THE OTHER SIDE OF THE LITERATURE OF THE 1970s

Milan Hamada

This will be no overview of literary history, so I permit myself the license of personal experience. In December 1968 I characterized the situation of our contemporary literature as critical, yet hopeful. Several months into the occupation of Czechoslovakia, I was increasingly disturbed about the fact that, at the time when both the individual and the human community at large were overwhelmed by social irrationality, literature was responding with artificial and stale texts. I considered them instances of false modernism, which the dogmatic Marxist critic Daniel Okáli and others saw as a pretext for arguing that our society was in a state of crisis. What those texts really manifested was their failure to master the modernizing efforts that were plentiful in our culture. Overall, however, I saw the developments in culture (in literature and the arts) as an autonomous process of creating values that was at last free from strict political and ideological norms.

I was struck by works that confirmed this at a time when lies and barbarism were yet again being masked as truth, and humanity was being debased and eliminated in its own very name. I presented Leopold Lahola's book of novellas *Posledná vec* (The Last Thing) as "a cruel truth about man and life". I was highlighting works that were intrinsically capable of critical thinking, as I was convinced that our modern culture was encountering a crisis of character paired with a crisis of knowing. I wrote that "there are situations where an individual, and, at times, even the whole of society must and may decide only by putting their own character at stake, or else suppressing or even surrendering it at all". I was introducing the works of Dominik Tatarka, Milan Rúfus and the then little known Nitra surgeon Pavel Strauss, his *Zápisky diletanta* (Dilettante's Notebooks), a sort of diary by an immensely rich and intellectual personality who began writing in the late 1940s within the already fading Catholic modernism. Another work I introduced, *Listy z väzenia* (Prison Letters) by Vladimír Clementis, "vis-à-vis yet another tragic discrediting of socialism, which this movement is up against, and only God knows whether it will survive". The occupation of Czechoslovakia was the true beginning of the end of socialism, as the remnants of what was, violently, "saved" was the "real socialism", that is a contradiction of socialism itself.

I was alerting that the human being was repeatedly being reduced from a multidimensional being to a flat individual. That we were hearing, daily, political speeches trying to suppress the power of human resistance and defiance against everything that mutilates the human being, nation and community in their longing for an independent human life. At a moment dangerously threatening to curtail, perceptibly and visibly, the realm of freedom, I was seeking firm ground in a poem whose language was fundamentally protecting and defending a free human being as it addressed us in the poetry of Milan Rúfus: "Increasingly more words out there. Deep down, all is governed by silence, given, in an equal share/to animals and gods alike." I was recalling the poetry of Ján Ondruš, Ján Kostra and other poets.

However, the resistant and defiant prowess throughout society was wilting under pressure. The powers that be were strengthening their hold for the sake of their own existence. The poet Ladislav Novomeský spoke of the need for putting on "the iron shirt of necessity", Milan Rúfus suggested to restrict life activity only to protecting the sole existence; very much the same. Poets Vojtech Mihálik and Miroslav Válek became servants of power, the latter reminding us "to prepare for a long systematic work". Political purges began, accusing and punishing. The powers that be expressed their opinion that society had been entangled in a crisis where the very existence or non-existence of socialism was at stake. So the process of overcoming the crisis commenced, involving also the writers community. The history of literature can, again, be neatly presented as chapters between the various congresses. The crucial congress that did away with the "crisis" and its perpetrators was held in 1972. The accusation (or its major part) was conceived by Vladimír Mináč. He referred to the condemnable offences of major sinners with a commentary affirming their guilt, and later steered the literary developments of the post-crisis era as its key ideologist. From the 1968 legacy, he conveniently exempted the Slovak emancipation towards federalism, which he took to such lengths as to speaking about the Czech genocide against the Slovaks. A historicizing literary critic wrote that the 1970s saw as much as a new philosophy of Slovak national history as authored by Vladimír Mináč.

The 1970s were not quite unlike the 1950s. At the beginning was violence, a violent break in the continuous development. Literary criticism, i.e. those who were able and/or willing to be "saved" were acting on precise political and ideological instructions as to what had happened and what should be expected from literature. As an ideological a priority, they knew what was allowed and what was not and what was forbidden.

This "normalization" program blow was most severely felt by the young generation of writers entering the literary arena. These deformations caught them unprepared and without an antidote; little wonder that later, when finally able to write more freely, many of them chose the ultimate silence. This, again, had a parallel to the 1950s. Indeed, many writers beginning to publish in the late 1940s were in the 1950s no longer able to create works of a lasting value, the value of those works being merely documentary.

Although the bulk of literature was shaken to its foundations, works of varying resistant power nevertheless prevailed. Those were by authors who had been through and withstood a similar test in the past, or those who had already committed to a firm ground for their work and did not succumb to ideological manipulations, including several authors of previous generations, such as Alfonz Bednár, Vincent Šikula, Rudolf Sloboda, Ladislav Ballek, Ivan Habaj, to name the most prominent.

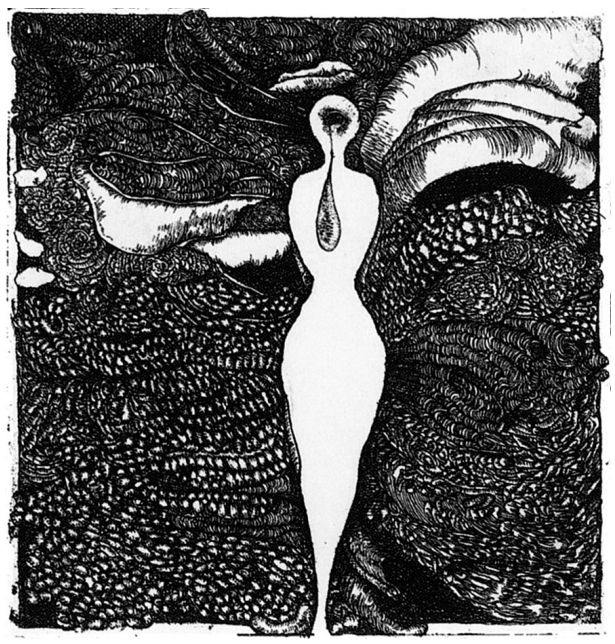
A unique voice of this generation was Pavel Hrúz, who was consistently in opposition, thus unable, like Dominik Tatarka, to

publish. Another such author was Janko Silan, a proponent of Catholic modernism, who finished his intriguing fiction *Dom opustenosti* (The House of Abandonment) in the 1970s, yet the publisher refused it. Pavel Vilikovský, too, was prolific as a strongly critical intellectual voice of our fiction, like Pavel Hrúz.

Indeed, the culture of the 20th century was in a state of permanent crisis; it *was* the culture of crisis. We were writing about it in search of its causes, course and related contexts. We witnessed its use and abuse for ideological and political purposes. I consider fundamentally wrong the opinion of the "normalizing" literary criticism of the 1970s that saw the younger generation's poetry and fiction as mere instances of superficial "leveraging" of the modern "decadent" Western culture. Again and unlike its predecessors, these authors understood literature as an independent activity of the mind, carried out in awareness of a considerable human and artistic responsibility, and, as such, in no contradiction with experimentalism such as uses of the French *Nouveau roman* in fiction. True, Johanides' two novels, *Podstata kameňolomu* (The Essence of the Quarry) and *Nie* (No) failed to master the process of modernism, yet his short novel *Nepriznané vrany* (Disclaimed Crows), published after years of involuntary silence, is a masterpiece of the *Nouveau roman* poetics.

Unique was the work of Pavel Hrúz, a truthful statement, in which the alleged reality of "normalization" is rendered guilty of a lie. Surely, his work was a fully informed and conscious attempt at a modern Slovak literature of the carnival (*Párenie samotárov, Chliev a hry*), a slap-in-the-face to the idealistic high literature, of which one critic says that "the hero of this fiction is typically self-confident, which is, without a doubt, the self-confidence of a Slovak of today". Early in his writing, Hrúz stood up to against such false ideas. In fact, his vision of the people and reality of real socialism is largely devoid of that self-confidence of human beings deprived of both human and civil rights, whether consciously or not. The world he sees is a labyrinth without any ultimate truth, the world of latent and actual crime, of violence and fear.

Also, I saw the historical topics so appealing to the writers in the 1970s as largely escapist from the bleak prospects of the day. Such as, under normal circumstances, Peter Jaroš would have probably never written historical literature; I consider his novel *Tisícročná včela* (The Thousand Year Old Bee) giving an idealized account of our history in the vein of Mináč a failure. Namely, the philosophy of Mináč, though hailed by its contemporary critics as a new and inspiring philosophy of our national history, is fake, too, as inconsistent with the historical truth, and instead providing a national mythology. Figuratively speaking, its predecessors are the Utopist Štúr, not Jonáš Záborský; the Messianic conservative Vajanský, not the liberal Palárik or *hlasizmus*. A historical critique, too, is at the heart of works by Pavel Vilikovský (*Večne je zelený* – Ever Green Is) who uses the method of deconstruction. Vilikovský has one very rare commodity in Slovak literature, the property of a critical intellect; for that, the lights were red in the 1970, so he was practically barred from his readership.



Karol Ondreička

One work I have already mentioned is also a part of these years, though almost unnoticed, Janko Silan's *Dom opustenosti* (The House of Abandonment). It is among the highest peaks of Slovak spiritual poetry, growing as it does from the most immediate quotidian existence of a Catholic priest, at times edifying, albeit mostly sordid and cruel. Astonished by both its radical allegiance to truth and uncommon beauty, we read this work, a mosaic of notes, meditations, poems, harsh human and social critique, dreams, those most often tormenting feelings of a hurt, suffering, but above all loving human being.

Silan's is a breakthrough testimony of a suffering God in the *theologia crucis* to the effect that God wants to be there for us in Jesus, and so he summons us to engage in a life devoted to others. "Beware of idolatry! The biggest and most terrible idol today in the nation is selfishness... Just look around and you'll see everywhere people bullying and murdering other people only to keep the good things for themselves." Hence, just like in the beginning of the new totalitarianism of the 1950s, Silan confesses his "most instinctive propensity for homeless people, beggars, gypsies, Jews..."

A similar statement is made by Vincent Šikula in his novel *Ornament* which he also began writing in the 1970s. In this gloomy vision of a gloomy time with repercussions of totalitarianism, Šikula, like Silan, finds hope at Whitsunday at the Holy Sepulchre where "Christ was lying among flowers as if ready to get up anytime, and convince us he had never been dead, that death is but a winter dormancy for nature to recover its energies to blossom once again."

And ultimately, Dominik Tatarka, alone in his resistance and defiance, writing his "písačky", letters "against the night" and for the eternity, spontaneous production of an aging man hoping to be rescued in love and cultivation of sensibility. Both these and his previous works are characterized by a deep human need of mutual sympathy and understanding as prerequisites of a full and undistorted life. His *Rozhovory bez konca* (Talks without End) *Prútené kreslá* (Wicker Armchairs), confessions for the working masses were an apotheosis of love, not power, as the "supreme labor of human culture"; and so are all his fragments, "písačky", "navrávačky", the notes of a writer in constant meditation on the world and human beings in it, their suffering and hope, despite the hopelessness of his position, which he himself chose unwilling to give up his Sisyphus-like destiny of "living in the Truth".

Thus was the other side of Slovak literature of the 1970s, which has largely yet to be realized.

Translated by Ľuben Urbánek

Dominik Tatarka

TAPINGS

(Extract)

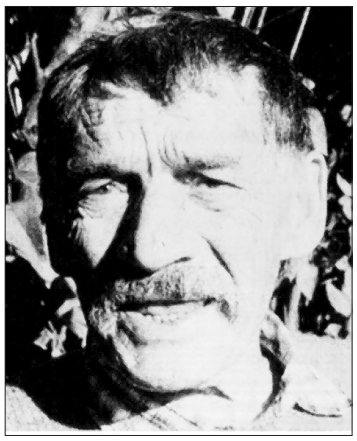


Photo: Archive

DOMINIK TATARKA (1913 – 1989) was one of the leading Slovak writers of the twentieth century. His career was typical for his generation: coming from a modest rural background, he studied in Prague and Paris between the wars and was strongly influenced by surrealism, then supported the Communist Party after it took over Czechoslovakia in 1948. A turning point came in 1956, when he satirized the "cult of personality" in his novella *The Demon of Consent.* After the 1968 Soviet invasion and his participation in the Charter 77 dissident movement, Tatarka was banned from publication. His later works were printed only by exiled publishers and circulated in underground samizdat editions. Peter Petro has written that "to the chorus of the great writers who have entered universal acceptance from Central Europe, to writers like the Pole Milosz, or the Czechs Skvorecky and Kundera, the voice of the Slovak Tatarka might be added as a voice of particular authority." Tatarka died in spring 1989, only six months before the end of the Communist regime. Soon afterwards, a literary award was established in his memory.

In the last years of his life, Tatarka's memoirs were tape-recorded by Eva Štolbová, a Czech television writer and dissident. In 1988, these "navrávačky," or tapings, were published in book form by Index, an exiled publishing house in Germany. The transcripts of his interviews with Štolbová were published in a different edition by the Centre for Information on Literature in 2000. The following reminiscences of his fatherless childhood are excerpted from the Index version.

As you know, I was two and a half years old when the authorities sent my father to the war, to the eastern front. Not a single photograph of him or letter from him was preserved. At the time peasants didn't have their pictures taken, only the nobility did. His contemporaries remembered him; they would stop me: Dominik, your father, now he was a real man! We went to the market together, we plowed together. My godfather told me how they used to go to market. At the time it was great fun to go to market, to see cattle and friends there, to sit in the tavern and sell or buy things. Back then farmers went to market the way we'd go to a coffeehouse.

They knew the livestock by sight since god knows when. They knew how a horse walked, they would look in the horse's mouth: the young horse has holes in its teeth, almost as deep as a kernel of corn, a hole that you could fit an oat seed into. And the older the horse is, the more the holes close up, and an old horse doesn't have any holes in its teeth anymore. You can tell an old horse by many such signs. Every man who raises horses, works with them and rides them, knows those things about them. Certain horses are tricky. An obstinate one like that is supposed to carry a load, and all at once it rears up and won't pull anymore. It's better to throw yourself to the ground. Sometimes this characteristic is quite dangerous. When a horse does this on the road, it's disastrous.

So in my imagination, my father was a tall, strong man; in the winter he carted wood from the forest; in the summer he plowed, reaped, and had eight children. Mother praised him; how loving he was; he never called her anything but "my sweet Zofia." And my sisters recalled that he never forgot to bring some sweets or buns from the market. In those days that was a real treat for us.

I tried to draw him, and I tried to carve his picture in dry wood with a knife. Mama told me that it wouldn't work, and said that I had drawn some kind of clown. You have to do it like this, she said, but it just didn't work, that picture didn't exist and it was a disturbing moment: I want to know, I want to know what my father was like.

Only now, now that I was seventy-two years old, lying in bed, my father came to me, outfitted with that kind of coat with a leather trim, dressed up for a journey, and he nodded his head somewhat - I was sorry that he was thirty-five and I was seventy-two, what a paradox that I was old and he was handsome, young.

He reached into his pocket and handed me five beautiful little stones. He says, take them and bite them apart. I said: Father, why, you know I don't have teeth anymore. But I took the stones. One very strange stone, grey, sandstone, was streaked with three veins like three opaque white rivers. I tried to bite it apart. . . and Father disappeared.

I'm convinced, that I was shown a likeness, a real likeness, of how my father looked: his stature, face, hair, beard, mouth. I told friends that I had dreamed this, about these pebbles, that I bit one of them apart. And they said: well, clearly, ... it's an obelus.

The Greeks, after death, put little coins into their mouths for the ferryman Charon in the underworld, so they could cross the river. In other words this stone, which your father showed you, was such a symbol, a metaphorical picture of this obelus.

Once in school the teacher asked when everyone had been born. On that occasion, a report was being filed and the beginning of the school year was to be shifted based on birthdays. And then half the class raised their hands to say that they were born in March. I was born in March too. And I figured out when they made me. What things were like then. It was June or July when they conceived me. When hay was made and dried. There are two beautiful months between two seasons of hard labor, between the spring work and the summer harvest. I figured out that not only I, but half the class. So I can judge that our fathers liked to make love more outdoors than at home. And so I learned that they conceived me in the Long Meadows. We dried hay and went on hayrides, said Mother. I made the stacks and Father loaded them. And as we were finishing the last one a storm flooded us out, and the rest of the hay was soaked. You see how your father was so easygoing, he didn't even finish that last haystack. I guessed that he would rather make love than finish that last haystack. Such is the conjecture of a childish, boyish mind.

I always longed to have a man in the house. A man who would speak and everyone would listen to him. You can tell a farm without a farmer at first glance. According to what? There is a sort of disorder. The farm wife sees something else, she sees her cattle, she sees her hens and her furniture, but she doesn't see, let's say, things that matter more to a man: there are holes in the roof, the axe isn't in the right place, that table is wobbly. You see a million things, from which you can judge: that one doesn't have

a man around. And my mother sometimes was so overwhelmed with sadness: no, I don't have a farmer. Where is my husband. . . Perhaps I perceived it a little differently, but I learned to perceive such spaces, such interiors. It is something like a feminine element and a masculine element, which complement each other, which can create a harmonious, flourishing home. Our home lacked this, and I feel that lack even today.

My father left me a little wooden hay-wagon which he had carved by hand. It, too, was proof that he was a skillful man who had all the tools you could think of. It was a medium-large children's wagon, the kind children could ride on for fun. I lost the back of the wagon and only the front remained. And I loved to wander around with the front of that wagon. I used to go along the main road, and often along that road came the brewery's horses, carrying large barrels of beer from the Bytča brewery all the way to Puchov. I sat on the handle and pulled the front of my wagon along behind me. Two wheels, a handle, and an axle. My legs got cut all over, but I was driving a brewer's wagon. And I had a marvelous feeling that I was driving who knows where. A wagon-driver going to Považská Bystrica came and stopped where he usually stopped, at the iron-monger's or at the tavern, and there the driver noticed that a little boy was driving along with him, picked me up and carried me into the iron-monger's and asked the old lady there, don't you want this little boy? Well, yes, certainly. So that housewife put me into the tub, washed me in warm water, and gave me a piece of fruit cake. I fell asleep instantly and when the driver came back, he took me to Mother. The front of that wagon was like an inheritance left to me by my father.

My father loved horses. Once he sold a horse which was suitable for the plow and worked well with it, and he bought a real gentleman's horse, harnessed to a buggy. He sat Mother and the children inside and people were pleased that a farmer was riding around like that. It seems that Mother reproached him for philandering. This is my husband, whom I married; I run a farm with him, and I'm to be faithful to him till the end. I have children, cattle, and everything with him. At that time, divorces in such peasant marriages were the exception. To have children was actually a blessing. Children were a help on the farm from a young age. When they were young they could raise geese, they had their duties, but they weren't just taken as something useful. Children were simply a blessing.

And Mother was like Father; she told me: You know, Dominik, whenever I as much as pause in the doorway with your father, I get pregnant. So every one and a half years a child came into the world. Father saw my little sister, the youngest, only for a moment; between one train and another he stopped, kissed her and went on. . .

When Father went off to the front, he wanted to clear up all his debts; he didn't want to leave such a burden on Mother. He sold the oxen and the steer and paid off his debt at the tavern. A year or two later that deceitful tavern-keeper said: the farmer owed me such and such an amount. Mother burst into tears. Good Lord in heaven, certainly my farmer paid and settled everything, and you gave him a receipt.

She thought it over for some time, checked the sacks, lit a candle and started to pray to Saint Anthony, the patron saint of those who are looking for something. And it dawned on her that the receipt had to be in the waistcoat pocket of the suit Father was wearing when he went to pay off the debts. His suit, his coats and his trousers had already been torn into rags. We wore them as raincoats. But where was that waistcoat? True, the waistcoat was of no use. But from some impulse, she had stuffed it between the lathes on the truss, and in the waistcoat was the receipt. Thus from the last rags of that tattered waistcoat I had some idea how my father was dressed when he left for the last time.

From early childhood I was actually the man of the house. Since I was a young boy I had been considered, among all the women, the representative of the farm. My mother was proud of me when our farm was introduced, for example, at the firemen's ball. The firemen's ball was also a collection by the fire brigade, for a fire engine. And every proper farmer came and made a donation by buying a ticket. Since I was, say, ten or twelve years old, I brought a lot of money: thirty crowns. This is from Tatarka. So they accepted me: yes, Dominik, yes, thank you very much. The male member of the Tatarka household has brought a donation.

A request came again for the church bells, for this or that. And Mother: Go, take this, and I took our donation for the church bells. I wanted to please her. To hear her appreciation: you're my dear little boy, you did well. You fed the geese, you brought clover, you brought it for us.

Since I was the only male in the house, I reaped and plowed, although I was going to school at the same time. It was time to reap, but they had taken everything away from us, I didn't have a scythe or even a rake. So I went to a shop and bought the last scythe that they had, which no one wanted anymore, because they had looked through the scythes thoroughly, testing their hardness. Well, I got such an awfully hard scythe, that was hard to sharpen.

I placed it on a "babka," that is, a round piece of iron set in wood. You had to sharpen exactly on the edge of the scythe, about three millimeters, that way you also planed it, everywhere equally. I'd seen how to do this since I was little. I sharpened the scythe up wonderfully, put it on the cradle with those little handles and the scythe reaped for me, how it worked for me, as if it were sweeping.

And Mother followed, gathering the stalks behind me: Oh, Dominik, Dominik, like this, like this. I reaped my little patch, one-two-three. And as early as at ten we were on our way back and Mother greeted everyone we passed, saying: Lord, help you, Lord, help you. Yes and everywhere they greeted us and said: So come and help. That was unusual, to return from the fields at ten.

So we went to help. And the neighbors wanted to trick me, lanky student that I was, and so they put me between two of the best reapers, expecting that I would fall behind. But my scythe cut so well that it was always swishing just behind their heels. So I had the honor of being the number-one mower. That was the greatest honor that you could receive in the village: to be the best mower and to also have the most skillful woman to gather behind you. Often I helped the neighbors where my first love grew up. And so Mother was proud.

We teamed up. They gave, or allocated, us an old mare which didn't know how to pull very well. We had a little horse and the neighbor another one, so we harnessed them together and in the spring worked as a pair. They carted lumber from the forest.

Translated by Charles Sabatos

Dominik Tatarka amidst the editors and employees of the daily Smena in 1968. Top row from left: M. Jurovská, E. Lužicová, D. Tatarka, L. Bielik, E. Trabalková. Below: J. Čomaj, (President Antonín Novotný) and T. Procházka

Janko Silan

HOUSE OF ABANDONMENT *(Extract)*

Photo: Archive

JANKO SILAN (1914 – 1984), Catholic priest, poet, prose writer. Born as Ján Ďurka (in Sila, he died in Važec), as a young poet along with his poet-schoolmates at the Theological University, he established a group called the "pirates of beauty". And as a "pirate of beauty" his entire life he grasped what should be foreign to a priest, and that was his sense of life, not dertermined by any doctrine, but his own inner feelings. He was not a pirate-conqueror, rather a gentle wooer of beauty in the murky waters of life. He searched for beauty in places where others did not see it and, purblind, saw it on their behalf. *Doomsayers* (Kuvici, 1936), *Stepladder to Heaven* (Rebrík do neba, 1939) – the title was recommended to him by brother Gencián, a bookseller from Societas verbi divini, and *Let's Celebrate It Together* (Slávme to spoločne, 1941). These are the titles of his first books of poems and such was the range of his work: from the doomsayers' voices to the call for a joint celebration of divine beauty; they were followed by collections of songs: *Songs from Javorina* (Piesne z Javoriny), *Songs from Ždiar* (Piesne zo Ždiaru), *Catholic Songs from Važec* (Katolícke piesne z Važca) and others, always filled with autobiographical motifs. And so it went on until 1969 - after that nothing came from him for the next twenty years. (His poetry, prose and translations were published in six volumes by the LÚČ publishing house, edited by Július Pašteka.) He enriched and further elaborated the philosophical-esthetic and reflexive approach of his poetry in a prosaic text after this pause. Although his poetry already includes narrative epic poems with a grotesque dimension – *Bedazzlement* (Oslenenie, 1969) – nonetheless, the novel *House of Abandonment* (Dom opustenosti), a journal as the author characterized it, caught the attention of prose writers. The book was published in 1991, though it was finished in 1970. Esthetically and style-wise, it corresponds to the works of writers such as R. Sloboda or V. Šikula. It corresponds to them also in the literary-historical sense. Its journal format reminds one mainly of Sloboda's *Reason* (Rozum), but since it preceeded it (it was published belatedly), it can be considered the vanguard of post-modernism in Slovak prose. With autobiographical earnestness, this work is an untraditional collage of various segments, notes, observations, prayers, meditations and reflexions; there are also sermons, notes on dreams, letters and lyric poems, together providing an accurate account of a poet himself in "socialist" society. And since this poet also lives the life of a Catholic priest, it is mainly an image of the world of a Christian poet, even though the vanity of the secular world and elusiveness of the temporal are also often themes of non-Catholic writers. In this prose, he gets back to his poetry through, among other things, grotesque motifs. The most powerful theme in his poetry and prose is the motif of mother. Twenty years after his collections of poems, his prose is a return to the "prosaic" life of a Catholic priest who oscillates between solitude (*Alone With You* – Sám s vami) and belonging to a certain community (*Let's Celebrate It Together* – Slávme to spoločne). The desire to belong somewhere, as well as the desire to be alone... His texts Wedding *in the House of Abandonment* (Svadba v dome opustenosti) and *Ode on the House of Abandonment* (Óda na dom opustenosti) contain surprising post-modernist techniques (the merging of boundaries between reality and fantasy, playing with characters' identities and the text's origin, and its vague expression); while, in the process, the accounts of regular episodes are not headed to destruction but to the author's fullness and inner freedom. And it is this search for inner freedom that is the message of Silan's work.

FOOTSTEPS IN THE ROOMS

1

In the most difficult days, when he no longer knew what to do, he used to whisper: Mother, Mother! And yet he knew that she was no longer alive, though he did feel that she was around and helping him. And how was his Mother? Well, as all mothers are. Good and sweet like honey. His tribute to her will sound moving even to us.

His Mother? Ever since her youth, she used to work in the Jewish families, those childishly resistant members of the Body of Christ, and she served them until her death, in order to support them and cultivate them and prepare them for the longed for meeting with the Lord Jesus, whom they longed for ever since the times of Abraham, Jacob, and Isaac and whom they found in the concentration camps, torture rooms, and gas chambers. He will never be able to express sufficient gratitude to his Mother even though he had attempted to build for her an excellent monument in his elegy *Requiem for Mother*. She brought him and his siblings up with the donations she had received for her washing.

Oh, what didn't he thank his Mother for every time! But above all, he was grateful for the touching songs of her young soul, as he imbibed them daily like his milk. As she was saintly, she had to die young so that he could promise over her grave as a child that he would become a priest, as a sacrifice for all, whether it would make them happy, or move them to beat him up. He was faithful to his promise and became a priest. But what an impossible priest, since he would offer his services to anyone he would meet and offer them in vain, for ever drunken with pain for not being needed. Nobody needed him. "He came to his own and his own people did not accept him." (*John I:11*) That was why he, ever since his childhood, had no home. And even these five rooms, where he used to live alone in constant loneliness, would not replace his Mother and would not conjure up the magic of his home.

That was why he would so instinctively cling to the homeless, the beggars, the Gypsies, the Jews; that was how the sacrifice of his own Mother dazzled him. The fruit of this mysterious orientation was that a Jewish doctor prophesied to him right after the war: "Have no fear. Nothing bad will happen to you, since you are a poet and as such, you love birds of passage most of all, and your desire pulls you towards God. You will experience unpleasantness, since unconsciously you exaggerate and make light of everything. You should rejoice even though you are strangely sad as you stand and look at the river flowing majestically and now roaring, now silently passing and that roar and silence is both within you. They fear that silence most of all..."

He entered that house of loneliness fourteen years ago and he did not go mad only because he liked to meditate over the words of Our Lord Jesus to Peter: "when you were young you put on your own belt and walked where you liked; but when you grow old you will stretch out your hands, and somebody else will put a belt round you and take you where you would rather not go." (*John XXI: 18*)

2

Mornings! Long and sad like mountain wells to which the cold dew falls so silently that they are not disturbed in their deep contemplation. During such mornings, he preferred to be alone, washing his soul with prayers, psalms, and hymns and in concentration and attention blessing all those who were leaving their houses to earn their daily bread "to labour till evening falls" (*Psalms XXIV:23*). He glorified them and raised them into the height. They were unaware of it, but felt it in their hearts when they later heard the subtle voices of the bell rang by their priest himself and they felt so good that he was walking with them. In the sacrifice he walks with them and joins with them and they with his spirit so that this truth really enters their blood and nurtures them according to the words he told them when preaching to them for the first time: "You are mine and I am yours and we all belong to God, so let us always praise the Lord Jesus!" None of the flowers are sweet for themselves; the bees fly over, the flowers open up to the sun, for how could one resist such music? When the dandelions bent down their little heads and moved to and fro as the bees sat on them, his heart trembled with new songs and silence, above all by silence, with that extreme sweetness that oozed from his soul and radiated all around. And the higher the sun ascended, the more his hope for the everlasting glory increased in him. He felt ready to give it to anyone, in order to re-conquer it without comfort and sweating blood to get a more beautiful and sure hope from the miraculous depths of inexhaustible life—and in this state of mind a letter from Bratislava reached him: "Why did I leave religion?" It was a cutting from a newspaper.

Underneath was a typed comment: "When will you follow, Mr. Poet?

Look, your colleague has done it already. He knows in whom he put his trust..."

It was slap, a gob of spit in his face, but he did not become sad. It just brought him to his knees, paralysed his members and who knows how long he had spent lying on the floor until he recovered from the faint because of sudden and persistent cramps. Like a bound little lamb he was only waiting in resignation and without complaint and even with an open indifference if his sacrifice will become realized the same day or tomorrow. He knew only one thing: that he will have to undergo this sacrifice as there was no escape and no need for one either.

The sun was setting, but not his love that the letter so insensitively ridiculed. On the contrary. His love was smiling, threatened by all sorts of monsters of hellish dominions. Was it not a miracle that his love was not afraid? His love was singing.

3

How disappointed he was by this parish, it seemed like a desert. When his Father visited him for the first time, the priest said: "You know, Father, this is what happened: I asked for a proper parish last year, in Oravský Podzámok. But the Bishop has returned my request. I also returned my request. I can read from my letter.

There, you see, I came only because of obedience.

And maybe this is for the best, when we agree with what God wants. Your will be done!"

4

If I were to believe what one of my lady friends told me, that I was a descendant of some Egyptian Princess, then it would explain my apparent and constant interest in poetry, in sun, in Nephretete, the greatest beauty of the Earth. There is just one thing that does not seem to fit: the lady could not explain how it is possible that I still love the Jews if I come from Egypt. (What followed could not be deciphered, unless one wanted to create from individual words or syllables a surrealist still life. What probably happened was that the priest ended up crying for a long time over a page in the diary penned in a grade one student's hand.)

5

And so this priest on his way to die said the following: "In this Communism we also don't know who we are, and for the Church it would not be too bad either, since we live, worry, while the soul is praying and rejoicing, if only they left the priests alone and stopped imprisoning them." Really, this was his last sigh. A silent and persevering one.

I am writing it down like an evangelist. He who believes me, praises God. I am writing it like this because it was followed by a banal sentence: I have a little dog. His name is Lux. I am a smoker and I reflexively thought about cigarettes. And cigars: "*Havana Lux—aromatisch, würzig, naturrein*." Only then did it hit me that in Slovak Lux means *light*.

And this was followed by a unique sentence about the dog who was always faithful: And he is smarter than five people. Not even Abraham had sank so low in classifying when arguing with God how many just men were in the world.

Then there were some ten illegible lines, maybe they were consumed by alcohol, but what I did manage to decipher I offer without a comment as gossip, as a song that surely contains some truth: Magellan. Even though Magellan was a great conqueror, he died a stupid death at the hands of the natives. How else can I die when everyone around me surrendered and nobody is protecting me? Except for God. And God likes to crucify his beloved. "For this is how God loved the world..." (*John III:16*)

6

Unwelcome visitors often visited the priest. He commented in this way about them to please the welcome visitors: "How tired is the lonely heart day by day!" Today, when I was sitting by the smaller door in the garden, in my garden, where there is silence and greenery, bright and healing greenery, I was feeding the ducklings and behind the fence was a little boy, just a little stripling, maybe a four-grader, shouting at me: 'Father, three cops are coming for you. You better hide from them!' I did not react. Then he shouted the same. I shouted back: 'Be quiet!' And my tone was clear and calm and communicated the fact that I was no longer young and that little boy should have some respect for my age. But he replied even more capriciously, so certain that I could not catch him even if I jumped right over the fence: 'I won't be quiet, I won't!' I don't know why I heard in my ears the song 'I'm not going to be good, I won't!' when the snot-nose went on shouting: 'Cops are after you! How afraid you are, what a shame! You are afraid of everything!' and so on. He was shouting, yelling, really and he did not quit until I went into the rectory. What else could I do, but hide, even though I wanted to enjoy the magical day in May, at the silent and warm approach of the evening? And I felt so very good when I thought for how many years I had been breathing in this lonely house. I particularly stress the word "breathing." Inhaling is inspiration and that connects it to spirit. But how hard it is for the spirit to really live. Here everything weakens it, making it dead, and abandoned. How pathetic it is when it can no longer bear to hear insults. But it still lives in me and I can even sing:

A precious day of May.
Same as every time.
I'm sad like you, I say,
When it kills this soul of mine.

All that's breathing in us,
That calls for dear God.
Enemy? I'm priest, alas.
May death get its nod!

No more defence for me
Have no more power
Loved ones left me,
There is no other.

7

And when I read through these thirty pages a policeman came. There was a regular interrogation. "A priest has died. What do you know about his death?" I heard that he was killed at night. We are before the elections. How will it sound with rumours that he was killed by the Communists?

"I beg your pardon? Why do you have to blame the Communists for all the bad things that happen? Some time ago, when they shot a priest in Dolný Liptov, I was told by a man that it was done by some underground Catholic organization. And why could this thing here not be done by some hooligans? Same as the case with the grave of Mr. Vitališ in Podturňa?"

Boys and girls gathered there. The deceased was visited by odd company, the police must have known about it, as he reported that church money was stolen during the daytime robbery and they even took his linen, so don't tell me there were no criminals. There were, and had I known that during that critical night there was somebody in there and he fought with someone to protect his life, then I would be the first one to report that. Whoever would keep quiet would be an accomplice to murder. Then he asked: "And where are his manuscripts? His historical writings? We know that he wrote critically about the State." I answered: You should have confronted him when he was alive and deal with it; why did you neglect it ?

Now it looks like every priest, according to you, is writing against the State when he writes. But seriously: this dead man, even though he was not quite a friend of mine, and I did not agree with him, still, I would defend this dead man to the last drop of my blood. When he wrote, he wrote truth. His manuscripts were taken by his brother. You can verify that. (I did not confess that I had copies of his diary, it was such a pious lie on my side, for I liked them very much and would not let them out of my hands. I think that everyone will gladly pardon me this transgression against the police.) And when this gentleman left and after I had formally complained to his superiors about his improper behaviour, I continued reading the diary of the dead man. That dear diary, that astonishing diary.

An Evening at the Big Franciscan Wine Cellar

Excursions and trips are really great. One forgets how lonely one is and that one is most lonely not at home, when alone, but on the main promenade of the capital city with its hustle and bustle with no regard for rules and you could ask: Well good, this is all very nice and it is a distraction to walk and walk aimlessly, but is there some refreshment around here, too? And this was how the priest came into the cosy wine cellar of the Franciscans where they offered good wine from the barrel.

There were three people sitting there: a priest and his two friends: an Editor and a Professor. *Nomina sunt odiosa*—no need to name them. Music was playing and actually disturbing, too. But in those longed for breaks, in the sweet silence, that we least respect, with a good meal and wine that we respect very much, one could have a good talk. And so the Editor asked: "How was it with the trial? We heard that they've tried you in Žilina on account of literature." The priest answered: "Nothing special. I thought it would be more terrible. And I was properly prepared for the terrible possibility. I took it as any peasant would. The Court is a Court and when you are tried, devil knows if and when you come back. The main thing is to keep your honour, even if you lose everything else.

And so I prepared a little suitcase with all the necessities when one is not sure of returning home. And so I set out without telling anyone. Only a good neighbour of mine saw me off. At the Court seven of us were gathered. First we prayed. Then they took us in one by one. Those who were after the interrogation could listen to the other interrogations. I was the third to go, as in the game of third man. I stepped in and put my little suitcase down at the door. Nobody noticed it. And why should they, being only interested in words. So I stood there as one is supposed to at the Court. There were questions and answers and after the introduction, the most piquant was the following:

Judge: "They seized from you a book entitled: *Inside the Soviet Prisons*. Is that the kind of books they made you read in the seminary?"

I: "Not quite. In the seminary we learned about faith and morals and other things of use to a priest in his work. The book in question came out in 1933, published by Vilímek in Prague and I bought it while still a secondary school student. I was interested in any kind of literature, Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist, and you can check out my library to see what sort of things I read. Why are you asking me? Is it in order to find out whether they praise or condemn the Soviet Union?

Of course they do. But in my library I not only have anticommunist books, but also Communist ones. You don't want me to list them all..."

Judge: "They seized from you a manuscript of *Let Us Glorify*. Were you planning to publish it in case the regime collapsed?"

I: "I beg your pardon? That's my book that has already been published in 1941 in Trnava and this manuscript with illustrations remained in my archive, since the second edition planned for 1947 was not published."

The last question of the judge: "What was your father's occupation in 1933, when this anti-Soviet book came out?"

I: "Labourer."

Judge: "What was his situation?"

I: (instructed by my friends to speak briefly and wisely at Court) "He didn't do well."

Judge: "And how does he do now?"

I: "He is on a disability, as he was hurt in Vienna, where he worked, and now gets 500 crowns. He's not complaining."

After this interrogation, almost ecstatic that I was let go and wouldn't have to answer every one of their questions, and even though I did not know how things stood with me, I started to run towards my little suitcase that I had left at the door, so that I had it with me when I sat down and listened, but I hurried so fast that I woke up the Prosecutor and he stopped me on my way just when I was about to sit down and said: "What's going on? You came here with a little suitcase?"

I: "Mr. Prosecutor, when a person from a village goes to Court for the first time in his life, he counts on everything."

Prosecutor: "And what do you have in that little suitcase?"

I: "Well, a breviary, a little piece of bacon and a towel and other little things..."

And the Court laughed at it and in this case it had a hearty laugh. But I became sad when my friend, who was interrogated before me, whispered to me as soon as I sat down:

'You idiot, do you think they would let you keep the suitcase had they arrested you?'

I was back home in the evening. And very glad of it."

And when I finished this story—so that we could silently laugh over our destiny—we ordered another litre of wine from the barrel.

Conclusion: "Everybody has his own fate," said the Professor. Yes, I agreed, but we usually accept this fate from the hands of our neighbours. We have to pray for them to be good, to be good also to us...

In Poprad

After my shopping, I was sitting in the station restaurant, having a glass of red wine. My coat was on the chair, my cane in my hand, my bag at my feet, and my hat on the table, turned upside down (I was perspiring when I arrived and did not want to mess up the table with the wetness). I was reading *Slovak Views* smoking, and drinking the red wine. The restaurant was packed. On my right, female students were giggling. On my left, behind a narrow passage through which flew girl waitresses in miniskirts, sat men with long hair. Suddenly one of them got up and dropped four white coins, that is, four ten- haller coins into my hat. Without uttering a word. In a flash, I gathered that he considered me a beggar, whether he was joking or serious. And I spilled the coins out on the table and put the hat back where it was before. So it was like a bowl and I was wondering if the other

man would also dare to give me alms. But my reaction, not saying a word, not approaching them to start an argument or telling them to observe at least the elementary decency in a restaurant, was so effective that the two just sat there dumbfounded and wordless. Finally, even their eyes looked embarrassed. And I looked around normally as if nothing had happened and if they considered me a beggar, then it was all right with me. Those coins belonged to me and I left them lying there, having overcome the temptation to get up, take out a hundred-crown bill and put it on the young man's table. I would have done that if I had known that he would not slap my face for it. I was not strong enough for a fist fight any more. And so I got up and went over to the platform, as the train was already due, only to learn that it was delayed by an hour. So I stood there, reading a news magazine, continued smoking and enjoying the spring weather that was already approaching. I don't feel like offending the place where I have spent 21 years working. But I can ask a question: Wasn't that man with long hair my close neighbour?

And when I safely returned home (thanks to God) an old beggar knocked at my rear door and came to wish me Happy Easter. He told me that he was getting only 400 crowns for his pension and that he would need a nice hat and then? Well, then he would need a better bag where to put the bread and other necessary things to keep his body going. And I told him: We are all beggars. I, too am alone like you and I, too, come from Martin. Here is twenty crowns. I don't have anything else for you, since I, too , am alone and poor like you...

Translated by Peter Petro

Ladislav Mňačko

THE SEVENTH NIGHT

(Extract)

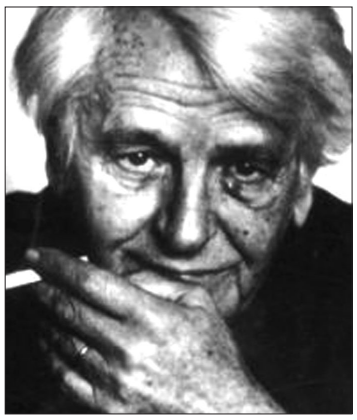


Photo: Archive

LADISLAV MŇAČKO (1919 – 1994), writer, dramatist, poet and publicist, born on January 29, 1919 in Valašské Klobouky (Moravia, CZ). From childhood lived in Martin, Slovakia, and was trained to be a pharmacy shop assistant. In 1939 he tried unsuccessfully to flee to the Soviet Union and in 1940 he was caught when illegally crossing the German-Dutch borders and sent to a concentration camp. He succeeded in escaping from the camp and returned to Moravia, where he became involved in the resistance movement. After WWII he became an editor of the dailies *Rudé právo* and *Pravda.* In the 1960's he focused on writing. In 1967 Mňačko emigrated to Israel, but in the Prague Spring he returned home. After the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies in August 1968 he emigrated again, this time to Austria. He lived in exile till 1990, after that he returned to Slovakia, to Bratislava, where he lived and was active as a publicist until his death in 1994. Mňačko is best known for his short stories, novels and reportages, as *Marx Street* (Marxova ulica, 1957, short stories), *Death Is Called Engelchen* (Smrť sa volá Engelchen, 1959, novel), *The Taste of Power* (Ako chutí moc, 1968, novel), *Comrade Münchhausen* (Súdruh Münchhausen, 1972, novel), *Israel. A Nation in Conflict* (Izrael. Národ v boji, 1949), *Adventure in Vietnam* (Dobrodružstvo vo Vietname, 1954), *I, Adolf Eichmann* (Ja, Adolf Eichmann, 1961). While living in exile, Mňačko published political essays, short stories and screenplays in German, e.g. *The Aggressors* (Agresori, 1968, political essay), *The Seventh Night* (Siedma noc, 1968, political essay), *One Will Survive* (Jeden prežije, 1973, short stories), *The Lighthouse* (Maják, 1972, screenplay). Mňačko's novels and reportages have been translated into many languages, especially *Death Is Called Engelchen,* which deals with the theme of fight against German fascism (18 languages) and *The Taste of Power,* a sharp criticism of the personality cult (5 languages). Mňačko was essentially a journalist with literary ambitions from the very start. He entered literature in 1945 with the play *Partisans* and he also tried his hand at poetry and gained success with his satirical verses (*Drums and Cymbals*, 1954), but he became famous mainly through his novels. Mňačko's journalism from the beginning of the 1960's, mainly the book *Overdue Reportages* (Oneskorené reportáže, 1963), where he came to terms with the political trials of the early 1950's against so called bourgeois nationalists and Zionists, marked the road to writing the novel *The Taste of Power*. In the book *The Seventh Night* Mňačko definitely came to terms with "real socialism" and the communist idea of changing the world.

On the seventh night of the catastrophe that had befallen us I went back into town. I couldn't hold out any longer. That morning the radio had announced that Svoboda, Dubček, Smrkovský and Černik had returned from Moscow. One radio reporter had managed to speak to Smrkovský. He replied in an infinitely weary, sepulchral voice, sadly, almost despairingly: "It was terribly difficult..." They had not slept for several nights. They had all returned, all those who had been there. That was all the reporter got out of him. The whole nation sat listening to the news, waiting for a speech from the President of the republic; it had been announced several times, but there'd been nothing so far. At last Svoboda spoke. He said the whole delegation had behaved bravely, he thanked people for their great moral support and assured them that everyone had acted honestly and added that they had achieved what it was possible to achieve. Clearly that was nothing very promising.

It was only several hours later that Alexander Dubček spoke. He talked openly, not hiding the unpleasant truth; there were longish pauses between his sentences and he seemed to be on the edge of tears. However, he managed the impossible: to give the despairing nation fresh hope. The trust that had already been weakened, was for a time renewed.

Even so, it has been a waste of effort. The Russians will not leave. They have gone too far to back away. They are capable of anything; they can't be trusted. Their guarantees are no guarantees, their promises are no promises, their claims that "their troops will gradually withdraw in keeping with the normalisation of the situation in Czechoslovakia", is only a transparent tactical manoeuvre, which no one took seriously, not even they at the moment they said it. Normalisation, what lies behind that term? Who can define it exactly? What do they understand by it? Perhaps something like "not interfering in the internal affairs of another country"? They brazenly claim they have not interfered. They call the crime of aggression "brotherly assistance". Who knows what they understand by normalization? At worst it could be the creation of a Czech or Slovak autonomous republic somewhere between the borders of Buryat Mongolia, Birobidjan and Yakutia. From them you can expect something worse rather than something better.

So far the attitude of both our nations is admirable. But life

doesn't stop here, it will not turn into a monolithic monument to monolithic unity. The Soviets will continue to goad. To divide, set at odds, dictate, provoke. After what has been a magnificent week, in spite of our great grief, another week will come and yet another and a few more, but one day something will happen, maybe something hardly discernable;the monolith of unity will begin to crumble and that will be the first day of the next round.

It's terrible to ponder the consequences. The best people of the second half of the twentieth century, who stood at the head of the state, will go into exile, from which there is no return. Or they will be silenced. While they are alive they are a lasting reproach and potential danger to the Soviets and their present government.

They have returned from Moscow and said that it was hard, they have spoken the unpleasant truth and called on people to hold on to their proud, united attitude; they have claimed they will achieve the maximum possible of what they wanted and that all is not yet lost.

No one expected them to bring back anything else. If the Soviets counted on people's love changing into anger, they were again mistaken. People are very fond of Svoboda and Dubček, especially now. They realize there was nothing else they could do and there is nothing else they can do now or in the future either. Dubček is no ordinary mortal, Dubček is a legend and that determines all his actions. Run away? He cannot run away, that is out of the question. Running away would only convince the Soviets they had been right to distrust him, and maybe that is just what they expect. Dubček will not run away. He must act as he is acting now, until his fate is fulfilled. Years ago Dürrenmatt wrote that in the present-day world neither pure tragedy nor pure comedy exist any longer. He was wrong. Dubček's totally predetermined fate is being fulfilled like the fate of a hero in a Greek tragedy. With the violation of Czechoslovakia tragedy has again taken on its pure form. Maybe later, years later, at the thirty somethingth congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, some new Nikita Sergeyevich will say the occupation of Czechoslovakia was a tragic mistake and call the culprits to account. There will be a repeat of the trial against Warren Hastings, who was brought to court by Prime Minister Pitt for bestiality committed during the occupation of India. But this did not result in India regaining independence or freedom. It always takes the superpowers a very long time before they begin to feel ashamed of their ignominious deeds. It only happens when nothing can be done to change them or put them right. When it's too late. After the war, Stalin ordered the small Chechen and Kyrgyz nations to be resettled in Siberia, the reason given being alleged collaboration with the Germans. Half of them died on the way to their "new homeland". Twenty years later the Soviet Union's XXIIth Communist Party Congress condemned this act. Will this return the Chechens to their old homeland? Stalin alone cannot be blamed for their forcible deportation; there were more people responsible and some are still alive. Will any of them lose their top posts? Will anyone call them to account? And even if this were the case, would it bring back to life those unfortunate people who died while being transported, or later in hostile Siberia? One is tempted to answer with one of Ellochka Schukina's thirty words or her famous: - Oho.

I was fond of the Russians, and I still am. I'm sad when I think I shall never again sit and chat with my friends in Moscow. I always told them frankly what I thought, without expecting them to talk in the same way. Even so, a few years ago in Baku one of my dearest friends complained to me: "We are a huge country, but people feel very small here. We are a free superpower, but many of those living here are not free...

I am fond of the Russians. From many points of view they are an outstanding nation. They are profoundly human. They are profoundly sad. They are profoundly unhappy. Those I made friends with are probably now feeling ashamed of the invasion of Czechoslovakia. But they don't say so. They don't say anything; they don't do anything at all. They can't. They only know what they are allowed to know. If over a period of many years radio and television feed people with one-sided information, their knowledge becomes one-sided. Millions of Soviet citizens are firmly convinced that Czechoslovakia was threatened by counterrevolution, an anti-socialist coup. It is understandable, because there is no one who would even try to convince them of the opposite. From journalists like Zhukov they can only learn Leonid Brezhnev's truth.

Most likely, somewhere deep down inside, they sense it. This is not a confident society; people there are afraid. It is not just a fear of the system. Their fear is wide-reaching, directed at the world at large. This is because they don't know whether that world really is as it is served up to them by servile journalists. And they can't find out for themselves. Only the chosen are allowed to travel abroad.

A few years ago I met one of my Moscow friends in Vienna. He is an excellent writer and I have a high opinion not only of his books, but also his character. We wandered through the streets of Vienna, gazing in the shop windows. More than half of all the things he saw behind the glass were unfamiliar to him. He didn't know what they were or what purpose they served. He couldn't read a single sign written in the Roman alphabet. He was "in the West" for the first time and I could see how appalled he was at the sight of so many unknown things he kept encountering. All of a sudden he began to curse capitalism, the degeneration of the West, the life of luxury of the bourgeoisie. He was convinced the West wanted to destroy the Soviet Union. This was sincere and could be explained by the shock he'd been given by the abundance of appliances and food he'd never seen before. If any of this ever reached the Soviet Union once in a long while, a kilometre queue would form. I compared it in my mind with what they tell them about their own life. It's understandable. The Soviet Union has not achieved a level of civilisation and technology high enough to allow it the comfort that is common in Western Europe. Soviet reality is in stark contrast to what Soviet propaganda declares, praising Soviet products to the skies. The true cause of my friend's angry outburst in a Vienna street was his horrified realisation that he had been deceived.

We went together to see Pasolini's excellent film The Gospel According to St. Matthew. For me it was an exciting experience. My friend left half way through. He was bored. There was no action in the film and when something did begin to happen, he didn't understand it. He had never seen the New or Old Testament. He wasn't familiar with the Bible. An excellent Soviet writer. A really very good one, translated into many languages...

The Russians will pay dearly for the occupation of Czechoslovakia . In a way they least expected. Sooner or later the young Soviet soldiers will get together with our people. If at present they think Czechoslovakia is a bourgeois country, they will understand that it isn't. Although the standard of living here is not very high, they will find culture, civilisation and technology such as they have never known. During occasional meetings with young Czechs and Slovaks they will learn about things they had never even dreamed of. The invisible army of General Schweik will complete their inner disintegration. They will return home with serious schizophrenia. They will talk about what they saw, what they heard, what they learned. They will become a source of infection.

Or they really will send them to Siberia, like many of their fathers who came back from the Second World War. They will put them in quarantine, where they will have to undergo brainwashing.

I am not making fun of them here, I am not looking down on them and certainly not making comparisons. I know how far they have come from the revolution and I also understand why they could get no further. In my turbulent life I have learned that it is not possible to compare everything, to measure it by our own standards. That is the worst attitude an observer abroad could succumb to.

I cannot agree with critics of the Soviet Union who, accustomed to European comfort, now ask wonderingly: "Where have the Soviets brought socialism in these fifty years? They have brought it a long way, but not to where socialism ought to be. The critics of the USSR, that is, forget that those fifty years were

no developmental idyll. After the revolution they began with almost no technology whatsoever. Without help from outside they built up the Soviet state, surrounded on all sides by the animosity of the rest of the world. It was they who bore the main brunt of the fascist attack; they had to deploy live flesh against steel teeth, in order to compensate at least partly for the technical superiority of the Germans. They suffered great losses; after the war there was perhaps not a single Soviet family without someone near and dear to mourn. In the first years after the war the whole burden of restoring this completely devastated country fell on the shoulders of the women. There were no men. It was the women who had to build everything from scratch, much of which they had built some time in the past at great cost in human lives. And they had to continue to develop; they had to make up for the USA's head start in the production of the atomic bomb.

All these are facts. Yet somehow they are not happy. I suppose they are angry they cannot solve many of their own society's urgent problems. Expansion outwards is always a sign of disorder within a state. Displays of strength are intended to cover up its own instability, its own weakness. As the present administration of the USSR is not able to provide satisfactory answers to topical issues, those in charge have decided to distract people's attention by a demonstration of strength directed outwards. One proof of this is the revival of anti-Semitism in the USSR. Anti-Semitism is an infallible sign of chaos and crisis within society. One thing is now certain. They have decided on expansion. And a socialist superpower cannot afford such a thing if it wants to continue to be socialist. Nowhere in the writings of Marx and Lenin can you find a justification for the occupation of a sovereign state. That is Brezhnev's personal ideological contribution in contrast to Marx's existing and ever valid truth that no nation in the world can be free if it subdues another nation.

(. . .)

I was against the enslaving of the greater part of the world by colonialism and imperialism. But likewise I am also definitely against the greater part of the world being enslaved by socialist imperialism. Force in any form is anti-Marxist and antisocialist. The position of socialism cannot be strengthened using the same methods as those used by imperialists to rule the world. The victory of socialism is something every nation must decide for itself. It cannot be exported or safeguarded by bayonets and tanks; that would be in stark contradiction to the fundamental nature of socialism. An admirer of Lenin such as Brezhnev should know that better than anyone.

I am against every war, against every occupation and against all national, racial and class oppression. That is in keeping with my – and I think not only my – communist convictions. That is the main reason why I became a communist.

So far as I know, both Marx and Lenin were against it, not only theoretically. If Brezhnev considers the teachings of Lenin, on which the whole ideology of communism is based, to be out of date and obsolete, let him say so openly and justify the occupation of Czechoslovakia – not, however, with a lie, which, as we all know, has short legs, but let him explain it scientifically and analytically. We'll be enlightened and we shall act accordingly. Once a certain Napoleon abused and ruined a revolutionary idea. Maybe Brezhnev feels he is a new red Napoleon?

I walked through the evening streets and as I went I asked myself: "How did it happen? Where did we make a mistake? Where, when, at what moment?

I had to laugh at myself. We had been nave and blind, we communists and all those who had trusted us. Those we had beaten, lashing out on all sides, had been more farsighted than we had been. How many belligerent articles in defence of the Soviet Union have I written against them! You there, on the rubbish dump of history, you diehards, you falsifiers of past events and their significance, why are you getting in the way, holding up progress, why don't you crawl back into your rat holes? They, however, saw things clearer; only we pretended to be deaf and blind to what were often incomprehensible, cruel facts. That doesn't mean they were right; they, too, were biased, but just in a different direction than we were. We saw their mistakes, they saw ours.

Yet would it have helped us if we had seen clearly? It probably would. In 1948, I suppose. At that time Czechoslovakia could still have decided on an independent policy. Tito has managed that for at least 20 years. And there can be no doubt that if there was an attempt to attack Yugoslavia, Tito would not surrender without a fight. The Soviets can only wipe out the independent policy of Yugoslavia by war, not by a smooth invasion meeting with no armed resistance.

What the Soviets have done to us is no longer such a great shock for me. However, what are they going through now – those hundreds of thousands of Czechoslovak communists who relied all along on the propriety of Soviet politics. How are they feeling today? We communists have always fared badly. The foreign world did not trust us and our own people treated us like rebels. What does Brezhnev care about the feelings of almost two million Czechoslovak communists! And the feelings of millions of other communists in Europe!

I walked through the brightly lit, but completely deserted town. This seventh evening there were only a few tanks in the streets and squares of Bratislava. They had withdrawn to outside the town. I didn't approach those that had remained at strategically important points – I only viewed them from a distance, giving them a wide berth. When I heard the roar of an engine, I hid in the nearest doorway. It could only be a Russian patrol in an armoured vehicle. Not one private car drove through the town that night.

I hardly met anyone. Here and there people were standing in front of their houses and chatting in low tones, no doubt about what was to come. When I passed by, they looked at me distrustfully. Once again that old psychosis; everyone was afraid of everyone.

The Russians are here. They will not leave now. We are hoping in vain that they will. They are here and they will stay for a long time. Maybe they will be driven out by a future war, but that would mean the end of this country, the end of this people. Thanks to their presence Czechoslovakia has become an important strategic area, towards which the interests and missiles of future potential enemies are directed. The occupation of Czechoslovakia has driven a dangerous wedge into the security system of Western Europe. This will force western strategists to change their defensive and offensive plans. In them Czechoslovakia will figure as an area marked out for the first strike...

When I passed this way a few hours earlier, I met some people I knew. Some of them pretended not to see me. Others stared at me in consternation. You're still here? Get out, while there's still time, in an hour it might be too late. Others looked at me as if I were a corpse, a ghost from another world, a leper. They had already written me off. Not they in fact, it was time that had written me off. There is no safe place for me in this country, no hope. Even if I were to deceive myself, the eyes of my friends, acquaintances and above all of those who are fond of me, make it clear. They needn't. I shall go. I just wanted to wait for this conclusion, I wanted to see it, feel it deeply and experience it.

I walked through the dark, deserted town; it was the seventh night. How busy it had been at this time not so long ago! In the half light of the streets jazz music would be heard coming from the dance bars. Tipsy youths would wake sleepers with their noisy singing and shouting. Cars would rush over the tarmac from one place to another. Young women would squeal. Laughter, anger, frolicking, vexation, the stink of burning petrol, the delicious aroma of sausages, the colourful lights of advertisements, the stars in the sky, the staggering steps of a drunk, the majestic calm of dark buildings, light and half-darkness, silence and commotion, desire and hopelessness, love and dejection, the strange night sorrow of a large town, here and

there windows lit up with agitated waiting, the sublime peace of thousands of windows behind which people are sleeping, crime stalks through the dark street and in the distance an ambulance wails, the uneasy footsteps of a young woman hurrying somewhere, I suppose to meet her lover, perhaps going home from his place, how many times have I felt deeply the thousands of lives behind the closed shutters, imagined that the town and all in it had turned to stone at the same time, only I am still alive and I am going, walking and looking and I can see what no one else can see, here on a bed a young man is stroking a girl and just next door another young man is strangling an old, defenceless woman; here a scientist sits at an old rococo desk racking his brains over a complicated mathematical task; I wanted my gaze to embrace the suffering of everyone, all the vices, all the hopes and sorrows of the night; I lived with them, quite often I would follow a man with a strange vocation, hunting down pigeons, reducing their numbers, to prevent them doing even more damage to the roofs of old buildings and thanks to the sensibility of the city fathers, he does this work at that indefinable hour between the night and the morning, when so many people are still asleep. Gas lamps... a few have remained in the old town and evening after evening one old lady lights them with a tinderbox on a long pole, but I never managed to discover who extinguishes them before dawn. The silhouettes of blocks of flats that I am intimately familiar with, the unpleasant, silent, seedy courtyards, the sleeping pubs, still stinking of beer, the Crystal Bar, where I have spent so many nights sitting at the counter, police patrols lurking around a dark corner, the lighted window of the hospital casualty department, a deserted petrol station...

This night everything was indeed different, differently noisy, differently quiet, differently sad...

Shop windows plastered with slogans and posters, graffiti covering the facades of houses, a little altar strewn with fresh flowers at an empty corner, a name written in uneven letters on wrapping paper, the name of a young girl, fourteen years old, shot by a twenty-year-old soldier, maybe a Siberian or slant-eyed Kalmyk. The windows of *Kultúrný život*'s editorial office dark, lifeless... But I can hear twenty hoarse voices, shouting, drunkenly singing a vulgar song: "*Já ti ho tam našroubuju, já ti ho tam dám...*" Someone yells at me: "Hi, Laco, come on..." I turn my head, I'm not coming, I won't be coming any more, bye, mates, it was good to be with you, it was good even in those dark, gloomy years, even then it was good to be together... the house in which I lived, I won't go back there any more, let the devil take it all, I won't go there, I won't step inside, a person should leave naked and unencumbered, everything up there, the bed with a dent in the mattress, the pictures on the walls and the books, so many books! All that was, none of that is now in this strange night, there is only the aria from Jakobin sounding in my ears, there is only my goodbye, goodbye town, I was fond of you, you were my spacious room, you were my study, bedroom, dining room, drawing room and hearth, I don't want you any more, you would stand in my way, even so, you remain my only piece of heavy luggage, a heavy burden that cannot be cast aside, cannot be sold, no one has yet managed rid themselves of it, when setting out to where I myself am going...

You were cheerful, now you will be sad, you were cherished, now you will be cursed, you were kind, you will be cruel, you were a refuge, you will be a trap, you were mine, whose will you remain?

Ten months ago I flew over you quite low; the plane was descending towards the runway at Schwechat airport; I looked at you through the little window, I saw your roofs, your outlines and for a moment I wanted to jump out or shout out loud, so loud that you would hear it, but then I wasn't yet an emigrant and my irritated reaction to this suggestion was always: "No, I'm not an emigrant, I shall go back home, I shall go back there soon..."

I did return, only to leave again, to leave again, maybe for good. I haven't left yet, I'm still walking along your pavements, but I am an emigrant, I am already an emigrant, that word scares me, that life scares me, that feeling of sadness scares me, but the Russians are here, the Russians are here and you are no longer the town for me and you never will be.

Once, a long time ago, oh, long before Cromwell, long before Luther, long before Robespierre, a revolution broke out in this country. A great, purging, cruel and appalling revolution, the first great revolution in Europe, the first against Rome and the first against the manor, the first against poverty. The tyrannical continent sent one army after another to suppress it, in vain; those armoured cavalrymen, those tanks of the Middle Ages, retreated in panic the moment they heard the battle cries of the Hussites. It took the cruel continent two centuries to completely crush the revolution, disperse it and seemingly push it into oblivion.

The cruel emperor put pressure on the remaining Czech Brothers, then the spiritual elite of Europe: "Come back, come back, you heretics, into the lap of the true mother, the Church, return and you can live here and enjoy your properties and you will be free and respected... they did not return, they left their homes, they left, dispersing to all corners of the world to teach the truth, preach the truth, speak the truth. When they crossed the border of their homeland, they kissed the soil and took handfuls of it with them as a memento, a keepsake, they wept and sang this mournful song:

"We have taken nothing with us, all is lost,
But the Kralice Bible and the Labyrinth of the World..."

This is how the intellectual elite of a small, humiliated nation departed. I, too, want to shout out, brothers, don't go! I must, I have no choice, but you who needn't, don't go, stay at home with this violated, humiliated people!

It is a vain call. The third wave of the liquidation of the Czechoslovak communist intelligentsia has begun. The third in the life of one generation. Will they leave? Will they gradually be lost like grains of sand in the desert? What if they don't leave? They will be abused, intimidated, crushed and exterminated.

It was too wonderful. Too wonderful... and too humane.

Ah, my homeland, hills, plains, forests, cliffs, how many hooves of enemy horses have trampled over you! The Romans built strongholds here, German tribes spread out along your rivers, the Huns whipped you, the Magyars, Germans, Poles, Swedes, Turks, French, Germans... what have you done to anyone? When have you waged an offensive war, when have you taken away others' freedom, what curse has hung over you, why do they all grind you down? Someone always frees you of freedom, someone always saves you from your own existence. They Germanised you, Magyarised you. And now the Russians have come...

I sat down on a bench in a little park near a plinth on which a bronze statue of Stalin used to stand.

Well, Iosif Vissarionovich, how does immortality feel? They took you down, desecrated you, threw you out of your mausoleum because you were cruel, evil, because you trampled on people's rights, because you went your own way, not looking to left or to right, the halo of your immortality did not survive you for even a decade, they put all the blame on you, even their own, they swore they would never let anything like that happen again, they called a whole period of development after you – Stalinism, the cult of personality...

He wasn't standing there on the plinth, but I had the feeling I could hear his sarcastic laughter roaring, echoing, over the whole town, over the country, carrying over the whole of the almost endless continent. Written in chalk on the plinth were the words: "Workers of the world unite, or I'll shoot!"

That seventh night I was gripped by panic. I got into a taxi. "To the Austrian border..."

I thought the driver would refuse, but he went there. The whole way he did not utter a single word...

Somewhere in Austria, 1 – 20 September, 1968

Translated by Heather Trebatická

Peter Karvaš

ARCHIMEDES

(Leseprobe)

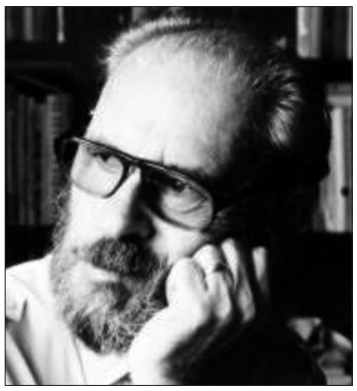


Photo: Peter Procházka

PETER KARVAŠ (1920 – 1999), Prosaiker, Dramatiker, Essayist, Theaterwissenschaftler, Diplomat
Das prosaische Talent von Peter Karvaš entwickelte sich in zwei Ebenen, die allerdings oft durcheinander kamen – einer ernsten und einer humoristisch-satirischen. Seine ersten Bücher reagierten auf die Kriegssituation und Verhältnisse in der Slowakei nach dem Münchner Abkommen. Im zweibändigen Prosawerk *Diese Generation* (Toto pokolenie, 1949) und *Die Generation im Angriff* (Pokolenie v útoku, 1952) hielt er die Genesis und die Verhältnisse in der Tschechoslowakei vor München fest. Seine Humoresken, Skizzen, Apokryphen, Gleichnisse und Essays zeichnen sich durch scharfe Ironie gerichtet gegen Karrierismus, Demagogie, Verrat von Idealen und Bürokratie aus. Hier die kurze Auswahl von vielen: *Der Teufel schläft niemals* (Čert nikdy nespí, 1957, Erzählungen und Skizzen), *Den Teufel an die Wand malen* (Maľovať čerta na stenu, 1970, satirische Skizzen), *Humoresken und andere Kurzweilen* (Humoresky a iné kratochvíle, 1989), *In Anführungszeichen* (V úvodzovkách, 1995, Essays). Parallel zur Prosa schrieb Karvaš Stücke für Theater und Rundfunk, in denen er vor allem eigene Erfahrungen mit beiden totalitären Regimen in der Slowakei seit 1939 ausnutzte. Seine Theaterstücke besitzen einen starken dramatischen Konflikt, vollblütige Charaktere, lebendige Sprache und gedankliche Schlagkraft mit ironischen Untertexten (*Die Mitternachtsmesse,* Polnočná omša, 1959, *Antigona und die anderen,* Antigona a tí druhí, 1961, *Absolutes Verbot,* Absolútny zákaz, 1970, und viele andere). Seine theoretischen Arbeiten zum Theater analysieren ästhetische Prinzipien des slowakischen Theaters und der Dramatik. Auch hier sucht und findet er Räume für Gesellschaftskritik. Peter Karvaš gehört zu den markantesten Persönlichkeiten der slowakischen Literatur und Dramatik. Seine Erzählungen und Theaterstücke wurden in viele Sprachen übersetzt und seine Dramen auf Hunderten von ausländischen Theaterszenen aufgeführt.

Als Archimedes, aufrecht und mit bloßem Kopf, durch die Straßen von Siracusa geführt wurde, blieben die Menschen stehen und sahen überrascht dem kleinen Umzug nach: Werden sie ihn etwa eingelocht haben? Oder ist das eine Ehreneskorte? Sei es wie es sei, es war komisch. Wieso würden sie einen stillen, bescheidenen Wissenschaftler festnehmen? Hat er Verrat begangen und ist er zu den Römern übergelaufen – das ist ja ausgeschlossen! Auf jeden Fall wurde der Gelehrte durch die Agora von Siracusa von einem ganzen Manipel der Hastaten geführt, von Soldaten in der ersten Linie, kommandiert vom Centurio Semporio Gratidano Burrus. Alle sahen, wie sie zum Haus des ehemaligen Tyranns steuerten und hineingingen.

Konsul Marcus Claudius Marcellus, der Kommandant der römischen Belagerungstruppen, der Eroberer und jetzt Kopf der militärischen Stadtverwaltung, lag im Garten des Hauses Gelonos, durch einige schnelle und witzige Eingriffe des Architekten zu einem Peristyl adaptiert, und aß frische Radieschen und gebratenen Schinken mit Eiern, was er mit sizilianischem Rotwein begoss (gleich nach seinem Sieg wurde das Bonmot verbreitet, wonach es sich schon alleine für diesen Wein ausgezahlt habe, diese Stadt zwei Jahre zu belagern).

In einem lockeren Halbkreis standen Liktoren mit Faszikeln, mit Akten, die von bevorstehender Amtsausübung zeugten. Und tatsächlich, nach einer Weile sah Konsul Marcellus, wie sich sein Tribun Publius Camillus Murena in voller Ausrüstung zwischen den Sträuchern, Beeten und Marmorsäulen näherte. Dieser trat an seinen Vorgesetzten heran, nahm breitbeinig eine festliche Körperhaltung ein und meldete düster:

„Marcellus, sie haben den Mann herbeigeführt."

„Her mit ihm!"

Archimedes kam in einer nicht neuen und nicht ganz sauberen Tunika herein. Centurio Burrus schob ihn auf den Wegen aus feinem rosaroten Sand unfreundlich voran. Marcellus schob Murena etwas zurück und änderte völlig seine Stimme. Er setzte einen jovialen und unerwartet milden Ausdruck auf.

„Sei gegrüßt, Archimedes, sei gegrüßt", rief er leutselig in einem perfekten Griechisch.

Der Gelehrte blickte überrascht zum Herrn über Leben und Tod in dieser unglücklichen Stadt. Er erwiderte heiser in seiner Muttersprache:

„Ich weiß nicht ganz, was ich antworten soll. Du musst anerkennen, dass ich die Götter nur sehr schwer bitten kann, dass sie deine Schritte am Boden von Siracusa segnen. Du würdest es mir auch nicht glauben, mein Herr."

„Nein." Der Konsul lachte herzhaft und wischte sich den Mund mit einem Tuch ab. „Das wirklich nicht. Ich habe gerade Prandium, möchtest du mitessen?"

„Nein, danke", entgegnete Archimedes kühl. „Wir Griechen frühstücken nur einmal. Ich habe bereits gegessen. Schafskäse, weißes Brot und einen Schluck Ziegenmilch."

Provozier mich nicht, dachte sich Marcellus kalt, provoziere nicht, Bruder, weil es ein schlechtes Ende mit dir nimmt. Er lachte jedoch lautstark. „Du brauchst nicht zu unterstreichen, dass du ein Grieche bist, Archimedes. Letztendlich ist es egal, seit ein paar Stunden bist du ein römischer Untertan."

„Das weiß ich", antwortete der Wissenschaftler kurz. „Darf ich mal fragen, warum deine Leute mich eingesperrt haben!?"

„Eingesperrt...?" wunderte sich Marcellus demonstrativ, „sie haben dich eingesperrt...?" Er schaute fragend und streng auf den Centurio. „Burrus, hast du den Herrn eingesperrt?" Er wandte sich an Archimedes. „Ich habe dir ein Ehrenkommando geschickt, um dich zu mir zu begleiten."

„Du hast mich mit Gewalt hierher begleitet", bemerkte Archimedes.

Marcellus wandte sich wieder an Burrus und befahl mit gehobener Stimme: „Kehrt! Abmarsch! Los!"

Der Hauptmann marschierte weg. Der Konsul schaute wieder sehr mild auf den Gelehrten und forderte ihn auf: „Fühle dich wie zu Hause."

Archimedes, scharfsinnig und würdig in seiner Gelassenheit, blickte zu den Liktoren mit Akten und Äxten sowie zum gut gebauten, glatt rasierten Tribun Murena in glänzender Rüstung und Paludament, einem wehenden Mantel, und lächelte mit den Mundwinkeln: „Das geht nur schwer", sagte er. „Obwohl ich zufällig zu Hause bin."

„Ihr seid zu empfindlich", merkte der Konsul kalt an.

„Besiegte, Gefangene, Untertanen sind immer irgendwie zu

empfindlich“, hielt Archimedes entgegen.

„Ich habe an euch Griechen gedacht“, fügte Marcellus hinzu und beendete das Intermezzo. „Man kann nichts machen.“

„Darf ich meine Frage wiederholen, Marcus Claudius Marcellus? Warum haben mich deine Leute festgenommen und herbeigeführt?“

„Leg dich nieder“, sagte der Konsul. „Hast du nicht gehört? Ich möchte mein Prandium fertig essen und mag nicht, wenn ich am Tisch allein liege.“

„Ich bleibe lieber stehen“, erwiderte Archimedes ruhig. „Im Leben werde ich noch viel liegen...“

Der Konsul beobachtete ihn eine Weile. Seine Augen verloren vollkommen den Ausdruck. Die Falten um den Mund und um die Nase verhärteten sich für einen Augenblick bösartig, aber später, als ob es ihm bewusst geworden wäre, zwang er sein Antlitz, sich aufzuheitern und wandte sich an Murena. „Lass es wegtragen.“ Die Speisen wurden weggetragen. Marcellus reichte die Hand. „Den Helm!“ befahl er. Sie reichten ihm den Helm und er setzte ihn auf. Alles war für eine Amtshandlung vorbereitet. Murena zog die tabulae ceratae, Wachstäfelchen, und einen Griffel heraus.

„Du bist stolz“, bemerkte Marcellus.

„Du meinst die Griechen“, sagte Archimedes bescheiden. „Kann ich gehen?“

„Überhaupt nicht“, lachte Marcellus. „Ich möchte mit dir reden. Ich habe deine Katoptik gelesen.“

Archimedes hob überrascht seinen Blick vom Gras und den rosaroten Steinen. „Interessiert dich etwa Physik?“

„Ein wenig“, lachte Marcus Claudius Marcellus und ein Lächeln überflog auch das Gesicht des Tribuns. „Auch den Efodotos habe ich gelesen. Sogar alle deine vier Aufgaben nachgerechnet. Witzige Sache, diese Integralrechnung. Wie sagst du dazu? Exhaust-Methode?“

„Bist du auch ein Mathematiker?“ fragte Archimedes mit Überraschung und ohne eine Spur Ironie. Eher schien es, dass er sogar eine unerwartete Freude hatte.

„Du sprichst mit einem der besten Physiker und Mathematiker des Jahrhunderts“, sagte Publius Camillus Murena.

„Das freut mich“, rief Archimedes aufrichtig, „das freut mich aber wirklich!“ Er wandte sich an Marcellus. „Wieso führst du Krieg, wenn ich fragen darf...? Wieso eroberst du fremde Städte...? Wieso sitzt du nicht zu Hause und rechnest?“

Der Konsul wandte sich zu seinem Kollegen. „Es ist Krieg, werter Freund. Und ich bin zum Konsul gewählt worden. Politik ist Politik. Und außerdem war die Eroberung von Siracusa ein reiner Pioniereinsatz! Aber erlaub mir zur Abwechslung eine Frage an dich. Warum führst du Krieg ...?“

„Ich...?“ wunderte sich der Wissenschaftler. „Ich glaube, ich verstehe dich nicht.“

„Wirklich nicht?“ Der Konsul schaute ihm direkt in die Augen. „Du hast mich gefragt, warum ich Krieg führe. Ich muss, ich bin der Konsul und derzeit dux classis, Flottenführer. Aber du –Privatmensch, Wissenschaftler. Warum führst du Krieg...?! Hm?“

„Aber ich...“ sagte leise und akzentuiert Archimedes, „ich bin doch nicht im Krieg! Ich habe mit dem Krieg nichts zu tun! Als deine Soldaten kamen, rechnete ich gerade die Fläche einer Ellipse. Seit Jahren beschäftige ich mich mit diophantischen Gleichungen. Was hat das mit eurem Krieg zu tun?“

Marcellus hätte ihn gerne gefragt, ob er bereits eine zuverlässige Methode für die Errechnung der Ellipsenfläche gefunden habe, er sagte jedoch hart: „Die Maschinen auf euren Befestigungen haben uns vier Schiffe vernichtet! Die Steinkatapulte haben uns eine classis longa versenkt und eure verdammten Spiegel haben Brand auf drei Triremen, Dreiruderern, gestiftet und sie auf den Meeresboden geschickt. Willst du sagen, dass du davon nichts weißt?“

„Ich habe davon gehört“, räumte der Gelehrte ein. „Seinerzeit wurde die Stadt von dieser Nachricht beherrscht.“

Der Konsul verfiel in Zorn. „Die Maschinen auf euren Befestigungen haben die Belagerung von Siracusa um mindestens ein Jahr verlängert“, schrie er.

„Tatsächlich?“ fragte Archimedes, offensichtlich erstaunt.

Der Römer beherrschte sich schon wieder. Der Tribun radierte aufmerksam und systematisch im Wachs. Es handelte sich um eine Einvernahme, und angesichts der geplanten Maßnahmen war es notwendig, die gesetzlichen Vorschriften zu beachten.

„Hör zu, Archimedes“, sprach leise und böse Marcus Claudius Marcellus, „willst du also sagen, dass du dich für die Versenkung unserer Schiffe nicht verantwortlich fühlst?“

„Ich?“ wunderte sich der Gelehrte, „aber ich?! Ich habe jahrelang keinen Schritt aus meinem Arbeitszimmer und Garten gemacht! Ich sitze und rechne, hie und da mache ich ein Experiment mit einem festen Gegenstand in einer Flüssigkeit, ab und zu gebe ich eine Papyrusrolle heraus... Diese kennt eine Handvoll Menschen – was hat das mit dem Krieg und mit euren Schiffen zu tun?“

Ich habe alles gelesen, was du herausgegeben hast, hätte M. C. Marcellus sagen wollen, ich habe deinen Aufsatz über den Schwerpunkt sowie die Papyrusrolle über das Gleichgewicht gelesen, den Artikel über die schiefe Ebene habe ich sogar experimentell überprüft, ebenso die Methode der Bestimmung des spezifischen Gewichts... Stattdessen donnerte er Archimedes an:

„Du hast also mit euren Verteidigungsgeräten nichts zu tun!“

Der Gelehrte zeigte seine Hände. Sie waren weiß, verwöhnt, intellektuell hilflos. „Kannst du dir vorstellen, Marcellus, dass ich mit diesen Händen einen Nagel einschlagen oder eine Bastkonstruktion zusammenbinden würde...?“

„Wer hat die Pläne dieser Geräte gezeichnet?“ fragte Marcellus scharf.

Der Griffel des Tribuns blieb in der Luft über einer glänzenden Wachsfläche hängen.

„Das weiß ich nicht“, sagte Archimedes deutlich. „Ich habe keine Ahnung.“ Hier wurde ihm plötzlich bewusst, worauf der Konsul zielte. Er protestierte empört.

„Ich kann überhaupt keine Pläne zeichnen! Das interessiert mich nicht! Ich bin Theoretiker! Ich habe mich nie für den Krieg interessiert!“

Für eine Weile trat Stille ein. In den schlanken Pinien wisperte die Brise. Vom Meer erschallten rhythmisch im Chor die Ausrufe der Legionäre, die auf Befehl schwere Lasten in Bewegung setzten: sie renovierten den Hafen, der von den Eroberern verwüstet und von den Eroberten vernichtet worden war. Konsul Marcellus machte einige Schritte, bei denen seine Kettenrüstung leise klirrte, dann kam er zurück und ließ sich abrupt auf seinen Sitzplatz aus Elfenbein nieder: die Symbole seines Amts waren nun komplett, der Spaß, die Höflichkeit und jedwede Kollegialität hörten auf.

„Archimedes“, sagte der Konsul mit unpersönlicher Stimme, „du bist angeklagt, dass du uns bei den Kämpfen um Siracusa große Schäden angerichtet hast und dass du mit deinen Erfindungen die Belagerung um das Doppelte verlängert und dadurch unsere weitreichenden Operationen in Sizilien verkompliziert hast. Was sagst du zu deiner Verteidigung?“

„Dass das ein vollkommener Unsinn ist!“ rief Archimedes. „Ich habe nie eine Kriegserfindung gemacht! Die Fläche und der Umfang des Kreises haben mit dem Krieg nichts zu tun! Ich bin Zivilist!“

„Hm“, sagte Marcellus, „also hör zu, du Zivilist. Das Steinkatapult, das uns einen Kreuzer versenkt hat, beruht auf deiner Hebeltheorie. Das Gerät, mit dem unsere Dreiruderer angezündet und deren Besatzungen verbrannt wurden, geht von deiner Theorie der Widerspiegelung der Wärmestrahlen von sphärischen Spiegeln aus. Sind das deine Theorien?“

„Das schon“, räumte Archimedes ein. „Ich trat jedoch nie auf die Befestigungen und sah keine Kriegsgeräte. Ich kann nichts dafür, dass jemand ein paar wissenschaftlich-populäre Artikel über meine Erfindungen gelesen und diese zu mörderischen Zwecken missbraucht hat.“

„Bist du dir sicher?“ fragte Marcellus versonnen.

„Womit?“ Der Gelehrte geriet ein wenig in Verwirrung.

„Dass du nichts dafür kannst."

„Natürlich nicht!" rief Archimedes. „Meine Erfindungen sind öffentlicher Besitz! Jeder kann mit ihnen nach eigenem Ermessen umgehen!"

„Hm", sagte Marcellus. „Zum Töten auch?"

„Das ist Demagogie!" erklärte Archimedes empört.

„Hast du etwas dagegen getan", fragte Marcellus, dass deine Gedanken, deine theoretischen Erfindungen nicht für die Kriegsführung missbraucht werden? Zum Töten der Menschen?"

„Bei Zeus, wie konnte ich nur?!" protestierte der Gelehrte wütend.

„Ich bin eine Privatperson! Laie! Zivilist! Ich habe keinen Einfluss auf militärische Operationen gehabt! Ich denke einfach über mathematische und physikalische Probleme nach! Keiner hat mich je etwas anderes gefragt!"

„Deine geschätzten Überlegungen", sagte Marcellus, „haben mich vier Kriegsschiffe gekostet. Und werden mich noch vierzigtausend Stimmen bei künftigen Wahlen kosten. Das schreibst du nicht", wandte sich Marcellus an den Tribun militum. Er stand auf. Er winkte Archimedes mit einer Geste zu sich, nahm ihn am Ellbogen und führte ihn in eine entfernte Ecke des Gartens, in der sie alleine waren.

„Woran arbeitest du zurzeit?" fragte er den Wissenschaftler gleichsam nebenbei.

„An der Quadratur der Parabel, am Ellipsoid, am rotierenden Paraboloid und so ähnlich", erwiderte Archimedes.

„Hm", sagte der Konsul und hustete. „Ich habe einen Vorschlag für dich."

„Was für einen Vorschlag?"

„Schau", sprach Marcellus wohlbedacht. „Du steckst in beispiellosen Problemen, ich kenne aber die Art und Weise, wie ich dir helfen kann." Der Gelehrte schwieg. Der Dux classis setzte fort: „Zivil bin ich Ingenieur. In Rom habe ich ein ordentlich funktionierendes Unternehmen. Etwas wie ein Planungsbüro. Wir bauen Häuser, Brücken, Zirkusse und so. Nichts mit dem Militär. Ich beschäftige circa vierzig Menschen, meistens Griechen. Alle sind gute Köpfe. Ich nehme dich jetzt pro forma gefangen, verstehst du, nach meiner Rückkehr in Rom nimmst du – gefesselt, das musst du mir verzeihen – an meinem Triumphmarsch durch die Stadt teil, und dann bekommst du eine gut bezahlte Stelle in meinem Institut."

„Soll ich für dich statische Rechnungen von Brückenpylonen oder Ställen für Gladiatoren machen?"

„Nein! Im Gegenteil! Verstehst du mich nicht? Du wirst deine Entdeckungen fortsetzen! In meiner Firma, aber absolut frei!"

„Ich möchte lieber hier in Siracusa weitermachen", sagte Archimedes widerstrebend.

„Hier bleibst du allerdings ein unbekannter Amateur", zischte Marcellus, „in ein paar Jahren wird sich kein Schwein für dich interessieren! In Rom machst du dir einen Namen, deine Erfindungen werden sich über den ganzen Erdkreis verbreiten!"

„Um sie dann überall zu Militärzwecken missbrauchen zu können?" fragte Archimedes leise.

„Hm", überlegte Marcellus. „Als du den Efodotos vorbereitet hast – wie viele Gleichungen hast du ausrechnen müssen...?"

„Ungefähr dreißig Tausend", entgegnete Archimedes.

„Siehst du! Bei mir brauchst du keinen Finger zu rühren! Du kommst mit einem Grundgedanken und meine Leute machen die mechanischen Rechnungen für dich!"

„Wie eine Maschine", merkte Archimedes unbeteiligt an.

„Genau!" bestätigte Marcellus und war froh, dass sie sich endlich gut verstanden. „Nimmst du es an?"

„Aber nein", sagte Archimedes. „Es ist ein Schwachsinn."

„Wieso?" staunte Marcellus.

„Ich weiß nicht genau", sagte Archimedes nachdenklich. „Nirgendwo auf der Welt gibt es so einen guten Käse und gute Milch wie hier in Siracusa..."

Du bist ein Narr, blitzte es dem Konsul durch den Kopf. Ein Narr wie alle Genies.

Er wandte sich jäh zum Tribun und den Liktoren und setzte sich energisch auf den Elfenbeinstuhl. „Hast du noch etwas dazu sagen, Archimedes?" fragte er ihn mit einer Stimme, bei der die Schwalben tot ins Perystil gestürzt wären, wenn sie ihn gehört hätten.

„Ja", sagte Archimedes. „Ich möchte eine Erklärung abgeben."

„Wir lauschen", sagte Marcellus und nickte dem Tribun zu.

„Was unsere Befestigungen und die Geräte betrifft... ich habe meine Ansicht geändert."

„In welchem Sinn?"

„Ich fühle mich dafür verantwortlich."

Der Tribun radierte. Marcellus beugte sich zum Häftling. „Hör zu, Archimedes, sei nicht verrückt. Es ist noch nicht alles verloren. Achte auf jedes Wort. Mein Angebot bleibt aufrecht."

„Nein, nein... Ich kann doch in bestimmtem Maße für die Maschinen. Und ich bin auf eine Art und Weise froh, dass sie von meinen Erfindungen ausgehen und dass es sie sonst nicht geben könnte."

„Froh?! Ist dir bewusst, was du sagst?!"

„Und dass wir ohne sie die ganzen zwei Jahre nicht durchgehalten hätten!"

Marcellus stoppte den Tribun mit einer Geste und fragte den Kollegen suggestiv aus der Nähe: „Beharrst du auf dem, was du gesagt hast? Überleg ein bisschen, Archimedes! Das wird ein Präzedenzfall in der Geschichte sein, den man nicht wieder gut machen kann, du Unglücklicher! Ein Gelehrter, der sich öffentlich zu den mörderischen Geräten bekennt, die aufgrund seiner Gedanken entstanden! Das hat es noch nicht gegeben! Möchtest du die Verantwortung dafür übernehmen...?!"

„Es gibt hier ein kleines Detail", sagte Archimedes sanft. „Hätten die Unseren die Maschinen genommen und wären sie Rom erobern gegangen... hätte ich wohl protestieren müssen. Das ist jedoch nicht passiert. Ihr seid nach Siracusa gekommen, nicht wir nach Rom. Ich bin froh, dass ich euch zwei Jahre Widerstand leisten konnte."

„Das ist aber purer Größenwahn!" rief Marcellus spöttisch und empört.

„Ich glaube, jetzt ist es genug", sagte Publius Camillus Murena und klappte die Wachstafeln zu. „Soll ich ihn wegführen lassen...?"

Der Konsul drehte versonnen den Kopf. „Nein", sagte er. „Du bist frei", wandte er sich zum Wissenschaftler.

Archimedes blickte verwundert zu ihm. Er schluckte. Er verbeugte sich ein wenig. „Wenn du eine Bitte erlaubst", meldete er sich halblaut.

„Ich weiß nicht, ob du darüber informiert bist, aber deine Soldaten plündern Siracusa. Das wäre vielleicht nicht notwendig."

Marcellus sprang auf. Seine Stimme überschlug sich. „Es ist überhaupt nicht notwendig! Ich scheiße auf euer Siracusa! Ich brauche es nicht! Ich habe es erobern müssen, um Agrigentum und Marsala besetzen und das zweite und dritte punische Expeditionskorps abschneiden zu können! Ist das klar?"

„Es ist ganz klar", antwortete Archimedes, und in seinen jugendlichen Augen blitzte etwas Hohn, „obwohl ich nur ein Theoretiker bin und mich eher bei den Fragen des Auftriebs und der Spirale auskenne..."

„Hinaus!" donnerte Marcus Claudius Marcellus.

Der Gelehrte verbeugte sich kaum merklich, drehte sich um und ging durch die verstümmelten Oliven- und Feigenbäume weg.

Publius Camillus Murena trat an den Konsul heran. „Soll ich ihn fangen lassen?" fragte er. Der Konsul schüttelte den Kopf. „Er wird also nicht hingerichtet? Mit der Axt und öffentlich, wie es im Gesetz steht? Ist es überhaupt zumutbar, dass er am Leben bleibt...?"

„Nein", sagte der Konsul. „Das versteht sich von selbst. Aber es ist auch nicht zumutbar, dass Rom die Verantwortung für die luxuriöse Hinrichtung eines großen Gelehrten übernimmt. Das würde sich für uns politisch nicht auszahlen."

„Ich verstehe", nickte der Tribun militum. „Er muss unauffällig zur Seite geschafft werden."

„Unauffällig ist zu wenig", sagte Marcus Claudius Marcellus.

„Es muss so geschehen, dass wir dann die Möglichkeit haben, unser Bedauern offiziell auszusprechen. Ist das klar?“

„Klar“, sagte der Tribun.

„Und verbreiten Sie eine glaubwürdige Version“, befahl der Konsul, der plötzlich müde wurde.

Der Tribun nickte und die Wache rief den Centurio Sempronio Gratidano Burrus. Murena sagte zu ihm: „Hast du in deiner Kohorte einen besonders dummen und beschränkten Kerl?“ Der Hauptmann verstand nicht, der Tribun musste die Frage wiederholen. Sie vereinbarten, dass sie den Betroffenen ins Haus von Archimedes schicken würden, damit er einen Streit wegen einer Lappalie anfinge, im Laufe dessen der Wissenschaftler tödlich verletzt würde.

„In den offiziellen Bericht schreiben Sie“, sagte der Konsul, „dass der geniale Archimedes gerade Kreise im Sand zeichnete und dem betrunkenen Legionär ‚Noli tangere circulos meos’ sagte. Archimedes befasst sich im Moment zwar nicht mit Kreisen, aber spräche man vom rotierenden Paraboloid, verstünde das auch in tausend Jahren niemand. Und es lässt sich nicht gut in den Sand zeichnen.“

Die Römische Nachrichtenagentur brachte die Nachricht noch am selben Abend. Keiner stellte sich merkwürdigerweise die Frage, warum Archimedes eine Sprache benutzte, die er nicht beherrschte.

Übersetzt von Simon Gruber

Milan Hamada

THE SIXTIES AND THE PRESENT

Photo: Authors' Archive

Prof PhDr. MILAN HAMADA, DrSc. (1933), prominent Slovak literary theoretician, historian and critic. He studied Slovak, Russian and literary science at the Philosophical Faculty of Comenius University in Bratislava (1952 – 1957). After graduating, he first worked as an editor in the Osveta publishing house in Martin. In 1954, as an aspirant, he began working as a researcher in the Department of Slovak Literature at the Slovak Academy of Sciences where he remained until 1972. In 1969 – 1970 he lectured on Slovak literature, part-time, at the Faculty of Education of Comenius University in Trnava. In 1969, he became editor-in-chief of *Literárny život* which was, after several issues, banned by the communist regime. Because of his civil and political views, he lost his work during the period of normalization and was forbidden to publish books and magazine articles. He took a job at the Slovak Pedagogical Library. After the fall of communism he returned to the Department of Slovak Literature. In 1992 he acquired the degree of Doctor of Science for his work *The Birth of Modern Slovak Culture* (Zrod novodobej slovenskej kultúry). In 1990 – 1992 he lectured, part-time, at the Philosophical Faculty of Comenius University. From 1993 up to the present, he has been lecturing at the Trnava University. On July 1st, 1993 he was awarded the Golden Medal by the Slovak Academy of Sciences and in 1994 he received the Dominik Tatarka prize. Vladimír Petrík, a literary critic, wrote: "Milan Hamada entered the critical arena professionally prepared and with solid conception, and found enough strength to implement it against his opponents. He considers literature to be an important organ of the spiritual life of a nation and criticism a partnership of two creative personalities."

I shall begin this reflection on the sixties with the polemic between two protagonists of this decade – Milan Kundera and Václav Havel about the Czech destiny. Before this polemic I wrote an essay on the *Destiny of Sisyphus*. This was a polemic about the Czechoslovak experiment and its culmination in 1968. According to Havel, its only meaningful purpose was to renew liberal democracy in Czechoslovakia with all its accompanying phenomena, including its failings. According to Kundera, it was an attempt to create a new form of social system that began to be sketched out during the "Prague Spring", or the Czechoslovak Spring. Havel took an ironic attitude to Kundera's opinion, saying that Kundera wanted to present the return of some freedoms, the abolition of censorship, and so on as something unique in the world, while these were values that were taken for granted in the civilized world.

In my reflections on the fate of Sisyphus, I said that it was the fate of small nations to be fake subjects who, in reality, are only objects of the politics of Great Powers that are governed by a pragmatically utilitarian idea of life. I expressed an opinion that the world was no longer divided horizontally, but mostly vertically and I understood the military intervention against Czechoslovakia in 1968 as the consequence of the Great Power division of the world into humanizing and dehumanizing powers. Our revival movement realized very clearly that it was above all the human face of politics, its human meaning, that would be decisive. And so we made a stand against the dehumanizing forces who were supported by a power freed from any human obligation, a power that saw its meaning in itself, since otherwise it would not have used the means of heavy military force.

This was a battle between culture and power that was Sisyphean, since it was a battle of the powerless that tried to change the world with the power of the spirit. What remained to us, and what we could consider our own and what carried the seal of the social and human independence and sovereignty was the independence and sovereignty of our spirit. We could not give that up for any price, particularly not for the price of quick profit. That was because by giving up our spiritual independence we would be left with nothing that could confirm our human dignity and our truth.

Kundera's statement that the people were here not for socialism but, on the contrary, socialism was here for the people, the power answered with violence against both people and socialism. Those who declared that they would not bury socialism gave up both socialism and their nation. Those who did this for the first time in 1948 and in 1968, were often the same people. The first time they fell for a Utopia; the second time they fell for an obvious lie.

So what were the sixties all about? We were returning to the sources, to the division of the world into winners and losers and we went back to the original meaning of socialism as the liberation of man, that is to the overcoming of the division

between the winners and losers and to the integration of the human being. A witness to this effort could be the 1964 polemic between Vladimír Mináč and the generation of the sixties. Our attitude had a clearly anthropological dimension, re-evaluating the meaning of the social revolution. We rejected the view of the revolution as some depersonalized force, a god, or fate, and so on. We rejected the religious concept of the revolution and a religious attitude to it. "Revolution was made by people and many of them found out that in a revolution a person had to defend himself not only against the enemies, but also against the revolution itself, against the force unleashed in it. To accept its cruelty meant to accept its anomalous and animalistic form." That was why, following the bad experience that we went through in the fifties, we have demanded the human transcendence of the social revolution.

It came to a fundamental choice between two interpretations of Marxism. The first, dogmatic, interpretation saw history as a change of social relationships, social systems, a period of wars and revolutions. The second, a philosophical-anthropological interpretation, was based on human existence and focussed on stressing the anthropological constants. One could compare it to the discussions going on in the sixties in the West, when a French philosopher, J.F. Lyotard, also identified two kinds of Marxism: he characterized the first one as a "metanarrative concept of the march of mankind towards socialism representing the equivalent of the life of the Spirit" (Stalinism), and the second was characterized by a critical knowledge that constituted an autonomous subject (the position of the critical theory by the Frankfurt School). Our position was close to the latter, so the polemic with the dogmatic Marxism could be characterized as an argument between the interpretation of Marxism as a deterministic theory of the supra-personal march of history *versus* Marxism as an anthropological vision of the liberation of man. Mináč, as a representative of the dogmatic Marxism, wrote: "There can be various interpretations of Marxism, but only one of them can be right." Obviously, his own. And he accused the young generation of uncritical acceptance of existentialism and other decadent Western movements.

And so, in the sixties a new form of culture was shaping itself, when the philosophically non-ideological point of view pushed out the political-ideological class and party criteria. Besides the concept issuing still from the political determination of society and man, the new wave began to look at society and man from the philosophical-anthropological and existential-phenomenological point of view. These thinkers were seeking deeper transformations of the human type behind the social changes; ones that would be more permanent and that would deepen and transcend the limits of social-political changes. Behind the *a priori* image of socialist man there existed a real human type who had to be discovered since it was this type that represented the real destiny of man. And this was how they uncovered the loss of certainty, the disintegration of man, the loss of identity, the anonymity of power, and so on. At the same time, in the West, the beatniks rose up against this type of reality in the USA, reacting to the massive violations of human and citizen's rights in their country, to racial segregation, to the McCarthy-type persecution of famous personalities (Leonard Bernstein, Charlie Chaplin, Arthur Miller, and many others). The European activists, on the other hand, were disappointed by the imperfect bureaucratic social system and demanded real emancipation, especially the emancipation of man of which spoke Jan Patočka, but also ourselves, when we formulated our programme of liberation of man that was close to Patočka's almost in the form of a manifesto: "We had enough of monoliths, hegemons, and iron men. The history that our generation experienced since our childhood did not fill us with optimism and in no way are we carelessly going to accept that history (the one to come) would be too much for us. Our generation does not want to give in to fatalism; not even when someone promises us bright future. Mináč's fatalism, or, to put it nicely, his faith that history irrevocably aims towards an optimistic conclusion, fails to satisfy our generation. Because, while he perceives the world from above, we look at it and into it mainly from the place and situation in which we find ourselves. We perceive history as a history of people and not as a history of a fictitious social organism, or more correctly a machine that neglects man. This is why we do not invent theories about "honest hypocrites" and consider the ethical point of view to be eminently political and that, what Mináč and his like-minded people judge to have been a historical by-pass, a historical mistake (that is, Stalinism), we call a degradation of humanity that impacted our entire social organism and each of us in our human essence. That is why we do not see our interest in the human individual, in man, as individualism, but we justify it by our effort to find forces that work within us and outside of us. We do not want to make excuses such as unfavourable conditions, we do not want to rebel against the determination of the world outside. We do not want to react merely to what is being given to us, but we want to be active co-creators of the conditions in which we have to live as human beings." A section of Slovak culture identified with reality seen and known in this way. At first it was Dominik Tatarka, in his *Demon of Conformism*, in his *Endless Conversations,* in his *Wicker Chairs*, and essays with penetrating analysis that created a Slovak variant of existential culture, exploiting the entire wealth of the native poetic and artistic avantgarde. This was an effort that was joined by poets, prose writers, artists and others of my generation. It was an effort to unmask and analyse the condition of society and man as a provisional being, something with which we could not live. And at the same time we were not talking about some political provisionality, but one in the relationship between human beings, in the values of existence, and so on. Works of art appeared that were no longer ideological (we rejected ideologies) but were full of ideas in the sense of investigating the possibilities and limits of man as a human being.

And again there appeared a fundamental tension between the two approaches on the side of a conservative opinion that warned that "destructiveness of various kinds reaches in the modern world to the very essence of life, that it threatens the very existence of man." At the same time, the author of this warning continued: "For me it is incomprehensibly cowardly if art, or what purports to be art nowadays, willingly serves the forces of destructiveness, when it slavishly submits to the general atmospheric pressure." Here he improperly fuses the destructive forces acting in the world with the artistic analysis of these forces and in addition, brands as destructive the efforts that penetrated to the roots of the reality, such as it was.

The movement of thought of a section of Slovak intellectuals expressed scepticism towards the passive ideological-political understanding and above all a system that ruled people in the interest of the Communist Party which acted as a power centre.This skepticism deepened, and some, in the spirit of this social revival movement, came to reject ideologies that handicapped men and they became radical critics of the "socialist" society and the political violence that culminated in the military suppression of the revival movement by the armies of the Warsaw Pact. This was a tragic end to an attempt to arrive at a democratic form of society, its culture, literature, and art.

I characterize the sixties as a process that aimed at the gradual transformation of the totalitarian political regime into a democratic one. My part in it was mostly intellectual, rather than concretely political. The monthly *Slovak Views* (*Slovenské pohľady*) unlike the weekly *Cultural Life* (*Kultúrny život*), was more interested in the deeper philosophical-political problems. Of significance was our cooperation with Czech intellectuals like Václav Černý, Karel Kosík, Robert Kalivoda and many others.

When I evaluate the sixties, I am not one of those who speak about a lost opportunity; an effort of the spirit can never be lost

if we don't give up; it continues under any conditions even though in different forms. Opinions that evaluate the sixties critically, like those of Havel, I do not treat polemically, I merely stress that the democratic movement of the sixties cannot be reduced to a purely political movement. Its intellectual form I see analogically with Patočka's understanding of the Platonic political philosophy that, despite seeing the unrealizable nature of its ideal in a given time or ever, cannot walk away from it. Like Plato, Patočka had before his eyes a community that was, in distinction to the Greek aristocracies, tyrannies, and democracies, internally one and where the main role of the state would be to awaken man to be autonomous. Plato's community is an empire that lifts man from the simple existence given to him to the genuine one. We equally understood the process of transcendence, self-improvement, and Patočka's effort to revive the original sense of socialism as a liberation of man. Look, today, there is no Communist Party in power with its total control. The political regime is democratic and nevertheless, one has to struggle all the time for the fundamental things, such as the freedom of man. What is at stake is what Patočka called concern about the soul, about the outer and inner cleansing of the individual that alone is capable of giving life to the individual and giving society its necessary unity, to give one the inner centre that each of us potentially keeps as unfulfilled meaning of one's life. Some of us, though not the politicians, increasingly realize that true freedom is difficult to achieve in the environment of a democracy that is fully beholden to the power of money and group interests.

Reflecting on the Prague or Czechoslovak Spring, we should switch from stressing the rule of one party and think of the rule of the civil society that became more influential than party politics. It is not an accident that in connection with the Czechoslovak experiment and its suppression they talk about "apolitical politics," which is relevant even today on the background of changes in paradigms of liberal democracy that seem to be mired in worldwide crisis. It is enough to remember Raymond Aron who pointed out the degeneration of civil society and its change into a society of producers and consumers, and to hedonism and the loss of meaning of life. In connection with the sixties, the political thinker Jiří Dienstbier noted that "after November, many of our Western friends had hoped that we would reconnect with the ethos of the Prague Spring and Charter 77 and would make a contribution towards overcoming the failings of the Western society. They were disappointed when we attempted to copy their standards. Nevertheless, their illusions testify that this ethos was not forgotten in the international community and that it could be inspirational even for us." We are more and more troubled by the reappearance of the pre-November politics. We should activate the citizen's initiatives and the resistance of the free people to the politics that wants to turn us into a manipulated mass. Again we see the makings of a power that sees meaning in itself and it is basically irrelevant whether it is our own and not a Great Power. They both seek to rule and not to administer public affairs. It is time to resurrect the free spirit of 1968 and November 1989.

Translated by Peter Petro

Ivan Kadlečík

TAROT

(Extract)

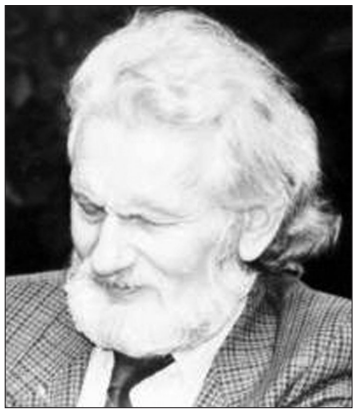


Photo: Peter Procházka

IVAN KADLEČÍK (1938), a poet, prose writer, literary critic and essayist, born on April 8, 1938 in Modra. He studied Slovak at the Philosophical Faculty of Comenius University. He worked at the City Archive in Košice and on the staff of the daily *Pravda*. In 1968 he started working for Matica slovenská in Martin, where he edited the biweekly *Matičné čítanie*. For his outspoken political attitudes he was dismissed in 1970 and banned from publishing. He lived and worked in Pukanec as manager of a book shop. Since 1990 he has worked in the Institute of Slovak Literature in Bratislava.

Kadlečík's first book, a selection of his literary criticism titled *From Sermons on the Plains* (Z reči v nížinách, 1973, samizdat), was banned before publication and officially published twenty-two years later. After the invasion of Warsaw Pact armies in 1968 Kadlečík was considered *persona non grata* and together with some other authors pushed outside culture and society. Kadlečík reacted to this pressure by searching more deeply for his roots. For him, autobiographical motifs and the stressing of authenticity belong to the most important moments of the creative process. The long-lasting correspondence with the Czech proscribed writer Ludvík Vaculík led to the development of another genre – epistolary literature – and to publication of their correspondence under the title *Paco Rubato* in 1994.

In the 1970's Kadlečík turned completely towards more personal genres (autobiography, epistolary literature, essays). It was manifested for the first time in the book *Rhapsodies and Miniatures* (Rapsódie a miniatúry, 1981) with an autobiographical quality. Nature for him means the circulation of life, the kinship of all living beings. A special motif in his work is that of music. He devoted to it a special chapter in his book *Last Year Like Today* (Vlani ako dnes, 1997), where it becomes a part of his pantheistic understanding of natural processes. A bridge between the 1970's and 1990's is formed by *Epistles* (Epištoly, 1992), containing mainly of correspondence and diary entries. In terms of genre, there are two exceptional works in the 1990's – a work of prose *Tarot* (Taroky, 1997) and the collection of poems *The Heart Is Called ň* (Srdce sa volá ň, 1994).

III

The female body stirred and moved to the left side of the chair. Maybe twenty or twenty-five seconds later its hand stretched out and in slow motion placed a sweater on top of a bra. The bra looked very dark in that light: it was probably black, but an unknown reader cannot say that for sure, he is just a boy from the countryside.

Then the hand suddenly moved, prior to which it grabbed the bra in her fingers, but unfortunately, goddamit!, the bra snagged on the sweater by the hook and the hand simultaneously lifted the bra and the foreign-made sweater, which was sticking out and touching the armrest with its entire weight. The woman's body turned around to see what caused this horrible insolence

that prevented moving the bra. When the body noticed that the bra was caught by a hook on the sweater, it dropped it on the floor and turned towards the mirror, which hung in front of the body like a hanged man. The body raised its arms and wrung them: now what? How do you unwring wrung hands? However the clever body came up with a solution. From the front you could see that it wedged its hands in between its legs. That's better than keeping them wrung in the air. It straightened up and the shoulder blades ruffled the skin on the back. It stood upright opposite the shiny mirror, which was joyously absorbing it. Then it shivered and nervously looked around the room as if someone was watching it. Of course, there was a Slovak writer watching it through the peephole, but that doesn't count until they translate his works into German.

To be more precise the writer – maybe it was Kaval, registered under code name Minister – right in this moment, maybe four minutes earlier, walked into the Danube Bar, shortly hesitating under the curious glances of some guests, which we won't name for now, and darted over to the cashier. He liked bar cashiers, the prosperous cashiers, regal, submerged into a dream interrupted as *coitus interruptus* by handing out Slovak crowns. Looking tired and without a smile she handed him a phone card, because he had forgotten his portable phone in the car. It was almost 4 a.m. and he felt guilty, a fashionable feeling back then. He didn't love the woman's body, that was the worst thing about it, but he wanted to know what she was doing, and this thought bothered him all day long. The phone made a chicken-like sound and right after you could hear the voice of the dialed body:

"Who is it?"

The frightened writer froze, afraid that the body would know it was him, afraid that he would get caught, just as he wanted to catch it. It was a horrible moment. Then he took out a green box of Csarda cigarettes from his pocket and hung up. With his right hand he turned on the ignition of his white Mercedes and hurried to hide out at the Club, presently again on 2 Laurinska Street. For a short while he hesitated under the glances of a few national artists, laureates of ministerial honors, which need not be named. They were playing Blackjack and Bavarian tarot with coppers.[2]

The entire woman's body felt like it is far away from all sorts of evil not even worrying about what kind of effect the evil could have on it. But now it understood that in the core of its being it collected so much evil, that its only responsibility after the fall of Communism was to decrease the amount of evil to the lowest possible level, that maybe it would even give a hundred crowns to the Catholic Church, or possibly give a few bucks to save the Stoka Theater. The body wasn't afraid that it would succumb to some bodily instinct but it did not want to remind itself of doing the thing that overwhelmed it not too long ago.

The writer doesn't know, but the readers probably know what it is. They told the woman's body about some fault that the author supposedly committed; the body did not understand the meaning of the words, it could not imagine his fault, for a while it connected her with the evening when it felt pleasure for the first time, as her colleagues at the Ministry of Interior used to talk about it, it thought that he is guilty by signing on to cooperate, that he enriched his body, that he revealed knowledge to it that the body did not know before, it thought that it made him guilty in its womb, it just did not understand how the others could have known about it.

In moments like this even the author's guilty feelings returned and kept flooding him until he started resisting it. In the beginning he didn't care if that feeling of guilt exists inside him because he masturbates, or because he admitted his guilt from the times of normalization and socialist realism. All those nights with his arms folded under his head, if he was not in the Writers' Club, he dissected his case in detail. His eyes, blood shot from lack of sleep, swelled up.

"You can't do it?"

"No, not at all, and if I am in a state like this, it is unlikely that it will happen at all. The important thing is what will show up later. To write means to have a personal computer and possibly, if it cannot be done any other way, at least some thought for the beginning. If you don't know anything, just write. If I only knew what that Hungarian tarot is!"

It's night, and like a spring, a daring desire stems from me. I desire not to be silent.

He started his novel again: 'I felt lonely, so I decided to make some tea. Besides, it makes me feel warmer.' He felt the sentence sounded right. Right, and unnecessary. But it was perched up on top of the page, actually the first paragraph. The author probably wanted to start differently. But he couldn't. He wanted to get to the point right away. But what point and what was the notion of the point?

Instead he began to read the directions and examined the piston applicator. He was even interested in the makeup of the birth control agent. It was made up of hydrargyrum phenyloboricum, acidum boricum in the background of hydrophilic methylcellulose gel, a hundred gram content. He read it and at the same time looking at the pictures, imagined the application method. He got a little sad and put the package away in the bottom drawer. He got a headache, thinking it must have been from the writing. In the hope of forgetting about his headache, he lit a cigarette, but it got even worse after about three pulls. In the regular cigarette box on the table he found, god knows why, a stick of sugar-free Wrigley's Orbit gum. He unwrapped a piece, put it in his mouth and put out the cigarette in an ashtray made of cut crystal which was placed in the right hand corner of his desk. The table was made from massive walnut wood with soft marquetry. He stole it from the Ethnographic Museum in Martin, from the centre of national culture and municipal knowledge. He realized that smoking was no longer fashionable in the United States, what a shame. The smoke irritated his nostrils so he opened the window to air out the room. The fresh air from Dimitrovka chemical plant refreshed him and while leaning out of the window and watching the well lit and clean streets, and the glowing faces of his countrymen, he figured he would write something tomorrow, or go fishing in the morning so he and the woman's body could cook some fish in the evening: he knew that the body liked fish, especially fresh fish, ungutted, from fresh mountain creeks, that foam like a light pasteurized cooled lager beer from Banská Bystrica near Zvolen. And he got scared a little that he wouldn't catch anything, only if...

"I am happy that we are friends," the woman's body said dreamily.

He kissed its palm.

"You know," the woman's body continued, "in the joint stock company where I work, and which I like very much because it is my kind of an environment, the majority of people, I'm not saying they're cynical, but more like without a childhood or youth, but you are young, you have to remain like that."

"I'll try. I'll even dye my bald spot."

The body spoke with a lovely seriousness. The author felt really young then: his cheeks were hot and he pressed his lips to the woman's delicate wrist, interwoven with small blue veins.

The writer wanted to describe all this, to write it by hand, as a handwritten, guaranteed, warranted, unique work as opposed to the quality ready-made non-uniqueness...

But the feminist body said all of a sudden:

"Leave me alone, let me be. It doesn't have to be. I trust you, you know that."

If he had been a few years older and all gray, he would have insisted. But he wasn't, and that saved him. He got up almost apologizing and walked to the door: it was once manufactured in Smrečina Pukanec, that is Exanuco Ltd, or Inc.; he almost made a mistake, when he was entering it, but it ended well. The body

was alone with a boring and dreamless night ahead of it.

Almost the entire woman's body was convinced that it was worthless. The work it did seemed to it as a wild hankering and its own actions seemed senseless to it. First thing in the morning when it was getting up, the body understood that the change it and the dissidents wanted had not come. The body grabbed its underwear and threw them into a wicker basket made from a birch tree, and right after that took out a fresh pair from the closet – the body changed its underwear everyday, unless it forgot, of course – and it put them on in two quick movements, the first movement went up to its knees and the second one, after a short one minute pause, all the way up to the crotch. This is how it did it every morning before it washed itself, had some breakfast, if there was any; the body usually had some milk or tea with a bun, a hot dog, a hamburger from McDonald's on SNP Square, just about anything, and on top of that a croissant with butter and strawberry jam or any jam, and then it cleaned its teeth, almost all of them.

But even so, it had a feeling of guilt, darker and more mysterious, which it did not understand and from which no one, not even the author blamed it, but nevertheless the body felt guilty and shallow, disgusting and revolting and dirty. Luckily, there was enough universal washing detergent without phosphate, excitement and soaking, and for a reasonable price.

But the author did not go mushroom-picking as he had planned. He had to take part at a political meeting. He didn't understand where he was, he only realized that his body, legs and arms were intertwining with the legs and arms of other men and women, and in the commotion he managed to notice the terrifying picture of a group intercourse. After a short while – we can't specify it more precisely – he was sticky from the secretions of surrounding bodies; collective sperm, in our language "seeds", glued up his eyes, nose and ears, and thrown to the ground he jerked in general ecstasy, which was, he didn't know exactly, as always, either accentuated or muffled by the mounting stench until he couldn't take it any longer and passed out. When he woke up he noticed that just like him others had also passed out and many had died. He got scared and he didn't know whether they had died from the Siberian winter, fear, not thinking and faithfulness or from the draining ecstasy which joyfully took over them.

In a desperate attempt at self-preservation he searched for a recollection from childhood, at least genetically uncertain, but his memory failed him.

Fathers did not write so they would remember. They wrote because they remembered.

"I didn't have a childhood and maybe not even any ancestors. Oy, if only I could convince any theatre or a literary magazine."

Even the woman's body gained by marriage disappeared in the mist of his native valleys, that is in his eyes' mist. According to the instructions, he watched its faint shadow on the fence of trees in front of him, he even tried to imitate its walk, lithe, very short and economic, absorbing it into himself, extracting it from the mist, but the body was walking faster than he was, visibly getting further from him, disappearing, and he stopped following it. Where did it go? Which way did it go and where was he walking now?

The writer, thank god, doesn't know: but the reader possibly suspects what is going on today.

Even Y does not know about all this. He was just mushroom-picking in the oak coppice in the part of the village called Where the Cow Limped, wringing his hands and desperately calling in the dark forest:

"Show up, please, show up!"

And suddenly he was surrounded by a flock of small golden chanterelles[3], as if they were hungry, sad or cold. He leaned down in front of them, unwrung his hands and placed the tiny bodies gently into the wicker basket. They will make a chanterelle goulash or paprikash.

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1. Writer Svetozár Hurban Vajanský once joked, when he walked down the street in Turčiansky Svätý Martin, with a parted gray Russian beard, in a jacket and with a cane, and stopped by at the Brtáň's for a game of tarot and a glass of Martinian beer:

"Oh, I could really use some apparatus to get in touch with my colleagues in St. Petersburg, Ljublana and Prague faster!"

So he went to the royal district post-office headquarters, where a nice looking lady courteously explained to him that the invention is being worked on abroad; he will just have to wait patiently a couple of years.

"Of course," said the writer, "maybe in a hundred years life will be easier for people, what's the rush, there's time enough," and he looked at the big chronometric watch on a thick chain with a smile. It was a gift from a thankful nation. For all the riches he had and gave away: a watch. Of course, Vajanský with his watch or without it, remains through his work – unlike the offices – and will last, until there is culture in the world and until there is culture and love, attention and honor to our own man.

The writer in Pukanec joked once when he returned home almost blind from complicated eye surgery:

"Oy, I could really use a phone, so I could talk to my friends in Vienna, Munich and Prague, and so I could continue working in a profession and on a mission, since my communication ability has been decreased like this!"

And he sent his wife to the committee of self-governing telecommunications and connections with a request to which he attached serious reasons, because of which he would like to promptly rent and pay for expensive and poor quality services. And her highness The Office Clerk said: "Does anyone think we live in a civilized and humane society, where you can install a phone line precipitately and extraordinarily, when a real Slovak, a straight up citizen-idiot waits several years until the almighty Bureaucracy takes pity on him?"

The writer laughed uncontrollably at the bureaucratic cynicism and sent the request to the Ministry of Communications of Zimbabwe: Would they be so kind and lend him a well-preserved tam-tam from the museum, so he could continue his work for the nation and its culture, which includes attention and respect, if not at the very least to a person, than at least a responsibility towards the paying customer.

2. Bavarian Tarot is only played with a deck of 36 cards, as well as Tapp Tarot, or Sans prendre. There are several more types of tarot: the Austrian deck has 7 cards in each color from the French deck (king, queen, jack – boy – garcon, four cards with numbers), add to that four horsemen (also cavaliers, knight or picture card, in between a queen and a picture card), 21 of your tarots and excuse = 54 cards. Big tarot encompassed the whole French game (52 cards), 21 own Tarots, excuse (fool, harlequin) and four cavaliers – hence 78 cards. That is also how many cards the Venetian deck has, Tarocco Bolognese (and ancient Italian name of tarocchi) had 62 cards and Tarot Florence had 97 cards. (Vojtech Omasta – Slavomir Ravik: Players, cards, card games, 1969.)

3. You can read about chanterelles in detail and devotion in Das eigene Horrorskop (Wieser Verlag, Klagenfurt 1995) on pages 110 and 111: 'Fünf Uhr Sonnenmorgen im Wald, Im Birkenheim...'

Translated by Viridiana Carleo

Rudolf Sloboda

REASON CHAPTER ONE *(Extract)*

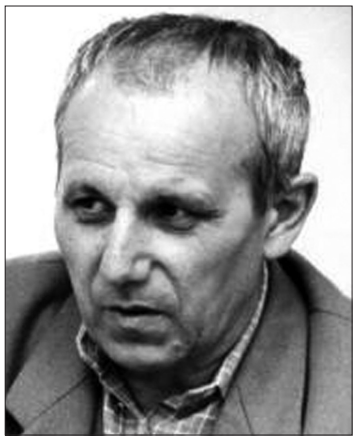


Photo: Peter Procházka

RUDOLF SLOBODA (1938 – 1995), prose writer, dramatist. Living in his own world in Devínska Nová Ves, near Bratislava, where Rudolf Sloboda lived his whole life (with a short stay in Bratislava, then in Ostrava), he was constantly in touch with philosophy, literature and music. He began studying the horn at the conservatoire, then studied philosophy at the Philospohical Faculty at Comenius University, but never completed his studies. He lived modestly and wrote all his life: short stories, scripts, novels, theater plays. He also kept a journal and had hobbies such as dogs, Chinese, playing the flute, and chess. He lived an eventful yet humble life, earning recognition among fellow writers and aficionados from other fields of work. His first short story (*A Wide Gate Led to That House* – Do toho domu sa vchádzalo širokou bránou) was published in Mladá tvorba in 1958. His book debut *Narcissus* (Narcis, 1965) became the base for the upcoming prosaic generation. The core of the story is a philosophy student Urban Chromý's stay in Ostrava where experiences from a working-class environment intertwine with the protagonist's philosophical thoughts. His next novel *Razor* (Britva, 1967) centers on personal problems, and issues of fidelity and jealousy. Stories from the collection *Blue Moon* (Uhorský rok, 1968) featuring twelve stories with short introductions, and the novel *Gray Roses* (Šedé ruže, 1969) thematically follow up on *Narcissus* and *Razor*, which are critical for the analysis of Sloboda's entire work. A concise work focusing on childhood and coming of age titled *Romaneto Don Juan* (Romaneto Don Juan, 1971) marks the highest point of the first decade of his work. In the 1970's he confirmed his central position in Slovak prose with the novel *Reason* (Rozum, 1982) – an analytical work depicting the author's life situation, and particular work, family and social issues. His life and work demonstrate how a person from a modest background can analyze the deep, genetic relations within politcs, culture and human individuality so fiercely, almost tragically.

When the sun is setting and the wind is blowing and I can observe, then, no matter where I am, I remember my native village. By the time the sun is setting, decent people have put most of their responsibilities behind them and are getting ready to comfortably nap before they fall asleep. All these people who have put their day's work behind them are no longer angry as they were in the morning, no longer in rage, and the first star of the East, or maybe the West, releases their metaphysical moods. My father was like that.

Those whose father had not died, would write the preceding sentence without stopping at the verb *was*. When I let this sentence run by my ears, it was clear to me right away that I shouldn't have mentioned my father in this context, since I still think about him with pain, as he died quite recently, not even a year ago.

The sun oppressed and comforted me. From the internal medicine ward of the hospital where I stayed I saw the sun set behind a hill, sinking into the clouds above Mare Mountain. I live behind Mare Mountain, on its northern slope. But I wasn't too keen to get back to my native village. I felt comfortable in the hospital, warm and good. If I wanted, I could sit on my bed and read, I could go out into the hall and then, if I got tired of it, I could lie down and take a nap. I was really surprised when they told me that I could go home. I did not feel like it. I would have to go back and live and work and quarrel with my family again. But I did not let on that I was disappointed, cleared the paper work, set out for the bus, without even asking if it was all right for me to walk, or wait for the ambulance.

It was the end of October. I was walking through the city that seemed wet and cold, full of bad people and scoundrels.

It's true that I was comforted by the thought that I was still not ready to work and would be able to rest at home. But as I thought about it more, on my way to the district doctor to whom I had to report, I felt in my mind a tiny, barely perceptible question mark that symbolized my distaste for the home to which I was to return. Included was, to be sure, also my revulsion for the environment that surrounded me—the neighbours who could barely tolerate me and in the wider context also the entire sprawling and muddy village full of unknown newcomers and a dirty pub.

In the doctor's waiting room I met a few colleagues. One had flu and the other was coming from a hospital. During our conversation, because of the common theme, I felt a bit refreshed and even cheered up a little: my friends had serious health problems. What ailed me seemed nothing to them, they managed to overcome that a long time ago. Maybe I was content also because we chatted in the presence of a new female colleague whom they introduced to me. (She had bad luck. She fell ill with flu just a week after she had started her new job.)

As I walked out of the doctor's office into the darkness of the cold street, I began to miss sadly my warm hospital, where the nurses were always around and one didn't have to worry about a thing. Just recently I was unable to appreciate how nice it was that we could sit on our beds, tell each other endless stories and philosophize. My friends from neighbouring beds expressed themselves accordingly: they said they no longer felt like staying in the hospital, because once you break a good room, you won't get used to a newcomer. (And indeed, as soon as I got dressed, the nurse brought a new patient in. My friends were looking at me sadly, shaking their heads, letting me know that the new guy was probably some sort of a dork.)

At home I sat in the corner, taking a nap. My wife studied a brochure on the *Diet for Ulcer Patients*, so she could prepare some diet supper. But the book pleased her so much with its theoretical introduction that she completely forgot why it was she picked it up in the first place.

She was surprised when I suddenly polished off a bowl of tripe soup, chased it with a glass of beer and, swallowing a pill, covered myself in bed. I forgot for a while the difficult day. I was happy that I managed to do everything I needed to do.

Tomorrow—I said to myself—I would spend the whole day in bed and wouldn't pay attention to anything. I am still sick and I can't run around. The soup soon started to put pressure on my stomach, but I decided not to do anything about it. I lay on my left side in a fetal position, trying to think about the pleasant autumnal days I have spent in the hospital looking out of the window. (I had a view of the entire western section of Bratislava, so I could see how the trolley buses left their garage, how the ambulance forced the right of way at the traffic lights with its siren and how, some time later, it appeared below the windows of the hospital. I saw the trains come out of the tunnel, and saw other trains go into the tunnel. And I saw how, closer to the windows, life went on in some other parts of the city.)

The days were warm, dry, and windy in the morning, with a bit of frost that decorated the copper roofs and the parked cars for a few hours with a silver covering. I was getting stronger every day: the level of the corpuscles reached the norm. This made my anxiety and low energy go away. I could read again and talk to other patients. The other patients, heart cases, felt completely differently about their lives and seemed to think that I was too spoiled and not seriously ill at all. Those who inherited a heart problem felt that they were more seriously ill than those who inherited laziness and a contemplative frame of mind and therefore were spoiled...

Doctors were telling me that my health was entirely in my own hands. That wasn't completely right. One doesn't get angry for any reason. I never got angry in the hospital, and if, I did then only for a little while. (Incidentally, I inherited that anger from my father. He, poor man, was angry almost up to the last minute of his life. His head was clear and fresh and he had a good reason to be angry. He was always surrounded by noise and shouting and nobody believed that he was seriously ill, since only I knew that he had cancer, and so I was the only one who could feel sorry for him. I was afraid to tell the others in case my father would find out. He was certain that his illness was a passing abdominal problem. After all, a few months before coming down with it he unloaded three tons of coal into my barn. He was sixty-nine. After he turned seventy, he suddenly started to lose weight, was operated on twice, and finally died on August 29, 1979 at quarter to six on Wednesday morning. We were just about to take him to the hospital where they would give him an infusion, or possibly a transfusion of blood and morphine, and it would give him comfort for a while so maybe he would find it easier to say good-bye to the world. In the hospital I found a piece of paper in a book, *Arabian Nights,* on a page dealing with two smart alecks who were cheating each other and on this paper were some lottery numbers, then the winning numbers and a note scribbled in my father's hand: "Assholes." Apparently he didn't win. I felt so bad seeing his handwriting and that sigh, that anger at something that prevented him to win. And it didn't look at all trite—now I see that even when I die many will pardon my failures as I pardon my father's. Only those who don't like me will not pardon me.)

It's not all in our hands. Why are we kidding ourselves? Is our height in our hands? Oh, I don't feel like philosophizing...

The day after my return from the hospital, after I had a good sleep, I stepped outside my house in my pyjamas to catch a breath of morning wind. The wind was pushing big clouds from the south, uncovering the sun for a while—as happens on such days—and the sun stood over the Mare Mountain, over the hill that I saw in the hospital from the other side. It was seven degrees Celsius, warming up.

Dogs came out of their doghouse and tried to jump up to lick me. I pushed their heads away, threatening them with my foot not to attempt to jump. Uru moved a step away and jumped in the air, while Shah moved his tail so fast he was wobbling. They were happy, greeting me, they too had a good sleep. I opened the gate and let them into the garden. Then I went in and slowly, constantly thinking of the injustice caused to me in the hospital, put on my clothes. My wife was away, in the city, shopping, or window-shopping. In the cupboard I found powdered milk with honey. So I mixed two cups of it and looking out of the window, I ate this tasty white mixture. Then I took my two-milligram pill of DIAZEPAM sedative, chased it with water and then, contrite as a thief who stole fruit and suddenly regretted it all, I sat down by my bed. Then I made myself another batch of honeyed powdered milk mixture. It was really tasty. And I chased it with water again. I can't have enough of water ever since I was forbidden to drink (or eat) for three days. When I was washing myself, the nurse at the resuscitation station kept watching lest I take a drink from the washbasin. To prevent that, she let me know that other patients were known to vomit and do all the rest in the washbasin. The washing of the face itself was so beautiful like bathing in nature after a sweltering hot day; it was something awesome.

When I had my fill of nature, I sat down by my electric heater and began to count my money. In my saving book, I had twenty thousand one hundred and twenty five crowns; those hundred and twenty five crowns being the interest. I reflected for a while whether my saving book was well hidden, whether it wouldn't be shrewd to note the account number somewhere, in case it gets suddenly lost... In my wallet I found three five hundred-crown banknotes and three hundred crowns in ten- and twenty-crown notes. In another wallet, a gift of Ewa Maria from Poland (the wallet itself came from China, but was bought in France, where the Pole often traveled), which I fixed when it fell apart, was change: ten ten-haller coins, two five-haller coins and one five-crown coin.

Translated by Peter Petro

Karol Ondreička

Dušan Kužel
Rückkehr eines Anderen *(Leseprobe)*

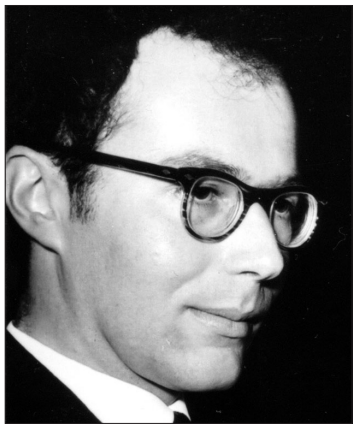


Photo: Peter Procházka

DUŠAN KUŽEL (1940 – 1985), Prosaiker, Rundfunk- und TV-Dramatiker, trat in die Literatur unauffällig, fast leise ein. „In die Literatur kam ein stiller Bursche", diese Worte, die den Titel einer seiner Geschichten paraphrasieren, den letzten Text seines Debüts, der Erzählsammlung *Rückkehr eines Anderen* (Vráti sa niekto iný, 1964) wurden oft zur Beurteilung seines Schaffens benutzt. Er zeigt in diesem Werk die Empfindungswelt eines Burschen aus einer Kleinstadt – eines Studenten und angehenden Lehrers. Wegen der lyrischen Stimmung und literaturhistorisch wegen desselben Debütjahres wie V. Šikula wurde er von der Kritik letzterem beigeordnet. (Zufällig war Kužel als Redakteur des Verlags Smena Editor der ersten Ausgabe von Šikulas Novelle *Mit Rozárka* (S Rozárkou). Auch die Struktur von Kužels Sujets ist der von Šikula sehr ähnlich – vor dem Hintergrund persönlicher Erlebnisse seit den Schülerzeiten zeigt er die Abneigung seiner Generation gegen den Kollektivismus, was ein häufiges Thema in seiner Generation darstellte. In den drei Novellen des Buches *Vorbeigehenden* (Mimobežky, 1967) entfaltet er die Geschichten von Liebespaaren, die trotz ihrer Bemühungen um Annäherung am unüberwindbaren Gefühl des Missverständnisses oder am existenziellen Gefühl der Entfremdung scheitern. Das gemeinsame Gefühl der Geschichten im Buch *Die Flucht aus dem Himmel* (Útek z neba, 1969) ist die Sehnsucht des Helden, sich von den Illusionen des Lebens zu befreien. Um diese Sehnsucht frei verwiklichen zu können, greift der Autor zu den Mitteln der Science-fiction. Bereits in den 1970er Jahren schrieb er den Roman *Die Lampe* (Lampa), schaffte es aber nicht, ihn im Verlag abzugeben, also erschien er erst posthum, 20 Jahre nach seiner Entstehung (Verlag Slovenský spisovateľ, 1991). Rufen wir uns die Titel der Prosawerke von Kužels Generationsgefährten in Erinnerung: L. Ballek – *Flucht auf eine grüne Wiese* (Útek na zelenú lúku), J. Kot – *Die Himmelfahrt eines Mittelstürmers* (Nanebovstúpenie stredného útočníka), V. Šikula – *Vielleicht baue ich mir einen Bungalow* (Možno si postavím bungalov) und denken wir an die Zusammenhänge mit Kužels Prosa *Die Flucht aus dem Himmel* (Útek z neba). Wir bemerken ein gemeinsames Lebensgefühl der Autoren, die während der 1960er Jahre in die Literatur eintraten: die eindeutig zum Ausdruck gebrachte Meinung, dass man sich zurückziehen oder irgendwohin flüchten, sich von etwas befreien und wo anders frei anfangen muss. Dieses Gefühl, wie auch immer gesellschaftspolitisch unterfärbt, stellt das ästhetische Kredo des Prosaikers Dušan Kužel und der Generation der 1960er Jahre dar. Folgende Leseprobe stammt aus der Erzählsammlung *Rückkehr eines Anderen.*

DIE DRITTE STILLE

Auf der Straße fuhr ein Auto vorbei. „Du bist ein Faulpelz, Jano", sagte der Vater und drehte sich zum Fenster. „Ein Faulpelz und Gauner. So schwer wurdest du aufgenommen und weißt es nicht zu schätzen!"

Das Auto bog zum Feld ab und begann, Sand auszukippen. Was wollen sie nur dort..., murmelte der Vater. Dann wandte er sich um, vergaß aber, wo er aufgehört hatte.

„Ich bin ein Faulpelz", erinnerte ihn Jano. „Ein Faulpelz und Gauner."

Darauf bekam er zwei aufs Maul, eine mit der Rückhand, die andere mit der Vorhand. Der Vater setzte sich in den Fauteuil, ohne ein Wort zu sagen, und knisterte zornig mit der Zeitung. Die Mutter kam zum Fenster und begann, Staub abzuwischen. Sie wartete, bis der Blick frei wurde. Staub wischte sie mehrmals am Tag, fast immer, wenn Jano nach Hause reiste, erwischte er sie mit einem Staubtuch in der Hand. Einst machte es ihn sehr nervös, es kam ihm ständig vor, als spüre er den Staub auf sich rieseln. Er rieb sich daher mit der Hand an der Nase. Die Burschen in der Schule verspotteten ihn deshalb. Einmal waren alle bei den Großeltern und als sie nach zwei Wochen nach Hause fuhren, stellte er sich vor, dass sie alles zu Hause mit einer einige Meter dicken Staubschicht bedeckt finden würden, unter der sich die Konturen von Tisch, Fauteuil, Betten und sonstigem Mobiliar nur undeutlich abzeichneten.

Sie fanden selbstverständlich nur ganz wenig Staub vor, die Mutter lief trotzdem bereits einige Minuten nach der Ankunft mit einem Staubtuch in der Wohnung herum. Nun wischte sie vielleicht zehn Minuten an einem Ort, dann fiel ihr das Staubtuch auf den Boden, aber sie rieb gedankenlos mit der Hand am Fensterrahmen und schaute hinaus. Sie erwachte erst, als der Vater den Fernseher einschaltete. Das Bild bewegte sich von oben nach unten und der Vater drehte verzweifelt die Knöpfe. Die Mutter kam zum Fernseher und wischte sehr sorgfältig Staub ab, als ob sie ihm damit helfen wollte.

Jano zog einen Pullover an und ging in die Stadt.

Im Kaffeehaus setzte er sich in ein Eck und begann die vorgestrige Zeitung, die hier auf dem Tisch herum lag, teilnahmslos durchzuschauen.

„Grüß dich, ist hier frei?"

Es war Ivan Michalčík, der zwei Jahre vor ihm maturiert hatte. Er wartete nicht einmal eine Antwort ab und setzte sich gleich zu ihm.

„Willst du grantig werden?" Er schaute Jano zu und schnappte ihm die Zeitung unter der Nase weg, um einen kurzen Blick hineinzuwerfen.

„Etwa so. Und du? Machst du Urlaub?"

„Ich habe Ferien."

„Studierst du etwa noch?"

„Nein", lachte Ivan, „ich unterrichte an einer Schule. Sie haben mich in so ein Kaff im östlichsten Osten gesteckt. Aber du studierst, nicht wahr?"

„Na ja... man kann es so sagen."

Ivan schaute ihn fragend an.

„Na ja...ich soll das Studienjahr wiederholen", erklärte er ihm. „Wegen einer Prüfung aus dem Wintersemester. Beim ersten Termin konnte ich nicht, beim zweiten bin ich geflogen. Weißt du, nicht dass ich es nicht schaffen würde... Es war einfach etwas, was mich Null interessiert und ich habe es unterschätzt. Ich habe geglaubt, dass ich irgendwie durchkomme. Und zu Hause glauben sie, dass ich der größte Schwänzer in Mitteleuropa bin. Was nehmen wir? Herr Ober! Sag mal was von dir!"

„Na, was denn...", überlegte Ivan. „Ich renoviere jetzt das Haus, hackle. Und will heiraten..."

„Drüben?"

„Nein, hier." Er zog ein Foto heraus und reichte es Jano. „Du wirst sie wahrscheinlich nicht kennen, sie ist in die Krankenschwesternschule gegangen."

Jano musterte das Foto – blonde Haare, breites lächelndes Gesicht, nichts Besonderes.

„Hübsch“, sagte er aus Höflichkeit und gab ihm das Foto zurück.

„Sie kommt dir dorthin nach?“

Ivan hob hilflos die Arme. „Das ist es eben... Weißt du, ich möchte hierher kommen. Es gibt schon eine freie Stelle, aber die dort lassen mich nicht gehen, weil sie wenig Lehrer haben. Nur in dem Fall, dass ich einen Ersatz auftreiben würde. Aber wer wird dort schon hingehen... Trinken wir noch was?“ Er winkte den Kellner zu sich und zeigte auf die leeren Gläser. Jano lehnte sich an die weiche Sitzlehne. Er hat Augenfalten, fiel ihm auf, und die Haare werden auch weniger.

„Hier könnte ich in einem oder zwei Jahren stellvertretender Direktor werden“, setzte Ivan fort. „Das heißt eine bessere Bezahlung. Ich könnte das Haus besser einrichten.“

„Basketball spielst du nicht mehr?“

„Nein.“ Er lächelte verbittert. „Ich bin schon schwer dafür. Ich habe keine Lust zu laufen.“

So, so, dachte Jano. Der größte Basketballstar in der Schule, ein ausgezeichneter Spielmacher, genaue Schüsse, auch aus mittleren Entfernungen. Ivan hat es für uns gewonnen, Jungs! Der Bub hat Zukunft, sagte der Sportlehrer zum Direktor. Er hat Zukunft: er wird das Haus renovieren, wird stellvertretender Direktor, heiratet. Vielleicht arbeitet er sich mal zum Direktor empor. Dann kann er das Haus noch besser einrichten.

„Trinken wir!“ sagte Ivan.

„Ivan, wenn du willst, geh ich als Ersatz für dich dorthin.“

Ivan glotzte ihn an. „Und dein Studium?“

„Ich wollte es eh abbrechen. Und es ist mir wurscht, wo ich lande. Werde glücklicher sein, wenn es weit weg von zuhause ist.“

„Aber... aber na... so trinken wir noch ein Stamperl, nicht?“

Es war schon finster, als er nach Hause kam. Im Abendnebel war kaum zu erkennen, wo die Stadtbeleuchtung aufhört und die Sterne beginnen. Als er hier mit Eva gegangen war, war es ihm manchmal vorgekommen, als müsste er nur einen Stein werfen und der Stern würde zersplittern wie die Glühbirne einer Straßenlampe.

Eva lachte, als er ihr das sagte, sie hielten sich bei der Hand und ließen los, wenn ein Auto vorbeifuhr.

Der junge Herr hat die Sau herausgelassen, bemerkte der Vater. Und hat nicht einmal Muh gesagt.

Er sagte Muh und ging ins Bett.

Der Zug sauste durch die Nacht. Es kühlte ab. Er nahm den Koffer herunter, aus dem Wäschehaufen zog er einen Pullover heraus, kuschelte sich in seinen Montgomery-Mantel und versuchte einzuschlafen. Die Räder klopften rhythmisch und die Oma, die ihm gegenüber saß, nickte im Takt mit dem Kopf, als ob sie den Zug vorantreiben wollte. Er konnte nicht einschlafen, der ganze Körper tat ihm weh vom Sitzen. Er ging lieber auf den Gang und kam mit einer jungen Schaffnerin ins Gespräch. Mir kommt vor, dass ich Sie schon mal gesehen habe, sagte die Schaffnerin, Sie sind wohl öfter unterwegs. Sie studieren in Košice, nicht wahr? Nein, sagte Jano, ich bin Lehrer. Aha, erinnerte sich die Schaffnerin, morgen beginnt das Schuljahr. Der Zug blieb im Bahnhof stehen und die Schaffnerin sprang schnell hinaus. Bin Lehrer, bin Lehrer. Wie komisch das klingt! Bist Lehrer, Jano! In Bratislava an der Fakultät wird bald auch das Schuljahr beginnen. Der Dekan wird groß darüber reden, wie sich alle mit neuer Lust an die Arbeit machen, aber es wird trotzdem zwei Wochen dauern, bis alles in Gang gekommen sein wird. Währenddessen kann man ins Kino gehen und wenn die Sonne scheint, schwimmen, sich loben, wie braun wir im Sommer geworden sind. Am Abend wird im „Funus“ die Festsitzung der Zimmerregierung stattfinden. Der Premierminister ist Igor, er wird eine Rede halten. In seinem „Privet“ wird er nach den Ferien Bohuš, den Minister für Zimmerverteidigung, im Sitz der Regierung begrüßen (diese hohe Funktion wurde ihm anvertraut, weil er gut boxt), den Gesundheitsminister Tomy (er ist an der Zukunft unseres Gesundheitswesens interessiert, konkret an einer Medizinstudentin) und ... und wo ist Jano, der Finanzminister? Der Finanzminister steht im Gang eines Schnellzugs, raucht eine Zigarette und schaut aus dem Fenster. Er hat seine Demission eingereicht. Oder noch besser, er wurde aus der Funktion im Zusammenhang mit einer neuen Betrauung mit anderen Aufgaben abberufen. Er wurde zum Botschafter im Fernen Osten ernannt. Gedenken wir seiner, liebe Minister, und trinken wir auf seine Gesundheit das erste Glas! Er ging unauffällig und alleine. Keiner hat ihm gewunken.

Der Zug bewegt sich vom Bahnhof weg. Schau, Jano, dort winkt jemand! Es ist ein kleiner Bub, der winkt dem ganzen Zug, aber in Wirklichkeit nur dir, weil ihn keiner bemerkt, nur du machst das Fenster auf und winkst ihm zurück. Wem winkst du, Burli? Ich winke meinem Freund. Weißt du nicht, dass die ganze Welt Freund eines kleinen Buben ist? Und wem winkst du? Eigentlich weiß ich es nicht, mir kommt vor, dass die Reisenden sich selbst winken. Vielleicht bin ich es nicht, der winkt, sondern ein kleiner Bub in mir, wie heißt er?

Janíčko heißt er doch, du kannst dich sicher an ihn erinnern, er hatte lockige Haare und immer dreckige Hände. Lehn dich nicht so sehr hinaus, Janíčko, ein Funke wird dir ins Auge fliegen. Das Auge wird dir dann nicht leuchten, sondern sehr weh tun. Gib mir die Hand, wir gehen zurück ins Abteil, weißt du, wir fahren weit, sehr weit und werden dort Kinderchen unterrichten. Nicht solche, wie du es bist, etwas größere, ungefähr so groß wie dieser Janko hier, der zerzauste Raufbold, der immer Jánošík sein musste, wenn die Buben Räuber gespielt haben. Ja, ja, er geht auch mit, na komm, Jánošík, keine Angst, ich werde dich nicht am Arm ziehen, ich weiß, für so einen großen Buben ist das eine Beleidigung. Und du, Jano, pass auf sie gut auf, du Ältester, beim Militär warst du auch schon! Ich weiß nur nicht, was dir eigentlich eingefallen ist, das Studium an den Nagel zu hängen und weg zu gehen, was hat dich in die Ferne getrieben? Die Sehnsucht nach etwas? Nein? Enttäuschung? Du sagst nichts. Zweimal wurdest du von der Hochschule für Musik und darstellende Kunst nicht aufgenommen, was soll´s, wirst wohl kein Talent haben. Du wirst keine Maske vor dem Gesicht tragen, wirst keine Glyzerintränen vergießen, deine Tränen werden echt sein. Weißt du, was mir scheint? Dass du nicht weißt, was du willst. Janíčko, der weiß das, nicht wahr? Na sag mal, Janíčko, was möchtest du werden, wenn du mal erwachsen bist? Pläsident? Na gut, Janíčko, dann musst du brav in der Schule lernen und lutsch nicht am Daumen, das machen die Präsidenten nicht! Nein, nicht einmal, wenn sie noch klein sind!

Und du, Janko, was möchtest du werden? Du weißt es nicht? Was hat dir denn bis jetzt am besten gefallen? Was für ein Artist? Aha, ich weiß schon, er hat mal mutig auf einem Mast Übungen gemacht, es war stockdunkel, nur die Mastspitze war beleuchtet. Es schien, dass der Artist gar nicht mit dem Boden verbunden war, dass er nur so auf den Lichtstrahlen schwebte. Also, das war schön. Ich weiß, dir hat es auch gefallen, Jano, aber es ist nichts mehr für dich, du bist erwachsen, hattest deine Arbeit, du wurdest auf die philosophische Fakultät aufgenommen, also hättest du studieren sollen, um etwas im Leben zu leisten. Ja, im Leben etwas leisten, so sagte es der Vater und es hieß, Assistent, wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter oder berühmter Übersetzer werden, eine schön eingerichtete Wohnung und Beziehungen haben, wenig Leute über sich und viele unter sich. So, mein Sohn, wie geht es dir mit dem Studium? Und du hast erzählt: so und so ist das. Am Anfang hat es ganz gut funktioniert, aber wenn du zu Hause darüber erzählt hast, hattest du ständig den Eindruck, dass du es in eine Fremdsprache übersetzen musst, die du noch nicht gut beherrschst. Dann hast du festgestellt, dass viele deiner Vortragenden und Studienkollegen diese

Fremdsprache gesprochen haben. Der Wortschatz dieser Fremdsprache stimmte im Grunde mit dem der Muttersprache überein, sie hatte Wörter wie: im Leben, etwas, leisten, Karriere, haben, Beziehungen, denken, an sich, sich die Finger nicht verbrennen – die Unterschiede lagen nur in der Deutung dieser Wörter. Du wirst diese Sprache lernen müssen, Jano. Also schlaf lieber, ich werde dich nicht mehr stören, lehn den Kopf an das Fenster und decke dich mit dem Montgomery-Mantel zu! Und du, Janko, schlummere ein bisschen, schau nicht so viel aus dem Fenster, dort ist eh nichts zu sehen! Und du, Janíčko... was ist los, du weinst? Aber geh, so ein großer Bub doch... schau, du bist nicht alleine, wir gehen mit dir und wir sind so viele, dass wir das ganze Abteil gefüllt haben...

„Ist hier frei?“

„Bese..., eigentlich, Entschuldigung, es ist frei.“

„Herr Lehrer! Herr Lehrer! Aufstehen für die Schule!“

Er machte die Augen auf, schaute auf die Uhr und sprang erschrocken auf. Er lief schnell auf den Hof, holte einen Kübel Wasser vom Brunnen und schüttete ihn über sich. Der Himmel war klar, es wird wohl ein schöner Tag werden. „Und wann kommen Sie zum Essen?“ Er zuckte mit den Achseln und lief davon. Verdammt, bereits am ersten Tag muss er zu spät kommen... Patsch! Fast wäre er auf die Nase gefallen. Der Weg war steinig, die Knie musste man bis zum Kinn heben. Gegenüber fuhr ein leerer Heuwagen, der auf den Steinen so hüpfte, dass dem Fuhrmann der Hut am Kopf tanzte. Ein verspäteter kleiner Schüler sauste vorbei, grüßte „Ehre der Arbeit“ und bekreuzigte sich zugleich, weil neben dem Weg ein Kreuz stand. Als er den Klassenraum betrat, verstummten die Kinder im Nu und standen auf. Die Tür war hinten, er musste durch den ganzen Klassenraum durch einen schmalen Korridor zwischen den Bänken gehen, stolperte dabei über ein Bankbein und fing die Fluchworte hinter den Zähnen rechtzeitig ein. Er trat auf das Kathederpodest, das unter seinem Gewicht nachgab und durchdringend quietschte. Er sah sich im Klassenraum um. Überall sah er Augen, lauter Augen, eine Unmenge von Augen, die auf ihn starrten und auf seine erste Bewegung, sein erstes Wort warteten. Na sag mal endlich was, zeig, wer du bist, was von dir zu erwarten ist!

Karol Ondreička

„Se... setzt euch!“

Er begann, etwas zusammenhanglos darüber zu erzählen, dass die Ferien vorbei sind und man sich mit neuer Lust an die Arbeit machen...

Das Gleiche sagte der Direktor gestern auch, wurde ihm bewusst, schwenkte die Hand und blieb wie ein kaputtes Grammophon stecken.

„So also was... Zuerst machen wir wohl eine Namensliste der Klasse. Habt ihr das schon mal gemacht?“

Am zweiten Tag beeilte er sich und kam als erster ins Lehrerzimmer. Er freute sich, als er unter dem Waschbecken einen kleinen Ball entdeckte, wahrscheinlich „Beute“ aus einer der Klassen. Jemand klopfte an der Tür. Genosse Lehrer, Štetina schlägt sich! Er ging in den Klassenraum, schimpfte mit Štetina, der sich schlug. Als er zurückkam, saß im Lehrerzimmer ein weißhaariger Kollege und wühlte in seiner Aktentasche.

„Guten Morgen.“

Der Kollege hob den Kopf von der Aktentasche. „Guten Morgen. Haben Sie gut geschlafen?“

„Danke, es geht. Und Sie?“

„Ach, was ich... ich werde demnächst gut schlafen, dort, jenseits ... unter der Erde.“

Jano war so überrascht, dass er nicht wusste, was er sagen sollte. Der wird wohl eine Krankheit haben, dachte er.

„Sie schauen gesund aus...“, wandte er schüchtern ein.

„Ich schau aus...“ Der Kollege lächelte traurig und schwenkte die Hand. „Lassen wir das. Wie gefällt es Ihnen hier? Haben Sie sich schon gewöhnt?“

„Ich gewöhne mich, langsam, aber schon.“

„Richtig, richtig, es geht nicht sofort.“

„Guten Morgen!“ Der Direktor betrat energisch den Raum und heftete einen Zettel an den Schrank. „Miško, diese Woche hast du Aufsicht, falls du nichts dagegen hast.“

„Na, was kann man machen, wenn Aufsicht, dann Aufsicht.“ Er stand vom Sessel auf und machte sich auf den Weg zur Tür. „Ich mache Aufsicht.“

Der Direktor schaute ihm nachdenklich nach, als ob er ihn auch durch die geschlossene Tür sähe.

„Der Arme, der glaubt das immer noch.“ Er drehte sich zu Jano. „Hat er Ihnen noch nicht erzählt, dass er sich für das Jenseits bereit macht?“

„Hat er schon.“

„Er redet darüber schon seit zwei Jahren. Letztes Jahr hat er einen Schlaganfall bekommen, seit damals ist er auf der linken Seite etwas gelähmt, und dazu hat er noch irgendwelche Komplikationen – aber es gibt Leute, die damit Jahrzehnte leben... Er hat sich in den Kopf gesetzt, dass er stirbt. Dass er in Pension gehen sollte, will er nicht hören. Ich überrede ihn auch nicht. Wenn er eine Stelle hat, denkt er nicht so viel daran: Also...“ – Der Direktor schwenkte die Hand. „Und wie fühlen Sie sich hier bis jetzt? Laufen Sie uns nicht davon?“

„Nein, warum?“

„Das kommt vor. Haben Sie gut geschlafen?“

„Gut.“

„Dann ist also alles in Ordnung.“ Der Direktor verließ den Raum. Unmittelbar darauf platzte der stellvertretende Direktor ins Lehrerzimmer. „Guten Morgen! Haben Sie gut geschlafen?“ Er wartete keine Antwort ab und schüttete einen Haufen von Büchern aus seiner dicken Aktentasche. „Es geht schon los“, sagte er resigniert. Jano nickte aus Höflichkeit, obwohl es ihm nicht ganz klar war, was los ging.

Es läutete schon, als außer Atem die Kollegin, die Geschichte und Geographie unterrichtet, eintraf. „Guten Morgen.“

„Guten Morgen“, antwortete Jano. Und fügte eilig hinzu: „Haben Sie gut geschlafen?“

Übersetzt von Simon Gruber

My Way of Writing

Interview with Peter Jaroš, by Anton Baláž

Photo: Peter Procházka

PETER JAROŠ (1940) belongs to a strong generation of prose writers who, in the mid-1960s, managed to modernize Slovak literature and gradually make it an equivalent part of European literature. As early as in his first works – *Afternoon on the Terrace* (Popoludnie na terase), *Make Me a Sea* (Urob mi more), Consternation (Zdesenie), *Scales* (Váhy), and *Journey to Immobility* (Putovanie k nehybnosti) – Jaroš increased in value the experience of existentialism, absurd drama and Nouveau Roman, combining the elements of distinctive tale-telling with elements of nonsense and absurdity. His works from the 1960s became grotesque allegories of the political situation of that time. He did not give up his grotesque view of reality even in his books from the 1970s: *Gory Stories* (Krvaviny), *The Thrice Smiling Darling* (Trojúsmevný miláčik), *Skein* (Pradeno), *The Body in the Herbarium* (Telo v herbári), rather he added elements of humor and imaginativeness similar to the imaginativeness of Slovak folk tales to it. He appreciated his previous creative experiences to the fullest and deepened the historical dimension of our national existence in the novel *The Millenial Bee* (Tisícročná včela) published in 1979 – that is nearly thirty years ago – which belongs to the best of modern Slovak literature.
Before I ask Peter about the birth of *The Millenial Bee* (I asked him for the first time as a journalist shortly after its release), I would like to ask him about his creative beginnings.

ANTON BALÁŽ: *Your first book was published in 1963, at the time when realism ruled Slovak literature, often in its socialist-realist form. Despite that, your generation (Johanides, Sloboda, Šikula) managed to, figuratively speaking, open the windows to modern literary Europe. How did this go along? Which authors from the West and which of their works played a crucial part in this process?*
PETER JAROŠ: The determining factor for me, as well as for several of my classmates was higher education. There were important figures of Slovak literature, linguistics, literary criticism and literary science working at the Philosophical Faculty. At that time they were professors Milan Pišút, Šimon Ondruš, Eugen Pauliny, Rudolf Krajčovič, Ján Stanislav, Andrej Mráz, Paľo Bunčák, Milan Rúfus and, of course, Ján Števček who was also the opponent of my dissertation paper on Surrealism. In my class there were Jano Šimonovič, Ondrej Nagaj, Marián Bednár and Dušan Kužel. I was roommates with Rudo Sloboda. He slept on the lower bunk – I was on the top one – until he stopped out. Milan Šútovec, Dezider Banga, Milan Leščák, Pavel Vilikovský, Vlastimil Kovalčík and Jozef Gerbóc were in the class after us. These classes were full of talented students, future poets or prose writers who, along with other younger and older ones (the entire namelist would be too long), represent the main stream of Slovak literature of the second half of the 20th century. As early as our freshman year we put together, along with Rudo Sloboda and Ján Šimonovič, a kind of literary collection titled *The Truncated Cone* (Zrezaný ihlan). Back then we were in love with our surrealists, Czech Poetism, French surrealists and existentialism. The collection included our poems, aphorisms, decalcomania drawings and pointillisms – they were various, mostly abstract pictures. Upon Rudo Sloboda's leaving the Faculty we split the collection in three, and chose by lots; I got to have the first part which I treasure up to today. At the end of our sophomore year we started publishing the *Tribúna mladých* magazine. The editor-in-chief was Jožo Gerbóc. It did not come out regularly. I remember publishing a short story in it titled „Christ is Looking for Tenants" (Kristus hľadá nájomníkov). It is not published anywhere else but there.
Milan Rúfus spent a lot of time with us in seminars. Once he took us to Prague where we met with Laco Novomeský who was working at the Museum of Czech Literature after his release from prison. It was an unforgettable experience.
What I appreciate the most is that back then we had the opportunity to also get familiar with literature that was less accessible. That was how we, as students, got to existentialism or Freud. Professors gave us notes of recommendation for the University Library and thus we had access to otherwise inaccessible literature. We attended seminars of Jaroslav Martinka, a philosopher, who talked about the works of J.P. Sartre, A. Camus, Heidegger and Jaspers in class or in student cafes. We used to borrow Polish magazines which featured articles on existentialism and European as well as world literary movements. That is how I got to Sartre's *The Flies*, Camus' *The Stranger* as well as to Freud's *Case Histories* and other books. To us, Professor Martinka was such an enlightened personality, a person with whom my generation of writers spent hours in discussion. He would inspire us even with analysis and interpretation of ancient Greek philosophy. Parmenides was his darling at that time...
Work at the Faculty started turning into collaboration with *Mladá tvorba*. In time, all of us had written for it. The first work I published in it was a poem, „A Ball of Thread" (Klbko nití). Later on some short stories and reports followed. *Mladá tvorba* was a kind of creative oasis for us, a beautiful and stimulating workroom. We were young and eager to know and embrace everything. On the one hand we were striving for originality, on the other we wanted to try all the avant-garde trends and movements which we accomplished sometimes more, sometimes less. It was a manifold start-up and a great training. We wrote automatic texts, drew pointillist pictures and decalcomania, we were enchanted by existentialism and loved Surrealism... I cannot deny that those were great times of our student lives which continued on after college until the end of 1969 when drastic normalization took over... A young author, over the years, usually finds a way of writing, his own path... I still do think, though, that writing well means writing clearly, concisely (if possible) and also comprehensibly...
ANTON BALÁŽ: *The principles of the French Nouveau Roman are already strongly present in your third book,* Consternation. Scales, *published shortly after, features elements of surrealist dream techniques and it was even dubbed a „semi-detective horror" by critics at that time. When we recall that literature then was under the control of preliminary censorship, the so-called press supervision, a dose of courage to write as well as to publish such books was required on the part of the author as well as the publisher. What are your recollections of the literary climate in the early and mid-60s in terms of this?*

PETER JAROŠ: Here the 1960s were very favorable towards original as well as translated literature. We, the young and younger writers, were getting familiar with the authors of the *Nouveau Roman* (Marguerite Duras, Michel Butor, Alain Robbe-Grillet) with great interest. Several starting and young writers tried this style of writing, me included. It was enticing and new because the so-called New Novel attempted, based on the thesis of primary, unmarked existence of reality, especially the material one, to capture it by a detailed and precise description of its exterior, visible and perceivable form. At the same time the New Novel rejected the Balzac*esque* literary character and story, as was sharply formulated by Alain Robbe-Grillet, a representative of one of the lines of the New Novel. It was also a kind of programmed attempt for „pure", politically uncommitted works which – after the rigid and one-sided 1950s – was convenient for us because of its artistic freedom and also because young authors wanted to differ significantly from the works of the previous decade. At the same time we wanted to prove that Slovak was just as suitable for literary experiments as was French, for instance. After some time, several of us – not just me – abandoned this style of writing (eye-camera). It enriched me, though, with a new professional knowledge and partly marked my future work, especially scriptwriting... Along with the New Novel, existentialism arrived once again in the 1960s, though more intensely. We eagerly read and studied Heidegger and Jaspers (analyses of man's sojourn in the world; analysis of the so-called orientation in the world; existence is a freedom which does not lie in knowing as much as in experience; metaphysics hides the unexplainable in the ciphers of transcendence; true existence can be touched in experiences, in getting through border situations, etc.). We also read and studied Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, who briefly visited Slovakia at that time... I, personally, liked his examination of the contrast between freedom and necessity, or search for the solution for „man sentenced to freedom" in his engagement, so that he could become „his own free project". The philosophy of existentialism influenced me substantially for a certain time and I gladly and often go back to its creators till today.

ANTON BALÁŽ: *I will take my next question from the end – by noting that three of your great fellow-writers from the 1960s and later: Ján Johanides, Rudolf Sloboda and Vincent Šikula are no longer with us. Surely, sometimes you, too, reminisce about the stories and experiences that brought you together while some surely set you apart, when looking for ways of further development of Slovak literature. How was it?*

PETER JAROŠ: It is diffcult for a person to judge himself, or his colleagues objectively because he can easily stray from the truth to visions. That is why you should consider what I will say from this view. There were never any serious conflicts between us, perhaps that is the reason! My generation mates, I will name just a few, for instance Johanides, Sloboda, Šikula, Ballek, Rakús, Zelinka, Kužel, Vilikovský, Šútovec, Kadlečík – they all were, or are, distinctive personalities with their own opinion and creative program. We never stood in each other's way, rather, we drew inspiration from one another... I will try to roughly and in general say what we wanted to achieve...

As far as I know, Plato, Husserl, Pascal and Leibniz considered mathematics to be the model of true knowledge and it was mathematics that led them to philosophy. Some say: write stories, you'll be a philosopher. We, story-tellers, often have the feeling (I am talking mainly about myself) that in order to be able to live in this world, in a family, in a particular society, we have to almost ironically comment on the life around us because life not just pushes us towards irony but completely raises us in it. I think that literature can deliver this feeling quite accurately. I am not sure to what extent mathematics can do that. Unamuno wrote that though mathematics is the only perfect science because of addition, substraction, multiplication and division of numbers, it does not do so with things real and tangible – thus it is perfect only when it remains utterly formal. Formal logic is of no use beyond this point, at least not as the only reliable way of cognition. Knowledge should bring solace but that which can be proven to be true by reason does not provide it...

However, good literature does provide solace. It has an entire repertoire of means to give a closer look at the mysterious and inconprehensible in human life, how to talk about fate, predestination and fear of the future. It uses imagination, farce and parody to do so. It uses fabrication and often exaggerates. It dreams. Without inhibition caused by the reality or irreality of dreaming, it transfers us to the reality or irreality of literary text. It experiments. It speaks in apocrypha, allegory and parables so that it can grasp at least some kind of truth about man... I, as well as my fellow-writers, work with all this when writing. Each of us in our own unique way, of course. I will dare to express a generalization, and it may not apply totally, that we were a kind of poetic sensualists because, when writing, we activated mostly our sensory potential which was a reaction to the extreme hypostatization and draining of sensory wealth in perceiving reality...

ANTON BALÁŽ: *The Millenial Bee holds an important position among Slovak novels. Very productively and progressively, you gave it a magical, fairy-tale and mythical dimension of our national existence with a strong erotic story line, disrupting the tradition of literary prudery then still present in Slovak literature since the national revival. Our first interview about it in the early 1980s was titled „The Millenial Bee Flew Out of Today" (Tisícročná včela vyletela z dneška). Today we can add: at the same time it flew out into the world. Not just due to Juraj Jakubisko's Fellini-like adaptation but also thanks to numerous book translations. How do you view its journey around the world, the contacts and arguments with its translators – including Ghias Mousli's Arabic translation?*

PETER JAROŠ: Each foreign language translation brings joy to the author. Sometimes the consultations of the author and translator are difficult but also pleasing and of benefit. Mr. Ghias Mousli translated *The Millenial Bee* into Arabic, his translation was published in Egypt and Syria. We had met several times before that because he had to, with my approval, edit several „love scenes" in the Arabic version.

ANTON BALÁŽ: *I have to mention also the translations of numerous of your short stories and book selections into German, English, French, Spanish and all the Central European and Balkan languages. Since you are one of the most translated Slovak writers, what chances, do you think Slovak literature has in infiltrating the awareness and publishing plans of „great" literatures?*

PETER JAROŠ: Personal contacts are often important but besides that also the appearance at bookfairs. Indispensable, in the Slovak context, is our Center for Information on Literature which publishes the *Slovak Literary Review*, regularly informing on Slovak literature in world languages and its subpart SLOLIA which supports financially foreign editions of literary works by Slovak writers. It is apparent that this activity is not vain as there are more and more foreign language translations of Slovak books appearing every year.

ANTON BALÁŽ: *Last year a unique translating project of the Visegrad group countries was realised – the publishing of the Literary Anthology of V4 Countries which include translations of three contemporary Slovak prose writers. This year, the Arabic--English edition of the anthology will also feature Ghias Mousli's translation of your short story Flowers in a Vase (Kvety vo váze) from your book Hot Snows (Horúce (s)nehy). It will be presented at the Cairo International Bookfair in January 2009, and the organizers hope you will be present. Looking at his maps, Martin Pichanda, your geographer from the Millenial Bee, only dreamed about travelling the world. How was it and is now with you – the creator of his globe-trotter dreams?*

PETER JAROŠ: I, too, like to see the world because getting to know other cultures is enriching and brings nations closer together. That is the purpose of culture...

Translated by Saskia Hudecová

Stanislav Rakús

THE ECCENTRIC UNIVERSITY *(Extract)*

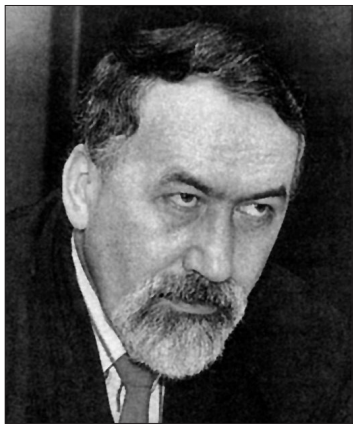


Photo: Archive

STANISLAV RAKÚS (1940), prose writer and literary scholar, born on January 20, 1940 in Šúrovce. After graduating from the Pedagogical Faculty of the P.J. Šafárik University in Prešov (reading Slovak and Russian) in 1963, he taught at secondary schools and from 1969 to the present he has lectured at the Philosophical Faculty of P.J. Šafárik University, renamed Prešov University, where he is Professor Emeritus today and teaches theory and history of literature. He lives in Košice.

Rakús's prose is connected with his profession. He presents in it not only his vision of the world, but also modern narrative and compositional methods. In *The Beggars* (Žobráci, 1976) he built on the traditions of lyrical prose and naturism. Rakús showed interest in people on the periphery of society and he looked for their human dimension. Similar in tone were short stories from the collection *A Song of Spring Water* (Pieseň o studničnej vode, 1979), but here Rakús drew more from folk myths and ballads. The novella *Temporal Notes* (Temporálne poznámky, 1993) is of a different kind. In contrast with the previous books, here he exploited his personal experience. At the centre of the plot is a teacher at a secondary school and his everyday work, full of embarrassments and paradoxes. Rakús returned to prose writing after eleven years with the novel *Unwritten Novel* (Nenapísaný román, 2004). There are many parallels between this and the latter work – similar topics and characters, one of them even appears in both the novella and the novel – and it seem as if the author tried to persuade the reader that he was reading a variation of the former text. It is again a story about a rather slow, unassertive intellectual, living in the seventies of 20th century, a period characterized by normalization, which prefers literature to the "normalized" reality. Rakús recently published a prose titled *The Eccentric University* (Excentrická univerzita, 2008), which, again, draws on the university milieu. Here, again, a novel is intended to be written, but remains unfinished. Its author just talks about it, collects materials, examines the possible ways of writing it and fills his notebook with new ideas and solutions, but nothing comes out of it. Rakús is also the author of five books of literary criticism and one book for children. His prose writing is characterized by a large measure of free fantasy, rather rare in Slovak prose. Rakús builds on associative rather than on logical or chronological motivation. He has a masterly command of narrative methods and at the same time he fully employs the poetic attributes of the language and stylistic finesse.

After I began studying at university, I became an entirely different person for Uncle Rudolf. Perhaps it was because I came home rarely and from a great distance that I was now included among those it was necessary to shake hands with. The moment he caught sight of me, he did just that. On each occasion, however, (his question returning me almost to my childhood) he immediately asked me whether I had washed my hands after my train journey and I, in the hope of relishing the sight of uncle washing my germs off his hands and drying them on his own towel, could never resist the temptation to reply in the negative.

My uncle and father's genteel ways had nothing to do with reserve and aloofness. They both enjoyed discussions and liked to seek company. Although father used to say that thanks to his meditations on higher things he could enjoy himself even when alone, nevertheless on occasion rather than indulging in philosophical solitude he would give preference to a visit to the pub.

Uncle Rudolf, who was not as keen on higher things as my father, was much more practical with regard to contacts and social interests. He took advantage of the new situation and wheedled himself into Barn's favour, with the aim of getting into Bokoš's villa, occupied by the militiaman František Ilavský. For this he was temporarily willing to sacrifice even his love of clean hands. He inspected everything in Ilavský's house and then reported in detail what he had seen and experienced there. He said that as the militiaman František Ilavský had called him by his first name from the very outset, he, too, had automatically returned the compliment. He described in detail how the wilderness of a garden had been completely cleared and the militiaman was now building a summer kitchen there, in spite of the fact that Bokoš's villa already had as many as three kitchens: one on the ground floor, the next upstairs and the third – the one used in wartime – in the basement. He talked at length about the building material piled up in the hall, as well as in one of the ground-floor rooms and about the militiaman's plans that would enable him – of this there could be no doubt – to spoil Bokoš's villa once and for all.

When now, years later, I recall uncle's visit to the militiaman, I wonder whether the words of Viktor Pavlovič Bochňa about language and literature as a sphere that concerns every atom, proton and neutron of this world do not apply to a considerable degree to uncle's account of the militiaman. The way – almost like an actor – he imitated in a ridiculing, but lively manner Ilavský's rapid, jerky speech, with its west Slovakian dialect; the way he demonstrated his waddling gait, strict, distrustful gaze, meliorated by the occasional tap on the nose with his index finger, all this together with other features of Ilavský's speech and behaviour, made a great impression on me. I thought his entire narration was entertaining and comical. It also seemed comical when uncle, imitating Ilavský, said how terribly bourgeois Bokoš had been, adding, as if just by the way, that according to the militiaman it would now be the turn of other, less rich members of the bourgeoisie. They were gradually being moved to the Czech borderlands or to infertile, stony central Slovakia. I felt amused and strangely delighted by my uncle's entertaining account until the moment when one of my sisters asked who were these less rich members of the bourgeoisie and Uncle Rudolf answered that these included citizens who had a house, a garden, a yard, car, garage, five rooms and so on. My sister didn't ask anything more; maybe she was afraid to hear uncle's reply, but from that moment I was troubled by the question of whether we ourselves would not be included among those citizens to follow Bokoš and be moved out from our street to the Czech borderlands or to infertile, stony central Slovakia. We had a house, an old Praga car, a wooden garage, a yard, a garden, but not five rooms, only four. That thought reassured me for a minute. But only for a minute, because it suddenly

occurred to me that those who would decide could consider the summer kitchen – which had nothing in common with a kitchen or with summer - to be the fifth room. It was a storeroom for the most varied junk, tools, screwdrivers, superfluous tyres, mudguards, nails, wooden boxes, wobbly and broken chairs and it was at the same time a kind of repairman's workshop. It was Mum's youngest brother, the darling of their family, Uncle Filip from Varávka – who goodness knows why, we had from childhood called Eugen – that spent the most time there. Always dressed in overalls saturated with some kind of pleasant, indestructible smell of oil, wood, paint, glue, rust, tar paper and cleaning liquids, he would mend various broken household appliances and, although he was not a driver, some of the parts from the worn-out Praga car that was on its last legs. Even though I was fond of the summer kitchen, after uncle's news about moving out the less rich bourgeoisie, I thought we'd be better off without it. I wished we didn't have the wooden garage, or even the car. That was used only on rare occasions by my father, who was a very untrustworthy driver. He had almost insurmountable difficulties just driving off, since he first had to reverse out of the garage. It was not often that he managed to drive down the path between the fence and the house without bumping into the wall. In the end he gave up trying to get into the street, but he did not give up the car and driving. Instead, he got Ján Bojna from Ajcingova Street to reverse out for him. Ján was a professional driver who delivered margarine, bread, rolls, buns, potato sugar and heavy canisters of watered-down milk to the dairy shops every morning. When Ján Bojna appeared at our house, we immediately knew that father was preparing to go somewhere by car, which might be dangerous for himself and the whole town as well; after all, if someone doesn't know how to drive backwards, he will not be a reliable driver even when he goes forwards. Father didn't agree with this. He used to say that he had no problem with driving forwards, because that was natural and in accordance with human nature. Which is why it was possible to reflect at the same time on higher things.

Mum was always adamant that he should not dare let anyone from the house go with him in the car. He was only allowed to drive scoundrels. These were the friends and acquaintances he used to meet in pubs.

My secret fear of being evicted resulted in me having an anomalous attitude towards things I had previously disliked. I delighted in the ugly, drab faade of our house, the shabby gate and fence, consisting of a crumbling brick base and rusting spiked railings that hadn't had a fresh coat of paint for a long time. While I had before admired the wonderful garden of our next-door neighbour, a Slovene by the name of Branko Parič, now I was glad to see our unattractive, almost off-putting functional garden, in which neither chickens nor hens were lacking. I no longer secretly watched with admiration the taciturn Slovene changing into his overalls and getting down to enhancing his garden when he came home from Nupod, where he worked as a clerk. How many times it had seemed to me that in a garden where there were ponds, gravel paths, ornamental bushes, trees and flowers in the most varied colour combinations, there was nothing left to do, much less improve, apart from cutting and watering, but the Slovene always found so much work that he devoted whole afternoons in spring, summer and autumn to this fragrant garden.

Now he could pay dearly for his care and gardening fanaticism. At that time both the Slovene's garden and his neatly-kept house gave me hope that there were those in our street whose turn for being moved elsewhere would arrive sooner than ours.

Many of the houses looked far better than ours. I now took a very different view of distinctive features such as the little tower on the house where my classmate Milan Radimák lived. I knew from him that no one could squeeze into the little tower, but as a decorative element it must catch the eye of every militiaman marching down our street. Maybe someone would consider that very tower to be a superfluous bourgeois luxury.

In our own house it was the dining room that worried me most. No one ever ate breakfast, lunch or dinner there. It was an unused room, full of carpets, lace mats and well-preserved, unspoiled furniture. With its strange musty smell it seemed to be waiting indefinitely for some special visit. Gradually everything in it began to disturb and irritate me. The walnut sideboard, the glass cupboard holding a set of crystal glasses and Chinese porcelain cups, plates from which no one ate, as well as the three pictures. One was of a castle, the next wild countryside and the third depicted part of the main street in our town. From time to time a sinister, haunting thought entered my mind, that the mysterious visit the dining room in its proud, stuffy inviolability had been waiting for all these years would be some inspector, militiaman or other dignitary. When he stepped into the house he would immediately be shocked by the glazed veranda, and when he entered the dining room, he would sit down in the brown armchair, in order to view it all at once with astonishment and unconcealed indignation. Then he would get up, pull some official papers out of his briefcase and begin to note down the different pieces of furniture, as well as the contents of both the glass cupboards, the sideboard and the lower, enclosed shelves. He wouldn't overlook the paintings, either. This vision, where the inspector comes to the conclusion that we are after all members of the bourgeoisie, although less rich than Bokoš, was so powerful and harrowing that it persecuted me in various forms and fragments even in my sleep. I couldn't put the dining room out of my mind. That superfluous, senseless, stupid room looked to me like a trap set long ago for our family. It probably held everything that was of any value that our parents had acquired or bought with my mother's inheritance and my father's selling at the market. As I walked to school in white canvas shoes and old, worn track suit trousers, which in the stressful period of my fear of being evicted I felt to be the most suitable clothes, I wondered why my parents did not hide or bury somewhere the unused crystal set, the porcelain cups, lace mats and other useless things in the dining room. Perhaps Uncle Rudolf's one-room flat in an old block in Predmerský Street would serve as a good hiding place. No one would ever think of looking for anything in his rented flat.

Uncle, who was on first-name terms with the militiaman and dignitary František Ilavský, could persuade him to leave us in peace, I thought to myself, and various arguments immediately began to occur to me that uncle could use to convince Ilavský that we were one of those families who lived on the brink of privation and poverty.

They eat mainly potatoes, Uncle Rudolf tells Ilavský. Leder's wife knows how to prepare them in twenty ways. She even makes them look like meat, which they only have once a week and that only thanks to the fact that they keep their own chickens. At the Leder's potatoes alternate with food prepared from what they grow in their unsightly, obnoxious garden. This is where they get the ingredients for various preserves and sauces, most often prepared from green cabbage or beans, and tomato soup, which the younger members of the family eat with noticeable distaste. The same goes for savoy cabbage sauce. They'd probably prefer to eat something else. But then they would have to be at least a bit better off. As for the wooden garage or the Praga car, I'd never get in a car like that. It'll soon end up on the scrap heap, among the rubbish, junk and spare parts that clutter up that hideous room they call the summer kitchen. If they had a horse or some cattle it could easily be a barn. But to get back to the car. One of these days that awful Praga car may cost my brother

Anton his life. He used it when he was a young man eking out a living at the market. That ruined his health. Since his operation he has only half a stomach. Now he's an invalid. He used his savings to buy a dilapidated, decaying house, but his savings alone weren't enough to buy even a house like that. The cost of that third-rate house swallowed up part of his wife's modest inheritance. Her father saved a bit when they were building the railways. That wore him out too. The Leder family has working class blood in their veins. You can see that from her brother Eugen. I can't even imagine him in anything other than overalls. That's the kind of family they are. Even the enclosed veranda or silly glitzy things they have in the dining room make them look ridiculous. The Leders couldn't even send their children to university. Their two daughters and their son are already working. As my brother's an invalid they have to help to make a living. Their education finished with the school-leaving exams. The youngest son and daughter are still at school.

These considerations calmed me down and in the unsettled, mercurial period of my boyhood, when I experienced everything intensively, but not long lastingly, they helped me, in that the fear of being moved away evaporated bit by bit and when none of uncle's reports and Ilavský's forecasts were fulfilled in our street, it almost disappeared altogether.

One day, however, the Sedlár family was moved out of our street. While Valentín Bokoš, charged with arson, was for us a well-known figure, but in fact a stranger, our family was not only in contact, but even friendly with Mrs Sedlárová, who used to sew dresses for my mother and sisters. This was particularly true of my mother, but their friendship was not entirely on equal terms. Although Mrs Sedlárová sewed clothes for my mother and not vice versa, it was my mother's dressmaker who had the upper hand in their relationship. Under the influence of Viktor Pavlovič Bochňa I wondered whether apart from her elegant way of dressing and genteel manners, she had not gained this superiority partly thanks to her linguistic talent and ability to talk about higher, nobler society, of which she felt she was a part, even though she had spent most of her life sitting at a sewing machine and didn't even have an elementary education. However, she knew how to speak in an interesting way about anything, for example, about her already deceased father, a shopkeeper who sold miscellaneous goods, or her husband, an expert and adviser on railway transport, who was forever away on his travels. What interested me most was that not long ago this railway adviser had pulled a gun on Mrs Sedlárová's mother, a powdered old lady. My attention was also caught when she spoke about how once in the night her dead brother had appeared to her in a strong draught and told her he would come for her in a year's time. However, this dead brother had not kept his promise. Usually Mrs Sedlárová and her only daughter, who was a year younger than I was, came to our house; Mum and my sisters visited the Sedlárs only when they went for a fitting, or when Mrs Sedlárová and her mother invited them to hear Miška (as her daughter Michaela was called) play the piano. From her Mum took over the habit, and Dad supported her in this, of getting me or Valika, my youngest sister, to sing or recite something for our guests.

There was a danger of this that unpleasant day when as a third-former I hadn't managed to get to the toilet in time before the last lesson. Anxious and ashamed, I sat down at my desk along with what had suddenly happened to my insides. At first no one noticed. The teacher, Haranta, tested two pupils and then explained the new material, talking for quite a while about forest predators, especially about red foxes, which are capable of lying in wait all day in thick undergrowth. Suddenly, however, he broke off and said in his strict, deep voice: "Something stinks here!"

He stared suspiciously at Milan Tulčík, who was sitting in front of me, and then at the dirtiest, strongest and worst pupil, Emil Bordiš.

"Stand up, Bordiš," he said to him.

When this - for me and all the others dangerous – classmate, who had twice had to repeat a year, slowly, unwillingly and mulishly got to his feet, Haranta ordered him to take his shoes off and show the class his feet. First one, then the other.

"You see! And that's what we all have to breathe. Go and wash them immediately!"

It was only later that my conscience began to prick me for not having the courage to confess. At the time, I was first scared stiff, knowing that if Bordiš discovered what had happened to me and that he had had to suffer instead of me, I would not avoid being beaten up, and later I was caught on the hop when I discovered that Mrs Sedlárová and her daughter Miška were at our house. I began to sprinkle scent on myself on the veranda, because there was no time for washing and changing my clothes, as Mum had already caught sight of me. I was afraid she would want me to sing right there and then the Romanian song "Marynyka, Marynyka" that was played on the radio so often that I had learned it by heart and I had sung it for Uncle Eugen a couple of times, always earning a crown. Shortly before this I had also sung it for Aunt Františka from Varávka and for one other visitor. The Sedlárs had not yet heard Marynyka. On the other hand, however, when they had last been on a visit Mum and my sisters Lucia and Monika had heard, and then often spoken about, how beautifully Miška played The Dawn is Coming on the piano. Only Marynyka could compare to that my mother had announced and the moment these words of hers flashed through my mind I realised that I was not going to get out of it. However, nothing happened, because Mum, unlike Haranta, had a good sense of smell. I didn't even get to see the guests.

In the end it was the Sedlárs who were moved elsewhere, though who knows why them – maybe it was their property, piano, dress, genteel manners and inclination for higher society, or on account of a certain eccentricity and quirkiness of the railway expert Róbert Sedlár.

Then the Grapners, whose five-year-old son Mirko drowned in the nearby stream, were also evicted.

After the Sedlárs and Grapners no other family had to move from our street, but the fear that it could next happen to any of us remained with us.

That is why I was glad when someone showed an interest in buying the Praga, which had broken down and been lying in the garage for a good half year.

Two Czechs, whose clothing and appearance was reminiscent of characters from Verne's novels, bought it for a thousand crowns. They were short, talkative, cheerful men in chequered suits and peaked caps. Whistling to themselves, or even from time to time singing arias together in harmony, they spent two weeks enthusiastically repairing the car, but when they had said goodbye to us and set out on their journey to Mělník, outside Agrasol something exploded in the car and further repairs were needed. Out of sympathy our parents returned five hundred of the thousand crowns to the new owners of the Praga. Mum calculated that, taking into account the cost of feeding these men, who lost nothing of their cheerfulness and good mood even after the explosion, we had sold the car for a total of minus two hundred crowns. But it was a good thing anyway, she added, at least Dad wouldn't be driving scoundrels around town any more.

Translated by Heather Trebatická

Irena Brežná
ON CHICKEN WINGS

(Extract)

Photo: Authors' Archive

IRENA BREŽNÁ was born in 1950, in Bratislava, and grew up in Trenčín. After graduating from high school she emigrated to Basel, Switzerland, with her parents where she lives and works up to today. She studied Slavonic studies, philosophy and psychology at the University of Basel. Besides her extensive writing and journalist activities, she has also worked as a psychologist, teacher of Russian, translator and interpreter, coordinator in Amnesty International and a war journalist in Chechnya. She has realized and supported various humanitarian and women's projects in Guinea, Russia, Chechnya and Slovakia. She mainly writes in German and for her journalist and literary texts she has received nine awards in Switzerland and Germany, including the Theodor Wolff prize in 2002, in Berlin.
She writes regularly for the Swiss and German press and media (Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Freitag, German radio WDR3) and for the Slovak dailies SME and Pravda. She has published eight books in German, including a collection of essays and reports from Eastern and Central Europe titled *Soul Collector* (Die Sammlerin der Seelen, Aufbau Verlag, Berlin 2003). Besides articles, a Slovak translation of her prose, *Psoriasis My Love* (Psoriáza moja láska), was published in 1992, and in 2005 a book of prose, articles and essays, *Liquid Fetish* (Tekutý fetiš, Aspekt) followed. Her newest prose *On Chicken Wings* (Na slepačích krídlach, Aspekt) came out in German under the title *Die beste aller Welten* in the Ebersbach edition, in Berlin. In it, the author talks humorously about her childhood in socialist Slovakia during the late 1950s. In September 2008, she made it onto the SWR-Bestenliste, the list of the best prose in German-speaking countries.

Mum is a proletarian, that is, she was a proletarian before she married my father. Proletarianism is a complicated thing; a man can lose it on account of an unproletarian profession and a woman by marrying. Mum is a renegade, that's why she lets me play with all the children and she thinks Grandma is stupid. Grandma is not stupid, she just has old-fashioned ideas and is afraid that proletarian children are dirty and have infectious diseases. If only Mum would come back soon! I have no new clothes, Grandma keeps mending my old ones; she doesn't like anything new. I'm ashamed to go out of the house in darned stockings. I used to be the best-dressed girl in our class and live in comfort. When Mum hugged me, I would be lost in her scent. Now no one hugs me and I can't read novels in the evenings, because Grandma turns out the light. Electricity is expensive, she says quietly in an apologetic voice, because she knows that reading novels is educational and she is depriving me of education. Should I ask Jesus Christ for help, or would it be better to write to our President in the capital? But Jesus Christ has his own problems and Comrade President could order our Mum to be executed, because he is strict and just. I'm afraid Mum wouldn't tear the blindfold off her eyes when facing the execution squad. Then she wouldn't get into the history books and she'd remain a nobody. I'll manage by myself. I'll bury my lovely big Mum deep in my heart like the hawk in the yard.

During the break one boy yelled right across the school playground: Your Mum's in the nick! Poor boy, his father staggers through the streets, blabbering to himself, then collapses on the pavement and sleeps there. His son must be terribly ashamed of him! That's why he vents his anger on me. Our father is not an alcoholic, he's a sportsman and sportsmen only drink water. Everyone in the playground froze to the spot; they stopped running around and shouting. I am standing there and suddenly I feel happy. Now I know what happiness is. It sits inside me and it is overwhelming. Time stops and I stop and in spite of that I'm alive, in fact more than at any other time, and I know: Mum is alive. Then life goes on, as if nothing had happened. I play with my friends, we eat my bread and butter and Comrade Teacher does not announce that our mum is in prison to show she is politically aware.

Since then I've been happy that Mum is not dead; she is lying on a hard plank bed in our beloved country and growing pale. She is safe in the prison cell; she can't do any harm there, consort with enemies, betray secrets, so that foreign, exploited soldiers can attack us. If she had left our country, I would have had to disown her in front of the whole class and I wouldn't get higher education. The children of traitors can't be allowed to be wise; their wisdom is dangerous for the state. Traitors and their descendents must build bridges and be useful to society. They are called the enemy within and can't choose for themselves how they will serve the common good. They carry within themselves the seed of betrayal. I imagine the seed of betrayal to look like a black bug. Even if a child renounces his or her traitorous heritage, the bug will still want to behave disloyally. There's nothing you can do about that. Bugs can't be re-educated.

Our President and all of us must be on the alert, says Comrade Headmaster. He teaches us a new subject – civil defence education and in every lesson he repeats that the danger of war has not yet passed. He shows us a poster on which our enemies are portrayed as horrible stray dogs with bared teeth. All the workers of the world must unite against these dogs, that's what is written in red letters on the wall in our classroom. Enemies within must not hold leading posts, because they could build our bridges crooked on purpose, so they would collapse. That's called sabotage. Whenever I hear that word, I can hear a bridge cracking and collapsing. I hope they are guarding Dad well, so he doesn't commit sabotage. Comrade Teacher says this country is swarming with saboteurs. Whenever a bridge collapses, they immediately throw a couple of saboteurs in prison. I should like to catch a saboteur in the act; I would report him to the police and be awarded a medal.

Mum hasn't stolen anything or killed anyone either. Could it have been words that got her into prison? Words are dangerous in our country. I'm afraid it might have been my words. Sometimes I forget Mum's warning: You mustn't repeat at school anything we say at home. I have erected a dividing wall in my head, on the right are family words

and on the left school words. They are two worlds and two languages and every day I go back and forth between them like a double agent. But, whether out of naughtiness or tiredness, sometimes a word slips out into the wrong world and that word may well have put Mum in prison. It's not easy living in a happy country. Happiness can disappear at any moment and someone has to pay for it.

Think what you like, but never say it aloud, that's another of Mum's favourite sayings. I consider keeping quiet to be cowardly and I promise myself that I will always say what I think. But I don't. If I met some heroes who weren't afraid to defend their opinions even in prison, I would have someone I could talk to. But the heroes in the history textbooks are dead and we who are to light up the future are still too weak. I like our hard-working ancestors, the tinkers, who went out into the world to mend the holes in pots and pans. They offered their services in the streets and squares of foreign towns, shouting out loud: Pots to mend! They were well-liked and good craftsmen. I'd love to shout out my opinions in our Great Victory Square and patch up all the holes in this world with my heart.

Although Mum was a proletarian child, she had traitorous plans. That is the great secret with which she entrusted me and my brother. Before she disappeared, she called us into the living room, told us to sit down on the sofa and she shut the door. She cleared her throat and hesitated for a moment, I was already afraid she was ill, but then she revealed her plan to us: Very soon we shall escape across the border and travel overseas by ship. I didn't hear what she said after that, at the thought of travelling by ship my ears filled with water, I could only hear the rush of waves and I never reached the enemy shores. My brother went dead quiet. As I said, he's a coward. But I too sat mutely on the sofa, where guests usually sat, and felt as if I was just there on a visit. I stared at Mum; she seemed so distant, as if she was someone I didn't know, as if I was wearing glasses through which all I could see was the sea.

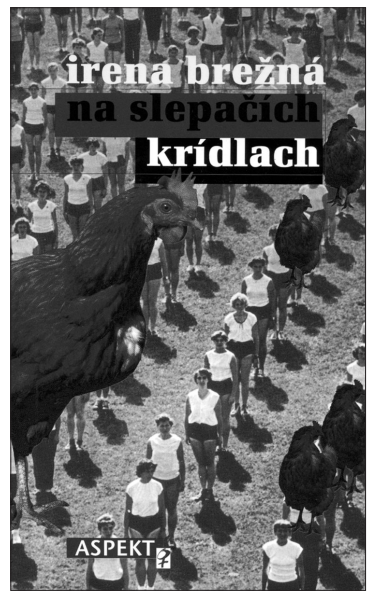
My head was swirling. Why did Mum want to go where there was oppression and injustice? She couldn't be a spy, could she? Could she want to destroy our bright future for a pile of money? So many heroes had been tortured to death and executed in jails, so that we could live in a better world. And Mum wants to live overseas, where the proletariat with despairing faces slog away for starvation wages, emaciated children beg in the streets and fat gentlemen pass them by and instead of sharing their bread and butter with them, they spit out saliva stained yellow by their fat cigars. But what can I do now when I'm sitting in the living room behind closed doors on the best piece of furniture opposite my fragrant mummy and she has just uttered that terrible word "emigration"? Our state gives us textbooks and exercise books free, so we can one day work for the benefit of the proletariat, and not for the benefit of spitting gentlemen in a hostile country, where textbooks and exercise books cost a lot of money and the classrooms are half empty. That's what we were told by our headmaster, who has never been in an enemy classroom. But, he said, we don't have wait until winter to know that snow is white. Our heroes used to declare that you must never run away from any danger, from any task, no matter how difficult it may be, and you must never betray your country and they themselves kept to this. I'm glad Mum's attempt to run away came to nothing. I want to stay for ever in our backyard and be progressive.

I certainly don't want to emigrate, but not because it is forbidden and ignores the need for solidarity. When I imagine us leaving, I see the children from our neighbourhood gathered at the gate to say goodbye to me and Mum calling irritably: Come on! I turn round to take a last look at our house and I just can't budge from the spot. It's like in a nightmare when I can't run away from a bad man, my legs are heavy, as if they have put down roots in the asphalt. So that day I sat on the sofa in the living room like a coward – after all, I am the sister of my brother and I have inherited the bourgeois bug from my father, and all I could manage to do was to ask quietly: Can I take my teddy bear? At which my mother hugged me in delight. But of course you can. Teddy isn't good at sums, which is why I have to spank him and then his eyes grow sad. That hurts me and I kiss him all over and beg him to forgive me. I certainly wouldn't want to emigrate without him. Then Mum told us very sternly: You mustn't tell anyone, otherwise something terrible will happen. She looked at us mistrustfully, as if we had already given the secret away. Hm, only something terrible happened anyway, even though I didn't say a word. But it could have been far worse. Isn't it better to sit in a dark cell in our country than be alone and free overseas?

We are to be more progressive day by day, like our country, which has more and more factory chimneys. In this way we can look after ourselves and also help poor countries to build factory chimneys. When Comrade Teacher hands out paper and coloured crayons, we draw red factory chimneys, from which proud black smoke is rising. When the sky over our country turns black and hides the sun, it means that we are well off and industrialisation is progressing and we don't need the sun. When I see the factory chimneys from our backyard, I know that I am well cared for. Our factory worker comrades are taking care of me, they know my needs. We have enough electricity, we have lots of rivers, we've got the better of floods and we have built a hydroelectric power station outside every village. Our rivers are choked up and filthy because of all those factories, but only backward countries have clean rivers.

Grandma says that only my guardian angel knows my needs. Mum, on the contrary, says – or rather used to say, when she was still with us – that Grandma is talking a load of rubbish. But I like listening to Grandma when she's talking about angels. Her voice goes soft, it's like cat's fur, and then I know that our Grandma is good. I sit near her in the kitchen on a footstool. It grows dark, but we don't turn on the light as we are saving electricity and I can hear angels flying around the kitchen, even though I don't believe in them. Outside the window bats whizz past in large circles and everywhere there is peace. Not the kind of peace that would stop our enemies from attacking us. It is the kind of peace that needs nothing more than to sit quietly and listen to sounds.

Translated by Heather Trebatická



Peter Krištúfek
DIE HAND

(Leseprobe)

Photo: Peter Procházka

PETER KRIŠTÚFEK (1973), Prosaiker, Szenarist, Filmregisseur hat Fernseh- und Filmregie an der Akademie für musische Künste studiert. Neben dem Fernsehfilm *Lange kurze Nacht* (Dlhá krátka noc) und zwei Spielfilmen *Nächte in der Sonne* (Noci na slnku) und *Welch eine wunderbare Welt!* (Aký nádherný svet!) hat er mehrere Dokumentarfilmbeiträge gedreht. Zudem arbeitete er als Radiomoderator bei verschiedenen Musiksendern und ist Mitglied von zwei Musikbands. Seine Prosatexte veröffentlichte er in Zeitungen und Literaturzeitschriften in der Slowakei und in Tschechien. In den Jahren 2000, 2002 und 2004 nahm er an dem Literaturwettbewerb *Erzählung* teil. Im Jahr 2002 debütierte Krištúfek mit der Kurzprosasammlung *Der ungenaue Ort* (Nepresné miesto), für die er den Ivan-Krasko-Preis erhielt. Die Kritik lobte vor allem seine auf bizarren Situationen aufgebaute Geschichten mit betont visuellem Charakter, starker Atmosphäre und einem irrationalen oder absurden Schluss. 2004 veröffentlichte er sein zweites Buch *Mit freiem Auge* (Voľným okom), dessen Titel als eine Metapher für Krištúfeks Erfassung der Welt gelten kann. Die Filmoptik und Technik des Filmschnitts prägen auch seine Poetik. 2005 erschien die Novellensammlung *Star der ausgeschnittenen Aufnahmen* (Hviezda vystrihnutého záberu). Aus der Konfrontation der Hauptfigur, eines behinderten Mädchens namens Amsterdam, mit der Welt entsteht in dem Novellenzyklus eine Reihe von Missverständnissen, Konflikten und Grotesken, die wie ausgeschnittene Sequenzen eines Films wirken. 2006 erschien sein Buch *Kompanie des langsamen Einsatzes* (Rota pomalého nasadenia), zusammengesetzt aus den nicht benutzten Filmszenen aus der Kultserie der Filmen von Rony Escherwood, das er zusammen mit Dado Nagy geschrieben hat. Sein bis jetzt letztes Buch *Der Souffleur* (Šepkár) erschien in diesem Jahr und ist für den europäischen Preis *Prix du Livre 2008* nominiert.

Wenn ich mich nicht irre, war es eine Hand. Es war sicher eine Hand.

Ich beschäftigte mich nicht allzu lange damit. Nachdem ich sie reflexartig in meiner Aktentasche verstaut hatte, fasste ich nicht mehr den Mut, sie noch einmal anzuschauen. Die Hand gehörte nämlich meiner Frau. Sie brauchte sie nicht mehr. Zumindest kam es mir so vor. Nach all dem. Wir haben lange genug zusammen gelebt, um mich jetzt von ihr so einfach verabschieden zu können, vermute ich. Da zwinge ich mich aber doch, darüber nachzudenken. Die Realität war einfach – ich legte die Hand in die Aktentasche und ging hinaus auf die Straße.

Alle Hunde schwiegen und schienen irgendwo verkrochen zu sein, als ich aus der Tür trat. So ist es immer. Den anderen bellen sie nach, aber ich bin offensichtlich nicht interessant genug für sie.

Am Imbiss bestellte ich 200 Gramm Pariser Salat, zwei Brötchen und eine Cola, 0,2 Liter, wie immer. Ich mag die Nummer zwei. Ich zahlte, nahm das Essen und stellte mich an den Tresen mit Blick auf die Straßenbahngleise. Ich mag Ordnung über alles und so stellte ich die Brötchen in einer Plastiktüte auf die linke und das Glas Cola auf die rechte Seite. Dann nahm ich die Aluminiumgabel (mit Widerwillen dachte ich daran, wie viele sie wohl schon im Mund hatten!) und zerquetschte damit den Salathaufen, um einen Überblick über all die Erbsen und die zu appetitlichen Rechtecken geschnittene Schinkenwurst zu haben.

„Verzeihung!“, sagte das Mädchen mit braunen Augen, das vorhin an der Theke stand. Sie hatte schwarze Haare und trug ein schwarzes T-Shirt. Auf einem Tablett stapelte sie die benutzten Teller mit Krümeln und Mayonnaise-Resten, dreckige Gläser und Gabeln. Sie langte nach einem Messer mit schwarzem Griff und berührte dabei flüchtig, vielleicht für ein Tausendstel einer Sekunde mein Handgelenk. Das fühlte sich angenehm an.

Ich schob den Salat in den Mund und biss das erste Brötchen an. Und das Mädchen war gleich wieder da. Jetzt hielt sie einen feuchten Lappen in der Hand und wischte damit die rissige Tresenoberfläche ab. Von einer und dann von der anderen Seite. Ich erwartete, von dem Mädchen gebeten zu werden, meinen Teller ein bisschen zu heben, aber sie sagte nichts. Ich beobachtete ihre schnellen Bewegungen und kaute weiter.

Und in meiner Aktentasche lag die Hand.

Auf der Straße brannte die Sonne und trocknete die Pfützen nach dem ausgiebigen Regen von heute morgen. Ich versuchte, den Pfützen auszuweichen, nicht immer mit Erfolg. Die Häuser und die zerrissenen Wolken über der Stadt spiegelten sich darin.

Ich kann nicht sagen, dass ich den Mann bereits von weitem gesehen hätte, da ich ihn erst bemerkte, als er mich anrempelte. Oder war ich es, der ihn anrempelte? Das weiß ich gar nicht, wahrscheinlich war ich in meine Gedanken vertieft oder so. Der Mann war viel größer und kräftiger als ich.

Schnaufend schaute er mich an.

„Was ist?“

„Was sollte denn sein?“

„Das zeig ich dir gleich!“ Er packte mich an meinem Kragen und schüttelte mich. Die Aktentasche fiel mir aus der Hand und landete an meinen Füßen.

„Immer mit der Ruhe!“

„Ich bin so was von ruhig, verdammt noch mal!“ Er drückte mich an die Mauer, im Rücken spürte ich den Wandverputz und im Gesicht seinen üblen Mundgeruch.

Ein paar Leute blieben neben uns stehen.

„Lassen Sie ihn doch los!“, meldete sich unsicher einer aus der Menge.

„Halt die Klappe!“, erwiderte der Mann über seine Schulter.

„Ist doch gar nichts passiert ...“, sagte ich versöhnlich und versuchte mit einem Fuß an die Aktentasche zu gelangen, um sie nicht zu verlieren.

„Also hör mal, du Idiot ...!“, er schritt zur Seite und versetzte dabei der Aktentasche einen Stoß, so dass sie an die Mauer flog.

Die Menschenmenge wuchs.

„Verzeihung ...“, sagte ich leise.

Das verwirrte ihn: „Was?!!“

„Verzeihung! Ich entschuldige mich bei Ihnen!“

Er ließ mich los und fuhr sich mit der Hand durch seine fettigen Haare.

„Hm ...“

Ich bückte mich und hob die Aktentasche. Staubte sie ab. Sie war verstaubt und verschlammt.

„Na ... Ist ja nichts passiert, du ...!“

Er klopfte mir auf die Schulter und mir fiel die Aktentasche wieder aus der Hand. Diesmal bückten wir uns beide nach ihr. Er war schneller, griff nach ihr und drückte sie mir gleich entgegen.

Die Menge löste sich langsam auf. Er reichte mir die Hand. Sein Händedruck war stark.

„Freunde ... Für immer!“, lächelte er. „Solltest du mal was brauchen, dann ...“

„Alles klar ...“

Er drehte sich um und ging. Nochmals schaute er sich um und winkte dabei zum Abschied. Ich umklammerte die Aktentasche und ging meinen Weg weiter.

Den Zebrastreifen muss ich immer mit dem rechten Fuß betreten. Diesmal gelang es mir beinahe nicht, denn auf der Verkehrsinsel zwischen den vorbei strömenden Autos standen zu viele Leute. Nachdem die Ampel auf Grün umgeschaltet hatte, stieß mich jemand an und ich hatte Mühe, das Gleichgewicht nicht zu verlieren. Letztendlich schaffte ich es. Mit dem rechten Fuß den ersten Schritt machen, gleichmäßig über den Zebrastreifen laufen und zum Schluss mit der Linken den Gehweg betreten.

Ich lief in Richtung Park, der sich von hier aus fast bis zum Bahnhof erstreckte. Dort wollte ich mich kurz auf eine Bank hinsetzen. Die Hand war schwer. Ich wusste gar nicht, dass sie so ein Gewicht haben kann.

„Hast du meinen Ball gesehen?“

Ich schaute nach unten. Vor mir stand ein kleines Mädchen von vielleicht vier Jahren. Sie stemmte beide Hände in die Hüfte, wie sie es wohl bei ihren Eltern gesehen hatte und schaute sich um. Dabei kaute sie gedankenversunken an ihrer Unterlippe herum.

Ich schüttelte den Kopf.

„Schade!“

„Wie sah denn dein Ball aus?“

„Rot. Mit solchen Punkten“, zeichnete das Mädchen mit seinen Armen in der Luft.

„Aha...“

„Was hast du in der Tasche?“

„Eine Hand.“

Das Mädchen fing an zu lachen.

„Tatsächlich“, sagte ich.

„Eine Hand! Das glaube ich nicht! Das hast du erfunden!“ Sie schaute mir unverwandt in die Augen. „Hast du nicht zufällig Schokolade drin?“

„Nein, nur die Hand.“

Das Mädchen zuckte mit dem Kopf. „Dann also nichts! Hast du nicht zufällig meinen Ball gesehen?“

Damit wandte sie sich bereits an einen alten Mann im grauen Anzug.

Ich schleppte mich müde zu Hause an. Ohne dieses Mal den Mantel auf den Kleiderständer zu hängen und den Stoff glatt zu streichen, damit sich keine Falten bilden. Ohne die Schuhe auszuziehen und sie ansehnlich nebeneinander zu stellen, so dass sich die Spitzen berühren würden. Niemand kam und nahm mir die Aktentasche ab, während ich mich ausziehen würde. Und plötzlich wurde mir klar, dass die ganze Zeit mein Leben bloß vom System zusammengehalten wurde. Jetzt fiel alles auseinander. Wie ein zerlegtes Uhrwerk. Wie ein auf Sand gebautes Haus.

Die Aktentasche schleuderte ich aufs Bett und ich selbst warf mich auch darauf. Angezogen, mit den Schuhen an den Füßen lag ich lange mit geschlossenen Augen und versuchte an nichts zu denken. Schatten wanderten über die Zimmerdecke, das Licht hinter den Fenstern wurde immer schwächer.

Dann drehte ich mich um und öffnete die Aktentasche. Ich schaute hinein. Sie war da. Glatt und kühl. Die Hand.

Ich zögerte, ob ich sie überhaupt herausnehmen soll, tat es schließlich doch. Als Gegenstand war die Hand ziemlich sperrig. Sie erinnerte mich an meine Frau, auch wenn es nur eine Hand war. Ich war den Tränen nahe, aber dann unterdrückte ich sie.

Die kühlen Finger drückte ich an meine Wange.

„Du, meine, du ... Meine!“

Mit der Hand streichelte ich mir über das Gesicht und schluchzte. Dann rollte ich mich zusammen und hielt die Hand in meinen Armen.

„Warum? Sag mir bloß, warum?“, flüsterte ich in die geballte Faust hinein.

Dann beruhigte ich mich und schaute auf dem Bett liegend an die Zimmerdecke.

„Ja, ich werde sie ihnen erst morgen zuschicken ... Das reicht doch ... Ins Papier eingewickelt lege ich sie in ein Paket. Das Paket schicke ich per Post ab. Ja, genau so mache ich es. Nur noch eine Nacht! Eine Nacht ...!

Ich stand auf und bereitete mir das Abendessen.

Während ich aß, lag die Hand am Tisch mir gegenüber. Das fühlte sich so selbstverständlich. Wenn ich die Hand verstohlen, wie durch halbgeschlossene Lider anschaute, schien es mir, als würde sie mir gegenüber sitzen. Sie. Meine Frau. Mit ihrem Gesicht und ihrer Nase und ihrem Mund. Und mit ihren Beinen. Ihrem Körper. Sie. Ganz. Sie schaut mich an.

Aber dann war es wieder die Hand. Nur die Hand.

Ich schnitt den Käse, aß Brot und Paprika. Es schmeckte mir nicht. Und die Hand war da. Ich werde sie wahrscheinlich nie los, sagte ich mir. Sie gehört zu mir. Ohne sie kann ich nicht leben.

„Bleibst du bei mir ...?“, fragte ich die Hand, was mich selbst überraschte.

Sie antwortete nicht. Sie konnte nicht reden. Ich seufzte.

„Ich ... brauche deine Berührung ... Sehr ...“

Die Hand bewegte sich, zumindest kam es mir so vor. Ich wurde aufmerksam. Hier spielte sich etwas ab. Sie bewegte die Finger, ganz sicher. Jetzt. Nein. Ich beugte mich über sie. Beinahe sprang ich vom Tisch auf, als sich die Hand zur Faust ballte. Ich erhob mich rasch vom Tisch. Aber so was! Die Hand erhob sich auch und bewegte sich langsam auf mich zu. Sie schritt auf den Fingerkuppen, jedoch nicht sehr geschickt, als würde sie eine Last tragen. Wie ein Einsiedlerkrebs im Sand. Wie eine Spinne mit zerquetschtem Bauch.

Ich drückte mich fest an die Wand.

„Sag mir, was du willst ...!“, rief ich.

Zugleich wurde mir bewusst, dass mir die Hand nur schwierig antworten konnte.

Stattdessen griff sie nach dem Paprikakern und ließ ihn wieder auf die Tischdecke fallen. Sie tastete sich weiter. Vorsichtig berührte sie die Brotkruste, spielte eine Weile mit ihr und warf sie wiederholt lässig von der Handfläche nach oben. Dann ließ sie von der Kruste ab und nahm das Messer mit dem Holzgriff. Es war nicht allzu scharf, aber scharf genug, um einem ein paar schlimme Schnittwunden zuzufügen. Der Mensch ist ein gebrechliches Wesen. Und die Haut ist eine verdammt dünne Hülle.

Ich fing an zu schwitzen.

„Das reicht,“ sagte ich, als würde es etwas bewirken. „Schluss jetzt!“

Die Hand hielt das Messer in den Fingern. Sie umklammerte es fest. Ich sah, wie ihre Fingergelenke weiß anliefen.

Plötzlich ließ sie das Messer los und erstarrte. Ich griff schnell nach dem Messer und legte es in die Spüle, damit es die Hand nicht wieder erreichen konnte. Vorsichtig hob ich die Hand vom Tisch. Ich streichelte sie an den Fingern. Zeichnete die Linien und Falten nach. Mit meiner Nase bohrte ich mich in ihre Handfläche. Sie duftete schwach, ganz schwach.

Hinter den Fenstern, in anderen Wohnungen leuchteten die Fernsehbildschirme. Alle gleich. In den Nachrichten wurde vielleicht gemeldet, dass eine Frauenleiche ohne Hand gefunden wurde. Irgendwo im Wald. Oder im Fluss. Ich weiß es nicht. Ich wollte es mir nicht anhören, solche Nachrichten. Sie gehörte mir, wie nie zuvor.

„Du gehörst mir! Nur mir!“, sagte ich.

Und in dem Moment überkam mich unermessliches Glück.

Übersetzt von Slávka Porubská

Jana Beňová

SEEING PEOPLE OFF *(Extract)*

(CAFÉ HYENA)

Photo: Peter Procházka

JANA BEŇOVÁ (1974), poet and prose writer, graduated from the Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts in Bratislava (1993–1998) with a degree in theater dramaturgy. At first she wrote for *Dotyky*, *Fragment* and *Slovenské pohľady*. Currently she works as an editor of the daily SME, writing under the name Jana Parkrová.

She debuted with a collection of poems titled *Lucifugous* (Svetloplachý, 1993). Next came another collection of poems, *Wombokhod* (Lonochod, 1997), which was composed as a book of travels spanning from the author's birth up until 1995. Just like her debut, this too is a "travelogue" of interpersonal relationships, loves, details and life observations. The collection *Loveful Naked* (Nehota, 1997) is characterized by peculiar poetics: it knows its aim as well as its boundaries. In the novel *Parker (A Love Story)* – Parker (Ľúbostný román, 2001), where prose blends with poetic text, Beňová follows up on the tendency which she had chosen in her poems. Thus an epic built on actual experience is created, a collage of separate moments in the relationship between Parker and Heidi (who is at the same time a dominant narrator in the first person). Heidi often changes genders – feminine when talking about herself, masculine when talking about "serious matters", neuter gender when she is "that man's girl". Beňová's next book is a collection of thirteen short stories – *Twelve Stories and Ján Med* (Dvanásť poviedok a Ján Med, 2003). The book is marked by poetics and sensibility bound with a poignant, peculiar insight into the human mind and behavior. In spring 2008 the L.C.A. publishing house released Jana Beňová's latest book – *Seeing People Off* (Plán odprevádzania) subtitled *Café Hyena. Seeing People Off* is a strange mosaic made of mini-stories, observations, perceptions, experiences, self-reflections and memories amidst which emerges a relationship between a young woman and an ageing man. Beňová's distinctive and authentic testimony about contemporary society perhaps also contains autobiographical features. In a review for the book, the well-known Slovak poet and writer Daniel Hevier wrote that one has to read this prose for a long time. Without doubt, it will be awarded and nominated, translated and filmed ... It will be proclaimed one of the most important works of new Slovak prose. ... The important thing is that the moment in which narrative becomes literature, has – after some time – come again.

KALISTO TANZI

Elza: Together we ate grapes and washed them down with pink wine. The next day I discovered a damp grape stalk in my pocket. It looked like an upside-down tree.

Kalisto Tanzi disappeared from the town, which was gripped by a heat wave. The heat radiating from the houses and streets burned people's faces and the scorching town seared its mark on their foreheads.

I stopped in front of the theatre's display case so I could read Kalisto's name on the posters and reassure myself that he actually did exist. I derive pleasure from uttering the name that had tormented him throughout childhood and puberty and only really stopped annoying him after my arrival. I slowly walk to the other end of the town, the muscles in my legs tingling slightly in the hot air. It is noon. Drops of perspiration are the only thing really moving on this planet. They run down to the bridge of my nose and spurt out again from under my hair.

I'm going to buy poison.

Yesterday Ian saw a rat in the lavatory.

The rat-catcher has a wine cellar under his shop. We go underground to escape the unbearable heat and sip wine. He tells me how intelligent rats are.

"They have a taster, who is first to try the food. If he dies, the others won't even touch the bait. That's why we use second generation baits. The rat begins to die only four days after consuming the poison. It dies as a result of internal bleeding. Even Seneca claimed that such a death is painless. The rest of the rats get the impression that their comrade has died a natural death. But even so – if several of them die in a short time, they decide the locality is unfavourable on account of the high mortality rate and they move elsewhere. Some people and even whole nations completely lack this ability to assess a situation."

A perfect, repulsive world. I smile over red Tramin. The rat-catcher speaks very fast. His face is in constant motion. As if he had too many muscles in it. As if a pack of rodents were running around under his skin. From one ear to the other. From his chin to his forehead and back. I can feel his restless legs jigging under the table and his whole trunk sways in a dance.

The sight of this makes me feel dizzy. My head spins like when watching a film that flashes too quickly from one scene to the next. The rat-catcher bends forward and gets tangled in my hair.

"You're such a pretty little mouse," he smiles. I smile back. I sense I stink of loneliness.

He sees me out and on the way he gives me a plastic bag full of rat poison. Instead of flowers. I clutch it proudly. Perhaps it will always be like this, I think to myself. If men want to court me, instead of flowers, they will give me a bag of second generation rat bait.

After emerging from the cool cellar, hot air and a world without Kalisto Tanzi hits me in the face.

I first saw Kalisto at a private preview. A lot was drunk there and a few new couples were formed in the course of the evening. As Ian says – where there are men, women and alcohol... – and he thus gives the basic coordinates for the localisation of sex.

I looked into his blue eyes and for the first time I longed for a being with coloured eyes. Ian's are almost black. Colours have always been a decisive factor for me. Their combination in Kalisto's face attracted me. We sat together and talked until morning. As always in the beginning: you can once more give an account of your life and everything is interesting. You talk, slowly revolving around yourself – the whole room dances with you – fine sparkling powder settles in your hair.

In Kalisto Tanzi's presence my account seemed more exciting. My own life swam before our eyes like a glass mountain. With every word I created it anew. Recreated. I recreated in Kalisto

Tanzi's presence. No doubt I could write a book about it. It would be a musical: *Ah, little fairy, if you only knew all the things I've been through…*

But it's lunchtime now. I am sitting in a coffee bar. Dressed in brown: an old woman. I am sitting opposite Ian. An old couple. The silence between us is broken only by the newspaper headlines. From time to time Ian reads one out to me over the table. Then he reads on. The newspaper is a drawbridge. He occasionally lets it down and looks at my face. Our eyes do not meet. The wine tastes like prunes and chocolate. The coca cola inscription on the tablecloth begins to rise imperceptibly to meet my face. I hold it down with a plate. I like things to stay in their place.

Back home I sit at the table and write a letter to Kalisto. Ian stands behind me – Ah, do you have to write such a long letter, you poor thing? Wouldn't an SMS do? For example: Where are you?

Kalisto Tanzi doesn't have a mobile or an e-mail address. He considers this form of communication threatening. (The old English term blackmail referred to extorting unjustified taxes. Non-existent debts, promises not given.)

There did not exist a simple way of interfering in his life, climbing through the window of a monitor or display, appearing in person before his very eyes. Elza could not rely on electronic seduction. Although she had a talent for it – for chatting and sweet nothings. She had the gift of the gab.

But the new possibilities also brought her stronger competition. It was so easy to get involved with someone, to contact them. Everything played in favour of seduction. In particular the time saved by rapid communication.

Nowadays no one had to patrol a dark street at night, travel in a coach, a car, a storm. Repair a wheel, change the water boiling in a radiator, walk around homes and coffee bars or helplessly roam streets where there was a hope of meeting the loved one. Map the possibility of their being there. Follow, track, hide, stay in the same place for year after year or travel endlessly.

Emails and quick SMS messages were windows and mirrors rapidly multiplying in the world. Through them it was possible to climb into a room, onto a roof, into a lavatory, plunge under water and fly into the air. Hang up your own alluring picture – install yourself – anywhere.

Elza: In the air, in someone's path. Expose you to my picture.

Elza's morning begins with writing. She puts on some music and for half an hour eagerly gets on with her book. While working she often gets up from her chair damp with perspiration, because when writing she drinks litres of tea and has the music on too loud and she writes and writes. She writes as if she were running downhill. She sweats and that chills her. All her life her body temperature has ranged between 37.1 and 37.6 degrees, which tends to produce slight shivering fits and weak nerves. Apart from the fact that a fever is good for creative work and erotic passion, it enables one to stay at home undisturbed. Doctors are usually afraid to send a patient with a temperature into the whirlwind of working days.

When she has finished writing, she is hungry, thirsty and her concentration is completely exhausted. Elza lacks the ability to keep at creative work for a long time – sitzfleisch. Her working day lasts three hours. When Elza gets up from her desk, her husband gets out of bed. They sit side by side on the couch in the kitchen and think about what they will eat and what Elza will go to buy. They usually have open sandwiches for lunch and they drink gin with grapefruit juice. Elza has read that your stomach – what is in it – contributes eighty per cent to how you feel. Open sandwiches and gin are food associated with celebrations. That is why whole years in her life have seemed to her like a really good, endless celebration. Day after day. And, as during every celebration genuinely enjoyed and properly done – in the early evening or early morning, when the light has long been vague and the scenery looks like a lit-up stage setting, somewhere at the back of the tongue and on the roof of the mouth a discreet bitter taste would appear – the taste of the end of a celebration. It had a fruity bouquet, room temperature, full body and long tail. It woke her up in the night more and more often: that taste of a sad end. Like when at New Year, just a few seconds after midnight, Ian goes outside for a while with another woman and a hairy troll crouches on Elza's chest, head and shoulders: a nightmare, and it tinkles a wave of heat right onto her flat breasts.

On the way home in the early hours of the morning, Elza bursts into tears in the middle of the street:

"I don't want march. I don't want to keep marching on any more. All my life I have done nothing but march on!"

"Then we needn't walk. I'll call a taxi," Ian tries to calm her.

"You don't understand. It's all the same. On foot or by taxi. One way or another, all we do is just keep marching on."

Elza: But in fact it is marching that has kept me awake. Some people solve the problems in our town by walking, others by swimming, horse riding or shooting.

"Where are you going, Elza? Aha. You're just wandering, are you? So am I. But where to? You don't want to tell me, do you? I had a friend who never wanted to say either. He would just lean over towards me and whisper: you know, mate, I'm just going to one of *those places.* So you just say the same, Elza. That you're going to one of *those places*."

It's a small town. You've only just set out and the greater part of your journey is already over. If you want to roam here, you must go in a circle – like a pony and on the way you keep bumping into other roaming ponies.

We roam in an attempt to avoid company and to patiently evoke, step by step, a feeling of freedom. But in fact we are like members of a pony sect with the rigid rules of the circle.

I prefer to jump into a swimming pool. My arms and legs work like two mills. My breath grows more rapid, deeper and then steadies. The smaller and larger pools in my head are gradually filled with swimmers: they take turns to race and drown, submerge and float.

There are too many people in the pool today. First I can hardly manage to avoid the arms opening wide under water, and then the kicking legs. There is a circle of children standing in the middle of the pool and throwing a ball full of sand. The fat legs of a woman exercising shoot out towards me from the wall of the pool. In the changing room a blind girl uncertainly changes into her swimming costume. It's as if someone has hit me in the face with a stick.

Opposite the exit from the pool is Kalisto Tanzi's flat. I can't take my eyes off it. I'm not leaving town this summer. I will not change my horizon. I'm not going in search of the sea. I cling to the windows of the deserted flat.

Ian and I meet by chance in town. We spend the whole long summer evening drinking wine. He tells me how he somehow used to think he would remember his life in more detail. "Whole sections, whole panels, have fallen out. And events don't move into the distance in a straight line with the passing of time. It's not a receding line; it's like a serpentine road. Some sections miles from each other in time come together at the bends, the curves intersect and suddenly something breaks through the surface of the water: an arm bent at the elbow, wet hair, a curtained window, a mouth stretched in a circle as it gasps for breath." I tell Ian what I have read today about a dangerous disease. It breaks out in middle age and manifests itself in such a way that a person begins to dance. "Then all you need is to find some good music to go with it," says Ian.

Ian led Elza to the taxi stand. In an effort to avoid a further bottle of wine and a walk through the sweltering night town. He sat her next to the driver and looked at his face. He himself remained standing on the pavement. He slammed Elza's door shut and his arms were left hanging limply beside his body, useless and too long. He had to be careful not to drag them along the ground. Not to trip over them.

A while later the taxi stops and puts Elza down at the end of the street. She leaps out like a young deer. She dives back into town. She opens her arms, kicks her legs. A man on the pavement looks at her retreating back and slowly begins to dance. The orchestra is not playing.

Kalisto Tanzi, Elza sings to herself. That is what the cuddly little animal that is lazily growing in me is called. Sings Elza. And women would like to buy it for men and it catches men's eyes. They look at me and see it, sitting inside me and maturing. Sings Elza. Just behind the door. And they would like to slit my belly and break my back in two. Just so they can have it. Sings Elza. They would like to tear off my head and grope inside me with their hands. Sings Elza. Not minding the blood: happily, even in front of the children. Sings Elza.

Even after his return, Kalisto Tanzi's flat remained empty. He spent most of his time in his car. As a dancer at the height of his career, he hardly moves except when on the stage. Driving his car helps him to overcome inertia. The landscape flashes past at a speed comparable with dancing. The car forms the lower part of Kalisto's body. His back grows out of the driving seat. Kalisto Tanzi is a minotaur. When Elza gets in, she sinks into the interior of the vehicle as into a close embrace.

When she and Kalisto hug each other, she remembers the warm rubber internal organs the children passed round when they were learning about the human body. She and Kalisto are the pulsating innards of this dark vehicle. The liver of the car. A paired organ. The kidneys. They work whole nights. Warmly dressed in the cooling car. Their movements keep the vehicle alive.

In the morning she would return through the empty streets. Washed white by a tidal wave: first it swept away all the houses and towns. Then it caught at people's legs. And two days later it returned them: faces smoothed by the hard sand, a pearl in every opening in the body.

At home she lay down beside Ian's sleeping face. It revealed the whole chain of appearances it had passed through in his life. Childhood friends, the endless summer, parents, a bicycle wheel sticking out from under a Christmas tree. Changes for the better and for the worse. Ian's face was ageless. It was a restless swarm that had settled in one place.

When she looked in his eyes, she could see all the forms they shared. Every couple that they were.

She was woken up by a pain shooting from her elbow into her palm and in the opposite direction towards her shoulder. It excited Elza. It was caused by her unnatural position in the car.

Kalisto ruled her life. When she walked through the streets of the town, she no longer looked into the faces of the pedestrians, but into the interiors of the cars. She was searching for the driving body of Kalisto Tanzi. She would have preferred to walk on the line in the middle of the road between the vehicles rather than on the pavement.

At times her arm was really weak. She couldn't work with it. (*Don't panic*, Elza probably thought, *don't panic*).

She couldn't hold anything in her hand. Her fingers went numb. Her arm withered and hung beside her body as a sign of perpetual presence – Kalisto Tanzi was always at her side: when she couldn't write with it, when a saucepan slipped from her fingers. If she needed her hand, but could not use it, she shivered with pleasure.

She stopped eating open sandwiches – just the grapefruit and gin remained, apple and calvados, whisky and ice. Eating seemed disgusting to her. To have chewed-up food in her mouth. She wanted it to be empty and sublime – prepared to receive. His mouth.

She disinfected herself with gin and at the same time it gave her the courage and shamelessness to meet with someone she liked so much. To look into the face that threatened her with what she desired. The gin made it more bearable and liveable. It was at the same time an answer to what to do with her free time. With the inertia of the night just before dawn.

When Elza felt desperate, she was sorry she had never learned to do cartwheels. She could, for instance, use them to fill in the time while she waited for Kalisto Tanzi. If she could do a few cartwheels around the edge of the car park, her day would no doubt pass quicker. As it was, she was just circling in ordinary figures of eight.

But then she caught sight of his car. It was standing right at the end of the car park, which is why she had not noticed it immediately. She opened the door and slipped into the seat. However, it was to a stranger that she turned her face. "I can't now, love. Look, I've got my daughter in the back." Elza turned her head round and looked at the little girl who was sitting there. "Maybe next time," the man pushed her out of the car.

She had to tell someone about it.

In the evening she described the incident to Ian, as a story that had happened to her Girl Friend. She kept the character of the Girl Friend in reserve. It would no doubt come in useful again. Later she read that lonely children without siblings often invent imaginary companions.

In time the Girl Friend she often talked about to Ian began to behave very like Kalisto Tanzi, they had the same opinions, friends and past. They had been to the same schools and restaurants. They had read the same books.

In this way over time Elza told Ian almost everything about Kalisto Tanzi.

Rebeka had an imaginary friend only in childhood. She disappeared with her first menstruation. Her name was Yp. And apart from her, Rebeka also kept invented animals – one very lively little dog, two ladybirds and a lovely horse that was completely white.

Wolfgang Elfman, the brother of Lukas Elfman, had his animals in the forest. They were wild. That's why he couldn't keep them in the flat. He used to go to see them in the forest. He would call and they would come running. Then they played together and chatted until darkness fell.

When Lukas was a little boy, he wanted to play with them too. But Wolfgang never took him with him to see the animals. Every evening he would just tell him what they had done during the day. He was fervent and his eyes would light up in the dark room. Lukas Elfman decided he would find the animals for himself.

"Wooolfgaaang's animals!" he called to them in the middle of the forest. "Wooolfgaaang's animals!" he shouted, going deeper and deeper.

Elza plunged into the forest. After a while she stopped and turned her face to the tops of the trees. "Kaaaliiistooo Taaanziii," she called, "Kaaaliiistooo Taaanziii," she shouted, going deeper and deeper. The tops of the trees shimmered on the surface. The water swallowed movements and words. With her mouth open, she hit the bottom of the lake.

Translated by Heather Trebatická

Culture Is the Best Bridge for Nations to Get Closer

Interview with Ghias Mousli, by Ina Martinová

Photo: Author's Archive

Ghias Mousli, MD, was born on March 21, 1945 in Homs, Syria. He studied medicine at the Medical School of Charles's University in Prague, Czech Republic, graduating in 1970. After that he worked in the Faculty hospital in Plzeň as a surgeon. After finishing post-graduate studies in China and again in Prague, Dr. Mousli and his Slovak wife, Dr. Eva Mousli-Polónyová, returned to Syria where they have lived ever since. Dr. Mousli still practices medicine and besides it he translates and publishes books of Slovak authors, as Alexander Dubček, Peter Jaroš, Milan Richter, Ladislav Mňačko, Ján Johanides, Pavel Vilikovský, Pavol Rankov, Daniela Kapitáňová.

INA MARTINOVÁ: *How did it happen that you started to be interested in Slovak literature and started translating Slovak authors into Arabic, although the profession you had studied at the University and you have actively pursued to this day is completely different?*
GHIAS MOUSLI: It all happened some ten years ago, during one of my visits to Bratislava. I came across Alexander Dubček's book *Nádej zomiera posledná* (Hope is the Last One to Die) there. Because I was a supporter of his idea of "socialism with a human face", I immediately thought it would be great to have this book in Arabic, and I started translating right away, while staying in Bratislava. I did it without having any publisher or sponsor, but in the end, on the advice of the Slovak Consul in Damascus, Mr. Ján Halušič, I applied for and received support from the SLOLIA Commission. I really liked this experience, so I took this path and continued by translating Ladislav Mnačko's book *Ako chutí moc* (The Taste of Power).
My activities in the field of literature do not interfere with my profession at all, as I was deeply interested in literature and was convinced of its importance in our lives long before I graduated from medical school. Being a physician, by contrast, motivates me and enriches my understanding of society and makes clearer for me the relationship between man and literature and the importance literature plays in our lives. It is culture that connects people, enables them to understand each other and which is perhaps the best bridge for nations to get closer.
INA MARTINOVÁ: *Is it difficult to find a publisher for translations from a lesser known culture and language in Syria?*
GHIAS MOUSLI: It should not be difficult, no matter whether I translate from Slovak or other less known culture, but the main point is that nobody wants to take risks and, unfortunately, everybody looks upon it through the eyes of a businessman, but of course, the name of the author can be an important factor...
INA MARTINOVÁ: *How do you choose books for translating?*
GHIAS MOUSLI: I do it very carefully, with the main goal not to damage the reputation of Slovak literature. You know, the market is flooded with different kinds of books and my task is to find the best, at least from my point of view, and I hope I do a good job.
INA MARTINOVÁ: *You have translated up to now mainly prose – fiction and non-fiction. Have you ever considered translating poetry?*
GHIAS MOUSLI: Actually, I translated poetry several years ago; it was *Slaughter in Beirut,* originally titled *Korene vo vzduchu* (Roots in the Air) by Milan Richter. I have some plans for the near future, and it will be a selection of poems of Slovak poets like Milan Rúfus, Ladislav Novomeský, Andrej Sládkovič and others.
INA MARTINOVÁ: *Which author of those you have translated represented the biggest "problem" for translator?*
GHIAS MOUSLI: I think it was Ján Johanides and Pavel Vilikovský.
INA MARTINOVÁ: *What are your plans for the future as a publisher and translator?*
GHIAS MOUSLI: As I have already mentioned, I will translate Slovak poetry, but at the same time I plan to read short stories by several young authors and hopefully, something will come out of it.
INA MARTINOVÁ: *Have you any dream you would like to fulfill?*
GHIAS MOUSLI: I have many dreams, but my main wish is to keep healthy and be able to continue my medical as well as translation activities. And maybe one day I will write a prose work and translate something from Arabic to Slovak...
INA MARTINOVÁ: *Thank you for sharing your experience with us.*

PARKER – LITERARISCHES LIEBESBEKENNTNIS

Adam Bžoch

Jana Beňová
Parker. Roman.
Übersetzt von Andrea Koch-Reynolds
Leipzig, Erata Literaturverlag. 2008

Das Buch, oder vielmehr das Büchlein von Jana Beňová, auf Slowakisch ursprünglich 2001 mit dem Untertitel „Liebesroman" versehen, liest man – und darin bleibt es dem Genre des Liebesromans treu – von der ersten bis zur letzten Seite in einem Atemzug.

In allen anderen Hinsichten ist es jedoch den herkömmlichen Liebesgeschichten unähnlich: die frei aneinander gereihten Fragmente und Gedichte, aus denen dieser Kurzroman besteht, bilden hier scheinbare Abschweifungen vom intimen Thema. Alles, was man hier so zu sagen am Rande sagt, mündet aber sowieso letzten Endes wieder in dieses Thema hinein. Die Grenzen des Romangenres werden in *Parker* auch auf eine andere Art überschritten – unter anderem dadurch, dass die „Unendlichkeit" der Liebesgeschichte bereits durch den fehlenden Anfang vorgegeben wird. Dies ist aber kein Taschenspieltrick der Autorin, sondern das sonderbare Lebensgefühl der absoluten Identifikation mit der geliebten Person, nach der dieser Roman benannt wurde.
Die Gestalt Parkers – des Geliebten, um dessen Beziehung es der weiblichen Hauptgestalt dieser Geschichte geht – konnte auf diese Art und Weise auch mit der Erinnerung an ihren Mitschüler Harry zusammenfließen, dem die Erzählerin Heidi am ersten Schultag in der ersten Klasse den Kopf angeschlagen hat. Es scheint, dass alles,

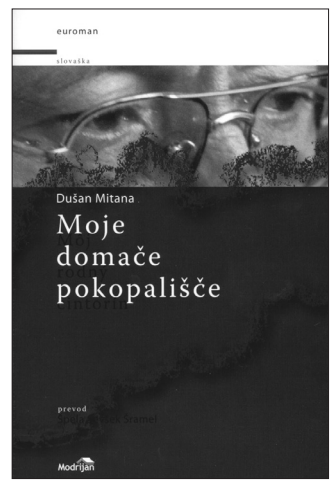
was diese Heidi in dem Roman erlebt, bereits in ihrer Kindheit vorgezeichnet wurde. Dies ist keine literarische Konstruktion, es ist ein Seelenzustand, den die Autorin voll auszuleben im Stande war. Aber nicht nur das – sie war auch im Stande ihn literarisch perfekt einzusetzen. Es ist der bewundernswerte Zustand der ewigen inneren Kindheit, der den Duktus des Buches von der ersten bis zur letzten Seite bildet und der uns stark an die Zeichnungen des mittleren und reifen Paul Klee erinnert.
In diesem seligen Zustand der ewigen Kindheit gibt es keinen Platz für Sentimentalität oder gar Nostalgie, aber auch keinen Platz für negative Emotionen. Der aufrichtige, glückliche Charakter gerät hier nirgends in Konflikt mit der Welt, die (mit Recht) den Mann, der hier Parker genannt wird, so oft irritiert: „Manchmal regt er sich mächtig auf. Vor allem über irgendwelche Gauner und Banditen, über Blechkisten (sie überfahren dich lieber, als mal einen Gang runterzuschalten), über Lebensmittelverpackungen (die verpacken das so, damit es gut gelagert werden kann, nicht damit man es öffnen kann), über Beamte (die wir alle ernähren), über Doppelflügeltüren (bei denen hierzulande immer nur ein Flügel funktioniert). Parker nörgelt herum." (Seite 35-36.) Heidi und die Autorin nörgelt nie.
Den Rahmen ihrer Welt stellen nicht Konflikte dar, sondern Harmonie. Im Buch findet sich vielleicht eine einzige Stelle (oder vielleicht handelt es sich um eine Kombination von zwei Stellen, die so nah aneinander liegen, dass sich ihre Verbindung aufzwingt), wo vom Leser keine Empathie erwartet wird und wo er von dieser Harmonie eine handfeste Vorstellung bekommen kann. Eins von den Fragmenten aus dem Kapitel „Klara" endet pathetisch mit dem Satz „Mit Blut schreibe ich blutige Gedichte." (Seite 20.) Kurz davor erfahren wir allerdings, dass Klara, als sie sieben Jahre alt war, ein Zahn gezogen wurde: „Ohne Spritze. Einfach so. Sie stand auf der Strasse und spuckte blutige Spucke auf zerbrochene Gehsteigplatten" (Seite 19). Es ist schon eine heile Welt, in der sich die Vorstellung vom Blut spucken nur mit dem Zahnarzt und mit den Milchzähnen verbindet.
Vor dem Hintergrund dieser beneidenswerten ewigen Kindheit entwickelt sich Heidis Beziehung zu Parker. Heidi, die spielerisch und mit dem Ernst eines kleinen Kindes ihre Identität ändern kann, ist von ihrem Parker überzeugt, dass er ihr Mann, ihr Liebhaber, ihr Vater, ihr Kind, ihr Bruder und Entertainer sein kann; es sind die Metamorphosen der Liebe, die hier dem Leser suggestiv vor Augen geführt werden. Es ist klar – *Parker* ist kein richtiger Liebesroman, sondern vielmehr ein Liebesbekenntnis.
Die gute Übersetzung ins Deutsche (Andrea Koch-Reynolds), in der Beňovás *Parker* vor kurzem erschienen ist, macht dieses literarische Liebesbekenntnis nun auch für deutschsprachige Leser zugänglich.

A LITERARY REFRESHMENT FOR THE SLOVENIAN READER

Karol Chmel

Dušan Mitana
My Native Cemetery / Moje domače pokopališče
Translated by Špela Sevšek Šramel
Ljubljana, Modrijan 2008, Zbirka Euroman

Dušan Mitana's journey to the shelves of foreign bookstores took considerable time, though, I remember that in linguistic regions accessible to me, he was at least introduced in magazines relatively early on (for instance the publication of Polish translations of short stories from *Dog Days* – Psie dni, and *Night News* – Nočné správy in *Literatura na Świece* in the 1970s had met with a favorable response); later on book publications followed and after 2000, Mitana became a quite often translated Slovak prose writer. Surely interesting is the contrast between the response of literary critics and readers – while after the publication of *My Native Cemetery* (K.K. Bagala – L.C.A. 2000) the critics at home reacted rather half-heartedly (i.e. the opinion of D. Kršáková: "... in the 1990s his writing took a quite dubious course... *My Native Cemetery* did not improve this damaged reputation..."). From *Knihy a spoločnosť* 3/2006), the book saw its second edition the following year. The fact that Croatian and Slovenian publishers chose it for translation only proves its success...
Thanks to the author's sense of irony about the absurdities of the system and the two-facedness of the rural environment during the building of socialism, presented through a seemingly naïve child-like view, the foreign reader, too, has a chance to enter the microcosm of family, generational distastes and alliances, and learn something about our mode of day-to-day living – adaptive and also defiant.
This novel, featuring many autobiographical features, describes the coming-of-age in the family of a gravedigger in his native village. These times, as the author says, "inescapably marked his future life and work". With a humorous, at times sarcastic, style Mitana captures the environment of a village in western Slovakia in the late 1950s and introduces a whole gallery of bizarre and grotesque characters. The story of coming-of-age and maturing, however, harbors also greater and further-reaching observations which could provide material for a socio-logical analysis of the villagers' interpersonal relationships sprung on a cross between the ruling (post-Stalinist yet still totalitarian) communist ideology and two churches – Protestant and Catholic – while their mutual denominational relationship is hindered by many ideological disagreements.
At the center of the story, there are three generations of one family. While the middle one, represented by the gravedigger and his wife, is frequently a source of ridicule due to their simplicity and naïveté (he does not even attempt to grasp the narrow-mindedness of the social system, he is content with his cemetery job which he took after his father and refuses any display of progress or anything foreign), the older (father Eliáš) and younger (older brother Servác and younger brother Pankrác) are presented more "seriously" – they draw up an alliance thanks to traditions and a suspected transcendence in the cemetery's deathly space, and find common grounds thanks to their grandfather's graveyard stories told to one of the grandsons.
The fictional memoirs narrated in the first person are perked up by lively dialogues which complete the characters – the western dialect helps in dertermining the protago-nists' social status – the gravedigger and his wife almost always speak it, and grandpa and Fidibus speak it rather often, while the main character Duško (Pankrác) insists on speaking the proper language for which he is frequently laughed at. (Here I must praise the inventive translation of Špela Sevšek Šramel – she succeeded in transfering into the dialo-gues a vibrant colloquial as well as dialectal Slovenian in all its flexibility, swallowed vowels, she got round archaisms in citations from Maliarik's opus Global Universal State, imaginatively played around with verses in chapter eight, and on top of that she rewarded the Slovenian readers with an afterword full of information not just about the author but also about the circumstances of this pseudo-memoir's origins, as well as about the priest Ján Maliarik, and even provided an illuminating annotation about Mitana's typical reckoning with critics that were unfair to him...)
Let's hope that literary gourmands in Slovenia do not miss this kind of refreshment. The book was published in an elegant binding with a cover on which Mitana's eyes are clearly looking far beyond his „native cemetery" and the map of Slovakia splashing out of the bloody red of the beloved past.



Pavol Rankov
Stalo sa prvého septembra (alebo inokedy)
It Happened on the First of September (or at another time)

Bratislava, Kalligram 2008

According to the authorial incipit of Pavel Rankov (1964) *It Happened on the First of September (or at another time)*, which was published in the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, "*Everything was made up. Nothing has ever existed, nobody has ever lived. There has never been any September 1 either.*" The author apparently denies the obvious because, in the space between Komárno and Žilina or between Čierna nad Tisou and Skalica, something beyond human understanding has always been happening. Rankov makes use of the undeniable right accorded him by his talent to make connections in a way that nobody has ever dared to make them, just in the way that his generational consciousness and artistic feeling directed him. In comparison to what the generations before him somewhat cagily adumbrated, the result is shocking: nobody will believe that what happened in his novel actually happened. Indeed, who would give credit to any consciousness and feeling today? Rankov the Merciful knows that, and so, in addition to a good read, he offers his readers the option not to believe in September 1 or anything that happened around this fiction.
On September 1, 1938, in the centre of Europe, at a fashionable swimming pool in Levice, a fictitious historical event occurred: three thirteen-year-old pubescents – Hungarian, Czech and Jewish – decided to compete in a swimming competition to win a claim over the Slovak blonde, Mária. The end is without any result but it continues throughout the more than three hundred-page novel: the three friends' contest for love is repeated in virtually every year of the novel's continuation, but the race never ends in victory. The novel rushes its characters onward through political hells, but never allows them to finish the fateful race. The characters' lives are filled with incredible events but never filled with the most common and sacred human content – love. Nobody wins Mária and Mária, the most innocent, loses all. Through all the novel's peripeties the characters' origin plays a crucial role. The author has had to come to terms with multiple contradictory historical circumstances, which remain the object of political feuds up to the present day: the Slovak State, the Hungarian occupation of Slovakia, the Protectorate, the anti-Nazi Slovak National Uprising, the rise of Israel, the liberation by Red Army, the February putsch, the Communist Terror in the 1950s, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, Khrushchev's political thaw, the Prague Spring, the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia. Each character must pass through purgatory and choose his or her own truth. The characters are virtually impregnated with the historical events determining the trajectories of their lives but, above all, their deeds are dictated by the most global of all strategies – love. In a nonchalant gesture, Pavol Rankov threw the Slovak novel probably the most meaningful challenge of all. If it is up to accepting it, Slovak literature is in for a lot of fun. If not, then Rankov's novel will remain a constituent fictional feat which overstepped the threshold of what is permitted.

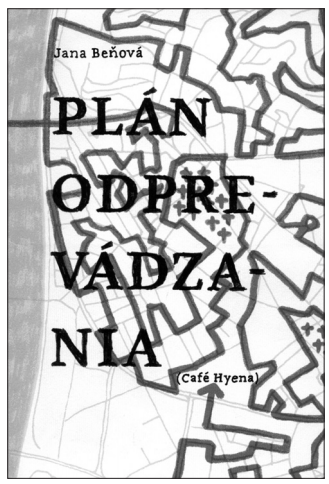
Alexander Halvoník

Jana Beňová
Plán odprevádzania (Café Hyena)
Seeing People Off (Café Hyena)

Bratislava, Koloman Kertész Bagala 2008

It is plain that Jana Beňová would like to write a novel. It is also plain that a novel about prefabricated Petržalka (a district of Bratislava) cannot be written. It is not that fictional things don't happen in Petržalka but that Petržalka abounds in things which have nothing to do with a novel: anonymity, anti-historism, dangerous liaisons, the solitude of a man seeking identity. Jana Beňová may not be aware of all that, but the inspired intuition she demonstrated in three books of poetry and two books of prose is clearly heading towards it. Her (novel-like) vision of Petržalka may be the first prose about this trans-Danubean and transurban continent of concrete, which has its colour, atmosphere and its subjective nature even despite the fact that this is exactly what Petržalka lacks. If the author herself is loath to call her Petržalka creation a novel, it may be due to the fact that in her Petržalka stuff she has mixed some completely new ingredients which nobody, herself included, is accustomed to. The dynamism of "seeing-off" rites is provided by an incredibly abundant narrative separated into fifteen segments. It is a first-person narrative dealing in particular with the cohabitation of the most prominent characters – Elza and Ian, but also with numerous others – real and fictitious, or even dream-like ones. The object of the narrative is feelings, senses, allusions, dreams, language, lyricism with the flavour of evil, in-depth psychology, real deeds of characters as well as banal thoughts, foreign names, foreign words, words used for a calculated effect, and effective malapropisms and shocking vulgarities. What really matters is that the narrative never loses its wholeness and every line strikes you with its originality. Intellectuals and boys from the street see off their kind and in their own manner, the seeing-off is done by digression, hastily, with unadulterated warmness as well as angry decisiveness – in the same manner as in the final lines dealing with Ian's dying mother – for good and in full awareness of the contradiction of life's courses. Beňová's texts are fraught with irony and self-irony, but also with tenderness and a desire for togetherness. They are texts bound by deep layers of feeling and perception, as well as politics and the estranged practices of modern societies. Precise cuts allow the intellectually well-prepared author to respond to everything, although it is quite clear that, in the rich texts, much will remain unread, the accent from some things will be transferred to others and many things will take on new dimensions. But this is always the case for quality literature: time works in its favour. Beňová's *Seeing People Off* is a good and full book. In an era of increasingly banal feminine literature, it is a miracle of authenticity indeed.

Alexander Halvoník



Peter Krištúfek
Šepkár
The Prompter

Bratislava, Albert Marenčin Vydavateľstvo PT 2008

If books by F. Kafka, M. Bulgakov or G. Orwell can be labelled as satirical, then it must be added in the same breath that it is satire with a vision. Satire with a vision presupposes not only penetrating vision, a sense of humour and wit, but also a system of understanding connections. Peter Krištúfek's fourth book and first novel follows this path. It means, above all, a release of unknown authorial capacities and, as a consequence, an openness with which Slovak literature is not much at home. Should we so want, in reading Krištúfek we could point a finger at some actual politicians and social archetypes. It is obvious that nowadays we expect literature which overly labels such things, which will show who with whom, why and how, and it is obvious that, in the contemporary upsurge of the novel, this will happen, but not in the case of Krištúfek. For the protagonist of his novel, Krištúfek chooses a prompter. A prompter is indeed a sage with distance, a connoisseur of the best texts, in which the best about humankind is deposited, but also a helpless recipient of all the blows of fate which can be dealt to its subject at the interface of civilization. A prompter is an embodiment of the necessity that the contemporary world needs an idea but also the proof that an idea is the danger the contemporary world needs the least. And there is also politics and politicians. The lame duck political boss, Berger, needs a prompter so he can use his thoughts to bamboozle his voters as well as peers. The great manipulator, Berger, thanks to his prompter, becomes a Prime Minister and the intellectual prompter becomes a ridiculous manipulator's manipulator. In Krištúfek's rendition, this basic model situation has multiple nuances which add strength to his narration. It is admirable how some situations can be expressed poetically by the author only to be transformed into sarcasms and gallows

humour, how he is able to convert the creeping ideology into a dynamic shape fraught with reversals and surprising "shots". Nonetheless, his parody is once again a picture of reality, although this time around it is more virtual than the one we suppose we live in. However, all the more lively, life-like and revealing for that.

Alexander Halvoník

Irena Brežná
Na slepačích krídlach
On Chicken Wings

Translated from German by Jana Cviková
Bratislava, Aspekt 2007

The vision of the world seen through children's eyes involves an irredeemable charm consisting, among other things, of a certain clarity or even navety of view which will never be repeated later. This was the writing approach of Irena Brežná – an author of Slovak origin living in Switzerland (she left the country with her parents in 1968) and recognized in Slovakia thanks to the Aspect publishing house – adopted in her most recent book, *On Chicken Wings*.
I love texts (I mean literature for adults) which set off on a journey "against time". This may sound like a paradox, but it is the "unsavvy", unadulterated children's viewpoint which sometimes offers a more truthful picture of events, characters and things than the mature, learned view of adulthood. At the same time, however, it involves risks; authors can never actually find themselves in the child's shoes, they can only reconstruct the traces of memories left by something they are trying to revive after a lapse of time. The personal dimension of the text is hardly surprising; as it is, the author's writing is always (also) touching on herself. She uses language to get under the skin right down to the innermost layers of living experience. Language, possibly because the author lives (and writes) in two languages, is for her an important instrument of self-detection, self-confirmation and self-identification but also one of defence and occasionally of refuge. No matter what she writes about, her texts will always deal with language. Occasionally, Brežná can make magic with her words, her imagery is matter-of-fact yet dreamy, her poetic sober yet magical, her images fuse the documentary veracity of facts with poetic imagination... The autobiographical reminiscences (with fictitious elements, of course) provide a concentrated, articulated, even staggering document about the age, the political and, in a broader sense, the social situation in Czechoslovakia (the notorious 1950s up to mid 1960s). The phenomena the author deals with are well-known to all her generation, and it is not just about queuing for bananas or toilet paper, the hunting for goods in short supply and the nepotism.... Most depressing of all was the split consciousness (both private and public), morale and behaviour as such (in families and public life); it was inconceivable to say in the public what one could say at home. The reason: the fear of eavesdropping, the permanent uncertainty as to where and in whom a denouncer was lurking. The book clearly reverberates with reluctance and unwillingness "to accept the world as it is", nor does Brežná discard this attitude later, when she responds sensitively to the wrongs, discrimination and cruelties of this world. The sense of justice is a characteristic of her girl protagonist, initially firmly believing in the ideals fed to her at school. The book also finds room for girls' friendships, secrets, the feelings accompanying the maturing body (collisions with gender stereotypes concerning the "beautiful" female body and "correct femininity"), dreams about the future; desires for wings which let you take off; the truth which could be attained in your own life. In conclusion, the book suggests that the protagonist will not give up on her search for her own way...

Etela Farkašová

Kamil Peteraj
Toto je moja reč
That Is What I Mean

Bratislava, Ikar 2008

Kamil Peteraj's poetry from his individual books is bred in the reader's bone in the form of mournful arrows of dragonflies, the quiet and fast turns of butterflies, pure snowflakes of love, trembling as they fall into snowdrifts where they melt or fly away like feathers. The young poet exhales colours as if they were colours and in the lyrically unstable frost sticks the glittering swallows of his verses on the windows of our eyes, on the doors of our memory. Of course, in his life-long authorial selection *That Is What I Mean* all this sticks, nonetheless we are unable to resist the feeling that we are dealing with a poet who beneath his bowed back has the classical scales on which he places increasingly heavier weights. The air of his poetry, too, can even be leaden, when he broods on the human journey and especially on its end. Death features increasingly urgently in the poet's verses, it has no lyrical parameters, it is precise and oppressive, whereas the march towards it, the march - because from its point of view we are always as if on parade - is destructively regular and hauntingly hollow. Only when reading this book may we understand what a serious and meticulous author Kamil Peteraj is. His poems may take place on quite a mundane stage, in a threadbare setting but the readers will be shaken by their razor sharpness, like the shining point of an eye, the living sense, they will accept as the sixth and probably the most precise one. Peteraj perceives events around him as a part of his own self, he is able to see himself with a strange, half-detached view which is more about sensing than seeing. He is not the author of sentimental or touched up lyricism, his observations and records are logically translucent and, if we can see beauty in rationally compact collocations, that's the way they are. He is not naive;
what may seem paradoxical is that his poems from any period are the poems of our frequently cruel contemporaneity and possibly similar experience. Kamil Peteraj selects and culls his words naturally, he sifts them. This is precisely why this selection can be a record of his lifelong ability to work with them; although they drop on us from his verses like clear rain, we perceive them as drops and then we shape our poetic world all on our own from all the riches we were served by this charismatic poet.

Viera Prokešová

Stanislav Rakús
Excentrická univerzita
The Eccentric University

Bratislava, Koloman Kertész Bagala 2008

I'm not sure, but I may have convinced myself that the recent development of Slovak prose has increasingly frequently been mentioned in connection with such names as M. Proust, J. Joyce or F. Kafka. It is, of course, about the great narrators of Modernist prose and about the specific Slovak situation in which a novel is no longer a rarity but duty addressing every prose writer... The novel is on the increase and soon there will probably be even more of them. The author and literary scholar, Stanislav Rakús, says his bit about it all. He not only writes, but also analyses novels. With a typical dose of ironic charm, he admits that his three novels, today regarded as a trilogy, (*Temporary Notes* – 1993, *Unwritten Novel* – 2004, *The Eccentric University* – 2008) were written because originally he intended to write a book of short stories but everything took such a methodological and thematic twist that he wrote three novels, after which he may be able to write the book of short stories he intended. It is an ingenious mystification indeed. Because these short stories were at least about a novel too. Initially it was diary-like and temporal, then unwritten and finally eccentric and university. *The Eccentric University*, in my opinion, is about how to write (and complete) an ideology-free novel. Rakús invented a "*silent*" and a "*narrating*" narrator. The former replaces omniscience, the latter, quite paradoxically, is serum against beating about the bush. The former listens in as a skepticist (not sexist!), the latter fills the space with wondrous content: there is no point in wisecracking, all you need is to listen and narrate. And one must believe that there is a lot to be told and listened to – that is the first principle of Rakús's novel. The second principle is the eccentric university (Prešov), directing the fates of the characters which are talked about and worth listening to. They are the fates of freshmen studying Russian literature in the 1950s (not everyone can come up with such an ingeniously simple paradigm).They are captivated by Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Chekhov (Chekhov is probably – not without a hint of paradox – the *spiritus movens* of Rakús's strategy of writing novels), are filled with the noble Russian nostalgia of the 19th century but they are also fed by the Russian presence in our history of the 20th century. The name of the greatest narrator is Viktor Pavlovič Bochňa, who is an intellectual Ostap Bender of sorts. He is innocent and that is why he eventually takes the blame. All such abstractions, however, are but temporary notes or a novel by a critic who is all but captivated by the immediate and, in the Slovak contexts, heretofore unheard-of narration of an ingenious author who theorizes everything up through his own experience.

Alexander Halvoník

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Rúfus's poems in Stockholm

In the heart of Stockholm, in the Dansmuséet, there was a recital of poems of the Slovak poet Milan Rúfus, *And What Is a Poem?*, taking place on July 1, 2008, commemorating the anniversary of the poet's 80th birthday. This event was supported by the Vice Prime Minister of Slovak government, Dušan Čaplovič, and organized by the Centre for Information on Literature, the Association of Friends of Milan Rúfus in Sweden and the Embassy of the Slovak Republic in Sweden. The Swedish poet and personal friend of Milan Rúfus, Tomas Tranströmer, with his wife took part in the event.

Cap à l'Est

The sixth edition of the European festival of poetry, drama and music, Cap à l'Est,
took place in Banská Štiavnica from 14th to 17th August. The topic of this year's meeting of francophone poets, translators and musicians was the culture of minorities and amongst them mainly the Roma minority. A special feature this year was a round-table discussion on the year 1968 and on the situation in society and culture before it and after it. Its participants were noteworthy European intellectuals, Professor Guido Gambetta from Bologna, journalist and film critic Antonín J. Liehm, currently living in Paris, writer, literary critic and translator Albert Marenčin from Bratislava, Professor of the Business School in Bratislava, Ivan Laluha, former Slovak Minister of Culture Milan Kňažko, former diplomat and writer Anton Hykisch, literary historian Vladimír Petrík, historian Dušan Kováč and the host of the discussion, journalist Juraj Alner. Poets from 9 European countries met in Banská Štiavnica this year and presented their poetry, discussed on various topics including translation of poetry and met with the young generation of Slovak poets.

Young Slovak poets (from left) Pavol Garan, Radoslav Matejov, Elena Hidvéghyová-Yung, Mária Ferenčuhová and Michal Habaj shortly before entering the medieval silver mine in Banská Štiavnica to present their poetry there.

One of the founders of Cap à l'Est and its Honorary Chairman, Albert Marenčin, gives a friendly hug to Bulgarian poet Aksinia Mihailova

Round-table discussion participants from left: Anton Hykisch, Vladimír Petrík, Ivan Laluha

Ján Lenčo in Krems and Gerhild Steinbuch in Budmerice

Based on reciprocal exchanges between LiteraturHaus in Krems, Austria, and the Centre for Information on Literature in Bratislava, Slovak writer and literary critic Ján Lenčo spent one month in the LiteraturHaus working on his prose.
Ms. Gerhild Steinbuch, an Austrian writer, spent a month in Budmerice in October engaged in her literary activities.
This exchange program has been going on for several years now, and a fewl Slovak writers including Mila Haugová, Jana Beňová, Michal Hvorecký and Marián Hatala have taken part in it, devoting their time to writing in the pleasant natural surroundings of Krems.

Elena Hidvéghyová-Yung and Peter Krištúfek in Stuttgart

The Municipal Library in Stuttgart hosted the young Slovak poet Elena Hidvéghyová-Yung and the prose writer and film director Peter Krištúfek on September, 10. Literary program, prepared and hosted by Daniela Humajová from LIC, was titled *Parts of the Whole.*
Peter Krištúfek read his short story *Hand* (Ruka), translated into German by Slávka Porubská. The story full of imagination, light suspense and funny absurdities was very well received by the audience. Elena Hidvéhyová-Yung presented herself with an appealing selection of poems from her first published collection, *To the Great-Grandsister* (Prasestre, 2007), and from her second collection, *Homme Fatal.* Presented poems were translated into German by Andrea Koch-Reynolds. The poet commented on the presented poems and cast some light on the real-life situations connected to them.
The reading was concluded by a lively discussion with the public on the literary subject matters, as well as topics of every day life.

Happy team after the reading: top row from left Daniela Humajová, Peter Krištúfek and Elisabeth Halassy, in front of them Elena Hidvéhyová-Yung

The portraits of Slovak writers were written and translated by Simon Gruber, Saskia Hudecová, Ina Martinová, Peter Petro, and Anna Šikulová.
The book reviews on p. 38 – 40 were translated by Pavol Lukáč.

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Exposition of Slovak publishers at the 60th International Book Fair in Frankfurt

This year Slovakia presented a newly designed stand at the International Book Fair in Frankfurt am Main. More open space, more comfortable chairs and tables, and more bookshelves in the same 60-square-meters area, flat TV-screen showing informative documentaries about Slovakia – those are the main features of the new design.
The Slovak stand was well attended, not only by professionals, Slovak publishers and their business partners, and wide public, but it hosted also some VIP's. The staff had the opportunity to meet again the General Consul of SR Imrich Donáth, the new Director of Slovak Institute in Berlin, Martin Sarvaš, envoy and the head of the branch of Slovak Embassy in Bonn, D. Matulay, and the EU Commissioner Ján Figeľ with his suite. The collective stand of Slovak Republic exhibited circa five hundred titles by nearly forty publishers.

European Union Commissioner Ján Figeľ (in the centre), together with the representatives of several publisher's and bookseller's associations visited the stand of Slovak Republic. They discussed with the director of LIC, Alexander Halvoník, the importance of joining the Federation of European Publishers by Slovak publishers.

On Thursday October 16, Slovak poet Ivan Štrpka and writer Jana Beňová presented their books in German translation at the Forum Fiction and Non-Fiction. Poet and translator Peter Repka, living in Germany, accompanied both the writers at their presentation and at the following cocktail on the Slovak stand.

From left: Ivan Štrpka, Jana Beňová, Peter Repka and Daniela Humajová at the Fiction and Non-Fiction Forum. Ivan Štrpka presented selection from his poems in German translation by Angela Repka and Jana Beňová read from her novel PARKER, just published in German translation by publishing house Erata. The novel was translated from Slovak by Andrea Koch-Reynolds.

The Literary Processes of Today: Italian – Slovak discussion

On November 4, 2008 in the Home of Slovak Writers in Budmerice a literary seminar attended by writers and publishers from Italy and Slovakia took place. Among the Italian guests, there was a well-known writer Francesca Duranti, the author of novel *La casa sul lago della luna;* writer Niccolo Ammaniti, the winner of the Premio Strega Award 2007 and author of translated novel *Io non ho paura;* poet, dramatist, translator and essayist Roberto Mussapi and Alberto Rollo, literary critic, translator and editor-in chief of well-known publishing house Feltrinelli.
Miroslava Vallová, representing the Slovak side, informed about the situation of translations from Slovak to Italian, and František Hruška from Comenius University spoke about translations of Italian authors into Slovak. Daniela Kršáková, the director of the Institute of Slovak Literature of the Slovak Academy of Sciences presented contemporary Slovak prose and literary critic Radoslav Matejov informed about contemporary Slovak poetry.
The Italian guests presented their work with great success at a literary event in Zichy Palace on November 5.
The event met with a huge response from the students of Italian and the wider public.

Roberto Mussapi and Miroslava Vallová at the reading in Panta Rhei bookstore

Berlin 2008

On the very day of Milan Rúfus's birthday, December 10, a festive presentation of Rúfus's poetry took place in the Slovak Institute in Berlin. The audience enjoyed selection of poems from poet's life work expressing his humanistic legacy.

From left: writers Dušan Mitana and Pavel Vilikovský in discussion with literary critic and director of LIC, Alexander Halvoník in the Home of Slovak writers in Budmerice.

Buch Wien 2008 – Newcomer among the Book Fairs

On November 19, at the opening ceremony on the premises of Messe-Wien, a new Interantional Book Fair was launched. Slovakia, as the immediate neighbour of Austria, was one of the Central and East European countries that participated at this book fair as exhibitors. The Book Fair was accompanied by a Reading Festival and several Slovak writers got the opportunity to present their works. On Friday November 21, it was Jozef Banáš who read from his new novel *Zone of Enthusiasm.* Later the same day prose writers Svetlana Žuchová a Jozef Puškáš presented their works in German translation. Children's books writer Ján Uličiansky introduced his successful book *Puss on Skates* (Kocúr na kolieskových korčuliach, 2007), recently turned into musical for children, and illustrator of the book, Miloš Kopták, helped the children to paint colourful masks of the Puss at the event.
The day was closed by a presentation outside the Fair, at the Austrian Society for Literature: Poets Jana Beňová, Ivan Štrpka and Marián Hatala read extracts from their works.

From left: Jozef Puškáš, Jozef Banáš and Ivan Štrpka

Bank Austria Literaris! The winner is from Slovakia!

On the occasion of launching a new book fair, the Bank Austria decided to give out literary prizes. First prize went to Slovakia, to Agda Bavi Pain for his prose work The *End of the World* (Koniec sveta). The prize for poetry received another Slovak, Rudolf Jurolek for his collection of poems *Life is Possible* (Život je možný).

KAROL ONDREIČKA (1944 – 2003) painter, graphic artist and illustrator, entered the Slovak art scene in the latter half of the 1970's. He studied in the Graphic and Illustration Department of the Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava (1968—1974) under the supervision of Professor Albín Brunovský. From 1979 to 1992, Ondreička himself lectured and read at the Academy, becoming professor in 1991. Ondreička was always interested in human destiny and in the mystery of existence, which he connected with the motif of woman; another line in his work was represented by relationship between man and nature, their metamorphoses reflected through allegory and symbols. Ondreička said himself: "I strive to transpose my life feelings into my pictures. I search for a space where I can make life poetically unique. And when I find it, I discover undreamed of secrets there." A synthesis of Ondreička's paintings and graphic art is to be found in his illustrations. He illustrated nearly 200 books, which influenced retrospectively his graphic art and painting. Although Ondreičaka started his creative work in the decade of "normalization", his exceptional artistic gift, his creative single-mindedness, orientation on humanistic philosophy, his humbleness and respect for graphic art techniques that he had inherited from his great paragons, Vincent Hložník and Albín Brunovský, did not allow him to succumb to any political or other society pressures. Ondreička's artistic and human profile is fully reflected in his oeuvre.

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Milan Hamada | Ivan Kadlečík | Rudolf Sloboda | Dušan Kužel
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Karol Ondreička:
Games (1999)