



CZECH
BOOKS
IN THE
WORLD

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased that you are interested in Czech literature and in the Czech stand, which presents it at international book fairs.

No more is contemporary Czech literature just Milan Kundera, Bohumil Hrabal or Václav Havel. New authors, who have a natural, transnational stylistic and thematic lure, have emerged after 1989 and, perhaps even more, with the onset of the new millennium. Miloš Urban celebrated his success in Spain, Michael Ajvaz in the United States, and Patrik Ouředník's *Europeana* has seen its translation into thirty languages. The most recent hit, *The Žitková Goddesses* by Kateřina Tučková, has sold over 120,000 copies in the Czech Republic. Translations into dozens of languages are in the works, as is a film adaptation.

We now hear about Czech literature at home and, I believe, increasingly so abroad. On one hand, Czech literature has shed its servitude: after 1989, authors stopped looking for "truths" about politics, society, or culture and began to pay attention to themselves. On the other, the concepts of postmodernity and globalization arrived; universal themes have emerged, as has a transnationally consumable style. Czech literature has certainly benefited from both. Of the annually, roughly 18,000 published titles, at least fifty can compete with the national literatures of our nearest as well as more distant neighbors. The trick is for someone to transport it over there, for someone to open the doors.

Literary agents certainly help, as does the network of foreign Bohemists. Foreign universities and libraries help, as does the Ministry of culture of the Czech Republic, and the Czech Centers in twenty countries around the world. And, for sure, Czech literature's famous past helps; names such as Karel Čapek, Jaroslav Hašek, Franz Kafka, Karel Hynek Mácha or John Amos Comenius. There is what to continue with, there is what to offer. See for yourselves.

Daniel Herman
Minister of culture of the Czech Republic



CZECH LITERARY PRIZES

Tomáš Kubíček

In 1990, literature in the Czech republic began to expand, freed from the pressure of intrusive power and subjected only to the limited capacities of printers and the book market. This, consequently, meant a broadened accessibility to previously forbidden literature, the return of exiled literature and sometimes of its authors to the homeland, as well as the debut of those writers, who prior to 1989 wished not to be part of the public arena. It also resulted – and this is logical in view of the above – in an enormous flood of the printed word and in the disorientation of the reader. Later on, the writer Jiří Kratochvíl called it the period of renewed chaos, for chaos does rather belong to democracy.

What was not possible to foresee, from the perspective of 1990 – at least not so quickly, – was the dramatic drop in the importance of the printed word. Throughout the twentieth century, and especially during the period of Czechoslovak totalitarianism, the printed word maintained its moral stance and perception as a tool of memory as well as a witness to the irreducible conditions of being human and of the importance of the freedom of thought. The totalitarian power recognized this. It consistently persecuted every unofficial expression. In the democratic and liberal society of the nineties, these humanistic values gave way to other values. Primarily, to that of consumerism.

Readers' disorientation and the decline in the importance of the written word were among the decisive forces behind the Czech cultural community's decision to try to reverse this situation. Literary awards were also among the important tools in this effort whose purpose was to establish benchmarks for the appraisal of literature and to point to its importance to society. How important a tool this turned out to be is evinced by the attention that is paid to these prizes and consequently to their recipients by Czech society today. Not surprisingly, the Czech literary prizes have acquired additional importance. They are a tool of orientation, and not just for the Czech reader, about the cultural situation in the Czech Republic: about the dominant themes, about evaluative battles, about the impulses that drive public discourse or about interests and directions of Czech society. Czech literary prizes thus provide a report for both the

►
Martin Reiner, the winner of the
main Magnesia Litera Prize – The
Book Of the Year 2015



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**MAGNESIA
LITERA
2015**

IN THE PANOPLY OF LITERARY AWARDS, IT IS THE STATE LITERARY PRIZE THAT STANDS OUT AS THE BRIGHTEST.

native and foreign “observers” about the state of Czech culture and society, its priorities but also about its self-respect.

There are prizes awarded by specialized panels consisting of literary scholars and authors, but there are also prizes awarded by broad segments of readers. There are prizes awarded annually as well as prizes that, wisely, are not, if there is—in the opinion of rigorous observers—no work worthy of it.

It is important to note, from the perspective of the past twenty-five years in the development of Czech culture, that literary prizes do fulfill their purpose. They help bring back prestige to the writer's trade, they draw the attention of readers (not only to the awarded titles and their authors), and they stimulate broader discussions about literature. They have also proven their worth as a means of orientation for Czech and foreign readers and publishers. Witness the fact, that it is foremost the laureates who, through the translation of their books, establish themselves as authors who find recognition in the European or worldwide context.

In the panoply of literary awards, it is the **State Literary Prize** that stands out as the brightest. Established in 1920, that is, during the era of the Masaryk republic, its significance was undisputable already then. The communist power tried to establish a different tradition of state prizes and the “Masaryk” state prize was, in 1948, abolished. Its revival, in 1995, was the work of Pavel Tigrid, the then minister of culture, the onetime editor of the exile journal *Testimony* and one of the most important cultural personalities of Czech history in the second half of the twentieth century. The state prize for literature is awarded annually for an original work by a Czech author, published that same year. Part of the prestige of this prize derives from the fact that the jury looks at the author's entire completed work. Still, the focus of the award is the quality of the newly published text. Among the most recent awardees belong the poet, novelist, critic and translator Patrik Ouředník (2014) and the poet Petr Hruška (2013).



Adolf Scherl, who received
the State Prize (2014) for his
contribution in the field of drama.



LITERARY
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The **Jaroslav Seifert Prize**, however, is perceived as the most prestigious: named after the only Czech Nobel prize laureate for literature and awarded, beginning in 1986, by the Charter 77 Foundation for an exceptional work of poetry or fiction published in the last three years. The fact that it has not been presented in the past two years speaks to the uncompromising standards of the jury. Its awardees, for example, include Vladimír Binar (2012), Jáchym Topol (2010), Václav Havel (2008), Ivan Martin Jirous (2006), Jiří Kratochvíl (1999) and Milan Kundera (1994).

The **Magnesia Litera** prize has the biggest media impact. Founded in 2002 and currently awarded in nine categories, it draws the attention of a broad swath of the public thanks to the television cameras and the national press. This, of course, guarantees the laureates not only media recognition but also markedly stimulates the sales of their books. The absolute winner in 2015 was Martin Reiner for his novel *The Poet* and in the category of new discoveries Matěj Hořava received recognition for his collection of stories *Moonshine*.

Kateřina Tučková is also among the laureates of this award (2010). In fact, she is easily the most closely followed and read contemporary authors who has also succeeded in making a breakthrough into world literature. In addition to the Magnesia Litera she received the **Josef Škvorecký Prize** and was nominated for the Jiří Orten prize. Her novel *The Žitková Goddesses* is now appearing in German translation with the DVA publishing house in Munich.

Intended for the up-and-coming generation of authors, the **Jiří Orten Prize** originated back in 1987 and established itself as outside the official literature of the communist regime. It was one of the first envoys of future literary prizes. The laureates of this award often introduce themselves as debutantes only to then become firm constituents of the Czech literary landscape. Presented here with several poems from the collection *You Don't Recount Clearly*, Alžběta Michalová was among its nominees for the year 2015 (she also received the nomination for the Magnesia Litera prize for this year).

Among the other important awards belong the *Karel Čapek Prize* (presented by the Czech PENclub), the *F. X. Šalda Prize* dedicated to literary criticism and journalism, the *European Union Prize for Literature* (Tomáš Zmeškal received it in 2011 and Jan Němec in 2014) and, finally, we should also mention the *Jan Skácel Prize*, meant specifically for poets. Finally, the *Franz Kafka Prize* is intended for authors whose work speaks to the reader regardless of their origin, nationality or culture (its laureates include, for example, Philip Roth, Elfriede Jelinek, Yves Bonnefoy, Arnošt Lustig, Daniela Hodrová, Haruko Murakami, Amos Oz and, in 2015, Eduardo Mendoza).

Awards of a different type consist of prizes that highlight, for example, the character of a book's design—*The Most Beautiful Czech Books*—or a particular readership—*Golden Ribbon*, a prize awarded to authors of books for children.

Even though the literary life in the Czech Republic continues to be busy and tempestuously stormy, thanks to the continued growth in the significance and active impact of literary prizes, it now has its dominant features and its own clarity. Literary prizes thus offer an important account of the values positively perceived by Czech society that transcend the field of literature.



CZECH LITERATURE IS ALIVE AND EXCEPTIONALLY COLORFUL

A conversation with
Pavel Mandys, literary
critic and organizer
of the annual book prize
Magnesia Litera

He was born in 1972 in Rakovník. He studied journalism and mass communication at the Charles University School of Social Science in Prague. He is interested in literary, comics and film criticism. In the year 1995–2010, he worked as an editor of the magazine *Týden* [The Week]; since 2010, he is the editor of the Internet literary magazine *iLiteratura*. In 2001, he co-founded the civic association Litera that, since 2002, awards the annual book prize Magnesia Litera. He is the (co)author of the books *Idiot a jeho návrat* [The Idiot and His Return] (1999), *Praha město literatury* [Prague, The City of Literature] (2012) and *2x101 knih pro děti a mládež* [2x101 Books for Children and Young Adults] (2013).

RK: How would you characterize contemporary Czech literature if you were to recommend it to a potential reader abroad?

PM: As a literature that is alive and particularly colorful, with living classics, a well-established mid-range as well as young talents. In all of these fields, there exist authors and titles that are comparable to the world's best. Perhaps only in the light genres, such as crime, science fiction and fantasy literature, do Czech authors attain but the world's average.

RK: Do translations of books for children and young adults, criticism and comics also have a chance of success?

PM: Czech literature for children is presently going through an excellent phase, many new authors are popping up; authors who otherwise write primarily for adults are devoting themselves to it. The series of Pavel Šrut and Galina Miklínová *Lichožrouti* [The Odd-Sock Eaters] could meet with worldwide commercial success especially if its film version works out well. I do not follow criticism much; on the other hand, for example, the success of the philosopher economist Tomáš Sedláček speaks to the fact that we have much to offer in this area as well. The situation is a bit more complicated in the case of comics; the small market presents a chance for only the most fervent creators. Consequently, authors who aim for an artistic expression



Pavel Mandys (1972)

An author of literary and film criticism. In 2010, he co-founded the civic association Litera that, every year since 2002, awards the annual book prize Magnesia Litera. He is active in helping shape the Czech literary scene.

THE IMPACT OF THE ANNUAL PRIZES ON THE BOOK MARKET WAS SLOW AT FIRST; IT HAS BECOME VERY IMPORTANT IN THE PAST FEW YEARS.

dominate Czech comics. Let us not look for commercial hits among Czech comics, although several of them are very interesting.

RK: Currently, the prose author Kateřina Tučková and her novel *Žítkovské bohyně* [The Žitková Goddesses] is something of a phenomenon in Czechia. Can one use her case to show what's up with Czech bestsellers nowadays?

PM: *The Žitková Goddesses* is a somewhat atypical bestseller. You see, generally it is the case that Czechs love humoristic novels in all its forms, from the most demanding to the more trashy. Hence, of the currently writing authors it is Michal Viewegh and Peter Šabach, most recently joined by Evžen Boček with his *Poslední aristokratka* [The Last Lady Aristocrat]. A noteworthy attempt at an atypical humoristic novel is the fantasy parody crime *Mlýn na mumie* [The Mill on Mummies] by Petr Stančík.

RK: You have been organizing the literary prizes Magnesia Litera since 2002. What impact do the awarded prizes have on the particular literary work and thereby on the literary market?

PM: The impact of the annual prizes on the book market was slow at first; it has become very important in the past few years. With one exception, all the books that have received the Magnesia Litera Book of the Year award in the past six years have surpassed the Czech bestseller benchmark of 10,000 sold copies, even though they may have sold but a few hundred copies prior to that. They have the most visible impact on the sale of fiction. Nevertheless, this year's crop also helped books for children. *Proč obrazy nepotřebují názvy* [Why Pictures Don't Need Titles] by Ondřej Horák and Jiří Fanta remains, since the award, at the forefront of the children's books bestseller list.

RK: Do literary prizes awarded in Czechia have any influence on foreign publishers' decisions to translate an awarded book?

PM: I assume so. As do our publishers, who take seriously the criteria of success in literary prizes of other nations. However, it also depends on the theme: *Peníze od Hitlera* [Moneys from Hitler] by Radka Denemarková would perhaps be successful in Germany regardless of having received the Litera for prose; only, perhaps, the novel's publication would come a bit later.

RK: Is there something particular about the typography of contemporary Czech books?

PM: In fact, every Czech publishing house that is devoted to literary fiction cooperates closely with some top Czech graphic designer. From this point of view, the Czech book market has good standing. Many books, those of Miloš Urban for example, which would receive short shrift and a sterile cover abroad, have the qualities of an artifact.

RK: You work for the Internet portal *iLiteratura.cz*. What does the future hold for the printed book?

PM: The printed book will be with us for a long time yet, as much as electronic publishing will gradually establish itself next to it. Whether and for how long will literary criticism work in print, now that is the bigger question mark. That is why we are making an effort, with the *iLiteratura*, to lift the quality of literary criticism in the Internet environment.

Interviewed by Radim Kopáč



ZŘETELNĚ
NEVYPRAVÍŠ

[YOU DON'T
RECOUNT
CLEARLY]

Alžběta Michalová

I Have Mother

I have
a madonna sketched with a coat's outline

she carries a child with her
her smallest is eight, long ago
even so
one more inside the head
that she may not forget
how it is placed to the breast

At the Floor

my
brother deathly eight-year-old
screamed

as one calls out for help in water
it is more human
than he is at this moment

the way he thrashed his feet his head
at the floor -
he was drowning

and mommy but a stare like at a broken plate
oh my God
may he get well
may the place be swept

* * *

I plead with you
try to return
to find a house with the white weathered fence
try to fall in love with it again

come home
it is not *that bad* here
come home mommy

children stood on the street
they whimpered, it was chilly
they caught cold, for nothing

perhaps they figured that
some woman would hear

* * *

you approach the room cautiously
so as not to trip over one of the personalities

you know not what to expect
your sons are as if foreign to you
they have become accustomed
they react only to rough touches
commands
at the time of battle they react quickly and indiscriminately
without concern
for they know not what to expect

it is like a cut out scene
from Indian documents
an unearthed war hatchet



battle paint and shamanistic rituals
In the middle of the house
at the torture stake

* * *

I held you in my arms brother
you radiated sickness with a hot forehead
I was afraid therefore
you looked around

daddy at work
mother in the unknown drunk perhaps to death

I screamed whether it's not enough
not enough - brother!

It was not enough
in the morning we are woken from a feverish dream
groping and searching
that damned
forlorn mother

* * *

you growled goodbye before the trip
I stormed
for one hundred years I will not see you, daddy
a hundred years!

you were leaving
I fell on to the seat
choking I wished to jump through the window
to fall into your arms

I believe namely
that you would catch me

a subconscious reflex
to protect a daughter
would raise your arms

Alžběta Michalová (1991)

Her first poetry collection **You**

Don't Recount Clearly (Fra 2015)

was nominated for the Magnesia

Litera prize (in the Discovery of the

Year category) and the Jiří Orten

Prize. She is the author of a series

of stage productions and plays.



THE LITERARY GATEWAY OF CENTRAL EUROPE

Petr Minařík

Sheepishly they turn the pages of manuscripts and published books, with the occasional sip of water or beer and scratch behind their ear, as if to make the point that they are not professional performers but those who wrote this. Such could be the first brief description of the biggest central European literary festival, The Authors' Month of Reading, which originated sixteen years ago in Brno, the second largest Czech city. As is usually the case, the truth is much more colorful.

The attempt, at the beginning of the literary festival in 2000, was to organize an event that would popularize the phenomenon of reading by authors in Czechia. This was not as common in the Czech environment as it is in the neighboring countries, particularly in Germany and Austria. Author readings and discussions were an occasional feature associated with book signings, a onetime event for a circle of friends and followers.

The Authors' Month of Reading, it was the sixteenth this year and yet, in some ways, the first. Literati crisscrossed the central European cities of Brno, Ostrava, Košice, Lvov and Wrocław, for 31 summer days. Some of them cultivated, and with the appropriate manners, and others as if they just flew off a carousel. The Author's Month of Reading welcomed in these cities—yes, indeed, in second and third ranking ones, no metropolises—sixty two writers from the Ukraine, Poland, Czechia and Slovakia. The ones from Kiev, Lvov or Dnepropetrovsk were the main guests. Let us not pretend that this year's gathering was about literature only. Russia is occupying the Ukraine and thirty one Ukrainian literati have made it to Poland, Slovakia and Czechia. Perhaps even the most conservative academic will not be upset that next to the lively polemics about the iambic and trochee meters the topic turned to the dead and the wounded. In short, literature is once again at the center of society's attention.

The inspiration came from the most important book fair, the one in Frankfurt am Main, which led us to the idea, beginning in 2005, that expanding the festival beyond the Czech borders, would not involve

inviting a given number of foreign authors, as is usually the case with similar festivals. Instead, we would focus on a single chosen country, or better, literature. Just as the Frankfurt book fair has its main country, so does The Authors' Month of Reading. That is why the cities and countries of central Europe reflect an airdrop of literati from various countries of the world. Canadians, Germans, Belarusians, Austrians, the French, Slovenians or for example, last year, the Scotts, have already introduced themselves.



Photo by David Konečný / Větrné mlýny





Photo by David Konečný / Větrné mlýny

What then marks the uniqueness of The Authors' Month of Readings? In addition to the local authors of the countries in which the festival takes place (Poland, Slovakia, Czechia and, starting this year, Ukraine as well) the literature loving audience is introduced to a single literature through a rather representative selection. Our aim is that the staging will reflect as much as possible the actual form of the given written tradition. We balance our work with authors of different generations and genres even though, understandably, we confront particular national specificities. The Belarusian line brings many more great names of poets, while the German guests introduce a rather strong contemporary short story writers workshop and, let's say, the Poles their famous literary reportage. I like to say, that while attending all 31 evenings of a given literature will not make you an expert, your overview of it will be very good.

A month of reading by authors is not only an airdrop of literature. In addition, the project advertises literature in central Europe beyond the framework of actual readings. Each of the foreign authors in attendance has a book published in Czech and Slovak. Traditionally held in July, a particular footprint remains even after the festivities end. There are the documentaries filmed by Czech, Slovak and Polish writers together with the individual authors from the guest lineup. A cooperative production of Polish, Czech and Slovak television, this project of a sixteen part literary series has no real counterpart on European public stations. Subsequently, the cycle airs in all three countries.

The Authors' Month of Reading is particularly successful in giving literature a voice in society. Although it is not common in any of the countries that host the festival, the main national newspapers, radio and television publicize information about literature and its authors. One can say that, as a rule, following the festival the visiting country becomes the topic of readers' interest and, prior to that, of the publishers' interest.

The festival is itself a popularization of literature and reading in general, in places where it is taking place (Brno, Košice, Ostrava, Lvov, and Wroclaw) but also more broadly, thanks to the media in the individual countries. One should not ignore an additional benefit, a sort of 'stipend' that stems from an aside activity, hidden from the festival itself. On the route, that is more than 2,000 km long, pairs of authors travel together through the festival cities, one from the home lineup (Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and the Ukraine) and one from the guest country. In the five to six days together spent travelling the roads of central Europe (by train, car, bus, or plain) they get to experience all sorts of things. The authors' joint projects, translations, and readings, in sum, the forming of literary networks across countries is a consequence that works and makes sense.

Authors from Spain will be the honored guests at The Authors' Month of Reading in 2016. They too will embark on a literary pilgrimage from Brno to Ostrava, Košice, Lvov and Wroclaw. I believe that the 31 intellectuals from southern Europe will feel at home in the heart of its center. Moreover, my hopes are that the festival will prove itself as the open literary gate to central Europe.



PÁLENKA

[MOONSHINE]

Matěj Hořava



Parental Home

Today they are burying old Woyner, the grandfather of Marian from third grade. The tractor is pulling the cart with his coffin. The father is praying, women and girls singing, chaps in the back of the procession are talking. Few are crying. Woyner was old, his death expected and simple. Rumbling, tractor is accompanying the singing. The ripened pumpkins are glowing in the fields from the ripened corn. The plumbs and pears have sweetened as well, and darkened in the large, karstic potholes. Blackberries are turning black at the edges of hornbeam forests and by the roads. Woyner saw it all many times; he tasted the toil and fruits of the fields, meadows, potholes, life. He spent his whole life in the Waitzenried meadows. It cannot go on forever, it is not possible to forever revolve on the four seasons merry-go-round (sow, plant, fertilize, pray, shovel snow, drink spirits, carry manure to the small fields on the sled, hoe, and harvest and make spirits and heap piles, over and over and again). He died. And, three days later they are driving him, escorted with litanies and songs to the graveyard; how often did he take this trip: when he last accompanied his relatives (but also just anyone from the village, in all his life he never made enemies with anyone such that he wouldn't go to their funeral, escort them. Sure, old Neuman was a bastard, but he prayed for him on this road then, what was, was). Old Hašek, drunk, dug his grave. Little Loyzík (in third grade he sits in the second row and naps, unwillingly), helps him along. They will toss that well-known earth on him and dust; ignite his baptismal candle (for dozens of years it laid with the small white towel, in which he had been wrapped for his baptism, at the bottom of an ancient chest, the chest his ancestors had once brought with them from Zdice or Plzeň). Few will weep. Woyner died the way one should die. He called the priest, closed his eyes, died. He died in his parental home. On the bed his mother once gave birth to him. He was born with a scream, died peacefully, quietly... We walk the dust, the fine dust of Balkan paths; tractor, prayers, the colloquy's whisper, footsteps. Few people cry, everything is clear, questions answered, everything is in its place... But, suddenly something jabs me; unexpectedly, insidiously,

like a fan of playing cards, in a single flash in front of me spread out all the places, all the apartments, all the houses I had ever lived in, from which I ran, in which I hopelessly hid, in hope of finding anchor, of settling in. It strikes across the eyes glaring, from the northern Bohemian, long raised maternity hospital, all the way here to my large, white building. Dozens of foreign rooms from long ago, entrances, beds, even the local rooms are foreign. Even the rhythm of my footsteps is foreign; it does not suddenly merge one bit with the reconciled and slow dignity of the black mob. While I am walking in its midst, I walk on the fine, malleable dust (I follow the fresh, churning footprints of tractors, women, children, men). Yet, I sense and see much too clearly that I am walking without a trace (the reversed image from Dante who is the one to churn the sand with footprints, while all the others have become dead, disembodied shadows; it has been some time since I last read the poem, I left it in Bavaria with everything else). Only a shadow, without a past, future, roots, nourished not by any land and nourishing no land (Woyner is getting ready, to fertilize the earth, parental earth from which he took and took; he is readying himself to this time gift himself to it). I walk and fight off, with all my strength, the approaching tears...

Matěj Hořava (1980)

The 2015 laureate of the Magnesia Litera prize in the Discovery of the Year category and, of the 2015 Czech Book prize for his collection **Moonshine** (Host 2014).

TO MAKE ONE'S LIFE MORE ATTENTIVE

A conversation
with Petr Hruška

Petr Hruška was born in 1964 in Ostrava. He writes poetry, scripts and he is also a literary critic and scientist. He graduated VŠB – Technical University in Ostrava and the Faculty of Art of the University of Ostrava, in 2003 Hruška got his Ph.D. at Masaryk University. Recently he works in the Institute of Czech Literature AS CR. He has published several collections of poems: *Living Unrest* (1995), *The Months* (1998), *Doors Were Always Closed* (2002), *The Green Sweater* (2004), *Cars Drive into Boat* (2007), *Darmata* (2012) and *One Sentence* (2015). He also participated on several collective monographs, for example *The History of the Czech Literature 1945 – 1989* (2007–2008), *The Dictionary of Czech Literary Journals, Periodical Literary Anthologies and Almanachs 1945 – 2000* (2002). His poems were translated into many languages. Hruška is a recipient of many Czech and foreign literary prizes, in 2013 he received The State Literary Prize.

TK: I know that this question is general, but if we admit that national literature reflects a national mentality, is there something that you would describe as specific to Czech poetry?

PH: I think that Czech literature reflected the property of small nations: good eyes for the close-ups not so good for long distance. What we have here is the ability to notice “small” things, a sense for what appears, at first, insignificant. That which big nations with their grand perspective, their expansive view of the landscape, at times overlook, even though it's full of inner drama and tension. I am thinking of the predilection for the inconspicuous, every day, and individual life, the noticing of details apparently banal, of events that look harmless and trivial. Yet, in the end, they may turn out to be decisive and determining in the life of a person and society. The literary hero commits some small trivial stupidity, fails at something unnoticed, fails morally or, on the contrary, commits something beautiful and upright, experiences anxiety or happiness. From the point of view of grand history, not even a calendar page flutters – and yet these things have their important, hidden consequences, affect the climate, relationships and inner world of the particular hero, they take part in human dignity. And

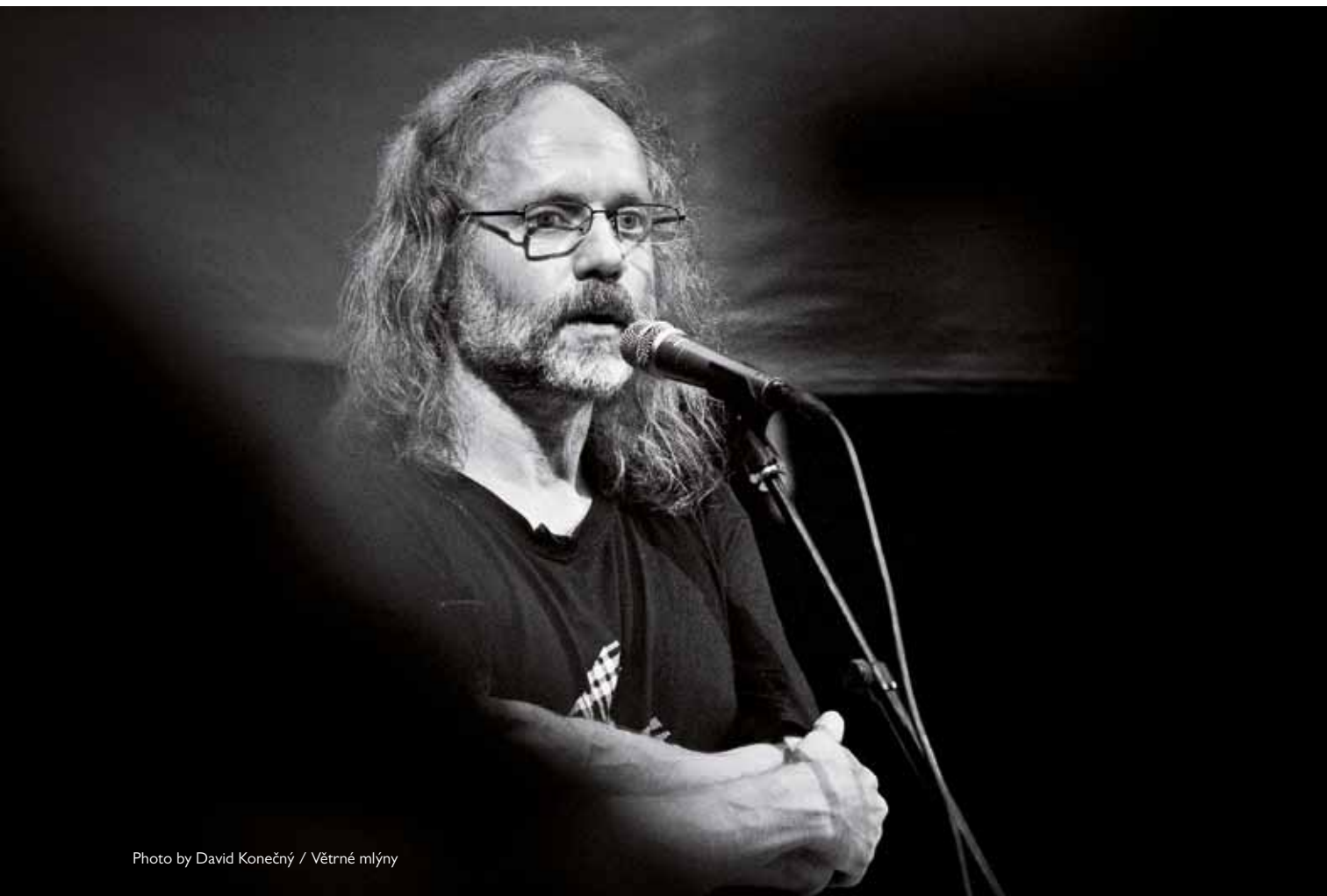
Petr Hruška (1964)

The laureate of the 2013 State Literary Prize, is the author of seven poetry collections most of which were published by the Host publishing house, for example *Cars Drive into Boats* (2007) or *Darmata* (2012).

that's a lot. Then there is the awareness and sensitivity to language or more exactly to speech.

TK: Nevertheless, sensitivity to language is something we expect of an author.

PH: The Czech language had to emancipate itself for centuries, confront oppression. Perhaps because of that Czech writers tend to be sensitive to direct speech, to language as employed in particular talk.



LET ME STATE
WHAT I AM
AFTER IN
POETRY.
I WANT IT
TO BE AN
EXCITEMENT,
A SPARKLING
OF PERCEPTION
– IN THIS I FIND
ITS PRIMARY
IMPORTANCE.

It relates also to another value as well as curse, that is, with the pub culture where a Czech spends a significant part of his life. The pub is one of the most important public places for an intense use of live speech. It is no accident that among our best and in the world most recognized authors belong Jaroslav Hašek and Bohumil Hrabal, both of whom managed ingeniously to hear in common speech something important regarding the general nature of the human being and also capture the face of his life. However, the same holds for the iconic author from the era of national awakening, Božena Němcová and her work *Grandma*, which is in fact assembled from small, lighthearted narrations exchanged by residents of a Czech village. They confront the ruin, pain, uncertainty and the poverty of all kinds with what is the most human of all – the ability to tell stories about it; that they know how to convey it. Is it so little? Yet, all of Christian culture rests on confession, prayer and even on sermon! Moreover, Czech poets tested a strong sense for the overheard word as well. For their poetry, direct speech, fragments of a conversation, a word just spoken or shouted from someone to someone, was an important inspiration, they absorbed it with great creative commitment into their poems – suffice to name Jiří Kolář, Ivan Blatný, Ivan Martin Jirous, Karel Šiktanc and many more.

TK: Your poetry has been well received in the Czech Republic for a long time now; if you were to characterize it yourself and define its strong features, what would you emphasize?

PH: Let me state what I am after in poetry. I want it to be an excitement, a sparkling of perception – in this I find its primary importance. Poetry is supposed to disturb our established “orderly perception” in such a way, that we are forced to piece it together again. That is when special attention towards one’s own life takes place. My aim is that the drama and the secret of the world that is so difficult to capture, that speaks to us, emanated from specific things, human situations, gestures from somewhere in the midst of the mundane human givenness, as I have already suggested in my first answer. I would like my poems made out

of words that give names to inconspicuous things and not out of big concepts. I do not care for poetry conceived as a way of escaping from this world. I perceive it, on the contrary, as a fall (jettisoning) into life. In addition, I want to know how to keep silent in poetry, but *expressly* silent. To depart from the word in time, so it does not lose its silence, its unfinished telling.

TK: Your poems are often anchored in Ostrava. Is the concreteness of a place important to you?

PH: A poet needs the not self-evident. Poetry itself is a thing that is by nature not self-evident. After all, it is made of words that we do not have full control over, that have their own proud beauty, individuality and secret. Poetry is an expression of uncertainty – he, who is at peace with his life, who commands it, does not write poetry. For this need for uncertainty and lack of self-evidence, one cannot wish for a better city than Ostrava! It truly originated as a non-city, more like a work camp. Thanks to the staggering deposits of black coal that hide under the surface here, a heavy industry grew for several centuries with all the devastation that this brings with it. People come here to work, to make big bucks and then quickly run away, from the devastated landscape, from the horrific exhaustion. Except that many of these people, for a variety of reasons, did not succeed in running away, on the contrary, in the end they brought their progeny into the world here. Such are the origins of the city of Ostrava. Ostrava is in fact a failed escape. The only option left to those who stayed behind was to try to lay the foundations here (as absurd as it seemed) of something that we call culture, that is of a respectable, multilayered life, in which existence is not limited to the factory, booze and sleep, only. They strove for an ordinary culture of housing, experiencing and even for a transcending dimension. However, they had continuously to battle it out, for it was not at home here. It is just this resistance; the effort made for a human dimension that would be not self-evident that marks the terrific energy that excites me. I am a native of Ostrava, for fifty years, and it is here that I experienced the stupefying communist



dictatorship and the capitalistic, grotesque play on worldliness. I am a mixture, “genetically” speaking, of the failed escape and the not self-evidence of culture.

TK: Naturally, as not only a poet but also a literary scholar you follow the life of literature and, critically speaking, the context of your own work. What attracts you to it, and why?

PH: Most of all poetry’s resilience. A hundred years ago, the great Czech poet, truly excellent and well respected, Antonín Sova, said, “I am old now and a poet means shit today.” In a hundred years, the sentence has not aged. In fact, this hard truth about the significance of poets continues to hold. Clearly, though, for many to *mean something* is not decisive, they just want *to be somehow*, and so continue to write – and even read! – poetry. Moreover, they have no intention on stopping just because they are in the minority.

Interviewed by Tomáš Kubíček



A LETTER FROM MEXICO

Jiří Gruša

Jiří Gruša (1938–2011),
Czech poet, novelist, essayist and
translator. Gruša was born in Pardubice
on 10 November 1938 and died in
Bad Oeynhausen in Germany on 28
October 2011.

He studied philosophy and history
at the Faculty of Arts of the Charles
University in Prague. He co founded
the literary magazine *Tvář* (**The
Face**) in 1964. After the Soviet
occupation in 1968 he was banned
from publishing. Since 1982 he lived in
Germany. After 1989, he engaged in
politics (as ambassador to Germany,
minister of education, president of
PEN International, and director of
Diplomatic Academy of Vienna). He
published about twenty books written
in Czech or German, among them the
latest *Dámský gambit* (**Ladies Gambit**,
2010) and *Beneš jako Rakušan* (**Beneš
as an Austrian**, 2011).

Speech by Jiří Gruša after he was elected President of PEN International
on 26th November 2003 in Mexico City

Mr. President, dear Homero
Distinguished guests
Friends

The vote from today pleased and honoured me. Again, my sincere
thanks with my promise to do my best. Your confidence in me - means
you are relying on contexts and communication.

Coming from a continent which frequently stresses the word freedom
I spent more than half of my live under regimes which oppressed it.
And coming from an old nation which in modern times was forced
to struggle for its languages and its own state, I had to see that saving
one's languages and states does not guarantee freedom.

Nevertheless, I was glad to have experienced that words and letters
become power and that literature plays its role only if it doesn't serve
ideologies.

I come from a country where writers achieved more than politicians.
And not only in my generation. The modern Czech Nation could be
- so to speak - understood as the creation of writers who have been
especially able to express something significant about which politicians
remained silent. And the writers had to pay for it. Loosing freedom or
in exile loosing even their language!

Making an important discovery - that the language of freedom doesn't
have to be the mother tongue. That freedom and origin could be
different but their unity remains a task. And I was lucky to be allowed
to return to my country and write in my language again.

I am not going to look retrospectively at the fulfilment of prophecy as
which dissident writings sometimes have been seen. No, I am looking

back to make a small remark about literature as aesthetics of liberty. I have experienced that literature was not able to express something without a risky choice – without the search for an unknown phrase of reality. Freedom is courage to make new connections which can be equalizing. However this freedom cannot be found collectively. It doesn't need preachers or prayers. It only needs a persistent persons asking for it.

And in the end it couldn't be won with hate. And that, too, is the reason why bright people understood freedom as freedom from hate. And I can assure you there is in our times no worthier goal to be reached. I think about writers in jails, about all these talented people suffering from hate. They confirm the rule that the most normal things have the highest price.



LET US USE
SENSIBILITY
INSTEAD
OF PATHOS,
IRONY
INSTEAD OF
PROPHETIC
VISIONS, LET
US RESPECT
DIFFERENCES
INSTEAD
OF USING
EXCLUSIVE
RITUALS.

And the danger for freedom grows if this rule falls to oblivion. Let us remember freedom.

International PEN – the oldest hatefree club I know – can be helpful here. Let us practise the aesthetics of liberty. All our centres and members are branches of a tree which magnifies the creative space. In the sultry atmosphere of our days in which black and white talking have become commonplace slang. Let us have colours and smells as antidotes. Let us breathe.

Let us use sensibility instead of pathos, irony instead of prophetic visions, let us respect differences instead of using exclusive rituals.

This is the secret for the contexts and communications – I have initially mentioned. Yes, we need creative words. And creative words will enable us to create the identities we need for our connected world.

Let us connect the specific sources from which the writing draws its sense.

I can promise you to do for the others what has been done for me in the time of suppression.

Twenty five years ago – having left gaol

– I found on my table at home a number of a magazine which I had already noticed. It helped me to leave gaol. Its name was Index of Censorship. It published my case and worked wonders.

And I can remember this idea, when reading it. The taming of a cannibal starts with the publishing of his menu!

Ladies and gentleman

Friends

There is still a lot to be published apart from our own books.

Jiří Gruša

Der 16. Fragebogen

Prosa III

Wieser

In 2014 Barrister & Principal (Brno, Czech Republic) and Wieser Verlag (Klagenfurt, Austria) started to publish Jiří Gruša's works in ten volumes. Both language versions, Czech and German, will be finished in 2018.



LONG LIFE OF A BOOK IS THE FULFILLMENT OF AN AUTHOR'S SECRET DREAM,

says Czech bestselling
author Kateřina Tučková

Kateřina Tučková (1980) is a writer and curator of contemporary art. Her novel *The Expulsion of Gerta Schnirch* (2009) received the Magnesia Litera / Book Club Readers Prize and was nominated for the Josef Škvorecký Prize as well as the Magnesia Litera prize for fiction and the Jiří Orten Prize. Its stage production at the Brno HaTheater has been running since October 2014 and continues to be sold out. In 2012, she published the novel *The Žitková Goddesses*. The book received the Josef Škvorecký Prize, Czech bestseller, the Magnesia Litera / Kosmas Readers' Prize and the Czech book Readers' Prize. Both novels belong among the bestsellers; *The Expulsion of Gerta Schnirch* has sold over 50 000 copies, for *The Žitková Goddesses* sales have climbed above 120 000.

DB: The novel *The Žitková Goddesses* was received exceptionally well in the Czech Republic. It has become a true phenomenon and I dare say, not just a literary one; the theater adaptation has been very successful and a movie version is in the making. What are the foreign responses up until now like? Now published in four languages, you have traveled to introduce the book personally in the Ukraine, Poland and Romania.

KT: Evidently, a half-forgotten story of healers in the White Carpathian Mountains, whose demise assured by the communist regime, resonates even in translation and readers take to the book well. Apparently, it is because in these countries they are familiar with a similar phenomenon. At readings in Poland we talk about local versions of goddesses and spiritual healers, about *szeptukhas*, in the Ukraine it is *vidunkas*, and most importantly, because these are countries that we share a similar historical experience with, about totalitarian power and the ways of abusing it.

DB: Do you think that the story of exceptional women from the region of White Carpathian Mountains that stretch across the borders of the Czech and Slovak republics can resonate in entirely different lands?

KT: Yes, I think so. Even though it is a story about village women in a small country, their stories reflect general themes that are comprehensible in all societies, cultures and languages. A clash between big, central European history and small, personal fates. A clash between Church, Nazi and finally communist power, and a hard to grasp, mysterious phenomenon. The power of belief in special abilities. A reader from anywhere will understand the contemporary dimension of the narrative; in it, through the main protagonist, I dealt with the reflexivity of the past and the question of coming to terms with discoveries about one's ancestors. In addition, to a foreign reader the broadly described ethnographic and historical dimension and thus view into a different culture may be equally captivating.

DB: To a certain extent, real stories lie at the basis of the book and one cannot overlook the meticulous factual approach and demanding research that went into its treatment. In writing it, how did you proceed?

KT: I travelled regularly to the White Carpathians and came to know what life is like there, I spoke with those who saw the last goddesses. I requested access to personal files in the archives of the communist secret police and visited regional archives and museums. Everything interested me. The air battles, during which American soldiers who were shot down, fell into the White-Carpathian forests and healed by one of the goddesses, as well as court trials. Those that were held against these women by the inquisition in the 17th century as well as those tried during the First Republic courts at which an accusation of hexing was discussed in all seriousness. I proceed this way with all my books. I learned it while working on my novel *Vyhnání Gerty Schnirch* [The Expulsion of Gerta Schnirch], which takes place against the background of the very sensitive issue regarding the deportation of Czechoslovak Germans, a problem that to this today provokes extreme reactions. Careful preparation was very necessary.

DB: That book of yours has met with very different reactions. While presenting the novel at book signings in Czechia, I am told,



you confronted some rather pointed, dismissive reactions. On the other hand, individuals such as, for example, the German president Joachim Gauck, consider it foundational. In his address regarding not only the 70th anniversary of the end of the world war but also the contemporary problem of migration of people exiled by war from their homes, he recognized your role during *The year of reconciliation* commemorations held in Brno this year. It seems, that in the story of Gerta Schnirch you not only introduced a locally controversial, historical cause, but also touched upon the more general problem of up-rootedness faced by people forced to leave their homes. What actually drew you to write this novel?



KT: I “found” Gerta’s story in the Brno neighborhood to which I had moved. Until this day, I walk home pass the sign on an old façade: Mährische Glass- und Spiegelindustrie, bullet holes, traces from the war remain on other houses. That impulse sparked my interest in the history of this place and so I began finding the sad stories of local families – of the Jewish ones, dragged from here into concentration camps or of those German ones expelled after the war. And it was this second cause, that is the transfer of 20, 000 Czechoslovak Germans – of women, children and the elderly – that took me by surprise more because I had known nothing about it up until then. The so-called *Brno march of death* was, until the 90s, tabooed, and when I learned about it, I wanted to come to terms with it in the space of a novel.

DB: 2015 was declared the *Year of reconciliation* by the city of Brno. The 70th anniversary since the end of the war occasioned a commemoration of victims among whom were included, for the first time, the Brno Germans who did not survive the mentioned march. The current city officials, historians as well as readers all agree that your book, *The Expulsion of Gerta Schnirch*, influenced fundamentally the perception of postwar retaliation that in so many cases hit upon the weakest yet innocent ones. How are you experiencing the long “life” of a novel, a book that is the topic of conversation for six years now?

KT: I think that one could describe such a book’s “life” as the fulfillment of an author’s secret dream. It is really material for a separate book. At first, the pointed public discussion and the ceaseless defense of Gerta’s story, followed by talks at high schools and universities and, finally, the situation when I walked with the thousand or so participants in the *March of reconciliation*. From the mass grave in Pohořelice into Brno, where the mayor declared, in public, an apology to the deported Brno citizens who were German nationals. I have the impression that with this gesture a long and intricate story of a place that grew from Czech, German and Jewish roots, as well as the story of a civil society that for many years lied to itself about the unseemly parts of its history, has found closure. We have thrown out a skeleton



Right now, the book *Žitkovské bohyně* [The Žitková Goddesses] is appearing in German translation by Eva Profousová as *Das Vermächtnis der Göttinnen*.

Eine merkwürdige Geschichte aus den Weißen Karpaten, in the prestigious publishing house DVA.

from the closet and my Gerta can sleep peacefully now; I feel relieved as well as moved that I was able to be part of such a fundamental shift of opinion in society.

DB: Are you working on a new novel? What theme did you chose this time?

KT: I found one neglected story in Czech history, one that relates to a society wide problem. In the 1950s, the communist regime tried to convert forcefully Czech society to atheism. There were staged Kangaroo trials with representatives of the Catholic Church, sentences issued of life imprisonment, forced labor in uranium mines, and religious orders interned in monasteries in the depopulated Sudeten lands. What interests me here is the women's question. The imprisoned or interned sisters must have lived in horrible conditions, forced to fend for themselves, forgotten by society and, in the end, by the Church. Yet, not even such fates have moved the Catholic Church to offer full rights to women who, in similarly extreme situations, cannot be self-sufficient in the practice of their faith. However, something quite fundamental took place in Brno in the early 1970s at a time when the Church had already split into the official and underground factions. Underground women were being ordained Catholic priests. This curious cause is, to this day, a source of conflicted reactions and it induced me to inquire further into the fates of some of these women and, what else, write a novel about them.

Interviewed by Dana Blatná



host

kateřina
tučková
- - - - -
žitkovské
bohyně



Kateřina Tučková (1980)

Presently one of the most successful Czech novelists, she earned attention with her novel **The Expulsion of Gerta Schnirch** (2009) about the deportation of Germans from post war Czechoslovakia. It received the 2010 Magnesia Litera prize. Her most recent novel **The Žitková Goddesses** (2012) has also received several nominations and awards, the Josef Škvorecký Prize and the Magnesia Litera Readership prize among them.



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MINISTRY OF CULTURE
CZECH REPUBLIC



This catalogue is published as an accompaniment to the
National Stand of the Czech Republic, organized by the Ministry of Culture.

Published by The Moravian Library in Brno (www.mzk.cz)

Translation by Andrew Lass, Alex Zucker (Memory and the Rewriting of History)

Design and typesetting by Štěpán Drlík

Printed by Josef Kleinwächter

2015