

Slovak Literary Review

Published by Centre for
Information on Literature

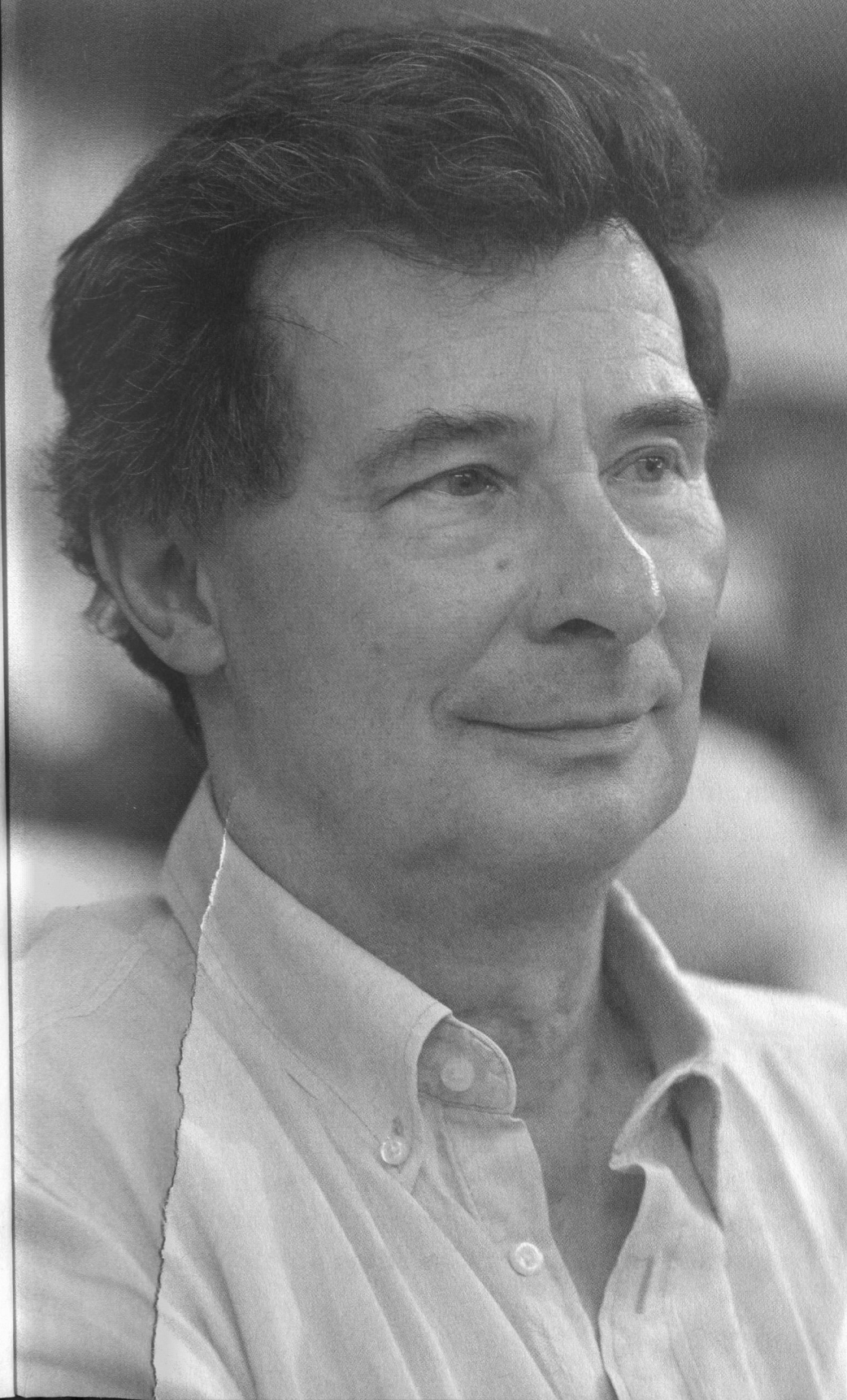
2016



Dušan Šimko

1945

An author-in-exile, living and working in Switzerland to where he emigrated in 1968, Šimko's work addresses themes of searching for identity and historical roots. He has published his work in foreign magazines and had it broadcast on DRS 2 and Radio Free Europe radio channels. His first collection of short stories, *Maratón Juana Zabalu* (The Marathon of Juan Zabala, 1984), was published in the prestigious 'Rozmluva' London exile edition and positively received by critics. In his travel novel *Japonský diván* (The Japanese Divan, 1993), he draws upon his experience of two research stays in Japan. His book *Šiesty prápor* (The Sixth Battalion, 1997) about the wartime Slovak state was made into a documentary film. In 2000, his wide-sweeping novel, *Esterházyho lokaj* (Esterházy's Footman), was published. In 2009, his book *Gubbio—kniha udavačov* (Gubbio—Book of Informers) was published, a set of six tales on the theme of denunciation, collaboration and betrayal was shortlisted for the Anasoft Litera 2010 Award. His latest work is the novel *Mramor a granit* (Marble and Granite, 2015). →



Dušan Šimko

Marble and Granite

Extract translated by Jonathan Gresty →

Stalinism is flourishing in Czechoslovakia; on the Letná hill above Prague a fifteen-metre high by twelve-metre wide statue of Stalin is being erected. Barbora, a restorer, escapes the grim reality of the dictatorship by going to the spa town of Kuks, near Prague. There she discovers the dreamy, surreal world of the High Baroque through her ardent study of neglected figures by the famous Austrian sculptor, Matthias Bernard Braun, commissioned at the turn of the 18th century by Count Franz Anton von Sporck. Together with an unnamed photographer, Barbora examines one sculpture after another, discovering their various stories and legends and becoming ever friendlier with her companion. The constable of the castle also becomes involved in the story and together they form an unusual triangle.

Stalin's Death

Barbora and the photographer went to have dinner at the pension where they were staying. In the dining room were three other holidaymakers, clearly pensioners. They had placed their enormous rucksacks in the corner and were busy slurping their soup from aluminium spoons. Some dance music was playing on the wireless. The cook stuck her head out through the hatch and said that the only thing on offer that evening was tripe soup with frankfurter. And she had hardly brought out the steaming soup and put it on the table when it suddenly went quiet, and a solemn voice came on the radio:

"We announce with great sorrow that the Leader of Nations, the great Joseph Vissarionovitch Stalin, today suffered a stroke with a haemorrhage in the left hemisphere of his brain..." After a long medical statement about the causes of the nation leader's death, there then followed some sombre funeral music. The photographer did not pause in swallowing his soup but Barbora put her spoon down next to her bowl and stiffened in surprise. The pensioners, two men and a woman, were also dumbstruck; the woman even started to sob out loud. The cook ran out from the kitchen mechanically wiping her swollen red hands on her dirty apron, sighing and repeating over again: "He's died. Our Stalin has died, died..."

The pensioners put their meal tickets down on the table, quietly stood up and left the dining room without a word. Barbora and the photographer remained sitting and the cook came up to them asking despairingly:

"Do you think he has really died? Why it's hardly possible, such a person..."

The photographer looked at her sternly: "He has died and what of it? We will all die at some point. Try to understand that, Madam."

And he slammed his hand down so hard on the table the soup bowls jumped up. Startled by his reaction, the cook quickly retreated into the depths of the kitchen, shaking her head and angrily mumbling to herself.

"The devil take the daft woman!" sighed the photographer and, in an effort to divert attention away from the embarrassing intermezzo, then added: "It'll be interesting to see what the top brass and memorial builders now do. Their idol is dead so what next for the monument? The Generalissimo felled by a stroke and we can now look forward to a display like no other... You see how good it is to be tucked away out here in Kuks! All those endless funeral marches of fallen revolutionaries! Here in the woods, we won't hear anything."

Barbora thought about the photographer's question.

"They should finish it off somehow, at least for the sake of all the stone masons and labourers who have been working so hard on it. I suppose they have some sense of pride. I know that you find the whole thing laughable but think of all the hard work they have put in."

The cook was in the kitchen and not making a sound; only her husband's angry voice could be heard from there. The photographer suggested to Barbora they leave the dining room, where they were now completely alone. Barbora stood up and they went out together. They didn't feel like going to Prague and agreed that they would stay in Kuks depending on how things developed in Prague.

"We'll go on listening to the radio here until it's clear what kind of funeral parade the top brass decide on. I can imagine what they're capable of—their Generalissimo has left them and it'll take them a while to get over it. Even worse is they'll be playing that dreary music till heaven knows when. If only they could all just march off to hell with that precious corpse of theirs!"

Barbora realized that the photographer was not afraid of asking the kind of questions that almost everyone else avoided asking. She did not know anyone who spoke so candidly. Since she got to know him, she had started to look at the people she was in contact with in a different light. The photographer openly expressed opinions no one else did—or which other people would only express in the softest of voices with their closest friends or family. Because of her stays in Kuks, she had the advantage of not meeting her colleagues often; and when she did, they talked only about how the latest work report was coming on or about what they would be doing at their chalet during the weekend. The photographer's openness and sincerity thus made a strong impression on her and gave her the feeling that he was doing something forbidden, something both highly dangerous and naïve. The death of the Liberator would now unleash all kinds of questions which had been around for a long time even if most people pretended they didn't actually exist. In 1949, a comrade from the accounts department at the directorate had been collecting signatures for the congratulatory sheets sent to Stalin on his seventieth birthday. Barbora had not signed because she was on leave at the time and after she got back, it was too late—the sheets had already been sent. But the accountant would still remind her of it with her reproachful eyes and Barbora had been avoiding her ever since.

Her walk to the office on the Malá Strana along the banks of the Vltava and across the bridge gave her chance to see what progress was being made on the megalomaniac structure going up there. The labourers and masons climbing up and down the scaffolding were as small as ants. For

Barbora it was a metaphor for the modern age, standing over the Vltava like an icebreaker trapped by icebergs. The complex of scaffolding that covered it gave the structure a fearsome quality in the dawn light.

One night she had a dream in which the whole pedestal and monument on top came loose and slipped down the steep layers of slate on to the bridge Čechův Most, which then crashed noisily into the river. It all happened in slow motion: one arch after another broke off and purple wastewater started to gush out from a ruptured drain. Miraculously the bronze statues of the four geni placed on the tops of the columns managed to survive: though they leaned over perilously, they somehow managed to remain standing. The rest of the bridge and the stones from the monument, however, all sank beneath the lazy waters of the Vltava and the river started to rise. Soon it was breaking its banks and flooding the old town, a blood-red stream running down Pařížská Street and into the Old Town Square, taking people and cars with it as it went. In that moment of horror, Barbora wanted to scream with all her strength. But some unknown force was throttling her, and try as she may, she could not make a sound.

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KALLIGRAM

← Published by
Kalligram, Bratislava,
2016