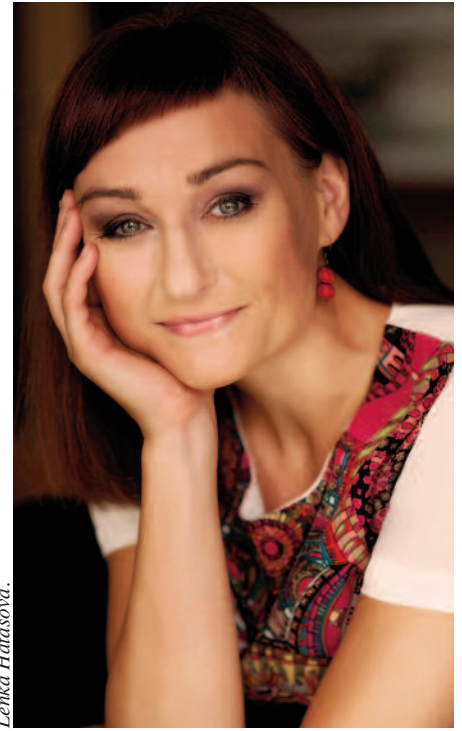


Brno story

Gerta, the first book by Czech author **Kateřina Tučková** (right) to be translated into English, is to be published in March. The author also works across a number of fields as a playwright, art historian and curator. She grew up in the village of Moutnice in Southern Moravia and then in the town of Kuřim. During her studies at Masaryk University, she moved into a flat in the quarter known as the Bronx of Brno. She talked to **Alex Mayhew-Smith** about *Gerta*.



Lenka Hatašová.

Many of our readers' lives echo some of Gerta's story through their own experiences... escape and exile, lost and gained cultures, distant families... are there parts of your family story in this book?

The basic and most important gift of being a writer is imagination. Authors are usually able to introduce characters which are very far from their personal experience or thoughts. They are able to describe human motivations or decisions that they wouldn't do themselves. So did I.

I have no German ancestors, I come from a Czech family that has lived in the south of Moravia for generations. However, when I was 22 I moved to Brno (the biggest city in Moravia) to a district known as Brno's Bronx and found out the tragic past of the place. By talking with old neighbours and research in archives I discovered the dark history of this district. It was once inhabited by Czechs, but also by Jewish and German residents, both of which – although for very different reasons – were forced to leave their homes.

When that happened in the war years, the place lost its soul and it was this aspect that attracted my attention, especially after I learned about the story of Gerta. She was a girl of the same age as I was at that time, a girl who had been expelled from her flat in 1945 with a six-month-old baby just because she was half German. No one had investigated her story. I really wanted to find out more about her and about others who had suffered the same fate. It was the beginning of a research project that took three years and resulted in the book which comes to the British book-market in March 2021 under the title *Gerta*.

Was Gerta a real person?

Well, the heroine in my novel is fictional but her fate mirrors the experience of real people during and after World War II. I wrote her story according to the memories of old women who survived the wild expulsion from Brno (today called the “Brno Death March”), who stayed in Czechoslovakia and were so nice and open in talking with me. I

obtained many details from found correspondence of one of the victims, from local newspapers of the time and from secondary literature. Gerta is not a real person, but she could easily be.

Guilt and responsibility are important themes that run throughout the book. Like thousands of Czech-Germans, Gerta is made to bear the responsibility for the perceived guilt of her community during the Nazi regime. Her life is made hopeless by Czechs and so the book raises some uncomfortable questions. What did readers and the media make of your novel when it first came out in 2009?

Since the novel was first released, I met with reactions of all sorts, many of them positive. But following my author readings for Czech audiences, there were also a few conflicting situations. The point of view on World War II which I chose – that is, one of a young woman of half-German and half-Czech roots born in Brno – was unacceptable for some people, especially for the older generation.

It is understandable, they have their own, often very painful, memories of the war. Of course, I did not mean to disregard their memories, however, I wanted to offer another point of view, which has been ignored for so long. This is the view that on the “other side” there were also victims among women, children and elderly people, who did not deserve the suffering that was forced upon them during the last days of the war.

And relating to my readings in foreign countries – they were attended especially by people who are interested in the topic of the war, or who were either displaced (such as descendants of Czech-Germans) or who emigrated and for whom the question of “lost home” is still very present. Of course, such meetings usually have a completely different atmosphere.

Your home city of Brno features heavily in your novel. Streets and buildings get renamed by Germans and then by Czechs as the city changes hands. Do Brno people today know the history of the city?

When I studied in high school and later at

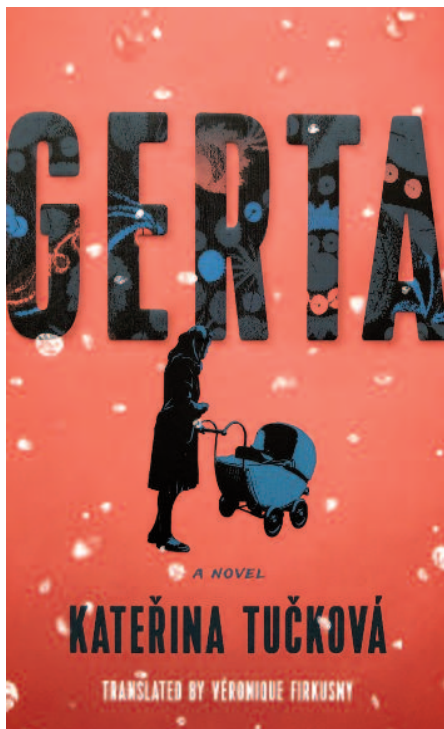
Masaryk University Brno, teachers didn't speak about the mixed history of our city. My parents and grandparents didn't speak with me about it either. This part of our past was hidden in the shade, it was taboo. Which is really absurd.

In the 19th century, Brno was famous for its textile factories, which were built mostly by German and Jewish industrialists. Especially my neighbourhood which was inhabited by blue-collar workers of multiple nationalities. Czech, German and Yiddish languages mixed and eventually created “hantec,” the particular dialect of Brno made up of all three of these languages.

However, after German occupation, Jews were sent out of the city on transports. After 1945 Germans were displaced and their flats were taken over by Czech and Slovak workers, who then, in the sixties, moved to newly built, modern housing blocks. Both the people and the city changed quickly and the common past was unfortunately forgotten. It lasted for 40 years through the communist era, but this has been improving in recent years.

The most significant reflection on the area's past is occasioned during the annual festival Meeting Brno, which I helped found with my colleagues in 2015 with the intention to communicate the rich local history to locals and the foreign public, and also open up the memories, which were long held taboo.

We successfully initiated the Reconciliation March (“Pout' smřfení”), when the official apology to the victims of Brno's Death March took place, proclaimed by the mayor of the city of Brno together with the bishop. Such a gesture of reconciliation had not been possible even in the minds of people for a period lasting three generations. Through discussion forums and diverse cultural programs, the festival aimed to confront the past through the eyes of the present. As a program director I organised the festival for three years, but in 2018 I retreated to writing – work on my next novel requires all my energy.



The trauma of being subject to human (or inhuman!) powers that decide our fate can manifestly be a crippling experience. All the things we would have had in our own country we have a version of in another country. Is there a hollowness to the life of an exile? Undoubtedly, it is extremely difficult to take root in a new place, start a new life. Not everyone will succeed. But I wouldn't talk about emptiness. The stories of emigrants and refugees describe a variety of emotions that lead to a dual identity rather than an emptiness.

Our obsession with borders seems to have set in motion many of the problems of the 20th century and so on into this century. Is there a way to retain a national identity and do without borders or are humans sadly limited in the breadth of our acceptance of others? I believe that it is possible to maintain national culture and specifics even without borders. Personally, I mostly consider myself a Brno patriot, then a European and only lastly a Czech. I can feel at home in Europe and in the same time love my language, culture and traditions. The concept of a united Europe without borders is close to my heart, but it obviously requires a huge degree of tolerance and constant clarification of the various perspectives.

How have you passed your lockdown time? Has it been an easy choice to get on with writing in this isolated life we are living? For me, the beginning of the pandemic was very difficult. My son had just been born and I was very worried about him as well as

about my old parents. Over time, however, I got used to the situation, as did most people. Despite all the limitations and restrictions, I returned to work, completed a book about important women of the Czech past and continued writing my new novel.

You are also curator of art exhibitions. What is your latest project?

My last art-project which I started together with two other women – literary historian Eva Klíčová and photographer Sylva Ficová – is called “I žárovka má sochu” (“Even a lightbulb has a statue”). It aims to call attention to the fact that in the streets of Czech cities, there are very few statues of female heroes of our past. In my hometown, Brno, for example, there are over 70 statues of men and only one of a woman. Moreover, she was a Communist heroine, whose statue was erected during the past regime. And yet one can find statues of objects even such as Edison's lightbulb or a sugar cube, which I find absurd.

Therefore, I started this initiative with my friends – active women – with whom we try to encourage Czech towns to install more art objects on their streets that would remind people of the many important women who contributed to the flourishing and fame of their cities, either through their art or through their public activity. They are very often forgotten in a Czech context, which is a pity, because seeing strong female models would not only inspire young women, girls and students, but would also broaden the general public's knowledge of our history.



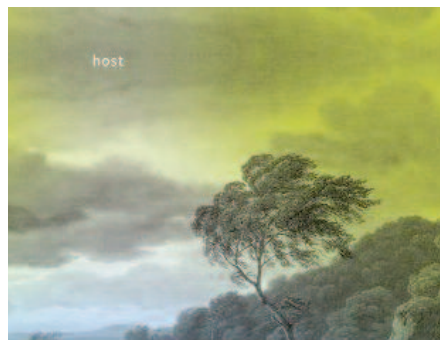
Kateřina Tučková's novel *Gerta* was first published in Czech in 2009 with the title *Vyhnání Gerty Schnirch* (*The Expulsion of Gerta Schnirch*). The English version published this year is translated by Véronique Firkusny.

The story carries us across decades and generations, telling the tale of Gerta Shnirch who is forced to march from Brno to an internment camp in Pohorelice. She is expelled as part of a general order forcing all ethnic Germans from Czechoslovakia following the end of World War II.

Alice Nellis, director of a Czech TV adaptation of *Gerta*, says of the work (also translated here by Véronique Firkusny): “The mutual problems between people and nations will

not be solved simply by an acknowledgment, and not even by an apology. An apology is just the beginning. We can admit our own guilt, take it on ourselves, but an even more difficult and important step, which is not spoken of so much and for which there are no laws or entitlements, is forgiveness – whether toward others or toward ourselves. For me, *Gerta* is a book about forgiveness.”

● Among her other work, Tučková has written a Czech children's book about sixty inspiring but somewhat forgotten heroines. Titled *Hrdinky, příběhy významných českých žen* and written with Renáta Fučíková, she pays tribute and acknowledges the legacy of some courageous Czech women.



The writer's most popular book is called *Žitkovské bohyně* (published by Host, 2012). The title translates to *The Goddesses of Žitková*.

The bestseller is about female natural healers from the Bílé Karpaty mountains, traditionally called *bohyně* – goddesses.

Tučková explores their history through the eyes of Dora Idesová, a niece of one of the goddesses who uncovers their history of persecution by the inquisition and, later, by the Nazi-regime.

The novel is sprinkled with archival records, medical reports, expert opinions and extracts from Dorina's diploma thesis as she unravels the story of the healers.

It became the sixth best-sold fiction title in the Czech Republic for 2012 and was listed in the top-10 best selling titles for 21 weeks.

The goddesses of Tučková's novel live and draw their power from the natural world around them in the Moravské Kopenice in the White Carpathians.

Although the book is a work of fiction, the goddesses were a real phenomenon and a museum to the last known *bohyně* – Irma Gabrielová – stands in the village of Čierná.

Born in 1905, she died in 2001 and lived alone for many years in a house which is now the museum. A Czech documentary film about her can be seen at the website:

<https://vimeo.com/168798113>

kateřina
tučková
žitkovské
bohyně