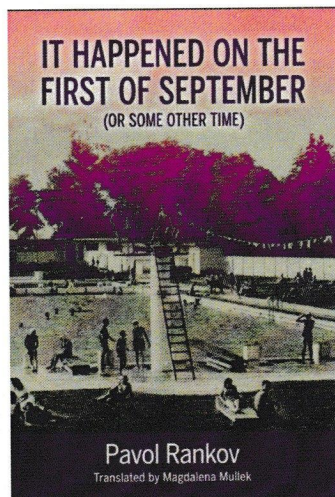
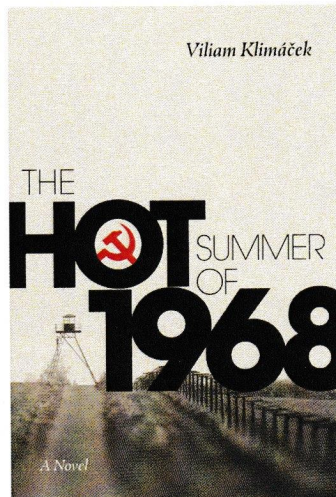


No. 33



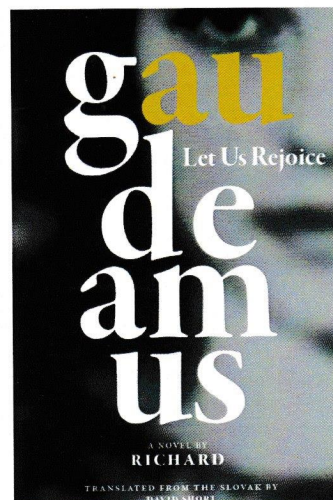
"What makes his depiction all the more effective is the genuine sympathy Rankov evokes for his compromised characters. It's impossible to stand outside and insist you'd do better."

No. 36



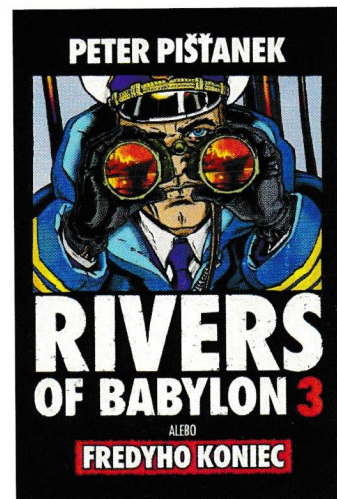
"What makes Hot Summer utterly unlike any other Slovak novel in English I've read so far, though, is that its account of Slovaks struggling under reascendant totalitarian power is paired with the experience of migrants and refugees who got out while they still could."

No. 25



"Part literary rumination, part crime fiction; a dose of sci fi here, a dash of fantasy there, a substrate of surrealism throughout; and a degeneration into wishful thinking that may, in fact, mask autobiography."

No. 19



"Pišťanek's principal goal seems to be to explode the myth that Slovakia is the land of peaceable beekeepers, treading their way silently through history, hoping that the surrounding exploiters will just leave them be... If you have a good grasp of recent Slovak (and Czech) history, there is plenty to glean here in the way of satire. But the effort is extremely unpolished."

Reading all the Slovak novels translated into English

About six years ago, as I started working in earnest on my memoir *I Am a Brave Bridge: An American Girl's Hilarious and Heartbreaking Year in the Fledgling Republic of Slovakia*, I quickly came to two realisations, writes Sarah Hinlicky Wilson.

First: I had a typical expat's view of Slovak history, namely random and inaccurate. It was time to start reading history seriously and iron out my facts.

Second: if I was daring to contribute to the world's literature on Slovakia, then I ought to see what was already in print. My Slovak being adequate for flirting and cooking but not philosophy or poetry, I decided to track down all Slovak novels ever translated into English, read them and review them.

I figured I'd find a dozen, 15 if I was lucky. I was wrong. I'm up to number 40 and not done yet.

My initial search was guided by online bibliographies, chiefly those of Martin Votruba and Julia Sherwood. In this way I found Martin Šimečka's *The Year of the Frog* about normalisation-era social stagnation; Jozef Čiger-Hronský's account of a naïve peasant in *Jozef Mak*; and Margita Figuli's moving and complex *Three Chestnut Horses*.

I quickly found, as an American reader, what a difference it made to know Slovak his-

tory. What a native author takes for granted is opaque to an outsider. In turn, knowledge of history drove my interest. What got published during the early democratic experiment of Czechoslovakia? Under the Nazi puppet regime? During communism? Afterwards?

For example, Artia in Prague published three Slovak novels in English in the 1960s, part of an effort to show the world that communists can produce great literature, too. The effort may have backfired: all three books deal with the pre-communist period.

Two of them, Rudolf Jašík's *St Elizabeth's Square* and *Dead Soldiers Don't Sing*, laud resistance against the Nazis and their anti-Semitism (fair enough) but conveniently mask the communist regime's own anti-Semitism.

The third, Janko Jesenský's *The Democrats*, ridicules the mess of a multi-party free-for-all (again, fair enough) but was written before anyone knew what a single-party system was capable of. Ladislav Mňačko's *The Taste of Power* was a much-needed antidote.

Less known in the bibliographies to date is the religious literature, and here the Slovak-in-English market is cornered by one towering figure, Kristína Royová. Virtually unknown today due to Communist bookstore purges, this reformist founder of orphanages and old

folks' homes wrote over 70 works, mostly fiction, illustrating the sanctified life.

Though herself a Lutheran, Royová made allies among the Plymouth Brethren of the English-speaking world who saw to the translation of six of her novels. *Martinko* is and remains by far the most famous of these, but (with the help of the internet and eBay) you can still get your hands on *The Heiress*, *Kept by a Mighty Hand*, *Only a Servant*, *Sunshine Country*, and *Three Comrades*.

Royová is almost certainly the most-translated, most-published, and most-read Slovak author in English. Obviously enough, since the Velvet Revolution authors have been freer in what they can put in print. They also, judging by what's come into English, have a fairly jaundiced view of the transition.

Peter Pišťanek's *Rivers of Babylon* details the ascent to power of a sociopath in a story that notes the transition in about two sentences. Richard's *Gaudeamus*, Viliam Klimáček's *The Hot Summer of 1968*, and Pavol Rankov's *It Happened on the First of September* are all excellent retrospectives on the travails of the 20th century and its sickening injustices, but hardly from the perspective of present-day triumph.

Of course, not every novel was to my liking qua novel, whether

for literary or political reasons. No small number of postmodern experiments have made their way into English, and I admit frankly I have no patience for them. But a well-crafted story that sympathises with the Tiso regime and covers up religious collusion with the Nazis doesn't get a pass: I powered through Joseph Paučo's *Unconquerables* and *A Slovak's Flight to Wonderland* purely in the interest of my mandate but they were noxious reads, to say the least.

A final category is Slovak novels actually written in English, not translated from Slovak. In this group fall Thomas Bell's *Out of This Furnace*, which you might call the Great Slovak-American novel, a multigenerational epic; Joseph Bruchac's *Dragon Castle*, a children's fantasy built on Slovak fairy tales and traditions; and Alexander Boldizar's *The Ugly*, a contemporary tall-tale written by a Slovak migrant to North America. All were great reads and deserve their place in this august company.

Sarah Hinlicky Wilson is a Lutheran pastor living in Tokyo with her husband and son. She's the author of many articles and books, including her memoir about Slovakia, *I Am a Brave Bridge* (reviewed in issue 180 of the *Review*). You can read her reviews of Slovak novels in English on her website.

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