

A Pending Matter (Nevybavená záležitosť)

Author: Jana Juráňová

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Translations: German (*Eine unerledigte Angelegenheit*, 2016); Hungarian (*Rendezetlen ügy*, 2016).

About the Author: Jana Juráňová (1957) studied Russian and English philology at Comenius University in Bratislava. She worked as a manager in the theatre in Trnava, as an editor in the review *Slovenské pohľady* and a commentator for Radio Free Europe. In 1993, she co-founded the feminist educational and publishing organisation Aspekt. This association edited the feminist cultural review *Aspekt* in Slovak and Czech (1993–2004). Also functioning as a publishing house, since 1996, Aspekt has published more than 100 fiction and nonfiction books which mainly focus on gender sensitive education and gender stereotypes (for instance Irena Brežná, Elfriede Jelinek, Olga Tokarczuk, Judith Butler, Carole Pateman and also the publications of Jana Juráňová).

Jana Juráňová has published 15 novels or short stories collections, five books for children and several plays for theatre or radio. The main topic of her works is the position of women in Slovakia in the past as well as in contemporary time and the efforts of women for equality and emancipation. Her works have demasked Slovak myths, famous figures of Slovak writers (Pavol Orságh Hviezdoslav) and gender prejudices. She has translated several books from English into Slovak, among others those of Virginia Woolf, Margaret Atwood and Judith Butler, as well as letters between Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger and she has co-translated the volume *An Anthology of the Israeli Plays* (Antológia izraelskéj drámy, 2017).

Further Important Publications: *Mojich 7 životov. Agneša Kalinová v rozhovore s Janou Juráňovou* (My Seven Lives: Agneša Kalinová Interviewed by Jana Juráňová, 2012); *Hry* (Plays, 2014; the volume contains five plays and three radio plays); *Cudzie príbehy* (Strange Stories, 2016; short stories).

Content and Interpretation

The novel is set in West Slovakia in the present time. The narrator and main character of the story is Zita Kubalková. She and her husband bought a small house in the village near Bratislava hoping to spend their old days after retirement calmly there. However, her husband unexpectedly died of a heart attack, and she is left alone.

Zita is a city woman and an intellectual. Now she is confronted with a different way of life in the village. Her neighbours seem rude and intrusive and so she becomes reclusive. She works in the garden, feeds a wandering cat and thinks about her life, her husband and her children. She accidentally finds a painting in the attic of her

house. It is the portrait of a young girl dated 1927. Zita also discovers letters and notes which belong to this woman. Gradually, it turns out that her name was Edita (Dita) Zöllner, she came from a rich and noble Jewish family and lived with her parents and her husband somewhere near the village. Zita attempts to find out something about Dita and her life. In the village, nobody knows anything. The Jewish cemetery is neglected and overgrown. Zita asks an elderly woman who answers:

Do you mean that old kike cemetery? It has been decaying for a long time, nobody cares about it. All of them were probably deported during the war, you know after all. There's a lot of talk about it, today. However, I grew up here and I never heard of it. There was no talk about it after the war. They weren't our people but they were also people after all. (Juráňová, 2013, p. 91)

There is a half ruined synagogue in the nearby town. Local citizens took bricks from it to build their houses. Zita remembers that a neglected Jewish cemetery is also in the village where her grandparents lived. Zita's grandmother spoke with gratitude about the Slovak Republic during the war, because due to the war their family was better off. As a young girl, the grandma had been a servant for a Jewish family. But she had never spoken what had happened to the Jews during the war.

Zita meets her older friend Soňa who owns a small cottage in the village. Soňa is still very active and establishes a song circle in the local church. Zita tries to help her, nevertheless is disappointed when Soňa hesitates to accept two Gypsy women into the circle.

Later Zita finds notes and letters of Mária (Marika), a young Slovak girl who was a servant of the Zöllner family. She learns that the whole family was deported in 1943. Immediately after their departure, the Slovak village mayor began to confiscate (to steal) property in the house and ordered Marika to disappear. Marika could only save Ms. Zöllner's painting and her papers. At the end of the war, Marika found out, that both spouses were killed by Germans in Hungary in 1945. She took the suitcase with the portrait and papers in the house where she was staying and where now Zita lives.

Marika's naive notes show a contrast to the almost racist mentality of most of the villagers:

The Jews are taken and slaughtered. I don't know the reason. I went to confession and cried. The parish priest said I don't need to be afraid, it doesn't concern us Catholics. And what have the Jews perpetrated? Allegedly, they let Christ be crucified. And just right now, somebody remembers it? The parish priest sighed and absolved me. I think, he was sad too. (p. 123)

At the end of the novel, a certain reconciliation is brought into play. Zita makes up with Soňa and the Gypsy women remain in the circle for the time being. Zita begins to get used to village life.

Main Topics and Problems

The novel was inspired by the book interview with Agneša Kalinová who came from a affluent Jewish family in Slovakia and was hiding in a monastery during World War II (Juráňová, 2012). Similar to other Jana Juráňová's works, *A Pending Matter* is centred

on the stories of women, Zita, Soňa, Marika, Dita and her women friends, even the cat is female. The men, Zita's unnamed husband and her son Peter or Dita's husband Ti-bor, play only minor roles. Nevertheless, a feminist rhetoric in the novel can't be found. Women are not oppressed or manipulated by men and gender stereotypes are not argued against. The plot is based on a secret, the portrait of a unknown woman, found by chance. The narrator Zita is attracted to the picture, and her life is interwoven with the life of the portrayed woman (Zita – Dita). The mystery is gradually solved and explained. In this sense *A Pending Matter* has a romantic plot.

In a deeper meaning, it is a story about memory and forgetting. The woman in the painting represents the world of the educated and cultivated Jews that does not exist anymore in contemporary Slovakia. The Jews were deported and killed, their property was stolen, their cemeteries were ravaged and synagogues ruined. They were displaced and forgotten by their former neighbours, the Slovaks. Zita, on the other hand, tries to reconstruct Dita's life and the whole seemingly forgotten world of the Jews. She finds support in Dita's letters and notes and also in a simple Slovak woman Mari-ka who didn't share prejudices against the Jews and saved mementos of them. Quotes from the *Book of Psalms* read by Zita also refer to this train of thought:

You made us retreat before the enemy,
and our adversaries have plundered us.
You gave us up to be devoured like sheep
and have scattered us among the nations. (Psalm 44, p. 102)

By confronting the lot of another woman, Zita ceases to deal with her own troubles. At the same time, she begins to better understand her life up to now and to consider her future.

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