

Slovak Identity in the Early 20th Century

by Frances Bathgate

Introduction

The following five poems were selected by the poet and literary commentator Michael Habaj. He was asked to select poems from early 20th century Slovak poetry which in some way dealt with the question of identity. The poems he has chosen represent an engaging and original view on the question of identity explored through dynamic tensions between home and abroad, similarity and difference, tradition and dislocation found in the poems.

The first 30 years of the 20th century was a crucial period in the history of the Slovak people. The end of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the creation of the first Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938) meant for Slovaks participation in a stable parliamentary democracy with Czech and Slovak as official languages. This brought about a great burst of creative energy in all areas of cultural and artistic life. The long period of struggle for basic democratic rights and against varying degrees of suppression in public life was now to some extent over for the Slovak population.

However, even after the formation of the first Czechoslovak Republic, emigration still played a role in the Slovak experience whether to the New World or within the borders of Czechoslovakia. Emigration from home to escape poverty and in search of work was a feature of Slovak life from the mid-19th century until the Second World War. From 1840 -1918 it is estimated that 500 000 Slovaks emigrated to the United States alone. The experience of leaving home, remembering home and returning home is reflected in the choice of poems made by Michal Habaj. In these poems the experience of leaving home both results in a intense and passionate reappraisal of what home means to the poet, and in some cases there is also a sense of dislocation from those who remained.

The poems are presented here both in the original Slovak and in English translation. Michal Habaj has provided a brief biography to each poet placing them within the wider context of the development of Slovak literature and including significant biographical details and major published works.

Interpretations of each poem have been provided by a group of Slovak adults who read through and discussed each poem, commenting on the significance and meaning of each poem for them personally.

IVAN KRASKO

OTCOVA ROĽA

(Verše, 1912)

Pokojný večer na vršky padal,
na sivé polia.

V poslednom lúči starootcovská
horela roľa.

Z cudziny tulák kročil som na ňu
bázlivou nohou.

Slnko jak koráb v krvavých vodách
plá pod oblohou.

Strnište suché na vlhkých hrudách
pod nohou praská.

Zdá sa, že ktosi vedľa mňa kráča –
na čele vráska,

v láskavom oku akoby krotká
vyčitka nemá:

Prečo si nechal otcovskú pôdu?

Obrancu nemá!

Celý deň slnko, predsa je vlhká
otcovská roľa.

Stáletia tiekli poddaných slzy
na naše polia,

stáletia tiekli – nemôž` byť suchou

The Fields of My Father

(Poems, 1912)

A peaceful evening was falling on the hills,
and on the grey fields.

In the last ray the old man's
field burns.

As a traveller from abroad I stepped onto it
gingerly.

And the sun like a sailing ship in bloody waters
burns under the sky.

The dry stubble on damp clods
cracks underfoot.

It seems that someone is walking next to me,
his brow wrinkled,

in his kindly eye there seems to be
a quiet reproach:

Why did you leave your father's land?

It has no guardian.

Sun the whole day, and still the father's field is
damp,

For centuries, serfs' tears have been running
on our fields,

They have been flowing for centuries – a serf's
field

poddaných roľa,
darmo ich suší ohnivé slnko,
dnes ešte bolia.

Z cudziny tulák pod hruškou stál som
zotletou spola.

Poddaných krvou napitá pôda
domov ma volá ...

A v srdci stony robotných otcov
zreli mi v semä ...

Vyklíčia ešte zubále dračie

Z poddaných zeme?

can never be dry,
For nothing the firey sun dries them
today they still hurt.

As a traveller from abroad I stood under the
pear tree

that has half-dried.

The soil that is soaked with blood of the serfs
calls me home ...

And in my heart the groans of my hard-
working fathers

ripened into a seed ...

Will the dragon's teeth ever sprout from
the serfs' soil?

EMIL BOLESLAV LUKÁČ

LIST NA LIST

(Dunaj a Seina, 1925)

„Už u nás, Drahý, ošarpané stoja stromy!“

Tak píšeš mi. Aj tu sú ošarpané.

„Obloha čierna skazonosné slzy roní!“

Tak sťažuješ si. I tu ťažká krupaj kanie.

Niet rozdielu. I tu „v rov klesli kvety“,
V záhrade Luxembourgskej zvädlá ruža leží,
polámané sú astry, zablatené margaréty,
ver, Drahá, dnes či zajtra i tu iste sneží.

„Už u nás – píšeš – ošarpané stoja stromy,
vetrisko urputne chichoce svoje: Hahá.“

V Paríži práve tak, jak kdesi na Pohroní,
jednako ošarpané stoja stromy, Drahá!

Leaf Upon Leaf

(Danube and Seine, 1925)

‘At home, dear, the trees already stand bare!’

That is what you write to me. And here they
are shabby too.

‘The black sky sheds tears of destruction!’
So you complain. And here the hard rain falls
too.

There is no difference. Here also, ‘the flowers
bow over the grave’,
in the Luxembourg gardens a withered rose
lies,

the broken asters, the muddy marguerites,

believe me, Dear, today or tomorrow here it
snows the same.

‘At home – you wrote – the trees are already
shabby,
the howling wind stubbornly laughs its: Ha!
Ha!’

In Paris just the same, like somewhere along
the Hron,

It is all the same where the trees stand bare,
Dear!

JÁN SMREK

PIESEŇ MÁRNOTRATNÉHO SYNA

(Zrno, 1935)

Na bosé podošvy nôh

páli ma teplá hlina.

Temperatúra môjho srdca

stúpa k nebesiam.

Hreje ma matka zem

na svojej hrudi,

márnotratného svojho syna

horúcim víta bozkom.

Líce moje sa zardelo.

Neviem, či pod dotykom voľnosti

a či snáď zahanbením.

Lebo som tulák.

Sotva raz do roka na svoju hrud'

stačí ma privinúť

zem, matka večne verná.

The Song of the Ungrateful Son

(Corn, 1935)

Warm clay burns

the bare soles of my feet.

The temperature of my heart

Is rising to the heavens.

Mother Earth warms me

on her breast,

welcomes her ungrateful son

with a fevered kiss.

My cheek has gone red,

I don't know whether from the touch

of freedom or because of shame.

Because I am a wanderer.

Hardly once a year, it is enough

to be welcomed into her arms,

earth, ever faithful mother.

LACO NOVOMESKÝ

DOJEM

(Svätý za dedinou, 1939)

„Kde si bol všade? V Louvri, v Notre Dame,
štrnásť júl si videl, keď na bulvároch plesá,
a jeseň na chodníkoch Boulongského lesa?
Ach, z Paríža máš iste dojmy nevídané.“

„Mám. V Clignancourtskej krčme na terase
raz vietor bláznivý mi privial na stôl lístie,
červenalo sa, chudiatko, a bolo také isté,
aké sa v stromoch u nás pri kaplnke trasie.“

Impression

(The Saint from the Village, 1939)

‘Which places have you been to? The Louvre,
Notre Dame,
you saw the fourteenth of July, when there is
dancing in the boulevards,
and autumn on the paths of the Bois de
Boulogne?
Ah, you must have amazing impressions of
Paris.’

‘Yes, I have. Once in the Clignancourt pub on
the terrace,
the foolish wind blew leaves onto my table,
it blushed, the poor thing, and they were
exactly the same
as those on the trees at home next to the
chapel.’

JÁN KOSTRA

MOJA RODNÁ

(Moja rodná, 1939)

Zachcelo sa mi zrazu šepkať slová:

Moja rodná.

Ej, zablúdili sme, zablúdili

V krtisku bolestí a smútkov,

d'alekým mestám vyznávali lásku

a bledým kráskam posielali verše

v poryvoch vetra, ktorý zrážal listy

prastarej jari.

A ty si zatiaľ vyčkávala na mňa,

ty verná rodná hruda kamenistá,

pás poľa zemiakového,

pokorný ovsík chudoby,

trnka na medzi,

šíp,

nepoddajný strážca krehkej nádhery

slepej ruže.

A ty si zatiaľ vyčkávala na mňa,

šatôčku vyšivala

v pokornej pýche svojej panenskej,

My Homeland

(My Homeland, 1935)

Suddenly I felt like whispering the words:

My homeland.

Oh, we went astray, went astray

in the tunnels of pain and grief,

we declared our love to distant towns

and sent verses to pale beauties

in gusts of wind, which blew down the leaves

of ancient spring.

In the meantime you waited for me,

you faithful stoney piece of native land,

patch of potato field,

humble oaths of the poor,

a sloe on the furrow,

rosehip bush,

untameable guardian of the frail beauty

of the blind rose.

In the meantime you waited for me

and you sewed a handkerchief

in your humble virgin's pride,

ty, ktorá nepoznala si dosiaľ chvály
milencových úst.

you, who hadn't known the praise
of a lover's mouth.

Ty bosá kráľovná moja,
pastierka jahniat najbelších,
svätica slnkom opálená,
práčka podkasaná
na brehoch najsladších vôd.

You my barefoot queen,
shepherdess of the whitest lambs
a saint burnt by the sun,
a washer woman with her skirts hitched up,
on the banks of the sweetest waters.

Vidím ťa
Na prahu domova.
Oheň praská v kozube západu
a iskry sršia po nebesách.
Spiežovce oviec vyhrávajú
a tichnu pod krídlom spánku.
Pod krídlom spánku tichnu
operence drobné
v jamkách mäkkých hniezd,
len ty máš dlane na nich,
na očiach,
vyštípaných túžbou
a čakaním.

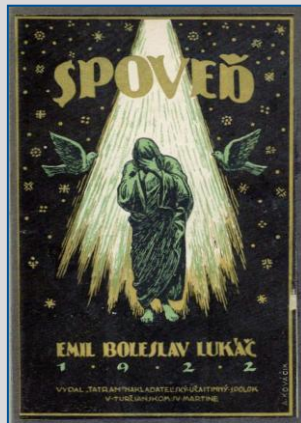
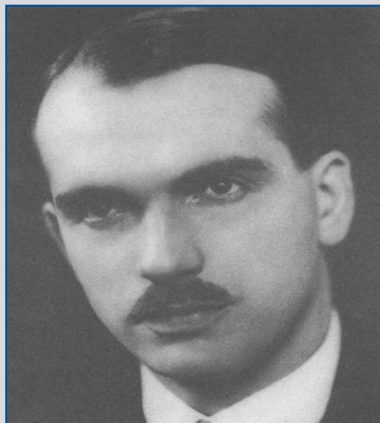
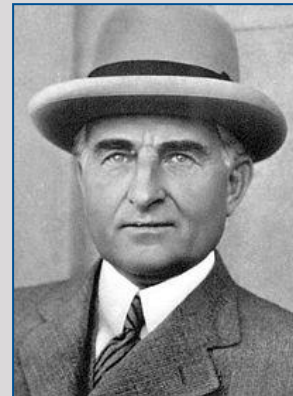
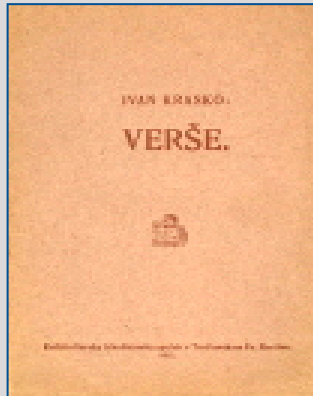
I see you
on the threshold of home.
Fire crackles in the fireplace of the west
and sparks glint in the sky.
The bells of the sheep are ringing
and fall silent under the wings of sleep.
Under the wings of the sleep
little birds fall silent
in the holes of soft nests,
only your palms are on them,
on their eyes,
that have been burnt by desire
and waiting.

Zhadzujem na prah mošnu žobrácku,
palicu lámem, družku blúdení,
a padám tvárou v lono trávnaté:
Moja rodná.

I throw my begger's sack over the threshold,
snap my stick, companion on my travels,
And I fall on my face in your grassy lap:
My homeland.

Biographies

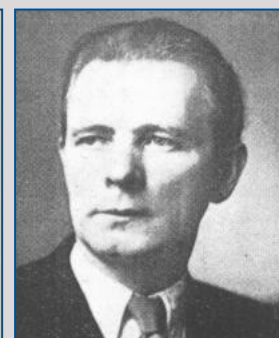
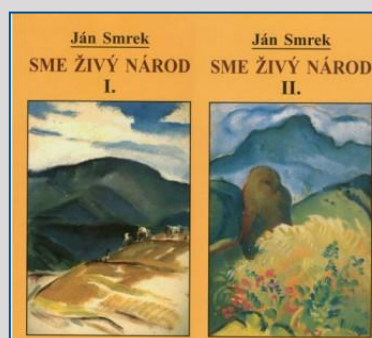
KRASKO, Ivan (1876-1958). Real name Ján Botto. Poet, novelist, translator. A major figure in the formation of modern Slovak poetry, the leader of the Slovak modernism and Slovak symbolism from the beginning the 20th century. He published two poetry collections *Nox et solitudo* (1909) a *Verše* (*Poetry*) (1912).



LUKÁČ, Emil Boleslav (1900-1979). Poet, translator and editor. A representative of neosymbolism in the 1920's, a poet whose work portrays the tragic sense of life, pessimism and dolorism. In 1940, he founded the magazine *Tvorba* (*Creation*), and also edited several other literary journals. He published the following collections of poetry: *Spoved'* (*Confessions*) (1922), *Dunaj a Seina* (*The Danube and Seine*) (1925), *Hymny k sláve*

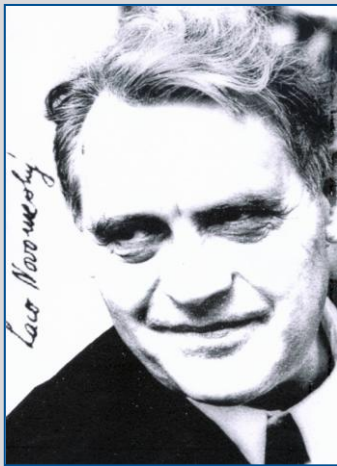
Hosudarovej (*Hymns to the Glory of the Great Leaders/ Hosudarovej*) (1926), *O láske neláskavej* (*O Unkind Love*) (1928), *Križovatky* (*Crossroads*) (1929), *Spev vlkov* (*The Song of Wolves*) (1929), *Elixir* (1934), *Moloch* (1938), *Babel* (1944). After a period of silence enforced by the communist regime came the following collections *Hudba domova* (*Home Music*) (1965), *Óda na poslednú a prvú* (*Ode to the Last and First*) (1967), *Parížske romance* (*Paris Romance*) (1969) and *Srdce pod Kaukazom* (*The Heart beneath the Caucasus Mountains*) (1978).

SMREK, Ján (1898 – 1982). Real name Ján Čietek (1898-1982). Poet, translator and editor. The leading representative of Slovak vitalism, poet of the positive life force of youth, optimism, freedom and humanity, a leading figure in the cultural and literary life of Slovakia in the interwar period. From 1930 to 1939 he lived in Prague, where he founded the



monthly magazine of literature and art *Elán* edited by young Slovak artists (EMSA). After the coup in 1948, he fell from grace and devoted his time to translation and writing for children. His collection *Cválajúce dni* (*Galloping Days*) (1925) marks a breakthrough in the Slovak lyric tradition. Other works

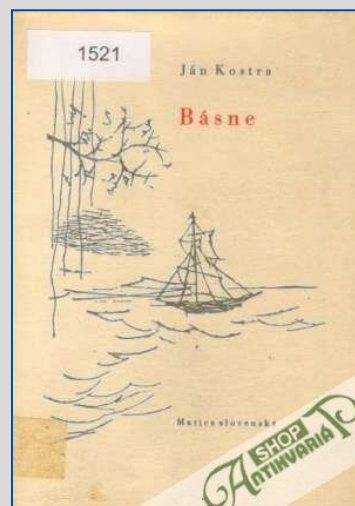
include: *Odsúdený k večitej žízni* (*Sentenced to Secular Thirst*) (1922), *Božské uzly* (*Divine Nodes*) (1929), *Iba oči* (*Only the Eyes*) (1933), *Básnik a žena* (*The Poet and a Woman*) (1934), *Zrno* (*Corn*) (1935), *Hostina* (*Feast*) (1944), *Studňa* (*Well*) (1945), *Obráz sveta* (*Images of the World*) (1958) *Struny* (*Strings*) (1962) *Nerušte moje kruhy* (*Do not Disturb My Rings*) (1965). In addition to these, are selections based on Smrek's unpublished poetry, the most important of which is *Proti noci* *Against the Night* (1993) which contains poems from the years of the communist dictatorship from 1948 to 1956.



NOVOMESKÝ, Ladislav (1904-1976). Poet, writer, journalist, politician. The most important representative of the left-wing avant-garde connected with the literary and political magazine DAV. One of the initiators and founders of modern Slovak poetry, a major Slovak left-wing intellectual. He published the following poetry collections *Nedeľa* (*Sunday*) (1927), *Romboid* (1932), *Otvorené okná* (*Open Windows*) (1935), *Svätý za dedinou* (*The Saint from the*

Village) (1939), *Pašovanou ceruzkou* (*Smuggling in Pencil*) (1948). He held several important political functions. In 1950 he was accused of bourgeois nationalism and in a show trial was sentenced to 10 years, and later conditionally released. After his political rehabilitation in 1963 came the collection *Vila Tereza* (*Villa Teresa*) (1963), *Do mesta 30 min.* (*To Town 30 min.*) (1963), *Stamodtiaľ a iné* (*Stamodtiaľ and Others*) (1964), *Nezbadaný svet* (*Unnoticed World*) (1964), *Dom, kde žijem* (*The House, Where I Live*) (1967).

KOSTRA, Ján (1910 – 1975). Poet, translator. A member of the literary circle R-10, a group of progressively-oriented Slovak university students in Prague. He published collections of poems *Hniezda* (*Nests*) (1937), *Moja rodná* (*My Home*) (1939), *Ozubný čas* (*Toothed Time*) (1940), *Puknutá váza* (*Cracked Vase*) (1942), *Všetko je dobre tak* (*Everything is Good as It Is*) (1942), *Ave Eva* (1943), his sorrow (1946), *Na Stalina*



(*Regarding Stalin*) (1950) *Za ten máj* (*For That May*) (1950) *Javorový list* (*Maple Leaf*) (1953), *Šípky a slnečnice* (*Darts and Sunflowers*) (1958), *Báseň, dielo tvoje* (*Poem, Your Work*) (1960), *Každý deň* (*Every Day*) (1964), *Len raz* (*Only Once*) (1968), *Prvé a posledné* (*First and Last*) (1977).

Interpretations

Ivan Krasko – The Fields of My Father

This poem is the most widely known. It was studied, analysed and often memorised at school, as it still is today.

Ivan Krasko was born into a farming family and as a young man moved to Prague. The poem depicts the feelings and thoughts of a son on returning to the land his father and forefathers worked on. National identity is closely bound up with the relationship to the soil and the passing on of its ownership from father to son. The hard and bitter conditions the Slovak serf and farmer lived under are depicted in the blood and tears the land is soaked in. The poet is brought into confrontation with his heritage on returning to the land and the poem can be seen as a protest against the conditions he finds there. The final question in contrast to the gentle reproach of the father contains within it a questioning call or expression of hope for resistance by the down-trodden farmers with its reference to the sowing of dragon's teeth in Greek mythology from which sprang armed warriors.

Emil Boleslav Lúkač – Leaf Upon Leaf

Emil Boleslav Lúkač is a poet studied in less depth at school. Younger adults remember studying his poetry at school, older adults did not and this particular poem was not known by the adults asked.

The title contains a play on words in Slovak and could also be translated as 'Letter Upon Letter'. Lúkač studied in Paris from 1922-1924 and the poem depicts the internal monologue of a Slovak man living in Paris in response to the letters from home from his girlfriend. In the poem parts of the woman's letters are cited which describe in florid terms the late autumn landscape at home, and the young man in response describes the autumn scenes in Paris in more pragmatic but rather more desolate terms. The landscape has been stripped bare, the suggestion is that ideals have been lost and everywhere is the same for the young man.

Ján Smrek – The Song of the Ungrateful Son

Ján Smrek is a popular and well-loved poet, known to the group not just from study at school but also from their own, personal reading. His sensuous love poetry in particular has been widely read. Although members of the group were not familiar with *The Song of the Ungrateful Son*, it was considered to be representative of his work.

This poem was written whilst the poet was living in Prague. The lyrical poem depicts feverish feelings of both guilt and joy on the poet's return to his homeland, which is represented as a nurturing mother-figure welcoming the son with unconditional love. The feelings in the poem are centred in the body and transmitted through the touch of the soil and sun.

Ladislav Novomeský – Impression

Ladislav Novomeský is another poet remembered from school.

The poem **Impression** consists of two verses and two voices in the form of question and answer. The questioner asks about the traveller's experiences in Paris and in doing so describes

typical or conventional and well-known sights that someone would be expected to see on a visit to Paris – The Louvre, Notre Dame, the Bois de Boulogne. In the traveller's answer he describes a seemingly trivial moment as his greatest impression – the sight of the wind blowing leaves over the table in a pub. The significance of the moment being the striking similarity with leaves of home. The charm of the poem comes from the clash of the questioner's innocence and the traveller's experience, the conversational tone of the eager questioner and the strangely animated and emotional response.

Ján Kostro – My Homeland

Ján Kostro was another poet whose works were not just studied at school but whose works were read and enjoyed in later life as well. Some members of the group were familiar with the poem *My Homeland* and all appreciated the poem's emotional intensity in its description of 'that stoney piece of native land'.

My Homeland depicts the joyful and ecstatic feelings evoked by returning home after being away in the city. The nurturing, wholesome aspect of home is presented through its personification as a village girl – innocent, beautiful, caring and closely bound with the natural world which as it is described in the poem bursts with a mysterious and vivid life-force. The sunburnt, barefoot village girl contrasts with the 'pale beauties' of the city. The poet on his return is so grateful to be home that he falls down to kiss the earth.

Acknowledgements

Poems selected and biographies written by Michal Habaj – writer and literary scholar at the Slovak Institute for Literature. His collections of poetry include: *Básne pre mŕtve dievčatá (Poems for Dead Girls)*(2004). Under the gynonymom *Anna Snegina Pas de deux*(2003) and *Básne z pozostalosti (Poems from Inheritance)* (2009). He is also the auther of the theoretical work *Druhá moderna (A Second Modernity)* (2007).

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