



**SHORTLISTED FOR THE TOP CZECH LITERARY
AWARD (2024)**

A European Woman

Great history is intertwined here with the fate of one man

by **Alexey Sevruck**

September 2023, 400 pages

The strongest voice of contemporary Czech literature

RIGHTS SOLD TO: Poland (Amaltea)

„The reader is caught up in the powerful flow of the plot, and perhaps here and there recalls the classic Issac Bashevis Singer or the contempo„The reader is caught up in the powerful flow of the plot, and perhaps here and there recalls the classic Issac Bashevis Singer or the contemporary star Guzela Yachyna. The strongest voice of contemporary Czech literature is this book by a young Czech-Ukrainian author. “

– Jáchym Topol

This novel captures the fractured, flickering and ambiguous image of a Ukrainian province – the Polesia region – through the memories of an elderly woman. The narrator, Maria, was born to a Ukrainian peasant mother and a Czech prisoner of war. Her chronicle, composed of powerful images and fragmentary stories, follows the fate of the central family and various other characters and figures who make up a colourful mosaic of life in the Zhytomyr Oblast from the 1920s to the present day. The narrative canvas is partly tattered, burnt and therefore incomplete, splintering into smaller, more personal stories, brutally interrupted by the dramatic arcs of Eastern Europe.

Alexey Sevruk (*1983 in Kiev, Ukraine) is a poet, novelist, journalist and translator. He has lived in the Czech Republic since the age of twelve, having moved there with his parents as part of the government's programme to repatriate Volhynian Czechs and their relatives. He studied Ukrainian and Slavonic studies at the Faculty of Philosophy of Charles University. He has translated the works of Yurii Andrukhovych and Serhiy Zhadan into Czech and Patrik Ouředník's experimental prose *Europeana* into Ukrainian. As the editor-in-chief of a literary monthly, he has also written for several domestic and foreign journals, magazines and anthologies. He works as an archivist at the Museum of Czech Literature.

English summary of the book

It is well known that it is usually women who preserve memory, whether it be family, historical, or personal memory. Preserving and passing on stories is often credited as the evolutionary reason women live longer than men. And so Marija tells her story.

She recounts growing up on a secluded farm in Ukraine, where remote dwellings were abundant in the good old days. She talks about her parents—her mother, a simple peasant woman who was robbed of man after man by the war and who was ultimately left to fend for herself, and her father, a worker from Beroun who spent his life toiling away at a cement factory and experiencing the massacres of war. She talks about her husband and their marriage, which—despite having its bright moments—resembled walking the razor's edge, about her children, neighbors, her immediate and extended family. Here and there, she shares a little bit about herself.

Throughout the book, Marija's narrative is interwoven with great historical events and the tragic history of a nation that was supposed to be long gone but managed to beat the odds. The history of twentieth-century Ukraine told from the perspective of the working class leaves no doubt that the story takes place in one of Snyder's Bloodlands. A lost struggle for independence. Ukraine's first famine (the one before things got even worse and people had to start surrendering their bread). Collectivization, which resulted in land being taken away from the peasants who had tended it for centuries. The second famine, which had people dropping like flies—people would sit down in the middle of the street and never get up again (if they were lucky, they hadn't gone mad and eaten their own children first). World War II, which had that moron Hitler believing he could break people who had experienced Stalin. The Holocaust. Post-war famine and everyday life in Soviet Ukraine. The Chernobyl explosion and perestroika, and finally, long-awaited independence followed by emigration. The narrative, which brings all these experiences together—out of order,

in fragments, circling back to some repeatedly—undoubtedly reflects the experience of the rest of Europe as well, though the experiences can be projected differently into the historical memory of each nation.

Who is the European woman the novel's title refers to? At times, her identity may seem to crumble under layers upon layers of labels put on her by the others. The unwanted "German bastard" at the beginning of her life, the equally unwanted old emigrant at the end. A Czechoslovak, a "Russki," a Ukrainian. But these labels don't mean much to the main character—all she cares about is that she knows who she is and where she belongs. She knows what's important in life and has incredible patience with everyone around her. The novel pays homage to all Ukrainian women, who quietly defied the tough times they lived in, women who passed on fascinating stories that were supposed to be erased from memory, women who are still passing them on today to the younger generations, sharing their insight into how to survive.

Alexey Sevruck

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