



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

A European Woman

Great history is intertwined here with the fate of one man

by **Alexey Sevruk**

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 Sevruk

English sample of the book

Translated by Graeme Dibble

We once had this pig we nearly couldn't bring ourselves to kill. A right jolly little porker, he was. What was his name again? Snowy? Or Fluffy? A lovely clean, white pig. We had him for quite a long time, and that was the problem. Not because we'd got used to him or developed a soft spot for him, God forbid. I mean, how can you fall in love with something you're going to eat afterwards? That'd be a recipe for disaster. Though there was an element of that as well. You get used to that little face looking up at you, don't you? But somehow we missed the right moment, that window of opportunity when we could still have slaughtered him easily enough. I can't even remember why, if it was because of a fast that had started earlier than usual, so the timing was no good, or if Ivan was away somewhere getting treatment, maybe at a spa. Anyway, that little porker was already well over two metres long and still

growing. We put off slaughtering him and then Ivan was reluctant to get down to it. He just kept putting it off. But at the same time he couldn't stop thinking about it, wherever he was, literally day and night. He lay there with his eyes open, and when he saw I was watching, he asked me:

Marie, how are we going to stick that pig?

How do you think, I said, the usual way. I'll calm him down, keep him quiet, we'll both pin him down and you'll stab him through the heart, like you always do.

And that's what we did. We hadn't fed him the day before, so it was easy to lure him out. He'd already taken a shine to me, because it was me who brought him his food and looked after him. He basked in the sunshine, grunting with satisfaction as I scratched his back and behind his ears. That pig didn't suspect a thing, except maybe that he was hungry, but he knew he'd get food from me. In the meantime, there was water boiling in the summer kitchen and tools for butchering lying washed and ready on the wooden table – long, sharp knives, a scrubbed-out washtub, containers for the blood and innards. Your granddad whetted a long, sharp barb that we call a shvayka. So that pig was just lying there on its right side, blissfully unaware, soothed by the scratching, and blinking in the spring sunshine. Me and your grandpa pinned him down, sitting astride him, and when I gave him the signal we'd agreed on, Ivan thrust that spike right into the animal's heart. It wasn't the first time he'd done it – after all, he knew a thing or two about husbandry. But this pig was awfully overweight and also tremendously strong. He must have lifted the two of us up a metre into the air, and for a moment I thought we were done for, that he was about to turn on us and rip us apart like two frogs or simply suffocate us under his weight. But the pig sank to the ground and then just twitched feebly. His cry grew weaker until he finally fell silent. They scream blue murder when you kill them. That loud squeal of theirs, full of animal desperation, that's unmistakable. It can be heard far and wide, and then you know: Aha, someone's slaughtering a pig, there's probably going to be a feast. And then you put two and two together: the Palamarenkos are about to marry off their daughter or the Svintsitskis' kids are here from the city or old Fedya Kuksa has died or the neighbours are just getting ready for Christmas. After that cry

has faded away, the smell of burnt hair usually drifts through the air. The pig has to be singed all over. These days it's normally done with a blowtorch, but we still did it the old-fashioned way, using straw. Then the lard doesn't stink of diesel and instead it has a nice smell of burnt straw. Dry, clean straw burns well and singes off all the hairs. It gives the pig that dark brown, smoky colour. That still needs to be scraped off using long, sharp knives while it's still warm and then rinsed in boiling water. After that treatment, the pig glows like a freshly washed baby. And you end up with enough pork to see you through a good six months.

But what was worse than that squealing before he died, a sound that's guaranteed to set your heart racing and all the dogs in the neighbourhood barking, was the look in his eye. At the very moment that the spike went into his heart, that pig looked right at me, but in a way that seemed almost human. I could see in that look how surprised that hog was, how it had suddenly dawned on him that I had betrayed him and sentenced him to death. That he'd been too trusting and in a moment would surely die. He would meet his death at the hands of those who had looked after him for years. And now they'd slyly stabbed him in the heart. So it just shows you how even animals can sometimes act a lot like people. While all too often people behave like animals. I suppose it's a sign of the times. Everything's all topsy-turvy and you don't know which way is up.

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In the past things were different than they are now. These days we've got everything. Water from a tap, meat from a shop, electric lighting, gas right there in your kitchen. In the past, when you needed meat, you had to slaughter a pig, and before that you had to rear it and fatten it up, boil up potatoes you'd grown in your garden, chop up nettles you'd picked in a meadow or wasteland so that little piggy would get its vitamins, eh? Nettles or beet leaves or some other leafy greens. The boiled potatoes had to be mashed in a bucket, and then the chopped nettles got mixed in along with a bit of bran. And if you hadn't grown any grain, rye or wheat, then the bran had to be bought or bartered. And then there was the stale bread – a pig goes through a lot of that. And that's how you produced meat, that's how you produced lard. Not like these days. You go to a shop, tell them what you need, pay for it, and that's that.

After your grandpa died, I stopped keeping pigs. It was too much for me. And there was no need for me to do it. I could go to the market any time – if it was market day, that is – and buy whatever I wanted. And I didn't want all that much. I said to the kids: You want meat? Then take care of it yourselves, I've had enough, I've had my fill of it. Chickens, geese, ducks, goats, pigs, cows – I've had it up to here with them. I can't abide them, can't bear to look at them or smell them. If you bring me something, then you're going to take care of it too. But who's going to come here from the likes of Kyiv or Zhytomyr, eh? So when they were planning the wake for Grandpa Ivan, your father came and so did your uncles and they helped slaughter the last pig. Potapchik was his name – a right jolly little pig, he was. What didn't get eaten, the kids divvied up among themselves. After all, homemade's better than shop-bought. You know exactly what that pig was fed on. Not like the stuff from the store.

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I remember when my oldest sister, Nastunya, got married. I must have been about four years old. It was summer, sometime before the Petrine fast. People didn't get married during the fast, it wouldn't have been much of a wedding feast, eh, it's not the same without meat. And the dishes they used to make! These days they never have such elaborate food. All sorts of roulades, a hundred different kinds of smoked meat, the finest ham, chicken thighs, meat in aspic, mmm! The heat was punishing – July, summer, getting on for harvest time. And just imagine what a wedding's like on a remote farm. You have to invite the neighbours and be sure not to leave anyone out – that wouldn't do at all. Relatives used to congregate all the way from neighbouring povity in horse-drawn carriages with their whole families, their children and their old folks, as long as they weren't too frail, bearing gifts and dressed in their Sunday best. Women in pretty frocks, men in black suits, quite a few of them wearing embroidered shirts or traditional garb. Oh no, these days people don't know how to dress the way they did in the past. They don't have that flair.

With that army of people coming to celebrate the wedding, the cooking would start weeks in advance. The aspic was made in a washtub. We had one of those big

wooden tubs which you'd put in the outdoor cellar where it was nice and cool, packed in ice. The ice was collected from the pond in winter, on the feast of Jordan, when the water is blessed for the Baptism of the Lord. A hole was cut in the ice – sometimes in the shape of a cross, but under the communists no-one wanted to risk that. The water was blessed by a priest and then people would wash in it: girls washed their faces so they would be beautiful and the boys would like them, and boys could even bathe in that icy water, if they felt up to it, so they'd have strength for the coming year. People took it home so they could wash in it. And ice was collected then as well, in great big blocks, and taken round the cottages by cart, and it was wrapped in straw and put in the outdoor cellars: a layer of ice and then a layer of straw so it would survive even the hottest days of the year, which are usually around the feasts of Saints Peter and Paul. Nowadays you've got fridge-freezers, but in the past there was none of that, oh no. You had to see to everything yourself. If you wanted aspic in summer, and for it to last and not go off, then you had to stock up on ice.

Oh, and I almost got eaten by a horse back then, have I told you about that? A huge stallion it was, a bay with a shiny coat. The horses were usually turned out and left to graze and people would sleep on the carts – on the carts, under the carts, it just depended how big a cart you had and how big your family was. Houses were small, so where would you put all those people? Well now, I was about four years old and somehow I'd wandered into the stables and up to the manger. Good Lord, since then I've come close to death countless times in my life and God only knows why He's kept me around. When I was a little girl, I almost drowned several times. Once near the edge of the pond – I'd already lost consciousness. It was my godmother who saved me. She grabbed me by the hair and pulled me onto the bank. One time I got caught in an eddy and only just managed to swim out again. The pond ended in a dam with an earthen embankment that you could walk or even drive across. Water drained out at the bottom of the embankment. And it churned wildly in the pond in front of the embankment. The water there seethed as if it was boiling, and that was precisely where the current dragged everything that crossed its path. Several people had drowned there. I was a fairly strong swimmer, but I was still just a little girl. I

overestimated my own strength, got too close to that spot and suddenly felt it pulling me in. I must have been struggling for at least an hour before I made it to the shore, utterly exhausted...

One time I got lost on the way to our farm. Another time I had a high fever and my parents thought I was a goner and just prayed. Various soldiers have pointed their weapons at me. I've walked across a mine field. I've hidden a Jewish woman from Vlasov's lot and a German woman from the Reds. Twelve bombs fell on our garden during the war – it was like a chess game, and the front line passed through here at least eight times. Over where Mala Zhytomyrska is, which then became Lomonosova, our lot advanced, across that meadow at the back of the garden, following the Cherche – and that stream was properly swollen back then. Along our street towards Velyka Zhytomyrska, which was probably Leninova again by then. And from the other side, by the waterworks past Velyka Zhytomyrska, the Germans had dug in and were firing in this direction. Our lot would force them back, the Germans would push forwards again, and so it went on at least eight times. There was nothing for it but to hide in the outdoor cellar and wait. And hope the roof wouldn't get set alight by a katyusha rocket.

But that stallion, that was my first brush with death that made an impression on me. It was seared into my memory as a child. That terrible look in his eye, all bloodshot as he whinnied, reaching out for me with his big mouth full of crooked, yellow teeth the length of nails. With those teeth he would have bitten my head off as if it was nothing, cracked it open like a nut with a loud crunch. I just froze and waited, too terrified to move. I suppose I must have got in his way or something, stallions like that are unpredictable and awfully aggressive. That's why they get castrated. It makes them placid and more useful around the farm. Poor beasts... A bloke, one of the guests who just happened to be there, came running up and drove that bay off. He took a drawbar to him – one of those wooden bars from a cart that you hitch a horse to, what we would call a dyshlo – and gave him a thrashing with that bar, wouldn't let him hurt me, and then he took me to my mum and gave her a right earful for leaving me unsupervised, a little kid like that. But my mum didn't see it that way.

She had half a dozen of us, and I was the youngest, and a bastard at that. One child more or less – what did it matter? Back then nobody fussed over children the way they do now. The death of a child – that was just unfortunate. Like the death of any other farm animal. Like the death of a cow, say. So many injuries, accidents and illnesses and no medicine, no vaccinations. That's why people made sure to have as many children as possible. They helped them with the work around the farm from a young age. The truly unfortunate thing was when a woman couldn't have children. Then the couple would often take in a child from a big family that was poor, usually some relatives of theirs. They would adopt it as their own. For the most part, the original parents were glad – the child got better care and was looked after better than at home. Everybody got something out of it, so everyone was happy.

I remember stepping on a dry branch from a pear tree. There were sharp thorns on it and, needless to say, I used to walk around barefoot all summer long, probably up until I started school. I've still got a lump there, at the base of the big toe on my left foot. My father bundled me onto a cart, hitched up the horses and drove me off to Radomyshl to see the doctor. My foot swelled up something awful, it hurt like hell, I couldn't walk and I got a fever as well. And someone had told my father it was a good idea to put the flesh of a frog on it. So the whole way there my father kept catching frogs, pulling them apart with his bare hands and putting them on the wound. I don't know if it helped – looking back, I have my doubts.

But my father was nice to me, I suppose he must have been fond of me if he pulled frogs apart for my sake. I wouldn't touch a frog with a ten-foot pole – disgusting, filthy creatures. We were fond of each other. There was a kind of bond between us – two outsiders against the rest of the family. Until I got angry with him when he left us and went off with some other woman. Widows were ten a penny back then. It hurt me to see him playing with someone else's children and not giving me so much as a second glance. He was probably under orders from his new wife, that's what I think now. Back then it just annoyed and offended me no end. So when I was sixteen, I took the surname of my mum's previous husband so I would have the same name as everyone else, so I would no longer be that Czech bastard. It was only later, when we were living in Radomyshl, that he started coming to see us again.

My husband, your grandpa Ivan, had no time for him. He used to call him “that Austrian”. Here comes that Austrian again. He paid a price for his defection, that’s the truth of it. They say that he who takes care of someone else’s children will die alone and destitute. In his case, that came true to the letter. He died after the war during the last famine and nobody gave him so much as a pint of water. Well, he wasn’t the only one. A lot of people died back then. Though not as many as in ’33. Back then it really was death on a mass scale. People swelled up with hunger – they were always gulping down water because it was the only thing to fill their bellies with. All that water made their skin crack. People just went around trying to get hold of a scrap of food. And once they got too weak, they would just sit down wherever they happened to be, in the middle of the road or under a hedge. And a moment later they were gone. People dropped like flies. In broad daylight. Dead bodies on the streets became something run-of-the-mill, so commonplace that nobody noticed them anymore. Special work crews took them away on carts and trucks and buried them in mass graves. It was horrible. That’s what Stalin did to us. Right enough, people used to sing: No cows left, no pigs at all, just Stalin’s picture on the wall. And after the patriotic war – it’s hard to say if it was Stalin’s fault, but it seems likely that it was – food was scarce. And my father bore the brunt of it back then. I don’t even have a photograph of him. That’s something I really regret.

Those photographs from Bohemia that survived, that was more like a miracle. Maybe my mum had hidden them away. Maybe they’d just got lodged somewhere, I don’t know. My father kept in touch with relatives from Beroun. One of my childhood memories: my father is sitting by the stove, tossing envelopes containing letters into the fire. And photographs. His hands are trembling. It’s cold outside, that’s why the stove is lit. The photographs shrivel up in the fire. Father looks scared and worried. He’s different from usual.

They’d summoned him to the GPU in Radomyshl. That’s what the KGB was called back then.

They said: So, Comrade Václav, you've been corresponding with an imperialist country? We can't have that. That's espionage, we've got laws about that. Here in the Soviet Union we punish espionage severely.

Someone must have reported him or something. One of the neighbours. The postman. Nothing got past them anyway. That's how it was back then. Sons informed on their fathers, mothers on their own daughters. He even changed his name. Before that he was Václav Janovich, because his father was called Jan. He took the name Vasiliy Ivanovich. Kept his own last name. I don't even know why he chose Vasiliy, given that Václav is Vyacheslav in Ukrainian. He probably felt it was more svoyske, more local, the kind of name that would sound right in a village. Vasyl and there's an end to it. Vasylko. A name straight out of the old Ukrainian chronicles, not like Václav.

He thought he'd burned everything. But then those photographs turned up, the ones we've got now. My father's sisters. With those fancy names they give people in the west.

Aunt Růžena. Aunt Antonína with her handsome husband, Mr Bydžovský. Little František, my cousin. I liked the look of him in that photo. I enjoyed imagining that somewhere far away in that imperialist country I had an older cousin, and such a good-looking one at that. I imagined meeting him. Introducing myself to him. I'm Marie, Václav's daughter. Well, I was young and foolish, I'd no idea he was no longer alive by then. He died not long after that photograph was taken – wasn't even fourteen, poor lad. Apparently he caught pneumonia when he was riding a bike. That's life. And I'd been dreaming of meeting a ghost. I'd never even stopped to wonder how I'd communicate with him. The few words I remembered from my father wouldn't have got me very far. These days I can more or less get by in Czech, but only by speaking slowly and using my fingers. And back then... One, two, three, four, five, once I caught a fish alive just wasn't going to cut it. Yep, that's what my father said when he was counting. He bent back his fingers and said out loud: One, two... Ukrainians don't count like that.

To me, all of them were ghosts from another world, faces in photos taken in a studio. Posh hairstyles, fashionable hats, gorgeous dresses that looked classy even in black-and- white photographs. Neatly pressed suits, bow ties and lace collars. Almost as if they were photos from somewhere in Paris and not Beroun... Even before the summons, my father didn't say much about his family. After that he didn't speak about them at all. And then he left. When the Germans retreated after the war, lots of people went with them. Especially policemen and collaborators. But also just those who had somewhere to go. In Radomyshl there were always a lot of Poles who still had relatives living in Poland. After all, in those days Poland basically began just past Zhytomyr. There are still some of them there.

I said to my father: What if we left too?

We were sitting in the kitchen – it was still in the old cottage that Ivan, your grandpa, had transported from Hluchov, the place where I was born.

And he just looked at me as if I'd said something really stupid and went: Daughter, you've no idea what the Czechs are like. You've no idea what they're like.

That stuck with me. I think that now we've moved here, I'm starting to understand what he meant. In any case it was a good decision, because as it turned out, Soviet counter- intelligence organized manhunts in Bohemia for those resettlers who had fled with the Germans. Interrogations, imprisonment, deportation, final destination: Siberia. And that was an end to it. You can't imagine what that was like and you wouldn't wish it on your worst enemy.

Then came the famine and my father died of malnutrition.

The Czechs that came here with Svoboda's army, that was something else. They were victors. But you know what they're like. Those old ladies that came here all the way from Litoměřice. Permed hair, lipstick, a ciggy on the balcony. They drank shots and sang dirty chastushka songs. At their age. And then all those katyusha and kalinka-malinka songs, all of that stuff. They swore like troopers – and in several languages as well. It was all kiss my arse this and kiss my arse that. A jolly bunch of

women, that's the truth of it. And they would laugh their heads off... They'd been through their own hell, they'd had a rough time too.

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