



© Inge Prader

Svetlana Žuchová – Slovakia

Obrazy zo života M. (2013)

Scenes from the Life of M.

Publishing House **Marenčin PT**

Biography

Svetlana Žuchová, born in 1976, studied psychology at Vienna University and medicine at the Medical Faculty of Comenius University in Bratislava. She works at a psychiatric clinic in Prague. Her stories have been published in journals including *Dotyky*, *Rak*, *Romboid*, *Vlna*, *OS* and the weekly *Slovo*. Twice she was awarded prizes at the annual short story competition *Povedka* (in 2001 and 2005) and her texts appeared in anthologies of works from this competition. Her first book was the story collection *Dulce de leche* (2003), for which she received the Ivan Krasko Prize. Next came the chamber novella *Yesim* (2006), set in the milieu of Turkish emigrants in Austria and based on the poetical narrative monologue of the principal character, the young woman Yesim, about the key events and circumstances of her life. In the novel *Zlodeji a svedkovia* (*Thieves and Witnesses*, 2011), the author continued to pursue her interest in the psychology of a person living away from home, and also explored relationships within immigrant communities. Her third novel, linked with its predecessor by the narrator and main character Marisia, is *Obrazy zo života M. (Scenes from the Life of M., 2013)*. All three novels were included in the final of the most important Slovak literary competition *Anasoft Litera* (2007, 2012 and 2014). Žuchová also translates fiction and non-fiction from English and German, including works by Michel Faber, Sarah Kane, Sophie Kinsella and Sabine Thiesler.

Synopsis

The plot of *Scenes from the Life of M.* loosely follows on from the writer's previous novel, *Thieves and Witnesses*. The main character, Marisia, returns from Vienna to Slovakia after her mother's death, lives with her partner and works as a nurse. While in the first novel, Marisia was looking for a home for herself, this novel shows her finding one. Descriptions of her everyday life alternate with memories of her mother's death, her mundane existence juxtaposed with the extremity of certain situations. The novel's main theme is one of family ties both old and new, close and distant, and their importance and futility.

Obrazy zo života M.

Svetlana Žuchová

Prázdnota

V deň, keď mama zomrela, som išla na kúpalisko. Mama zomrela nadránom a krátko pred siedmou mi volali z nemocnice. V tom období som chodievala každý víkend za mamou, a od piatku do nedele som spávala v jej prázdnom byte. Bolo to v čase, keď sa Janut odsťahoval. Od vzťahu s Janutom som si veľa sľubovala. S Janutom som chcela dospieť, pretože dospelosť ma veľmi zaujímala. Od rána do večera sme mali plné ruky práce na dospelosti. Predstavovala som si, že dospelosť pozostáva zo zariadenia bytu, z nájomnej zmluvy a z úspor na bankovom konte. Svoj záujem o dospelosť som si všimla v jedno víkendové popoludnie v Ikei. Predpokladá sa totiž, že človek si niečo uvedomí v istej konkrétnej chvíli. Napríklad jedna z Otových sestier mi raz povedala, že lásku svojho budúceho manžela si uvedomila, keď jej povedal, že s ňou chce mať dieťa. Janut zas tvrdil, že sa rozhodol nechodiť viac do práce, keď ho šéf zavolať do svojej kancelárie v maringotke. Vraj ho ani nevyzval, aby sa posadil, a Janut musel jeho nadávky počúvať postojacky. Nie som si istá, či je to pravda. Či si isté skutočnosti naozaj uvedomíme z okamihu na okamih. A niečo, čo sme dovtedy nevedeli, zrazu vieme. V presne ohraničenej chvíli. Je možné, že vedomie niečoho v nás skôr pomaly dozrieva a postupne sa dostáva stále bližšie k povrchu. A potom sa, zdanlivo náhle, stane viditeľným. A je rovnako možné, že okamihy uvedomenia v skutočnosti neexistujú, a vytvárajú

sa až spätne v spomienkach. Že postupné, pomalé tlenie sa skondenzuje do spomienky na chvíľu, keď sme si niečo uvedomili. Akoby náhle, z okamihu na okamih.

(...)

Keď Janut prestal chodiť do práce, navrhol, aby sme išli do Ikey. Nemáme síce ešte nájomnú zmluvu a pracovné povolenie, ale na začiatok si môžeme kúpiť aspoň novú posteľ. Súhlasila som a v jedno víkendové popoludnie sme sa vlakom odviezli do nákupného centra. Celý život som mala na nábytok vyhranený vkus. Vyrastala som so starou mamou v dome zariadenom ťažkým starožitným nábytkom. Pri stene v jedálni bol masívny kredenc. Nemali sme konferenčný stolík ani sedáciu súpravu s medovožltými poťahmi, ale jedá- lenský stôl a štyri ťažké stoličky. Rokmi práchniveli a vŕzgali, ale patrili kedysi ešte rodičom starej mamy, a tak sa z piety nesmeli nahradiť. Navyše sme mali na kobercoch porozkladané kožušiny, v ktorých sa držal prach. Okná domu boli obrátené na západ a popoludní jedáleň osvetľovalo agresívne slnečné svetlo, v ktorom vírili prachové čiastočky. Prachu bolo v našom dome vždy dosť. Usadzoval sa na nábytku, na porcelánových soškách v presklenej vitríne a v kožušinách, ktoré sa rokmi štiepili a spôsobovali alergie.

Vždy som bola presvedčená, že svoj byt si zariadim len niekoľkými kusmi ľahkého nábytku. Ušla som od mamy do prázdna, pretože prázdnotu som si veľmi vážila. Veď tam nič nemáš, hovorila mama, keď som si balila pár kusov oblečenia do ruksaku a deklarovala som, že odchádzam do Rakúska. Myslíš, že tam niekoho zaujímaš? Kde budeš bývať a čo budeš jesť? Varovala ma, že budem vo vzduchoprázdne a naletím podvodníkom. Vezmú ti pas, čo si to nečítala v

novinách? Sama som nedokázala pomenovať, že chcem práve to vzduchoprázdno. Predstavovala som si poloprázdne izby a v mojich predstavách boli okná vždy obrátené na východ. Žiadne zaprášené slnečné popoludnia. Niekedy som vo fantázii nemala ani posteľ, ale spávala som na prikrývke položenej rovno na linoleu. Nechcela som ani koberce ani záclony, len žalúzie brániace byt pred prisilným slnkom. Môj priestor mal byť priehľadný.

Keď mama zomrela, musela som vyprázdniť jej byt. Mama vtedy už bývala v prenajatom bratislavskom byte, ktorý musel byť do konca mesiaca prázdny. Nájomnú zmluvu mala vypovedať tri mesiace dopredu, ale vzhľadom na okolnosti na tom majitelia nenástojili. Niekoľko ľudí mi povedalo, že som na to mala myslieť, ale mne to skutočne vôbec nenapadlo. Zavolať majiteľ-ke maminho bytu a vysvetliť, že mama je v nemocnici a pravdepodobne bude musieť vypovedať nájomnú zmluvu. Že presný dátum síce nepoznáme, ale pravdepodobne to bude čoskoro. Našťastie to potom majiteľka chápala a dohodli sme sa, že kľúče jej vrátim do konca mesiaca. Medzitým jej umožním prístup do bytu na prehliadky z realitnej kancelárie. Mama zomrela tridsiateho prvého mája a na vyprázdenie bytu som mala celý jún. Naďalej som cestovala do Bratislavy každý víkend a postupne som všetko odnášala do kontajnera. Nakoniec som pár kusov nábytku dala odviezť do spaľovne. Dedičské konanie ešte neprebehlo, ale mama mala v byte hotovosť a tak som nemusela šetriť. Pár zimných kabátov som rozdala bezdomovkyniam, ktoré posedávali okolo domu.

Janut, s ktorým sme ešte krátko predtým boli v Ikei, sa odsťahoval krátko predtým. Nová posteľ, ktorú sme v to popoludnie kúpili, ostala v našej niekdajšej izbe pre nového nájomníka. S Janutom sme sa v Ikei prechádzali po rozľahlých priestoroch. Pomedzi regály, kancelárske stoličky zo svetlého

dreva a rozkladateľné a ľahko prenosné stoly sme sa dostali až do oddelenia spálni. Prezerali sme si niekoľko postelí, ktoré pozostávajú z ľahkej konštrukcie. Len z niekoľkých dosák priložených k sebe a na miestach, kde sa krížili, prichytených niekoľkými skrútkami. Zhodli sme sa, že chceme svetlé, prírodné drevo. A potom som si všimla tmavohnedú spálňovú zostavu. Dvojposteľ so záhlavím, dva nočné stolíky so zásuvkami. Na nich položené reklamné výtlacky kníh vo švédčine a dve nočné lampy. Predstavila som si, ako večer vankúše osvetľujú dva kruhy mäkkého svetla. K zostave patrili aj bielizník a skriňa s posuvnými dverami a zrkadlami na ich vnútornej strane. Na stene boli nakreslené okná zakryté závesmi. Inštinktívne som pocítila útulnosť tej miestnosti. V tom okamihu som si uvedomila, že nahromadené drobnosti tvoria bezpečie, v ktorom môže vyrastať dieťa. Aj usádzajúci sa prach, ktorý treba zodpovedne každý deň utierať. V ten víkend sme s Janutom nakoniec kúpili jednu z tých rozkladacích postelí zo smrekového dreva a niesli sme ju spolu naspäť vlakom. V Ikei sa dala požičať dodávka, ale netrúfli sme si na to. Ja som síce mala vodičský preukaz, ale od maturity som nešoférovala. O tom, že sa mi v skutočnosti páčila skôr tá tmavá spálňa, som Janutovi nepovedala. Myslím, že už vtedy som vedela, že spolu takú nikdy mať nebudeme. Že taká spálňa patrí do dospelosti, a tú nedosiahneme spolu.

Keď mama zomrela, zistila som, že moja predstava o dospelosti bola naivná. Zmenu som si chcela vynútiť, opatrne som kládla nohy pred seba, aby som nezišla zo správnej cesty. A zrazu sa bolo treba rozbehnúť a nebol čas ani dýchať. Po prvýkrát som sa zhlboka nadýchla vlastne až vtedy, keď som mamin byt konečne vyprázdnila. Naposledy som sa doň vrátila na stretnutie s majiteľkou. Mala byt skontrolovať, vrátiť mi kauciu a prevziať si kľúče. Prišla som o niečo skôr, aby som

na nič nezabudla. Dvojizbový byt bol teraz celkom prázdny. V jednej miestnosti ostal koberec, ktorý nepatril mame. Boli na ňom stopy po nábytku, štyri priehlbiny v pravidelných odstupoch po nohách postele. Steny potrebovali vymaľovať, na niekoľkých miestach farba praskala a ostali v nej diery po klincoch, na ktorých predtým viseli obrazy. Všade bolo čisto, povysávala som, v kútoch neostali chuchvalce prachu, a zo smaltu umývadla a vane som vydrhla usadeniny vodného kameňa. V kúte kúpeľne ostalo vedro, cez jeho okraj prevesený pár žltých gumených rukavíc a okolo niekoľko čistiacich prostriedkov. To boli jediné predmety v byte. Kým som čakala na majiteľku, sadla som si na dlážku v predsieni a rozhliadla sa po prázdnych izbách. Maminu smrť som si vtedy neuvedomovala. Všimla som si najmä, že zľahka a zhlboka dýcham. Keď majiteľka prišla, zaklopala, ale hneď si odomkla vlastným náhradným kľúčom. Podala mi ruku a znovu povedala úprimnú sústrasť. Poďakovala som sa, že netrvala na výpovednej lehote. Samozrejme, povedala. Vymenili sme si obálky s peniazmi a kľúčmi a rozlúčili sme sa. Vlakom som sa vrátila do Viedne, vyprázdniť svoju a Janutovu izbu.

(...)

V Bratislave som nikoho nepoznala a na celé dni som chodila na plaváreň. Z týždňa na týždeň bolo krajšie počasie. Pred štyrmi rokmi bola pekná teplá jar. Za mamou som chodievala už len vo svetri a na plavárni som plávala aj vo vonkajšom bazéne. Vodu vyhrievali a niekedy tvár oziabala v chladnom vzduchu, ale už svietilo slnko. Raz som sa na chodbe pred maminou izbou stretla s lekárom, ktorý mal práve službu. Vo filmoch trávajú príbuzní v nemocnici celé dni a neustále konzultujú s lekárom zdravotný stav. Mala som výčitky svedomia,

že sa nesprávam rovnako. Maminho lekára som videla prvýkrát. Zastavila som ho a videla som mu na tvári, že je nervózny. Teraz tomu dobre rozumiem. Vo víkendových službách sa počíta každá minúta. Keď sa na našej ambulancii zastavia v nedeľu príbuzní a chcú zavolať lekára, opakujeme, že až v pondelok. Až v pracovný deň, lebo cez víkend je na niekoľkých oddeleniach len jediný pán doktor, a ten sa venuje len naliehavým prípadom. Ale mamin lekár sa pri mne pristavil a chvíľu sme sa rozprávali. Škoda, že mama prišla neskoro. Teraz je v popredí zlyhávanie obličiek pri dehydratácii. Nedarí sa zastaviť stúpajúce hodnoty kreatinínu. Nemožno postupovať v liečbe základného ochorenia. Používal taktný termín základné ochorenie. Mama zle znáša liečbu a v noci je nepokojná, takže musíme pristupovať k obmedzeniu. Neskôr v rekvalifikačnom kurze pre zdravotné sestry sme preberali kapitolu podávania nepriaznivých informácií. Hoci sestry nepriaznivé informácie nepodávajú, to je v kompetencii lekára. Patrí to však k zdravotníckemu vzdelaniu. Hovoriť vecne a držať sa faktov. Nevyhýbať sa, nechodiť okolo horúcej kaše. Zlú správu povedať na začiatku a nehovoriť mrzí ma, že vám to musím povedať. Pri takýchto vetách narastá úzkosť a strach sa nafúkne. Hovoriť jasne a zreteľne, akoby sme udierali na struny cimbalu. Cink. Cink. Mamin lekár sa držal pravidiel, ktoré som vtedy ešte nepoznala. A potom som sa ho spýtala na otázku prognózy. Takto pekne som to sformulovala, hoci do nemocnice som vtedy chodila prvýkrát v živote. Skúseného pána doktora som nezaskočila. Nezneistel, neodkašľal si. Ani sa neospravedlnil, že mi to musí povedať. Reč jeho tela bola prirodzená a reč, ktorou mi odpovedal, profesionálna. Pripomenul, že sa to nedá celkom predvídať. Že závisí od úpravy obličkových parametrov a ďalších komplikácii lieč- by. Zároveň, že mama prišla neskoro a liečba je paliatívna. Pri takomto stupni ochorenia

však najdlhšie tak šesť mesiacov. Nedodal, že v medicíne sa niekedy dejú zázraky, a že najdôležitejšia je nádej. Poďakovala som sa mu a on to prijal. Keď odišiel za roh chodby, zastavil sa v miestnosti sestier. Nedovidela som tam, ale cez otvorené dvere som počula, ako ho milo vítajú.

Mama bola viditeľne veľmi chorá, ale nevedela som si predstaviť, ako zomrie. Kožu na tele mala veľmi krehkú. Praskala a krv špinila obliečky, ktoré sestričky starostlivo vymieňali. Vždy ma spoznala, ale popoludní a večer už nedokázala skladať vety. Bola veľmi chudá a na päťkách sa jej tvorili preležaniny, pod ktoré jej sestričky podkladali zvláštne matrace. Večer robila rukami drobné nástojčivé pohyby, akoby z prikrývky zhadzovala hmyz. Niekoľkokrát hovorila o tom, že sa jej narodilo krásne bábätko. Mama hovorila nárečím a nevra-vela bábätko ale bábätko. Televízor bol pustený, ale mama už nedokázala sledovať ani prírodovedné programy bez deja a s peknými scenériami. Raz vysielali program o karibskej oblasti. Na obrazovke boli zábery z Havany. Mama kedysi učila španielčinu a na vysokej škole strávila niekoľko mesiacov na Kube. Chcela som upriamiť jej pozornosť na film, ale už sme to nedokázali. Napriek tomu, že od začiatku jari do mája sa mama z týždňa na týždeň menila, nevedela som si predstaviť mechanizmus smrti. Nevedela som, ako sa zomiera. Väčšinou som na to ani nemyslela, lebo bolo toľko úloh, ktoré som musela plniť, že na rozmýšľanie neostal čas. Neperlivé minerálky, nutridrinky, z vlaku do nemocnice, v nedeľu večer stihnúť posledný vlak späť a v pondelok do práce. Janut bol preč, odsťahoval sa a zrušil si rakúsky mobil, takže som nevedela, kde je. Z Viedne som dvakrát denne mame volávala, ale nemohla už dvíhať mobil. Zdvihla sestrička a povedala, že je všetko v poriadku.

Každotýždenné cestovanie za mamou ma unavovalo. Chcela som, aby bolo konečne pekné počasie a nemusela som so sebou vláčiť kabát. Aj tašku by som mala ľahšiu, keby som v nej nemusela nosiť sveter. Cesty na stanicu a zo stanice by boli príjemnejšie, na zastávkach autobusov a na perónoch by mi nebolo zima. Dokonca z okien vlaku by bol krajší výhľad, nie na tmavohnedé polia rozmočené topiacim sa snehom. A počasie bolo v ústrety letu skutočne z týždňa na týždeň krajšie. Autobus cestou zo stanice obchádzal nákupné stredisko, pred ktorým sa na veľkom ihrisku hrali deti. V helmách liezli po preliezkach lanového parku a skákali na trampolínach. Na plavárni si už niekoľkí ľudia ľahli k bazénu na deku. Onedlho mali otvoriť tobogan. V ten rok prišla jar skoro a sľubovala pekné leto. Ja som si pomaly formulovala plán, že od septembra sa vrátim z Rakúska a zmením zamestnanie. Aby som to mala bližšie k mame. S maminým lekárom som sa na chodbe nemocnice stretla niekedy v apríli. Mama nakoniec nedožila ani tretinu jeho prognózy. A hoci som to vtedy nevedela, nemohla som sa prestať tešiť na leto. Niekedy som sa snažila radosť zastaviť a počítala som, koľko mesiacov je do leta. Ale napriek únave z cestovania som sa v slnečnom počasí nemohla leta dočkať. Životná radosť sa nedala zastaviť.

Scenes from the Life of M.

Svetlana Žuchová

Translated from the Slovak by Heather Trebaticka

Emptiness

The day Mum died I went to the swimming pool. Mum died at daybreak and they called me from the hospital just before seven. At that time I was visiting Mum every weekend, and from Friday to Sunday I slept in her empty flat. It was then that Janut moved out. I had placed great hopes in my relationship with Janut. I had wanted to mature with Janut, because maturity was something that fascinated me. From morning to evening we had our hands full working on maturity. I imagined that maturity consisted of furnishing a flat, of a rental agreement and savings in a bank account. I noticed my interest in maturity one weekend afternoon in Ikea. You see, the supposition is that a person becomes aware of something at one particular moment. For example, one of Oto's sisters once told me that she became aware of her future husband's love when he said he wanted to have a child with her. Janut, on the other hand, claimed that he decided not to go to work any more when his boss called him into his office in a caravan. Apparently, he didn't even invite him to sit down and Janut had to listen to his abuse standing up. I'm not sure that it is true. Whether we really become aware of certain facts from one moment to the next and we suddenly know something we didn't know before. At a precise moment in time. It may be rather that our awareness of something slowly ripens within us and gradually gets nearer and nearer to the surface.

And then, seemingly all of a sudden, it becomes visible. And it is equally possible that moments of realisation don't in fact exist and are created retrospectively in our memories. That this gradual, slow smouldering is compressed in our memories into an instant when we became aware of something. As if all of a sudden, from one moment to the next.

(...)

When Janut stopped going to work, he suggested that we should go to Ikea. It's true we haven't yet got a rental agreement or work permit, but for a start we could at least buy a new bed. I agreed and one weekend we took an afternoon train to the shopping centre. All my life I have had a well-defined taste in furniture. I grew up with my grandmother in a house furnished with heavy antique furniture. Along the wall in the dining room there was a massive sideboard. We didn't have a coffee table or a lounge suite with honey-coloured upholstery, but a dining table with four heavy chairs. Over the years they had become rotten and creaky, but they had once belonged to my grandmother's parents, and so out of respect they couldn't be replaced. What's more, spread out on the carpets we had fur rugs that collected the dust. The dining room windows faced west and the aggressive afternoon sunshine lit up the whirling particles of dust. There was always plenty of dust in our house. It settled on the furniture, on the porcelain figurines in the glass cases, and on the fur rugs that became cracked with age and were the cause of allergies.

I had always been convinced that I would furnish my flat with just a few pieces of light furniture. I left Mum to step into empty space, because emptiness was something I greatly valued. But you haven't got anything there, Mum said, when

I packed a few clothes into a rucksack and declared that I was leaving for Austria. Do you think anyone there is interested in you? Where are you going to live and what are you going to eat? She warned me that I would be in a vacuum and fall prey to conmen. They'll take your passport, haven't you read about it in the papers? It was hard to put it into words: the fact was that being in a vacuum was what I wanted. I imagined half-empty rooms and in my imaginings the windows were always facing eastwards. No dusty sunny afternoons. Sometimes I imagined I didn't even have a bed, but slept on a blanket spread out on the linoleum floor. I didn't want carpets or curtains, just blinds protecting the flat from too strong sunshine. My space should be uncluttered.

When Mum died, I had to clear out her flat. By then, Mum was living in Bratislava in a rented flat that had to be empty by the end of the month. She should have terminated the agreement three months in advance, but in view of the circumstances the owner did not insist. Several people told me that I should have thought of this, but it really never occurred to me. To call the owner of Mum's flat and explain that Mum was in hospital and probably would have to terminate the rental agreement. That we don't know the exact date, but it would most likely be very soon. Fortunately, the owner understood and we agreed that I would return the key by the end of the month. In the meantime I would allow access to the flat so the estate agent could show it to prospective tenants. Mum died on the 31st of May and I had the whole of June to empty the flat. I continued to travel to Bratislava every weekend and gradually carried everything out to the dustbins. Finally, I had a couple of bits of furniture taken to the incinerator. The inheritance proceedings had not yet commenced, but Mum had some cash in the flat and so I didn't have to economise.

I gave a few winter coats away to the homeless women who used to sit around near the block of flats.

Janut, who had been with me to Ikea only a short time before, moved out just prior to this. The new bed we had bought that afternoon was left for the next tenant in what had once been our room. In Ikea, Janut and I had wandered through that spacious store. Passing shelves, office chairs of light-coloured wood and extendable and easily portable tables, we reached the bedroom department. We looked at several simply constructed beds made of a few planks held together with a couple of screws. We agreed that we wanted light-coloured, natural wood. And then I noticed a dark brown bedroom suite. A double bed with a headboard, two bedside tables with drawers. Promotional copies of books in Swedish placed on them along with two night lamps. I imagined the pillows lit up in the evening by two circles of soft light. The suite also included a chest of drawers and a wardrobe with sliding doors and mirrors in the middle. Windows had been drawn on the wall and covered with curtains. I instinctively sensed the cosiness of the room. All at once I realised that the little things amassed there created a feeling of security in which a child could grow up. Along with the settling dust that needed to be conscientiously wiped off every day. In the end, that weekend Janut and I bought one of those pine pull-out beds and together we carried it back on the train. It was possible to borrow a van from Ikea, but we didn't dare to. It's true, I did have a driving licence, but I had not driven since leaving school. I didn't tell Janut I really liked the dark bedroom better. I think I already knew we would never have one like that together. A bedroom like that belonged to maturity, and that was something we would not reach together.

When Mum died, I discovered that my idea of maturity had been naïve. I had wanted to make a deliberate change; I cautiously moved forward step by step, in order not to veer from the right path. And, all of a sudden, I had to break into a run and there was not even time to catch my breath. I actually breathed in deeply for the first time only when I had at last cleared out Mum's flat. I went back to it for the last time to meet the owner. She was there to check the flat, return the deposit and take back the keys. I arrived a little early in order not to forget anything. The two-room flat was now completely empty. In one room there remained a carpet which had not belonged to my mother. There were marks left by the furniture, four depressions at regular intervals made by the feet of the bed. The walls needed painting; in several places the paint was cracked and there were holes in it from nails where pictures had previously hung. Everywhere was clean. I had vacuumed, there were no wads of dust in the corners and I had scrubbed off the deposits of limescale from the enamel of the wash basin and bath. In one corner of the bathroom there was still a bucket with a pair of rubber gloves hanging over the edge and several cleaning agents beside it. They were the only objects in the flat. While I waited for the owner, I sat down on the floor in the hall and gazed around at the empty rooms. I wasn't aware of my mother's death then. The main thing I noticed was how easily and deeply I was breathing. When the owner arrived she knocked, but immediately opened the door with her own spare key. She shook hands and once more offered her condolences. I thanked her for not insisting on the terms of notice. Of course, she replied. We exchanged envelopes with the money and keys and said goodbye. I returned by train to Vienna to clear out the room I had shared with Janut.

(...)

I didn't know anyone in Bratislava and I spent whole days at the swimming pool. The weather got better from week to week. The spring four years ago was lovely and warm. I only wore a sweater when I went to visit Mum, and at the swimming pool I also swam in the outdoor pool. The water was heated and although the cool air sometimes chilled my face, the sun was already shining. Once, in the corridor outside Mum's room, I met her doctor, who happened to be on duty just then. In films, relatives spend whole days in the hospital and keep consulting the patient's state of health with the doctor. I had a guilty conscience for not doing the same. I was seeing my mother's doctor for the first time. I stopped him and I could see from his face that he was irritated. I can understand that very well now. On weekend duty every minute counts. When relatives stop by at our outpatients' department on a Sunday and want us to call the doctor, we keep repeating: not until Monday. Not until a working day, because at the weekend there is only one doctor for several wards and he can only deal with urgent cases. But Mum's doctor stopped and we spoke together for a while. "It is a pity your mother came too late. Now the critical thing is kidney failure due to dehydration. We are not managing to stop the increase in the level of creatine. We can't make any progress in the treatment of the basic illness." He used the tactful term 'basic illness'. "Your mother is responding badly to the treatment and is restless in the night, so we shall have to limit it." Later, in a retraining course for hospital nurses, we studied the chapter on giving unwelcome information. Albeit nurses don't give unwelcome information; only doctors are authorised to do that. However, it is part of medical education. Speak to the

point and keep to the facts. Don't be evasive, don't beat about the bush. Tell the bad news at the beginning and don't say I'm sorry I have to tell you this. Such sentences only increase the listener's anxiety and fear. Speak clearly and distinctly, as if you were hitting the strings of a cimbalom. Plink. Plink. Mum's doctor kept to the rules which at that time I did not yet know. And then I asked him about the prognosis. I formulated it nicely like this, even though it was the first time in my life I had been visiting someone in hospital. The experienced doctor was not taken by surprise. He didn't look confused, he didn't clear his throat. He didn't apologise either for having to tell me. His body language was natural and the language he used to answer me was professional. He reminded me that it was impossible to predict this exactly. That it depended on the improvement of the kidney parameters and other complications arising from the treatment. At the same time, that Mum had come too late and that the treatment was palliative. However, at such a stage in the disease, six months at the most. He did not add that in medicine miracles sometimes happen, and that the most important thing was hope. I thanked him and he accepted my thanks. When he had turned the corner of the corridor, he popped into the nurses' room. I couldn't see that far, but through the open door I heard how pleasantly they greeted him.

Mum looked very ill, but I couldn't imagine her dying. Her skin was very fragile. It tore open and the blood stained the bed linen that the nurses conscientiously changed. She always recognised me, but in the afternoon and evening she could no longer put sentences together. She was very thin and bed sores had formed on her heels, which the nurses supported on special pads. In the evening she made little urgent movements with her hands, as if she was brushing insects off the bed

cover. Several times she talked about having given birth to a beautiful baby. Mum spoke in dialect and didn't say *bábätko* but *bábatko*. The television was on, but Mum could no longer follow even a nature documentary without a plot and with lovely scenery. Once there was a programme about the Caribbean. There were scenic shots of Havana. At one time, Mum had taught Spanish, and while at the university she had spent several months in Cuba. I wanted to draw her attention to the film, but without success. In spite of the fact that, from the beginning of spring to May, Mum changed from week to week, I couldn't imagine the mechanism of death. I didn't know how people died. For the most part I didn't even think about it, because there were so many things I had to do there was no time left for thinking. Bottles of still mineral water, nutritional drinks, getting from the train to the hospital, catching the last train back on Sunday evening and going to work on Monday. Janut was gone: he had moved out and cancelled his Austrian mobile phone number, so I didn't know where he was. I would call Mum twice a day from Vienna, but she could no longer answer the phone. The nurse answered it and said that everything was all right.

Travelling every week to see Mum was tiring me out. I wanted fine weather at last, so I wouldn't have to drag a coat along with me. My bag would be lighter too if I didn't have to carry a sweater in it. The journey to and from the station would be pleasanter; I wouldn't get cold standing at the bus stops and on the platforms. There would even be a more beautiful view from the train windows, not those dark brown fields soaked by the melting snow. As the summer approached, the weather really did get better from week to week. On the way from the station, the bus passed a shopping centre where children were playing outside in a large playground. Wearing helmets,

they were climbing through the jungle gym and jumping on the trampolines. At the swimming pool there were already several people lying on blankets beside the water. The spiral slide was to be opened soon. Spring had come early that year with the promise of a good summer. I was gradually forming a plan to return from Austria in September and change jobs. So as to be nearer to Mum. I had met her doctor in the hospital corridor sometime in April. In the end Mum lived for less than a third of the time he predicted. And even though I didn't know that then, I couldn't help looking forward to summer. Sometimes, I tried to suppress this joyful feeling and I counted how many months it was to summer. But in spite of the weariness from travelling, in the sunny weather I just couldn't wait for summer to come. My enjoyment of life could not be suppressed.



EUROPEAN UNION
PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

2015

Svetlana Žuchová – Slovakia

Obrazy zo života M.

Scenes from the Life of M.

152 pp, 2013

Translations: The book has not been translated yet.
(*Last Update – March 2015*)

Publishing House **Marenčin PT**
Jelenia 6 – SK-811 05 Bratislava 1 – Slovakia
Tel. + 421 220 723 752
www.marencin.sk

Contact: Albert Marenčin – marencin@marencin.sk
Rights information: svetlana.zuchova@gmail.com
ISBN: 978-8-08-114184-3

EUPL / FEP-FEE – Rue Montoyer, 31 – B-1000 Brussels – T. +32 (0)2 770.11.10
info@euprizeliterature.eu – www.euprizeliterature.eu



Creative
Europe



European and
International
Booksellers
Federation



FEDERATION OF EUROPEAN PUBLISHERS
FÉDÉRATION DES ÉDITEURS EUROPÉENS