

INTERVIEW

SLOVAKS SHOULD START LIKING THEIR OWN COUNTRY, WITH ALL ITS DEFECTS

Dutch expert on Slovakia. This is how Abram Muller, translator, author and globetrotter who has devoted almost half of his life to Slovakia, describes himself. His interest in Chekhov, Gombrowicz and Hrabal brought him to the shores of the Slavic culture. From there, he continued by studying Russian and Polish, and later "Sovietology" which focused on affairs and events in the former Soviet bloc. He may be laughing now that Gorbachev brought his career to an abrupt end, and without his concepts of perestroika and glasnost Abram would probably have become an agent or diplomat in the countries east of the Iron Curtain, but eventually he got to exercise some innocent form of "spying" in the East anyway. After the Velvet Revolution, he decided to stay in Slovakia, where he subsequently spent more than 20 years. During that time he got to know our country, came to like it and he avidly promotes it abroad. He even translates prose by Slovak authors into Dutch. He may be living in Rotterdam at the moment but he still takes a keen interest in current Slovak affairs. During our brief encounter in Bratislava in August he did not fail to inquire about life in Slovakia at the moment. His interest in Slovakia does not end with the beauty of our nature, bryndza dumplings or folk art. Abram Muller is an attentive observer capable of extremely apt commentary that allows us to see our country and our national features from a different, unbiased perspective. In the following interview you will read how Abram remembers Slovakia of the 1990s, what memories he has of the Faculty of Arts at the Comenius University where spent many years working as a teacher, what keeps foreign tourists from visiting Slovakia again and what surprises him about the mentality of, in the words of the Slovak double comedy duo Lasica and Satinský, "one of the most cultured nations... in Czechoslovakia".

You are a true Flying Dutchman – you were born in the Netherlands, you went to schools in France and later in Singapore, you studied at the universities in Leiden and Amsterdam, then you lived in New York and visited many other countries but in 1990 you decided to settle down in Slovakia and you spent more than 20 years here. Why? How did you pick Slovakia among this tough competition and stayed here for such a long time?

Well, in 1990 I visited Slovakia (or rather Czechoslovakia, at the time) for the second time (the first having been in 1986), just like I visited most European countries behind the Iron Curtain: out of some vague feeling of solidarity with the people on the wrong side of freedom.

Back in 1986 I met a woman here, but was not allowed to keep on seeing her at the time because of 'the system'. I visited her again in 1990 and we decided to stay together and I found a job as an English teacher at the Department of Languages of the Faculty of Arts. There were still no English or American lecturers and most students wanted to finally learn English as the country opened up.

Then I started building up a normal life, just like anyone else. Yes, 20 years Slovakia with a short interruption of three years in Paris where we married: a Slovak woman, a Dutchman, an Italian and a Moroccan as witnesses, and a French mayor officiating. I guess I was a bit idealistic at the time about the world coming and living together.

Can you remember the very first time you came in contact with Slovaks or Slovakia in general? Was it a positive encounter? Has your opinion changed over the years?

My first encounter with Slovaks was in the summer of 1986 in Bratislava. They seemed very laid back and the town had this southern flair with lots of café terraces lining the sides of squares and hiding inside old, decrepit courtyards. The evenings were different - by 10 p.m. the only thing that stayed open was the odd hotel nightclub, not much else. There I was surrounded by neurotic youth mixing red wine with Pepsi, asking me about prices of stuff in the West; from watches to BMWs. I hadn't the faintest idea, so I must have been quite a disappointment to them. This curiosity changed, of course, although there still was a complex of inferiority in them later on whenever they asked me what the hell I was doing in Slovakia, as if life in the West must have been so much better. The second most frequent question was what I thought of the Slovak women. In Bratislava people don't ask these questions any more. But there is still a gap between the capital city and the rest of the country. Young people and young political parties may have the best intentions to change their country but as long as they stay in Bratislava and do not venture into the rest of the country, their intentions will remain dreams without an actual outcome.

You mentioned that shortly after the Velvet Revolution you began working as a lecturer of English at our Faculty of Arts and a few years later you even helped to establish Dutch language and cultural studies as a separate study programme at the faculty. What are your memories of those times? What was the academic environment like at our university in the 90s?

In 1990 the atmosphere was marvellous. Students were active, optimistic, self-confident. They had just helped to change the political system of the country and now they were eager for more. There were lots of discussions, they were still activists, just as students should be. I am proud to have known many who later became successful in life, especially in the area of culture. (*Abram Muller's students from that time include, among others, the publisher Koloman Kertész Bagala; the author, literary scholar and translator Tomáš Horváth; the film director,*

screenwriter and creative producer Tomáš Kaminský; the playwright and theater director Svetozár Sprušanský and the popular TV director and producer Peter Núñez: editor's note.)

Later in the nineties something changed and students became more passive, studying in order to obtain their degrees without paying much attention to the world around them. Everyone seemed disillusioned with the politics which did not serve the young and the future but the old and the corrupt.

I had this one group which was different, they were ready to march publicly against Mečiar, then prime minister, every time. And then there was this colleague of mine, decorated with I think at least four academic titles, who railed at me, saying *"the university should not be used for political activism"*. Those teachers still thought they had all the wisdom in the world and that students should just listen and do what they were told. I sincerely hope that generation has died out. Then there was the corruption - to enter young people on shortlists for certain study programmes. As I was drafting admission exams for the Dutch studies programme, I was offered presents by parents who casually came to see me. They could be quite rude about it, at times. Even some colleagues pleaded and tried to exert influence. I have a strong suspicion that in the end not all students in the opening year of Dutch studies entered the programme entirely according to the rules. Corruption was just so deeply rooted in society since communism. It was sometimes deceptively called "helping each other out". I hope and believe that this has really changed at the university by now.

Your command of Slovak is amazing and you even translate Slovak literature into Dutch and that is just one of your activities. Between 2006 and 2013 you were a business associate in the travel agency, Amazing Slovakia, which organised tours for foreign tourists, mainly from the countries of Benelux. You even wrote a travel guide to Slovakia in Dutch, published by the respectable publishing house Dominicus. To me, that seems like true devotion and I am very grateful to you for that. What are, in your opinion, the top 5 reasons to visit our country and "take a chance" with our culture?

Well, it is pointless to promote a country by just saying there are great cultural sites and beautiful nature. Almost all countries have those. Therefore, there is no such thing as top 5 reasons. Rather, there is just one reason: come and discover the unknown. Most people who went East, visited Hungary and the Czech Republic: why not come to Slovakia now? And very importantly: Slovakia is not just Bratislava. Come and travel around the country, be open-minded and enjoy it.

In one of your interviews you said that tourists generally liked our country but frequently did not plan on visiting again. What, in our opinion, still makes Slovakia "the country for a one-time visit only" in the minds of foreign tourists? And what can and should we do about it?

First of all, Slovaks should start liking their own country, with all its shortcomings. No country is superior to another; or inferior, for that matter. I know it's not easy because Slovaks have not opted for their own country. But why do people return to southern France, to Spain, Italy, Greece? Not just because of the coast, most people do not even go to the coast. It's because of some sense of peaceful homeliness they find there. The little town with the quiet square where the water bubbles in the fountain, the little café on the corner where one can have a glass of wine without any further commitment. There is no constant Fun Radio in the background disturbing the calm, gentle thoughts and views. It's the air of being at peace with oneself and with the world that draws people on holidays after all.

Most of those working in tourism in Slovakia are entrepreneurs. They start a business, and when they reach some success, they start another. They leave their small hotel, campground, restaurant or whatever to be run by some family or an acquaintance who knows a bit of English and has some basic qualifications. In the end these places become impersonal - just another generic tourist business. People like to come to places that radiate a 'couleur locale': where the owner is always present, greeting the visitors and shaking their hand, making them feel special rather than just a pocketbook of money that is tolerated for a while. Guests want to leave a place with a smile and talk about it with their friends back home; that

is the best advertising Slovakia could hope for.

I read that you want to write a book about Slovaks and the title of the book would be "A Pit on the Hill" which you say is the perfect metaphor for the Slovak mentality. Can you explain that?

Well, the book was just a thought. First of all, we are all born the same, but mentality is historically and geographically determined. The Netherlands is a flat country, one can easily see the horizon and there is the sea which invites you to explore what is beyond. In Slovakia one needs to climb a hill or mountain in order to see further. This requires effort, so one may decide to just stay in the valley and let life go its way. Those people will always keep on complaining. Then you have those who do climb the hill and are amazed by the view and by the challenges it promises; by the beauty of it all. Some, though, become frightened because openness leads to responsibility and the risk of having to admit mistakes, of allowing for imperfection. But in the end one becomes a better person, despite all the imperfections. So instead of facing the horizon, some just dig a pit on the hill and start hiding, exactly like those down in the valleys. Until recently, such people have been the leaders of Slovakia, running it from state institutions and politics. But the times they are a-changing, as new generations come and face the challenges on the top of the hill, without fear. The best people I know in Slovakia are exceptional, even more so than the people in the Netherlands because they needed to make the effort to climb the hill, in order to see further.

I find your observations on Slovaks to be really accurate. There are many national characteristics which we are used to express or hear about ourselves: we are considered (mainly by ourselves) to be hospitable, peaceful, hard-working, devoted to our family, but also self-doubting and disinterested in anything beyond our fences. I often hear foreigners say that they see us as unfriendly at the beginning and sometimes easily offended. The Polish journalist and writer Mariusz Szczygieł said in one of his recent interviews that Slovaks were very similar to Poles – they were spontaneous, hospitable (especially when liquor was involved), strong believers and conservatives, which is why he was so fascinated by the Czechs who were different from us – with their specific sense of humour and the distance they maintain. What do you think of that? What, in your opinion, is the most characteristic feature of Slovaks or the feature you find most interesting (one way or the other)? Have you noticed any differences between us and our Slavic neighbours?

A few years ago I was walking with some Slovaks around a town in the Netherlands. It's always interesting to hear how foreigners, outsiders, perceive one's own country. They were amazed that gardens had no fences, or hardly any. You could just walk straight to anyone's front door. And of course, they noted how you could see right into our houses, with no curtains covering the windows. It's as if the Dutch wanted to show they had nothing to hide. That's so different to the tall fences surrounding Slovak houses, with loud, aggressively barking

dogs, sometimes kept on chains. Almost as if fear reigned in Slovak households, as if people were hiding while at home. Is it that they fear what others might say or think about them and their possessions? It's as if 'the eye of the others' were present everywhere. It's as if it was important to hide, and to act 'comme il faut' at all times while out in the open, in order not to attract suspicion. Fear is at the centre of it all. I would say the Polish are anything but fearful. They are a nation of fighters - for their rights; for anyone's rights throughout history; from Crimea in the 19th century to Arnhem in 1944. Even Catholics there are combative and not as passive as the Catholic church in Slovakia where one should first live according to the rules before going out onto the streets. Having taken the train from Bratislava through Czech Republic to Warsaw a couple of times, I noticed people in Slovakia mostly quietly staring outside their window into the vast nothing, while in the Czech Republic there was a sudden waft sweaty smell in the train when very casually dressed people entered with hairstyles you wouldn't see anywhere else. And in Poland you would see people reading newspapers and books.

You've been living in Rotterdam since 2012. It makes a good home, I suppose. So to return the question you asked during our meeting in Bratislava: How is life there? And what are you currently working on? Actually, I'm not working on anything at the moment, I'm enjoying a sabbatical year thanks to corona, and considering a comeback to Slovakia.

Abram Muller

He initially studied Russian and Polish language and Sovietology at the universities in Leiden and Amsterdam in his native country, the Netherlands. Once the Iron Curtain came down in the Velvet Revolution, he moved to Slovakia and remained there for more than 20 years. In the 1990s he worked at the Faculty of Arts of the Comenius University as an English lecturer and assisted in the birth of Dutch studies as an independent study programme. In addition to his teaching activity he accompanied many tourists from the Netherlands and Belgium around Slovakia as a tour guide. He is the author of the book *Dominicus landengids Slowakije*, one of the first travel guides about Slovakia in Dutch language. Since 2012 he has been living in Rotterdam and making a living as translator and interpreter in Slovak, Dutch and English while still travelling to Slovakia on a regular basis as a tour guide. He has also translated literary works by Peter Pišťanek, Rudolf Sloboda, Dušan Mitana and Vladimír Balla into Dutch.