

Božena Němcová

The most famous female author of the 19th century, a great personality, a writer who was ahead of her time. An admirable woman who dazzled not only with her famous physical beauty, mental harmony, but also with her intellect and modern views.

"Never drive love away from you. There is so little of it in the world." Božena Němcová wrote.

We can rightly call her a Czecho-Slovak writer for her interest and respect for the culture of the Slovak nation. Unfortunately, the thread of her life was prematurely broken by a serious illness. She died on 21 January 1862 in Prague.

A woman of an extremely sensitive soul whose life was not easy at all. Her origin is not clear, it is shrouded in mystery. Božena Němcová was born on 4 February 1820 in Vienna, as Barbora Novotná Panklová. Her mother was a maid and her father a gentleman Johann Pankel. At the age of seventeen, she married a high-ranking customs officer, Jozef Němec. Although her husband, 15 years older, was mentally and personally distant from her, he was the man who made her sensitive to national awareness.

Although her mother tongue was German, she chose Czech language for her literary expression. She studied it diligently and eventually mastered it flawlessly. In her work, she was able to make an extraordinary use of her good education, as well as travelling with her family, as they often moved. Her husband, a financial commissioner, was often transferred to different places. She gave birth to three sons and one daughter. But their marriage was an unhappy one. In time, they had moved to Prague, where her husband was promoted.

In 1850 Josef Němec took a place in Miškovce and then in Balážske Ďarmoty on the banks of the river Ipel'. His family remained living in Prague and Božena visited him three times: in 1851, 1852 and 1853. Her fourth trip to Slovakia in 1855 was aimed, not only at a treatment in the Sliach Spa, but also at getting to know the Slovak country and its people. The unique personality of Božena Němcová enabled her to identify with the way of life of the Slovak people, with their speech, customs, way of solving problems and to empathize with their painful social position. She meticulously wrote down not only in her notebook, but especially in her mind and heart.

She was particularly pleased with the sincere interest in which she was welcomed, hosted, and accompanied everywhere. She admired Slovak poets and scholars, therefore she tried her best to find ways for them to present themselves among Czech intellectuals. It is sufficient to mention works such as "Pohorská vesnice" (The Village under Mountains); "Chýše pod horami" (Rustic Room under Mountains); "Slovenské pohádky a pověsti" I, II. (National Stories and Legends), here she compiled tales such as "Salt above Gold", "Mahuliena, the Golden Maid", "The Sun Horse", "Three Brothers Turned into Rooks", "About Twelve Months", "The Good for Nothing", "Prince Bajaja", "The Goldilocks and many others").

In the summer of 1855 she received a passport, without which she would not be able to visit the regions of what was then Upper Hungary, where she could feel that police spies snooped around everywhere she went. She justified her journey by treatment in Sliach Spa and in the healing mountain air, but she was led to Slovakia mainly by a great desire to explore the

treasures of its folk culture. Since, even such an innocent activity as collecting of fairy tales, could give the police an impression that it was a pan-Slavic activity, she had to choose carefully who she could meet. But all of those who belonged to the circle of Němcová's friends treated her with great respect and hospitality. Such were the poets Ján Francisci-Rimavský, Janko Kráľ and Samo Chalúpka, the writer Gustáv Kazimír Zechenter-Laskomerský, the mayor of Banská Bystrica Michal Rárus, the devoted nationalist Július Plošic, the parish priest in Selce near Banská Bystrica and Samo Tomášik.

She wrote to her friend Eliška Lamblová from the Sliach Spa: *“I wish you could see the local countries, there are adorable regions and I can see the mountains from around my room. Just ask your brother, he was here and he will tell you how beautiful it is here. In the light as well as in the cloudy weather, the valley is covered in dense fog, as if big waves of the river were rolling in it, and above the fog the blue peaks of the mountains rise high, right up to the clouds, they are higher, lower, pointed as well as cone-shaped...”*

She received the most support from the Roman Catholic priest in Hájniky, Štefan Záhorský, to whom she went from the spa for lunch every day. He also took her to the Radvaň Crafts Fair, which was an unforgettable experience for a curious observer of a normal, truly human life, and even offered her husband a position of an administrator of the new church property in Rybáre. However, Josef Němec, who was unemployed at the time, rejected this honest offer.

On one pleasant day, she went for a walk to Zvolen, from the Hájniky parish through the fields along the river Hron, walk through the town and the castle, and again on foot, this time through Borová hora, she returned to the spa.

After the spa treatment, Němcová travelled to Banská Bystrica, where she stayed with the Rárus family, visited the parish priest Július Plošic and objected very vigorously when she found out that she was being followed by the police. In Brezno, she lived with the mining and forest doctor and writer Gustav Kazimír Zechenter-Laskomerský, with whom she visited the Čierny Balog Handle and Bacúch (the local mineral water spring holds her name today), and her stay at the Upper Lehota parish with the poet Samo Chalúpka was particularly rich in impressions. Later on, she travelled to Revúca via Tisovec.

Looking back at the life of Božena Němcová, we learned that she came to Slovakia (then Hungary) four times in total, of which her first visit was limited to the town of Miškovec, but during the following three visits she explored the territory of central Slovakia. From Balážske Ďarmoty, where her husband Josef was a financial officer, she got not only to the immediate vicinity and thus to the Slovak side of Ipel', but also during her husband's business trip to Banská Štiavnica, Sliach and Banská Bystrica. Her last visit in 1855 was focused entirely on central Slovakia: treatment at the Sliach Spa and visiting her friends - the Slovak national and literary personalities living in Horehronie, Malohont and Gemer.

A memorial plaque at the Detva Spa house (then Pešť) commemorates Božena Němcová's stay in the Sliach Spa.



However, her return home was not a voluntary one. Her stay was very closely monitored by the police, and after her return from Horehronie to Banská Bystrica, she was ordered to leave the country. And so, on 20 October 1855, she involuntarily left the place where she found the hospitality, respect and warmth, from which she drew in the last difficult years of her life.

She died at the age of 42 of tuberculosis and probably cancer in Prague. Although the Czech society rejected her, her funeral was pompous. She is buried in the Vyšehrad cemetery.

