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Janko Jesensky's The Democrats: Translation form the Slovak with Commentary and Introduction

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Recommended Citation

Huba, Rastislav, "Janko Jesensky's The Democrats: Translation form the Slovak with Commentary and Introduction" (2016). *Senior Projects Spring 2016*. 142.
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Janko Jesensky's *The Democrats*:
Translation from the Slovak with Commentary and Introduction

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Language and Literature
of Bard College

by
Rastislav Huba

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2016

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank to my professor and advisor Olga Voronina, who guided me not only through my Senior Project but also through my studies for the whole time at Bard. It was a privilege to study with Mrs. Voronina. She is truly a unique professor and person and I will be eternally grateful for her help.

To professors Oleg Minin and Marina Kostalevski: Thank you very much for your wisdom and patience and help with my Russian grammar and practicing my conversation during all those years.

I want to give a huge gratitude to my two role cello professors Peter Wiley and Luis Garcia-Renart who spent five years giving me all their knowledge and answers for my questions.

I would like to show my huge gratitude to Robert Martin, David Shein, Eileen Brickner, Ann Gabler, Lisa Hedges and financial support of Bard College for the opportunity to study at such a prestigious College.

I also want to thank to my whole family that supported me in every possible way not only here at Bard but for my whole life.

I would like to thank to all the unique people I met and were like my second family at Bard. I would not succeed in finishing my studies without them: Aischa Guendisch, Václav Kalivoda, Noemi Sallai, Veronika Mojzešová, Kristýna Iris Petíšková, Antonín Fajlt, Katarína Garcia-Renárt, Gergo Toth, Erika Allen.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgement	2
Translator's introduction	4
Chapter I: A New Party, "Equality," Is Established	21
Chapter II: We Need to Set an Example	33
Chapter III: Showing the Equality	37
Chapter IV: The Schemer	49
Chapter V: The Inconveniences	57
Commentary:	71
Bibliography:	75

Translator's introduction

I.

The art of translation has been unconditionally one of the most important stimuli for the progression of all civilizations. Every intellectual pursuit of this kind accelerated the growth of knowledge in a nation at any stage of its development. Therefore, translated, appropriated, and reinterpreted works of literature could be imagined as building blocks of every culture or religion. Alexander Pushkin described the great importance of translation when he called literary translators as the “post-horses of the Enlightenment.”¹ This apt metaphor highlights the fact that translators’ work brings the enlightenment to their nations by introducing new ideas and literary trends, usually adding a streak of “high” source culture to the mainstream or “low” target culture.

But translation can also be used to promote a political agenda or manipulate people’s perception of who they are and what the value of their culture could be. As Edith Grossman asserts, “oppressive regimes have an incontestable penchant for dominating, corrupting, and stultifying language. Despotic governments are willing to go to extraordinary lengths in their usually successful, tragic official efforts to control, restrict, and narrow access to the spoken and written word.”² Grossman’s understanding of translation’s contribution to the ideological discourse stems from her belief that to control the language means to control the knowledge of the people. In her view, the latter is one of the ultimate powers a state or a political regime can obtain. Naturally, attempts of controlling the written language, including the language of translation, were pursued in many countries over the course of human history. For instance, the Soviet Union was notorious for introducing one of the most rigid censorial systems in the

¹ Wolf, Tatiana, and Bayley John. *Pushkin on Literatures*. Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press. 1986. p. 277.

² Grossman, Edith. *Why Translation Matters*. New Haven, CT, Yale University Press. 2010. p. 53.

twentieth century. The Communist Party tried to control not only its own media and literary output, but also translations of “western” works – poetry, drama, and fiction written by European and American authors. Limiting readers’ access to the western literary canon was one of the crucial aspects of the Soviet control over artistic production, which is the main reason why the works of European and American literature banned under the Bolshevik regime became popular only after the ban had been lifted.

Although the attempts of ideological control either in the Soviet Union or in the countries of the so-called Eastern Bloc were invariably strong while the regimes lasted, the power of a written word would eventually overrule that of the state. Translation in particular emblemizes literature’s ability to overcome prohibitions and last beyond the eras of state-imposed censorial rules. In translation, a work of literature can be adjusted to fit the ideological requirements of the day, often even in agreement with a totalitarian regime’s political agenda, but as soon as freedom of speech and publications is established, there might appear another version of a literary work, retranslated by someone who is unwilling to see his or her favorite poem or short story reach the national audience in a distorted form.

Janko Jesenský’s novel, *The Democrats*, is an example of how translation may be manipulated to achieve a political goal. In 1957, it was translated to Russian by Larisa Vasileva and Irina Ivanova and published in thousands of copies by the State Publishing House (*Gosizdat*). The reason for the novel’s popularity with Soviet editors was its author’s “pro-democratic agenda,” which, as N. Rogova tells us in her afterword to the Russian translation, allowed Jasensky to “reflect the greatest injustice of the capitalist world order in his works.”³ Blatantly political, this statement was, nonetheless, off the mark, for Jesenský’s novel heralded not only the ripening of the Slovak literary production, but also Slovak

³ Jesenský, Janko. *Demokraty*. Moscow: State Publishing House. 1957. p. 502.

literature's breaking free from the Austro-Hungarian literary canon. His literary efforts helped separate Slovak letters from the paradigmatic "big brother" of a national literature, thus undermining any attempts to establish a hierarchy of literary and political values the Soviet ideologues deemed so important. The translation of several chapters from Jesenský's novel that constitutes the bulk of this senior project is an attempt to undermine the ideologically motivated attempt at translating this author as purely a "democrat at heart." The goal of this work is to show the literary merits of Jesenský's fiction – its verbal playfulness, irony, colloquial richness, and narratological complexity. Although I translated from my native language, the Slovak, I checked my translation against that done by Vasilieva and Ivanova to analyze the differences between their version and mine and to correct their ideological renderings and misinterpretations in my translation.

II.

"Slovak literature itself can be compared to Cinderella: the beauty, ability, and potential for fame are there, but it is unknown, or at any rate less well known than it deserves to be – to the English-speaking world, at any rate."

Peter Petro⁴

Slovak language has existed since the time of Great Moravia, but written work in it was little known before the 19th century. The Slovak literature began during the years when writer and grammarian Anton Bernolák (1787-1844)⁵ established first norms of the Slovak

⁴ Petro, Peter. *A History of Slovak Literature*. Montreal:McGill-Queen's University Press.1997. xi.

⁵ Anton Bernolák - (1762 - 1813) one of the first scholars in Slovakia. He tried to codify the language for the first time, so that the reform ended up being named after him (Bernolákovčina). The core of the norms was based on the western cultural dialect of Slovakia, and the orthography was the phonological. Although Bernolák's attempt to codify Slovak language was officially unsuccessful, important writers like Ján Holý and Juraj Fádly accepted it and used it for literary purposes. Petro, Peter. *A History of Slovak Literature*. Montreal:McGill-Queen's University Press.1997. 46-47.

language, eventually to become official. However, for decades, the Austro-Hungarian monarchy refused to formally accept the language of the majority of the country's population. The acceptance followed only in 1844-1852, after Ľudovít Štúr⁶ codified the Slovak. Since then, the rules of the language have not changed; they used today mostly in their unaltered, 19th - century form.

Needless to say, young Slovak literature had to overcome many obstacles because of the Slovaks' political dependence on Austro-Hungary. From the end of Great Moravia (907 AD) and until the beginning of the 19th century, the empire systematically suppressed the Slovak national culture. Thus, the 1,000-years rule of Hungarians or Austro-Hungarians over the Slovak minority had slowed down and even stopped the evolution of the nation's literature and thus, the nation itself. It is a true tribute to the people's staunch spirit that such circumstances have obliterated neither cultural traditions of the Slovaks nor the development of their vernacular.

Literary translation was one of the most important aspects of linguistic and literary development in Slovakia. At the very beginning of Slovak literature, all the important poets and scholars in Slovakia were also outstanding translators of literary masterpieces from other languages. For instance, the poet and translator Ján Holý (1785-1849) used the newly standardized Slovak language to translate Virgil's *Aeneid* as well as some of Virgil's pastoral poetry. His translation proved the capability of Slovak language to express complex poetic ideas and imitate new poetic forms. Another significant figure in the early years of Slovak literature was Pavol Országh Hviezdoslav (1849-1921). In his Hungarian-sounding middle name "Országh," but also in his compound Slovak name, one can detect several national cultures blending together. Born and raised in the region of current-day Slovakia, where he

⁶ Ľudovít Štúr (1815 - 1856) was politician, poet, professor and one of the most important figures in Slovak National Revival. He modified Bernolák's norms of the language by speaking on this subject at a meeting of linguists in Bratislava in 1843. Later, Štúr's changes were officially accepted. Petro, 65-67.

studied first his mother tongue Slovak, and then Hungarian, German, Russian and Polish languages, Hviezdoslav became one of the greatest Slovak poets and an exponent of realism in literature.

Among many others dedicated to fostering a fruitful exchange between the Slovak and other languages, Hviezdoslav made an enormous contribution to the evolving Slovak literature not only through his own works in the Slovak language, but also through translation. He translated from Russian, German, Hungarian and Polish languages, including works of such authors as Goethe (*Faust*, *Iphigenia in Tauris*), Pushkin (*Boris Godunov*, *The Gypsies*, *The Water Nymph*) Shakespeare (*Hamlet*), Lermontov (*A song about the Emperor Ivan Vasilievich*; *The Song of the Merchant Kalashnikov*). Slovak literary critics of those days hailed his translation of *Hamlet* as a great achievement.⁷

Translation work on this high poetic level was crucial not only because of the literary value of the source text, but also because of the uplifting moral message the translation itself conveyed to the Slovak nation during the years of political and cultural oppression. Paul Selver, an English writer and one of the best translators of the Czech literature, once said: “By these translations, Hviezdoslav carried out a task of great educational value to the Slovak people: he extended the [internal] resources of the Slovak language.”⁸ In my opinion, Hviezdoslav’s translations were precise, sophisticated, elegant, and very melodious.

Slovakia would have never succeeded in becoming an independent nation without the systematic hard work on its own language development by the scholars I have acknowledged above. The figures I mentioned represent just a small selection from the overall list of names that includes contributions to the Slovak literature and translation. It was due to Holý’s, Hviezdoslav’s and other translator’s achievements that, from the very beginning of Slovak

⁷ Nicoll Allardyce. *Shakespeare Survey*, Volume. 4 Interpretation. New York, NY. 2002. p. 109.

⁸ Ibid.

literature, the nation's translation canon was evolving simultaneously with the language itself, forming an extensive and variegated translation tradition. However, because Slovakia was never a highly populated nation, this rich tradition of translation and the beauty of the literary work of Slovak authors are not really known in the West – or worldwide.

For a long time, the acknowledgement of the Slovak literature's merit was made only in national literary circles. Fortunately, at present, the Slovak government offers translators and publishers greater support. Due to these efforts, the nation's literature has achieved international recognition and has become more available worldwide. Nowadays, the main focus of translators from the Slovak is on contemporary literature, rather than on works written in Slovakia before the 1930s. I have chosen for my Senior Project to translate excerpts from Jesenský *The Democrats*, partly to overturn this trend and make the selection of literary works in English broader. Jesenský was one of the first modernist Slovak writers; he had a significant influence on the development of Slovak culture and literature. His novel is important because of the author's challenging usage of the archaic, colloquial, and literary Slovak language. As I have already mentioned, it used to be frequently misinterpreted because of its ideological underpinnings. But that was more characteristic of Jesenský's translations to Russian and other Eastern European languages. In the West, it has been frequently overlooked not only because its political content, perceived in the 1930-60s as pro-Communist, seemed off putting to publishers, but also due to the complexity of its verbal structure.

III.

The novel *Democrats* and some of Jesenský's novellas and poems were translated to many languages as well as filmed. Joan Rosemary Edwards made a first translation of Jesenský's work to English in 1961.⁹ It was a solid, and, overall, truthful translation. But it lacked contemporaneity – the sense that the author's ideas had evolved with time and required a new rhetorical make-over. Although I could translate from the Russian to English, I have decided to translate the work from Slovak. The original language is important for the precision and originality of my translation; moreover, I am Slovak myself. My goal was to make sure that this new rendering of Jesenský's novel would give my readers both a thorough familiarity with the text and a chance to look at it through contemporary eyes. I must say that, during the process of translation, I referred to the Russian translation for many reasons. One of them was to see the changes introduced by other translators to the work I understand so well but have found challenging to render into English. And yet it is the original that has guided me along my path. My consulting the Russian text was necessary, because it showed me what particular phrases or words I can adjust in the target language or what I should keep absolutely without changes. It was also important, as I noted above, to avoid the mistakes of politicizing or misinterpreting the original in an ideological way – as the Russian translators did, prompted by their censors.

Janko Jesensky was born in 1874 into an aristocratic family in Turčiansky Svätý Martin¹⁰. His father was a lawyer and an important participant in the Slovak National Movement, the so-called “Memorandum of the Slovak Nation”. Jesenský received his earliest education in his hometown, and later he studied at the gymnasium in Banska Bystrica and Rimavska Sobota. He graduated from the faculty of law in Presov (1893-1896) and received

⁹ Jesenský, Janko, *The Democrats*. Transl. Jean Rosemary Edwards. Artia, 1961.

¹⁰ In Slovakia.

a doctorate degree in Cluj¹¹ (1896-1900). After his studies he worked as a lawyer in Lučenec, Bytča and Martin, where he fell in love for the first time with the young pianist and singer Oľga Kraft. Although he never married Ms. Kraft, the meeting was an important chapter of Jesenský's life. About seventy love letters to Oľga were found and published after Jesenský's death.¹² Their written correspondence serves not only as a proof of their strong feelings but also it shows how much Jesenský reflected his private life in his work. After the years spent in Romania, the writer moved back to Slovakia and opened his own business as a lawyer in Bánovce nad Bebravou. Through his work, he became very close with a daughter of the historian Julius Botto whose expertise was on the history of Ľudovít Štúr's family and his codification of the Slovak language. Jesenský eventually married Anna Botto.

After the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, he was imprisoned as a Slovak nationalist for his support of *Pan Slavism*, the ideology of united Slavic nations. Released from prison in 1915, he had to fight at the Russian front. He immediately defected on the side of Russians, where he entered the Czechoslovak legion. Jesenský's desire to contribute to the development of the Slovak language and culture convinced him to return back to Slovakia in 1919. As an educated member of the nobility, he was twice elected mayor as well as the head of the Union of the Slovak Writers' Society. He was strongly against the splitting of Czechoslovakia during the Second World War as well as against the establishing of an independent Slovak state. He expressed his disagreement with these political changes by publishing political pamphlets and poems. Illegally smuggled to London, these works were featured on the BBC radio's Czechoslovak station during the war. They were also published as satirical pieces, "*For the Ire of the Day*" ("Na zlobu dňa"), in a Czech newspaper in London.

¹¹ In Romania.

¹² Jesenský, Janko, Gáfrik Michal, and Oľga Kraftová. *Letters to Ms. Oľga*. Bratislava: Tatran.t. Svornost. 1970.

Janko Jesensky made a significant contribution to the Slovak culture not only as a writer, poet and politician, but also as a translator. As an enthusiast of the Russian language and culture, he translated the works of Alexander Pushkin, Alexander Blok and Sergey Yesenin into Slovak. One of his most significant achievements is his translation of *Eugene Onegin* (1942). He worked on it after the first translation of *Onegin*, by Samuel Bodický,¹³ appeared in Slovak. Jesensky's return to Pushkin's novel testified to the fact that in the course of those forty years the Slovak language and literature had undergone significant progress; not only Jesensky's translation suggests this, but also his desire to compete with the work of an already well-known translation. It is not accidental, that, having completed a linguistic comparison of several Slovak translations of *Eugene Onegin*, critic Slavomír Ondrejovič¹⁴ said: "From the point of view of a modern critic, one can feel that Sam Bodický's translation suffers, because it belongs to the early stage of the Slovak language <development>." Jesenský took his translation to a monumental, almost romantic sphere," – the sphere other Slovak writers did not dare to explore earlier.¹⁵

The peak of Jesenský's prose is his novel *The Democrats* (1934). He put his lifelong political and administrative experience in this work. Jesensky's engagement in political life during the first Czechoslovak Republic revealed to him the real background of democratic parties and their corrupt and unscrupulous methods. In the novel, Jesensky mercilessly dissects social prejudices and conflicts of his time. Its title itself could be understood as an ironic commentary on the novel's main theme, the protagonists' – and, broader,

¹³ Samuel Bodický (1850 - 1919) was a priest, writer and translator. He wrote literary biographies of such Russian and Ukrainian writers as A. Pushkin, M. Lermontov, and N. V. Gogol. He also translated works from the English, Hungarian and Russian. Pašteka, Július. *Slovenská Dramatika v Epoche Realizmu*. Bratislava: Tatran, 1990. 53-54.

¹⁴ Slavomír Ondrejovič (1946) is a contemporary linguist and translator as well as a director of "Ludovít Štúr Institute of Linguistics" in Bratislava. His field of scholarly research is in linguistics, sociolinguistics, syntactic and lexical semantics, phonetics and orthoepy. His translations are mainly from the German. See <http://www.juls.savba.sk/~slavoo/>

¹⁵ Ondrejovič, Slavomír. "Poznámky k A. S. Puškinovi Ako Lingvistovi." *Slavica Nitriancica* 3. Issue 2 (2014): 13-15.

intelligentsia's failed attempt at democratizing the turn-of-the century Czechoslovakia. The novel consists of two parts and does not follow a continuous story line. Its plot is rather a diverse mosaic reflecting different aspects of Czechoslovakia's political evolution. Probably it was the author's intention to show many examples of the political ineptitude so as to condemn the tempestuous relationships between intellectuals, radicals, and common people of his day and age. His judgment reflects his moral principles: honesty, strong belief in social equality, staunchness, and readiness to act for the cause he found important. Jesensky, however, criticizes the political practices of his time not only from the moral point of view, but also from the position of a democratically-committed citizen. His protagonist, Dr. Landik, is a very conscientious young doctor. His character, actions, and way of thinking have an indisputable autobiographical proximity to the author's own views.

As mentioned above, the novel is divided into two parts. Its first part, of 24 chapters, was published in 1934. The second part, of 28 chapters, appeared in print in 1938. The only elements which connect these two parts are the characters and the theme of evolving and faltering democracy. The Old Town, easily recognizable as the historical area of present Bratislava, provides the setting for the novel's first part, while the locus of its second part is the metropolitan Bratislava, with all its environs. Written in the satirical and even derisive mode, which escalates as the narrative progresses, the novel reaches its apogee with Landik's removal from the office and the separation between the two romantically involved protagonists. Since the novel concerns social inequality, then central to anyone's life in Czechoslovakia, Jesensky writes in it not only with humor, but also with anger. Social inequality is reflected in Landik's relationship with Hana, who is a maidservant and, thus, socially inferior to him. Nowhere else is Jesensky more explicit about the borders that then existed between classes and social groups. In the first Czechoslovak Republic as well as

through the writer's life, equality was possible on paper only. In real life, as *The Democrats* reveals, the people were severely divided into the rich and the poor.

I have decided to translate the first five chapters of the novel, because I wanted to preserve the continuity of the plot and introduce the readers to the story's protagonists, themes, and motifs. In these chapters, Jesenský's main ideological message is clearly outlined. Besides that, he shapes the principal characters of the story in these chapters, revealing their characteristic qualities to the reader and investigating the early complexities of their relationship. Although the chapters are just a fraction of the novel, and the characters' actions and thinking would change fast over its consecutive parts, I find the novel's beginning a most convincing and revealing exposure of Jesenský's style and artistic approach in general.

IV.

The story of the first book starts with the conversation between the two main Characters, Doctor Landik and a butcher named Tolkosh. They are having a long talk about the ridiculous inequality of the citizens of the "Old Town." They do not find it appealing that people are always trying to stay separate from one another by forming a variety of parties, which are accessible only for those with a degree of prestige or social rank. Later, in a friendly heart-to-heart conversation, the butcher confesses that he likes a servant girl, Hana. He complains that, because of social stigma and prejudice, he cannot ask her out. Both indignant, Landik and Tolkosh decide to create a new party, *Equality*. Its goal is to vanquish hypocrisy.

The problems begin when Landik decides to demonstrate to Tolkosh that it is alright to go out with a servant girl. Having asked Hana out, Landik falls in love with her, which

results in Tolkosh's getting jealous. The butcher sends anonymous letters to Landik's mother as well as his supervisor, Mr. Brigantik. In those epistles, Tolkosh writes about Landik's affair with Hana. Although Brigantik himself is married to a daughter of a menial laborer, he summons Landik to his office to discuss the inappropriateness of his affair with a low-class woman. They argue, with the peak of their conversation coinciding with Landik's mentioning the lowly background of Brigantik's wife. After this, Landik's career is in peril, so that his mother has to send him to his aunt Kornelia's house. There, the doctor of law meets a young Želka Petrovičová. The young lady's personality is very different from Hana's but he starts to like her anyway. One day when Landik and Želka decide to go out in a horse-wagon, a prominent aristocrat, Dubec, tries to overtake them in his carriage. Landik attempts to race Dubec, which causes an accident: his wagon falls on its side. After this misfortune, Landik returns home. He also decides to reconnect with Hana by giving her the red shoes he had bought for her earlier.

Landik continues to face complaints about his behavior, which eventually brings him to president himself. Landik tries to convince him that he did not do anything wrong. Finally, the scandal slowly subdues, while Landik continues to meet with Hana. It turns out that Landik, Hana and her friend Milka, also a servant girl, can meet freely for a while in the Rozvalidov's residence, where Hana works, since the family has left for vacation. And yet, their happiness ends when Hana and Milka decide to visit Landik at his home. Mr. Rozvalid comes to visit at that very time, only to discover the girls in Landik's house. Although the young people are just talking, Mr. Rozvalid is shocked and even scandalized. After this encounter is made public, Landik has to relocate to a different office in another part of Bratislava. His new workplace is now far away from the Old Town. Meanwhile, Hana and Milka get paid a half year's advance salary before the Rozvalidovs fire them.

At the end of the novel's first part, Landik is busy at the office. On his very first day there, his boss asks him to prepare a speech for the Indian king. Landik meets with Želka again; the young lady helps him prepare the text for the occasion and translates his speech to French. Unfortunately, the event gets canceled, so that Landik never gets a chance to talk. Despite the fact that he never read his speech, a rumor spreads in the city that his oratorical feat has, indeed, happened. Suddenly everyone talks about his excellent command of French. Landik immediately becomes very popular with his fellow citizens; his old "sins" are forgiven.

The beginning of the second part starts with Jesenský's portrayal of Želka's father. Mr. Petrovič sits in his office and studies the program and regulations for the Council Elections which are soon to begin in the county. He knows how to take advantage of the rules and how to go around them, so that one could carry out his goals without breaking the law. He forms a plan to succeed, for which he is also going to maintain good relationships with his colleagues. The only problem is that he does not know whom he should or should not support in the elections. A seasoned politician, he decides that it would be best for him to remain silent and wait. He expects his parrot Lulu to agree with him. Instead of giving an anticipated response, though, the parrot says: "Kiss me, kiss me." Mr. Petrovič is upset. He wonders who could possibly kiss in his office. Would it be his wife or Želka?

One day, he finds Želka with Landik. Mr. Petrovič does not like their relationship is becoming romantic because of Landik's history with Hana. His joining the family could put Petrovič's political career in danger, which would be the most misfortunate thing for him. After the candidates get nominated by their parties (with Petrovič's not being successful), he decides that he needs someone who could help him succeed. Želka immediately suggests Landik. Mr. Petrovič does not like the idea but he agrees. He thinks he can please his

daughter while earning more votes from the younger constituency because of Landik's age. When Mr. Petrovič invites Landik to his office, the latter meets his friend Mikeš there, who mentions Hana. Landik does not want to accept the offer. He does not like the job and begins to dislike Želka. His plans are back with Hana. Unfortunately, as a man in need of money, he does not have any other option and has to accept Petrovič's offer.

While Landik struggles to fit in with his new employer, the Rozvalid family where Hana used to work encounters financial troubles. Mr. Rozvalid is alone; he feels bad about his firing Hana. He recalls how they even wanted to adopt the girl, but at that time Hana said she was not an orphan. Sadly, the father she cherished had no interest in her. It was the wealthy man, Dubec, whom Landik met earlier at his aunt's place. Rozvalid's thoughts are interrupted when he receives a visit from Petrovič accompanied by Mikeš. After their conversation with Hana, Petrovič is amazed. He tells the girl that he would marry her. He competes with Landik for Hana, but when Petrovič sees that the girl does not love him, he leaves so that Hana could finally be with Landik. In the end, Mr. Petrovič decides that Dubec would be an ideal husband for his daughter Želka; he gives them a blessing and prepares a wedding for them. Želka becomes Hana's stepmother and Landik marries Hana.

V.

In the original Slovak version of *The Democrats*, Jesenský uses either very formal, "official" or bureaucratic language or colloquialisms, folk expressions, and slang. By choosing this stylistic approach, he tries to emphasize not only the differences between certain characters, but also deviations between ranks in Slovak society. For instance, Jesenský resorts to the colloquial language when depicting the servant Hana or other characters of her class and rank. He also makes a clear linguistic distinction between the

“educated” characters, Landik included, and the high-minded simpletons, such as the wealthy butcher Tolkosh. When Landik talks in the novel, his speech is characterized by the proliferation of sophisticated literary and poetic words, while the register of Tolkosh’s speech stays on the lower level.

My approach to translating the colloquial dialogues in Jesenský’s novel is based on my realization that the simplicity of uneducated characters’ word choice should be reflected in the simplicity of the sentences. Instead of translating their phrases into grammatically perfect English, I have tried to keep usually truncated, shortened, with distorted grammar. I have also chosen the lower register of vocabulary for rendering Hana’s and Tolskosh’s speech. This distinction comes through mainly in the sections based on dialogical speech.

The other side of Jesenský’s writing is very formal and poetic. As I mentioned before, he uses this flowery or bureaucratic language for portraying educated characters and other figures of a higher social rank. In the chapters I have translated, the main character Landik comes through as a highly moral and sophisticated person. He also shines as someone with fine intellect and curiosity. Jesenský emphasizes Landik’s being different from others by using all kinds of poetic constructions and idiomatic expressions for his interior monologues and pronouncements. I have tried to retain this distinction, keeping in mind that it is difficult to adapt certain phrases from the Slovak language to English because of the differences in their syntax structures. The Slovak, along with other Slavic languages, is reflexive (it has both conjugations and declensions) and morphologically more flexible than English. When Jesenský uses challenging forms of expression, I try to find a suitable equivalent in English, sometimes replicating Slovak grammatical structures with phrases that have a more nuanced meaning and mood in English. I rarely decide to provide a literal translation of Slovak idioms and phrases, for I often choose to resort to British or American idioms. And yet, when

Jesenský uses culturally specific names or specifically Slovak ways of addressing people (as in “Pan,” for example), I keep the original Slovak words and explain them in my footnotes.

To summarize my translation project, I should say that the translation of Jesenský’s *The Democrats* has been a challenging and unique project. Its two main challenges have been the stylistic complexity of the translation and the need to render Jesenský’s poetic language in English, which is my second language. That said, because I worked on the novel written in my mother tongue, I felt responsible for the accuracy, transparency, and flexibility of my translation. My responsibility to my culture has pushed me to be more precise and meticulous in my work. The affinity between my and the author’s national background has turned my translation of Jesenský into English a personal quest – and a tribute to the culture that has sustained and inspired me all my life.

Translation from Jesenský's *The Democrats* (Chapters 1-5)

Chapter I: A New Party, "Equality," Is Established

The big clock, on the wall of *At the Ram* canteen struck an hour after midnight. The full, melancholy, resonant sound of the strike lingered in the silent, almost empty room for a long while. All decent guests had already left some time ago. Only an innkeeper with curly hair like that of a gypsy was lazily bumping around among the tables. Here and there he would brush his hip against a chair or a tabletop, then crumple his face and mumble into his moustache – steering, like an old autumn fly, to the table where his last two guests were still sitting. A gas lamp was blasting above them. The innkeeper had already jerked off tablecloths from all other tables to show them that this was a new day and time to go home. When the ruse did not work, he started putting chairs on tables and dimming lamps that weren't in use. He opened a window to let some fresh air in and sat down nearby. A couple of times he would even yawn loudly, clapping his mouth with a hand. When the guests had failed to respond to this, he dozed off. Rain, weak and silent, could be heard rustling through the leaves of chestnuts in front of the open window. The air pouring in from without alleviated the stuffiness, diluting the thick air.

The two guests at the table also looked as if they might fall asleep. The younger one, dark-haired in a small cheap boater, skinny, shaved, sharp-featured, his front teeth with a tiny gap between them sticking out just like a marmot's, was looking down at the table thoughtlessly. He clutched a cane between his knees, his hands in off-white summer gloves resting on its knob. The gloves nicely matched his yellowish clothes and bowtie. Sometimes,

he would take a deep breath, as if in a dream. The other person was older, a man in his forties, with reddish hair, a pale, somewhat freckled face, and a thick drooping white moustache. Dressed in a cap, a soft bright shirt without a tie, and a stained suit of clothes, he was occasionally puffing on a cigar. A bottle of wine and two empty glasses was standing between them.

They were thinking about creating a party for which they had already found a name: “Equality.” After a long conversation and much counting, first on their fingers and later, when they had run out, on paper, they agreed that such a small place like their Old City had too many parties for its meager five thousand inhabitants. What, the parties multiplied like rabbits when no hunter would chase them. Don’t we have the Red Falcon, the White Eagle, the International Union of Gymnasts, the Christian Scouts and the Jewish Maccabees, unions of tourists, even of vagrants... There’s the *Matica*,¹⁶ the Enlightenment Union, the Enlightenment though Agriculture group, the League of Educators, the Slovak League... Had there been just these few!... But we have the Peace League that wants to stop the war. And it will! Then the Masaryk League, the Air-Force League, the Anti-Revisionist League, the Red Cross, the White Cross, the Union of Slovak Women, *Živena*¹⁷, the Union of Slavic Women, *Libuša*, the Union of Fallen Girls, *Záchrana*¹⁸... All kinds of circles and clubs, the list just won’t stop: the Catholic Circle, the Evangelic Circle, the Philatelist Circle, the Club of Chess Players, that of Old Bachelors, of Soccer Players, Tennis Players, Rowers, of Cactus Growers... There is the army as well: the Legionnaires on the right and on the left, the 1918 Slovak Volunteers, the 1919 Slovak Volunteers... The Invalids... The Firemen...

– The Hunting Guild, – chimed in the older man after a pause.

¹⁶ *Matica Slovenska*, a scientific and cultural institution established in Slovakia in 1863.

¹⁷ *Živena*, the oldest union of Slovak women established in 1869, which was a reaction to the strong nationalistic movement of the Slovaks.

¹⁸ *Záchrana*. established in Bratislava in 1922 as a “Union of Fallen Girls.” The union was helping young “delinquent” women who arrived in Bratislava to find a place to work and living quarters.

– The Canine Guild. The Animal Protection League, – added the younger one.

– The Union of Abstainers.

– *Chevra Kadisha*¹⁹.

– Let’s also count the political secretariats.

– Well, here we go: political secretariats of the Folk, National, Agrarian, Social-Democratic, National-Democratic, National-Socialist, and Communist parties...

– And look, in pubs, every table would be taken up by a society of sorts: Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, Jews, different politicians, Lutherans, Catholics, public officers, private officers, and the homeless!

All of these groups were disgusted that they had become rivals, so they turned away from one another like thieves. It is as if one would crush a rock to smithereens and all the pieces would then spread out and align themselves in layers according to their nationality, religion, race, gender, class, wealth, and political affiliation, but each piece would think itself better and stronger than the other... No, people should become like bees. Let everyone have their own hive or honeycomb, let them fly and collect pollen from flowers, let them fill hive cells with honey, and let them also have a common field. It is necessary, for we could all meet there and be equals, there would be no social or professional differences, no rank, no family, no party, no religion, and no race. Everyone there would be equal. This has to be emphasized. Human decency would be the only condition on which one could enter this common field. Common, pure, and equal, it should operate like a society and will be called Equality. So they agreed to establish such a society. And to show that they were equal, they immediately started to address each other on the first-name basis.²⁰

¹⁹ Chevra Kadisha, Jewish Burial Brotherhood. Its members were offering all the funeral rituals free of charge.

²⁰ In Slovak, using the second-person singular pronoun as a form of address is called “tykat’.” Only people who know each other very well or are approximately of the same age may use this form of communication.

Normally, during the day, there existed a significant difference between them. The older man, wearing the cap and the colorful shirt was a butcher by the name of Tolkosh. The younger one, in a cheap straw boater, was Dr. Landik who worked as a commissar at a district office. And yet, according to the principles of the Equality Society, there wasn't any difference between them, although one was an educated man and the other was not, one produced written paragraphs and the other handled meat, one carved out verdicts for civic violations, and the other carved pork joints in his slaughterhouse, one lashed at people and the other lashed at an ox. None of this could be an impediment to social equality. So they clicked their glasses and buried the Moloch²¹ of differences. If only the whole Old Town would do this as well! Then equality would bloom like a rose bush in the spring, eliminating all the differences between people.

Having switched to familiar terms, they also moved to more intimate topics. In fact, the butcher began to talk in whispers, by putting his hand in front of his mouth, so that only the commissar could hear him. He said that that amongst his customers, the girl he liked the most to serve was a cook called Hana – the one who worked for the director of the Rozvalid Bank. Such a beautiful girl. Tolkosh admired her. He would even think of marrying her, except that his bourgeois status wouldn't allow him, somehow, to even get nearer to her. Landik was listening, but he wasn't very interested in the subject. He wanted to talk more about his police cases, for the city was seething with crime. He had nearly five hundred unfinished cases on his desk, and he was often swamped, there was so much work, and besides, his superior was a very strict and pedantic person who would often tell Landik to hand his work book over to him so that he could leave notes and comments in it, peppered with question and exclamation marks in red pencil. Tolkosh, in his turn, could not care less.

Otherwise, they would be forced to use the second-person plural pronoun (“Vy,” “vykat”). This is a very respectful form of address, but at the same time it makes the interlocutors realize their distance.

²¹ Moloch is an ancient name for God.

Now they went silent. They wished to be quiet after all that drinking. Languor took over, they wanted neither talk nor move. Certainly, each one of them thought, it would be so much better at home, even more so under a blanket. If only they didn't have to walk back, but rather fly, covering all the space in between here and home and suddenly diving into bed.

A gush of air from the open window refreshed and awoke them. The older man's cigar went out. He puffed out the last whiff of smoke and stuffed the cardboard mouthpiece in his vest's side pocket.

– Let's go, – he said, – We shouldn't sleep here. – Determined to move out, he stood up and stretched. – I'm sick of sitting down, my back has gone numb.

– Wait, – the younger man protested, – let's finish our drinks. It's raining anyway. And the wine would go to waste. Sit down, wait for the rain to be over.

Landik put his hat down again and began to pull off his gloves.

– I'll go. I need to get my sleep.

– Sleep addict, you!

– I'm not that, but it's a pity to waste the night like this. We've been sitting here since eight o'clock, and, honestly, we haven't come up with anything to break the ice of our stiff community or liven up our social life. The society's leader should be an important person – a minister, perhaps, or your boss Brigantik. We'r too weak. We alone cannot pull it all together. You said it yourself, we are nobodies, so it won't work with us alone.

– I would rather ask the devil than Brigantik. I've told you this guy has a bag of paragraphs in place of a head. The best would be to put a wealthy bourgeois, like yourself, in charge of it all. We can't bring educated minds to our society by force; they have to join us on their own.

– But you’ve just said that we are simply shoes, pots, and bars of soap! Nothing else – just craftsmen. A chunk of work done and forgotten. You said we don’t have a sense of how it’s done. We won’t even leave a mark. Smart people should stoop down to our level and help us! We cannot bring ourselves up to where you are. Won’t our priest do?

Landik perked up and said with a feeling:

– He also doesn’t know anything or anyone else besides his church. He might go out to the cemetery, but then, he’d rather go to *Steiner* for a beer. Yes, his job is to spread Christian love and equality, but he only thinks of his wide mouth and giant belly. Of stuffing himself. Eating, drinking, earning a penny – that’s what he finds the most important thing. He’s surely blind and deaf to the higher-meaning things that don’t add anything to his kitchen.

– Like most people... Still, we should get someone smart to lead us.

– What kind of trumpet, what thunder will you heed, – Landik was raging now, – so that you could finally understand that everything depends on you, the bourgeois, and not on those fifty “smart minds” that will tell you the truth, manage you, heal you, teach you, defend you at courts and read you a sermon about Christian morals. There are four thousands of you and only fifty of them. And yet, it is them who rule. They walk all over you, like they walk over Main Street. And you don’t feel it. Do you really want to be mute, cold and obedient as that street is? Do you believe that only others should step on you, pull heavy wagons over you, spit and dump trash on your back... Do you want to be water, dust, mud, pebbles, bits of asphalt? To let anything green or useful grow through you?... Equality is meant for you, so that you could educate yourself, find confidence in your power and domination... It would be no good to establish equality parties with priests. Same thing as planting a garden on a rock.

He made a quick gesture with his hand. In his mind, he was happy to have spoken so nicely. But when the older man did not sit down, Landik stood up as well. He picked up his white vest, stomped his feet to straighten his pants, put the hat on in front of the mirror and fixed his bow tie.

“What a dummy,” Tolkosh thought when he saw it, but his animosity subdued after Landik said soothingly:

– Come on! You don’t have to be angry.

He approached the exit, opened the door and let the older man go first.

It was really dark outside. The rain had not stopped but it was not so heavy. The light in the canteen went out as soon as they left. At first, they could not make out their way. Some distance away, almost at the end of the long, straight street, a gas lamp was blinking weakly. To stay dry, they had to walk under the wide roofs of small houses. Landik took off and marched on, hatless. Peering into the darkness, they could recognize tree shapes near the road, wooden fences around them, buildings, windows, tall telegraph poles, chimneys on the roofs. Landik kept on talking, trying to pacify the butcher, as if asking forgiveness about comparing the common people to Main Street and its pebbles.

– Don’t be mad at me. Even I am just a street pebble. Even I can’t get up, fly and crash through a cold forehead. I have to wait for someone to pick me up and throw me far.

– You see! So why do you ask that we fly on our own, you, genius. What we need is an agitator. Wish we could all move.

– But both of us have this idea. It’s an old idea, spoken a hundred thousand times, then drenched in blood, then again victorious, and finally, kicked away like a worn-out slipper. Let’s bring the idea back.

– That idea! – laughed the butcher.

– What are you laughing at? – asked Landik and stopped in his tracks. – An idea is what puts everything into motion. It's the core, the corn, the seed. An embryo from which a child will appear and then grow up to be a genius. We'll take the seed, plant it, and then you will see how a tree will grow. We will make the idea heard again. That will be a beginning of everything. The intellect will speak through the mouth, reaching all the ears...

Landik put his arm around Tolkosh's shoulder and they continued to walk.

– If everyone, – continued Landik, obviously enjoying his own words, – had one and the same, honest, living idea, only one idea, which means nothing yet to you, then all the Jews will establish proper Slovak companies above their shops and start speaking Slovak. That's just one example, for clarity's sake. Then all those fifty smart people will bow low to us – or they will go to hell. – This, Landik finished angrily. He stopped.

The butcher sighed and retorted sadly:

– You need real spirit to implement such an idea and tools, too, but that's another thing altogether. The idea needs to exist first, that's it. But it doesn't. At least, it's not burning hot. Not even in you. That's why I've been laughing.

– What do you mean, not even in me?

– Not really in you. You are like every other smart guy, a proud aristocrat. You are a democrat, but just in jest. In your daily life, you think we stink. We sense it, and therefore we don't trust you. It's true, the idea has to be spoken, but there's more to it. Otherwise it's bullshit. You can say anything out loud. But your idea has to have its roots in your heart. If it's not in your heart, it doesn't go on fire. It won't set anyone on fire, either. It won't convince... Even you go to smelly pubs to drink with those below yourself. You will be giving us a hand, sharing the idea with us, talking, and we would still feel you were just pretending. We won't be able to overcome the feeling of difference between you and

ourselves. And I am sure you would rather be in the Central Coffeehouse, looking at the girl behind the counter or at your newspaper. From your soft arm chair you would look at the street through the window, rather than sit on a wooden bench in a small pub full of smoke and stare at our old coats, cheap caps, those dirty crafty hands with callused palms or listen to our naive, stupid conversations and watch our coarse manners, our drooling and spitting... Even now, you must think what I say now is stupid and vulgar... You don't feel at home among us. You pretend. You, the nobleman, come down to stay between us. We don't trust you. That's why you cannot even convince us, pull us over to your side. All wise guys are like you. In your eyes – you said it right – we are simply junk. Your thoughts don't come out of your heart. You don't have honest beliefs so you can't convince anyone in them.

– What a sensitive, touchy and proud nation you are, – Landik interrupted him.

– Who makes me come down to you? Do I want anything from you? Am I a politician who needs your votes? Do I want to sell you shares, or belts, or cloth, or fat, or pigs? Do I want to chair your Folk Bank? Do I raise money for anything?... One has to hug and kiss you right away! Or you'd begin to sulk. Do I have to smoke the same cigars as you do or have a torn coat sleeve? Do I have to get sick from the stale market beer and start spitting on the floor to convince you and become your friend?... That's the idea coming from your heart!

He laughed contemptuously and ran his cane against the metal roll-up door of a shop. The dark and silent street was overcome by a nasty rattle.

The advocates of equality stopped under a gas lamp. Its light made the drizzle visible. The older man stuck to his defiant silence. He did not want to respond to his younger friend's humiliating comments. Landik waited. When he realized that he was waiting in vain, he gave Tolkosk his hand and asked him teasingly:

– And what about your Hana? You, proud aristocrat. Hmm?

– Cut it out, – the butcher said under his breath, as if something has just shaken him.

– You said you liked her so much that you would consider marrying her. So why don't you get closer to her?

The butcher didn't say a word. He stood under the lamp, peering into darkness above Landik's head.

– Come on, – urged Landik, – tell me. We are friends who have just founded the Equality Society. Now we mean to be honest, tell the truth and do not show off before the other... I've seen Hana. She is pretty and wears a better hat and coat than many daughters of our bourgeois. She is neat, tidy, and maybe she's already earned some money to spare, although you don't need her money. As a butcher, you won't have money problems because people will always eat meat. You are in your forties. Why don't you ask her? She'd be happy to marry you.

– You are right. – mumbled the butcher. – Although what a way to kill our Equality! You are above me, and I am above Hana. Then Hana is above a maid, and a maid is above a cow. I cannot get closer to Hana. People will notice, and I still come from the circle that matters.

– From the wasteful and the proud.

– No, but from those who care about their rank.

He shook Landik's hand, turned around fast and disappeared into the night. It seemed he was embarrassed.

“What a fool,” thought Landik, taking slow steps in a different direction. “He wanted to accuse me of my being a proud intellectual, although he himself is a hundred times prouder than I... Those sensitive, demanding, proud people. Try to deal with them, but only from a

distance and with great pride. They are the worst material for the Equality Society. Yet it's good that he thinks I am better than him..."

Chapter II: We Need to Set an Example

As soon as Landik came home and lit the lamp, a man knocked on his window. It was three hours after the midnight, and hearing a knocking on your window at that hour is very unpleasant, unless it is a young lady. In any event, Landik was morally pure and would not tolerate such a visit. The knocking gave him a jolt. He did not know who it could be and hesitated to open the window. Yet he walked up to the curtains and pulled them away. It took him a while to recognize the face. He could not believe his eyes: it appeared to be that of Tolkosh.

“Now, what does he want again?” he thought gloomily. “Fifteen minutes ago we parted and now he is here again.” Angrily, he opened the window and stuck his head out.

“What?” he asked with resentment. “Can’t you sleep?”

“Don’t get angry at my bothering you. I just want some advice,” the butcher said quietly. “You have mentioned Hana. I told you I liked her so much that I could marry her. Could it really be?”

“You have to go ask her.”

“But how and where? I can’t do it here.”

“Won’t you come in? We can have tea.”

“No thank you. The rain has stopped and I do not want to bother you. Just talk to me briefly. You have read all kinds of novels.”

Landik opened the second half of his window and leaned out on his elbows. His tone was mocking. Love is always comical to the people who aren’t in it.

“Try to show to her that you like her. Take her out for walks and to the theatre or to a public park for a dance. Give her presents sometimes. I do not know what, a new dress or

some jewelry. You don't even have to say that you like her. She will feel it and you will know about it. Love will be cooked in the flame of your eyes like a steak when the stove is burning. You will get hungry. Both of you will want only to eat each other over and over again. As the saying goes 'They wanted to devour one another.' One day you will get it. There's nothing to it."

"No, no," the butcher stopped him. "There is an enormous difference between us. As I said, Hana is a servant girl, and I am one of the gentry. My family has history. My grandfather was a local reeve, my father was a member of the committee on which I now serve as a representative too. It would ... Everyone would laugh even I find it ridiculous. Butcher, representative, descendant of a well-known family....That's Tolkosh going out with a cook!"

"Messalina!" mockingly laughed the doctor. "When you marry her, she will become Mrs. Butcher, the wife of the committee member. Even princes have renounced claims to their thrones for love. And the throne is something greater than your butchery. So you should renounce your honor too. We are at the same point now as thirty minutes ago. Does the equality you were talking about really mean nothing to you?"

The butcher plugged his ears with his fingers like he was thinking.

"Is there no other way? Can I do it in a quieter, more silently way so that it would not strike the eyes and offend the ears? For example, can I write her letters?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Landik exploded. "Like Napoleon when he sent Berthier to Vienna to ask Marie Louise to marry him in the name of the emperor. How will you take Hana to the altar? By letter? Or will you send me?... Leave me alone!" He wanted to close the window but Tolkosh stopped him by catching the frame.

"If it's ridiculous," he said sharply, "then you are just as proud."

“If I were interested in Hana, I would not hesitate for a second.”

“Would you then take her to the theatre or to a dance?”

Landik looked at him as if an idea of greater importance had just crossed his mind.

After a while, he said decisively in a loud and clear voice so that Tolkosh would understand:

“I do not have anything to do with your Hana. I am not in love with her. But to prove to you that there is no pride in me, tomorrow I will go and get acquainted with her and I will accompany her from your butcher shop to the director’s house where she works. I will do it in such a way that people will see it and understand that it is done on purpose and is not just a coincidence. I will keep doing this for a week. What do you think?”

“I don’t believe you.”

“You will, when you see me do it. I will not be proud and overbearing towards Hana. I will be proud against the society’s judgement, which will condemn my actions. I won’t be embarrassed.”

“You will embarrass Hana, though. She won’t even go out with you. She will think God knows what about your intentions and people will think badly of you too.”

“I will take what comes. My intentions are pure. I will protest against the walls that people build between each other. I will convince her of that, too, but you cannot be jealous.”

“I will not even think about it. I know that the example has its own price. You can keep showing it until the very end and then marry her.”

“If I fall for her, why not? But promise me that you will not nag me out of jealousy.”

“I won’t; here is my hand.”

“One more thing. If I see you take a walk with Hana even once, it will be a sign for

me that you had thrown away your bourgeois pride and your sense of honor. Then I'll step aside. Alright?"

"Agreed."

They shook hands on it and said good night. Landik closed the window.

Even when he has gotten under the blanket, he kept laughing at Tolkosh. The butcher, the public representative, the member of local committee and the offspring of an old, well-known family in the Old City. He just cuts the meat and gets soaked in blood daily, happy to sell as much flash possible and yet, at the same time, he thinks that he is superior to those who cook or roast his meat. He serves the public, brandishes the cooks so they will buy more and he still considers them inferior creatures, maybe because they only serve one master.

Landik blew out the flame inside the lamp. For a long time he was still thinking about Tolkosh and all the other bourgeois folks... So many rocks, rocks, rocks... Crush them with an iron hammer... Pierce through the hard circle of their stubborn heads so that some useful pieces would chip off. Useless to try to enlighten them by ideas and streams of words, however profound. It will not move them...The primitive types... But are the educated people any better?

The doctor imagined chain links standing unlinked from one another and bragging about their individuality and isolation and fighting against each other instead of bonding and forging a powerful chain, inseparable by anyone.

"I will show them, definitely I will." He confirmed his decision to himself, and, while thinking how he would do it, fell asleep.

Chapter III: Showing the Equality

It was a beautiful May morning. The sun was already shining on one half of the square while the other half was still in the shade. People were standing in small groups around a big smutty church. They were waiting for a mass. Most of the people who waited there did not have any work to do out in the fields. A saleswoman black-roasted sausages and liverwurst around the back of the church. The smell was spreading everywhere. It was a market day. Peasants were flocking to the city from afar to run unpleasant chores, such as going to the court or paying taxes. Others were paying interest at the bank or buying essentials at the market and thus, again, spending their money. From time to time they would stop and check out stuff on the grill, poking at the fatty meat. Then they would bargain and feast. After the rich breakfast, some of them had time to go to the pub and have a drink.

Many servants and cooks gathered in front of the Tolkosch's slaughterhouse. All of them tried to squeeze in front of the tiny window, demanding that "Mr. Butcher" gave them their orders of meat faster.

Hana was there as well. Dressed like a lady, even without a hat she looked as if she were a young missus who came to choose the meat herself to stop the butcher from sneaking in whatever pleased him or just the bones. Her big round eyes had a sad, almost bitter look. Only her slim and dense eyebrows drawn towards her ears were giving her a somewhat puckish, joyful expression. When she smiled, her eyes turned into slits, her eyebrows lifted and her whole face would suddenly become worriless, childishly cheerful and almost happy. Her full fresh lips would open; the upper, much thinner, lip would rise toward her small straight and thin nose. Her lower, thicker lip would then tighten up, eliminating the

characteristic curve under her nose as well as doing away with her whole girlish, maidenish standoffishness.

Tolkosh was delighted as usual when he spotted her. He became more voluptuous, loud, skillful, and he cut the meat faster before weighing and handing it out. His cheerfulness did not last long, though. He started thinking about Landik's accompanying her home; he scowled. Eventually, the butcher began to serve his customers faster in hope that he would delay Hana and talk to her. If only he would not worry about giving away his feelings in front of other girls. He could even invite her to the slaughterhouse. It almost slipped from his tongue that she should come and choose the meat inside, but then he spotted the red-haired boot-maker Jakub, a big gossip. Tolkosh swallowed his words and served Hana as usual. She saw that he was taking too much time and urged him on:

– Please finish my order, Mr. Tolkosh. The Commissar is now waiting for me.

– Commissar who? – He acted surprised as if he did not know about it.

– Commissar Landik.

She pointed with her basket back to the street, where the sun was shining. Indeed, Landik was standing there under the streetlamp, dressed all in black and wearing a soft dark hat. He was leaning on a cane and looking at the slaughterhouse. He even had a small purple aster in his jacket lapel.

– And what do you have to do with Mr. Commissar?

– Nothing really, although he wants to talk to me.

– What does he want to tell you?

– He said he has something serious to say.

– Perhaps he likes you. He favors you. – The Butcher tried to intrigue the girl.

– But I talked to him for the first time today!

– Well, do not let him steal your heart!

She bowed her head looking at the tip of her shoes. “Why is he telling me this?” she thought. There was nothing of the sort. This morning, Landik bowed to her and excused himself. He said that he would like to tell her something and that he would wait for her before she started on her way home. She was not even curious. She knew that it could only be in jest and thus did not mean anything. It was not unusual for a gentleman to speak to her and tell her how beautiful and skillful she was, but it was the same as when someone would stop in front of a beautiful picture to see its features and praise them, then realize that he would never be able to buy it because it was too expensive, so he would go on.

Men usually knew what they could get from a girl and what they couldn't. They all considered Hana beyond their reach. Therefore they could afford themselves only a quick glance or a compliment before moving on. It will be the same with Mr. Commissar and their “serious conversation.”

– Give me the meat please! – She urged him on. – I have to go.

– He can wait. – Tolskosh laughed bitterly.

How angry he was that she did not appreciate the chance to talk to him and was in hurry to get to Landik. It is, after all, an honor for a servant girl to have a longer conversation with him. There is plenty of time.

The red-haired Jakub looked around and directed his steps towards the slaughterhouse. Tolskosh gave Hana her meat and then she left. Jakub went around the church. The Butcher, tortured by curiosity, followed Hana to see what would happen. On the street corner, he noticed that his apron, hands and sleeves were covered in blood. Having returned

to the slaughterhouse he took an axe and thrust it into the oaken chopping block. It bothered him that Landik should see Hana off. God knows what kind of gibberish he would give her, he might even befuddle her.

Landik approached the girl as if she were a noblewoman. He bowed formally and introduced himself, saying that he was an employee of the District office. Addressing her like a lady, he asked for permission to accompany her home.

– What for? I can go alone, – protested Hana, – I am in a rush. What do you want to tell me?

– That I have a great deal of respect for you.

– Thank you. Is that all?

– Can I walk with you a little?

– Choose a girl of your own standing to walk with.

– You are like an equal to me.

– No. Just go your way. You should have not approached me like this. I am not a lady, – retorted Hana. She was not offended but she was scared.

Landik did not want to give up. “It’s stupid to force her like this,” he thought, “but what Tolkosh would say if I gave up so easily?”

– You are a lady in my eyes. Not only daughters of lawyers should be addressed this way, right? I would rather call a lady the girl who works as hard as you do. We are not worshippers of goddesses in bonnets and furs. Trust me and give me your hand.

She did not. But Landik kept on walking with her. He was confused and did not know what to say. He was shooting the breeze, only to avoid being silent. Hana was quiet, though. He thought the Rozvalidov’s house was way too far, that they were walking too slowly. Wished he could fly through space. Do others in the street slow down or turn around to gape

at them suspiciously or with a derisive smile? Fortunately nothing unusual was going on, so he relaxed... After all, there is nothing unusual about it, Landik kept convincing himself... Just an officer walking along with the Rozvalidov's cook. What else is there to say? What if he asked a local girl for directions and now she is showing him the way.

At her gate he raised his hat. He was not brave enough to offer Hana his hand, for fear she might refuse him again. He just said:

- See you tomorrow... Please give me your hand.
- Just go, – she grunted, – and leave me alone.

Hana felt bad that he had accompanied her to the gate. What an arrogant gentleman! She wished no one would step out to see her with a stranger, a *pan*.²² It's better to get rid of him as soon as possible.

- So, we won't see each other again?
- Well, we might.
- But won't you give me your hand?

She jerked her hand back as soon as she gave it to him and ran up the stairs.

Landik stepped back onto the street. He, too, was relieved that their walk had come to an end. Thinking about the days ahead and five more walks like this was not nice. Today's walk was no fun. They kept running as if they had stolen something. He was telling her about his admiration, but he was still nervous that a friend of his might see them. If he really admired her, he would not feel that way. So he wasn't entirely honest, prattling for conversation's sake. Did he prove they were equals? Not really, because he did feel the difference. No one would believe that what he did today was done out of respect for her as another human being. In fact, he himself doubted it. She – and others as well – would surely

²² In Slovak, a man from the highest class is addressed as “pán,” while an aristocratic woman is called “paní.”

think: “Proving that we are equals, you say? Bullshit! Rather, showing off your low desires and spiteful intentions.” Even Tolkosh wouldn’t believe it. Did Landik want to give Tolkosh an example? Nothing came out of it, the only thing he felt was embarrassment. He felt like an arrogant moralist, humoring his pride. Pfuj!

In an unsettled state of mind, he came home and changed into his work clothes. Had it helped, he would have slapped himself for giving anyone such a stupid promise.

Unfortunately, Landik had given Tolkosh his word. A promise is a promise, and one’s integrity is one’s integrity. Giving up one’s resolutions won’t do. He won’t do it. What he has decided to do will be done.

It was too early for him to go to work. He threw himself down on the sofa. It was his place to think. With a cigarette in his mouth, blowing the smoke to the ceiling, thinking that, in fact, actually he had already given Tolkosh his example. Now he just had to talk Tolkosh into doing the same thing and thus avoid forcing himself to take these embarrassing walks again... But what if Tolkosh would not rise up to the challenge?... I should give him a good reason for walking with the girl... All kinds of clichés started swarming in his head... The more of an intellectual a person is, the easier it is for him to communicate with the most primitive kind, finding in them the charm and the fascination that dumb or narrow-minded people can’t see. Simplicity and humility are the wisdom of life. The more educated a man is, the simpler he is, and also smarter, spiritually richer, and more joyful...

His cigarette was burning out. He looked around for an ashtray. It was on the table, but he didn’t feel like getting up. So he pinched the burning cigarette with his fingers and dumped it on the floor by the oven, while he was licking his burned digits.

“And what if I get burnt?” he was still rummaging through his thoughts, “For it might.

Hana is a pretty girl – a bit stiff-necked and wild, though. It would be a fine sport to tame her, to convince her that my intentions are pure... But then, I cannot think of it as a task which has to end as soon as possible, so that I could relax and be free again...”

Landik jumped off the sofa.

He decided that he won't follow the common prejudice. Let the sensible man lead the stupid majority. He would squish the class bigotry, at least in himself. And if he has to overcome himself, he would...

Once decided, he did it. He accompanied Hana every morning. At the beginning, she was very withdrawn and fearful, like on their first walk. She was sullen, she would turn her head away from Landik, she seemed to be running as if someone chased her. She did not listen to him nor did she answer his questions. Tried to show him how angry she was, she knitted her eyebrows, frowned and shrugged her shoulders. Having looked at him all over from head to toe, she either turned away from him with an offended look or kept silent when he asked her something. Without any words she was showing her dislike, almost an aversion to “Pán Doctor”. However, Landik persisted. He did not want to notice her resistance. Walking at her side, he kept saying whatever came to his mind. The words were to destroy his inner struggle. On the fourth day, Hana picked up some courage. She faced him directly and asked:

- What do you want from me, pán Doctor?
- It's all very simple: I like you.
- But why me?
- I do not want to compliment you to your face.
- And what do you want from me?
- Your trust.

– Why do you need my trust for?

Landik wondered what he should say. Should he start philosophizing about equality? Or confess that he is giving Tolkosh an example? No. It would take him nowhere. He should tell her something nice.

– I want you to be my girlfriend, – as soon as he said that, he touched his nose.

At that time to be someone's girlfriend was shameful, ugly, almost immoral.

– You know, – he corrected himself, – I am only a lonely sparrow who is trying to find a branch to perch on.

That was even worse. Had Hana been wily, she would have used it against me. “So,” her thinking would go, “You want to sway on me? Am I just a limb for a dumb sparrow?...” Fortunately, Hana was an innocent girl. She liked it. She thought that Landik was confessing his love, and so she blushed. Now Landik was looking at her with admiration, waiting for her answer.

– Listen to me and I will do the explaining, – he continued, when the answer was not coming. He even coughed loudly, taking out his handkerchief to cover his mouth so that he could think through what he should actually say to her. – And wouldn't you, Miss Anna, go out for a walk sometimes and leave your residence for that? We could sit on a bench together, even if it were a bench in the town garden. And there, I could tell you everything.

He scared himself by making this offer. If she accepted, he would have to spend the evening sitting with her in front of the whole world. He held his breath to hear what she would answer. But Hana slowly shook her head in disagreement.

– No. What would they say?

– Who they?

– The people.

“What would they say, what would they say? That’s the girl’s morals. They would be willing to do anything, but then, what would others say about it? If no one sees us, fine, but if someone is there, then no, it can’t be done!” Landik was thinking. He said out loud:

– You see, this is what your distrust is like. Now you think: “ Why should I spend time sitting in public with this person, almost a stranger to me? He just wants to have fun,” But I am sure you are wrong.

She kept silent.

– When do they give you a day off?

– Every other Sunday.

– Not often, indeed. Where do you usually go?

– Nowhere. I sit at home and read.

– You read? – Landik was surprised. And what do you read?

– Books.

– What books?

– Fairy Tales. Folk tales about Matej, Goldilock, Loktibrada...²³ “If there is the truth in the world about Janko Hrasko.”²⁴ Now I am reading this beautiful book I got as a gift from our chaplain.

“Miracle”, thought Landik, “ This servant girl sits down and reads the books instead of going out although she can. I’ve never heard anything like this.”

²³ A Slovak folk tale by Pavol Dobšinský (1828 - 1885), writer, priest and collector of Slovak folklore tales.

²⁴ Another Slovak folk tale collected by Dobšinský.

Suddenly, in his eyes, Hana's value increased.

– Do you like books?

– Yes. But I've already read them all.

– I'll bring you more tomorrow, – he said, offering his help with pleasure.

Not only that a girl like her would read has made him happy, but also that a bond appeared between them. Books used to be a bridge connecting two minds and hearts. Such a bridge would easily convey not thoughts alone but also the heart.

Almost every woman's novel begins and ends with a book... So look here. The bridge hasn't collapsed yet!

– I have plenty of books. Shall I bring you some?

– Please, do.

At the gate, she spontaneously offered him her hand. Landik took it with joy and put his other hand, in a friendly fashion, on top of hers.

– I will choose well.

– Are you serious?

She looked him in the eye again. This time she smiled. Landik was looking at her as well. Her expression cleared up, her face becoming open, tender and childishly playful. None of that harshness. Her eyes were sparkling and bright, like cornflowers.

– Of course...Have a great day, Miss Hana.

– Tie a knot on your handkerchief to remember.

– It won't be necessary, I won't forget.

Before Hana went upstairs, she nodded to Landik once again. He raised his hat high above his head and waved with it. He was delighted that Hana's shyness finally dissipated and that their conversation now flowed smooth and natural.

Now he began to think that “demonstrating equality” would be easy and fun. It would be such a pity to stop right there; perhaps he would even be sad when walking home alone, without Hana.

“What a jewel, what a beautiful jewel” he kept muttering to himself excitedly. “It is obviously better to look down than up. Up can be beautiful but down can be even more beautiful. And you cannot take a star down from the sky, but you can lift a jewel up to it. It would be such a waste if such a girl ended up with Tolkosh.

Chapter IV: The Schemer

At home, he stood for a long time in front of his book-shelf and looked at the titles through the glass. He took out some of them and read for a while. He thought the books were written in very sophisticated way. Hana won't understand Vajanský²⁵. Neither she will enjoy Kukučín.²⁶

“...The other option is too heroic...” Landik read from Vajanský's book out loud: “But I, a bohemian, have the right to propose nonconformist views...” He put Vajanský away, picked up Kukučín and read: “... Šora Anzula jumped, a flame burst in her eyes and blood boiled in her face. Each complaint of a responsible peasant lashed at her...” He set this one aside, too, and pulled out *Jokes and Whims* by Laskomersky. “So the educated and uneducated people alike would know in which parts of the world the eclipse is perfectly visible, whether one looks at it through Lucifer's bones or through smoked glass. The pictures of the Earth were made with black, thick lines, dragged from one corner of the map to another...” She won't understand that, either. He took out Sladkovič²⁷.

“Youth, the fatherland of burning desire!

Youth, the rock of feelings sincere

Youth, the picture of hopeful rainbow

Youth, the Valhalla of love.

²⁵ Svetozár Hurban-Vajanský (1847 - 1916), a Slovak writer, literary critic and politician. His work was controversial, for it did not adhere to the predominant tradition, the so-called Slovak realism of the 19th century. He was under a huge influence of foreign authors writing in German, English, Russian and Czech.

²⁶ Martin Kukučín (1860 - 1928) was the most significant writer of the Slovak realism. At the beginning of his career he wrote in grotesque, humoristic style. Later he switched to tragic, nostalgic mode, focusing on existential problems. His works were translated to many languages.

²⁷ Andrej Sladkovič (1820 -1872), a priest, poet, literary critic, publisher and translator. Under an influence of Ludovít Štúr, he was one of the core members of the newly established Matica Slovenska. The life of a strong Slovak national supporter inspired him to write his most famous work, *Marína*.

Beautiful, but still not for Hana. Wouldn't she think: "A burning desire? Kerosene burns, the stove burns, a sauce can burn, some fat can burn in a pan, but desire? If it can, the whole fatherland will go up in flames and end up in ashes... Such feelings cannot last long... How can a rock feel the burning, a rock is just a rock and it is not youth... Well, thank you, if you think that my youth should be like a rainbow..."

Landik smiled and made a decision: No. While perusing Hviezdoslav, he kept making a waving gesture:

*"Like a swan, she fills her days with moans,
the hissing sound seeping through her teeth,
and bears her suffering alone."*

Janko Král'²⁸, Samo Chalúpka²⁹ or Ján Botto³⁰ would certainly be better than this:

*"You lived, Colossi of the world,
And who could hide the truth?...."*

Tell us, our prisoner,

Tell us: who are you?

²⁸ Janko Král' (1822 - 1876), a poet and one of the most radical interpreters of Slovak Romanticism.

²⁹ Samo Chalúpka (1812 - 1883), a writer, poet and a supporter of the Slovak national movement. He is considered one of the most important writers of the Slovak Romanticist movement. Kopčok, Andrej. *Spevy Sama Chalúpku*. Ružomberok. Nákladom Kníhtlače Karla Salvu. 1898. p. 81-82.

³⁰ Ján Botto (1829- 1881) is well known for his sad and realistic folk ballads. His inspiration often came from nature and folk poetry. The peak of his work is the poem "Smrt' Jánošíkova - Jánošík's Death." Mišianik, Ján, Pišút, Milan and Čepan, Oskár. *Dejiny Slovenskej Literatúry, Zväzok 2*. Bratislava: Osveta. 1960. p. 432.

*And why are you nailed
to this rock so forcefully?...*

*The sun dies in the golden cradle above the mountain,
like silence, darkness arises in the depth of a cemetery.
The sky's heavy sadness bends down to the ground
like a grieving mother above the grave of her only son."*

Well, in his opinion, he had only the works written for educated people... And he won't get her started on poetry. Those poets, they twist everything... Who has ever seen the sun die, particularly in a golden crib?... Contemporary poets, they are even worse. For whom are they writing, anyway? One should write for at least for two million readers, but these folks write for five hundred the most. Literature is to be clear and interesting for everyone. After all, it is possible to write about the simplest things in comprehensive, interesting and yet have some artistic value. Writers of great nations can afford to write only for a minority, but if the whole nation is small, then please, write for everyone because otherwise even the small group of its readers might stop reading altogether.

Thinking this, he stumbled upon Tolstoy's tales. *Two Wanderers, How Do People Make a Living?, Fire is Lit, and it Cannot Be Stopped...* That's what should be clear to her. Happy now, he put the book in his pocket so that he would not forget it and Hana would not be able to tease him for being forgetful.

In the early evening, he found Tolokosh in his apartment. It was a big but low-ceilinged room with curved wooden beams, lime-plaster walls, an iron bed, an iron sink and an unstained table with three heavy, sturdy chairs. Nails were hammered in the walls and all

kinds of stuff were hanging off them: dirty towels, aprons, a coat, a hat. The floor was uncovered and worm-eaten. The strong smell of the oil lamp was getting mixed with the stink of Tolkosh's cheap tobacco.

Tolkosh was a wealthy man, so his poverty with all this stinky air seemed deliberate to Landik. "It is because of his greediness," he thought. Not a single picture on the wall. No books or newspapers, either. Only yellow papers were sticking out from an old shelf. A big pipe filled with tobacco was lying on the table and, next to it there was a small bottle of ink propped upon a matchbox.

The butcher wore a black silk cap, slippers, but no coat or apron. He was smoking a pipe in a long holder, writing something on rough paper.

When Landik entered, Tolkosh threw his paper in a desk drawer.

– What have you put away? – Landik asked after making his greeting.

– I've been writing a letter to my sister, – Tolkosh answered sourly.

Red spots popped out on his forehead and cheeks. Taking off his cap, Tolkosh offered a seat to Landik. He, however, sat down without removing his hat and with a cane in his hand.

– And you haven't got enough courage? – Right away, he started on the subject of Hana.

– I won't even try, – grumbled Tolkosh.

– Why not?

– For all my customers would abandon me.

Landik's shoulders shook with laughter.

– You don't have to laugh at me only because I do care about my honor.

– Old excuses, old excuses... Listen, I am beginning to suspect that your “honor” means something else. Isn't it your greed in fact? You are like that butcher who wouldn't marry because he was afraid to lose his women customers. He thought if he chose one of them for his wife, others would stop buying from him. They are your customers and you are their butcher! It is nonsense what you are saying. Who cares whom you date. Your customers won't leave you if your meat is good. Do you want to tell me that the ministry would punish you for hygienic reasons if you decided to meet with Hana? I've shown you how, and you can follow me. Hana is surely pretty, nimble, smart and sweet girl. She even reads. I plan to give her a book.

Tolkosh scowled. A deep curve, cold and sharp, appeared between his eyebrows. He left the table very fast, put his pipe away, and sat down next to Landik, still keeping his silence unbroken. For a while, he stared at the floor, lost in his thoughts. Then, still not looking at Landik, he wheezed through his pursed lips:

– Your plans for that girl are immoral.

– What are you saying? Why would that be?

– You won't marry her.

– No, I won't.

– That's what I mean.

– Really? Have you forgotten about our agreement? I want to take the wind out of your sails, to make you gain some courage. I had to show you an example, so that you would see: I, this “Doctor of Law” Landik, won't be ashamed to go out with Hana, so that you, “a proud butcher,” could go ahead and date a cook. So here's our agreement: I will do it three more times, or I can stop now if you decide to change your mind.

– Three more times, – Tolkosh forced a laugh. – After you befuddled her, you want me to do the same in your place. After the Doctor there will be me, the butcher.

– But you with your wealth and your honest occupation can easily kick me, a small city officer, out of my saddle. I'm not even in that saddle anyway... I am telling you, give it a try. If I saw you out in the street with her tomorrow, I would disappear and not speak with Hana again.

– And what if you won't see me with Hana?

– I'll carry on.

– You'll make the girl lose her head. How can I step in afterwards?

– The girls are forgetful, especially if they have someone else to look up to. I'll explain everything to her.

– No you won't. You are an educated man. An officer. You are *pán*. Girls are ready to sacrifice anything only to become one of your classes. But I don't like this about you. You are trapped yourself. You like her. Give her up now, for your own benefit.

Having heard these words, Landik realized how much he enjoyed Hana's laughter today. It would be a lie for him to say that he didn't like her.

– If you really cared about her, you have known when to stop these walks with her, today or tomorrow, – the butcher mentored him.

– Aha, so you are jealous! – Landik exclaimed. He got up. – Had you not been so jealous, you would have not cared when I stopped going out with her, today or tomorrow. I have been sticking to our agreement. You cast your net, and I will stop my fishing right away.

– I won't do that, – protested Tolkosh. – I won't fish for anyone. You can cast your net as you wish. But you know what? I will make sure your net falls apart. So you won't catch anything.

He spoke firmly, but angrily, emphasizing every word. Then he stood up, came to the window, picked up his pipe and he pushed unburned tobacco in with his finger. He shook a matchbox and added in a quivering voice:

– I can't stand that you doctors fool around with our girls. Trying to delude and use them to your advantage. When they lose their good names, you leave them alone. Saying that you were merely showing everyone an example of "equality."

Tolkosh shook his long pipe at Landik who went on fire:

– What kind of "our" girls? Is Hana your girl or what? She is no one's. Even better, she will belong to the one whom she chooses. And now we will see who it will be. A doctor or a dumb butcher.

He struck the floor with his cane and added:

– I won't let my fish escape. Keep it in mind. You may have enough strength to handle an ox, but you are incapable of breaking my net.

Furious, he left.

"What an idiot... Thinks of me as "some Doctor!.." Landik felt insulted, as if his mouth was flooded with spite. He spit heartily.

Chapter V: The Inconveniences

Next day Landik did not miss his chance to see Hana home. Besides demonstrating for the so-called equality, doubtful anyway, he had two other reasons to walk with the girl: to give her the book he promised and to annoy Tolkosh.

The butcher was jealous already, but his sense of honor was stronger than his love, and so he kept to himself as a detached, but increasingly more jealous observer. There was a third reason, too, although Landik did not recognize it right away. We may call it a strong desire for this girl, love, even, but love still shy as a butterfly.

She had already bought vegetables and the meat when Landik joined her on the way home. Her collarless dress of white batiste went exceptionally well with her marble paleness and light hair. She was cheerful, with a smile fluttering across her lips. When laughing, she would bend her face and then glance at Landik over her shoulder, as if flirting, but also in a childishly naive way.

He admired her, as if seeing her for the first time. It is only today that he noticed how remarkably beautiful her nape was – not thick but gracefully flowing towards her slender back and shoulders. Her maidenishly round arms in their short sleeves were strong, but not masculine. Then those small hands with their stubby reddish fingers. She had ring on her index with a big red stone. It could be a ruby or just a red rhinestone. But then there was a stamp on its gold, suggesting that it was not a cheap ring bought at a market. It caught Landik's attention for a fleeting moment it attracted his attention. Why didn't he see it on Hana's hand before? Perhaps she didn't wear it. Choosing to put it on just today, or maybe she wore it before, but he didn't see it?

His heels clicking against the pavement, he walked at her side. But Hana's steps were quiet. Walking in her cheap, low-heeled yellow booties on rubber soles, she made no noise. Landik could not accommodate his walking rhythm to hers. Hana's hand gestures were broad, even more so than her usual habit was. She waved her basket with meat, radishes, onions and carrots, swinging it almost up to his nose, then bringing it down. From time to time, she would touch her forehead with her free hand, fixing her coiled tresses or simply putting her hand in her dress pocket.

Landik liked Hana. He tried to watch her closely, discover some flaws. Are her gestures too stiff, curt or choppy? Is her laugh too loud and vulgar? Or maybe she turns her toes in when she walks? He listened to her talk, thinking that perhaps she was too rough in conversation. But the more he looked at her, the more certain he was that there was nothing rough or ugly about the girl. On the contrary, he found everything about her pleasant, nice, soft and light, as if he were in the company of a sophisticated society lady.

The girl perceived Landik's thoughts instinctively. To herself, she admitted that he accompanied her because he liked her and that she was beautiful in his eyes. So Hana was careful not to do anything to spoil her looks. She felt flattered today, and she did not shun the "doctor's" walking with her. Having thought about it at home, she figured that if a prince could fall in love with a pauper, the doctor could certainly fall in love with her. After all, doctor was far below a prince.

Landik was taking Tolstoy out of his pocket to give it to Hana when he noticed the district director Brigantik, his boss, walking ahead. He was a man in his fifties, with a ruddy face and grayish hair. His lips were pursed, as if he were to whistle any time. His enormous nose with a wide tip was hanging over his upper lip, nearly obscuring the gray moustache from, of which only sharply waxed ends were visible. Overall, Brigantik looked like someone

who smelled fish no matter where he was. He stared at Landik and Hana as he approached, swaying, his steps heavy and portentous.

Landik was immediately ashamed. He lost his nerve very suddenly, choking on his words and feeling blood rushing to his face. Having stuffed Hana's book back into his pocket, he looked around stealthily, searching for an entryway they could escape to before his boss recognized him. How regrettable that the boss of all people would see him with Hana. He's such a nitpicker: would definitely ask around about the girl whom Landik had been out with. If only they had walked seriously, in silence. Instead, they were talking, laughing together... Landik was even handing a book to her... Clearly, they were on intimate terms... Thanks God it was only half past eight. Otherwise, Brigatnik would tell him off for neglecting his office duty...

The director squirmed, giving a sign that he knew what was going on. He shook his head slightly, a perfidious smile on his lips. Then he lifted his hat. It even seemed to Landik that his boss had pulled at his coat sleeve as he passed. Landik squinted his eyes. He did not feel like seeing what was going on around them. It would be great if he could stick his head in the ground like an ostrich.

Landik had not even responded to his boss's greeting, however slight it was! For about ten steps, he was unable to talk with Hana. He was mad at himself for this stupid reaction. Has someone caught him in an ugly, embarrassing act? He threw Hana a timid glance and immediately saw that she had noticed it all. No longer smiling, she wore a concerned look. It was high time to make amends and soothe the girl, unless she would stop trusting him.

Landik produced the book again:

– These are fetching stories, – he said, – Some folk tales about stupid Ivan, about the seed

and the egg, and about whether men need any property... Read the book, so that you could tell me how you liked them.

But Hana was not listening. She was aware that the doctor had become embarrassed when that gentleman saw them together. Silently, she took the book Landik was giving her, then nodded politely and joylessly. She wanted to leave right away, but Landik stopped her. – Don't go now unless you have to. We had walked in such a hurry... That man was a head of my office, my boss. He is such a stickler, – Landik explained.

It occurred to him that he should explain his being embarrassed not because of her, but because of the director himself. He had to lie if only because he did not want her to think that she was not his equal.

– If you still have time, let's keep walking, shall we? – he suggested, pointing back to the street.

His voice didn't sound right, though. At least, she was not convinced.

– I have to go – Hana nodded, and, refusing to give him her hand, entered the gate.

The next day Hana did not even go to buy the meat; she sent the other servant girl, Mila. Landik kept watch on the corner. He waited. Today, he decided that no one would confuse or embarrass him, be it his mom or anyone else. He would introduce Hana even to her. He was picturing the moment in his mind, how it could all come to be... This is my mother, and this, mother, is Miss Anna... Miss Anna... He did not know her last name! Hasn't he heard it before? No, he has not, not even from Tolkosh or herself. Definitely not, for he asked no one about her and so no one could tell him.

He felt it yesterday and was convinced if it today: he was no fighter for equality. He got embarrassed because of it yesterday and today he did not even know the girl's name, that's equality for you. It was a joke. He clowned around, lied, hurt and offended others. He

hurt his feelings and those of Hana's, assailed Tolkosch's dignity and even did damage to the society he is part of, the class he belongs to, the rank of bourgeois, even servants. He wanted to break the boundaries between social strata, but instead got immediately defeated with a stupid lie.

“Not only I am a liar and hypocrite,” he was silently chastising himself, “I am also a coward. I had to lose my battle because I wouldn't even start fighting. A cowardly fighter! A cowardly reformer! A cowardly apostle of justice!... I am exactly like Tolkosh. Not better than him at all. I am worse! Tolkosh at least can marry Hana but I... I can't... It would be such an outrage. Tolkosh may be a fool but he is more honest, for he is stupider. I am also an idiot, but I am not honest: I should be smarter than that. Tolkosh misleads no one. I do. Tolkosh is not a scoundrel. But I am...”

Landik was reaching the slaughterhouse when, near the church, he ran into Milka. She was walking home with a full basket. When she said hello him, he bid her to stop.

– And what about miss Anna? – he inquired. – Did she stay at home?

– At home, – Milka smiled and escaped.

– Wait! I'll come with you! – he shouted.

Milka did not even turn to look at Landik, she simply shook her head, no.

– Give her my regards! – he yelled.

“This one won't believe me, either,” he thought sadly, continuing to walk to the slaughterhouse.

As he walked, he took control of his fear. “I will show to all of you that I can be sincere, that I can and want to be sincere.”

Landik looked at the tower watch. It was well after nine. He turned around to go to his office. But when walking by the shoe-seller Zeleň's, Landik lingered in front of the window. Zeleň came out and greeted him.

– Those are my newest products, – he started the chit-chat, – I recommend these women's slippers to you. Just look at them! That's exactly what you need.

He pointed at a pair of nice girly slippers.

– Why do I need slippers for girls?

– To give them to someone as a gift?

– To whom?

– That you know better than I. But I have shoes for you, too.

– Thanks.

Landik frowned. He was offended because he knew that Zeleň was hinting at his friendship with Hana. Walking with defiance, he left. A few steps later, though, he began to convince himself that as an equality agent he should not be offended. So what if some people point it out? He shouldn't have tried to deny in front of Zeleň that he did not have anything to do with Hana. Instead, he should have bought the slippers and said directly: "Yes, I am buying them for Miss Hana, for that fair and lovely girl. I want to thank her because she is worth a hundred times more than your whiny, spoiled Mary, or, rather, Mara... Well... But, why would I want to insult Mara?... I want to hurt Zeleň... Then, why do I want to hurt him? Because he accused me of being with Hana and because he feels that Hana is beneath his noble Miss Mara...I'll be damned!

Landik promised himself to buy the slippers on his way back so that even Hana, that humble cook girl, could have something nice, like Miss Mary does. It crossed his mind, somehow, that such a small present would boost Hana's trust in him. Today, he thought, that

trust took a bad shaking. He began to realize that Hana's trust in him and the distrust of any other girl – Mary, or Zizi, or Flora, or perhaps Nini and their precious “moms” and “pops” – seem to be tied in tightly. The more Hana trusts him the less noble girls would. His friendship with a cook will cool them down. “Why does he see us? Let him meet with maids,” they'll say.

He counted the bourgeois houses to which he was invited and considered how much he would lose if he continued to see Hana. Will Hana compensate the loss? And here again he caught himself – the equality fighter – in the act of trading equality for his social connections. He weighed them as Tolkosh would weigh meat on his scales!

“Nonsense, nonsense,” he repeated as he walked, pondering equality and his being its knight.

About twelve thirty he brought home the slippers he had bought for Hana. Zeleň willingly promised that if they don't fit, he would exchange them. Landik decided to buy the slippers after he spent the whole morning at the office, thinking about the high society of the old city and their antiquated prejudices, their pride and anger. His curiosity almost forced him to unwrap the slippers, but then he suddenly noticed a letter on his desk. He recognized his mother's handwriting and put the gift away. An anonymous message, written in fat upright letters on bluish paper, was attached. His mother only said that he should take care of himself and choose people he meets with carefully. First and foremost, he should avoid the company of fast women. Greetings and so on at the end. The attached anonymous letter summoned Landik's mother that “to take care of her son who keeps shocking the society by promenading through the city with a servant girl. It would be best if she could come and see that by herself.” It was signed, “A Concerned Citizen.”

“That’s Tolkosh,” he realized with a jolt. “What a snake! He isn’t embarrassed to write such letters and bother my mother... Atrocious manners... So these are the tattered nets Tolkosh talked about for the fish to escape. I see.”

Furious, he wanted to find Tolkosh and deal with him directly... No one else could do such a thing. Who else would care about this? Remember, Tolkosh hid something bluish in his desk that last time Landik came to see him. He even said that it was a letter to his sister... The anonymous letter is also written on bluish paper. It was this very letter.

Landik clenched his fist and threatened Tolkosh:

“ I will show him! That spineless son of a bitch... What an idiot!... We both started it and now I cannot shake the filth off. How can I now bring my honor back? I stepped in a pile, and it’s now like a soiled shoe... I will beat it out of him, that miserable swine!... Honor, indeed... A pig!”

A moment later he realized that, at the moment, Tolkosh was having lunch with his parents. Landik could not go there. He would scandalize the entire city. He hesitated. At his parents’ house, in Tolkosh’s own place, in a pub, on the street, either here or there, if Landik attacked that wretch to beat him up he would only get himself into trouble. It would ruin his name and him as a state officer as well as the reputation of his office... Then a trial or a disciplinary procedure may follow. No. I won’t do anything like that. It would be best to spit on that pile of shit, to ignore it.

Landik returned to the canteen where he usually had lunch and took a seat in the corner where others would not notice him. He did not want to see anyone or to be seen. A sad thought of Hana being judged, pushed away and almost stalked by this society and himself, was penetrating his anger. He was also bitterly disappointed in his friend, with whom just a

short while ago he was ready to establish a new party, "Equality." The party in which all the bourgeois pure in mind and spirit would meet and talk together regardless of their status.

Hana deserves that people take their hats off to her as he does. He began to compare her to the daughters of prominent citizens again and realized, not for the first time, that she with her beauty and modesty was way above them. Had there been no prejudice, he wouldn't hesitate for a moment to marry her. She would certainly be a better wife than any other woman. Those he knew craved luxuries, idleness, and high reputation. They wanted to be handled like porcelain, they demanded tenderness, drama and, sometimes, hysterics. Hana, indeed, would be more helpful. She would be the one who soothes and comforts, makes no demands, a faithful wife and a pure soul...

But here he had to stop at a question: "So who is standing in your way? Go ahead and do it!" A small voice was coming from the depth of his brain: "Marry her, but not for your stupid equality. It has never existed and never will. To be an equality knight is Quixotic. You should rather check whether anything is drawing you to Hana. If yes, don't look at anyone else. The people you would thus lose or those who will laugh at your decision, they do not matter. They would never support or make you happy anyway, in fact, you never had their help, so you can't lose anything. Do it! And if it makes you happy, you'll have a good friend for life.

But then there was a thought coming from another corner of his brain. It said: "Remain within your circle. Don't get confused. If Tolkosh likes her, let him have her. You don't even know whether you like her, while Tolkosh knows already. Give her up to him. Don't get in between their happiness."

Our brain is an eternal Jesuit. It's an actor, comedian, an accountant. Better go ask your heart.

He was brought back from his thinking by a gentle poking on the shoulder. It was Tolkosh.

– Good day to you, doctor, – He greeted him, even gave him his hand. Landik raised his eyes. Tolkosh was dressed in his Sunday suit with a bowler hat and carried a walking stick in his hand.

– I was looking for you, – he continued, – I want to tell you something. It concerns me and you as well.

Landik's blood was boiling. Tolkosh voice was so friendly, as if nothing had happened. And yet, there was that anonymous letter between them, such a breach of honesty. He did not accept Tolkosh's hand, turning away from him.

– What's wrong with you? – Tolkosh asked.

He pulled away an arm chair near Landik's table and sat next to him.

– Don't sit down here, with me! – Landik yelled and hit the table with his fist. – I won't sit at the same table with such knaves as you.

He blushed with anger.

– What happened? A knave? But why?

– You've just made even a bigger fool of yourself. Why do you write anonymous letters? It's mean and disgusting. Look!

He took the letter out and showed it to him. Tolkosh tried to wriggle away from the truth, but Landik kept looking at him persistently, with a scowl on his face. Red blotches spread around the butcher's cheeks. Also around his forehead.

– Now you have a hell of a face, – Landik said, – Your conscience is on fire and reveals the devil.

Landik fingered Tolkosh's red blotches. They got darker.

– What bad conscience? What devil? I am your guardian angel, my friend. I did it only in your and Hana’s interests...

– And your own.

– Yes, and my own, too, – agreed the butcher looking at the brook in the yard through a side window. – I wrote a letter to Hana as well.

– An anonymous letter.

– I didn’t sign it.

– You, insidious snake!... What are you, Hana’s tutor? Or mine? Are you her fiancé? Are you our father to care so much? An anonymous letter, it’s like shooting from the corner at an unarmed or unprepared person... like you would pour a poison in a spring that people drink from. Shame on you! I won’t be sitting with you!

Outraged, he stood up from the table, convinced that he won’t speak with Tolkosh ever again. He did not wait add, throwing words into his face:

– You think that a human being is like cattle. You treat them as if you are handling beef in your slaughterhouse.

To annoy Tolkosh even more, he added:

– I am going to marry Hana.

Landik slithered out between chairs and tables. Tolkosh also stood up. He grabbed Landik’s sleeve and wanted to pull him back down into the chair.

– Wait a minute. Sit down. You are insulting me, but, you see, I’m not angry. Don’t go to Hana with your proposal now because it is I who will go.

– Don’t even touch me! I will marry Hana.

Landik slipped out of Tolkosh’s grasp and reached with his walking stick for his hat on a hanger so that he could leave.

– And what about our agreement? – Tolkosh asked.

– You still haven't gone out on a walk with Hana, as was an agreement is between us when we were friends. But the one who poisons wells isn't a friend.

– I'll go to Hana. Get out of my way.

– You'll go in vain.

– It's you who will go in vain. She will dump you. Now she has such a nice picture of you. She knows what kind of person you are.

“What kind of person.” That made Landik even angrier. A rotten person points out I am more rotten.

– Wasn't it you who drew the picture?

– Yes, and I'll draw even a better one, – Tolkosh threatened.

Landik raised his walking stick like Tolkosh did once with his pipe and waved it at Tolkosh.

– You swine! – Landik yelled.

Tolkosh moved back and tripped over a big arm chair. He rolled into it over a soft arm. When Landik saw the soles of Tolkosh's shoes, he lowered his walking stick, turned around and walked out. It felt as if he had just crushed a larva between his fingers. He was disgusted. After a while, though, the feeling of disgust disappeared. Instead, something heavier and more uncomfortable, like a big stone, dropped onto his heart and stayed there until the evening.

After the butcher had fallen into the arm chair, he tried to stay there for a good while. He wanted someone to find him like that. This way, he could tell what happened and acquire a witness. But no one was approaching him, so Tolkosh recovered slowly. He transferred his dangling legs to the side of the chair and propped himself up with his elbows. He remained sitting in this position, thinking. Thoughts of revenge pooped out of his head like a chickens

from eggs. He will write one more letter. That made him happy. There was only one annoying thing that nagged at him through this sense of pleasure: Hana. He had to find her and talk to her. For that reason he got all dressed up... But how could he see her? He cannot go to her now. It's the end of lunchtime in the kitchen! As they wash the dishes, he will barge in as if on a parade, in his Sunday's best, the wealthy butcher, his family's pride and honor ... He would have to wait until Sunday.

So he did not go.

In the evening, neither Tolkosh nor Landik stepped out of their houses. They were too afraid to run into one another and fight. Tolkosh was writing an anonymous letter to the president of Bratislava, the most important person in Slovakia; Brigantik, the district director, would no longer do. He was that crow who won't even twitch when its eye was poked out. The best thing to do was to go to the very top. And Landik stayed at home with the unwrapped slippers which he had bought for Hana but could not give to her yet because he was in doubt about his loving her.

That's how the Equality party ended, which not so long ago the two friends had established to bring together social circles and classes. Its very first two members have become relentless enemies. For the first precious thing they competed for has divided them apart.

Commentary:

p. 33 - **young lady**: Jesenský uses the name *Málíka*, *Malíka* in Arabic (or another variant, *Malíkah*). It is a feminine name of an Arabic origin, and it means a Queen. To call someone Malika is flattering and elevates the beauty and importance of the woman. It can also be used to describe the metamorphosis of a young lady becoming a beautiful woman, a “queen.” Jesenský wants to show that only Malika/queen knocked on Landík’s door at that hour, he would forgive her for the enormous awkwardness and rudeness of that action.

p. 33 - **morally pure**: *mravne čistý*. The root of the word “mravne” is “mrav” and it has several meanings like: manners, steady or usual course of action or the behavior in specific circles. *Mravne* is an adverb that is here translated as “morally.” The word *čistý* is an adjective describing purity of an object. The literal translation of the word *čistý* is clean/clear, which is usually used to evaluate the cleanliness or hygiene of an object in question. In the story it is used to describe the purity of the protagonist’s character and the innocence of his desires, thinking, and actions.

p. 33 - **such a visit would not tolerate**: The original states: “*a dievčenskú návštevu po polnoci, možno, že by si bol i vyprosil.*” The English translation cannot follow this line literally, for the translation would be clumsy. It would sound like this: “... and a young lady’s visit after the midnight, maybe that he would have asked for.” The word *vyprosít’* at the end of the sentence causes difficulty because of its diversity. It has a root *prosit’*, which can be used for excuse, forgiving, begging, asking or in a formal proposal, such as in the question, “Shall we dance?” By adding the prefix *vy*, the author makes the meaning and usage of the word more diverse. The quality of the prefix *vy* in the words generally adds the nuance of understanding or of one’s “getting something out.” The last and probably the trickiest aspect

of the word *vyprosiť* has to do with the reflexive pronoun *si*, which means “myself.” In the Slovak language, the combination of the prefix and the reflexive pronoun creates an idiomatic expression which is untranslatable to English. It is used always in a negative context, when someone is offended, for example, and it means the following: “you do not want someone allow to do/think something bad against/about you/yourself.” In Jesensky’s story, the phrase expresses not only Landik’s refusal of a visit by any female at that hour, but it reveals the purity of his thoughts.

p. 33 - The rain stopped, and I do not want to **bother you**: *unúvať ťa* is an archaic Slovak word, which is only rarely used by speakers of colloquial Slovak at present. It does not have an equivalent meaning in English. Translating it as “to bother” may work, but it is not ideal. “To bother someone” is understood more in the way of taking someone's time or of annoying someone, whereas the meaning of the Slovak word *unúvať* refers more to a combination of physical and psychological demands, such as: “to load, to burden, to encumber someone with physical work.”

p. 34 - **Love will be cooked in the flame of one’s eyes**: *To sa ti láska sama vypečie pri svetle očí*, a metaphoric expression used only in poetic works and usually not in conversation. This phrase could not be translated literally, either. The translation would sound too cumbersome: “For you, the love will cook/bake itself in the light of your eyes.”

p. 34 - **They wanted to devour one another**: *išli sa zjest’ od lásky*, an idiomatic expression also grounded in a metaphoric meaning of “eating.” The literal translation of this sentence would be “They were going to eat each other out of love.” It is very common in the Slovak language to use this phrase to describe the emotional attachment as well as physical intimacy between two people. Moreover, it can have both a positive and a negative connotation. When someone uses the phrase to describe the pure and sincere love of a young couple in the

beginning of their relationship, the meaning is positive. The sarcastic or negative reference is mainly made through a description of inappropriate physical behavior of two people in public.

p. 34 - **There's nothing to it:** *nič prostejšie*, this collocation actually refers directly to the simplicity of the action and not to the difficulty itself. The word *prosto* is an adverb meaning “simply, usually, generally, modestly.” A rare and not so common usage of the word *prosto* is when someone wants to change the tools or the way of the process in the action to a simpler and more natural method. For instance: “Instead of trying to bend over and drink the spring water, use simply (‘prosto’) your hands.”

p. 34 - “Father was **a member of committee**”: *boženík* is an archaic Slovak word the meaning of which no longer exists. The first usage the word fell to the end of the 19th century. During that time, to be a “boženík” meant to be a distinguished member of a higher-class, a group or a committee. Later on, the usage of *boženík* changed. To be a “boženík” now actually means to be a servant.

p. 34 - **Messalina:** *Mesaliancia* is the name of the third wife of the Roman Emperor Claudius. Her full name was Valeria Messalina. She was a powerful and influential woman, but she also had a reputation of someone promiscuous. It was claimed that she conspired against her husband and was executed when he discovered the plot. It is not used often in Slovak literature or in standard conversation. In literary works, whenever used, it describes either a voluptuous or promiscuous woman. Jesenský applies her name to Tolkosh (male) because of Tolkosh’s reminding him of the pathetic qualities of that a powerful, lusty woman. He humorously humiliates and condemns his interlocutor as well as ironically refers to the mode of thinking of the society the butcher represents.

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