

# Transcultural phenomena in contemporary Slovakian Hungarian prose

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### ABSTRACT

In my study I deal with the transcultural literary-spatial position of contemporary Slovakian Hungarian prose. I have selected the works for interpretation from the representative writings of the last five years (Katarina Durica: *Szlovákul szeretni [To love in Slovak]*. Libri, Budapest, 2016; Anikó N. Tóth: *Szabad ez a hely? [Is this seat free?]*. Pesti Kalligram Kft., Budapest, 2017; Pál Száz: *Fűje sarjad mezőknek [Grass grows on meadows]*. Pesti Kalligram Kft., Budapest, 2017). Due to their diversity in genre, language and subject, these works provide a cross-section of contemporary Slovakian Hungarian prose. The peculiarity of the corpus is that it reflects on the hybridity, inter- and multiculturalism typical for Central-European literature (cf. Welsch, 1999), and it also demonstrates translocality, multiculturalism, multilingualism and the experience of using multiple language varieties.

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### KEYWORDS

transculturalism, Slovakian Hungarian literature, contemporary prose, multiculturalism, multilingualism, translocality

Toward the end of twentieth century, studies of international literature emphatically began to reflect on societal and cultural processes that relativize globalized, bi- and multilingual, and national perspectives (Németh and Roguska, 2018, p. 5), and approach literature in a wider context, through the lens of transculturalism. Transnational or transcultural approaches to literature focus on the gesture of border crossing (broadly construed), and direct attention to the

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crossing over, permeation and hybridization of local, homogeneous characteristics (Jablonczay, 2015, pp. 137–138). It is no accident, therefore, that transcultural interpretations of literature apply methodologies that are closely related to those of postcolonialism, migrant literature, multiculturalism and *littérature mineure* (minority literature), all of which consider topics like multilingualism, multinationalism, dislocation, or xenism in the textual spaces of literature (Németh, 2018, p. 5).

Slovakian Hungarian literature, a minority literature marked by various debates on terminology (viz. Ardamica, 2006; Bárczi, 2014, pp. 9–16; Keserű, 2010; Németh, 2005) includes a corpus which is linked, on a thematic/linguistic/geographic level, to the Slovakian Hungarian community, their language use, and the problematic of defining the Slovakian Hungarian identity. The Hungarian literature of Slovensko/Czechoslovakia/Slovakia lacks poetic unity; its cohesion is based on geographical and linguistic identification. Its recorded history goes back to post-World War I border changes, when the parts of Upper Hungary (*Felvidék* in Hungarian, formerly a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) with a significant Hungarian population became parts of the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938), the Second Czechoslovak State (1945–1989), the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic (1989–1993), and finally, Slovakia (since 1993) (Szarka, 1996). Following the first border changes, Hungarians of former Upper Hungary were cut off from the literary and cultural life of Hungary, and from the early 20th century on were forced to develop their own literary traditions, to establish a (Czecho) Slovakian Hungarian literature. At the onset, it focused on the community- and identity-building, societal functions of literature, reflecting the needs of a Hungarian community scarred in its national identity (Bárczi, 2014, pp. 18–23). Zoltán Németh points out that for this reason, the Hungarian/Upper Hungarian literature of (Czecho)Slovakia/Slovensko has primarily defined itself through the concepts of “a bridge between cultures,” “vox humana” and “minority genius,” i.e., on the border between Hungarian and Slovak cultures. Another, equally significant strand of the (Czecho)Slovakian Hungarian literary corpus distanced itself from such an understanding, and considered itself part of a single Hungarian literature, citing the common language of literatures in Hungary and abroad as well as the texts’ lack of reflection on local/regional/bi-national coexistence. According to Németh, interpreting Slovakian Hungarian literature using a transcultural framework could help resolve, or at least develop a more nuanced approach to, this dilemma of self-definition: a transculturally-based interpretation of texts considers the transcultural positions of author, text, reader and context, and internalizes and reconciles the two different approaches to the corpus in an inclusive way (Németh, 2019, pp. 12–15).

Contemporary Slovakian Hungarian prose is closely connected to Central European literary trends that markedly reflect the experience of penetrating cultural barriers by dealing with themes of hybridity, mixedness, permeability, and inter- and multiculturalism (Welsch, 1999) and refuse patterns of incorporation into a homogeneous culture and the exclusivity of interpretation through a national literature (Németh, 2018, p. 9). This paper traces developments of the poetics of transcultural phenomena through a selection of representative texts of Slovakian Hungarian literature published in recent years that have garnered significant critical attention and provide a cross-section of contemporary Slovakian Hungarian literature through their generic, linguistic and thematic diversity. I consider the selected works – *Szlovákul szeretni* [To Love in Slovakian] by Katarina Durica (Budapest: Libri, 2016), *Fűje sarjad mezőknek* [Grass Grows on Meadows] by Pál Száz (Budapest: Pesti Kalligram, 2017), and *Szabad ez a hely?* [Mind If I Sit Here?] by Anikó N. Tóth (Budapest: Pesti Kalligram, 2017) – through the lenses of multiculturalism, multilingualism and translocality.



## THE EXPERIENCE OF MULTICULTURALISM

In the interwar period, Czechoslovakian Hungarian writers were striving to create a “novel of the Czechoslovakian Hungarian destiny,” a “minority novel” on the themes of the experience of living in Slovensko and the Slovakian Hungarian identity (Bárczi, 2014, pp. 18–23). The novels *Vakfoltok* [Blind Spots] (2017) by Noémi Bogyó and *Szlovákul szeretni* (2016) by Katarina Durica<sup>1</sup> both fit into this tradition, which is still very much alive. I will discuss the manifold, transcultural approach to Slovakian Hungarian identity and the complex web of connections to space and nationality through Durica’s novel that reflects both the author’s autobiography and her personal experiences as a journalist.

The novel follows and describes the characters’ lives during two distinct periods, in the 1980s under socialism, and in the 2010s of the so-called capitalist era. The primary common denominator among the characters is their experience of the lack of a sense of home and of community roots, which mainly stems from their complex ethnic and geographic backgrounds. The novel seeks to be documentary in style (Gágyor, 2016) and it can be seen as a “display novel” about Slovakian Hungarians: through the characters’ recollections and the references to key historical events, it aims to provide a cross-section of the life experiences of Slovakian Hungarians since World War 2, and – primarily through articulating ethnic stereotypes – it covers the relationship between majority and minority populations, i.e., between Slovaks and Slovakian Hungarians. The novel provides an overview of “minority history” and offers insights into the daily life and layered identity of the Slovakian Hungarian community, mainly for readers with little or no knowledge about this group: with the exception of the character called Sali, who hails from Africa, all major characters in the novel are of Slovakian Hungarian descent, from Dunaszerdahely<sup>2</sup> and the surrounding island of Csallóköz.<sup>3</sup> As a result of historical-political developments, one group of characters were forcibly expelled from their homes and deported: they were either resettled to Hungary<sup>4</sup> after World War 2 (e.g. Szabi’s ancestors), or they fled to Western countries from the Communist dictatorship<sup>5</sup> (e.g. Aunt Vali and her family). Another group left their native country in hopes of a better life (e.g. Petra), whereas a

<sup>1</sup>Katarina Durica is a journalist of Slovakian Hungarian descent, the author of three volumes of prose, currently living in Budapest. Minority living and the identity constructs of minorities are prevalent themes in both her journalistic and literary work. Her second (*Szlovákul szeretni*, 2016) and third novels (*A rendes lányok csendben sírnak* [Nice Girls Cry Silently.], 2018) both deal with stories of Slovakian Hungarians from the second half of the 20th century.

<sup>2</sup>Dunajská Streda in Slovakian.

<sup>3</sup>Žitný ostrov in Slovakian.

<sup>4</sup>Being on the losing side, after World War 2, the northern regions of Hungary were attached to the newly-established Czechoslovakian state, and ethnic Hungarians living there were considered war criminals. Under the Beneš decrees, part of the ethnic Hungarian population was either deported for forced labor to the Czech lands, or was relocated to Hungary, calling it “population transfer.” The “expulsions” mentioned in the novel meant the forcible deportation and relocation of Hungarian inhabitants of Csallóköz to Hungary. Following the expulsions, family members living in Hungary and in Czechoslovakia were only allowed to meet subject to official permission (Vadkerty, 2007). Characters in the novel living in different countries could only see one another when attending funerals.

<sup>5</sup>In 1968, an attempt to weaken the Communist dictatorship took place in Czechoslovakia. The ensuing more democratic atmosphere lasted for only a few months before it was ended by the incursion of the Soviet army. The restrictions and cleansings following the revolution led many to emigrate to Western European countries (Szarka, 1996); in the novel, this is how Aunt Vali and her family ended up in Switzerland.



third group remained at home (pl. Erika and Feri). The geographically dispersed characters face dilemmas around the questions of who they are and where they belong: the notions of ‘homeland’, ‘home’, ‘native country’, ‘nation’ and ‘mother tongue’ become blurred for them, and they can only interpret these in a hybridized, permeated way. One of the key features of the novel is the way it unravels the personalities of Slovakian Hungarian characters living in Csallóköz and of those living abroad in parallel, and grounds their identity issues in the complexity of their spatial relationships and their attitudes toward their problematic and complicated national and familial past. In this way, the novel relays the simultaneously familiar and alien, transcultural experience of being stuck between different spaces, languages and nationalities.

The novel has a well-constructed structure, evidenced by the fact that it first introduces the paradoxical experience of cultural foreignness and familiarity through a meeting between characters hailing from different, very distant places, followed by the depictions of exchanges between characters living at closer and closer to one another, without ever mitigating the sense of cultural foreignness drawn up along the lines of ethnic, national and cultural stereotypes. The foreignness of different continents, that is, the opposition of the European and African realms is primarily seen through the eyes of European-born protagonist Petra, who used to work trading antiques in Africa for a few months. The sense of foreignness stems from a sense of cultural primacy, a hierarchical relationship between the West and the Global South; it is organized along the lines of Western stereotypes regarding Africa, and becomes manifest through existential anxieties, manic disinfecting (Durica, 2016, pp. 11) and developing quasi-ritualistic means of protection against malaria (Durica, 2016, p. 19). Yet the image of Africa seen from the perspective of an outsider changes into an insider’s sense of familiarity as the protagonist gradually settles in and is reminded of scenes from her childhood by the desolation of the neighborhood and the apathy of the locals. *A maguk elé bambuló, cigarettázó öregemberek, az egyforma szürkeség, a káromkodó kamaszok, akik sosem mulasztották elmondani, hogy mit és hová tennének nagyon szívesen, ha egy fiatal lány ment el előttük, mind nagyon ismerősek voltak Petrának. Ez volt ugyanis az ő megszokott, otthoni közege, ebben nőtt fel, és ebből sikerült “kivakaródnia”. Igen, így mondták ezt Ligetfaluban, Pozsony panelrengetegében* (Durica, 2016, p. 36). [The old men smoking and staring in front of themselves; the uniform grayness; the swearing teenagers, who never forgot to emphasize what they would love to put and where every time a young girl walked by; all these felt utterly familiar to Petra. This was, after all, her well-known, homely atmosphere she grew up in and managed to “scrape” herself out of. Yes, that’s how they used to put it in Ligetfalu, in the concrete jungles of Bratislava]. Later on, the novel plots out connections not only between African and Central European (or, in the novel’s terms, Eastern European) spaces but also a parallel between the impossibility of coming to terms with the past for their respective inhabitants: Sali, a native African survivor of the massacres in Rwanda, considers silence and the fleeing of one’s homeland the most acceptable method of processing one’s past, as does Slovakian Hungarian Petra, having seen her share of . . . *kelet-európai családi traumákat* (Durica, 2016, p. 273) [Eastern European family traumas].

Experiences of foreignness in the different continents also become apparent within a hierarchical cultural relationship between Western Europe and Central Europe. Petra is a particularly good example as she experiences a number of different cultures: hailing from Csallóköz, she grew up a Hungarian girl in Bratislava, went to university in Vienna, takes up



work there, then travels to Africa on a service trip. Petra initially saw herself as cosmopolitan, and begins to become aware of her uncertain identity and her ambivalent relationship toward space and nationality only when she returns to Europe after experiencing foreignness in Africa. As a university student in Vienna, she is primarily seen as an economically and culturally backwards Eastern European girl (*A sok nyugati pénzes diák úgy nézett a szokított hajjú, kopott tornacipős pozsonyi lányra, mintha egy másik univerzumból érkezett volna közéjük. A Bécs és Pozsony közötti negyvenperces út úgy tűnt, mintha a múltból a jövőbe szállítaná a fiatal művészettörténész lányt.* – Durica, 2016, p. 39 [Well-off Western students were looking at the Bratislavan girl with her bleached hair and worn sneakers as if she were from another universe. The young art historian felt as if the forty-minute train ride from Bratislava to Vienna took her from the past to the future]), who, having recognized her own disadvantage, is willing to study and work more and harder than local students. A symbol of the Western European sense of cultural superiority is . . . *hogy a szinte tökéletes német nyelvtudása ellenére folyton csipkelődtek vele az akcentusa miatt. Pedig megszokhatta volna ezt már, gyerekkorában folyton a magyar akcentusa miatt cikizték* (Durica, 2016, p. 39) [that in spite of her near-perfect command of German she was constantly mocked for her accent. She could have gotten used to it, though; as a child, she was always made fun of due to her Hungarian accent]. Central European identity is presented as a difference to be addressed in the ways both she and others see herself, and she tries to improve her inferior position by striving to rid herself of her Central European identity.

Following the oppositions between Europe and Africa and between Western and Central Europe, the novel deals with Hungarian and Slovakian Hungarian experiences of foreignness, raising questions around a Slovakian Hungarian identity and highlighting the problematic nature of the attachment to space and nation. Senses of difference and cultural distance are expressed through the ways the defector, the expelled, the relocated and the economic migrant see themselves, are seen by others and look at those around them. The difference of the Slovakian Hungarian identity from the Hungarian one (implied to be the “original Hungarian” identity) is most markedly presented through the eyes of the characters living in Hungary. Descendants of the originally Slovakian Hungarian relatives deported to Hungary see Petra and her family as strangers: according to them, . . . *ők voltak a határon túliak, a csehszók, akiktől a fiatalabbak folyton azt kérdezték, hogyhogyan ilyen jól beszélnek magyarul, hol tanulták a nyelvet, és mikor költöztek Csehszlovákiába* (Durica, 2016, p. 119) [they were from abroad, the Ceskos, whom the younger ones always asked, ‘How come you speak Hungarian so well?’ ‘Where did you learn the language?’ ‘When did you move to Czechoslovakia?’. The deported Slovakian Hungarians reacted to their traumatic change of homeland by categorically distancing themselves from those who remained home, and by silence. Similarly, the rhetoric of silence serves as the way to process the past for those who remained in Csallóköz. A similar sense of distance between Hungarian characters living in Hungary and those living in Slovakia is underpinned by their differences in language use: the novel emphasizes the use of loanwords (*szemafor* [semaphor], *blokk* [block], *stekker* [electric socket]), the appropriation of characteristic meals and drinks of the region (*Kofola* [a carbonated soft drink], *treszka* [a type of cod salad with mayonnaise]), and the names of products from Hungary that are alien to the language of Slovakian Hungarians (*közért* [grocery store], *mirelit* [frozen food], *rizibizi* [a side dish made of peas and rice]), all of which serve as tools to linguistically distance Hungarian and Slovakian Hungarian characters and bring about feelings of inferiority in Slovakian Hungarian characters:



*A hetven körüli néni rögtön kiszúrta, hogy ők ketten “nem idevalók” [értsd: Budapest], talán csak a külföldi rendszám miatt, de Feri meg volt győződve róla, hogy a néni gúnyos mosolyát a tájszólása váltotta ki (Durica, 2016, p. 109). [The elderly lady of around seventy immediately sniffed the two of them were not ‘from around here’ [i.e., from Budapest], maybe only because of the foreign license plate, but Feri was convinced that the lady’s smirk was attributable to his accent].*

The complex Slovakian Hungarian identity depicted in the novel is further elaborated on through the description of the relationships between Slovaks and Slovakian Hungarians. The novel contains several short, reference-worthy episodes, but even more important are the apt sociographic observations that capture moments in an almost naturalistic way, presenting factual images without pathos. Examples of such observations are the depicting of the village fair as a social function (*délelőtt focimeccs, főtt kukorica, hűtött sör, estére teljes lerészegedés* – Durica, 2016, p. 168 [footie in the morning, corn on the cob, cold beer, punch drunk by night]) or the description of the tower blocks presented as the symbol of Central Europe (*Hiába a vidám színek, az új lift és a fém postaládák, a panelek beton építőelemeibe mélyen beivódott az egész előző rendszer. A frissen dauerolt haj, a kiömlött Kofola illata, a szőrös női hónaljnak párája, az olcsó Pitralon, a csempészett benzin, a sokszor mosott textílpelenka szaga kering* – Durica, 2016, p. 228 [The bright colors, the new elevator and the metal letterboxes notwithstanding, the concrete panels of the tower blocks were thoroughly permeated by the previous regime. Freshly permed hair, the scent of spilled Kofola, the breath of hairy female armpits, the smell of cheap Pitralon [a brand of aftershave lotion], smuggled petrol and washed textile napkins was everywhere]). The text treats choices of names as an iconic example of the Slovakian Hungarian identity, most aptly illustrated by the story of the protagonist’s defecting father. The father, Károly, first changes his name to Karol and then to Charlie, with both changes symbolizing a shift in his identity brought about by a spatial change: he first leaves the Hungarian-speaking environment of Csallóköz for Slovakian-speaking Ligetfalu, and then, after being approached to become an informer, he defects to Australia. Károly has trouble finding himself in both foreign-language environments, and this difficulty is expressed by the fact that he does not respond to his new location-specific names; he even feels uncomfortable with attaching his foreign-language names to his letterbox.

The novel provides a sensitive overview of the power of one’s spatial and linguistic relations to form one’s identity, and of the way in which experiences of foreignness resulting from one’s unclear and layered spatial and linguistic relations can unsettle one’s identity. In the text, the borders between “own” and “foreign”, between “us” and “them” become blurred and gives rise to a hybridized experience of multiculturalism.

## EXPERIENCES OF MULTILINGUALISM AND MULTIDIALECTALISM

It is characteristic of a significant portion of contemporary Slovakian Hungarian prose to connect characters with Slovakian Hungarian identities from multiple cultural environments with multiple uses of language. Characters bearing traces of Hungarian and Slovakian cultures are often depicted as being bi- or multilingual, frequently communicating with one another in a language studded with code switches and loanwords. This phenomenon is apparent in György Norbert’s novel *Klára* (2004) or in Pál Száz’s ‘phytolegendarium’ *Fűje sarjad mezőknek* [Grass Grows on Meadows] (2017). The unique features of language use in contemporary Slovakian



Hungarian prose will be demonstrated using a work by Pál Száz<sup>6</sup>; similarly to Durica's novel, Száz's work also depicts the lives of Slovakian Hungarians, but it does so by choosing a unique generic framework, language use and an ironic perspective.

Pál Száz's phytolegendarium qualifies as a unique enterprise in Hungarian literature because the specific text types of the volume, which are tied to the world of plants (phytoaphorisms, phytoicons, phytoenigmas, phytolegends and phytoanecdotes), "for the first time in Hungarian language region" (Juhász, 2017) are used to convey life stories of people and communities not in the common language norm, but in the Slovakian Hungarian language variety (Vančo and Kozmács, 2016, p. 313). The writings collected in the volume follow the 20th century history of the Slovakian Hungarian minority, which is burdened with numerous traumas. They offer an insight into the everyday life of a village of Hungarian nationality, which belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire until the beginning of the 20th century, after which it was attached to Czechoslovakia following World War I. During the war it got reattached to Hungary, and after World War II, it was attached to Czechoslovakia again, and then finally it became part of Slovakia. The Hungarian community went from a majority to a minority and thus was faced with many challenges: its mother tongue was not an official language in the country anymore, and compared to the majority ethnicity, it only had restricted rights (in the next few years, which followed World War II, this meant that people were entirely deprived of their rights and had to undergo enforced deportation to the Czech Republic and Hungary). On top of all this, they had to adapt to the expectations of the continuously changing political power systems. In Pál Száz's work, we can read short stories and wise sayings which are the reflections and imprints of the historical events this community lived through. Hence they are strongly tied to the Slovakian Hungarian community both thematically and linguistically. The linguistic world of Pál Száz's volume is borne out by the exclusive use of the Slovakian Hungarian language variety. By reflecting the language of the local speech community, it supports widening the scope of what counts as an acceptable literary language beyond just standard Hungarian. The language of the volume, the Slovakian Hungarian language variety, is marked by specific, colloquial language items (e.g. phrases not used in standard Hungarian, since they are connected to the Slovakian reality – *alapiskola* [basic school] : *általános iskola* [general school]), uncodified language items which differ from the Hungarian used inside or outside the borders of the country – dialect-based regionalisms (*écsikkasztnak* : *elpusztítanak* [they destroy]), contact phenomena (e.g. *jéérdé* : *TSZ* [agricultural production association]) (Lanstyák and Szabó Mihály, 1998, pp. 211–214). This unusual language variety selection in literature is present in the whole volume visually too, since the author published the entire corpus in a phonetic representation of the Transdanubian dialect full of contact phenomena. He does all this in a way that is less characteristic for written language – therefore for the style of tropical expression and metaphorical perspective of literature used in this volume as well–, because he uses language resembling live, everyday speech with its idiomatic turns and twists.

<sup>6</sup>Pál Száz belongs to the promising young writers of the literature of the Hungarian minority living in Slovakia, he teaches at the Department of Hungarian Language and Literature of Comenius University in Bratislava [Pozsony in Hungarian.]. An author of three books, Száz has established himself as an author of note with his volume entitled *Fűje sarjad mezőknek*: besides the highly positive criticism (Fried, Mellár, Gaál, Juhász etc.), he also received the Alfonz Talamon Prize for the best work of Slovakian Hungarian prose in 2018, and the Artisjus Literary Prize, one of the highest pan-Hungarian honors for literature, in 2019.



The dialectical items can be observed in all levels of the text, and they mostly correspond to the dialectical phenomena described by dialectological research: e.g. using long *i*-s *repedésék* [repedések – cracks]; closed *ë*-s – *sëmmi* [semmi – nothing]; shortening of vowels – *husvét* [húsvét – Easter], etc. (Menyhárt et al., 2009, pp. 75–97). The application of dialect does not only serve to make the text more colorful – its manifold functions are way more complex. It has a location-appointing function; its role is to designate a region – István Fried says that “one’s regional language indicates where one belongs” (Fried, 2018). In the work it designates the geographical coordinates of the fictitious village, Marad, within a referential region, between *Gelánto* (Galánta) and *Sëlle* (Vágsellye). The text-flow narrated in the dialect takes the possible textual effect the receiver can get into account, since, by using the recording methods of oral history, it intends to transform the narrational rags into a documentarist gown, and by summoning the language use typical of the region it aims to create a pretense of the referential readability of the narrations. The selection of a dialect qualified as authentic encourages the receiver to read not only the language of narration as authentic, but the narrative as well.

The corpus, written in dialect, is filled with Slovakian Hungarian spoken language registers which deviate from the Hungarian standard. The phoneme level marks of the suprasegmental tools emphasize the live speech quality of the text: the coherent thoughts are merged, indicating speech pace: *istentuggyahun* (Száz, 2017, p. 16) [isten tudja, hol – God knows where]; shifts in the borders of letters words: *vész a zembër* (Száz, 2017, p. 62) [vesz az ember – the man buys], which extends to the writing of proper names: *Szökösferi* (Száz, 2017, p. 62) [Szökös Feri]; and long dashes used to indicate breathing which are present in transcriptions imitating intermittent speech: *Somogyomáro – tizënnyc család – Miiind maradi – Mind, mind* [Somogyomárol tizennyolc család – Mind maradi – mind, mind – From Somogyomáro eighteen families – all of them from Marad (all of them are old-fashioned) – all, all of them] (Száz, 2017, p. 280). The lengthening of the speech pace and the attitude of the utterance is indicated by multiplied sounds as well: *jóóómegcsinátom* (Száz, 2017, p. 277) [jól megcsináltam – I did it well]. The live speech nature of the transcribed speech-flow is confirmed by the unfinished clauses, thought-flows interrupted by interjections, and interpunctuations which deviate from the spelling rules and are marked based on speech rhythm: *ami kötve vót elódozza, mi zárvo vót megnyissa* [Ami kötve volt, eloldozza, mi zárva volt, megnyitja – The thing which was tied was let loose, and the thing which was locked got opened] (Száz, 2017, p. 206). Striving for the transcription of the flow of the thought process, the narrations recording oral accounts oftentimes use self-correction; they fix and realign their utterance: *No, nem is úgy vót, mert akkor vót a ruszkikarácsony* (Száz, 2017, p. 16) [No, nem is úgy volt, mert akkor volt a ruszki karácsony. – It wasn’t like that because that was the time of the Russian Christmas], as well as they repeat entire sections of the narration creating an intratextual web above the text-corpus (such piece, for example, is the tale of the *galajfü* [lady’s bedstraw, *Galium verum*] on the 18th and 23rd page). These retellings do not only serve to strengthen the spoken linguistic situation; they represent the self-tricking quality of the capacity to remember self-stories as well as the phenomenon of the layering feature of the past causing one to forget a wide spectrum of details, thus creating a memory-flawed, foggy atmosphere around the thought-process flow: e.g. *és az megbetegédett, nemcsak valahol, minnyá eszëmbë gyün, Pozsony mellett valahol, megbetegédett* (Száz, 2017, p. 71) [és az megbetegedett, nemcsak valahol, mindjárt eszembe jut, valahol Pozsony mellett betegedett meg – and that one got sick, not just at any place, it will pop into to my mind, that one got sick somewhere next to Pozsony]. The fact that the author uses words of real and meaning-based regional varieties





further validates the point that the analyzed work has a dialect-based regionalist nature. If the reader is not familiar with the dialect in question, such words, e.g. *no në gebeszkëggyé* (Száz, 2017, p. 231) [Na ne erőlködj – Don't exert so much effort] might cause difficulties in understanding.

Beside dialectical elements, the linguistic corpus of the phytolegendarium contains many contact phenomena, which – except for a few examples – can be placed inside the (sub)standard part of the Slovakian Hungarian vocabulary (Lanstyák and Szabó Mihály, 1998, p. 214). The language of the volume is full of direct and indirect borrowings, which are specifically typical for the Slovakian Hungarian language variety: e.g. *obcsánszki* (Száz, 2017, p. 71) ‘identification card’. They markedly detach the variety in question from the Hungarian standard. Some of these borrowings serve as designators of the area of a given story, since they are only used at events happening on the Slovakian Hungarian territory, e.g. the phrase *jéerdé* (an acronym of Slovak *jednotné rol'nicke družstvo*, ‘unified agricultural cooperative,’ from the socialist era from Slovakia) gets replaced by *téesz* (a Hungarian acronym for *termelőszövetkezet*, ‘agricultural cooperative’) when the narration turns to the life-stories of those deported into Hungary. The texts are much more receptive to the code switches as opposed to the use of borrowings, since in order to authentically recall certain speech situations, entire sentences and story parts are transmitted in a foreign – in most cases Slovak – language: *Krucifiksz, ti szí magyar?* (Száz, 2017, p. 101) [Crucifix, are you Hungarian?]). The linguistic curiosity of the addition of foreign language text sections is that – regardless of what the writing style or the phonemic system of the given language is – they become the victims of the phonetic writing style characteristic of the entire corpus. The linguistic monopolization generates linguistic distortions and misunderstandings, which can be regarded as the linguistic idiosyncrasies of the narrators who have an unsteady level of foreign language competence; it also reveals certain attitudes towards the Slovakian Hungarian language variety and identity. The Hungarian performers often express themselves with the help of literal translations: *Aszonta nás vojín, hogy vízért vigyenek embèrèkèt* (Száz, 2017, p. 98) [Azt mondta, a mi katonánk, hogy vízért vigyenek embereket – *Our soldier* (in Russian) said to take people for water]. One can observe the phenomenon of code-blending several times too, when either the Slovak or the Hungarian phrase gets the affix of the other language, e.g. *Legyüttek valahunnan Oravárú. Hunné gyüttek? Árvárú na Vágrú, felètik, csak ennyit tudtak mondanyi. Há ha Vágrú, akkor Vágrú, árvánok ippenséggè árvánok níztek ki* (Száz, 2017, p. 215). [Lejöttek valahonnan Árváról. Honnan jöttek? A Vág-menti Árváról, felelték, csak ennyit tudtak mondani. Hát, ha Vágról, akkor Vágról, árvának éppenséggel árvának néztek ki. – They got here from some place called Árva (literal meaning: orphan). From where? From some place called Árva at Vág (in mixed Hungarian and Slovak), they replied, and could only say this much. Well, if from Vág, than from Vág. Yes, they actually look like orphans.] The foreign language additions are not exclusively Slovak, since we can find Czech: *Jésztlí mnyè nèvjerzsítè pánové, pogyívèjtè sè co sè gyeje v Americè! Monta Maszarikelftárs* (Száz, 2017, p. 200) [*Ha nem hisztek nekem, uraim, nézzétek meg, mi történik Amerikában!* (in Czech) – mondta Masaryk elvtárs. – If you don't believe me, gentlemen, take a look at what is happening in America – said comrade Masaryk.], Russian: *ordít ègy hang, hogy davaj na csetiri cseloveka* (Száz, 2017, p. 97) [ordít egy hang, hogy négy ember jöjjön (in Russian) – someone is shouting for four people to come], English: *no jóvan, misztër* (Száz, 2017, p. 245) [Na jól van, *uram* (in English) – It's okay then, sir], German: *Mondanyi nem mert sèmmít, mer nem tudott amèrikajíú, sè nímètú, csak három szót, ich hilfè dú csalèn* (Száz, 2017, p. 245) [Mondani nem mert semmit, mert nem tudott



amerikaiul, se németül, csak három szót, *én segíték neked* (in German) – They didn't dare to say anything, because they didn't speak English, nor German, only three words, I help you], Romani: *Fut ehë a fáho, kérdezi ettú, attú, amattú is, tavës, tu szan a nyírfácsko?* (Száz, 2017, p. 39) [Fut ehhez a fához, kérdezi ettől, attól, amattól is, *te vagy* (in Romani) a nyírfácska? – They are running towards the tree, they are asking from this one and that one, too, are you the birch-tree?] and even Latin sections in the text-flow. This language cavalcade can be interpreted as a natural phenomenon of the narrations set in the area of Central Europe, and it is evidence to the multiculturalism and multilingualism of the region (e.g. N. Tóth, 2020, pp. 259–270).

## THE TRANSLOCAL EXPERIENCE

Besides the experience of multiculturalism and multilingualism, another important theme in contemporary Slovakian Hungarian prose is the problematic of spatial relations, the literature of mobility and the interpretation of a translocal experience. Perpetual en-routeness, mobility, border crossing, dislocation, removal and relocation are characteristic features of globalized world (Jabloneczay, 2015, pp. 153–154), and they are at the core of Anikó N. Tóth's<sup>7</sup> 2017 volume of short stories *Szabad ez a hely?* [Mind If I Sit Here?], particularly its story cycle entitled *Úti jegyzetek* [Travel Notes] that focuses on the trope of mobility and captures the experience of travel. Apart from a few pieces about traveling for leisure, N. Tóth's short stories primarily focus on forced travel, that is, on the sociology of forced commuters (Juhász, 2018), and, through capturing the micro-events of waiting, departure, arrival and en-routeness, the process of traveling as well as on travel-related attitudes. The 38 pieces of microfiction in *Úti jegyzetek* offer varieties of being set in motion: passengers are ambling, taking walking tours, taking a bus, a train, a boat, or a tram, or riding a horse. Their departures are mostly motivated externally; they are forced to commute, yet there are also occasional examples of travels for leisure. The short stories provide a cross-section of passengers: besides people of various ages and occupations, we also witness the wanderings of animals, objects, ideas and desires. Most of the narratives are related from an external, objective point of view, surrounded by occasional tinges of magical realism and poeticality. The cycle's internal cohesion is enhanced by the retellings of stories that offer alternative versions of the realities of mobility (e.g. *Csomagmegőrző* [Checkroom], *Anya* [Mother]). The various routes and travel experiences can be interpreted as a single overarching narrative that begins with a crowded early Monday morning bus ride (*Az állva maradás joga* [The Right to Stand]) and ends with a lonely, single-passenger bus ride to the terminus (*Az utolsó utas* [The Last Passenger]), and that, similarly to a guidebook, *...mintha hosszabb-rövidebb vagy több-kevesebb megállóhelyel megszakított útvonalakat jelölne ki oda-vissza* (N. Tóth, 2017, p. 111) [seems to trace routes of varying length back and forth, interrupted by more or less stops]. The stories have a characteristic structure based on dichotomies, which helps maintain the dynamism of travel-related difficulties, circuitousness and the vulnerability of the passengers. The exploration of inner and outer sceneries, the perpetuation of mobility in one's

<sup>7</sup>Anikó N. Tóth is the author of many books, a lecturer at the Institute of the Hungarian Language and Literary Science of the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, and one of the presidents of BÁZIS – Association for Hungarian Literature and Art in Slovakia. She has been publishing her work since the 1980s and has been the recipient of several awards (Imre Madách Award, 2006; the Grand Prize of the Pisonium Literary Prize, 2006; Alfonz Talamon Prize, 2009).



personal life, generates a constant sense of anxiety in the characters and contorts them into a never-ending crouch on a starting block: they can no longer unwind or relax, they cannot stop in their lives. Inert, they . . . *start és cél között rázkódják* (N. Tóth, 2017, p. 10) [judder between start and finish] all their lives. Hedvig Gyarmathy therefore refers to these short stories as tiny life moments condensing the marginality of travel that present the universe of the fatigued and terrified passenger (Gyarmathy, 2018). Dávid Mellár emphasizes the passengers' vulnerability in the face of external circumstances and the burden of depending on others (Mellár, 2018a, 2018b). Besides such vulnerability, Zoltán Szászi also calls attention to trying to find one's place en route, the loneliness of travel, and an inevitable association with others (Szászi, 2018). Travel shrinks to a space of vulnerability and fills passengers with feelings of anxiety and panic, making them believe that . . . *igazából nincs biztonságos hely* (N. Tóth, 2017, p. 34) [there really is no safe place] when traveling: . . . *kiszolgáltattak vagyunk. Tervezetten-szándékoltan. Váratlanul-ártatlanul. Egyremegy* (N. Tóth, 2017, p. 43) [we are vulnerable. By design, intentionally. Unexpectedly and innocently. It makes no difference]. Perpetual en-routeness is therefore a depressing experience – subject only to a couple of exceptions – and forced mobility does not provide an opportunity to go beyond the limits of any one culture as highlighted by Arianna Dagnino (2013).

According to Zoltán Németh and Magdalena Roguska, authors located within the discourse on transculturalism are characterized by linguistic and cultural border-crossings (Németh and Roguska, 2018, p. 6). Henri Lefebvre calls spaces that dissolve such borders the maps of social spaces, which is never sterile but is multilayered and multisense courtesy of the aspects of mobility and fluctuation (Györke, 2015, p. 227). The modes of transportation featured in N. Tóth's cycle of short stories become scenes of cultural diversity and culture mixing where various social groups and representatives of different cultural milieus are forced to interact, creating a web of cultural interference. Passengers step into a transpatriated space and thus become participants in a miniature society where people from different cultures meet and affect one another (Jakab, 2009, p. 167). For example, the short story *Egy asszony beszél* [A Woman Speaks] offers a glimpse into the neomodern existence of a commuting nurse, which is defined by the transience of the perpetual crossing of physical and mental borders and which proposes an alternative approach to the cultural otherness between “us” and “them.” As a means of illustrating the diversity of passengers, several stories survey the passengers and those waiting for travel (e.g. *Mentő* [Ambulance], *Nem férsz el mellettem* [There's No Space Next to Me], *Foglalt* [Taken]). They all come from different lives and backgrounds, are of different ages, and have different expectations (the latter is poetically presented in the piece *Igényes utas* [The Sophisticated Passenger]). The most compelling depiction of this cavalcade of cultures can be found in the short story *Egy közönséges kombinóút* [An Ordinary Tramride] which features a wide range of passengers who are strangers in their surroundings. Off-duty ticket controllers wearing their uniforms; a father and his son speaking with a foreign accent and in a language different from that of those around them; the black twins traveling with their blonde, white mother: all these characters are shown to be the ‘others’ of the crowd of passengers.

Traveling on public transport is governed not only by the provisions set forth in the terms and conditions of travel but also by . . . *íratlan törvények, láthatatlan hatalmak* (N. Tóth, 2017, p. 62) [unwritten rules, invisible powers]. The dynamics thereof bring about a peculiar social stratification among passengers. On the top of the passengers' hierarchy sits the mythical character of the driver (ticket controller), being the mover, lingering at the margin of staticity



and dynamism, . . . *kint és bent határán* (N. Tóth, 2017, p. 24) [on the border between inside and outside], and as guardian of the border separating these two realms, they have the power to allow or refuse one to travel (*Késésben vagyunk* [We Are Late], *Hosszú az út* [It's a Long Way]). Besides the publicly advertized terms and conditions, the culture of travel is also markedly regulated by hidden rules that prevail among passengers. Knowledge of these rules is the privilege of regular commuters, as is the power to amend them: they are the “first people,” the natives. In contrast, occasional travelers are fumbling about as culturally illiterate outsiders, not unlike immigrants. Regular commuters can even make the driver make an extraordinary stop for them (*Rendkívüli megálló* [Extraordinary Stop]), and their interactions with the driver are characterized by a sense of familiarity (*Cipity*).

Mobility provides a thematic framework for the cycle of stories, and it is presented as a basic situation or state, as an integral part or even attribute of identity; this is also implied by the motto *Útközben lakom* (N. Tóth, 2017, p. 7) [I live en route], borrowed from Miklós Mészöly. For the characters in the texts, travel is not merely a means of getting from one place to another so that they can get on with their lives, having endured the transitoriness of travel; it becomes a significant position in their lives – whether they like it or not – as life itself goes on while traveling. The overarching mobility through physical and virtual spaces triggers the most basic activities in life: people are eating, drinking, sleeping, working, talking, fighting and flirting en route. The constant physical mobility and need to live life on the way allots the characters a neomodern existence (Roguska, 2018, p. 40) and forces them to strive to create a momentary sense of at-homeness. Thereby, the experience of travel reshapes the passengers: while on the way, “the need to settle the passenger compartment” becomes their primary driver instead of the aim of reaching a specific destination. The stories constantly circulate . . . *start és cél között* (N. Tóth, 2017, p. 10) [between start and finish], relativize destinations (being further and further away from the start yet getting ever closer to the destination, . . . *egyszerre fogy és nő a távolság* (N. Tóth, 2017, p. 10) [the distance is growing and shrinking simultaneously]), and reveal the characters’ lives through their commute: from the reader’s point of view, passenger compartments are the only scenes in the characters’ lives. Through the appropriation of these spaces, passengers shamelessly expand their private sphere into the means of transportation, turning it into their makeshift home. In most cases, however, establishing one’s personal comfort entails an inevitable breach of other passengers’ privacy, manifested in a constant confrontation between “me” and “the other”: one strives to make oneself comfortable without regard to the needs of others.

In the short stories, the notion of traveling goes beyond passenger transport. Vehicles, letters and packages are in constant circulation (*Bőröndök, hátizsákok cserélnek helyet hátizsákokkal, bőröndökkel.* – N. Tóth, 2017, p. 22 [Suitcases and backpacks keep switching places with backpacks and suitcases.]), and besides physical mobility, virtual travel also has an important role in the cycle, with thoughts, desires, feelings and memories lingering across space and time. According to Gaston Bachelard, space – in this case, that of the passenger compartment – is not homogeneous and empty, but is saturated with sensations and dreams (Bachelard, 2011, pp. 29–30); that is to say, exploring and experiencing one’s inner space is just as important as the exploration of external space. A scarf left on a seat metonymically recalls a love from thirty years prior (*Szabad ez a hely?* [Mind If I Sit Here?]); a bus departing late launches a chain reaction of anxiety and panic over potential consequences (*Tűrészatáron* [Tolerance]); a fight during the commute determines the fate of relationships (Juli, Gergő); visiting one’s alma mater layers



events and experiences from various ages into a single space (*Üzenet egykori iskolákba* [Message to Former Schools]). Books and stories are traveling, too: as Tímea Jablonczay writes, the trope of mobility expands beyond human subjects, and embraces and encourages the transcending of literary boundaries, of those between life and literature, author and reader (Jablonczay, 2015, p. 138). The short story *Útikönyv* [Guidebook] (which can be seen as a *mise en abyme*) follows the physical journey of book supposedly about traveling, and raises questions about the comprehensibility of a story in a foreign language. Moreover, the entire cycle itself is a ‘Grand Tour’ across works of literature, enmeshed in an intertextual web of canonical Hungarian literature (through quotations from István Örkény, Ágnes Nemes Nagy, Attila József, Miklós Radnóti, Dezső Kosztolányi and Miklós Mészöly).

## SUMMARY

Considering representative works of contemporary Slovakian Hungarian prose, it can be said that in the selected works, elements of bi- and multilingualism, phenomena of the Slovakian Hungarian vernacular expressed through dialect and code switching, and the flows of foreign-language quotations and allusions are endowed with a poetic function. According to Zoltán Németh (2018), these elements and phenomena contribute to the performance of thinking about a literary language. The narrative perspective of transcultural prose works is dominated by a sense of in-betweenness, through which the notions of “own,” “foreign,” “different,” “minority” and “majority,” and thus the self-definition of Slovakian Hungarians, receive new meanings. By situating the stories in a transcultural literary space, the notions of mobility and exploration of physical and virtual spaces are enriched with new layers of meaning and interpretational possibilities (Dagnino, 2013). As a result, the geological definition of regional affiliation requires redefinition and a translocal approach.

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