

•Visegrad Literary Award

BOOKLET

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• Visegrad Fund
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Welcome Note

The establishment of the International Visegrad Fund reflects the belief that international cooperation is built not only through institutions and policies, but also through culture, dialogue, and people-to-people contacts.

In celebration of the 26th anniversary of the Visegrad Fund's founding, we would like to dedicate this occasion to literature—a space where diverse experiences, identities, and historical memories converge. The Visegrad Fund's mission is to strengthen meaningful ties throughout the region, and cultural cooperation is an integral part of this mission.

The Visegrad Literary Award ceremony pays tribute to authors whose works offer distinctive perspectives on contemporary Central Europe while resonating far beyond the borders of their respective countries. Their writing reminds us that literature continues to deepen our understanding, inspire reflection, and strengthen the shared cultural identity of our region.

About the Visegrad Literary Award

Created in celebration of the 25th anniversary of the International Visegrad Fund, the Visegrad Literary Award recognizes outstanding literary voices from Central Europe.

The Award honours four authors—from Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia—whose works reflect the diversity, complexity, and imagination of the region today. Developed in partnership with the Villa Decius Association and institutions across the V4 countries, including the Czech Centre for Culture in Prague, the Petőfi Literary Museum in Budapest, and the Slovak Literature Centre in Bratislava, the initiative also supports the international translation and circulation of contemporary literature.



Czech Republic

Alena Machoninová

Hella (Maraton, Praha, 2023)



Photo by P. Ševců

About the Author

Alena Machoninová (1980) is a Czech writer, translator, and Russian scholar whose work explores literature, memory, exile, and the moral complexities of contemporary history. She has translated into Czech works by Mariya Stepanova, Oksana Vasyakina, Andrei Platonov, and other major voices of contemporary Russian literature. Alongside her academic and translation work, she regularly writes essays and cultural commentary for the Czech literary magazine A2.

Her literary debut *Hella* received exceptional recognition, including the Czech Literary Fund Foundation Award and the Magnesia Litera Book of the Year Award.



Author's Reflection

"I wanted to understand why I had lived for so long, and willingly, in a country that many people — outside and inside its borders — consider impossible to live in."

Reading Excerpt

"Memory does not preserve events whole. It keeps only fragments — gestures, voices, the shape of a street in winter, a sentence someone once said and no one else remembers anymore."

About the Book

Part essay, part literary investigation, part memoir, *Hella* reconstructs the fragmented life of Helena Frischerová — a Czech Jewish woman who survived Stalinist terror and years in the Gulag. Moving between archives, letters, memories, and literary references, Alena Machoninová creates an intimate meditation on exile, language, historical trauma, and the fragile persistence of human memory.

The book deliberately dissolves the boundary between personal and literary memory. Moscow becomes both a historical place and an inner landscape shaped by literature, longing, and loss. Through a refined and deeply reflective prose style, *Hella* asks how stories survive — and how literature can preserve lives that history nearly erased.

Alena Machoninová

HELLA

The drizzle is gentle but unceasing. Bare branches sway in the wind. Sodden leaves in black puddles. The light outside a yellowish grey. It is November and the whole country is enveloped in fog. A sad November. The worst month of the year. It is also my month – unlike the words I've just used to describe it. Those belong, in part, to the protagonists of my story, the objects of my research or, rather, obsession over many years.

November 1937. The worst month in the years' memory. In other people's memories. In mine, it links two women. One was born on Wednesday, 17 November, in a small town in Central Bohemia. The other, born two days later, on Friday, 19 November, in Moravia, was arrested, aged thirty-one, in the Soviet capital.

Both were fiery women. This was how the former was referred to in a brief posthumous note by a Czech professor, a former student of hers; the other said it of herself. Both were driven by fire and consumed by it. It radiated from within and could not be extinguished. The two women never met. And yet, unconsciously, the former led me to the latter – as, incidentally, she led me to all kinds of other things. The former was a university professor of twentieth-century Russian literature who would deliver her lectures with her eyes half-closed, absorbed in the texts she was discussing, as well as in the lives of their authors. She would sweep her students along – those willing to be swept along, that is. Her private book collection was extensive and messy, just as she was. The other woman was initially only a literary character with an exotic name that sounded like a scream: Ri. Only years later did the real woman emerge from behind the fictitious heroine of Jiří Weil's first novel *Moscow – Border*: the author of short works of prose, of poems gone astray and of searing private letters, signed simply Hella. She is the one who wrote: "Soon November will come, the worst month of the year, the worst month in the years' memory." These words were written in Russian, in a letter addressed to her friend Tamara Petkevich in Leningrad. The words about the fog come from the conclusion of a letter that Jiří Weil wrote on 20 November 1938 to his translator Marie Weatherall in England: "It is raining and fog has enveloped this whole country of ours, the roads are muddy, this is the sad month of November. Perhaps one day spring will come: we all believe that it will."

Laureates of the Visegrad Literary Award 2025

Hungary

Róbert Milbacher

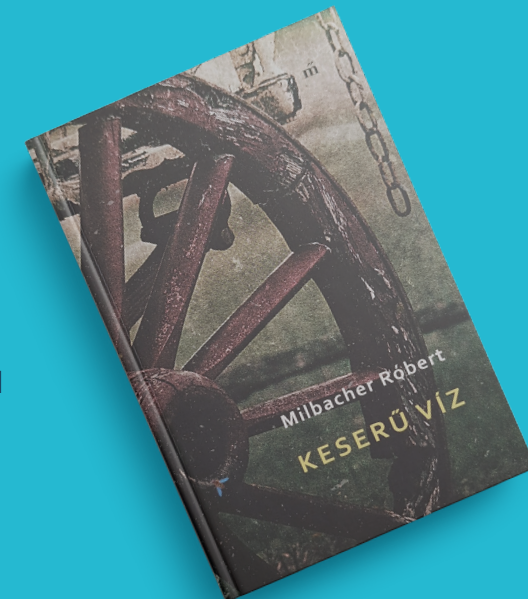
Keserűvíz (Magvető Kiadó, 2023)



Photo by Csaba Gál

About the Author

Milbacher Róbert (1971) is a Hungarian writer, literary scholar, and professor at the University of Pécs. Trained as a historian and specialist in 19th-century Hungarian literature, he has published extensively on Hungarian literary culture while also establishing himself as a distinctive voice in contemporary fiction. His work is characterized by a deep interest in memory, storytelling, and the ways personal histories intersect with larger historical processes. He is the recipient of several literary distinctions, including the Margó Prize, the Litera Prize, and the Artisjus Literary Award.



About the Book

Keserű víz (Bitter Water) is both the chronicle of a vanished Slavonian settlement and the life story of the narrator's grandmother, who was born there. Moving between family memory, archival research, oral histories, and historical reconstruction, the novel traces the fate of a Swabian-Hungarian community from its founding in the nineteenth century to its eventual disappearance in the twentieth. As the story unfolds across generations, the novel explores migration, belonging, displacement, and the fragility of cultural memory in Central Europe. Milbacher masterfully weaves together personal testimony, historical documents, family legends, and collective experience, creating a narrative in which the history of one family becomes a reflection of the region's broader past. Critics have praised the novel for its ambitious structure, linguistic richness, and emotional depth.

Author's Reflection

"I must remember other people's stories as if they were my own, because it is from them that I have built a past I can still inhabit."

Reading Excerpt

"Nothing binds together a suffering body and a struggling community more strongly than the desire to remember and to tell stories."

Róbert Milbacher

BITTER WATERS

(an excerpt from the chapter 'Rigor mortis')

For at the very end I was indeed there and saw everything with my own eyes. On reflection, it is only of these last few hours that I can give a truthful account. Everything else I know only from hearsay and cannot vouch for, I mean as far as its veracity is concerned. On the other hand I was terrified that I would share the fate of Lot's wife, petrified into a saline silence when she saw what she should not have seen and that memories would surface to override everything that I cherished about my grandmother, whom by the way I never addressed as such and never referred to by that term, not even in my own head, regarding it as overly mannered and therefore contrived.

Still, for want of anything better, let's call her that, if only for simplicity's sake.

Be that as it may, I feel obliged to recall the stories of others in the same way as my own, since in reality it is from these that I have fashioned for myself a kind of past that is just about inhabitable. To put it another way, to this day I have lived as the wordless shade of alien memories. So, once I start, I cannot make a mistake, otherwise there will remain nothing at all of me worth wasting one's breath on.

Yet I felt I had to make something of the fact that she was the first, and still the only one, of my own dead. My dead grandmother.

If, that is, anyone can assert that they have a dead of their own and without blithely laying claim to the clearly illegitimate ownership of another person's death in order to be able, having wholly appropriated them, to leech off them without fear of any consequences. Perhaps precisely for this reason it would be more sensible of me to exercise greater care from the outset and put it this way: she was the first person that I actually saw die.

Try as I might I would not be able to describe in any other way and with greater precision how I saw the light gradually fade from her eyes, flickering uncertainly and hesitantly, pulsating weakly, now stronger, now fading away – in line, as it later turned out, with the physiology of dying: hypoxia develops as a result of the blood receiving an uneven and inadequate supply of oxygen. Of course anyone would be justified in feeling disappointed that I am capable of retailing everything that happened only in somewhat hackneyed clichés, but I am bound to admit that the banality of death truly does not demand – indeed does not really admit of – anything else, so for want of a better option the only way I can recapture that final moment is by saying that it was as if an invisible hand had switched off in her every last remaining glimmer of light.

I fancied I could even hear the unobtrusive click of the bakelite light-switch. Taken aback, I turned my head in the direction of the sound I thought I heard.

Most curious of all, though, the darkness in the constricting pupils didn't swallow up every imaginable colour and shape all at once, but a step at a time. If I had to liken it to something, it would be to the slow, gradual dimming of the filaments of the many dozen lights in a theatre auditorium.

Now, I am aware that this too was one of those blind spots of existence which, it could be said, I had searched for with efforts both demented and, of course, pointless. In those days the only task preoccupying me was how to pare everything back to an unadorned, elemental simplicity that I could, beyond the shadow of a doubt, term reality. I sought those exceptional moments, which can be likened only to those of enlightenment, when, even if only for an instant, we can see ourselves as what we might have become, once freed of the alien matter that has inevitably accreted around us – the dross of others' pasts, if you like.

If such moments do indeed exist, I imagine they are like finding oneself all of a sudden in the no-man's-land of a space-vacuum and of time slowed to a crawl, whence one can survey the narrow yet nonetheless impassable passageways that have opened up for one between life and death. After a while, though I could not say whether it took a matter of minutes, or seconds, or perhaps just a fraction of a second – because just then and there the length of time seemed entirely filled by a barely easeful suffering – her eyes, by then dull and a mottled, glassy brown, merely mirrored my inquisitive glance as I looked into them when I bent towards her. In truth I was a little ashamed of what I saw in them, ashamed of – no two ways about it – the eagerness of my searching scrutiny, at the very least profoundly inappropriate in the circumstances. As if all that interested me was whether I could catch it in the act, this death as it crept up on her, literally only an arm's length away, to see if it could be caught doing some barely noticeable dirty trick, a sly ruse, or I might put it this way: some kind of seemingly insignificant mistake, the discovery of which would however suddenly make it possible to reverse a process that was apparently one-way.

I could certainly make out the outlines of Dr MacDougall's tense countenance as he bent, exercising great self-control, above the scales, with the dispassionate imperiousness of the scholar-scientist, awaiting the moment the dial stirred. Perhaps at this point he did not dare, even in theory, to try to hasten the end. With an impatience that manifested itself in tiny twitches of the muscles on his face, but stoically nonetheless, he waited with a self-imposed calmness. It is said that he later also took such measurements of dogs too and was by then actively involved with speeding up the process of dying but had willy-nilly concluded that – considering his equipment sufficiently sensitive and having no qualms about the methodology he had adopted – animals really did not have a soul.

At least, there were no significant differences between the starting and end-points. Nevertheless, the sight to which his impassive gaze was exposed, of strapped-down human bodies, tubulated to collect a wide array of gases, fluids and vapours released during decomposition and wired up with sensors of every kind, must surely have seared itself into his retina.

Precisely 21.26 grams. In the end that was how much he managed to measure. For all his best efforts he was able to provide evidence of barely an ounce of immortality.

Poland

Paweł Pieniążek

Wojna w moim domu
(Znak Literanova, 2025)

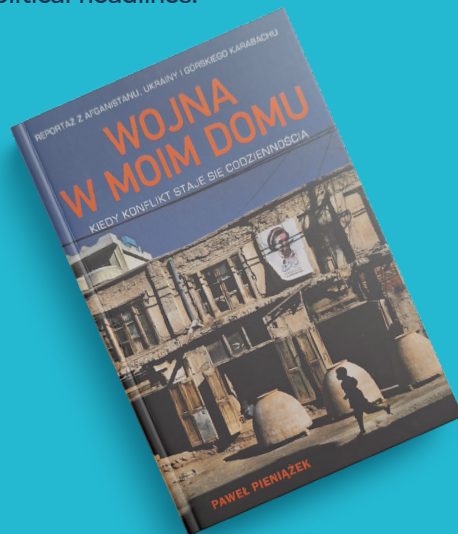


Photo by K. Celej

About the Author

Paweł Pieniążek (1989) is a Polish journalist, war correspondent, and author specializing in Eastern Europe and conflict zones. He has reported from Ukraine, Afghanistan, Nagorno-Karabakh, Iraq, and Syria, and regularly contributes to Tygodnik Powszechny. His previous book, *Opór. Ukraińcy wobec rosyjskiej inwazji* (Resistance: Ukrainians in the Face of the Russian Invasion), was nominated for the Ryszard Kapuściński Award and received recognition from the Witold Pilecki International Book Award. He is also a recipient of the MediaTory journalism award.

Throughout his work, Pieniążek focuses on the human consequences of war, giving voice to individuals whose everyday lives are shaped by prolonged conflict rather than by political headlines.



About the Book

In *Wojna w moim domu* (War in My Home), Pieniążek follows the lives of eleven people living amid ongoing conflicts in Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Afghanistan. Rather than focusing on military operations or geopolitical analysis, the book explores what happens when war becomes part of everyday existence — when uncertainty, loss, and displacement become ordinary conditions of life.

Built on years of reporting and close relationships with its protagonists, the book reveals how people adapt to violence while struggling to preserve dignity, relationships, and hope.

Through precise observation and deep empathy, Pieniążek creates a powerful portrait of lives suspended between moments of fragile peace and the constant possibility of renewed destruction.

Author's Reflection

"When war enters your home, it does not want to leave. War is not a single event but a condition that reshapes everyday life long after the sounds of battle have faded."

Reading Excerpt

"Not long after that phone call, a group of rebels stormed the school. They didn't let the children leave until their parents showed up."

Pawel Pieniazek

WAR IN MY HOME

An excerpt from part two: Sloviansk translated by Kate Webster
Lessons, Tetiana, first week of the war

Her grandson hadn't been to school in several days when Tetiana got a call from the teacher.

"Why isn't Sasha coming to school? He's missing lessons, he'll fall behind."

"Forgive me," said Tetiana, "but until things calm down in the city centre, I'm keeping him home."

The teacher lowered her voice; her tone softened.

"I'm keeping my grandchildren home too."

Not long after that phone call, a group of rebels stormed the school. They didn't let the children leave until their parents showed up. Then the rebels spoke to the parents, one by one, explaining that they must support the rebels' cause and ensure that the guards at the sentry point near the school had everything they needed: food, and a place to sleep, wash and rest. The parents must look after them as if they were their own children. After all, it was they whom the rebels had come to liberate.

Tetiana's sense of anger grew, but there was also a strange feeling – something like shame. She regretted sitting in front of the TV when there was still a chance to fight back, to go to the main square, to show that the authorities in Kyiv had their supporters here too. Especially since, in the beginning, there had been no need for an army to put a stop to the chaos in the Donbas – the police could have dispersed the aggressive crowds. But no orders had come from Kyiv. Besides, there were numerous henchmen of Russia among the regional commanders and politicians who were prepared to betray their country.

And the public? Well, if the war in the Donbas could be summed up in one word, it would be indifference. The rebels didn't have the widespread support here that you might expect from a Russified region. The lack of volunteers from the local population was one of the main concerns for the leaders of the separatist rebellion known as the citizens' militia. How it was the citizens', exactly, was unclear.

And the other side? Those who were pro-Ukraine and supported the new government in Kyiv? They were left in the lurch. Until, eventually, they were suppressed by the violence of the rebels. Or forced to escape, or to go deep underground.

The vast majority, however, pretended that nothing was happening. They were convinced that politics had nothing to do with them, so they carried on with their lives. As a result, Russia dominated the narrative of the war, portraying an entire region eagerly awaiting the tricolour flag. It was to be a re-run of the Great Patriotic War, when the people had stood up against the Nazi onslaught. Although the people remained passive, and the Nazis were nowhere to be found, a great many people around the world believed this story.

The opportunity to resist had vanished. Tetiana could only wait for the Ukrainian state to miraculously regain control over the city. She had no idea if this was possible. The new authorities had estimated that of the 130,000 soldiers in the Ukrainian Army, only 5,000 were fit for combat. The rest had fallen victim to the ubiquitous corruption, budget cuts and unfavourable politics, and the loyalty of certain leaders remained questionable. All Tetiana could do was place her hope in the remnants of the army and the thousands of volunteers, who had quickly learned the meaning of war.

Laureates of the
Visegrad Literary Award 2025

Slovak Republic

Ivana Gibová

Babička©

(Vlna, Bratislava, 2023)



Photo by T. Benedikovič

About the Author

Ivana Gibová (1985, Prešov) is an award-winning Slovak fiction writer and editor. She studied Slovak language and literature and emerged as one of the distinctive voices of contemporary Slovak prose with works such as *Usadenina*, *Bordeline*, *barbora*, *boch & katarzia*, and *Eklektik Bastard*. Her writing is known for its stylistic inventiveness, sharp ear for spoken language, and willingness to confront uncomfortable social and family realities.

Her novel *Babička©* became the most awarded Slovak prose work

of its year, winning the Anasoft Litera Prize and the Tatra banka Foundation Art Award, among other recognitions.



About the Book

Set in the 1990s on a small-town housing estate in eastern Slovakia, *Babička* follows an adolescent girl navigating family life that appears ordinary from the outside yet hides alcoholism, emotional manipulation, and sexual abuse beneath its surface. The novel combines an intimate portrait of relationships with an unflinching examination of the violence and silence embedded in everyday domestic life.

What gives the book its power is its distinctive narrative voice. Ivana Gibová captures the rhythm and spontaneity of teenage speech while creating a story that is both deeply rooted in eastern Slovakia and universally resonant in its exploration of trauma, memory, shame, and survival. Acclaimed for its linguistic inventiveness, *Babička* offers an unflinching portrait of contemporary society.

Author's Reflection

"I wanted the book to sound as if it were spoken in one breath — urgent, fragmented, unable to look away from what families often hide in plain sight."

Reading Excerpt

"Returning to the Family Home is like passing through hell, particularly when the magnificent title of Family Home is applied to a crumbling old flat, in which half the things don't work and the other half is shit."

Ivana Gibová GRANDMA

Let's listen to Maria Callas. Maybe *La mamma morta*? It's kind of appropriate, emotionally speaking. We don't know the words, we can only orient ourselves by the music, we go through the gate, march up the steps.

Sort of like this: the lift to the right, inside it's actually quite nice, but we'll never know that, as the flat is on the ground floor. We go pass the lift and see the door with the 1990s-era ugly brown leather, which we unlock, but even if we'd just kicked it lightly, the effect would be the same: the door would have opened.

Throughout our childhoods, all we heard was: don't slam the door, you'll damage the lock, use the key! The only people who do this are Grandma, who constantly repeats it, and Anetka, who is simply Anetka, no more and no less. The rest of the family doesn't give a fuck and slams it. And the result? Yes, a damaged lock. Unchanged for thirty years. A gentle kick is enough.

We're there. Even the hall is a bleak space, and actually, we could stop here, but we don't, because we're masochists, we want to know what's next, we want to know whether it could be any worse, and what's more, Maria Callas has just reached that heartrending bit which won't let us leave (we don't know yet that we'll have this aria interpreted by Maria Callas on a lifelong loop in our brains, which means we have actually unwittingly ended up in everlasting shit). The evocative word *miseria* rings in our ears, we stand in the hall and wonder whether it's a good idea to close the door behind us. It isn't, but we do it anyway. We strike a match and light candles like in church, and before us appears a disgusting, narrow room painted orange (no, let's not imagine any sort of sophisticated or even, God forbid, pretty orange).

For aesthetic reasons (in some universe, anyway), this disgusting pale orange has even more disgusting darker orange butterfly patterns on it, which were cut out using a template. Not even Anetka can possibly think that they're actually any good for anything now, and if even the hall actually depresses us so much that we find consolation in the butterflies, that we see a little of Anetka's angelic nature and optimism in them, do we feel this will save us? We're afraid to take the next step – and we can't even begin to imagine what history the hall has – and, although some memories may pop up, all those bottles of solvent, the pyjamas, tiles, broken spirit-levels and various styles and sizes of slippers... we single-mindedly drive away all these images and resolve to take those few steps, but is this actually what we want? We're not sure. We leave the doors to the bathroom and toilet behind us on the right, and we hesitated to open them (it'll soon become clear that we guessed why, but it's best that we left that till the end). Leaving these rooms behind us means we can decide whether we're going to enter the next room on the left, the right or even the one directly ahead of us, like in a joke or logic puzzle, only there's no logic here and it's definitely not funny; we suspect none of us are going to have hugely different feelings about this, whichever room we go into, some of the feelings already present will intensify, after all, Maria Callas is in her intense phase right now – we creep forward a little and go into the room which, once upon a time in (probably) better times was the living room and then, in worse times, was a bedroom used to store stage props, Maria Callas is bawling at the top of her lungs, extending the tone, *io son l'amore, io son l'amor*. Returning to the Family Home is like passing through hell, particularly when the magnificent title of Family Home is applied to a crumbling old flat, in which half the things don't work and the other half is shit. Your Family Home is, broadly speaking, gloomy, and it would be hard to find a less welcoming place. You don't know if all flats have walls capable of absorbing bad energy from their inhabitants, but the walls of your Family Home have this ability; they contain the remnants of your father's alcoholism, your mother's submissiveness, your Grandma's bossiness and all your fucked-up childhoods.

All the walls, mattresses and even appliances in the Family Home remember everything. The contents of the fridge in this small-town Family Home look like a dairy dessert pot installation, like a still-life with dairy dessert pots, pedantically arranged, and which, when the fridge door is opened, first smiles sweetly at the unprepared user, and secondly, mentally exterminates their own sophisticated structuredness: two thirds of the fridge consists of dairy dessert pots, arranged strictly by flavour and use-by date... But fuck. If only... In fact, the dairy dessert pots, bought when they're reduced for quick sale in the supermarket, by the dozen or even two dozen, by the size of reduction and then just because, roll randomly out of the fridge. Finding a dairy dessert two weeks out of date rolling on the fridge floor is not an isolated phenomenon. Neither is someone actually eating it. Nothing ever made sense in the small-town Family Home fridge, however often some Member came across rotten celery there, or stinking cauliflower, spilled ketchup or cheese growing mould, although paradoxically, maybe that was what made the most sense, even the food understood where it was and how to adapt to its surroundings. That's something you never managed.

