

---

# SEMINARS IN GASTRONOMY AND ABANDONED GARDENS

---

**DADO NAGY** ON HIS FRIENDSHIP WITH THE LATE PETER KRISŤÚFEK  
TRANSLATED FROM THE SLOVAK BY **JULIA SHERWOOD**

TO WRITE ABOUT PETER MEANS TO ME, FIRST AND FOREMOST, TO TELL the story of our friendship. Apart from hanging out in cafés, we worked together on a number of projects, such as composing film-like dialogues, co-writing a crime story, and TV and radio shows, as well as being involved in a bizarre theatre show at the Black Raven club. Any excuse for a meeting was welcome.

One of the best excuses was what we used to call Seminars in Gastronomy – a contest in inventing dishes that told stories on a given theme. These gatherings for around ten friends plus some additional guests always followed a set structure: tasting, analysing, awarding the prize and chronicling the whole event.

A few more seminars have been held since Peter left us but it just wasn't the same anymore.

My café chinwags with Peter would start in the morning, often extending into lunch and an endless seeing-each-other-home, some train watching and an even more prolonged, zen-like, saying of goodbyes....

In my mind's eye I see Peter's first attempts at directing – the short student films and video clips for his songs in which I would appear playing the part of, for example, the man studying beetles in the botanical garden, the slow-witted son, or one half of a kissing couple passed by a car.

And last but not least, *The Hungarian Dressmaker*, the feature film directed by Iveta Grofová from Peter's novella and script.

Music was another of his gifts. He was a member of Cadillac dei, a band

he'd founded with some former schoolmates. They rehearsed regularly and played the odd gig. For, as he used to say, the best thing about playing in a band are the five minutes after the gig.

For the last three years, almost every Monday morning after I deposited my son in nursery school, Peter and I would set out for exploratory walks in our city of Bratislava, especially around the hilly residential area under the Slavín monument. We'd stop for a coffee at the café in the woods at Horský park, before scrambling up Kalvária hill and walking down Hlboká cesta back to the centre of the city.

This being the period when Peter had become completely addicted to collecting old printed matter, I regularly had to fend off his exhortations to force illegal entry into various seemingly abandoned houses in the vicinity. Because you never knew – there may have been some rare books there....

Peter grew up on the Koliba Hill in an old house surrounded by gardens and vineyards. The unique atmosphere of the area forms the backdrop to his poems and stories, such as the tale of the twins who lived across the street; of Mr Slušný, a local brawler; his grandma, a former teacher suffering from memory loss who would run away from home; his eccentric mother Zora, and the night jungle he passed through on his way home after a late night at the radio.

In fact, this world existed mainly in his memory and imagination. To reach those real 'abandoned gardens' we usually had to trudge through endless boring new streets, passing newly built houses behind tall fences.

The first time I realised that Peter was a truly great writer was when I read his short story 'The Man Who Had his Shoes Shined'. It tells the story of the first person to be photographed, by Louis Daguerre in 1838 on a busy Paris boulevard. The man is standing there having his shoes shined, as hundreds of people and carriages streamed past, the only one who stayed in one place for long enough to be captured by a daguerreotype, the precursor of photography, and thus be preserved for eternity.

The work that holds a unique position in Peter's oeuvre is the conceptual book *The Atlas of Forgetting*, which shines a light on the last hundred years of Slovakia's history through documents, both known and unknown.

And then, of course, his great novel, *The House of the Deaf Man*, which resembles, in more ways than one, the Hungarian modernist Péter Esterházy's *Revised Edition*, in the ways in which it exposes skeletons in the cupboard that people would rather not talk about.

Peter embodied a rare combination of vast knowledge, a sense of humour and love of parody, as well as a bohemian and venturesome, single-minded spirit. He had a tremendous sense of responsibility and capacity for hard work. Though an introvert, he would expend a huge amount of energy on cultivating intense friendships with people he felt close to. This is best illustrated by his friendship with the bibliophile and writer Kornel Földvári, forty years his senior, whose memoir Peter decided to compile on the basis of his stories. For several years they would meet every Thursday at the Ex Libris café where Peter recorded hours of Kornel's inexhaustible treasure trove of stories, later sorting, abridging and consolidating one version after another. The editing alone took him about two years.

At the same time, Peter embarked on the mammoth task of tidying up and sorting thematically the gigantic, disorganised mountain of books cluttering Kornel's home. Thanks to Peter, a part of this vast library is on display at the Slovak National Gallery. He brought the same meticulousness and single-mindedness to every one of his projects – be it film or book production or their presentations.

Yes, yes, the world is a beautiful place to be born into....

All of this might give you a hint of what sort of person Peter Krištúfek was. Nevertheless, I realise that... well, actually, I don't know. And that's a good thing.

Some people are much more colourful, complex and mysterious than they appear to be. That is why they write stories. And that is why the only possible way to describe them, while preserving what is truly interesting about them, is through fiction.

**Jozef 'Dado' Nagy** was born in Bratislava in 1970, and is a Slovakian literary publicist, editor, moderator and propagator of literature. He was a close friend of the late Peter Krištúfek, whose novel *The House of the Deaf Man* (translated by Peter and Julia Sherwood) is forthcoming in a new edition from Parthian.

*A film, The Hungarian Dressmaker, based on Peter Krištúfek's book (Emma and the Death's Head) was last year's Slovakia entry to the international feature film category of the 2025 Oscars.*