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October 28, 1990, the people of Říčany again gave the Švehla memorial a place of honor in their town.

Marie Zdeňková's brief Švehla biography aptly ends the book. Mrs. Zdeňková, the official chronicler of the Agrarian leader's birthplace, and author of Antonin *Švehla a Hostivař* melds the facts of Švehla's life with an assessment of his role in Czechoslovak history. She explains:

> Švehla did not become the object of a cult. Instead, in the hearts of the people, he remains a legend. His much-vaunted ability to find compromise makes him a symbol of what unites our nation in history's fateful moments. He was an extraordinary personality whose moral principles and political expertise deserve that we should never forget him (106).

Mrs. Zdeňková's contribution provides the necessary framework for making sense of the book's myriad details. Simply put, she places Švehla and his monuments into historical context.

Berný and Zdeňková make excellent use of primary sources. They based their study on the local chronicles that all municipalities, even small villages, keep and used contemporaneous newspaper reports to supplement the logs. When it was feasible and appropriate, the authors interviewed chroniclers and others. Berný's introduction and Zdeňková's conclusion prevent readers from seeing the monuments as discrete facts and details. They compel then to focus on Švehla and his achievements. Furthermore, the copious photos of the memorials and ceremonies enhance and enliven the book.

Unfortunately, the work deals only with the Czech lands and does not encompass Slovakia. Had the authors done so, the readers would have had a more nuanced assessment of Švehla's popularity in the country as a whole, i.e., Czechoslovakia.

All totalitarian regimes strive to re-write the past to suit their vision of the present and future. The Nazis and Communists wanted to erase Švehla and his accomplishments from Czechoslovak history. They destroyed memorials to make people forget that Švehla ever had a place in his fellow citizens' hearts. The painstaking research of Marie Zdeňková and Lukaš Berný that resulted in *Ze srdce a kamene: Pomníky Antonínu Švehlovi* makes sure that the totalitarians' endeavors have not succeeded.

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Pavol Rankov, *It Happened on the First of September (or Some Other Time).* Trans. by Magdalena Mullek. Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 2020. ISBN 978-0-89357-502-1. 267pp.

Initially published in 2008, Pavol Rankov's *Stalo sa prvého septembra (alebo inokedy)* is now available in English under the title *It Happened on the First of September (or Some Other Time).* The historical novel has received widespread

acclaim. In 2020, it obtained the fourteenth European Union Prize for Literature and the Angelus Central European Literature Award. The judges lauded the work as "a great contribution to researching the memory and consciousness not only of the people of the Eastern bloc but of all Europe" (Litcentrum).

A faculty member at Comenius University in Bratislava, Pavol Rankov (born in 1964) writes fictional prose, essays, library informational science, and newspaper articles and works on Slovak radio projects. He has authored five novels since 1995.

Writing a historical novel can be challenging since it requires respect for historical accuracy reflected in a plot with fictional characters. The genre involves capturing the spirit of the times by portraying social norms, manners, customs, and traditions of a bygone era while unraveling some truth. Rankov attempted to do just that by focusing his novel on thirty years of turbulent Czechoslovak history.

As unorthodox as the title, the plot presents four individuals' lives each first of September from 1938 to 1968. Rankov weaves a story of characters who struggled to survive amid external events beyond their reach or control. They found themselves adapting to the situations that ensued during the wars, occupations, and totalitarian systems that rocked Central Europe.

The novel's main characters are purely fictional, but they represent the multinational social composition of Central Europe in the early twentieth century. They all hail from Levice, a small town in southern Slovakia with a historically mixed Hungarian, Slovak, and Jewish population. The characters reflect that nationality mix: Peter is Hungarian; Gabriel is Jewish; Ján (Honza) is an ethnic Czech whose parents came to Slovakia to work after 1918; the sought-after damsel, Mária, is a gorgeous Slovak blonde.

Rankov opens the novel with a scene at the swimming pool in Levice as the three adolescent boys engage in a water race to see who would have a first chance to woo the dazzling Mária, with beautiful hair, "the color of wild honey." No one is a clear winner, so the race to garner her favor becomes a recurring theme throughout the narrative. The characters often hark back to those days when their lives seemed more carefree and focused on the frolics and fantasies of youth.

Rankov interspersed the novel with bits and pieces of historical background. However, the treatment is uneven and random, so it is best to know some European and Slovak history. In the opening year of 1938, the Munich Pact would conclude by the end of September, but there is no reference to the turbulent situation in that year when many thought war was imminent. Levice became part of Hungary, and Ján would change his first name to the Slovak János for political expediency. Of course, in the following year, 1939, Germany invaded Poland on the first of September, and a historical merry-go-round would begin.

World War II disrupted the characters' world, compelling them even to Slovakize or Magyarize their names to be politically correct. The war forced a different life on each of them. For example, Jews like Gabriel had to fear for their livelihoods, as he had to perform forced labor. After the war, he and Ján tried living in Israel but wound up returning to their native Slovakia, only to find the country turned upside down by a communist seizure of power. The political establishment again set new rules and platitudes, searching for a utopian paradise that punished

those who dared to challenge the party line. Each character adopted a new identity in the totalitarian setting, with Ján even writing catchy slogans for the communists. Regardless of adjustments the individual protagonist chose, he lived in fear of the dreaded secret police.

At times, the author takes potshots at historical characters he disapproves of, such as Jozef Tiso, the president of the first Slovak state in World War II. He mocks Tiso's obesity, stating that he "was extremely proud of himself for having eradicated pride, greed, lust, envy, wrath, and soth a long time ago. Only gluttony continued to get the better of him" (136). The writer also satirizes the communist President Klement Gottwald, a former carpenter. Rankov refers to him as "Master Klement," who built coffins for Rudolf Slánský and other discredited comrades during the party purges in the early 1950s. He mocks President Antonín Novotný's paranoia on his visit to Slovakia, to the point of suggesting that the USSR drop a nuclear bomb on the town of Martin and blame the Americans. While lashing at such leaders, the author is less judgmental when portraying his fictional characters, even though, at times, they would also compromise truth and morality to get ahead in their careers or merely to survive.

At the end of the story, Mária becomes the narrator and offers an alternative female perspective. She voices her disgust with politics as 'mischief by the privileged and the twisting of the truth... The only time it was different was during the war. Back then, the line between good and evil was clear and indisputable' (256). Nevertheless, 1968 raised new hopes that politics could be constructive and transform the country into a land ruled by humane socialism. It was not to be. Appropriately, the novel concludes on the first of September 1968, just a little over a week after the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Pavol Rankov's novel is well worth reading, and he displays a firm grasp of history. The story flows smoothly despite the skipping from year to year, but that original approach is part of the draw for readers. Chapters are compact and focus on the characters' lives based on the themes of that year in history. The narrative effectively depicts how historical events impact the lives of individuals and shape the limited array of choices they had if they wished to survive in the whirlwinds of change.

Though written in 2008, Rankov's book did not receive broader European acclaim until its French translation appeared in 2019. Magdalena Mullek followed up with an artistic job of translating the original Slovak into readable English. She erroneously assumes that the reader is acquainted with some central European terms or events on a few occasions. For instance, while Central Europeans and scholars might understand the term *nyilas*, i.e., a pro-Nazi Hungarian Arrow Cross Party member, those less familiar with history might be confused and not make the necessary connection to the ensuing conversation. Similarly, the non-East European reader might not know that Košice became Kassa after the 1938 Hungarian annexation of southern Slovakia. It would be best to add a few short footnotes to explain this. Moreover, it would have been helpful to the English reader to have words like *šišky* (Slovak doughnuts) and several other foreign expressions translated or footnoted. However, for the most part, Magdalena Mullek smoothly

translates foreign words into their English equivalents and presents an eminently readable story that conveys the author's meanings well.

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