

Introduction: This Is Not a Biography

The Bitter Life of Božena Němcová is biographical, but it is not a traditional biography. My favorite “biography” is Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, which is, of course, not a biography but a novel that humorously exposes the inherent limitations of biography—of the representation of any person, any interior life. As I researched and crafted a narrative of Božena Němcová, a nineteenth-century Czech writer with an unconventional life, I embraced those limitations, along with my limited knowledge of the Czech language, as Oulipian-like constraints that led to a collage-based approach. Thus this project is less of a biography than an excavation and hopefully an unveiling.

Most people fall for Prague’s architecture; I fell for its literature. I fell for the stories of Milan Kundera, Franz Kafka, Ivan Klíma, Bohumil Hrabal, Josef Škvorecký, Karel Čapek, Jaroslav Seifert, and Jaroslav Hašek. But they were all men; their stories were of wars and paramours. Božena Němcová was not only a woman writer in a canon of men, but a woman writer who preceded them all, who emerged at a time, in the 1840s, when the only other known Czech female author was Magdalena Rettigová, a writer of cookbooks whose ideal woman was devoted above all to her husband. Němcová, who never felt compatible with the man she married, wrote tales of smart and powerful heroines who defied convention and sometimes suffered for it.

Like most important encounters in my life, I discovered Božena Němcová by chance. (“Chance and chance alone has a message for us,” says Milan Kundera in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.) In 2003, I went to Prague for the first time, on a whim. I was visiting a friend in Berlin, and she suggested a weekend trip. We toured the castle grounds and St. Vitus Cathedral, where we climbed the spiral staircase to the top of the clock tower. The view of Prague’s red roofs spread out before me like a field of poppies in the gray of mid-March. I could see Old Town Square and the Charles Bridge, which we’d crossed to get here. The gray Vltava River had flooded the year before, and there was evidence of its

destruction on the walls of many of the buildings in Malá Strana at the foot of the castle's hill. As I stood at the top of a five-hundred-year-old stone clock tower, I felt like a girl in a fairy tale.

One could even say that a spell had been cast upon me, perhaps by the Noon Witch. She may have already bewitched me an hour earlier, as my friend and I joined a hundred other tourists to watch the Astronomical Clock—adorned with saints, serpents, scholars, and skeletons—strike noon in Old Town Square. Perhaps, like Němcová's Divá Bára was said to be, I was put under a spell, destined to spend years reading and writing about Prague, reading and writing its stories.

At the castle's gift shop I purchased a beautifully illustrated copy of *Czech Fairy Tales* by Božena Němcová and Karel Erben for my daughter, who was six at the time. Did I notice, as I paid, that Němcová's portrait was on the 500-crown note I handed to the cashier? I did notice eventually. A woman? On national currency? Who was she? This book is the result of years spent trying to answer that question.

I began my search online, where information was contradictory and poorly translated: Was she born in 1820, 1818, or 1817? Were her parents peasants, or was she the illegitimate daughter of royalty? Such contradictions might be expected on the Internet. I went to my university library and consulted the scholars, searching for Němcová's name in indexes of English-language books about Czech literature and culture. I found primarily short entries that praised her fairy tales and lamented her bitter life. Over and over this came up: her short, bitter life. I found these claims surprising in the context of her writing. Like most fairy tales, her Czech and Slovak stories are full of happy endings. Her 1855 novel *Babička* (*The Grandmother*), subtitled "Scenes from Country Life," relishes in communal stories and the cycles of nature, and, though it ends with the grandmother's death, she is proclaimed a "happy woman" in the famous final words.

As I kept researching, I learned that Němcová's marriage was not happy, and that she had a series of extramarital affairs. The couple's

political beliefs made them the target of police, especially after the failed nationalist revolts against the Habsburg Empire in 1848, so the family constantly had to relocate. They had four children, one of whom died of tuberculosis when he was fifteen. A decade later, in 1862, despite the success of *Babička*, Němcová spent the end of her own young life begging for money and food, suffering abuse by her husband, and dying of an aggressive cancer.

Well, I thought, what else could one expect of the life of a woman writer one hundred and fifty years ago? Bitter indeed.

But then I found a book that transformed my perspective. In *Women of Prague* by Wilma Iggers, I encountered a Božena I'd not yet read about: the Božena of her own letters. In her letters she is a new, sad wife, an illicit lover, a worried mother. In a letter to her husband she says she could have had any man she wanted. In a letter to a lover she writes that she denies her husband sex, then she admits to feelings of sexual desire. In her letters, I discovered a voice of intelligence, frankness, and longing, but little of the bitterness I had been led to expect.

When I read these letters, I felt kinship, sisterhood, gratitude. And confusion: Why hadn't I heard of Božena Němcová the way I'd heard of the Brothers Grimm? Why was the available information so contradictory and reductive? Why weren't the rest of her letters translated into English?

The answer is primarily historical: During Němcová's life, the Czechoslovak regions of Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, and Slovakia were part of the Habsburg Dynasty, and these regions did not become an independent Czechoslovakia until 1918, more than fifty years after her death. The country's independence was quickly subsumed, once again, by a century of German and Soviet occupiers, and her stories and letters were hidden behind the Iron Curtain for decades.

Nonetheless, Němcová's influence on Czech writers has spanned generations. Franz Kafka read *Babička*—the first Czech novel—as a

student in the 1890s, and critics note its direct influence on his *The Castle* (written in 1922 and published posthumously in 1926). Her letters were published for the first time in 1917 at the height of Kafka's career, and he read and admired them. In 1940, during the Nazi occupation of Prague, František Halas and the future Nobel Prize winner Jaroslav Seifert each wrote a collection of poems about Němcová. In 1993 Milan Kundera called her "The Mother of Czech Prose."

It has not even been three decades since the Velvet Revolution of 1989, so perhaps I am too impatient for a process that will surely take time: the rendering into English of Němcová's letters, of the numerous scholarly books and biographies, of her many untranslated works. When I first began researching Němcová in earnest in 2007, the only version of *Babička* I could find in English was a 1960s translation, mimeographed and bound in a metal clip, at the Indiana University library. When I returned to Prague in 2010, I found Frances Gregor's 1892 translation reissued by the Czech publishing house Vitalis for sale at the Kafka Museum. Slowly, slowly, things are changing. Jack Zipes, translator of the Brothers Grimm tales, and a scholar who has been writing about fairy tales since the 1970s, discussed Němcová for the first time in his 2013 *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre*. Articles and dissertations are being written about her in English. Rose Metal Press is publishing this book.

Like Němcová, I am a storyteller, and I wanted to tell her story even if I didn't have access to all of the information and my Czech never much improved. The gaps have become part of the story. The information I gathered came in fragments, and those fragments had strong voices: that of the dismissive scholar, the enthusiastic biographer, the awkward English translator, the experts on radio interviews, the voices of Němcová's husband and lovers, and Němcová's own voices as fairy tale writer, novelist, lover, and letter writer. *The Bitter Life of Božena Němcová* is told entirely through these voices and found fragments. The letters and other first-person reminiscences by her contemporaries are in italics throughout the book. The footnotes identify the source for each fragment. Many footnotes also provide the reader with additional context about

the source text, relevant historical figures and debates, and scholarly discussions of Němcová's work. Because so many representations of Němcová are visual—statues, paintings, book illustrations, and even her tombstone—the biographical collage also includes my own travel photographs, postcard-size paintings, and mixed-media collages.

If the main text is an unveiling of Božena Němcová, “Postcards to Božena” is an unveiling of me. As I worked on this book (and in 2012 in particular), my personal life underwent many changes that seemed intrinsically linked to my work on this project. In the summer of 2012, having just gotten tenure at my university job, I enrolled in a month-long Czech language course in Prague. I hoped to learn enough Czech to begin translating Němcová's letters on my own, but instead I humiliated myself on a daily basis by saying things like, *I'm a professor, I'm from America, I ate a car for breakfast*. As I studied her language in the city where she lived and wrote for so many years, I felt more connected to Božena than ever. I was almost forty-two, the age she was when she died. Every day on the bus to and from the Czech class, I passed by the apartment where, according to the plaque, Božena Němcová's *The Grandmother* was written. After a lifetime as the privileged eldest grandchild, I had just lost both of my beloved maternal grandparents. I was with my Granny when she died on Mother's Day just two months earlier. And while in Prague, I took a train to my grandfather's family village in Slovakia, where I was welcomed by his first cousins whom he had never met, and I saw the house where his mother was born. And then, most significantly, I returned home and faced the beginning of the end of my seventeen-year marriage. Inspired by Němcová's letters—and by my friend who advised me to write it all down—I began to compose postcards to Božena, which became a meditation on life, letters, love, and happy endings.