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“Because Slovaks are the best people in the world and the Slovak language is the most beautiful language in the world”: Defamiliarising the Slovak “Imagined Community” in *Samko Tále’s Cemetery Book*

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Abstract

*National identity and language have been understood to be inseparable. This claim is supported by the history of the Slovak language, notably the codification attempts made by Anton Bernolák and Ľudovít Štúr as part of the Slovak National Revival Movement. National community tends to be perceived as being defined and categorized by a unified language, or by a homogenous grammar and lexicon shared equally among the community members. This concept of speech-national communities, I propose, is deconstructed in Daniela Kapitáňová’s *Samko Tále’s Cemetery Book* (*Kniha o cintoríne*), published in Slovak in 2000 and translated into English by Julia Sherwood in 2010. Through Samko’s pedantic engagement in Aristotelian categorization of knowledge, in his obsessive attempt to illustrate his (anti-)logical logic of what it means to be a Slovak and to be part of a community which has gone through dramatic changes in history, tenets and beliefs which are unquestioningly accepted as truth are mercilessly defamiliarized, or “made strange”. *Samko Tále’s Cemetery Book* corresponds with Benedict Anderson’s notion of human communities as imagined entities in which people “will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”.*

In 2010, the Slovak National Party (Slovenská národná strana), known as the SNS, stirred up controversy with its xenophobic campaign strategy aimed at instigating hatred and intolerance towards the Roma community in Slovakia. The SNS’s propaganda campaign culminated in an election billboard which featured an overweight, half-naked and dark-skinned man, elaborately tattooed and wearing a thick gold chain around his neck. Depicted in the background of the portrait is a dark cupboard with shelves on which rows of glasses and stacks of plates are cast in shadowy light. It is obvious at whom the caption, “Do not feed those who do not want to work” (“Aby sme nekrmili tých, čo nechcú pracovať”), is truly targeted. The billboard plays on the stereotypes of Roma people as lazy, dirty and morally corrupt social parasites living on good Slovak citizens’ tax money by exploiting the welfare system and who, according to Jan Slota, SNS’s co-founder and former president, should best

be disciplined in “a small courtyard and with a long whip” (Nicholson, 1998). The visual composition of this controversial billboard is a story in itself, a narrative which, like social parasites, lives and grows on what the public find familiar and, at the same time, obscure. The thieving gypsy comfortably sitting in his dark and dirty kitchen and staring defiantly at the voyeur seems a familiar sight to the mind’s eye, which tends to stare through the fabric of rumours and laces of media-spun sensational headlines. However, the man’s day-to-day existence remains a mystery to the voyeur who is not and never will be part of his household or community, i.e., not living in his dirty house or standing in his dark abyss of a kitchen. One does not know him. One does not even know his name or his family. One does not know what he does or fails to do for a living. The figure on the billboard is seen and, at the same time, imagined. The face is both real and unreal. Anonymity is crucial for racist and xenophobic discourses. One is not supposed to look beyond the indifferent label of “otherness” and find a fellow human being who is, in fact, not different “from us”. The true story behind the man on the billboard exposes the process of story-telling itself. On 5 May 2010, *SME.sk* (Kováčová, 2010) published coverage on a man named Lukáč Bart. The face on the billboard was, for the first time, given a name and a narrative. Bart collects scrap to feed his wife and his two children. He and his brother were paid 150 euros for a photo shoot which he claimed he had no idea would later become an emblem of ultra-nationalist propaganda. On the *SME.sk* website, readers are given two juxtaposing photos. One of the billboard and one of a thinner, less hairy and less tattooed Lukáč Bart in front of an ordinary cupboard. There is sufficient light in the kitchen background. No dark corners. In this original shot, Bart is not wearing a thick gold chain. His facial expression is far from menacing. Apparently, the heart-shaped tattoo on his chest was artificially created and inserted as part of the photographic production. What does Lukáč Bart’s story, this “narrative within the narrative” of the billboard tell us? Nationalism and notable works of fiction share the attributes of a good story. Drawing on the repository of “the familiar”, be it familiar characters and landscapes, or familiar themes of human love and strife, life and death, nationalist sentiment thrives on threads of gripping and memorable story lines. The Lukáč Bart on SNS’s billboards is not a reflection of reality but a projection of an imagined story. The billboard itself is not an end product, but rather part of the whole production process which aims towards making tangible and rendering more abstract the familiar and the obscure terrains of known collective fears and unknown shared destiny. Nationalism is not only a product but also a procedure. It is a production which is constantly adapted and hijacked to create as well as promote an ideology: “the ‘nation’ proved an invention on which it was impossible to secure a patent. It became available for pirating by widely different, and sometimes unexpected, hands” (Anderson, 1996, p. 67).

In this paper, I shall go as far as to assert that nationalism *is* a work of fiction. Like Scheherazade in *One Thousand and One Nights*, whose fate hangs off the cliff’s edge of the Sultan’s mercy, nationalism’s survival depends upon its cliffhanging narrative woven with threads of the familiar past, unknown present and utopian hopes for the future, upon having ordinary characters made into extraordinary epic or tragic heroes/heroines, upon its constant myth makings and remakings which strive not only to *capture*, or attract, the imagination but also to *captive* the imagination by inducing it not only to will the stories to be true but also to kill and die for these stories. Though Boyd C. Shafer’s *Nationalism: Myth and Reality*, published in 1955, seems anachronistic, the text is worth quoting as this paper’s starting point. In this classic book on the rise of European nationalism, Shafer not only points out the hybrid and Janus-faced nature of modern nationalism but also offers a list of nationalism’s preliminary characteristics which help one to understand nationalism as a constructed concept, as Scheherazade’s most painfully beautiful dreams, nightmares and beautifully painful fabricated lies:

The fact is that myth and actuality and truth and error are inextricably intermixed in modern nationalism. The only reasonable way to get at the nature of nationalism is to determine what beliefs – however true or false – and what conditions – however misinterpreted – are commonly present. The following ten are here hypothetically advanced. No claim is, however, laid for their infallibility or finality:

1. A certain defined (often vaguely) unit of territory (whether possessed or coveted).
2. Some common cultural characteristics such as language (or widely understood languages), customs, manners and literature (folktales and lore are a beginning). If an individual believes he shares these, and wishes to continue sharing them, he is usually said to be a member of the nationality.
3. Some common dominant social (such as Christian) and economic (such as capitalistic or recently communistic) institutions.
4. A common independent or sovereign government (type does not matter) or the desire for one. The “principle” that each nationality should be separate and independent is involved here.
5. A belief in a common history (it can be invented) and in a common origin (often mistakenly conceived to be racial in nature).
6. A love or esteem for fellow nationals (not necessarily as individuals).
7. A devotion to the entity (however little comprehended) called the nation, which embodies the common territory, culture, social and economic institutions, government, and the fellow nationals and which is at the same time (whether organism or not) more than their sum.
8. A common pride in the achievement (often the military more than the cultural) of this nation and a common sorrow in the tragedies (particularly its defeats).
9. A disregard for or hostility to other (not necessarily all) like groups, especially if these prevent or seem to threaten the separate national existence.
10. A hope that the nation will have a great and glorious future (usually in territorial expansion) and become supreme in some way (in world power if the nation is already large). (1955, pp. 7-8)

If nationalism *is* a work of fiction, where else, then, can one fittingly witness the nationalist Scheherazade in action and come to perceive such a mythical creature and living flesh and blood called “the nation” than the work of fiction itself? Thus I shall examine each of Shafer’s hypotheses alongside my analysis of Daniela Kapitáňová’s *Samko Tále’s Cemetery Book* (*Kniha o cintoríne*), published in Slovak in 2000 and translated into English by Julia Sherwood in 2010. I shall demonstrate that, through Samko’s pedantic engagement in Aristotelian categorization of knowledge, in his obsessive attempt to illustrate his (anti-)logical logic of what it means to be a Slovak and to be part of a community which has gone through dramatic changes in history, tenets and beliefs which are unquestioningly accepted as truth are mercilessly defamiliarized, or “made strange”. *Samko Tále’s Cemetery Book* corresponds with Benedict Anderson’s notion of human communities as imagined entities in which people “will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (1996, p. 6). The novel is written in the form of a memoir, Samko’s cemetery book, where the living are juxtaposed with the dead, and where the ideologies of present-day Slovakia are juxtaposed with those of

its communist past. Samko, the main character, is depicted in the novel's introductory section by Julia Sherwood and Donald Rayfield as "an intellectually and physically stunted creature and arch-conformist who enthusiastically embraces every kind of prejudice under Communism and as it continued in the newly independent Slovakia" (Kapitáňová, 2011, p. 5). Samko describes himself in this following passage:

"The thing is I hate it when people call me Boy, because I'm not a boy, I'm nearly forty-four years old and people respect me because I'm hardworking, even though I don't need to work because I have a disability pension due to my kidneys, and I have another illness as well that has a proper name, but that illness has nothing to do with my disability pension, I just have it. My disability pension has gone up quite a lot because people respect me. Anyway." (Kapitáňová, 2011, p. 12)

Note that the name "Samko" is referred to in diminutive form despite his age. This can be seen as a traditional marker of intimacy and a condescending marker of his "otherness" as an intellectually disabled person. Samko's position and status in society contribute to his appeal as his views on the world possess the power to "make strange", or defamiliarize, one's preconceived notions of truth. Samko's straightforward and, at times, awkward comments reveal questions and concerns which one prefers to gloss over with euphemism or evade with silence. The adverb "anyway" can be found after most of Samko's statements in the novel. This "aside" characteristic of his observation which the adverb connotes might signify that Samko's words, like himself, are a digression from the mainstream narrative of the novel and nationalist discourses. However, the irony lies in the fact that the whole book is written as a digression. It turns out that the "anyway" turns out to be the "only way" in which the story develops or fails to develop.

Returning to Shafer's ten hypotheses on nationalist sentiment, the first item, which is the notion that a fixed territory, be it geographical or mental, is necessary for the development of nationalism, is put to question by Samko in his following remarks:

"There's just one thing I don't get and that's why there are so many Gypsies in Komárno, and not just in Komárno but all over the world, because what I don't get is why there have to be Gypsies in the world. I don't want there to be Gypsies in the world, they should go somewhere else, for example to Gypsyland where they came from..." (Kapitáňová, 2011, p. 36).

To define itself against "the other", a nation with supposedly fixed borders and boundaries like Slovakia is to be defined against its menacing adversary, in Samko's case, Gypsyland, home of the Gypsies. The belief that each nationality forms a separate and independent group sustained and propagated as part of the nationalist movement, as pointed out by Shafer in item 4, is also challenged. My argument finds its resonance in Benedict Anderson's critical dissection of nationalism and of a nation's need for imagined boundaries: "The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind" (1996, p. 7).

If it is true that gypsies belong to a limited nation called "Gypsyland" as Slovaks belong to the territories of the Slovak Republic as Samko believes, then the absurdity of such a statement is made clear to readers. If one finds Samko's idea of Gypsyland ridiculous, given the history of the Romani people's migration, displacement and persecution, not to mention the stereotypes of their nomadic habit and lifestyle, one should also find the idea of Slovakia and the notion that this land, with its definite cultural and physical borders, should be populated exclusively by pure-blooded "Slovak people" ridiculous as well. The existence and legitimacy of "Gypsyland" are questioned alongside that of Slovakia, given the country's history of shifting borders and multiculturalism. Komárno, in particular, is a case in point. The territory of this Czechoslovak town was defined in the Treaty of Trianon, signed at the end of the First World

War in 1920 as part of a peace agreement between the Allies and the Kingdom of Hungary. The newly created border cut the original territory of the Hungarian town in half. The smaller section is known in the present day as the Hungarian town of Komárom. In the same way that the relation between words and meanings, Ferdinand de Saussure's "signifier" and "signified", is arbitrary (1983, p.67), borders and boundaries, as well as the essence of so-called "Gypsiness" and "Slovakness", what it means to be a gypsy or a Slovak, are arbitrarily human-made and constantly customized. Who, one might ask, is the true "other" in a town like Komárno? Is it the Slovaks, the Hungarians or the Gypsies? This Derridean undecidability yields constructive as well as destructive results. A return to multiculturalism and promotion of tolerance form part of the creative aspects of a suspicion towards nationalist labelling. On the other hand, socio-political conflicts, ranging from mass physical violence and suppression to petty vandalism of, for example, the bilingual street signs in the town and casual racist remarks, form part of the degenerative aspects of nationalist otherization. "We did not establish our independent state for minorities," said Robert Fico, "although we respect them, but mainly for the Slovak state-forming nation" (Smith, 2013). Stripped off of its ultra-nationalist rhetoric, such a statement would have only revealed blatant discrimination as a result of an all-too-familiar ignorance in supposing that what constitutes Fico's "minorities", Slovakia's parasitical other, is a given entity independent from the repeated production and reproduction by what Louis Althusser terms "ideological state apparatuses" (2001, p. 96), signified by Fico who is the Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic himself, and therefore not to be questioned. Samko, from a "strange" perspective as "the other" in a society of "normal" people, puts on centre stage and makes strange the notion of nationhood and the question of national territory which one tends to take for granted as given entities. The affirmative "I didn't like it, either" (Kapitáňová, 2011, p. 14) when he thinks that the Slovak public do not like the idea that his great grandmother was Hungarian and had a Hungarian name is rendered disturbing in the following passage:

"But Grandmummy and Granddaddy were not German because they were in Slovakia, except that Grandmummy's grandmother was Hungarian and her name was Eszter Csonka, meaning that she had a Hungarian name too. And nobody liked that. I didn't like it, either." (Kapitáňová, 2011, p. 14)

By wholeheartedly conforming to mainstream nationalist discourse against the Germans and the Hungarians, Samko shocks readers into an awareness of how ridiculous and narrow-minded racial discrimination truly is. Through defamiliarization, Samko propels readers to stop, think and question the ideology behind "not liking" the fact that one's own ancestors or relatives are so-called "foreigners".

What is defamiliarization? The term "defamiliarization" is a translation of the Russian *ostranenie* which means "making strange". The concept was introduced by Russian formalist thinker Viktor Shklovsky (1965, pp. 213-214). In "Art as Technique", Shklovsky argues against an individual's automated perception and responses to life. Objects, landscapes and physical experiences tend to be overlooked and undervalued as they have become too dull to provoke an individual's thought or sensation. It is art's mission to shatter the familiar images of the world: "The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged (Cuddon, 1999, p. 12)". Such a defamiliarization device can be seen in Samko's treatment of the notion laid down by Shafer in items 2 and 5 that a sense of nationhood is honed out of a shared language, which leads to supposedly shared culture, customs and history: "We used to call our grandparents Grandmummy and Granddaddy, but only at home because it would have been weird to call them Grandmummy and Granddaddy in front of other people, ... Because that's in German and

we're in Slovakia" (Kapitáňová, 2011, p. 14). What is deemed "weird" to the "weird" Samko is the act of addressing his grandparents in a foreign language such as German in public while in Slovakia. Through Samko's defamiliarized eyes, one encounters the "all too familiar" concept that national identity and language are inseparable. This claim is supported by the history of the Slovak language, notably the codification attempts made by Anton Bernolák and Ľudovít Štúr as part of the Slovak National Revival Movement. National community tends to be perceived as being defined and categorized by a unified language, or by a homogenous grammar and lexicon shared equally among the community members. Such a notion can be seen reflected in Samko's attitude towards Hungarian people and is juxtaposed with that towards Vietnamese people:

"[B]ut the Vietnamese are nice because they don't push other people around and they don't speak Vietnamese. I mean they do speak Vietnamese but only among themselves. But Hungarians speak Hungarian even when they are not among themselves.

But people forgive the Vietnamese for speaking Vietnamese because we have never been suppressed by them. And that's why they are allowed in Slovakia. We have always been suppressed by the Hungarians and that's why we will never forgive them. That goes without saying, right?

Right." (Kapitáňová, 2011, p. 92)

The absurdity in Samko's statement is put on centre stage through defamiliarization. For Samko, the Hungarians are "not as nice as" the Vietnamese because they speak "Hungarian even when they are not among themselves" (Kapitáňová, 2011, p. 92) while living in Slovakia. The sense of ownership regarding national language and territory, as culminated in the notion of "while in Slovakia, do as the Slovaks do", including speak what the Slovaks speak, is fuelled by Hungary's "unforgivable" late 19th century Magyarization law and policy, of which forced assimilation left a mark in Slovak history. However, as Benedict Anderson posits at the beginning of *Imagined Communities*, national identity is an artefact, a signification process which evolves with time and adapts to changing the socio-political climate and landscape:

"My point of departure is that nationality, or, as one might prefer to put it in view of that word's multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind. To understand them properly we need to consider carefully how they have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why, today, they command such profound emotional legitimacy." (1996, p. 4)

"[P]roper Slovak" (Kapitáňová, 2011, p. 11) is, according to Samko, deemed the "proper" official language for the independent Slovak Republic. The rationale behind such a rule lies in Samko's phrase "[b]ecause that's the law" (Kapitáňová, 2011, p. 11), which is repeatedly emphasized throughout the novel. The irony of Samko's repetition is clear. There is no rationale behind the nationalist arbitrary assignment and allocation of language usage. Though breaking such a law does not lead to criminal punishment, the law tends to be readily incorporated into the social norms and customs which, when breached, leads to the idea that someone would "be in big trouble for that" (Kapitáňová, 2011, p. 11). The scorn and mockery, which is part of the punishments for corrupting "proper Slovak", do not come in the form of a sentence following legal persecutions, but rather in the form of what Pierre Bourdieu (2003, p. 121) terms "symbolic violence", a subtle form of cultural and social domination common in everyday life. Violence of this kind is "symbolic" because it works not on the physical level, but on the level of categories of thoughts and perception. In the following extract, the dominant language usage establishes further "laws" which normalize ignorance and prejudice. In this case, Samko defamiliarizes the subtle gender prejudice which attaches itself in day-to-day language usage:

"[A]t school we did this writer, her name was Timrava and she was a woman. Seriously, I'm not making it up, she was a woman and her name was Timrava not Timravaová, even though

a proper Slovak name for a woman is supposed to have *-ová* at the end, like Darinka Gunárová, she's also called Darinka Gunárová with *-ová* at the end *because that's the law*" [my emphasis] (Kapitáňová, 2011, p. 16).

Once again, simply "because that's the law" (Kapitáňová, 2011, p. 16), the name "Timrava", without the feminine suffix *-ová*, defies the rules of "proper Slovak" and therefore causes surprise to Samko when he learns that this writer is female. Božena Slančíková (1867-1951) took her pseudonym from a water well in her village called Polichno, in the Banská Bystrica region, as she explained in an interview: "Za pseudonym vzala som si názov jednej studne v polichnianskom chotári, ktorá bola vo veľkej úcte, pretože z nej nikdy nechýbala voda [I took a pseudonym from the name of one water well in the region of Polichno which was held in high esteem because it never ran out of water – My translation]" (Timrava, 1931, p. 237). The practice of adopting Slavic names or names of towns, villages and geographical landmarks as pseudonyms was common for Slovak writers in the late 19th to early 20th century. This custom was part of the realist nationalist movement of celebrating the Slovak countryside and promoting Pan-Slavic sentiment. However, Samko would not have been so surprised to hear the names of Pavol Országh Hviezdoslav (1849-1921), whose Slavic-sounding pseudonym "Hviezdoslav" means "Slav of the stars", or Jozef Gregor Tajovský (1874-1940), who took his pseudonym from "Tajov", the name of his birthplace, as when he encountered Timrava at school. The irony in Samko's remark is subtle. The fact that Timrava is a woman and also a woman writer whose strange and out-of-the-ordinary name stands out amidst the predominantly male writers in the Slovak literary canon to be taught in school reflects on the patriarchy embedded within the Slovak nationalist movement.

Shared language, customs and history among the imagined citizens of the artefact called "nation" bring about shared love and pride in national language and culture, as Boyd C. Shafer points out in items 6, 7, 8 and 10. As Samko reveals in his exaltation of the Slovak people and language, such nationalist devotion and hope for a collective utopian future are constructed, inseminated and disseminated in institutions such as schools, as part of Althusser's "ideological state apparatuses" (2001, p. 96): "Because Slovaks are the best people in the world and the Slovak language is the most beautiful language in the world. That is what we were taught at school and it is also said on TV that the Slovak language was the most beautiful language in the world" (Kapitáňová, 2011, p. 37). By "making strange" Slovak national pride, Sanko exposes the ways in which it is sustained and instigated. Nationalist sentiment is built up on a macro scale through mass media and on a micro scale through members of the family unit. For Benedict Anderson, though the nation is an imagined community, the comradeship forged within the imagined group is real and has the power to compel people to sacrifice their lives and take away other people's life for such a construct: "the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (1996, p. 7). Patriotism, as Shafer also points out in his third hypothesis, needs to be represented through an emblem or a shared institution. In Samko's case, the Communist party and regime are necessary signifiers for such immense imagined love, honed out of fear and pride, for one's nation. For him, the colour and condition of his Young Pioneer's scarf must be impeccable as it reflects on his devotion to the communist regime and on his being a good Slovak citizen:

"I'm a really good Slovak and I used to be a really good Young Pioneer, too But the one thing I don't get is why it had to be me who got a Young Pioneer's Scarf that wasn't properly red but sort of orange. That's why sometimes I thought that people might wonder why my scarf wasn't properly red like all proper Young Pioneers' Scarves and that they might think that I was different. But I'm not different, I'm just like everyone else in the world and the only reason I have a disability pension is because of my kidneys and not because of this illness that

has a proper name and makes you stop growing and stops your beard from growing.” (Kapitáňová, 2011, p. 53)

Samko’s fear and anxiety of being or looking different reflects the nationalist mentality which possesses a high propensity towards xenophobia. As Shafer also posits in his ninth hypothesis, one’s love and devotion for the nation is based on and can lead to hostility towards other national groups. Samko’s exaltation in the Slovak language is based on and fuelled by his contempt for the Czech and Hungarian languages:

“Other languages, like the Czech language for example, can never be most beautiful in the world because they don’t have the letter *L*. And that’s why the Slovak language is the most beautiful in the world because it has the letter *L*’.

The funniest language in the world is Hungarian.

And the way you can tell is because if you say something with a Hungarian accent it’s very humorous and it makes everyone laugh. Because it’s very funny” (Kapitáňová, 2011, p. 37).

Making fun of other languages and having a good laugh as a result might seem petty. However, Samko’s innocent remarks expose a disturbing root cause for discrimination and intolerance which is ingrained in one’s personal mindset: false belief in one’s superiority. The damage caused by such delusion might not be apparent. The Czechs and the Hungarians might only feel annoyed and offended by Samko’s remarks. However, more severe injuries can be found in the following passage, where intolerance has the power to destroy lives:

“There was this man in Komárno whose name was Zdenko Horilla and he was the manager of a Cinema. Once he was sent to the Soviet Union regarding Friendship because back then we still had the Soviet Union so it was OK. And during Friendship they drank all sorts of Soviet alcoholic drinks and because Russian doesn’t have the letter H they called him Gorilla instead of Horilla. He didn’t like that at all and when they finished drinking all the Soviet alcoholic drinks he said this:

‘If you call me Gorilla we will say Haharin instead of Gagarin.’

And everyone in the Soviet Union took offence because he offended the World’s First Soviet Cosmonaut and when he came home he got into big trouble because he had offended them. And he couldn’t be manager of the Cinema anymore.

And then everyone said it served him right, even managers should keep their mouths shut in the Soviet Union.

I said so, too.” (Kapitáňová, 2011, pp. 126-127)

The most atrocious aspect of Zdenko Horilla’s story is not the fact that Horilla has been sacked as a manager of the cinema by the Russians, but rather the fact that everyone, including Samko the conformist, chooses to ignore or even fails to see the atrocity of censorship created by the Soviet Union. Nationalism has the power to transform a linguistic joke from a meaningless prank to a disaster. Horilla’s punishment is decided by the ruling regime, which is the Soviet Union. Had the power dynamics and relations been different, it would have been entirely acceptable, or even witty and comical, to refer to the famous Soviet cosmonaut as “Yuri Haharin”.

Samko Tále’s Cemetery Book is a novel which kills the lure of the Scheherazade of nationalist discourse by “making strange” nationalist beliefs which one finds “all too familiar” and by unveiling the absurdity behind the likes of Lukáč Bart’s presentation on the SNS billboard. The book demonstrates that nationalism is a work of fiction, a product of the imagination, and that the “nation” is an imagined community which can be fully understood, challenged and deconstructed within no other imaginable realm than one’s own (literary) imagination.

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