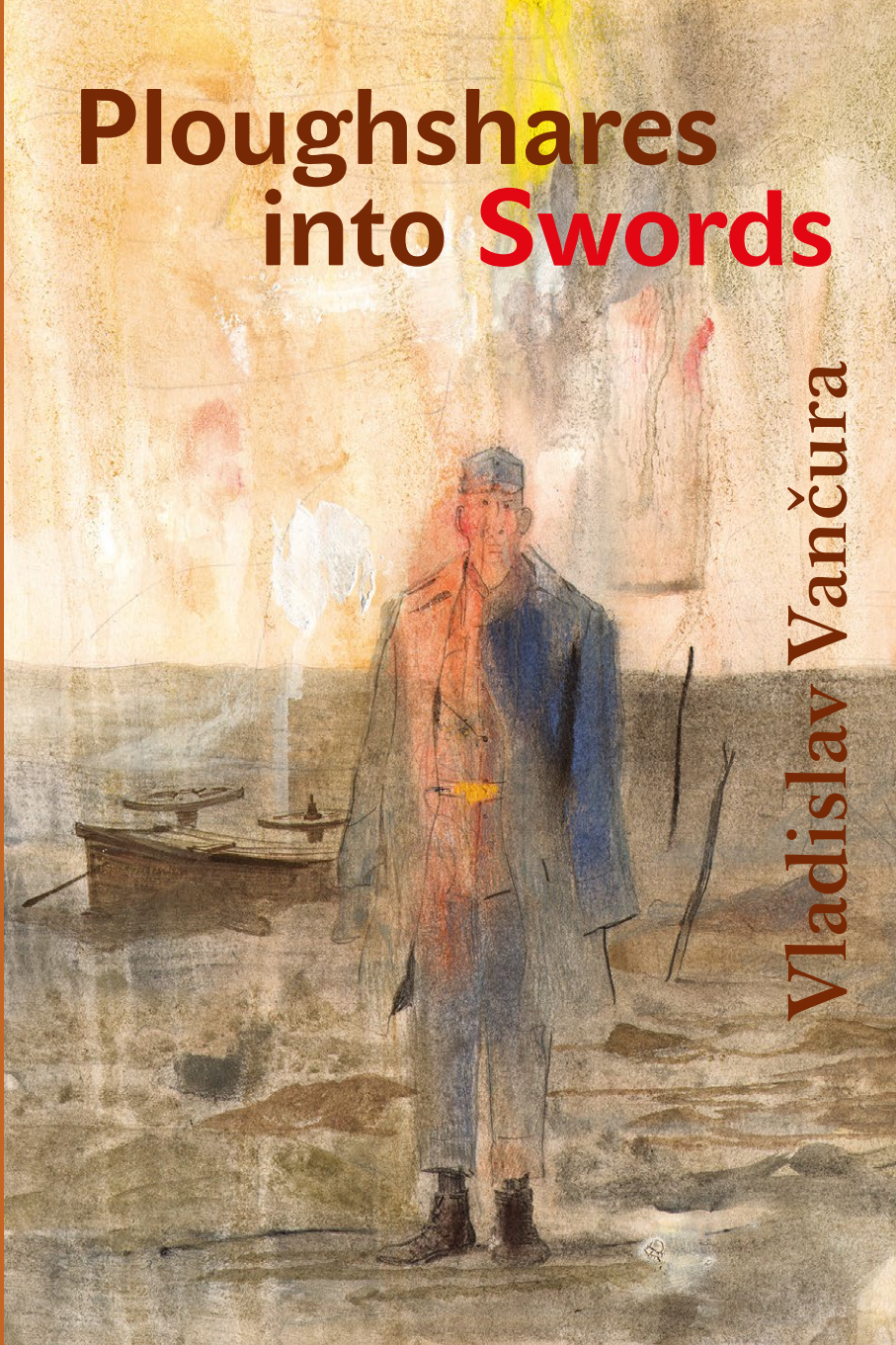
# Ploughshares into Swords



Vladislav Vančura

**Ploughshares into Swords**

**Vladislav Vančura**

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## CHAPTER ONE

The loam that barely covers the porphyry, gneiss and schist about the middle reaches of the River Vltava, the shallow topsoil with a smidgen of clay on the western slopes of some hills that have no name, the depths of ordinariness, the floor of destitution, is by no means so meagre for woods not to have sprung from it.

They do spring, exactly as speech – before being rendered at last by a voice – springs over the course of a long silence.

In this valley, famine has reigned for too long. The old generation of workers has sinned against itself, and health and strength have been allowed to moulder away. Pain has not been stirred to revolt beneath blows and whippings, new arrivals have become farmhands, and they have not been many. A cowed calm has been this land's clime, and passion its only lightning flash.

The workers' wages, counted out into the palms of their hands, are paltry, paltry is their life, and paltry are the episodes of their despair. Tales told lack all edge and a word can scarcely elevate truth, when its ordinariness is general and of no greater value than dust and ashes.

A landscape threaded by a river, a landscape with bare rocks, with tiny fields stretching in narrow strips across the sides of hillocks, with a church standing above water, stabbing the pool with the reflection of its

cross, a landscape both poor and beautiful, tufted with bushes, sunk in lamentation and pathos, enclosed to the north, the south, the east and the west by distance.

The barrier of its destitution is open space.

The world may be vast, but somewhere it ends, and the cartographer has marked the spot:

"Hic sunt leones."

And so the globe is no greater than the shadow cast by the tree of knowledge, a shadow haunted by a dark legend. This cramped spot is the world in which events in the life of Ouhrov manor are told.

During winters of indigence that inspire anger, in the evening after the stars have come out, at hours of death, in seasons of love and during bouts of insanity fired by liquor, this dark corner opens a chink and you can see roads leading into the distance, lined with crosses to terrify anyone who dares try to escape. Female saints glare at his neck as he passes by the trees on which suicides have hung; he'll be happy enough to turn back, the roads being fit only for carts that creak and seesaw over the uneven surface, and Ouhrov breeds none but ox handlers, ploughboys and wagoners to serve its estate.

In this confine, in this abeyance of life, dwelleth naught but passion and death.

Seven tumps break up the landscape, and that superstitious number holds sway in these parts. A horse walks alongside its flailing shaft, the axle-tree creaks and the

cursing never lets up. It does not have far to go, and the sameness and repetition drag on along the tracks.

Too much blather has gone on pastures and the girded sower, to no effect has the ploughman's labour been extolled. No one teeters on the brink of precipices, no one seeds the fields, or works a share plough, and the words used by silly singers have been long forgotten. 'Tis unspeakable how the farm labourer has been made the butt of adage, accorded names that reek of sentimentality.

The fellows who do this kind of work are vulgar and coarse, pig-headed or shiftless, but also capable of working till they drop. They fornicate and they get drunk.

The five-beam motorised plough now carves up the land and no ploughman needs put his weight behind the stilts of a plough drawn by oxen. The sickle and the scythe are almost forgotten.

The summer days of 1913 had passed and the fingertips of autumn were heralding the wind about to blow across the stubble fields and the cold to follow. The harvest had been piled into ricks, the days had begun to shorten and a merciful Saturday, summing up the working week, was about to hand out the beggarly wages. Small they might be, but the pub is nearby and is not a large one.

The estate managers Saček and Chot, two monsters deserving of a measure of compassion, prone to exag-

gerate their importance, were now, grubby notebook and tally in hand, exercising their authority amid the scrawny gang.

A foundling, Řeka, a halfwit bent low with shame and centuries-old contempt, one whose name – meaning 'river' – is pure accident or a bit of bureaucratic lyricising devised by some dreary jackass when the foundling's guardian wanted to have him called something different from his own František..., the sun-scorched Řeka was becoming a man of substance as he counted his five florins. His due having been received, his perspective closed down and he awoke to a new world.

"Along with you," Hora told him, "what are you waiting for?"

Some lame words made to rise to his tongue, but he offered no reply and his insatiable thought severed itself from the lengthy process of speaking. He turned, getting even more in the way of the others, and, at the same spot, planting his clogs where Řeka's feet had been, a large man took up position.

This labourer's money did not sound right and he re-counted it from closed fist to palm, not dropping it from any great height, and muttering one number after another. His eyes lacked the resplendence of evening that was falling upon them, and if he had turned towards the manor house or the shallow prism shape of the pub, on which the roof, too narrow, had been set

awry, he would not even have seen things so close at hand. He wanted no more, nor could he do more, than to persist in doing his sums.

Another man was approaching the seat of judgement by money, laughing loud and gesturing wildly. One man leaned on another for support, ignorant of the difference between work time and pay time. The wives of these drunkards rolled their eyes and between one heartbeat and the next uttered a word of abuse.

Two old men stepped out of the huddle and headed past the sheds full of implements and the weighbridge towards the trough that was the animals' water hole.

Hora and Ber they were, two widowers who, like a thing that creepeth upon the earth and a piece of tinder, recalled the difference between a sneaky creature and a paltry, lifeless object only willed into motion by a playful God; Hora's arms, bearded like barley, hung by his sides and he dragged one leg behind him, there being no cure for its impairment.

"The security of old age, insurance and all the other nonsense they come out with," he said, not mincing his words either, "I'd sell the lot for the bushel of rye they might give me each autumn. Where's the certainty they promise me? Being poor means having to do what others tell you, and old age is nothing but biding your time."

Ber replied, smashing one fist into the palm of his other hand: "It could be that among the paperwork and

stuff taken down by officials there is a record of your infirmity and you could be home and dry, since there are hospices and poorhouses where there's nothing to do bar a bit of cleaning and tidying."

"Seven times," said Hora, "seven times I've seen the inside of institutions like that and everyone had striped jackets, sticks and some sort of coupons. When the bell rang in the middle of the building, they went to be fed and then waited again, then ate again next time the signal came."

This talk of the sick man's hopes dragged on for a long time until, finally, Ber brought it to a patronising close like someone in charge of the destinies of such poor wretches: "Dream on, be as keen as you like on the idea, you flea-ridden sod, and even if you got in, they'd soon boot you out again, you and all your bugs and the scabies that gives you that tingling!"

Meanwhile the two old boys had been joined by a herdsman, who, having nothing to contribute, just snuffled and sighed.

"Well," he opined, "before you know it, maybe even tomorrow, the rains will be upon us. I'm pretty sure we'll see a turn for the worse."

By way of response Hora looked back at the farmyard, now deserted. Five women were just leaving by the gate; it was approaching seven. The manor house had veiled its hideousness in the dusk, the trough and

puddles glinted and all talk was fading away. Days at Ouhrov ended quietly. Night did nothing to deaden the pain, but it did muffle its voice.

František Hora was seventy-two and he had spent that entire lifetime in the fields of the Ouhrov estate, in its stables and cowsheds and out in the great yard. He had no particular likes, nor any grievous sins. He was neither poacher nor thief and the drabness that was his suit lent him some value, for as long as he was fit.

There had been that time when, with much shouting and whooping, he had decked his hat with a posy of wild flowers and, no less tipsy than the others, answered the call-up. An accordion, scintillating like an acoustic torch, had led them to the county town.

"Don't go asking questions," they told Hora when he faltered in his merriment. "Ask no questions and stop worrying. The demands of the army are clear and you'll soon get the hang of it. For the next three years, František, you won't see any cattle, so keep singing and be off with you."

The three stations on the way were called the first, second and third years of service. A hayrack, which the publican had set up outside even before daylight, jangled with a primitive array of glass, artificial flowers and grasses dyed as gaudy as the devil's broom. Peasants' horses were at the manger, turning their lovely eyes towards František, who, knowing his place even in

his cups, was standing beside them. He unhitched the traces and having fashioned some loops, tossed them two by two over the wheelers' flanks. He tugged at their saddle pads and made everything neat and tidy.

Before handsome young peasants are brought into line by the demands of army life, they sit around in taprooms and drink to their heart's content. This time, bottles passed from mouth to mouth and tankards swung up and down like a balance beam with a stuffed purse on one pan and the measly mite of a working man on the other. Like clockwork, like hammer on anvil, drunkenness struck the oak table top.

Let's go for it! Mustn't waste a single drop, drink on, my thirsty lieutenant, drink till your brain gives up. Pull the string! And down the hatch! The one who drank died – but so did the one who didn't. Sound the beer-mug trumpet! Doesn't a drunk man have a candle inside his head? Right then, make yourself scarce if you've had your fill so you don't go and snuff it out.

"Hey!" one old gannet bellowed, after thumping the window frame with his fist. "Come on, František, the sky never quenched anyone's thirst, come inside, get drinking and face the recruitment board with a skinful. Get pissed to pieces, you're not the one paying!"

Hora raised the brimming glass of brandy and didn't hold back, for this moment could earn him some renown and esteem on the Ouhrov estate.

An image of the pub's interior glinted on the curved surface of the glass, taking in the landlord's doxy and the figure of the mayor, who appeared more elongated than potbellied. Hora drank on and both image and brandy diminished until finally the empty glass enveloped the drinker's nose like the bell cloches gardeners use to protect young asparagus shoots.

When it was time to leave, the recruits came out and the farmers, having finished off their own pints, harnessed their horses. They took their time, but they still arrived before those on foot reached the outskirts of the town of Hradec. However, František Hora need not have got out of bed that day. He staggered over to a poplar tree by the roadside and there he lost his balance and fell into the ditch. The local constable, guardian of the parish peace, who was literally meant to be the poor man's guardian angel, vented his anger by giving his man a solid thump, thereby bringing relief to his stomach: František turned his entrails inside out, with no regard for keeping the place clean, tidy and quiet.

This incident did not go unpunished, though it did become the most famous thing the stablehand ever did, because his infirmities meant that he could not even do his military service. Since the threshold of infancy, since as far back as he could remember, nothing, no single moment had been greater, for he was so drunk that the sea of the world came right up to his knees. No one

could ever consume the lakes of brandy that he swallowed that day, for with the passage of time everything grows, enlarged by the remembrance of them.

The stablehand's marriage had been a simple and sudden affair. About forty years previously, one long-forgotten winter or summer's day, a young maid was taken on at Ouhrov manor to feed the horses and do the mucking-out. At the time, František's plank bed stood in the west-facing angle of the stable, in a nook adorned by cobwebs and swallows' nests. The new arrival was anything but pretty and her tattered green skirt did her no favours.

The estate manager, having opened the cutting shed, pointed his stick towards a small heap of straw and said: "That's where you'll be sleeping." However, after he had gone, she grabbed it and carried it to the stables.

"Here I am and here I'll stay," she said, "if you're freezing cold in the night, come to me. Luckily, I've got plenty of everything."

After she had put out her lamp. František did not hesitate, but waving his arms about spookily in the dark, tried to find her, groping at the damp walls with quivering hand. He took her and they made love to the snorting of horses.

"My name's Anna," she said and František said in reply: "I'll buy you a shawl covered in flowers and with tassels dangling like fingers at the end of an arm."

Five months later, the fodder girl became pregnant, which the other women found funny: "Who on earth put the tuck in that green skirt of yours, making it so short?"

"You're right," she replied, "we've been very thorough." She was to have a brief weep that evening, but she would soon cheer up again.

Even then František Hora did not have much to say. For three months he set aside one florin, then with the money wrapped safe in his motley scarf, he set off to see the priest at Smrdov.

"We're a twosome," he said as he entered the clergyman's abode, "who wish to enter into wedlock – that's me, a farm worker, name of Hora, and Anna Myslbeková."

"All right," the peasant cleric replied, "so where's the bride-to-be?"

"She's pregnant," said Hora, looking about him as if looking for her. The rectory was not shaken to its foundations, nor did the priest cross himself.

"Come on in," he said, holding the door open with his rough hand.

"This book contains all the exhortations, advice and instructions that relate to marriage. Come back with Anna and I will read it to you to make you aware of them."

Five times they heard the priest speaking the language of books without understanding anything but the parable of the mustard seed, the tale of what befell

the prodigal son – for whom they felt sorry, and the talk of miracles, alas, all too divine. The priest himself could not confirm that any of these things were essential to a wedding.

Anna's belly kept expanding at a rate disproportionate to their expanding knowledge of religion and they would go home from these sessions like those who, at school, had to put up with the waffling of the reverend catechist, and meanwhile they were falling behind with their work.

Thrice did František's name descend from the pulpit, thrice was it announced to the dearly beloved in the congregation and no one said a word, for the pointlessness of the ritual was beyond all doubt.

When the wedding day came, František mucked out the stables and entered the byre with the words: "I'm ready." He had to give Anna a quick hand because she was behind with her work, then off they went.

Before they reached Smrdov, František slipped the pack, prepared the night before, off his shoulder and they put on their shoes, he fixed his collar while Anna wrapped herself in her shawl and slipped her tunic from her shoulders. They entered the gaping void of the church and followed the service listless and with the humility that Churches deem a virtue. Finally, they knelt and saw the priest saying the words.

Insofar as a rite can be solemn, this wedding was that. Words filled the expanse of the church right up

to the vaulted ceiling and the rafters painted all over with stars. The priest turned away from the altar, as a reaper turns to face the vastness of his field, and Anna and František uttered the words: "I do take thee without duress, freely and wholeheartedly."

They made their way back, again barefoot, and barefoot they toiled until the birth.

Married workers were meant to be accommodated in a long, shingle-roofed hut. Eleven doors and another eleven opened onto the road and onto the yard, but the two estate managers had their quarters at the end and by the gate. Narrow passageways, ending in storerooms, gave access to the two rows of dwellings, and each room had just one window. František, as he proceeded from one to the next, sized up all those hollow prisms. Damp and the tracery drawn by the rain that had come in through the now decrepit roof had left their same mark on all of them. Here a blackened corner marked the spot where a stove had once stood, there a missing paving slab, or a plank that had come adrift, had left gaping holes in which rats squealed. František did not possess even a table, and so, having pondered on his penury, he declined the rooms that he was being offered.

"We'll each give Potměšil a florin so they'll let us cook in our own pots. Two florins is a decent sum and Potměšil will be glad of them because he likes his tipple and he's penniless."

And so it came about. They made pallets from sacks and horse blankets and, having stuffed them, carried them to their new home.

For six days they got on, for six nights the Horas slept on their own beds and peace reigned. However, discord soon descended and Potměšil, almost sober, took some chalk and drew a border between Hora's patch and his own. Having marked out a right-angled triangle, whose hypotenuse went from the stove to the middle of the door, he said:

"This part is where you'll live."

"All right," František replied. "It's less than I've paid for, but I'm not going to argue."

Meanwhile, the pregnant Anna's time was coming closer and all minds were on the birth. Mrs Potměšil ripped up a duvet cover to make plenty of nappies, furious at being forced so to dissipate her property.

At about seven one Friday evening, Anna Myslbeková began having pains, which came back at ever shorter intervals, and, knowing that her time had come, she rose to go. Her sheaf of straw still lay in the middle of the cowshed.

"I haven't finished my work," she told the womenfolk, "and night's caught up with me. Go and tell František to fetch the midwife."

They did as bidden and František made haste.

Having crossed the yard, Anna entered the Potměšil room and dropped into her corner. Time oscillated hither and yon. The voice of pain grew louder and the din of the moment rose higher and higher like the smoke of a bonfire or the call of hospitals.

The midwife, who also nursed the sick and washed the dead, acclaimed accessory of death and of life in the making, got everything ready for bathing the new baby, sure in her mind that Anna was going to have a boy. Mrs Potměšil took a sheet from her chest, and although twilight had not yet fallen, she lit the lamp. They chatted and time slipped past the mother-to-be's corner.

Eleven struck and František came back to ask what was what.

"Nothing yet," they replied, "you go and sleep in the stable, you and Potměšil."

Around five in the morning, act two of the birth, the birth itself, began.

"Don't be afraid, Anna, don't be afraid," the midwife said, "it's going to be all right," then she stopped mid-utterance, suddenly scared as she touched the four fingers of the baby hand that had slipped out.

"This abnormality means a transverse lie and spells trouble. Go and hitch up the horses and get her to the hospital in Hradec."

Outside, day had begun to dawn. The cowherds rose from their beds and set about their statutory labours.

"Tchah!" they said in reply to František, "Why all the fuss, doesn't every woman giving birth get pains?"

František could not take his fears with him to the steward's room and bellow into the sleeper's ear. It was too early. He went back and waited two hours without anything happening. The pains had passed and the mother was dozing. Something of the serenity and repose of death entered the dwelling and a chance silence fell amid the voices of morning. It was striking seven when Anna's hand moved.

The death of working folk echoes to hammer blows and the ring of scythes. It had never entered the Ouhrov estate so slowly and silently, though now they recognised it for what it was. It was coming, getting nearer, raining and snowing oblivion.

František dashed out to prepare the horses and in no time was standing outside the hut. One last time the midwife put her temple to Anna's swollen belly, listening to the foetus's sounds with a wild and futile joy.

"It's alive," she cried, "get there as fast as you can!"

They picked up Anna's body and placed it on the wagon. František yanked the horses round towards the road and the wagon hurtled without stopping as far as the village of Trnová, where the doctor lived.

In the depths of the man's fear a new hope had begun to rise.

"Whoa!" he shouted and before the wagon had even stopped he hurled himself at the doorbell.

"Go back home, she's been dead over an hour," the doctor said.

But František did not turn the horses round. He listened to the clatter of the cart, the thudding of hooves and the clangour of their shoes. He could but infuse the track with weeping and bewail the corpses alone. Unhurried, the horses arrived outside the hospital, where František heard the selfsame assurance: She's dead.

This crazy certainty quite deadened his spirit. He waited, emotionless and silent, while Anna lay in the hospital mortuary.

An autopsy was carried out the following day. Her belly was cut open from womb to liver to reveal a gleaming blood clot, covered by the peritoneum. All this matter having been lifted away, the foetus's tiny hand appeared, with the umbilical cord wound round it. A small amount of blood trickled from the external genitalia. The uterus yawned through the terrible opening with the placenta and amnion projecting from it. The main body of the womb was empty. The foetus was lodged in the cervix in a simple rectal position with its head lying, roughly speaking, between its legs and its left arm. The right arm, pressed back towards the sacrum, was red and swollen.

In his report, the medical examiner stated that the cause of death was abdominal shock caused by incomplete rupturing of the uterus.

František Hora returned home the following day and, having abandoned the horses in the middle of yard, he hastily set about selling all that he possessed. This produced five florins and another five florins were paid him as an advance on his wages. He used the money to bury Anna Myslbeková in a pauper's grave.

Thereafter, Hora lived thirty years up to the day that struck another blow. Hunger and satiety, work and rest, falsehood and truth, all this came turn and turn about as the days passed by, and František could not tell the difference. He drove his horses, daydreamed and grew old.

Once, after Hora had become frail and decrepit, a young horse caught him on a knee joint with a shoe nail. They had been working in the forest; it was snowing, evening was drawing on and the other workmen had already left. Hora did not start moaning. He snapped a branch and made himself a crutch, then he dragged himself over to the tree trunks bearing down on the wagon's axles. He got up and fell again, not even feeling much pain, until he finally sat sideways on the logs and, careless as to where the boisterous horses might take him, he cracked his whip. The animals calmed down and made their way at a walking pace all the way back to the gateway to the grange. Henceforth Hora was a cripple,

and his wounds refused to heal. He couldn't walk beside horses, he couldn't lever a shovel, he couldn't lift a sheaf on a pitchfork. He became an animal feeder and waited for death.

Many years previously, before he met Anna Myslbeková, František had carted to Hradec a gift sent by the great landowner of Ouhrov for the city's poor.

The Baron's good works were on a grand scale. The poor of the manor would have gobbled in an instant more than he gave away in a year, for on this estate they had gone hungry for nine generations. He could put on a banquet for them every day, without giving them any more than their due, and he expected them to be grateful. Paying good wages is good business, but Baron Danowitz was niggardly in such matters, as befits an aristocrat. He worked his day labourers hard while supporting imbecilic art projects, the fatherland, gambling dens, whores and, now and again, the Hradec poorhouse. The gift grew in the preparation and conveyance of it. Such a sweeping gesture was visible all round.

In the days when he drove wagons, Hora did this trip seven times. During the four-hour drive he would keep glancing back at his load, and having finally stopped outside the entrance to the institution, he would unload the Baron's beneficence with no sense of how slight it was.