Sparling, Don

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In: *Canada consumed : the impact of Canadian writing in Central Europe (1990-2017).* Sparling, Don (editor); Kürtösi, Katalin (editor). 1st edition Brno: Masaryk University, 2019, pp. 161-173

ISBN 978-80-210-9368-3 (paperback); ISBN 978-80-210-9369-0 (online : pdf)

Stable URL (handle): https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.81858
Access Date: 02. 04. 2025
Version: 20250401

Central European Association for Canadian Studies
Association d'Etudes Canadiennes en Europe Centrale

Alice Munro and Leonard Cohen: Becoming Czech

Don Sparling

Abstract
This article looks at the different paths through which the work of Alice Munro and Leonard Cohen has entered and become part of the Czech cultural space. For most of the period under study (1990-the present), Alice Munro remained a well-kept secret. Her first book in Czech, *"Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You" and Other Short Stories*, appeared in 2003, and only after winning the Nobel Prize for Literature did she become widely known to Czechs. The first translations of Leonard Cohen's work, on the other hand, date back to the late 1960s; his songs and poems soon gained him a major underground reputation. Since the end of Communism, his reputation as writer and singer has soared, as can be seen in the reception of translations of his books and his appearances as a singer as well as in the response to his death in 2016.

Résumé
Cet article examine comment l'œuvre d'Alice Munro et de Leonard Cohen s'est introduit et intégré dans l'espace culturel tchèque. Pour la plus grande partie de la période étudiée (de 1990 à nos jours), Alice Munro est restée inconnue. Son premier livre en tchèque est paru en 2003, mais les Tchèques ne l'ont connue qu'après avoir reçu le Prix Nobel pour la littérature. De sa part, Leonard Cohen a commencé à être traduit à la fin des années soixante. Ses poèmes et ses chansons l'ont vite rendu connu dans le milieu underground. Depuis la fin du communisme, sa réputation en tant qu'écrivain et chanteur n'a cessé de grandir, comme en témoignent la réception des traductions de ses livres et de ses performances comme chanteur ainsi que la réaction du public à sa mort en 2016.

> I think a word used about me in Canada was "quaint." And this would be in the early seventies, when writing was so adventurous. And the hero of Canada was Leonard Cohen. And so it was very good for me to find a discerning public [the readership of *The New Yorker*] that nevertheless did not object to this perhaps regional or old-fashioned quality. Mind you, I don't think I'm an old-fashioned writer at all. (Munro, in Quinn)

The first short-story collection by Alice Munro translated into Czech, "*Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You" and Other Short Stories*, appeared in 2003. By this point, she was hardly a newcomer on the Canadian or the international literary scene. Her first collection of stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, had been published in 1968; it received the Governor General's Award for Fiction that year. Subsequently she had published nine further collections, two of which had also won the Governor General's Award for Fiction. In 1980 she had been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Numerous other forms of recognition had come her way, in Canada, the United States, Great Britain and the Commonwealth. Leonard Cohen's tardy induction into the Czech literary scene was similar. *Death of a Lady's Man* appeared in Czech translation in 1996, almost twenty years after its original publication in 1978. And Cohen, too, had had a long history of publication in English by the time he first appeared in book form in Czech: nine collections of poems (the first dating from 1956) and two novels, *The Favourite Game* (1963) and *Beautiful Losers* (1966). He had also received two Governor General's Awards, for English-language Poetry (1968) and the Performing Arts Award for Lifetime Achievement (1993), as well as numerous awards as a song-writer and singer. To an outside observer it would appear that the Czechs were somewhat tardy in recognizing the genius of these two outstanding Canadian authors.

This, however, would be to oversimplify. If one looks at the Central European region as a whole, things take on a different perspective. *"Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You"* was the first collection by Munro to be published anywhere in the region: it was another three years before similar translations began to appear in other languages. In the case of Cohen, his Czech *Death of a Lady's Man* was not a "first" in the region, but only three publications predated its publication, *The Energy of Slaves* (1981) and two volumes of selected poems (1987, 1988), all in Serbian. In addition a Slovenian translation of *Beautiful Losers* appeared, like *Death of a Lady's Man*, in 1996. And this early start for Munro and Cohen in Czech was followed by numerous translations in subsequent years, especially notable in comparison with the other countries in Central Europe. The ten editions of Munro's works (this figure includes second editions of three titles) represent just under one-fifth of the total for the whole region, Cohen's eight editions close to a quarter. By any standards, then, both authors are clearly popular with Czechs.

Before the publication of *"Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You,"* however, Alice Munro was virtually unknown to the general Czech public. It would seem that no individual stories had appeared in Czech translation. A 1996 dictionary of British and British Commonwealth authors contained a seventeen-line entry on Munro (Procházka, 503),[1] while the reference to Munro in the section on Canadian culture by Miroslav Jindra in his and Lenka Rovná's *Dějiny Kanady* ([History of Canada] 2000), was even briefer: Jindra devotes only six lines to Munro, writing of the "'photographic realism' with which she depicts the endeavours of women and girls in their lives" (Jindra, 320).[2] The wish to make Munro's debut on the Czech literary scene as strong as possible helps explain why *"Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You"* is in fact a selection of twelve stories from six of her collections rather than the translation of one of her collections as a whole. In an interview that she gave soon after it appeared, the translator Alena Jindrová-Špilarová explained the genesis of the book. She had been approached by the Paseka publishing house in the capacity of reviewer, her task being to read two of Munro's short story collections and report on whether she felt Munro should be translated or not. Only after her enthusiastic recommendation was she commissioned as translator; she and her editor at the publishing house then worked together making the selection of stories for the book (Kolinská).

Two factors are in play when it comes to this late recognition of Alice Munro in the Czech Republic, one international, one local. In the world of letters in general, short stories as such have not received the recognition that many feel to be their due. Munro's Nobel Prize was the first awarded to a writer whose oeuvre comprises, for all practical purposes, short stories alone. In a telephone interview with Adam Smith, Editorial Director of Nobel Media, immediately following the announcement of the award, her first words reflected her concern for the "subaltern" status of the short story:

> I just wanted to thank you, very much. This is quite a wonderful thing for me. It's a wonderful thing for the short story… Because [the short story's] often sort of brushed off, you know, as something that people do before they write their first novel. And I would like it to come to the fore, without any strings attached, so that there doesn't have to be a novel. (Munro, "Interview")

This critical marginalization of the short story is even more marked in the Czech Republic, which lacks the rich short story tradition of the Anglophone world. Though a few prose authors are known for their short stories, in the vast majority of cases

1) It is interesting to note that the dictionary accords Cohen higher status: his entry runs to 30 lines (Procházka, 182–83).

2) Cohen rates even less – only two lines, which recognize him as an "internationally famous" singer-songwriter, a poet "highly regarded" by literary scholars, and the author of two experimental novels (Jindra 318).

short stories play a very secondary role in writers' work. There are virtually no prestigious journals or magazines publishing short stories on a regular basis. As a result the reading public for short stories is limited, and this is doubly true when it comes to translations. At a conference on "Other literatures in English" held in Prague in 2016, one of the leading Czech editors, Hana Zahradníková of Argo publishers, made this very clear. In the course of a discussion about Canadian authors so far unpublished in Czech, the name of Mavis Gallant came up. Zahradníková's response was immediate and clear: she considered Gallant one of the world's great contemporary short story writers, on a par with Munro, and for many years had been trying to convince her own and other publishing houses to take Gallant on, but with no success whatsoever. And the reason given was always the same: the publishing houses were unwilling to take the risk, because they were convinced that "collections of short stories always bomb" (Zahradníková).

Given Czech readers' aversion to short stories, then, the subsequent success of Munro in the Czech Republic is remarkable. Reviews of "*Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*," though limited, were favourable (see below), but it was not until several years had passed that the publishing house, Paseka, felt encouraged to commission another translation of Munro's works, in this case a complete collection of her stories. *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* appeared in 2009 and was soon followed by *Runaway* (2011); both were translated by Alena Jindrová-Špilarová. *Too Much Happiness* (the translator in this case being Zuzana Mayerová) appeared in May 2013, five months before the announcement of the Nobel Prize in October of that year, and although *Dear Life* (also translated by Mayerová) appeared in 2014, the decision to publish it had been taken several months earlier, before the awarding of the prize. However, the publicity generated by the prize certainly led to the re-issuing later in 2014 of *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*, *Runaway* and *Too Much Happiness*. *The Love of a Good Woman* (Alena Jindrová-Špilarová, translator) appeared the following year and in 2017 *Open Secrets* (Zuzana Mayerová).

It should be pointed out here that Munro benefitted greatly from two factors. First, the Paseka publishing house is one of the most prestigious in the Czech Republic, the recipient of numerous national awards in a wide variety of genres as well as in the category of translation. Second, the two translators of Munro's books are very experienced. Alena Jindrová-Špilarová (who died in 2016 at the age of 87) was one of the legends of Czech literary translation: her approximately ninety titles included many of the greatest British, American and Canadian authors (of whom she also translated Margaret Laurence [*The Diviners*] and Robertson Davies [*What's Bred in the Bone*]). Her younger colleague Zuzana Mayerová (born 1953) is also a highly experienced translator, with a dozen titles by British, American and Canadian (Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing*) "classics" to her credit. The combination of these two factors has meant that the

Czech translations of Munro's books are of a very high quality and that by virtue of their publisher they enjoy an advantageous, perhaps even somewhat privileged, position when it comes to publicity.

Elsewhere in this collection I have dealt in more detail with the vehicles and outlets in the Czech Republic that allow one to speak of the impact of literary and other texts (see "Canada's Post-Communist Literary Footprint in the Czech Lands," pp. 51–67). This shows that there has been a fairly limited number of venues for bringing the kind of work that Munro produces to the attention of the public. "*Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*" in fact had only two significant reviews. One appeared in the literary section of *Mladá fronta dnes*, the most popular serious daily, the other in *iLiteratura*, the most successful serious online literary portal. Both reviews were highly favourable. Over the years *iLiteratura* has proved to be a consistent promoter of Munro's work: it has reviewed (or published reviews of) every Munro translation, most recently in August 2017. Veronika Geyerová opened her review of *Open Secrets* with the statement that "There is no need to make a lengthy introduction of undoubtedly the best known Canadian author," and closed it with the hope that Paseka would gradually publish hitherto untranslated collections of her stories. The shift in the Czech perception of Munro in the course of fourteen years is evident.

The increasing interest in Munro over the years has been reflected in various ways. In the field of the media, other newspapers have begun reviewing her books on a regular basis, and the dailies have been joined by a number of the more serious weeklies. Some Czech literary journals have also published reviews of her work (though not in great numbers, as they tend to see their mission as focusing on the Czech literary scene). By now most of these dailies, weeklies and literary journals have online versions, and their reviews are often accompanied by excerpts from the stories in question, at times even whole stories. And large numbers of information sources nowadays are exclusively online: here, too, reviews of her work appear frequently.

It would appear that two events contributed, at least in some way, to this increased interest in Munro. One was her winning the Man Booker Prize in 2009 and then, to a much greater extent, the Nobel Prize. In the latter case, all of the various channels mentioned above covered the story. In addition, the more popular printed media carried the announcement – an event not usually covered by publications of this type. For example *Blesk*, by far the most widely read daily in the country, carried an extensive article that included much background information on Munro, several substantial quotes from comments she had made on her work in the past, and the inevitable (not only in the context of Czech commentaries) comparison of her to Chekhov. What makes this surprising is that *Blesk* is a classic tabloid, the bulk of its content consisting of reports on crime (especially when violent), gossip about celebrities and hair-raising scare stories about dangerous hordes of Muslim refugees.

Munro's winning the Nobel Prize also reached a wider audience through commentary on radio and TV. It of course made the daily news on both private and public TV stations as well as on radio stations. But the public radio cultural station, Vltava, went a step further, with a substantial programme that included a well-informed commentary on Munro's work by one of their leading editors, Milena M. Marešová, as well as lengthy interviews with Munro's first translator, Alena Jindrová-Špilarová, and the well-known book reviewer and academic Hana Ulmanová. Events to mark the event also took other forms. In Brno, for instance, the Mahen Municipal Library organized an evening that included an introduction to Munro and her career, an evaluation of her work, and readings from selected stories by a well-known Brno actress, Helena Kružíková, long since retired but lured out by the strength of Munro's work to reappear in public at the age of 87.

This latter event embodies what is perhaps most interesting about Munro at the present time in the Czech Republic – how she has become a familiar presence on the local scene. It seems quite natural, for example, that in a review of Pedro Almodóvar's *Julieta*, which is based on three stories by Munro, the reviewer should remark in passing that "Almodóvar likes to play with the kitsch esthetics of the telenovela, but this time he is much more faithful to the realistic world of the original stories by Alice Munro" (Stejskal). Or that Munro's short story "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage" should be adapted for Czech radio's Vltava station, where it was broadcast in three parts in October 2014 with the three roles being taken by leading figures from the Czech theatrical world. Or that Munro's works all appear in *Databaze knih ... Váš knižní svět* [Database of books ... Your world of books], a popular online website for book lovers. This offers a fascinating insight into her reception in the Czech Republic among ordinary readers, with comments ranging from high praise through puzzlement to outright rejection.[3] Or that Munro should pop up in a blog filled with miscellaneous subjects entitled "A divorced woman blogs," where the writer conveys her excitement at having discovered a new (to her) author: "It's absolutely unique in today's chaotic and hurried world to discover an author who's able to cut and polish a short story so brilliantly, to create a small jewel ... I warmly recommend her books, and I'd be interested in knowing what men think of them" (*Rozvedená bloguje*). All in all, it is as though Munro has become domesticated in the small town that is the Czech Republic, is almost like a character in one of her own stories.

Leonard Cohen's name is also familiar to many Czechs – certainly far more so than Munro's. The trajectory of his fame took off almost forty years earlier, back in the 1960s, when he first entered into Czechs' consciousness through his songs.

3) Three readers' comments on *Runaway*. "Some stories sent chills up my spine, and after finishing every one of them you're forced to think hard about them." --- "My only criticism is that I have no idea what happened at the beginning of some of these stories." --- "I expected a bit more from it. Not my style." (*Databazeknih.cz*)

Beginning in 1970 their texts, accompanied by brief commentaries, appeared very sporadically in *Melodie*, a monthly and the sole magazine devoted to pop music and jazz that was allowed in the Communist period (*Melodie* 1970, 230; 1978/2, 41). In 1980, Cohen was included in Vejvoda and Novotný's *Víc než jen hlas* [More than just a voice], an adventurous (for the time) and bulky (391 pages) collection of the texts of songs (in fact referred to specifically as "poems") by seven internationally famous singer-songwriters (the other artists represented being Paul Simon, Jacques Brel, Bulat Okudzhava, Joni Mitchell, Donovan and Bob Dylan). Cohen was represented by nineteen songs/"poems." The unusually large press run (96,000 copies) disappeared quickly from bookshops, and the book was passed eagerly from hand to hand as a rare window into the outside world. That same year saw the publication of twenty-four of his poems in *Světová literatura* [World literature,1980/3], a monthly journal that published translations of foreign literary texts. These were not songs, of course, though some were related to, or reworked as, songs. In 1989 the Czech record company Supraphon issued Cohen's 1988 album *I'm Your Man*, with liner notes in Czech. And this more or less exhausts Cohen's official visibility in public during "normalization" – the term officially employed to designate the years following the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia by the armies of the Warsaw Pact.

However, Cohen's real presence and deep influence during this neo-Stalinist period was very different: the published texts were only the tip of the iceberg. A good overview of what was actually going on in those years comes in an article by the doyen of Czech pop music journalists, Jiří Černý. Written early in 2008, when it was not yet certain whether Cohen would visit Prague on his first world tour, it is entitled "Ať přijede nebo ne, Leonard Cohen je tu už dávno" [Whether he comes or not, Leonard Cohen has been here for a long time now]. In the article, Černý points out the varied ways in which Cohen's songs and poems enjoyed wide circulation in the country in the Communist period, and the many artists affected by him. Only a year and a half after it appeared in 1967, Cohen's "Suzanne" was already being sung by the rising pop star Václav Neckář in a translation so good that it set the standard for Cohen's songs in Czech. The young singer-songwriter Vladimír Merta translated and sang Cohen's songs and also translated many of his poems; they found wide circulation in samizdat form and were taken up by other singers. Pavel Šrut, a celebrated Czech poet, author of children's books, lyricist and translator (the poems in *Světová literatura* were his work) gradually built up a large selection of Cohen translations; they, too, spread in samizdat form. In his article, Černý explores the many singer-songwriters and lyricists (one of whom, incidentally, Michal Horáček, was a recent candidate for the Czech Presidency) who were influenced by Cohen, whether in terms of his songs' texts, their themes or musical elements – translating the songs directly or paraphrasing them, adapting them to the Czech context, drawing on them for

inspiration, reworking their subjects, musical lines and motifs. The pervasive influence of Cohen in the Czech musical milieu that Černý reveals in the article fully justifies its title.

Cohen's underground popularity in the Communist years was remarkable. Music as such is central to Czech culture – a favourite Czech saying has it that "Every Czech is a musician" – and in the years following the Soviet invasion the music scene, or at least one element of it, took on particular importance. This was the modern folk branch, in particular as represented by the *písničkáři* – the singer-songwriters. Their gamut of songs was wide, but in at least some of their texts, and in the case of some individuals in many of their texts, they were able in a veiled way to reflect the mood of the society and express criticism as well as a range of complex emotions, in direct contrast to the bland fare that was the official musical culture. These singer-songwriters found fertile ground in the many folk and country festivals that began springing up towards the end of the 1960s, often bordering on the edge of legality and always trying to push the envelope, even if ever so slightly. Cohen's songs fit this context perfectly; they were soon taken up by many singers, and resonated strongly with listeners. The atmosphere in the 1970s is well caught in this reminiscence:

> Not much was said of Cohen in the official media, while in the unofficial culture Cohen's songs spread at the speed of light. People played them over and over, tried to translate them. Cohen's texts spoke of sadness, but also of hope, of the ancient wisdom of the Bible … We tried to understand him. In a strange way, in poetry he was close to us. It's interesting that he clearly spoke more to people who were longing for freedom and in some way weren't able to achieve it than to those who didn't experience this frustration. (Březina)

Young people's and students' clubs were another milieu where Cohen's songs flourished. Some songs were absorbed through Radio Free Europe. Others were acquired physically: even today people still recount how they made illegal copies of Cohen's LPs and cassettes, swapped them with friends, or bought bootleg copies at the illegal but tolerated street markets that began to appear in the 1980s. In this connection, it is essential to understand that Czechs view singer-songwriters' songs as *poems*, fully-fledged representatives of the genre. (It is interesting to speculate on why it took the Nobel Prize committee another fifty years to come to this conclusion. And many Czechs would argue that even then they chose the wrong recipient.) This awareness of Cohen as an author was also reflected in the fact that his prose works, too, circulated in samizdat, both the complete text of *Beautiful Losers* and fragments of *The Favourite Game*.

So the ground had been well prepared for the reception of Cohen after the end of Communism in 1989. In the early 1990s a few poems appeared individually in various

newspapers and journals, but it was only in 1996 that the first poem collection appeared, *Death of a Lady's Man*. Cohen's two novels followed quickly, *Beautiful Losers* in 1997 and *The Favourite Game* in 1998. That same year a *Selected Poems* was published. The first decade of the millenium saw another four poetry collections: *Book of Mercy* (2000), *Stranger Music* (2003), *Flowers for Hitler* (2004) and *Book of Longing* (2008). All these publications were widely reviewed – in the daily and weekly press, journals, online sites, Czech radio. And most of the reviews were highly positive, even adulatory. The extravagantly praised translations of the novels were the work of perhaps the most promising translator in the younger generation, Tomáš Hrách (he was only thirty at the time). Pavel Šrut was responsible for the *Selected Poems* (many of the translations had originated in samizdat days). The delicately nuanced translations in *Flowers for Hitler* and *Book of Longing* came from one of the grand old men of Czech literary translation, Miroslav Jindra; in 2009 he was awarded the State Prize for Translation in recognition of his lifetime achievement as a translator and specifically for his translation of *Book of Longing*. So in general, Cohen was very well served by his translators. Unfortunately this was not universally true. The translation of *Death of a Lady's Man* was criticized by many as being weak (it did not help that the translator was apparently unaware of the meaning of the term "a lady's man," thinking that it meant a man who had been or was in love with only one woman). And the translation of *Stranger Music* was given the ultimate Black Spot: it received the Czech Literary Translators' Guild *Skřipec*, awarded annually to the year's worst translation.

The weaker quality of these two translations, however, did nothing to diminish Cohen's reputation. There was widespread excitement when it was learned that he would be coming to Prague on his first world tour, nor did this abate on subsequent occasions. In the end he appeared there three times, in 2008, 2009 and 2013, each time playing to packed houses of over 10,000 spectators. It was clear that, for many of the many reviewers who wrote about his performances, experiencing Cohen live was one of the great moments in their lives, a feeling they undoubtedly shared with the rest of the audience.

Cohen did not return to the Czech Republic after 2013, nor were there any further translations of his works. Occasional articles chronicled his doings, and when his album *You Want it Darker* was released in October 2016 highly positive reviews appeared in numerous newspapers and magazines, various media and social networks. However, these were nothing in comparison with the flood of tributes and reminiscences that erupted just over two weeks later in the wake of the announcement of his death on 10 November, and that continued for days and even weeks. So broad is Cohen's appeal in the Czech Republic that it would be impossible to seek out and record them all, in print media, broadcasting media and digital online news sites, not to mention blogs and social media. Comment came from professional journalists, authors,

singer-songwriters, ordinary individuals. Specific words and phrases that keep recurring in the headlines of these accounts give a sense of how Czechs viewed Cohen. In a good proportion of cases, his double role was captured: "singer-songwriter and author," "singer-songwriter and poet," "musician and poet," "a poet among musicians"; in other cases, only one of these was highlighted – "poet," "singer-songwriter." (Interestingly, "musician" on its own was notably absent.) The titles of certain songs often stood out in the headlines, most frequently "Hallelujah" – according to the Czech singer-songwriter Jarda Konáš "a song that, sooner or later, everyone hears," and one that boasts at least nine cover versions in Czech, including one by a brass band that normally plays Moravian folk music ("Hallelujah")! But "Suzanne" and "So long, Marianne" were also referenced many times, reflecting the long history of these songs being recorded by Czech singers and their actual popularity with Czechs, at least as measured by an online poll that asked readers to choose their favourite from a list of eleven of his best songs ("Nejlepší písně Leonarda Cohena").[4] Cohen himself was accorded such epithets as "unique," "legendary," "charismatic," "in a different class"; his voice was characterized as "unique" (again), "plaintive," "melancholy," "not for a single generation but for all [generations]."

This is all perhaps unsurprising, and very likely replicated in headlines round the world. What is perhaps unusual, and reflective of the way in which many Czechs respond to Cohen's work, is how so many commentators refer to aspects of what they regard as its existential, ontological, and spiritual or specifically religious dimensions, the latter particularly striking in a country that many sociological surveys have shown to be among the least religious in the world (Lyons, 325). This take on Cohen comes up again and again in the tributes. Great stress is laid on his Jewish roots – something that of course shaped his whole oeuvre, and became especially clear in his final years, but is often overlooked by his listeners and readers and was inevitably obscured by Cohen's own long engagement with Buddhism. (And indeed this aspect of his life is sometimes highlighted, whether through the misleading characterization of him as a "Zen monk" or in fond reference to "the Master" or "Master Cohen.") The dark vision that runs like a thread through his work is frequently pointed out: "He was above all a poet whose work resonated with feelings of alienation and existential sadness" (Spačil); "Leonard Cohen has died, and the world goes on being darker" (Hocek). Yet this is not quite so simple. "He was also exceptional in his sophisticated use of irony, which enabled him to be unusually direct, without this seeming inappropriate. One could speak of existential irony" (Hocek). And in fact this existential darkness also serves as the source of his hope: "Through his own tentative groping and grappling with darkness, Cohen offered his audience an answer and a point of de-

4) "Suzanne" topped the list, followed by "Hallelujah" and "Dance Me to the End of Love." "So Long, Marianne" came fourth.

parture … He reported from the depths of his being, risking everything – as a model and as a warning" (Turek). The leading singer-songwriter Vladimír Merta saw in Cohen's songs a special quality, what he called "a certain meditative silence," stemming from his conviction that "his talent must serve the unspoken aspects of the human spirit." He refers to these songs as *cohenovky* ("Cohen-type songs"), claiming that he (Merta) and a few other Czech singer-songwriters and lyricists had also managed to create some songs of this type. They come from an approach that is familiar to "any person who at some point has found himself alone with a guitar on a bluff or in the countryside or high up in the mountains." What comes out of this "isn't something meant for the public. It's a song directed inwardly to oneself, yoga breathing directed inwardly to oneself." (Merta)

Exactly a year and a day after Cohen's death, on 8 November 2017, in Prague's Municipal Library, there took place what was undoubtedly the most memorable Czech tribute to Cohen. This was "Leonard Cohen poetizes and sings in Czech," a programme prepared and hosted by his translator Miroslav Jindra. In the course of an hour and three-quarters, the 88-year-old Jindra offered his listeners a subtly shaped and profoundly moving portrayal, in word and music, of Cohen's life and work. A key component of the evening was the small ensemble consisting of himself as lead singer, two young women as vocalists and his son playing keyboard (and joining in occasionally as vocalist), a kind of mini-version of the bands that accompanied Cohen on his tours (though as Jindra impishly remarked, he was one up on Cohen, in that his female singers were twins). The evening started at the beginning, with a rendition of "So long, Marianne," from Cohen's very first album back in 1967, and then leaped forward almost fifty years to the end, the death of Marianne – Cohen's lifelong love Marianne Ihlen – in the summer of 2016, and Cohen's own death only a little over two months later. Jindra had just finished translating Ihlen's autobiography, and he read from that – her reminiscences of her relationship with Cohen, letters from Cohen to her, a hitherto unpublished poem from the book – and then went on to speak about her dying and Cohen learning of this, and to quote the simple, tender and by now famous letter in which he said goodbye to Marianne, wishing her godspeed on her journey and expressing the belief "that I will follow you very soon" and "see you down the road." In the course of the rest of the evening, Jindra filled in Cohen's life – providing biographical details, reading from his translations of Cohen's poems, singing, accompanied by the others, his translations of Cohen's songs. Along the way he spoke about some of the milestones in Cohen's life and about translating Cohen – of having had "the pleasure and honour" of rendering Cohen in Czech, "one of the most exceptional and challenging experiences in my life as a translator" (Jindra). Jindra's choice of songs and poems, or rather the themes they dealt with, was fascinating – love, of course, but also longing, suffering, acknowledging but at the same time unburdening oneself

of the mistakes of the past, coming to understanding, ageing and the acceptance of imperfection – "the crack that lets the light in." In the final number of the programme, he invited the audience to join in as they sang "Hallelujah," a fitting end to a celebration of a life that could well be summed up succinctly in the song's final words:

> I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool you
> And even though
> It all went wrong
> I'll stand before the Lord of Song
> With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah

It was a remarkable evening, the experience heightened by an awareness among at least some in the audience that they were also celebrating the long and richly productive life of Cohen's translator. The evening was also clear proof that, like Alice Munro, Cohen too had taken up permanent residence in the Czech Republic and become a local.

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