I am more flattered and honored than I can possibly tell you to have been asked to introduce Jan Vilcek, who is being honored tonight by Bellevue Literary Press. To begin with, the entire story of my childhood and early life is intertwined with that of Bellevue. My father worked at Bellevue, as a pathologist, in the fabulously mysterious and historic Old Morgue Building; in the hospital is a plaque dedicated to his memory.

My first summer job was as an assistant in a laboratory adjacent to the autopsy room at the morgue, and I credit the first stirrings of my life as a writer to the pleasure of having lunch with the dieners, German for servant, the men and women who did the hard physical work of the autopsy, and who knew the stories (and were eager to tell them to a girl who hadn’t heard them all before) of every homicide that had transpired in New York over the previous decades. My mother, also a doctor, also worked at NYU; perhaps it was a strange place in which to run up and down the halls and to feel as if it were a second home, but that’s how it was, for us.

As you are about to hear from Jan Vilcek, I first met him and his wife, Maritsa, when I was in high school. My parents, who were generous and kind hearted, semi-adopted the Vilceks when they came to the United States as refugees from Slovakia, then part of Czechoslovakia, and they were often at our house. It’s hard to explain now just how intensely romantic we thought it was to have escaped from the Eastern bloc countries, to have emerged, against all odds, despite great danger and hardship, from behind the so-called Iron Curtain. And the Vilceks, who were not only charming and interesting and intelligent, but also (I feel compelled to say) were and remain extraordinarily good-looking, seemed the most romantic of all. I remember thinking that they were like the couple played by Paul Henried and Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca*, without the interloping distraction of Humphrey Bogart. The Vilceks were so—the word has become a sort of joke, but it wasn’t then—so continental.

That was when most Americans still understood, or had yet to forget, that we were and still are a nation of immigrants, that refugees from all over the globe had contributed to the richness and complexity of our culture and our society.  And that is something that Jan Vilcek—in the years since the time when I was fortunate enough to see him and Maritsa so regularly—has never forgotten. His ground-breaking research, extraordinary achievements, and success as a microbiologist have enabled him to found and continue the work of the Vilcek Foundation, dedicated to acknowledging the precious and wide-ranging contributions—scientific, artistic, and culinary--that immigrants have made, the ways in which they have changed and brightened the country, and the world, in which we live. The Vilceks, who know, from direct experience, that there is a direct connection between artistic and political freedom, have always been fervent supporters of literature and the arts. Among his other accomplishments, Jan is the board chair of Bellevue Literary Press, which I want to applaud and thank for its own remarkable success in publishing work that often explores the rich and vital connection between science and art. “Small” (I’m putting quotes around that) presses and the saints who work at and sustain them are the heroes of our community.

We have never needed Jan’s work and his generous spirit more, never valued it more, never depended on it more, and I have never been prouder to have known Jan and Maritsa Vilcek, and to have been among those lucky enough to have first welcomed them to this, their adopted and welcoming and grateful nation.

Thank you.

Francine Prose