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# The Jews and the Shoah in Czech Literature after WWII

1.

In Czech literature, this theme is not as intense as it may perhaps be in Hebrew, German or Polish literature. This is understandable given that the Jews were oppressed, the German Nazis were the guilty party and the extermination camps were located in Poland: Auschwitz, Majdanek, Treblinka, Sobibor and Belzec. In addition, the majority of the victims were Polish Jews and even today the question is still controversial as to how much anti-Semitism on the part of the Poles contributed to their fate. We find testimonies about their fate in works such as Henryk Grynberg's *Żydowska wojna* (1965) and *Zwycięstwo* (1969) [*The Jewish War*, *The Victory*, translated into English by C. Wieniewska, 2001].

Czech literature has obviously produced several unique works as well and some of these are more documentary in nature, while others have a stronger fictional side. In the 1960s, the Shoah became one of the main themes of both prose and film (this theme occurred very rarely in poetry and drama). The traditional anti-Semitism which the Jewish victims of the Holocaust directly experienced after the war in Poland and in certain places in Slovakia (leading to pogroms which were officially concealed for the most part) did not occur in the Czech milieu. This aspect from the past has now become a subject of controversy today in these countries, even influencing the political sphere. Pogroms never took place in the Czech lands. Disputes concerning the Holocaust have been limited to Czech Fascist and skinhead sub-culture fringe movements. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that occasional anti-Jewish provocations have been incited. Due to the age factor of the actual witnesses of the Shoah, first hand testimony is gradually dying. Aggressive anti-Semitism is not characteristic for Czechs; instead, indifference prevails towards their fellow Jewish citizens.

The Shoah theme went through various phases within Czech literature. Immediately after the war, it primarily centered on documentary accounts of those who

had lived through the Nazi camps. From the dozens of works, the book about Auschwitz *Továrna na smrt* (1946) which has been translated into the world's main languages (*The Death Factory*, translated into English by S. Jolly, 1966) by Ota Kraus (1909–2001) and Erich Schön (later taking the name Erich Kulka, 1911–1995) is especially famous. The designation of Auschwitz as "the death factory" became a part and parcel of Holocaust terminology, even though Kraus and Schön were evidently not the first ones to use it. They concisely describe the link of racist ideology to the manner of segregation and the liquidation of the Jews, emphasizing the impersonal role played by the bureaucracy and the most up-to-date technology.

Such worthy publications as *The Death Factory* or the somewhat-later published novel by Jiří Weil (1901–1959) *Život s hvězdou* (1949) [*Life with a Star,* translated into English by R. Klímová and R. Schloss, 1989) not only presented the horrible brutality of the Shoah, but also its seemingly banal, even mundane side. *Život s hvězdou* is considered the most important work on this theme in Czech literature and has inspired a multitude of other books.

Jiří Weil incited his readers with the very manner in which he wrote his novels, in particular with *Život s hvězdou*. He gained inspiration from modernist theories which shunned both traditional psychological analysis and structured plot and instead re-established prose on facts and factual reality. The bearer of meaning is not the dramatic story of the hero or any authorial commentary, but much more often factual life situations, a record of daily life which is described in a "dry," seemingly disinterested manner.

The protagonist Josef Roubíček is part of "small history," not heroic History, as sought by Communist critics and thus, this book resembles the majority of those about the Shoah. However, Jiří Weil's art lay in his purposeful choosing of non-heroic heroes who went about living their daily, commonplace life, avoiding all that was considered "socially relevant." Roubíček lives alone during the war in a hut on the edge of Prague. Like the rest of the Jews, he goes to work and must check in regularly at the various offices. He dreams about a cup of coffee which he cannot hope to ask for and recalls how

he went riding in the mountains with his girl-friend Růžena and to the cinema and to cafés.

The hero speaks with his friend Pavel about the loss of his human identity as they discuss the upcoming transport:

> (...) 'There's no other way but to become a number.'
> 'What do you mean?'
> 'A number – hanging around your neck, attached to your suitcase, glued to your rucksack. Then I'll load myself with fifty kilos and go. (...)'
> (Weil 1998, 99)

Throughout the entire narration, Roubíček almost never meets with either Germans or Nazis. They are office workers from the Jewish community which organized records of the people, confiscation of money, property, transport preparation, etc.

The novel captures human degradation on a normal level, yet made more conspicuous by Nazi despotism. This degeneracy is all the more convincing precisely because it was "normal" and rationalized – its absurdity also lay in that its victims accepted this fate. One of the most important scenes in the novel describes an Aryan wife who forces her Jewish husband to commit suicide, thereby "making the situation easier" for her and their daughter; he chooses to accept her argument.

2.

The Stalinist regime, which was implemented in Czechoslovakia after the takeover in February 1948 and climaxed at the beginning of the 1950s, was marked by flagrant anti-Semitism, just as the other Communist regimes of that period. Publications about the Nazi regime and their concentration camps emphasized the Communists' heroic fight in all the Eastern-block countries, while the systematic extermination of the Jews was only mentioned in passing or not at all. Even in the cogent literary works of that period the Judaism of the main heroes is suppressed or marginalized. The filmed version of the well-known novella by Jan Otčenášek (1924–1979) *Romeo, Julie a tma* (1958; *Romeo and Juliet and the Darkness*, translated into English by I. Urwin, 1960) describes the

tragic story of the love of one Czech boy and a Jewish girl during the Protectorate. It was filmed by director Jiří Weiss whose entire family had been murdered in Auschwitz. In 1959, however, the film was censured by Václav Kopecký who was the minister and a party functionary at the time. The final scene was considered subversive: the Czech inhabitants of the home where the young Jewish girl was hiding sent her directly into the hands of the Nazis, out of fear for their own lives.

In Czech literature, the theme of the Shoah was increasingly developed only at the end of the 1950s, when the Stalinist system was being dismantled, and later especially in the 1960s as the culture underwent great liberalization. The first prosaist to enter the scene in that period was Arnošt Lustig (b. 1926) who survived both Theresienstadt and Auschwitz. Thus for him, the Shoah became the theme of his life's work. His first works belong among his best: *Noc a naděje* (1958) [*Night and Hope*, translated into English by G. Theiner, 1962) and *Démanty noci* (1958) [*Diamonds in the Night*, translated into English by I. Urwin, 1962, new translation of *Diamonds of the Night* by J. Němcová, 1977). These stories by Lustig inspired two of the most exceptional films in the Czech "New Wave" movement of the 1960s – Zbyněk Brynych's *Transport z ráje* (1962) [Transport from Paradise] based on the Theresienstadt stories from the first book and Jan Němec' *Démanty noci* (1964, the filmed version of the story "Tma nemá stín") [Darkness Casts No Shadow translated into English by J. Němcová, 1976)]. Similarly to Jiří Weil, the author makes use of an intimate, inner perspective (even though he narrates in the third person) and works especially expressively with the subjective observation of time. His heroes are not heroic figures, outsiders, children or older people. Lustig also distinguishes himself by his non-conventional picture of the war and the concentration camps usually depicted in terms of active resistance against the Nazis. Despite all the bleakness which these people must repeatedly undergo, donning an outer shell just to survive, the majority of them try to maintain basic moral values (for example, the story "Sousto" [Morsel] describes a boy who extracts his deceased father's golden teeth in order to exchange them for a lemon urgently needed by his ill sister).

In 1964, Josef Škvorecký (b. 1924) published his prose work *Sedmiramenný svícen* [The Menorah] which sources Jewish themes by its very title. This work was structured as a cycle of seven stories integrated by a type of literary chorus where a young Jewish girl, Rebecca, and her boyfriend Danny (the author's alter ego and the protagonist of Škvorecký's prose) reminisce seven years after the war about their youth in a small Czech town in eastern Bohemia. Some of the situations recounted are particularly moving. For example, Rebecca describes the moment when she must board the transport for Theresienstadt alone and leaves for the train station with her suitcase. On the way, she runs into her schoolmate who absent-mindedly greets her and then passes quickly, since she is in a hurry to get to the cinema or perhaps for some date. The story "Eine kleine Jazzmusik" features several student larks and a jazz concert in a provincial Czech city during the occupation. Young musicians considered jazz (which was strictly forbidden as "degenerate negro art") as a protest against the Nazis and against the caution and traditional taste of their fathers. However, after the concert, a certain Czech collaborator denounces them and the students are subsequently expelled from high school, while one of the participants, the half-Jew Paddy Nakonec, is arrested and executed. According to the author, moral lines are not to be drawn among people because of nationality, since you can find Czech, German and Jewish cowards, heroic people, frightened people and finally, those that are united.

3.

For Škvorecký, the Shoah becomes a metaphor for man caught in the machinery of the totalitarian regime and for the functioning of evil at large (Rebecca and Danny's meeting takes place in 1952 when the mass-scale unlawfulness and executions of the post-February regime were taking place). Other prose also emphasized this parallel in the 1960s by using a more complicated approach to styling. Such is the case with Ladislav Fuks' (1923–1994) novel *Pan Theodor Mundstock* (1963) [*Mr. Theodore Mundstock*, translated into English by I. Urwin, 1969], his collection of stories *Mí černovlasí bratři* (1964) [My Black-haired Brothers] and the novella *Spalovač mrtvol* (1967) [*The*

*Cremator*, translated into English by E. Kandler, 1984]. Based on Juraj Herz's script (on which Fuks himself cooperated), an excellent film version was made starring Rudolf Hrušínský and Vlasta Chramostová in 1968. Fuks belonged to a group of writers who did not have Jewish roots nor any personal experience from the Shoah, however they often wrote about this theme in the 1960s.

Based on elegant repetition and variation, Fuks' prose smoothly fuses realistic tableaux with fantastic ones. *Pan Theodor Mundstock* allows us to observe the main character in detail, however he himself lives at least half the time in his own head. For example, he converses with his friend Mon about items which the reader finds out are only figments of his imagination half-way through the book. Otherwise, Mundstock is an discreet character who was employed as an office clerk before the war, but who now lives, similar to Weil's Roubíček, in complete loneliness in an empty Prague flat waiting to be summoned for transport. He tries to think up something which can save him. He comes up with an apparently faultless method of how to prepare himself for the concentration camp by training himself for the future hardships to be endured, including uncomfortable sleeping on wooden planks, being beaten, going hungry, etc. Eventually, he dies in a tragicomic manner at the very moment they come to take him away for the transport: based on his methodology, he must switch his suitcase from one hand to the other so that he will not become overtired, yet as he does so while crossing the street, he does not notice the German car which runs him over.

Ladislav Fuks understands the fate of the Jews as that of helpless people who have succumbed to a fanatical, systematic hate and to their own personal fears. He purposefully describes the horror of a world which has lost its humaneness and has instead become a place of threat and persecution. Fuks' prose depicits the existential anguish of an individual surrounded by an incomprehensible, coldblooded mechanism.

It is interesting that Arnošt Lustig used a similar approach in the mid-1960s; previously, he had opted to write using real-life situations as the basis. His most famous book remains the novella *Modlitba pro Kateřinu Horovitzovou* (1964) [A Prayer for Katarina Horovitzova] translated into English by J. Němcová, 1973] which was made

into a television movie by Antonín Moskalyk in 1965. The story was inspired by actual events which took place in Auschwitz in 1943 – the murder of a group of rich Jews whom the Nazis had promised safe passage across the border for a high price. However, the prose is structured in an extremely complicated way, high lighting the intelligent Nazi Arthur Brenske who acts like the devilish Mefisto. He does not dominate his victims with brute force, but rather uses sophisticated double-edged talk and promises. For example, he talks about "the final solution" and the "gloom which will decide everything." The rich Jews gradually prepare their finances saved in American banks for transfering to Nazi accounts, hoping that this will help them survive.

This manipulation of the people via language and the abuse of power is one of the most important themes in Czech literature from Karel Čapek and Karel Poláček to Václav Havel. The perspective set in the novella is remarkable, since the majority of the situations are viewed through the eyes of the naïve American Jews who take a long time to realize that they are nearing their downfall. Meanwhile, the reader, who is receiving additional information, awaits the mercilessly tragic end. Unlike Fuks' work, where the observer does not cross the characters' own horizon, the perspective of the reader versus the character is reversed here. In Lustig's novels, the rich American Jews go into the gas chambers like sheep. One woman among them rebels: Kateřina Horovitzová grabs the SS-man Schillinger's gun and shoots him. Thus Kateřina is likened to the Biblical character Judith.

4.

Another integral theme in Czech prose of the 1960s was a non-traditional depiction of the Shoah from the standpoint of the guilty party. Once again, Ladislav Fuks and his novella *Spalovač mrtvol* serve as an example of this. The extermination of the Jews is not strictly in the center of the action, since the plot of the novella concludes time-wise sometime at the end of 1939 with a short coda set in May 1945. (The film version is somewhat closer

to this theme, since it explicitly portrays Karel Kopfrkingl who is charged with organizing the liquidation and burning of people en masse by the Nazi authorities).[1]

This character is even stranger than Fuks' previous characters. As is characteristic for the author, the reader also finds factual reality mixed with the fantastic and various visions. This work indeed verges on a horror story in terms of genre, while from the narratological point of view, the narrative is unreliable. Thus, the fictional world is depicted in purely personal terms via the unsettled perspective of the reality donned by the protagonist. Only the subtle suggestions within the novella's text and other more marked signals towards the end reveal this distance to the reader.

However bizarre and psychologically disturbed, Kopfrkingl is not the embodiment of the traditional villain. In essence, he has a petit bourgeois mentality, works carefully, loves music (opera melodies sound from the crematorium), cares for his family, does not drink or smoke and enjoys speaking in a flowery manner (he calls his cat "enchanting-beauty" and his wife Marie "Lakmé"). Thus, he is "decent" as a person, yet personality and individuality are lacking and thus is a complete conformist. Characteristically, Kopfrkingl accepts the thoughts and empty phrases which he has previously heard.

Fuks' novella skillfully, and even monstrously, paints the fun-house atmosphere as solemnity and stark ornamentation devolve into horror. The entire text is structured as a web of allusions and anticipations. For example, the second chapter covers the Kopfrkingl family as they visit a carnival, including a fun-house with frightening scenes from the great plague of 1680. The dying and killing which are demonstrated here (hanging, death by being run through with spikes) foreshadow Kopfrkingl's own actions in chapters 13 and 14, when he hangs his wife in the bathroom and runs a spike through his son, Mili, at the crematorium. Right before the visit to the fun-house, the reader learns about Mr. Strauss who lost his wife; she died of "*consumption in the neck*" and his son who died from "*scarlet fever*" (13, italics L.F.). Once again, this foreshadows both

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[1] The novella's conclusion obviously differs from the film, primarily in that the ambulance seemingly takes Kopfrkingl to the sanatorium for the health of his spirit. However, in the film, a German car takes him away from the crematorium to fulfill his supposed "mission."

murders, since Kopfrkingl throws a noose on his wife's neck and burns the body of his son in the crematorium.

5.

From the end of the 1960s onwards, the theme of the Shoah did not play such a key role in Czech literature as had previously. The works which did address it basically continued in two main directions: genuine authentication (Arnošt Lustig, Ota Pavel) and figurative stylization (Viktor Fischl).

For the generation which has never experienced the Shoah, they have primarily understood this theme in terms of set images and stark Holocaust iconography. Some authors have attempted to push these borders. From a traditional standpoint, their works appear as a defamation of the Shoah theme, however, he does provide possibilities for its being updated in a contemporary way.

Czech literature has also concentrated on the Shoah theme after 1989. Arnošt Goldflam's (1946) play *Sladký Theresienstadt* (premiere 1996, in book format 2001) [Sweet Theresienstadt] serves as an example. Hearkening to his Jewish roots, he originally recorded a famous episode from the Theresienstadt ghetto in his propaganda film "Theresienstadt," better known as "Vůdce daroval Židům město" [The Führer Gave the Town to the Jews]. Meant to impress the international Red Cross commission, the film starred the well-known German actor and Theresienstadt prisoner Kurt Gerron (named Gerroldt in Goldflam's play). In this "documentary," people state how peaceful life is in Theresienstadt, how they play soccer, visit various cafés, libraries, etc. Similar situations were also filmed in "Transport z ráje" [Transport out of Paradise]. After the Red Cross Commission left, the director and the actors in the film were sent on the transport to die to Auschwitz. Within his play, Goldflam used comic, tragic and grotesque elements as well.

The theater advisor and literary historian Radka Denemarková (b. 1968) also accessed the Shoah theme in her successful novel *Peníze od Hitlera* (2006) [Money from Hitler]. It describes the cruel fate of Gita Lauschmannová, a German-speaking Jew from

Moravia with Czechoslovak citizenship. Although she has survived the concentration camp, her parents have died there. After the war, she returns to her home village only to discover that the local inhabitants have confiscated the estate where she was born under the guise that her father "committed an offense against the Czech national honor." In order for the inhabitants to keep the property that they have usurped, they have designated her as a German and a daughter of a collaborator. She has to work like a slave, be tyrannized and barely escapes death. Once again, she returns to her village sixty years later, when her parents are in the process of being vindicated. She now has a right to have her property restituted, but she is actually more interested in moral fulfilment. The sons and daughters of the former neighbors, however, hardly differ from their fathers. We can classify this novel with works that cover the "trauma of the return," as well as those that describe the brutality of the wild, post-war resettlement of the Sudeten Germans.

Perhaps the most remarkable attempt at a new approach to the Shoah theme is the "Auschwitz" chapter of Jáchym Topol's (b. 1962) novel *Sestra* (1994) [*City Sister Silver*, translated into English by A. Zucker, 2000] entitled "I Had a Dream." This text, written as a frightening vision fuses horror, vulgarity, the grotesque and banality. It may thus be understood as a provocative summons against conventional Holocaust iconography and its being blasphemed. The narrator describes a dream he had wherein he found himself, together with his friends, on a type of flying carpet which lands in a sea of ash and bones in Auschwitz:

> It was the ashes of cremated people, my brothers, the ashes of cremated Jews. Any last hope we had that maybe there'd been a mixup, an at least we were in some slightly cosmopolitan wicked old gulag, was lost. An the ashes stirred up by our landing stuck to our shoes an clothes, an made it hard for us to walk. An where there weren't ashes, brothers, there were bones, human bones, an endless ghastly sea of bones. Then we saw towers in the distance an so we started walkin ... usin one of the taller towers as our point of orientation ... an we were afraid cause the skulls were watchin us, lookin at us, an we asked ourselves: Why are we here? Why us? Why did it happen for me? And some of the skulls seemed to answer: Why not? Some of them lay there softly, jaws set in a knowing smile, but more, far more, just peered out blankly at us, what was left of the jaws twisted into a grimace of pain, cause they these'd got in the hard way, brothers, an heavy-duty,

> alive. There was a sea of them, an ocean. An this comparison occurred to us when we couldn't walk anymore because we kept plunging into the bones an so we tried to swim our way through, we tried to move an crawl an shove our way through with our arms. (...) An we inched along toward the towers, trying not to catch the skulls' empty glances so we wouldn't go insane. There were children's skulls, my brothers, an there were piles of skulls smashed to bits, an there were skulls shot full of holes, an skulls that looked like they'd been crushed in a press, an skulls with small holes mended shut with barbwire, an one oif us, O knights and skippers, cracked another joke: Guess that's what you'd call his-and-hers skulls, ho! ho!, but then started to vomit. An the one creeping in front of him didn't hear him because he was weeping, an the one crawling behind him didn't hear him because he was praying out loud. An, friends an brothers of mine, it wasn't hell we were going through but whatever it is that comes after it. (Topol 2000, 101–102)

The heroes meet with the live skeleton of the Czech Josef Novák who did not end up in Auschwitz for racial reasons or for having taken part in the resistance, but because of an illegal store selling food products. This strange guide – the prototypical "small-scale Czech person" speaks in a low-class type of Prague slang (the remainder of Topol's entire novel uses normal, spoken Czech in a non-traditional manner). To horrified listeners, he recounts drastic scenes of torture and murder which he himself partially participated in as the "capo"; this alternates with gallows humor. Despite all this, he and the famous Dr. Mengele (who apparently atoned for his sins after the war by devotedly treating the Indians in South America), go to Heaven after their deaths. His very arrival in Heaven recalls the selection process in Auschwitz:

> ...that was Mr. God, my boys, an as the lines went past he'd jus smile an go Rechts! und Links! wid this like white cane, an in the line I was in, the Angels took care our wounds (...) but the debbils tore inda that other line wid pitchforks an whips... (Topol 2000, 116)

Topol's text may be explained not only as an evocation of the Shoah's horror, but also as a reminder of the Czechs' responsibility in the Jews' extermination. At the end of his dream, the narrator meets with the lofty Face (of God) from whom he learns that the future Messiah died as a young Jewish child in Auschwitz. The hundreds of thousands of skulls in the bone fields cry out to him and his friends, "Our blood on you and your

children!" (Topol 2000, 123), referencing Matthew 27:25 from the Bible: "His blood be on us, and on our children".

The chapter "I Had a Dream" climaxes with the sentence, "time'd died with the Messiah in Auschwitz" (Topol 2000, 123). A remarkable analogy may be found in Elie Wiesel's declaration that "It is impossible to comprehend Auschwitz *with* or *without* God. According to him, Auschwitz is an event which was just as significant as God's appearance on Mt. Sinai or the future coming of the Messiah, however in a negative sense, such as an "anti-appearance" or the "Anti-Messiah" (Saint Cheron 1988, 51).

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