



THE JEWS AND THE SHOAH IN CZECH LITERATURE AFTER WWII

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to present a concise insight into the Shoah topics in Czech literature. The images of the Shoah went through various phases within Czech literature. Immediately after World War II, it primarily centered on documentary accounts of those who had lived through Nazi camps (*The Death Factory* by Ota Kraus and Erich Schön/Kulka about Auschwitz). Jiří Weil's novel *Life with a Star* (1949) not only presented the horrible brutality of the Shoah, but also its seemingly banal, even profane side. This novel is considered the most important work on this theme in Czech literature and has inspired a multitude of other works. Arnošt Lustig, who survived both Theresienstadt and Auschwitz, entered the literary scene at the end of the 1950s. The Shoah became the topic of his life's work (for instance *A Prayer for Katarina Horovitzova*). Arnošt Lustig, Ladislav Fuks (*Mr. Theodor Mundstock*) and other authors used persecution and extermination of the Jews also as a metaphor for man caught in the machinery of the totalitarian regime. Some of these works also became famous in film versions like *The Shop on Main Street*, which was inspired by the story of Ladislav Grosman and received a foreign-language Academy Award in 1965. From the end of the 1960s onwards, this theme did not play such a key role in Czech literature as it had previously. So the Shoah appears in the background of several books by Viktor Fischl who emigrated from Czechoslovakia to Israel. For the generation which had never experienced World War II, they primarily understood this theme in terms of set imagines and stark Holocaust iconography. Some younger authors attempted to push these borders through representing the Shoah in an unusual way, such fusing the grotesque, horror, vulgarity and banality (Arnošt Goldflam, Jáchym Topol).

1.

We must take various non-literary recollections into account when we seek to evaluate the depiction of the Holocaust/Shoah in Czech literature. Naturally, this topic can never be a purely aesthetic issue. Considering the lack of secondary literature in English dealing with this theme, it should introduce non-Czech speaking readers to the most important works in this field.

In Czech literature, the theme of the Shoah is not as frequent or 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. 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.



Little attention has been paid to the images of the Shoah in Czech literature. The topic of Jews remained on the periphery of research after World War II. The main reason was the marginalization of Jewish topics during the Communist regime, which took power in Czechoslovakia in 1948 and evidently showed signs of anti-Semitism, often masked as anti-Zionism and as fight against Jewish bourgeois nationalism. The situation began to change a few decades ago, after the Velvet Revolution in 1989. Since then, several important historical studies have been published but the Shoah literature had not yet been researched at that time. Not a single study was published until 2005. In that year, an international symposium “The Holocaust in Czech, Slovak and Polish Literatures” took place in Prague at Charles University’s Faculty of Arts. The resulting collection of papers was the first book on this theme published in the Czech Republic.³ In 2011 a second book related to this subject followed, the collectively authored monograph edited by Jiří Holý, Petr Málek, Michael Špirit and Filip Tomáš.⁴ The last book publication was released recently in 2013. It was written by Eva Kalousová and Ivana Bednaříková-Procházková from the Kurt and Ursula Schubert’s Centre of Jewish Studies at Palacký’s University in Olomouc.⁵

The Centre for the Study of the Holocaust and Jewish Literature was established at Prague Faculty of Arts In 2010. The Centre organizes a series of workshops with Czech, German and Polish researchers focusing on fiction and documentary literature devoted to the Shoah in Central Europe.⁶ All of these studies and papers summarize and classify the relevant material and attempt to do first analysis. At the moment the main methodological problem seems to be a tension between the documented historical event of the Shoah and the fictional worlds of literary works. Most of the studies dealing with this subject stop at “images of the Shoah”, in the mere registration or vague, non-reflected literary thematology. It is necessary to examine *specific literary techniques of the Shoah representation*, such as narrative strategies, representations of characters, configurations of style and metaphors; to demonstrate how these literary configurations are used to construct patterns, ideological emblems and form cultural memory. This should be a task for future research. This article aims to take first steps: to give an overview of the Czech Holocaust literature and its periodization.



2.

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 after World War II. Disputes concerning the Holocaust have been limited to skinhead sub-culture as well as radical Islamic fringe movements. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that occasional anti-Jewish provocations have been incited. Due to the advanced age of the generation of actual witnesses of the Shoah, first hand testimony is gradually dying out. 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 novel published somewhat-later 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 a “mundane history,” not a 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 unheroic protagonists who went about living their daily, commonplace life, avoiding all that was considered “socially relevant.” Roubíček lives alone during the war in a dilapidated hut on the edge of Prague. Like the rest of the Jews, he goes to work and must regularly check in at the various bureaus. 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 girlfriend Růžena and to the cinema and to cafés.

Život s hvězdou was in many respects founded on the author’s personal experiences. It is a work primarily dealing with a person who, through no fault of his own, is subjected to humiliation, irrelevance, and anonymity, as if he were at times, an inorganic object – for example, when he must sew on the yellow star with the lettering “Jude”:

I went out the next day. After all, I had to go shopping. I saw people looking at me. At first it seemed as though my shoelaces must be untied or that there was something wrong with my clothes. In some way I had upset the everyday, accepted order of things. I was a sort of blot that didn’t belong in the picture of the street and everyone seemed to be aware of this. And I was alone among other people, completely alone, because people would make way for me. They would stop and look at me. I was no longer one of them.

(...)

‘Hello, sheriff!’ a boy called to me. And everyone laughed, but I knew they weren’t laughing at me. I laughed too. It was a funny thing to be going about with this emblem. It was a masquerade...⁷

The protagonist 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. (...)’⁸

Throughout the entire narration, Roubíček almost never meets with either Germans or Nazis. The people which organized records of the Jews, confiscated money and property, prepared transports, etc. are office workers from the Jewish community.

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 the fact 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.

3.

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-bloc 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, such as the famous novel *Nackt unter Wölfen* (1958; *Naked among Wolves*, translated into English by E. Anderson, 1960) by the East German author Bruno Apitz or the Czech prosaist Norbert Frýd’s (1913–1976) *Krabice živých* (1956), *A Box of Lives*, translated into English by I. Urwin, 1962; the Judaism of the main figures 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 German occupation in Prague. It was filmed by director Jiří Weiss whose entire family had been murdered in Auschwitz. In 1959, however, the film was censored by Václav Kopecký who was



the Minister of Culture and a party functionary at the time. The final scene was considered suggestive: 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 culture underwent great liberalization. The first prosaist to enter the scene in that period was Arnošt Lustig (1926–2011) 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, and a 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 out of 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 protagonists are not traditionally heroic figures but outsiders, children or old 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 needed urgently by his ill sister.

Lustig's stories interweave several autobiographical experiences, such as his escape from the death transport in the story “Tma nemá stín” in a fictional way. The author portrays exceptional threshold situations where decisions about life and death must be made. For example, his story “Druhé kolo” (The Second Round) follows a boy who has three minutes to run up to a wagon, steal a loaf of bread and return to his starving friends before the patrol makes



its round once again. If he does not make it in time, the patrol will shoot him. The narrator details his inner consciousness during this situation for more than ten pages.

Interestingly, Lustig does not equate good with the Jews (as victims of persecution) nor evil with the German Nazis (as the executors of this). The story “Růžová ulice” (Rose Street) relates the story of an old Jewish woman who is beaten by a cruel SS officer for no reason. This act is also witnessed by the officer’s chauffeur, a German who is outraged, but cannot act against his superior. He brings the woman a tin of sardines the next day and also displays compassion towards her later on as well.

In 1964, Josef Škvorecký (1924–2012) 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 stories) 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 who was collaborating with the Nazis denounces them and the students are subsequently expelled from high school, while one of the participants, the half-Jew Paddy Nakonec, is incarcerated 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.



4.

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 as well as the anti-Semitism masked as anti-Zionism were taking place⁹). 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. M. 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 together 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 superior, Mon, about items which the reader finds out are only figments of his imagination half-way through the book. Otherwise, Mundstock is an unobtrusive 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.



Oftentimes in Fuks' prose, words and motifs which carry visual significance are repeated, such as dust and stars in *Pan Theodor Mundstock*. Likewise, in the closing scene of the protagonist's death, the internal perspective which was dominant so far changes into an external one within the final few paragraphs:

He heard a horrible noise. Glancing round he saw an enormous military truck bearing down on him. Everything went dark, some vast force tore his case from his hand, and he realized he had fallen into some dreadful trap... My God, what has happened? He heard the words shriek in his head; what were we doing, just practicing, we couldn't prepare ourselves for everything, it was all some terrible mistake I made, I must have made an awful mistake... he felt as though a star was falling, a star that was a part of him, down, down (...).

When the truck moved and they turned Mr. Mundstock over onto his back, the policeman, although he was no doctor, saw that this man who had so suddenly stopped still in the middle of the road would never get to the other side.

It was a thin man with a graying face and motionless eyes, eyes turned beseechingly somewhere towards Heaven. The yellow Jewish star on his dark blue coat was covered in dust, but strange to say there was not a speck of blood on it.¹⁰

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 depicts 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.¹¹ However, the prose is structured in an extremely complicated way, foregrounding 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 handing-over, hoping that this will help them survive:

The final solution is at hand. You’ll see for yourselves. Your worries will all go up in smoke and burn away like brush fire. From my own personal experience, I can testify that people often don’t believe things which concern them in the most fundamental way until they feel them on their own skin. (...) We want to liquidate this exchange operation in the best possible way. You must listen to what I’m telling you. Until we’ve reached a destination which will be satisfactory to everybody and about which you’ll have no fault to find, I’m doing my level best to make this trip as pleasant as possible for each and every one of you.¹²

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. The perspective of one protagonist (Mundstock, Kopfrkingl) dominates in Fuks's narrative. In contrast, the perspective of narration in *Modlitba pro Kateřinu Horovitzovou* is constructed so that the reader knows more than the characters in the story. In Lustig’s novels, the rich Jews go into the gas chamber 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.

5.

There are several Holocaust prose pieces which take place in Slovakia, but are written in the Czech language. After Czechoslovakia was dismantled, the Slovak Republic existed from 1939–1945 (excluding what would today be southern and eastern Slovakia, which fell to Hungary). It was officially an independent country headed by the Catholic priest Jozef Tiso, however in reality it was only a satellite of Hitler’s Germany. The Jews in Slovakia were also segregated, sent to holding camps and finally to the death camps in Poland.



The most well-known work on this topic is Ladislav Grosman's (1921–1981) *Obchod na korze* (1965) (*The Shop on Main Street*, translated into English by I. Urwin, 1970). Grosman himself came from a Slovak Jewish family, went through various labor camps during the war and eventually, escaped being transported to the extermination camp and thus had to illegally hide-out for the rest of the war. After the war, he studied in Prague and worked as an editor and screenwriter, publishing in both Slovak and Czech. His prose was made famous by the film directed by Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos, eventually winning in the 1966 American Oscar for Best Foreign Film. The screenplay and film were preceded by Grosman's story "Past" (1962) (*The Trap*) which was published in the Prague journal *Plamen*. The novella *The Shop on the Main Street* was then written after both the screenplay (which Grosman cooperated on) and the film.

The main figure, as very often occurs in Czech (Slovak) literature, is a small man who is not overly interested in politics or in public events – the carpenter Tonko Brtko. He lives in a provincial city in eastern Slovakia (the author took this image from his native Humenné). However, his brother-in-law is the leader of the local Hlinka Guard (the Slovak Fascist organization) and his wife is very pushy. Therefore, Brtko becomes the so-called Aryanizer. He acquires a small, worthless and insolvent store belonging to the old, almost deaf widow Rozália Lautmanová. Because he is a good person at heart and does not like conflicts, he helps the old Jewess repair her furniture. He pretends to be her helper, while at home he makes out to be a strict Aryanizer. The situation becomes acute when the Jews from the city and the neighboring regions are lined up for transport. They have forgotten about Lautmanová, but Brtko assumes that this is really just a clever move on the part of his hated brother-in-law who will then designate him a "white Jew" (someone who helps and protects Jews) and thus permanently get rid of him. He thus convinces the old lady to go out to the square and line up for the transport, but then regrets this and tries to save her. At first, Lautmanová does not understand anything, but then she assumes that a program is taking place. Brtko inadvertently slams a door on her head, which causes her stroke and death. He then goes completely crazy and commits suicide.

The novella depicts the drama of a person who is roped into an oppressive, irresolvable situation through no fault of his own. Moreover, the film utilizes grotesque and surrealistic



scenes carried out by the stellar performances of the Slovak Jozef Kroner and the Polish Jewish actress, Ida Kamińska.

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 by director Juraj Herz, 1969, 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).¹³

This protagonist 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.

Kopfrkingl is the opposite of Mundstock in terms of the figure's relation to the fictional world. *Pan Theodor Mundstock* features aggression assailing the character unexpectedly from *without* versus *Spalovač mrtvol* where aggression arrives just as unexpectedly, yet stems from the protagonist *himself*. Theodor Mundstock is a Jew who, through no fault of his own, finds himself under extreme threat and is trying to defend himself. He ends up as a victim of the Shoah. At the beginning of the text, Karel Kopfrkingl – the crematorium employee – is a slightly curious type, similar to Mundstock mentally. Mundstock's imaginary double is Mon, who in turn has his own parallel in a Tibetan monk who visits Kopfrkingl.¹⁴ However unlike Mundstock, Kopfrkingl undergoes a transformation. He takes advantage of the exceptional situation. Even though he is Czech, i.e. predisposed to being “neutral” and only a “witness” as far as the Shoah, he harkens to his German ancestors and Nazi ideology. The “night side” of his personality, at first seemingly unobtrusive and harmless (a fondness for cremation, reading notices from the obituaries aloud) makes a criminal out of him, given the conditions of the totalitarian regime. He



denounces his colleagues at the crematorium and becomes a double murderer, as he kills both his wife (a half-Jew) and his son, both of whom could have negatively affected his career. At the conclusion, he is charged with organizing a mass burning, building a “gas cremator” and “some sort of chamber” which are obviously all references to the Shoah. From his position as a conformist, he transforms into an actual perpetrator of evil, even though it appears that he will be taken off to the mad house at the end of the novella, thus no longer able to continue his “mission.”

However bizarre and psychologically disturbed, Kopfrkingl is not the embodiment of the traditional villain. In essence, he has a petit bourgeois mentality, works conscientiously, loves music (opera melodies can be heard pouring from the crematorium), cares for his family, does not drink or smoke and enjoys speaking in a flowery manner (he calls his cat “enchanted-beauty” and his wife Marie “Lakmé”). Thus, he is “decent” as a person, yet his 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 ceremoniousness 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*” (italics L.F.). Once again, this foreshadows both murders, since Kopfrkingl throws a noose on his wife’s neck and burns the body of his son in the crematorium.



6.

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

Arnošt Lustig's creations continue with these themes, with very few exceptions. His later books, however, accentuate the more abrasive side of life in the camps (homosexual prostitution, lack of unity among the prisoners, etc.). He often recorded the stories of young Jewish girls and women, such as in *Dita Saxová* and *Modlitba pro Kateřinu Horovitzovou*. Their beauty and youth form a moving contrast to the horrors of the Shoah. This approach also applies to *Nemilovaná* with the subtitle *Z deníku sedmnáctileté Perly Sch.* (Toronto 1979) (*The Unloved. From the Diary of [a 17-Year Old – J.H.] Perla S.*, translated into English by V. Kalina-Levine, 1985) which was most likely crafted in counterpoint to the famous diary of Anne Frank. This story of a young Jewish prostitute in Theresienstadt is written as a fictional diary, capturing the period from August to December 1943 with naïveté and abrasive matter-of-factness. Similarly to *Kateřina Horovitzová*, Perla takes revenge because of her having been humiliated: when lying together with a German officer, she bites a hole in his throat since he embodies evil for her.

Oftentimes, Lustig would also rework his older prose, thus producing new, extended versions which are also occasionally given new names. This may have been the author's attempt to reach out to the American public. Like many others, Lustig left Czechoslovakia after the invasion of the Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968 and lived in the United States from 1970. In the last years of his life, he shuttled between U.S. and Prague. The majority of critics, however, agree that his original, more laconic prose versions are stronger.

Even though his autobiographical experience of the Shoah became a life-long theme for Arnošt Lustig, this cannot be said for another well-known prosaist of the same generation, Ivan Klíma (b. 1930), even though he spent a relatively long period (three and a half years) in the Theresienstadt ghetto. At first, Klíma was enthusiastic about the Communists, but he became a dissident after the reforms in 1968. He often seeks to deal with the mechanism of power and the concept of Communism, but rarely returns to the Shoah theme, such as in *Soudce z milosti* (1986) (*Judge on Trial*, translated into English by A. G. Brain [A. and G. Turner], 1990). The



protagonist is the judge, Adam Kindl, who recalls his childhood in the Theresienstadt ghetto. Likewise, the story “Miriam” from his collection *Moje první lásky* (samizdat 1981) (*My First Loves*, translated into English by E. Osers, 1986) and some other works stem from this milieu.

A friend and literary student of Arnošt Lustig, Ota Pavel (1930–1973) came from a “mixed marriage,” thus his father and two older brothers were deported to a concentration camp. However, they all survived. His collection of stories entitled *Smrt krásných srnců* (1971) (*Death of the Beautiful Roebucks*), based on the author’s experiences in life, depicts the persecution of his family, among other things. His father was fired from the Electrolux Company, where he had worked as a successful traveling salesman. These unfavorable conditions forced the family to leave Prague, moving to the village of Buštěhrad near Kladno, where his father and then his brothers worked in the coal mines. Here, they lived through the burning of the neighboring village of Lidice in 1942. When both older brothers were summoned for transport to Theresienstadt, his father set out to go to his friend Prošek, despite the order not to leave his place of residence. He did this in order to bring his sons a plentiful amount of food before they departed to the camp. Even though he could have been given a death sentence, he successfully hunted a roebuck and brought it home. This “success of a father,” who was presented thus far in the book as a palaverer and braggart, a lover of life, fishing and beautiful women, is now portrayed as the responsible father of his family, an unpretentious hero and a narrator's model. The book’s styling switches between dramatic scenes and humor, as well as idyllic nature descriptions.

Viktor Fischl (1912–2006) was another author who also frequently addressed Jewish themes. He was a Zionist who came from a Czech Jewish family and although the Czech lands were already occupied, he was able to successfully immigrate to Britain in 1939 where he worked as a clerk for the Czechoslovak emigration authority. After the Communists came to power, he left for Israel, taking the name Avigdor Dagan and working in the diplomatic corps. Fischl began his literary career before the war, however the majority of his prose was written much later in his life after his retirement. In addition to his literary endeavors, he was also the chief editor of the exhaustive, three-volume publication *The Jews in Czechoslovakia: Historical Studies and Surveys* (1968, 1971, 1984).



The Shoah appears in the background of several books by Fischl, but it takes center stage in his novel *Dvorní šašci* (originally written 1982, then in Hebrew with the title *Lejcanej hachacer*, eventually published in Czech, 1990) (The Court Jesters). The “court jesters” were in fact four Jewish prisoners in an extermination camp where the Nazi camp commander saved up money for entertainment during his nightly drinking sprees. One of them is a dwarf, another – a juggler, the third – an astrologist and the fourth, a hunch-backed judge named Kahana, who is able to predict the future and serves as the narrator of all the events, with a certain amount of distance. The story takes place in separate two time spheres. The first part covers before, during and right after the war, while the second sphere deals with the second half of 1967 and is set in Jerusalem during the Arab-Israeli War. At that point, three of the four protagonists meet once again and listen to the story of one of them who was able to avenge the death of his wife and search out her Nazi murderer in Argentina.

The stories stimulate a larger-scale contemplation of the way the world is proceeding. The frightening events which the narrator and his friends have experienced severely impact their previous conceptions of stability and indeed, the humane foundation required in modern times. They have stopped believing in justice and in God’s love. They ask whether they themselves are puppets and jesters in the hands of God. They know that the catastrophe of the Shoah is not explainable through reason or faith and can repeat at any time.¹⁵ Even though the judge Kahana still views the world as a dense jungle for a long time after the war, he does search for his own mission to bear witness to what has happened and to guard against the danger of forgetting.

The novel *Ulice zvaná Mamila* (in Hebrew *Rechov ušmo Mamilah*, 1984, published in Czech 2006) (The Street Called Mamila) follows as a sequel to *Dvorní šašci*. Here, the wind opens the Old Testament to the book of Job for the now old judge Kahana, who then reads about the impossibility of man deciphering God’s intentions. This causes him to turn from evil and meet God halfway. Just as in the second half of *Dvorní šašci*, the story unfolds in Jerusalem, the mystical city of God’s presence and thus helps the figures to once again re-establish their equilibrium.



7.

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, for example Art Spiegelman and his comics. As an American with Polish Jewish ancestors, he has written a book based on his father's stories *Mouse* (1986) wherein the Nazis are depicted as cats, the Jews as mice, the Polish as pigs and the Americans as dogs. From a traditional standpoint, his re-working appears 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 (b. 1946) play *Sladký Theresienstadt* (premier 1996, in book format 2001) (*Sweet Theresienstadt*) serves as an example. Harkening 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). The film starred the famous 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 filming, the director and the actors in the "documentary" were sent on the transport to die to Auschwitz. Within his play, Goldflam used comic, tragic and grotesque elements as well.

Jewish topics can be found also in other Goldflam's plays and short stories. In the first part of his play *Písek* (Sand), directed by himself (1987), the characters are suddenly packing their things and boarding the train. Smoke rises over them, they undress and disappear, only their shoes remain. It is an obvious allusion to the Holocaust. Very soon after the premiere of *Sladký Theresienstadt*, the radio play *Budou vyvoláni jménem* (1998) (They Will Be Called by Name, directed by J. A. Pitínský) was broadcast. It is set in Theresienstadt too. Most of the motifs are similar to *Sladký Theresienstadt*. In his later play *Z Hitlerovy kuchyně* (2007) (From Hitler's Kitchen), six mini-stories linked by the character Adolf Hitler add up to a slightly unorthodox perspective of Hitler. Goldflam's grotesque reconstructions of Hitler's life and death remove any demonic qualities and present him as a completely private, bookish and slightly bizarre person.



In the first scene Hitler and Stalin meet (by coincidence sometime before World War I) at a train station in Brno. They hope the trains will take them off to meet their dreams. At the same station, a little Jewish boy from Hungary is lost; his name is Georg Tabori. Tabori was a Hungarian-Jewish writer and dramatist who survived World War II in exile and was famous for his provocative plays about the Shoah. Goldflam's interest in the life of the Jewish community in Czechoslovakia was expressed in documentary films shot for Czech TV in the mid-nineties: *Ztracený domov* (Home Lost) and *Domov nalezený* (Home Found). These two documentaries contain Goldflam's interviews with Czech, Slovak and German Jews who emigrated from Czechoslovakia to Israel. Older interviewees recall their lives before World War II and the Nazi persecution. They also describe Czech and especially Slovak anti-Semitism. Among them are celebrities such as the writers, journalists and researchers Viktor Fischl, Erich Kulka, Ruth Bondy and Joab H. Rektor.

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 after her parents have been vindicated. She now has a right to have her property restituted, but she is actually more interested in moral fulfillment. The descendants 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. Unfortunately, this theme was taboo in Czech historiography and literature for many decades.

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 summons against conventional Holocaust iconography¹⁶ 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 mix-up, an at least we were in some slightly cosmopolitan wicked old gulag, was lost. And the ashes stirred up by our landing stuck to our shoes and clothes, and made it hard for us to walk. And where there weren't ashes, brothers, there were bones, human bones, an endless ghastly sea of bones. Then we saw towers in the distance and so we started walking (...) using one of the taller towers as our point of orientation (...) and we were afraid because the skulls were watching us, looking at us, and 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, because they'd got these the hard way, brothers, and heavy-duty, alive. There was a sea of them, an ocean. And this comparison occurred to us when we couldn't walk anymore because we kept plunging into the bones and so we tried to swim our way through, we tried to move and crawl and shove our way through with our arms. (...) And 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, and there were piles of skulls smashed to bits, and there were skulls shot full of holes, and skulls that looked like they'd been crushed in a press, and skulls with small holes mended shut with barbed wire, and one of 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. And the one creeping in front of him didn't hear him because he was weeping, and the one crawling behind him didn't hear him because he was praying out loud. And, friends and brothers of mine, it wasn't hell we were going through but whatever it is that comes after it.¹⁷

The figures meet with the live skeleton of the Czech Josef Novák who did not end up in Auschwitz for being a Jew 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 speech (the remainder of Topol's entire novel uses normal, oral Czech speech 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, and as the lines went past he'd just smile and go 'Rechts! and Links!' with this like white cane, and in the line I was in, the angels took care our wounds (...) but the debbils tore inda that other line wid pitchforks an whips..."¹⁸

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 to his friends, "Our blood on you and your children!"¹⁹

The chapter "I Had a Dream" climaxes with the sentence, "time'd died with the Messiach in Auschwitz".²⁰ 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, it is an event which was just as significant as the 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," the Messiah of Death."²¹

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NOTES

- ¹ This article was supported by grant GACR 13-03627S.
- ² Bolton, “Czech Literature”.
- ³ Holý (ed.), *Holokaust – Šoa – Zagłada v české, slovenské a polské literatuře*. The texts are published in Czech, English, Polish and Slovak.
- ⁴ *Šoa v české literatuře a v kulturní paměti*. In Czech.
- ⁵ *Reflexe dějin v poválečné literatuře českých Židů*. In Czech.
- ⁶ Ibler (ed.), *Ausgewählte Probleme der polnischen und tschechischen Holocaustliteratur und –kultur*. Holý (ed.), *The Representation of the Shoah in Literature, Theatre and Film in Central Europe: 1950s and 1960s*. Holý (ed.), *The Representation of the Shoah in Literature and Film in Central Europe: 1970s and 1980s*. Ibler (ed.): *The Holocaust in the Central European Literatures and Cultures since 1989/Der Holocaust in den mitteleuropäischen Literaturen und Kulturen seit 1989*.
- ⁷ Weil, *Life with a Star*, p. 65
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 99.
- ⁹ This Stalinist anti-Semitism culminated in Czechoslovakia in November 1952 in the show trial against the prominent Communist leaders, in which the “Jewish origin” of 11 out of 14 convicted was emphasized.
- ¹⁰ Fuks, *Mr. Theodore Mundstock*, pp. 213–214.
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- ¹¹ See Ammann – Aust, *Hitlers Menschenhändler*.
- ¹² Lustig, *Modlitba pro Kateřinu Horovitzovou. A Prayer for Katerina Horovitzova*, p. 218.
- ¹³ 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”.
- ¹⁴ Herz’ film portrayed this doubling in a most excellent manner, since Rudolf Hrušínský played the role of both Kopfrkingl and the monk.
- ¹⁵ In his novel *Oblak a valčík* (1976) (The Cloud and the Waltz), Ferdinand Peroutka views the catastrophe of the war and the Holocaust in a similar manner. The cloud and



impending storm at the beginning of the novel signify the opaque quality of the suddenly destructive catastrophe, as well as the fragility of illusions concerning personal happiness.

¹⁶ For more details, see Kliems, pp. 197–210.

¹⁷ Topol, *City Sister Silver*, pp. 101–102.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

²¹ Saint Cheron, *Rencontre avec Élie Wiesel. Dialog avec Philippe-Michael de Saint Cheron*, p. 51.