

## Time is playing with what happened yesterday. The Czech Literary Response to The Holocaust. The Overview (1945–1989)

**Keywords:** literary representations of the Holocaust, Shoah in the Czech literature, Cold War, Czech-Jewish relations

**Słowa kluczowe:** literackie reprezentacje Holocaustu, Shoah w czeskiej literaturze, zimna wojna, kontakty czesko-żydowskie

### Abstract

The article provides an overview of the history of Czech literary representations of the Holocaust (with particular emphasis on prose) in the second half of the twentieth century, the period of the so-called Cold War (1945–1989). The author tries to show the sinusoidal presence of reflection on the Shoah experience in the works written by Czech writers, depending on the political situation and current artistic trends.

Artykuł przybliży w sposób przeglądowy historię czeskich literackich reprezentacji Holocaustu (ze szczególnym naciskiem na prozę) w drugiej połowie XX wieku, w okresie tzw. zimnej wojny (1945–1989). Autorka stara się pokazać sinusoidalną, uzależnioną od sytuacji politycznej i obowiązujących trendów artystycznych, obecność refleksji nad doświadczeniem Shoah w twórczości czeskich pisarzy.

[Genocide traumas] cannot be simply forgotten and put out of mind, and neither can they be adequately remembered.

(Heyden White, *The Modernist Event*)

Those who are dead, do not speak [...]. The memory that serves the living betrays the dead. It is not in the power of the living to give the word to the dead. Time works against the innocent. Time is playing with things, which happened yesterday.

(Arnošt Lustig, *Essays*)

Reflection on the Holocaust literature is, to a large extent, reflection on changes in memory and its official, individual, social and national dimensions. Today, the repeated and fixed phrases about the end of literature, the impossibility of writing poetry after the Holocaust, are remembered even by the average recipient. “The world of Auschwitz lies beyond the limits of language, just as it lies beyond the limits of the human mind,” said Georg Steiner, and Dan Diner added: “The mass extermination of European Jews has its statistics, but no narrative”.

The study of the representation of the Shoah in the Czech literature could not be carried out solely on the basis of aesthetic criteria. This rule applies to any national literary space. The literary reaction to the Holocaust never remains a purely cultural, linguistic, aesthetic or poetic reaction. It is always a kind of utterance that is overwritten by the historical, political, social and sociological context. Focusing on the major events of common Czech–Jewish history, one can get the impression that, like the history of Czech–Jewish relations, with all its ups and downs, the subject of the Holocaust in the Czech literature and culture has been similarly sinusoidal.

In the following article, I will try to briefly clarify and confirm this statement presenting overview of the Czech Holocaust literature written in the Cold War period. It is worth paying attention to the current trend – moments of greater literary (and not only) interest in the Holocaust experience occur in the years immediately after the war (before the communist coup in 1948), then in the 1960s (which is the moment of cultural thaw and revival related to socio-political changes in Czechoslovakia), and finally in the post-revolutionary period or even at the very beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Between these periods of increased reception and artistic representation of the Holocaust, there are, to use the Czech term *mezery*, blank spaces, officially controlled or natural gaps in the memory of this experience (at least in the official literary space).

It is important to be aware of the differences in the intensity of the literary response to the Holocaust and the differences in the perception of this experience in national literatures (as Agata Firlej writes, “the discourse on the Shoah is stuck in national communities at all”, Firlej,

2016, 13). In this respect, Czech literature certainly does not propose such a broad and, so to speak, intense approach to the subject, as Polish or German literature. The reasons are obvious and result mainly from various historical and social experiences, as well as different national-Jewish relations in the pre-war period. The distinction between the Slovak and Czech representations of the Holocaust strongly needs to be emphasized, but, unfortunately, it would not be a point in this article. However, it is difficult to ignore the coexistence of these two cultures during the Cold War and the complementarity of their literary markets. For the purposes of this paper, therefore, I adopt a nomenclature that is often imprecise, and I will elaborate only on the “Czech” reaction to the Holocaust. Moreover, I am going to limit my considerations even more, focusing on prose. This may be explained to some extent by the fact of a partial absence of Holocaust representations in poetic and dramaturgical texts – Czech poets and playwrights did not exclude the Holocaust from their literary interests or duties (just to mention such names like Ferdinand Peroutka, Jiří Kolář or Jaroslav Seifert<sup>1</sup>), but certainly the most recognizable and the most representative examples of Czech literary reactions to the Holocaust during the Cold War period, are to find in prose.

Like almost all European literatures, the Czech literary scene also produced many titles related to the “Age of Stoves” (a term coined by the Polish writer Adolf Rudnicki). At least a few of them have become, in a way, iconographic for the Czech culture. Film adaptations, especially from the 1960s, have played here a major role, thus they have been appreciated all over the world.

The first three years after the war in Czechoslovakia are called in the Czech language *moment přerodu* (“a moment of transition”), a period of a certain cultural release, which in the sphere of literature with the subject of the Holocaust brings primarily (similarly to other Central European literatures) literary documents, testimonies and corre-

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the Czech Shoah poetry, see for example: Štěpán Balík, *Yelling into the Silence and its Echos. Czech Shoah Poetry Written till 1960s and its Reception*, “Poznańskie Studia Slawistyczne” 2017, no. 12, pp. 29–45.

spondences. Perhaps the most important text of this kind and of this period is the co-authored book written by Ota Kraus and Erich Schön *Továrna na smrt* (The Death Factory, 1946)<sup>2</sup>. A suggestive title is not surprising any more today. According to Jiří Holý, the title term has been a part of the iconography of the Holocaust around the world for many years before *Továrna* was published. However, Kraus and Schön indicated the first Czech literary description of the well-organized Holocaust machinery, in which creating thousands of average citizens, were involved (cf. Holý, 2011, 15)<sup>3</sup>.

The 1940s, however, was primarily the moment when on the Czech literary market appeared a book, that would remain a point of reference for subsequent authors practically throughout all the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – *Život s hvězdou* (Life with a Star) written by a writer of Jewish origin, Jiří Weil. The text appeared in bookstores in 1949, so shortly after the communist coup, but it hardly meets the requirements of the “new literature”. As a result of his incompatibility with socialist poetics, Jiří Weil was placed on the list of authors with a publication ban, expelled from the Union of Czechoslovak Writers (Cz: Svaz československých spisovatelů), and almost ended up in prison (cf. Holý, 2011, p. 14). His text, brutally depicting the cruel machinery of killing in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, through a detailed description of the camp’s everyday life and human degradation, which becomes something completely ordinary and pro-

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<sup>2</sup> Other examples of testimonial literature from this literary period are for instance: Lev Sychrava, *Záznamy z Buchenwaldu* (Records from Buchenwald, 1945), Jan Hajšman, *V drápech bestie* (The Claws of a Beast, 1947), Jiří Beneš, *V německém zajetí* (German captivity, 1945), Václav Jirů, *Šesté jaro* (The Sixth Spring, 1946), Anna Auředníčková, *Tři léta v Terezíně* (Three years in Terezín, 1945), Olga Košutová, *U Svatobořic* (1946).

<sup>3</sup> On the margin, Czech “participation in the Holocaust” was based primarily on observing, not responding, and often being involved in expelling Jews from their homes to take their property after all. Hence the contemporary need to confront the “spacial emptiness”, the disappearance of the neighbors, which resulted, for example, in the *Zmizelí sousedé* (Neighbours who disappeared) educational project (<https://www.jewishmuseum.cz/en/program-and-education/>).

saic, met with extremely severe criticism. It concerned, among others, Weil's book as a "decadent" example of "pernicious existentialism" and hit the main character of the text, a protagonist who did not meet the criteria of a socialist literary hero, a non-hero, showing "capitulation and cowardice" (as critic Ivan Skála claimed).

Weil's testimony and the film directed by Alfréd Radok *Daleká cesta*<sup>4</sup> (The Distant journey) symbolically closed the stage of the post-war presence of the Shoah in the Czech culture. Both works were created in 1949, both were also immediately banned. *Distant Journey* did not even have an official premiere.

Two years later a kind of a repetition of the pre-war Czechoslovak anti-Semitism demonstration took place – a political show trial in which, among others, Rudolf Slánský, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, was accused of participating in a spy network for Israel. During the process, the allusions to the Jewish origin of the accused were not avoided. 11 out of 14 defendants were sentenced to the death penalty, which was carried out in December 1952.

The subject of the extermination of Jews ceased to exist in the official cultural space. Underskin communist anti-Semitism crept into the poems of eminent poets representing the generation of the Czech interwar artistic bohema, including for example Vítězslav Nezval. Unofficially, however, quite different initiatives were taken, such as illegally published collection of surrealist poetry, *Židovská jména* (The Jewish names, 1949), in which the authors, as a sign of protest against anti-Semitic atmosphere in the country, started to use pseudonyms referring to Jewish names. One of the authors stayed with this pseudonym until the end of his life, thus signing all his later publications (I am mentioning here the famous "underground pope" Egon Bondy, born as Zbyňek Fischer).

Independent literary reflections on the Shoah had to step aside in the 1950s for proclaimed literary aesthetics and narratives about war,

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<sup>4</sup> *Distant Journey* is a Czech Holocaust film directed by Alfréd Radok and released in 1949. The plot is blending historic footage of the Nazis crime with a fictional love story between a Jewish woman and her Aryan husband.

understood as the struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Those years brought important texts that will unfortunately be published only after few decades, such as the autobiographical *Treblinka, slovo jak z dětské říkanky* (Treblinka, a word like from a children's rhyme) by Richard Glazar, a former prisoner of the Treblinka concentration camp and one of the heroes of the famous movie *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann. Or the collection of poems *Černá lyra* (Black lyre) written by the eminent Czech poet Jiří Kolář in the 1950s as "the history of human wickedness" (quoted after Holý, 2011, p. 19) (the full edition of the collection was not published until 2000). The officially edited "contemporary accepted texts with the theme of concentration camps" (Holý, 2011, p. 20) were created by such authors as for example Norbert Frýd (*Meč archandělů* [Sword of the archangels], 1954 and *Krabice živých* [Boxes of living], 1956), Milan Jariš (*Oni přijdou* [They will come], 1948, 1949, 1953, 1956, 1985) and E.F. Burian (*Osm odtamtud* [Eight from there], 1954, 1956). A characteristic feature of these publications, as Jiří Holý claims, is their diligent avoidance of Jewish topics, as if the Holocaust described by the authors did not concern the Jewish nation, and a rather ironic attitude towards American liberators (cf. Holý 2011, 20 and 21).

A subtle signal of change was the publication of another, perhaps the best known, text written by Jiří Weil, who returned to writing after eight years of silence. The bibliophilic publication of *Žalozpěv za 77,297 oběti* (Lamentation for 77,297 victims) took place in 1958. The number in the title refers to the number of Czech citizens killed by Nazi regime whose names were commemorated on the walls of the Prague Pinkas Synagogue. The original structure of the text, to some extent already heralds the narrative experiments of the 1960s, and, at the same time, becomes an extremely clear breakthrough in the official artistic "trends" of the 1950s.

Smoke from nearby factories shrouds a countryside as flat as a table, a countryside stretching off to infinity. Covering it are the ashes of millions of dead. Scattered throughout are fine pieces of bone that ovens were not able to burn. When the wind comes, ashes rise to the heavens, bone fragments remain on the ground. And rain falls on the ashes, and rain turns them to good fertile soil, as befits the ashes of martyrs. And who can find the ashes of those from my native land, of whom there were 77,297?

I gather some ashes with my hand, for only a hand can touch them, and I pour them into a linen sack, just as those who once left for a foreign country would gather their native soil so as never to forget, so as always to return to it" (*Lamentation for 77,297 Victims*, translation by David Lightfoot, source: <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/distributed/L/bo68264052.html>).

Another postmortem published text by Jiří Weil opened a decade that significantly changed the shape of the Holocaust literary discourse in the Czech cultural space – the novel *Na střeše je Mendelsohn* (Mendelssohn is on the Roof) from 1960 tells a fictional and quite grotesque story of ordering by Reinhard Heydrich removal from the Rudolfinum roof the sculpture of German composer with Jewish origin Felix Mandelsohn. Two Czech workers, assisted by SS-men, climbed onto the roof, but none of them knew which of the sculptures is “defiling the German palace of music”. They were just about to throw off Richard Wagner’s figure, because of non-standard size of his nose. In fact, Wagner’s sculpture never stood on the roof of the Rudolfinum. The story written by Weil is, however, repeated till today by Prague guides and functions like an urban legend.

The end of the 1950s brought another great literary personage to the history of Czech literature. Arnošt Lustig, a Terezin and Auschwitz survivor, devoted all his work to the subject of the Holocaust. His literary debuts were also so famous thanks to the outstanding screenings representing the Czechoslovak New Wave trend: the prose *Noc a naděje* (The night and the hope) and *Démanty noci* (Diamonds of the night) published in 1958 were the literary prototypes of the movies directed by Zbyňek Brynch in 1962 and by Jan Němec in 1964. The protagonists of Lustig’s texts broke the socialist stereotype, the image of the war and the Holocaust, conventionalized in the 1950s, an important element of which was an active opposition to the occupant. As Jiří Holý wrote, these are usually nonheroic characters, weak and defenseless or old people, children, and outsiders fighting for survival, desperately sticking to what is fundamental, basic humanity, moral values, which seem to be a guarantee of survival in the world denuded of norms and ethical rules. Lustig’s texts constitute of almost crude record of the cruel everyday war-life. In the context of this work, it is difficult not to stop for a moment over Jan Němec adaptation – one of

the greatest works of Czechoslovak cinema, a collage of images, details, reminiscences, voices and echoes that build an atmosphere of being surrounded, but also an almost animal instinct of survival.

The film opens with a scene of two boys jumping off a German train – as they were being deported from one concentration camp to another at the end of the war [...]. Their *distant journey* begins, as well as the no-story of their escape and wandering (Málek, 2011).

Arnošt Lustig’s prose balance on the verge of fiction and the authentic experience of the Holocaust survivor. They differ slightly from the other texts published at that time, which were mostly based on the form of a document, often presenting the camp reality<sup>5</sup>.

Another important name of the turn of the 1950s and 1960s is Ludvík Aškenazy, who proposed a narrative about the Holocaust from the point of view of a sheepdog belonging to a Jewish woman (*Psí život* [A dog’s life], 1959), the text *Černá bedýnka* (Black box) from 1960 combining photographs from the reality of war and literary commentaries on them, and the prose *Vajičko* (Little egg, 1963), being an example of using in the Shoah narrative the child perspective. Another work, which became famous also thanks to its movie adaptation was *Bez krásy, bez límce* (No beauty, no collar, 1962) written by Hana Bělohorská, on which the screenplay of the movie *...a pátý jezdec je*

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<sup>5</sup> *Dita Saxová* (1962) – a tragic story about a Jewish woman for whom the experience of the war and the ghetto has become such a heavy wound that she is unable to start living in the „normal” post-war world. *Modlitba pro Kateřinu Horovitzovou* (1964, The prayer for Kateřina Horovitzová) – the text that brought the author the greatest publicity in the 1960s – it tells the authentic story of a Jewish woman who, before entering the gas chamber, tears out the guard’s weapon and kills him. Her act becomes a gesture expressing the strength of the humiliated, a manifestation of the dignity or pride of the defeated. *Z deníku sedmnáctileté* Perly Sch. (1979, From the diary of seventeen-year-old Perla Sch.) – a book which, according to J. Holý, was written as a response to the famous Anne Frank’s Diary – a fictitious diary of a young Terezin prostitute, written and published in exile. The background for many texts created in this literary period are very often transit camp and ghetto in Terezin and Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, where many Terezin prisoners were finally transported.

*Strach* directed by Zbyňek Brynch was based (...and the fifth horse-man is a Fear, 1964).

The mid-sixties was the period in which Czech literature, cinema-tography and broadly understood culture begin to revive, the golden age of Czech prose, so-called “golden sixties” brutally ended with the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies on Czechoslovakia in August 1968 and the cultural and political “normalizing” regulations introduced in 1969. It is worth remaining for a moment in this lush period for Czech prose, in which the theme of the Holocaust is again discovered (or maybe uncovered?). It appears for example in the works of the most outstanding writers of this epoch – Josef Škvorecký, in a collection of short stories under the meaningful title *Sedmiramenný svícen* (Seven-armed candlestick, 1969) and the novel *Lviče* (Lioness, 1969), where the Holocaust theme was used by the writer in an original way and woven into the detective threads. The fate of this last book was, however, as the date of publication indicates, more complicated (it had been already in bookstores, but was immediately banned and the official edition was destroyed).

Existential tendencies in the prose of the 1960s caused that the representation of the Holocaust in the texts created in this epoch focuses more on the condition of man and his position in the face of evil. That, in fact, opened the field for comparing two totalitarian regimes (Nazism and Stalinism) and showing the repetitive mechanisms of functioning the ideology. The 1960s was also the moment when the readers got the opportunity to read texts written by Ladislav Fuks, a writer without Jewish roots or personal experience of the Holocaust, but obsessively returning to Jewish topics in his work. In the 1960s came out some of his most recognizable novels: *Pan Theodor Mundstock* (Mr. Theodore Mundstock, 1963) – a case study, “Anatomy of Fear” (Šebek, quoted by: Schmarz, 2015, 317), a tragicomic, absurd story of a lonely man who, waiting for a transport to the concentration camp, tries to prepare himself mentally and physically for the unimaginable, to survive, to align with the “vision of a future full of dread”; *Mi černovlasí bratři* (My dark-haired brothers, 1964) – a collection of short stories about the war fate of six young people with Jewish origin; *Variace pro temnou strunu* (Variations for a dark string, 1966) – talk-

ing about pre-war times, fears and premonitions, threatening the individual and entire society; and finally the famous *Spalovač mrtvol* (The cremator, 1967) – text composed of words, phrases and disturbing repetitive images, balancing on the verge of horror, in which the main character, a decent citizen and an orderly employee of the crematorium turns into a monster that decides about life and the death of his family and in fact cocreates the “the Holocaust factory”. Fuks’s novel is one of many, but certainly also one of the most important among Czech literature, visions showing the mechanism of fanaticism, as well as the guilt and responsibility of the average people.

The book of Fuks is famous also thanks to the outstanding film adaptation, directed by Juraj Herz, with unforgettable roles of Rudolf Hrušínský and Vlasta Chramostová, two undeniable personalities of Czechoslovak cinema.

And since we are dealing with outstanding Czechoslovak film adaptations of this time, it is impossible to ignore the one appreciated all over the world, awarded with the most important film award – *Obchod na korze* (The shop on the main street) directed by Ján Kadar and Elmar Klos. The film was based on the story *Past* (The trap) written by Ladislav Grosman in 1962. Grosman, who managed to escape from the transport to the concentration camp and stay hidden until the end of the war, was participating in writing the script for the film, and simultaneously creating a short story under the same title. The prose is describing an average citizen, an ordinary Czech, whose conduct, passivity, and attitude towards Jewish neighbors made him, slowly and unnoticeably, coresponsible for the Holocaust crime.

The 1970s and 1980s, the time when more and more texts, analyzes and studies on the Holocaust are published around the world, in the Czech culture is again a period of politically imposed avoiding the literary representations of the Holocaust. There are (published mainly in *samizdat*) some texts written as well by debutants as already well-known authors. Actually, no fundamentally new tendencies in the description of the Holocaust appeared – texts published in the years of “normalization” used either a “real authentication” or a “figurative stylization”.

Arnošt Lustig returned, Ivan Klíma, a dissident and famous author of popular novels, made his debut – the memories from the Terezín concentration camp are “smuggled” in some of his writings (ex. *Moje první lásky* [My first loves], 1981; *Soudce z milosti* [Judge by grace], 1986). Hana Bořkovicová published her childhood memories from Terezín and Auschwitz, where she lost her family, although she officially admitted her Jewish origin only after 1989 (*Světýlka* [Lights], 1971). Jewish motifs are present in independent literature of this time, ex. *Nanebevstoupení Lojzka Lapačka ze Slezské Ostravy* by Ota Filip (Ascension of Lojzek Lapaček from Silesian Ostrava, firstly published in German in 1973, then, in 1975 in Czech in *samizdat*) or *Dotazník* (Questionnaire), written by Jiří Gruša and edited unofficially in 1975. One should also remember about texts, that had been waiting for the print for years, such as the *Tryznivé město* trilogy (A harrowing city), which includes Daniela Hodrova’s oniric prose *Podobojí*, written between 1977–1978, and published shortly after the Velvet Revolution.

However, I believe that the most important literary event of this period is the text by Ota Pavel *Smrt krásných srnců* (The death of the beautiful roebucks) from 1971 – inspired by the author’s memories and personal experiences nostalgic story about life during the war, in the shadow of the Holocaust. The novel is considered unique due to, among other, the form of the expression (language and vision of the world from child’s perspective). The narrative of Pavel’s text is an attempt to maintain the illusion of normality in completely abnormal times – this illusion remains a guarantee of surviving and, at the same time, symbolizes man’s struggle to protect dignity.

The real Czech literary revival accompanied with complementing missing translations, took place only after 1989. I would even risk the statement, that the “resurgence” of the Holocaust theme in the Czech literature, took place more at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when the literary Velvet Revolution and quite complicated situation on the Czech book market, resulting from the necessity of unification three literary circuits existing before 1989, calmed down.

The most current Holocaust literary representations are often surprising or even shocking, they are using the theme of guilt, unex-

pected (and unwanted) return of survivors (here the Jewish fate is quite often compared with the fate of the Germans expelled from Czechoslovakia after World War II), grotesque, historical parallels or contemporary transformations of memory (e.g. in the brilliant short story *Chladnou zemí* [Devil’s Workshop] by Jáchym Topol from 2009).

Recently, we easily notice striking changes in the artistic methods of aestheticizing historical experience and shifting the “Holocaust decorum” (Leszek Engelking’s term) in contemporary culture. Modern art, literature, and education face the questions about an adequate form for unspoken content, for which description there still are no words and concepts. However, aesthetic and formal experiments are recently accompanied by an intense return to testimony, the personal history that, according to Arnošt Lustig, “is also history. Just like a scar is an evidence of an injury, and a used calendar is a testimony of an age.”

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