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Between Freedom and Imprisonment. The Shanghai Ghetto from the Perspective of the Bulgarian Writer Angel Wagenstein

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Angel Wagenstein's novel *Farewell, Shanghai* is this article's focal point. The attention focuses on the literary picture of the Shanghai ghetto (Hongkew district) during the Second World War. Wagenstein shows the ghetto as symbol of the end of the Jews's eternal wandering, where they found autonomy from other nations, and reunification based on sufferings and religion. Before them there stands the long-awaited promised land, where they themselves will govern themselves.

Keywords: Angel Wagenstein; Bulgarian literature; roman; China; Shanghai; World War II

Farewell, Shanghai[1] is the last part of the trilogy by the Bulgarian author and film director Angel Wagenstein (1922–)[2] focusing on the fate of the Jewish diaspora in various parts of the world, from Spain, through Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans as far as Asia.[3] It tells the story of Jewish refugees from Germany and other enemies of fascism, who spent the Second World War in Shanghai, living in the ghetto in the Hongkew district among other places. This topic rarely appears in literature, and it is known to specialists or tourists who have visited the Shanghai museum in memory of the inhabitants of the ghetto: Feng Xueting. It is worth adding here that the theme of the Holocaust is also a delicate and controversial issue in Bulgaria, but for reasons other than in other European countries. With the help of the Church the Bulgarians, resisted the extermination of their citizens, but those Jews who did not have Bulgarian citizenship, including those from modern-day Macedonia suffered in the Bulgarian-administered territories during the war. Today it is a great bone of contention between Macedonia and Bulgaria, despite the fact that Bulgarians argue that German policy prevented them from granting citizenship to all the inhabitants of the country.

In *Farewell, Shanghai* Wagenstein does not touch on the problem of the Holocaust *per se*. The action takes place before the genocide or focuses on areas where the final solution was not applied. All events take place in Asia, where the Japanese resisted German pressure to introduce the anti-Jewish law. The book was conceived as a protest against fascist, nationalistic ideology in all its forms and on all continents. It seeks to expose the collective experiences and challenges specific to the end of

1 In this article I used the second Bulgarian edition of the novel, published in 2009. The first edition was released in 2004.

2 Wagenstein is also a script writer, playwright, social activist and member of parliament. Born in Plovdiv to a family of Bulgarian communists, Wagenstein grew up in France. After returning to his homeland, he became a member of the labour movement and during the Second World War he joined the Partisan resistance, and was sentenced to death for combat activities. He miraculously escaped execution of the sentence.

3 Wagenstein novels have not yet been the subject of academic interest. He is known primarily as a film director, see: Janakiev, 2000, 41.

the first half of the twentieth century through the prism of the fate of individuals drawn into the vortex of History.

The essential issue here is the characterisation, since it focuses on their psychology, ways of thinking, attitudes to the world in which they found themselves and had to deal with their fate. The narrator's comments also play a significant role in the novel because, instead of attempting to explain or understand this strange world, built on paradoxes, he rather tries to describe it in terms of distance and irony. He therefore eschews euphemisms and calls things plainly by their name, with all their rawness, which results in the uncompromising and acerbic interpretation of reality its political protagonists. What provokes strong and constant criticism from Wagenstein is fascist totalitarianism and, in the narrower sense, the theory of racial purity presented as a nonsensical, anti-human and false or fabricated tradition,[4] which allowed authorities to shun ostracised groups.

Most of the fictional characters are runaways, not only Jews. They come from various European countries, but mainly from Germany. Some are simply trying to survive, while others actively resist fascism in the politics of Germany, Spain and Japan, while Germany and Japan worked closely together (Wagenstein, 2009, 72–73, 76–77).

The novel is written for a wide readership. Critics might suggest that it is popular, commercial literature. It is largely based on fact, but it includes adventure, sensation, espionage and romance. Because Wagenstein is also a film director, his text concentrates on the cinematic technique that favours prologues, retrospectives and metaleptic narrative exposition. The narrator of the novel uses a variety of story-telling techniques, from dry fragments of documentary, to epic tales, at times sentimental and exaggeratedly clichéd romances. If it were a film, its genre would be described as occasionally saccharin melodrama. The aesthetics of kitsch effectively balance documentary motifs, personal narrative critical of nationalist ideology, sarcastic towards the silent, indifferent witnesses of genocide, descriptions of victims' suffering, and the narrator's and author's comments that develop the plot. We have the right

4 In terms of Eric Hobsbawm, see: Hobsbawm, 2008, 10.

to believe that in all the prologues and epilogues,[5] in narrative remarks, jokes or stanzas Wagenstein presents his own view of the history of the 20th century. The autonomy of history also explains various reactions of people to tragic events, providing the reader with the best interpretative key to his novel. He also explains the main characters, which he modelled on a combination of features of several real people in one epic form.[6]

The starting point of the novel is mysterious, the readers not knowing the details of the contexts of the story that begins with a post-war scene in which the members of the Dresden symphony orchestra are talking together in Chinese during the rehearsals. This annoys the famous Austrian conductor Herbert von Karajan, who angrily reminds them that in this concert hall the Chinese language is forbidden.[7] The current action of the piece is being conducted in parallel on two plains, in Europe and Asia, primarily in Shanghai in China, From Wagenstein's perspective Eurasia is a global village, overwhelmed by the conflicts of war and governed by totalitarians after opposition has been suppressed. The history of Europe is reflected in the history of Asia, Spain and Germany replaced by Japan, led by China gradually annexing Asian countries and putting in place repressive governments tht oppose the local population.

The order of the old world is gradually falling apart and forcing people to establish a new system. The plot turns on a series of events: the Night of Broken Glass in Germany, the defeat of democracy during the civil war in Spain and Japan's joining the war for the Axis Powers.

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5 Since the plot concerns an orchestra, its contents are organised by such musical terms, as introduction, finale.

6 Wagenstein thus commemorated *inter alia* three unknown Bulgarian agents working for Soviet intelligence, who had to leave the country in September 1923 after the anti-government protests of leftist parties were muzzled. Though Wagenstein himself, as well as well the aforementioned agents, regarded those protests as no more than an anti-fascist uprising, the modern historiography perceives them only in categories of the oppositional "September riots" of left-wingers. For more details, see: Gjuzelev, 2012, 3992.

7 The subsequent stages of the narrative allow the reader to understand the reason the German musicians speak Chinese. The reasons for Karajan's restlessness are not explained in the novel, but it is widely acknowledged that at the time he had nothing against Hitler's political programme.

The world represented in the novel is constructed of two essential storylines. The first one is based on the fate of the Jewish musicians from the Dresden orchestra, victims of Nazi persecution. The main roles are played by the German-Jewish Weissberg couple, Theodor, a world-famous violinist, Jew, prisoner of the Dachau camp before the war, and Eleonor, a German singer as famous as her husband. The second storyline concentrates on the fight against fascism. The protagonists here are Władek, a soldier of the International Brigade from Spain, and Hilda, a young Jew from Berlin, who works as an actor and photomodel. These people combine to form refugees against the fascist regime, as well as a complex, multi-layered identity, radically different from the one-dimensional identity of fascists. They identify as libertarian humanists who reject the idea of racial purity and embrace the idea of a nationally and culturally diverse society. Władek does not even specify his nationality. He says at one time he is a Czech and at others that he is Polish or Portuguese (Wagenstein, 2009, 58–59). Hilda has the appearance of the ideal of a pure-bred woman. In Germany she had been a symbol of a German beauty and physical fitness. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the magazine covers are adorned with stunning photographs of her. This external image, however, is a façade: Hilda's family had come to Germany from Austria and had only recently converted to Christianity, her father deciding to adopt a German name, so as not to stand out in the new country. On the contrary, Theodor Weissberg, a Jew, feels fully German, cannot understand the reason the anti-Jewish ideology has been directed against him. His wife, in turn, a so-called pure German, sees no reason to relinquish her beloved husband under the pressure of Nazi law, although she will later pay with her life for that choice.

Among the protagonists is a Europeanised Asian, a physician, a pacifist and a patriot, Dr Hiroshi Okura, a Japanese from a solid medical family, educated in the United States and Paris. Drawing the figure of this character, Wagenstein did not resist the temptation to stereotype him along the lines of the European norm of perception of the Japanese elite. Doctor Okura looks, thinks, feels, talks and acts just as the average European imagines. He is short, wears thick, round glasses, has a *kasa* hat on his head and a white silk scarf, which the narrator explains is the result of the doctor's fascination with American films about high

society and his ideas about the West. In his behaviour, Okura distinguishes between 'Asian reserve' and 'irritating courtesy'. He loves lyrical poetry and sophisticated Japanese cuisine.[8] The doctor's conduct is guided by an unwavering love for his country; the narrator even conferring on him a "love of war", a characteristic typical of the Japanese. When Japan mobilises, the doctor returns home and serves on the front. The fighting is incompatible with his views, but he cannot act otherwise because he identifies himself, as the narrator would have it, do all Japanese with his homeland, both on the mystical and ontological levels (Wagenstein, 2009, 98–102, 111).

The above-mentioned storylines mesh together and sometimes even connect with each other, in order to show a wide panorama of events, in which all the participants are involved. As a result of many surprising coincidences, the roads of all characters cross in Shanghai. Europeans flee the war, persecution and the indifference of the democratic West towards German policy. Okura is there serving the military, trying to help those who have fallen victim to Japanese politics.

In an ideological confrontation with the West, China definitely wins on the pages of Wagenstein's novel. He portrays pre-war Europe and America in the context of Egyptian enslavement, i.e. a death trap, from which no one who denies the politics, ideology and nationalist values may escape. The writer makes no exceptions. Germany is an apparent public trap, a place where the opposition is openly destroyed and enemies of the state are liquidated. Other countries, whether democratic, such as France, Britain and the US, communist, such as the Soviet Union or neutral, such as Switzerland, are hidden traps. Officially, they criticise Germany and Spain, but at the same time unofficially foster their politics. They apprehend the Franco's enemies; they deny work permits to asylum seekers; they cease to give visas to refugees, in attempts to compel them to return to their countries, despite the fact that death frequently

8 Wagenstein even managed to divide civilisations according to the table manners. Its principal criterion is determined by the height of the table because this piece of furniture conditions the ritual of eating, which seems simple in the West, while the East complicates it. The only result of this division is a misunderstanding the eastern civilisation (in Wagenstein, Japanese) by the West (Wagenstein, 2009, 100).

awaits them there. The most shocking is the brief account of the fate of the passengers of the MS Saint Louis, who, after escaping from the Germans, asked international governments to take them in, but they are either refused or ignored. In the end, as the narrator says without emotion, "the ghost ship" was forced to return to Hamburg. The finale of this story was recorded in the archives of Auschwitz and Treblinka (Wagenstein, 2009, 105–107).[9] Pointing to those guilty of this state of affairs, the narrator recalls the infamous role of the world's Jewish financial elite shamefully hidden even today, who failed to support refugees, for fear of economic competition.

In this global kaleidoscope of hostility, indifference and hypocrisy, only Shanghai shines bright. It is still an open city, a dream refuge, where one might find shelter. We read it is, "the last salvation shore, a symbol of desperate hope for salvation" (Vagenštain, 2009, 108). They come from all sides, from the west and east; by ships, the Trans-Siberian railway through the Soviet Union or walk from Manchuria. The narrator connects the Jews' acceptance with the total absurdity of Nazi racial ideology, which has come to light in Shanghai and in general in Asia, as nowhere else. He is of course aware that Shanghai enjoys the status of an international city, a privileged zone, where many countries have autonomous territories and the right to vote in the political and economic arena, but most importantly the Japanese, the current rulers of a large area of China, refuse to recognise the racial theory. They do not want to divide people according to this criterion because they do not understand it. They consider it contrary to the social organisation, the principles of the economy and therefore to common sense.

In Asia, since the Middle Ages, the tradition of the co-existence of cultures has been consolidated. For centuries foreign merchants, including Jews, wandered along the Silk Road, trading Chinese commodities. This was a situation beneficial to all parties and many of them settled, earning the respect of their neighbours. In the Shanghai crucible of nations, cultures, religions, Jewish newcomers are therefore the same

9 Wagenstein recalls a simplified course of the cruise, since some of the passengers survived the war finding asylum in various countries.

insofar as they shock no one. They do not even pique anyone's interest. They settle in the districts where financial resources allow them. Some in rich central district, but far more on the outskirts of the city. In the poorer, port district of Hongkew they occupy flats not only next to the Chinese, but also thousands of Japanese who left Japan, in search of better lives. Here, no one forbids anyone to practice their own religion, to lead their own lifestyle, to socialise with anyone. Children go to school, where the curriculum is not censored like it is in Nazi Germany. There is a hospital and a synagogue. Shanghai makes it possible to ease religious tensions, tolerate liberal followers of Judaism as well as the orthodoxy, and the eternal hostility between Jews and Christians abates.

Great material and spiritual help to new arrivals is provided the Chinese Catholic nuns (Wagenstein, 2009, 123–124). Human solidarity achieves a real dimension. Help and self-help funds are created, collected from everyone. The extremely poor do not agree to be scabs, because they are afraid of taking away hunger payments to others (Wagenstein, 2009, 284–285). The difficulty of existence gives rise to the noblest features in common cut-throats, and sometimes also in military enemies, as exemplified by Dr Okura (Wagenstein, 2009, 338). Jews in Shanghai are even afforded the opportunity to take part in the resistance movement and carry out espionage tasks. Analysing the current world, where nothing is black or white, when one's enemy may help one and a friend may betray one, the Rabbi of Shanghai, Leo Levin, does not hesitate to soften, the dogmatic position of Judaism and relinquished the precedence of Yahweh over other gods, coming to the conclusion that all Gods in the world, like people, are equal and respond to the prayers of believers (Wagenstein, 2009, 250–253).

Shanghai's European community, in turn, more important than racial purity adds to the old, classical social values and the German cultural identity of the refugees, who commonly were called Germans.[10] The

10 This is an important plot in the novel and the narrator constantly stresses that the majority of German Jews regarded themselves as Germans, who had been brought up with the German language and knew little about their Jewish roots. Their community grew in Germany to that extent that they could not be distinguished from Germans by appearance. Hilda was a clear example of this.

rich old Jewish emigrants, the so-called Baghdadi Jews,[11] welcome the elite of the newcomers (Wagenstein, 2009, 189–191). There are no reasons to repress the old school German diplomats appointed even during the Weimar Republic. Even Nazi officers in Chinese were able to forget political ideology and tolerate the presence of Jews. They maintained close social and economic contacts with Baghdadi Jews, with whom they shared the German language and secular culture.

Despite the advantages of the Chinese refuge, refugees denied that Shanghai was their biblical promised land (Wagenstein, 2009, 263). Their captivity is lighter, but it exists: the Egyptian becomes Babylonian. The city has a second, dark side. It is an alien, hermetic microcosm that limits freedom just as a prison. Only money rules there. Even before the real Jewish ghetto was created, the emigrants absorbed the financial ghetto (Wagenstein, 2009, 170, 172). The omnipotence of money is reflected in every aspect of life. Money determines life and death. Without money, one has no permission to stay, no tickets for travel, no housing, no work and no medicine.[12] The influx of people raised prices immensely. There was no chance to maintain one's prior financial, professional or social status. Most of the arrivals were doomed to penury in overcrowded night shelters, adapted from post-industrial factories, to work for a pittance with neither prospects nor social assistance. Many people were surprised by the contrast between rich and poor, which was inestimably greater than in Europe, even for those who had grown accustomed misery in the old country. Shanghai's poor neighborhoods knew nothing of hygiene and running water was a luxury (Wagenstein, 2009, 143–145).

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11 Known also as Indo-Iraqi Jews. These were names given to the former communities of Jewish migrants and their descendants from Baghdad and elsewhere in the Middle East, who settled primarily in the ports and along the trade routes around the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea (Slapak, 1995).

12 The émigrés had to secure their existence by their own hands. The authorities established expensive entry fees, in order to keep the newcomers alive. The Jewish foundations offered the poor temporary loans for visas, which must be repaid upon arrival in order to enable others to leave. The debtors often kept the borrowed money because they simply wanted to avoid starving to death. They therefore forget their compatriots, even if they were members of their own families (Wagenstein, 2009, 108–110).

Tropical diseases took their toll. The other side of non-interference by the authorities was lawlessness, which allowed criminals to act with impunity and where there was real danger of kidnap and murder. In his commentary the narrator says that the custom of the municipal authorities was to warn Europeans against visiting poor areas, but, when the number of European emigrants increased, this habit ceased (Wagenstein, 2009, 249). If a woman was to reveal her handbag, it was sure to be stolen (Wagenstein, 2009, 204). In certain cases, the cultural barrier between the newcomers and locals transpired to be insuperable. In the foreground, as the narrator suggests, the Asians would manifest an overly confidential attitude to women, which in the novel results in the death of Eleonora Weissberg. In such circumstances, as always, people from lower social strata or from the criminal world thrive. The helpless, gentle and the sensitive perish.

The joy of refuge in Shanghai was suppressed more by the mental barriers between the newcomers and older European diaspora than by their lack of money and cultural foreignnesss. Although this did not ostracise them completely, it was difficult to find a common language, mutual understanding and agreement, when someone who had experienced the anti-Jewish law, survived the crystal night, lived through the concentration camps, tried at all costs to escape the trap, but encountered a wall of indifference. Some knew nothing about it, while others did not know how to talk about it. The gap exacerbated the feeling of humiliation of the Jewish refugees in the face of the contented Shanghai elite who were unaware of the impending catastrophe. They took care of their own comforts and cultivated their old friendships and traditional entertainment. In this environment it seemed normal to invite the Nazis home and willingly do business with them because nothing was more important than profit. By way of conclusion, the narrator sarcastically called to mind that these are the same Baghdadi Jews who once persuaded the Japanese government to forbid German Jews entering China for economic reasons (Wagenstein, 2009, 104, 208, 261).

The outbreak of war in Asia deprived the Jewish escapees of this substitute for freedom that they had enjoyed earlier. The Japanese were enclosing them in the ghetto. While they did not believe in the Nazi's racial theory, their worst side revealed the imperial interests

of the Japanese and their indifference to the fate of the persecuted. As a result, the Jews continued to hold German citizenship, so the Nazis managed to force the allies to decide about them. Like everything in Shanghai, the ghetto had two sides: a bad side and one a little better. The bad side involved the change in the status of the emigrants from free people to prisoners of war, being enclosed within the borders of the *Zona* ('the restricted zone') and the ban on leaving, and the curfew. The living conditions were also severely reduced: the dwelling was subdued; the number of jobs decreased; the population grew rapidly; and the sanitary and medical circumstances were terrible. It is not without significance that the need to release housing for displaced Jews aroused hostility in the Chinese inhabitants of the district. *Zona's* better side was minor but important: the governor was a Japanese civilian, greedy for money, but not bloodthirsty and the regulations in the ghetto were relatively relaxed (Wagenstein, 2009, 264–265), which allowed them to work outside the zone. Schools and hospital were in operation, of course, as part of self-funded financial and medical scheme. One must immediately add, however, that the narrator concentrated on ways for prisoners to solve their own problems, organise their social activity and mutual help for those in need rather than the martyrological side (Wagenstein, 2009, 267).

The final scene is tragic in its expression, but spectacular. American planes flew over Shanghai, bombing the city, including the Jewish quarter, on 9th May, 1945, when the end of the war in Europe was announced, and the inhabitants flocked into the streets to express their joy. From the perspective of the history of the Shanghai Jews and the ideological message of the work, together with the whole trilogy, however, this scene is not the most important. The decisive role was played by a modest dialogue between Rabbi Levin, an eternal optimist, and Professor Mandel, a sceptical doctor, on the day the organization of the ghetto was decided. It raises a universal question about the meaning of Jewish suffering. The answer is prophetic, maintained in the classic biblical key, the exodus and the hardships of life in captivity: the price of the future independent state that God, perhaps, plans to give to the Jews after centuries of wandering. Hitler, paradoxically, becomes the executor of God's plans in this plan (Wagenstein, 2009, 263–264). From

today's point of view, when the state of Israel has existed for decades, the thought of an independent Jewish state seems too obvious. For our analysis it is more important that it was formulated in Shanghai, a city according of curses and salvation, which the rabbi calls the Babylonian captivity, but also the new Sinai. According to the Bible, Sinai is a place of God's revelation, giving Israel a system of rights, a metaphor for the old order (Ga 4[13]). It is also the territory where the Israelites attempt to enter the promised land (Dt 30:1–5), where God examined the faithfulness of his people by bestowing curses and blessings on them, "life and good, and death and evil" (Dt 30:15), transforming former Egyptian slaves into a uniform Israeli nation worthy of receiving their own land (Dt 30:16–19, 31:7). The Shanghai Ghetto in Wagenstein's artistic concept was therefore shown as the equivalent of Sinai, the city of the providential attempt of the Jewish diaspora, from which it emerged victorious, proving that it deserved, and was ready for, a better future in its own country. Here Jews from around the world practically checked their skills, demonstrated their ability to organise themselves in the spirit of law, social justice, moderate, conflict-free religiousness[14], as well as consistent co-operation with their neighbours. Some gave their lives for freedom. On the Chinese soil, they clashed with each other and successfully smoothed the moral and cultural differences of Jewish emigration from the East and West, speaking Yiddish and German. Here, finally, the Jews who had assimilated with other communities, "servants to other Gods" and religious converts, saw the need to return to their roots, like Hilda, who before her death in a Japanese prison confessed to being a Jew and asked to be buried in the Jewish cemetery. This is the way the new identity of the Jewish outcasts was brought forth. Its bond is the pre-war and war-time experiences, forcing the persecuted gradually to leave the communities in which they had previously settled in order to become those shaped, on the one hand, by experiences

13 According to *The Bible in Basic English*.

14 It is no accident that the rabbi never mentions the idea of the creation of *Israel* and *special* relationship with God. He co-operates closely with the superior of a Catholic monastery and reconciles the ultra-orthodox and liberal branches of Judaism (Wagenstein, 2009, 124–127).

caused by the anti-Jewish law, and, on the other, by the immemorial Jewish tradition that is to elicit the long forgotten past, and to develop it as the common experience of the nation. The West is foreign to this new community, as is Asia and America with its sense of superiority to others, and tardy, irrelevant political decisions.

In Shanghai, therefore, Wagenstein sees the symbol of the end of the eternal wandering of the Jews and only the long-awaited promised land awaits them, where they themselves will be their own hosts. If the protagonists fail to enter, as did Moses, then their compatriots and descendants will enter.

For the Jewish society Shanghai was a place of empowerment, isolation from the rest of the world and re-unification based on suffering and religion, inasmuch for the anti-Fascist movement the very city transpired to be a space of internationalisation, where the West met the East, political systems and ideologies merged in a common struggle against the Nazi enemies of humanity, and consolidated by the common aim to implement it. Broadly speaking, during the Second World War Shanghai perfectly illustrated the idea of China as the Middle Kingdom, which introduced itself as the centre of the world, where all routes cross, economical interests meet and international business is carried out.

Due to its belonging to the genre of pop culture and despite the extraordinary presentation of the world, the novel is unlikely to be included in the literary canon, but thanks to its light form it may reach more readers, thus more effectively inform them about the events described, commemorate them and stimulate discussion. This process continues, as witnessed by the translations of the book into various languages[15] and the international awards it has won.[16]

15 The novel was published in Bulgarian, German and French almost simultaneously.

16 It won the Jean Monnet award in 2004 and in the 2007 National Jewish Book Award category for fiction.

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