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# “Mr Hitler,” Greta Garbo and the Jew Hidden in the Grass. The Literary Representation of the Holocaust in *Ruth Tannenbaum* by Miljenko Jergović

**ABSTRACT:** Szperlik Ewa, “Mr Hitler”, *Greta Garbo and a Jew Hidden in the Grass. A Literary Representation of the Holocaust in Ruth Tannenbaum by Miljenko Jergović*, “Poznańskie Studia Slawistyczne” 24. Poznań 2023. Wydawnictwo “Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne,” Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, pp. 209–231. ISSN 2084-3011.

This article is an attempt to provide an insight into the fate of the Jewish diaspora in Zagreb, a city marked by the spectre of the Second World War. The events in the diegetic world are based on the fictionalised, tragic life of a young Jewish actress Lea Deutsch (1927-1943), who was acclaimed a prodigy of the Zagreb theatre scene and was killed in Auschwitz. Miljenko Jergović undertook the difficult task of addressing Croatian antisemitism, the circumstances surrounding the creation of the Independent State of Croatia (1941-1945), of which the darkest outcome was the Jasenovac concentration camp. The analysis of the work is part of a wide-ranging discussion on the acceptable ways to depict the Holocaust (language and form). The Croatian writer's novel highlights the topos of the eternally wandering Jew; he also dispels the myth about small promised lands in the history of Jews, who were scattered across Europe and had to face local exclusion, antisemitism and ghettoisation.

**KEYWORDS:** Independent State of Croatia; Lea Deutsch; concentration camp; the memory of the Holocaust; (in)expressibility of Shoah; topos of the Wandering Jew

(...) people didn't just turn into bloodthirsty tigers overnight to make you suddenly so scared. This is Zagreb, not Mumbai, where tigers eat people.

M. Jergović, *Ruth Tannenbaum*

## 1. Introduction. Acceptable representations of the Holocaust

In his novel *Ruth Tannenbaum* (2006), Miljenko Jergović undertook the difficult task of addressing Croatian anti-Semitism, the circumstances of the creation of the Independent State of Croatia (1941–1945), the darkest outcome of which was the formation of the Jasenovac concentration camp. The fictionalised biography of Lea Deutsch (1927–1943), a young actress of Jewish origin, hailed as the miracle child of the Zagreb theatre scene, who died in Auschwitz, caused a great deal of controversy particularly in Croatia. Known for his uncompromising approach to history, Jergović also looked at the somewhat forgotten fate of the Jewish diaspora in Zagreb, marked by the spectre of the Second World War, confronting the inhabitants of Zagreb in the face of the impending Holocaust. “Prose about the Holocaust rarely left the safe ground of high literature” (Buryła, 2011, 139), by which Sławomir Buryła sees in the cautious, conservative approach to discussing the Holocaust a certain fear “not to alienate a conservative audience” (Buryła, 2011, 152). The issues related to the Shoah have been given a rather strict label of indescribability, ineffability, unimaginability and untranslatability, thus intensifying the broad discussion among researchers and experts on the problem about acceptable ways, forms and language of description “so as not to offend the memory of the victims and trivialise their suffering” (Kwieciński, 2012, 7–8). The issue of the weakness and limitation of language, which “never ‘grasps’ reality: it represents but does not copy, and in this sense all representations of our experiences are imperfect. (...) They do not encompass experience, but approximate it” (Ziębińska-Witek, 2009, 153–154). There are, however, other means of expression (e.g. film, painting). Testimonies and documents were held in higher esteem than, for example, fictional works (Krupa, 2013, 123) or those

that were free realisations of artistic visions. First-hand testimony was preferred to mediated accounts. Critics were hostile to any combination of comedy and the Holocaust, seeing it as “unauthorised and outrageous, (...) forbidden laughter that denies the seriousness of the crime” (Łysak, 2014, 65–86). Over time, looser forms of representation of such a sensitive subject became acceptable, devoid of pathos<sup>1</sup>, often accompanied by (black) humour, grotesqueness or irony. According to Bartosz Kwieciński, “fiction becomes dangerous when it opposes history, but our ideas about those times rely more on literature than on historiography” (Kwieciński, 2012, 9). Nearly eighty years after the end of the Second World War, the subject of the Holocaust is making an increasingly bold foray into pop culture (Buryła, 2016, 107)<sup>2</sup>. Laughter and humour came to be seen as a “reaction to mediated trauma” (Łysak, 2014, 73). The ways in which the subject of the Shoah is portrayed have lived to see a number of classifications, among which the following may be distinguished: realistic/anti-realistic (Rothberg), “are based” (*self-writing*, LaCapra), expressions by means of literalness or metaphor (Lang), *intransitive writing* by Barthes, the concept of *middle voice* (Jay), the *indexical* discourse of memory (Ankersmit), *common memory* and *deep memory* (Friedländer), and the categories of the pertinent, the sublime and even the sacred (Des Pres) (Ziębińska-Witek, 2009, 141–154). Today it is already clear that realism and literalism are no guarantees of the reliability of representation.

## 2. A place behind the barbed wire: Jasenovac

The restoration of the collective memory of testimonies relating to anti-Semitism and the Holocaust was extremely difficult in Croatia. The factors inhibiting this process were the unfavourable political

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<sup>1</sup> Is it possible to speak of the Shoah only as a “sublime experience of the past”? (Krupa, 2013, 104–106).

<sup>2</sup> Buryła points to the increasingly bold presence of the Holocaust in detective fiction, novels of manners and romances (Buryła, 2016, 108). However, he warns against the danger of inappropriateness, lest the Holocaust be expressed in the convention of kitsch (Buryła, 2011, 144–156).

conditions (the situation after 1945, followed by the war in Yugoslavia 1991–1995 and Yugoslavia’s bloody disintegration). In Croatian literature of the last quarter of the century significant examples of the realisation of this difficult task have been fictional works of momentous importance including the works of Daša Drndić (*Totenwände*, 2000; *Leica Format* 2003; *Sonnenschein*, 2007) and Miljenka Jergovicia *Ruth Tannenbaum* (2006). In Jergović’s work the representation of Holocaust issues is at once a pretext for speaking about the difficult history of Croatia and its Serbian neighbours, as well as the bubbling followers of Islam and the endless reprisals and justification of mutual repressions<sup>3</sup>. The Jasenovac concentration camp, also known as the death camp, in the Independent State of Croatia (Croatian acronym NDH, 1941–1945, a fascist satellite state under the leadership of Ante Pavelić, the *poglavnik*), was established in mid-1941. Although the camps were officially supervised by the Ustasha<sup>4</sup>, their operation was closely linked to the interests of the Third Reich. Mass executions of prisoners were carried out in the nearby forest and during so-called off-camp works. From the late 1940s onwards, the subject of the Ustasha camps in Yugoslavia has been inadequately explained, as the Communist authorities deftly filtered all documents through a fine-mesh sieve of censorship, deciding which might see the light of day and which should fall into oblivion. Once the end of the Second World War came to a close, the subject of the Ustasha death camps posed a political problem for the Yugoslav

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3 “Croatsians are like a vineyard. They have to be constantly pruned to make them worth something. (...) And then you will see, native brother, how Croatian-ness grows, how everyone immediately becomes an Ustasha, and how the priests in the churches start teaching about killing Serbs and Jews, instead of babbling about how all people are the same and one is the other’s brother” (Jergović, 2008, 290–291).

4 The Ustasha movement, a Croatian ultra-nationalist organisation founded in the early 1930s, by Ante Pavelić, was judged by some as an independence movement and by others as a criminal terrorist organisation. Attempts to settle the politics and criminal activities of the Ustasha movement and Pavelić’s state have not been made to the desired extent. In the act of reckoning with the national past, the issue of concentration camps, the persecution of Jews, as well as of Serbs and Roma, placed Croats (together with Bosnian Muslims from the Handžar division) in a poor light, making them the repositories for and supporters of fascist ideology in that area.

authorities. Keeping the truth about ethnic cleansing quiet was intended in order to prevent the shattering of the idea of brotherhood and unity (Szperlik, 2019, 157–197). The written Holocaust narratives (testimonies, autobiographies, memoirs) of witnesses to those events that were in literary circulation just after 1945, became the objects of manipulation in the collective memory by the Yugoslav authorities, who decided to create their own way of representing the Holocaust. Jasenovac and Stara Gradiška, 'Balkan death camps and a Yugoslav Auschwitz' (he described them as Ante Ciliga<sup>5</sup>), being a "horrible negation of civilisation", was one of many links in the chain of concentration camps that spread across Europe. A former camp inmate and author of memoirs, Milko Riffer, lamented the silence concerning Jasenovac, which, as a place of human cruelty created by the fascist regime in Croatian-administered territory, was in no less brutal than camps such as Auschwitz, Mauthausen, Buchenwald and Ravensbrück in rank. In the novel *Ruth Tannenbaum*, the writer tackles the thorny subject of complicated inter-ethnic relations in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1929–1946) and the particularly tense Croatian–Serbian relations in the early 20th century. The description of the enthusiastic welcome accorded the German troops entering Yugoslavia<sup>6</sup>, where the Serbian majority, previous rulers of the country, was treated as enemies and the Croatian minority was given its own national government may be seen as a litmus test of relations between the two: "(...) the Croatian cultural elite was liberating itself from Serbian muddled *opprobrium* and communist homelessness" (Jergović, 2008, 228–229). With the advent of a seemingly independent Croatia, there

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5 Ante Ciliga (1898–1992) Croatian was a writer and columnist, communist political activist for the liberation of Istria, over time anti-Tito dissident, prisoner of Soviet gulags, then a prisoner of the Jasenovac camp.

6 "And then on the tenth of April [1941], in the afternoon, when decent people were resting after lunch, the German army entered Zagreb with a marching stride. To the thunderbolt, how handsome these soldiers were! Tall and fair-haired, two metres one into the other. Or maybe, in twenty-odd years under the Serbian boot, we have already forgotten a little what a real army looks like. Their foreheads raised towards the sky, their gaze as cool and sharp as Krupp steel, they step stiffly forward, and in the windows appear Zagreb ladies, freshly awakened from their afternoon nap, and clap for them with eyes full of tears" (Jergović, 2008, 262).

was a growing, increasingly boldly demonstrated resentment towards Serbs, an expression of *revanchism* for the oppression of non-Serbian nations under the Karađorđević monarchy.

In those days Slavko Govedić, the little Croatian Führer, would march through the centre of Zagreb, (...) provoking the few remaining Serbs in the city, (...) to the applause of the audience, he would call them out as apostates and promises that they would soon have to lick off all the Serbian mud from the streets of Zagreb, which they brought on their poles, polluting the famous Croatian Gothic city of Zagreb, by the grace of good God and the German language also bearing the name of Agram (Jergović, 2008, 261).

The pacification of Serbian villages began. Although officially Serbs became public enemies in Pavelić's state, Jews (along with Roma, communists, freemasons, etc.) were also subject to overt discrimination through the introduction of so-called race ordinances. Over time, all 'undesirables' were successively caught and transported in cattle cars to the Jasenovac camp, which had become the quintessence of the NDH's criminal policy.

Jergović's novel provides the historical context and mechanism for the popularity of the Croatian Ustasha movement. The members of this controversial organisation, which operated under the banner of an anti-Serbian independence uprising, were mainly recruited from the lower social strata, eager for blood, revenge, historical justice and the cleansing of the region of foreign, non-Croatian elements. For the most part, they are primitive, empathy-deprived young men in the uniforms of the new state that gave them power and authorised racial cleansing. In one scene at the Novska railway station, where a train carriage with Jews being taken to the Jasenovac camp stops, Radoslav Morinj, a switchman (later Ustasha) working on the railway, impulsively shot a girl fleeing the carriage. A denial mechanism emerges in the young man's mind. Morinj first seeks solace in prayer and then tells himself that he was not at fault except for the times in which he lived. He began to believe that there were no people in the wagon at all; only animals being transported, or bales of Chinese silk and crates of Brazilian coffee.

Zygmunt Bauman in *Postmodern Ethics* asks the question: is moral progress being made? (Bauman, 2012, 351). The case of Radoslav makes it clear that in the vast and complex machine of ideologically fuelled persecution and violence, evil is the result of individual decisions made by individual people who pull the trigger:

So Radoslav saw all kinds of people who had never run before and didn't know how to do it. Some were dressed up as if for a Sunday stroll in Ilica, in black festive suits, others were wearing merchant smocks or clerical black overshoes to protect their shirts from dirt. There were also grammar school students in round glasses with gold frames, gymnasts in Sokol T-shirts, elderly men in button-down *bonjours* and unfashionable ties. And nobody but this girl jumped out. (...) Most of the people in the carriage looked cultured and dignified, like Zagreb doctors and lawyers, judges, German teachers, retired officers of Emperor Franz Josef, famous musicians and writers, the very rich and famous people towards whom he, a Zelenika-born switchman, should save face (Jergović, 2008, 281–283).

Interestingly, in *Ruth Tannenbaum* the only scene that takes place in the Jasenovac concentration camp concerns a tragic fight between three conflicted Ustasha men, triggered by antagonism based on origin and religious affiliation<sup>7</sup>. Jergović's portrayal of the partial participation of NDH supporters in the extermination of the Jews, which is a sensitive topic in Croatian history and public opinion, caused much controversy and dissatisfaction, especially in the Zagreb milieu where Bosnian-born Croatian Jergović was trying to establish himself.

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7 The reason for the conflict turns out to be the triple identity of one of the Ustasha, who is Muslim by birth (which he does not know), a Jew by upbringing and a Catholic by choice, and takes the name Josip.

### 3. Cosmopolitanism, anti-Semitism and the eternally wandering Jew

Scattered throughout the world, Jews were part of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies. Stanisław Sułowski, a descendant of Polish Jewish Holocaust survivors, points out that “Jews in Europe were cosmopolitan, but their cosmopolitanism was quite specific, and in turn their particularity was cosmopolitan in its essence” (Sułowski in Szneider, 2015). Szneider attempts to describe the way transnational Jews, “their own and foreign/other and yet their own” (Szneider, 2015), sought their own place in the Europe of nations and nationalisms (Sułowski, 2015, 7). The first Jews arrived in what is now Croatia as early as the end of the first century, settling mainly in coastal areas (Švob, Brčić, Podgorelec, 1994, 55). The topos of the eternal wandering Jew was introduced into Croatian literature by August Šenoa (Czerwiński, 2005, 3–24)<sup>8</sup>. A Jew perpetually migrating, arriving in new places, he tries to “blend in”, to survive in his surroundings, to understand them, but unfavourable circumstances almost always arise. He often finds himself in the middle of internal conflicts, as a result of which beatings and imprisonment (*batine* and *zatvor*) await the Jew (Stamać, 1992, 15). Perhaps this is the reason the Mosaic family scattered across Europe existed in diaspora settings, organising their own spaces within Jewish neighbourhoods (e.g. the famous Juderia in Cordoba, Sijavus Pasha’s neighbourhood in Sarajevo). The protagonists of *Ruth Tannenbaum* are exasperated with wandering and trying to settle down, which is the reason Solomon always shouted his views loudly, so that his neighbours heard him and knew that he had nothing to hide. On the other hand, “a Jew would like to change, but cannot” (Stamać, 1992, 17). “The fate of Jews in the Diaspora has always been torn between the

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8 In the novel *Vječni Žid u Zagrebu ili tri dana tuge i nevolje* from 1862 (*Eternal Jew in Zagreb, or three days of sadness and trouble*) the main character is Ahasver (vel Lóvi Stern), Ahasverus, Aswerus, the legendary figure of the Jew who refused to rest with Christ carrying the cross to Golgotha. One of the European archetypes of the eternal vagabond, in Romanticism a symbol of humanity, Ahasver wanders without hope of return, not expecting to find a second homeland, his vagabonding is eternal, without a specific destination, metaphysically assigned as an end in itself, until the end of the world (Stamać, 1992, 12–13).

longing for territorial sovereignty conceptualised in Zionist programmes and the temptation to belong to other cultures" (Sułowski, 2015, 8). This placed this social group in the position of a passive observer. The new geopolitical order after the First World War (the great powers having crumbled), the state of affairs of winners and losers, nation states and minorities within them, meant that appropriate treaties were needed to provide relative stability<sup>9</sup>. In an interesting study, Karol Franczak devotes a deal of space to the issue of Christian anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria, where one of the stereotypes was the topos of Jews reproduced in public as Christ-killers, betrayers of Judas, greedy, driven by the desire for profit (usurers), but also the vengeful Jew, who, in response to anti-Semitism, would take revenge for the wrongs done to his people (Franczak, 2013, 64–65). The perpetuation of stereotypes about Jews has been aided by the Catholic Church, especially the pontificate of Pius XI (Kwieciński, 2012, 91). In the context of anti-Semitism in France, Kwieciński cites a curiosity occurring, consisting of a particularly privileged social category of 'exceptional Jews' (artists, writers), treated as 'social specimens', received at salons (Kwieciński, 2012, 88). In the Nazi-controlled areas of Europe the situation of the newly created successor states, multi-ethnic, created by divisions of past empires, such as the Austro-Hungarian or Ottoman empires in the Balkans, where Jews were an officially recognised minority (Arendt, 2010, 234). With regard to the Final Solution of the Jewish Question in the NDH, the Croatian government under Ante Pavelić carefully introduced anti-Jewish legislation. The Reich Minister of the Interior demanded that the country be cleansed of Jews by the end of February 1942 (Arendt, 2010, 236)<sup>10</sup>. That year saw Eastern Europe's Holocaust at its

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9 After the First World War treaties on national minorities were signed by the states that had regained their independence: Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Yugoslavia and Greece, and the defeated states: Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria and Turkey (Sznaider, 2015, 120).

10 "For every Jew deported, Croatia paid 30 marks to the Nazis. In return, the Croats received all the property of those being deported. The original deadline of February 1942 was not and could not be met, as many Jews managed to escape to Italian-occupied areas. Adolf Eichmann sent Hauptsturmführer Franz Abromeit to assist the German police attaché in Zagreb. The deportations were handled by the Croats themselves, the Ustasha. After the arrival in Zagreb of Herman

most intensive. The racial laws introduced in the NDH contained a peculiar paragraph under which the title of 'honoured Aryans' was awarded to all Jews who contributed to the so-called Croatian cause. Arendt (2010, 237) had it that the wives of almost all members of the ruling party were of Jewish descent. With official anti-Semitism in Ante Pavelić's regime, chief public enemies were not Jews at all, but Serbs (Szperlik, 2019, 170)<sup>11</sup>.

*Ruth Tannenbaum* also features the phenomenon of 'internal anti-Semitism', the manifestations of which are applied by Jews themselves to other members of the Diaspora. One such Jew is the figure of the ticket taker in a theatre Klara Diamantstein, who looks after young Ruth and who, according to Solomon "looks as if she was personally made by the propaganda minister Goebbels to show what Jews really look like" (Jergović, 2008, 217). Internal anti-Semitism and a sense of superiority on the basis of social status and even physical features are manifested in the digressions about Klara's symptomatic and stereotypically stigmatising 'big hooked nose' for the entire community:

(...) They are just sending me Diamantstein, she's supposed to bring the baby home to me in the evening. Eh, dear Ivusia, I'll tell you, it's no coincidence at all. I'm a little Jew to them, who by a miracle of nature was born Shirley Temple, so they send him from the theatre one of his... But forgive me, gentlemen, Diamantstein is not mine! I don't know the big-breasted woman, I don't know who her father is, and I don't wish anyone in the world to be called Dimantstein. I have, dear gentlemen, nothing to do with Jews! And the fact that my father was Jewish, or even not him but my grandfather or great-grandfather, is a coincidence, nothing more. (...) as for little Klara, she [Ivka—E. Sz.] didn't like her either, so huddled, with a humped nose, she looked like a dwarfed bird of prey (Jergović, 2008, 141).

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Krymey, sent by Eichmann himself, by the autumn of 1943 30,000 Jews had been deported to the extermination camps" (Arendt, 2010, 236).

11 On the circumstances of the introduction of the 'law on race' in the NDH and the honourable Aryans (*počasni arijevc*), the wife of Pavelić himself, who was Jewish by descent: an interview with the eldest daughter of the *poglavnik* Višnja Pavelić (Szperlik, 2019, 171).

The Zagreb of the interwar period is a multicultural city where people of different religions and ethnic origins live, in relative symbiosis. With the advent of the NDH, the gradual degradation of the social status of Serbs, Roma and Jews begins. The position of the Tannenbaums changes dramatically, due to the deepening discrimination and segregation in social and urban space. In Zagreb society we observe a phenomenon Bauman termed mixophobia, i.e. the lack of real social integration (Bauman, 2000, 50). The inhabitants turn out to be xenophobes who do not really tolerate foreignness or being different. Individual communities form small hermetic groups, whose main determinant is religious affiliation.<sup>12</sup>

#### **4. Ruth Tannenbaum and the world of wartime Zagreb**

The literary oeuvre of Miljenko Jergović (born 1966 in Sarajevo) certainly belongs to high literature. The dominant thread of the world depicted is the fate of the authentic character Lea Deutsch, a child actress of the Zagreb theatre, hailed as the Croatian Shirley Temple, who died in the Auschwitz concentration camp. In Jergović's work, fictional characters are created on the basis of authentic figures (Ruth/Lea), while the members of her fictional family and the entire Jewish community are a compilation of possible and probable figures. Fiction is intertwined with fact. Jergović confesses in the afterword the reason he forsook to write a biography of little Lea. The obstacle was that there were too few sources and the last witnesses had also died, so he opted for a roman-à-clef, a work of fiction, precisely out of respect for the memory of Lea Deutsch and the other victims of the Holocaust. It is Ruth's dream to go to America and pursue a career on the scale of

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12 The specificity of multicultural Sarajevo, where individual ethnoses and religious groups (Jews, Muslims, Catholics and Orthodox) co-exist, however, in hermetic, non-inter-penetrating spaces, may be found in many examples of the region's literature, from the monumental work of Ivo Andrić to the works of Gordana Kučić (e.g., *The Scent of Rain in the Balkans*).

Shirley Temple, Greta Garbo or Gloria Swanson<sup>13</sup>. The names of Hollywood actresses famous in the 1930s are often evoked and refer to the world of pop culture that fill Ruth's imagination. Ruth's acting is an opportunity for her family's social advancement.

God, God, so beautiful is our white Zagreb (...). No one still knew what had changed in the life of Salomon Tannenbaum and his family, but when they found out, he would walk in the middle of the pavement and no longer step down onto the tram tracks to let others pass, only others would give way to him. Hey, he's not a scoundrel, to use the language of the gendarmes, nor a miscreant, a nobody, a zero, a church mouse—here he walks down the street the master father of our Croatian Shirely Temple (Jergović, 2008, 142).

When the newspaper *Novosti* publishes an article about Ruth as a child prodigy, respect and interest in the Tannenbaum family soars, the neighbours are helpful, kind and polite. One of them even made the effort to shake hands with Solomon's father.

It's strange to breathe with someone thirty centimetres away, to be separated only by a wall, to breathe like that for thirty-five, forty years and not say a word to each other, and then to hold that person's hand in yours. (...) People become so nice good when you're not a nobody, a little grey mouse, a Tannenbaum all year round, not just before Christmas, an evergreen Jew, a homely old Jew. Now he was shouting and indulging his voice, and Ivka was walking freely on the dance floor, like someone who had been a sub-tenant at the bad tenants' house and was now at home (Jergović, 2008, 143–144).

Solomon's (Moni's) words about the 'green Jew' are a reference to the carol commonly known in German-speaking areas *O Tannenbaum, o Tannenbaum, wie treu sind deine Blätter*<sup>14</sup> (*O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree,*

13 Gloria Swanson, née Gloria May Josephine Svensson, (1899–1983) American actress, one of the most prominent stars in the history of silent cinema.

14 See: <https://tinyurl.com/4kkayxk5>. 10.04.2023.

*how green are your needle leaves*). From Moni's expression comes a desire for respect, for equal treatment among neighbours in 'white' Zagreb, a desire to assimilate, a quest for admiration, to be noticed. The talented Ruth is offered an engagement at the Croatian National Theatre, and her runaway career is supervised by director Branko Mikoči and her parents (Ivka and Salomon). The casting of the Yugoslavian Shirley Temple is reminiscent of the fairy-tale plot of the search for Cinderella; finding (choosing) 'the one' becomes a matter of great importance to local cultural life.

(...) in May 1936, Ruth Tannenbaum saw her name on a theatre poster for the first time. And not somewhere at the bottom, written in small letters, with the obligatory misprint, but right after the great Biserka Herm, the one from *The Lady of the Camellias*, the play to which Ruth was not allowed in the autumn, and above Branko Mikoči, our famous director. Ruth's name was thus, like Biserka Herm's, written in blood-red capital letters and Mikoči's in small yellow letters, as if it could disappear completely at any moment (Jergović, 2008, 136).

The colour yellow is significant for the novel as a whole, as it is rather pale, almost fading, foreshadowing the disappearance of Jews from public life. Branko Mikoči, who Ivka had something of a crush on, "presented her with a huge bouquet of yellow roses after the premiere because she had given birth to Ruth" (Jergović, 2008, 140). The marking with the colour yellow from the very beginning of the plot evokes the stigmatisation of Jews with a yellow armband with the Star of David. "Yellow is the colour of envy", said Mikoči, "and I envy for the first time in my life, because to this primitive, hideous, rotten world you have given such an angel" (Jergović, 2008, 140). Ivka and her husband will, however, pay a high price for giving birth to Ruth.

Authentic and fictional characters are interwoven in the world depicted: Adolf Hitler, other political leaders, representatives of the world of art, theatre and film, as well as a whole plethora of somewhat grotesque fictional supporting characters. One of these is the eccentric artist Marin Gašparić, who took up residence in Zagreb's Hotel Esplanada, a graduate of a Berlin university, fascinated by the cult of

the body and the philosophy of the superman (German *Übermensch*), whose behaviour heralds the arrival of fascism from the very beginning of the novel:

Gašparić turned out to be a very strange guest. He ate little, drank little more, but got up at night and ran around the hotel corridors in his pants and T-shirt. He said that he was doing this to keep in shape and that, by decision of the Führer, a provision had been introduced in all Berlin hotels to allow guests to run at night (Jergović, 2008, 133).

Another such figure is the director of the ballet Ivanka Kovačić, who was maliciously called Frau Schmidt for allegedly spying for Hitler, whose trademark was a swastika-shaped brooch set with rubies: “on a snow-white shirt, under which two small pointed breasts protruded, as if two miniature bombs with poison gas” (Jergović, 2008, 231). Adolf Hitler, who “believed he was the Messiah. And then he infected a nation of many millions with this faith” (Milewska 2012: 160), is not present in the foreground of *Ruth Tannenbaum*. He appears in the background as the main character in the whole sequence of events, but the figure of the dreaded *Führer* is trivialised in many passages. In societies gripped by the war brought about by the chancellor of the Third Reich there was a need for a satirical, deprecating portrayal of Adolf Hitler, which served a compensatory function and de-demonised the image of the great leader (Buryła, 2013, 255). In *Ruth Tannenbaum* there is a kind of carnivalisation of the world depicted, where persecuted Jews speak of Hitler with ironically tinged respect and self-irony, mocking the German leader and his entourage:

Did Mr Hitler completely destroy German fashion? You know, my dear, Germans have never had good taste in clothing. And especially German women! They could never compare with Italian, French or Viennese ladies. (...) they always looked like typical Bavarian peasant women. (...) did you have the opportunity to meet Miss Eva Braun? I am very curious to know what kind of woman she is, if she can be with such a man. (...) It seems to me that there is something special about you German women. You like neurotic brutes of petit physical build. Mr Hitler is of a petit

build, isn't he? At least that's what he seems like in the photographs in the newspapers and in the newsreels. I would say that Mr Hitler is no bigger than me. But I wouldn't want to touch you! No, (...) I did not intend to compare Mr Hitler to some Jew (Jergović, 2008, 257–258).

In *Ruth Tannenbaum* the figure of the German chancellor, often referred to as "Mr Hitler", takes the iconic form of a pop-culture image of the authoritarian leader as an integral part of politics, created and replicated for the propaganda of the time, "as a powerful lever for controlling the consciousness of the masses, not only inside the country, but also beyond its borders" (Ndiaye, 2014, 236). The figure of Hitler functions through the prism of the cult of the individual (exemplified at the time by, for example, Benito Mussolini, Ante Pavelić) and is also a model of a man attractive to women (evoked in the piece: Eva Braun, Hilda Teute, Ivanka Kovačić). His presence is palpable in political, social and cultural life. Hitler appears as a lover and patron of the arts (Ruth's planned performance in Vienna in front of him) and of sport, as patron of the 1936 Berlin Olympics.

The intertwined fates of the Singer family, the Tannenbaums and other Zagreb Jews, as well as their Christian (Catholic and Orthodox) neighbours soon confront the spectre of impending fascism. The situation of the local Jews changes dramatically to their disadvantage, not only because of the top-down policy coming from Berlin, but because attitudes towards members of the Jewish diaspora change in the non-Jewish inhabitants of Zagreb themselves, hitherto neighbours, friends and acquaintances. The Zagreb Jews described in *Ruth Tannenbaum* seem not to see the threat approaching from Berlin. They feel secure in a place that has provided their families with relative stability and peace for many generations. Nor has the idea of Zionism taken hold among Zagreb's Jews, driven by the need to alienate, to create a hermetic group. Yugoslavia appears a safe distant country, where it is possible to speak critically and somewhat disparagingly about Hitler, and the Jews there do not believe in the impending Holocaust of their nation. Cwi Berger-Lewi, who has arrived from Palestine, warns of the impending danger, in which, no-one unfortunately somehow believes:

(...) and tells people to think about leaving. But to think right away, because in six months it might be too late. (...) Tall and blue-eyed Berger-Levi, with slicked-back hair the colour of rye, looked like one of Hitler's athletes and Hercules whom we had seen in the newsreels of the Berlin Olympics a year or two earlier, and for that reason alone few believed him. In Warsaw, Prague and Bucharest it was still more or less manageable, but in Belgrade, Sarajevo and Zagreb almost nobody did (Jergović, 2008, 151).

The novelist Abraham Singer (Solomon's father-in-law, Ivka's father) has actually always been convinced that he had nothing in common with his Croatian neighbours. He was the only one to notice the invisible wall between the Jewish and non-Jewish communities. He patiently endured the widespread verbal harassment about the Jews' culpability for the crucifixion of Jesus, the use of blood to make matzah. In Old Singer's reflections the thought of disappearing, literally and metaphorically hiding in the grass to wait out the looming evil, arises. This is an attitude of passivity, however, and living on the fringes of the rest of Europe preparing for war. It is also possible that Singer represents the attitude of Ahasver, who is resigned to his fate, lacking the strength to continue wandering.

Life is suffering, thought Abraham Singer (...). He sat and looked at the grass as it bent like the rye in the pictures in the book about the people of Moses. Very deep, he thought, is this grass. So deep, in fact, that a man could hide in it and live for a long time between the blades and no one would discover and catch him. If something terrible happens, he will hide in his grass (Jergović, 2008, 249).

After the introduction of the race law, discrimination is carried out *ex officio*. Over time the term Jew/woman takes on a pejorative connotation. It is henceforth the Jews who find themselves on the lowest rung of social hierarchy, and behind the scenes, mass extermination is planned in places such as Jasenovac, and deportation to other camps within Europe. As if by magic, anti-Semitism is roused in the people of Zagreb. In the dreams of Ruth too, who wants to make a career in Hollywood,

there is a spark of hope of being saved, should she leave for America at the right time. There comes a moment, however, when it is too late: "In the spring of 1943 the princess of Gundulić Street, the number is not important here, performed witchcraft, it is not clear with the help of which or whose god, to become invisible" (Jergović, 2008, 5). The public mood was becoming increasingly uneasy:

step by step, Anschluss after Anschluss, death is approaching. This death will eventually become fashionable like panama hats. The old Jews will be killed off, the young will be expelled to Africa, and the granddaughter of Abraham will be given the opportunity to be a real German, because she will not remember that she was ever anything else (Jergović, 2008, 160).

Ruth's symbolic change of identity, however, takes place much earlier when, in the play *The Red Rose of Damascus*, in which she starred in the title role. The girl performs in Vienna under the pseudonym Christine Horvath in order to conceal her Jewish identity, as sought by Hilda Teute herself<sup>15</sup> because, after all, the main character cannot be Jewish.

The Singers and Tannenbaums made a mistake because they believed that in Zagreb their families had found refuge and a prosperous life for at least a few generations. For a long time they refuse to believe in the realisation of the Final Solution, ignoring signals from everywhere, such as letters from Singer's brother, who lives in Poland and reports on the situation of the Jews since 1939. They also see refugees from the rest of Europe seeking refuge in the Jewish Sports Association Maccabi<sup>16</sup>. Ivka

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15 A fictional Croatian writer, she wanted the play to be presented in Vienna in front of Hitler himself. She even sent him a leather-bound German translation of the play with a dedication: To the great, wise, brave and bold, just, loving Adolf Hitler, Führer and hope of the justice-loving world, Caesar of the new times, saviour of our generation and great connoisseur of dramatic art (Jergović, 2008, 181). The daughter of a leather merchant, Hilda Teute, a.k.a. Manda Crnogaće, hides her identity, coming from "some idyllic rump in Lika, where people have names with which to scare the wolves" (Jergović, 2008, 192).

16 From 1933 the Jewish community in Zagreb provided shelter to refugees from Germany, Austria and other countries in Europe where persecution had

brings them help, but she herself does not allow the thought that a similar fate, or even death on the street or in a concentration camp, could befall her family. After all, she is a respected Jewish woman, the mother of Ruth Tannenbaum herself, a child prodigy who will perform on stage in Vienna, even in front of “Mr Hitler” himself. Two worlds meet in this scene: the tangible, looming hell of an already war-ridden Europe and crematorium fumes, and Zagreb as a fragile asylum. Even Salomon Tannenbaum naively believes that Kvaternik fooled Hitler, who wanted to occupy Yugoslavia and, meanwhile, an independent Croatia was created, where not a single hair on the head of any Jew would be harmed. Dida Kvaternik’s mother too “is from the Singers” and “for this city and the Croatian people, Ruth means more than the racial laws” (Jergović, 2008, 288). As it transpires (repressed) fear has always been a factor in Moni’s life. He remembers incidents of harassment and discrimination<sup>17</sup> from his childhood. The consequence of these experiences is an undercurrent of fear that is not always articulated and the inheritance of fear, associated with the so-called eternal Jew syndrome. Grandfather Abraham Singer begs Solomon to take Ruth out of the theatre and hide her from the *Führer*’s policemen. Hitler soon appears in Ivka’s fears as a metonymy for fulfilling biblical prophecy:

She didn’t ask what this thing was or what it was: was it as terrible as Daddy Abraham thinks it is, or as others, younger and more sensible, who didn’t spend as much time in the temple, think it is, so why should their lives turn into a succession of Old Testament predictions and prophecies? For Ivka, what is coming simply exists. Just as there are rain clouds, a full moon, tides, and there is not much difference

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intensified Despite the assistance provided, approximately 80% of Croatian Jews (21,000) died as victims of the Holocaust (Švob, 1995, 256.).

17 “It could have been in 1904 or 1905, Solomon Tannenbaum was dying of fear of Karl and his dull icy eyes, as blue as the serene sky over Golgotha, and begged Sister Marija not to turn him in, so that she wouldn’t say to Karl—dear Karl, you have a Jew here, this is a Jew, ask him yourself what he’s doing on Sunday and whether he’s not going to crucify Jesus again! And she looked at him as if he were a black gypsy, a hateful Turk or some other wretch, she looked at Moni as if he were a rotter who would soon become a big black louse” (Jergović, 2008, 196).

between meteorological disasters in nature and Adolf Hitler over Europe. He thunders at the Jews, sends thunderbolts at them, in Germany strips them of their property. He deprives them of their jobs and throws them out of their own homes. This is what he does in Germany, but would he dare outside Germany? (Jergović, 2008, 202).

Soon the psychosis of anti-Semitism spreads throughout the country, permeating social strata. Zagreb's ustasha, Cvek Alojz, arrests Solomon Tannenbaum and then brutally kills him in the middle of the city by beating him to death with a dog-chain. In the dramatic scene the indifference of passers-by, which it is worth noting includes theatre employees (Branko Mikoči and Anđelija Ferenčak-Malinski), who knew Ruth's father very well, is significant. In the new world the man becomes no more than a Jew, who may be dealt with at will. Interestingly, even Moni himself pretends that he is not the one lying in the street:

(...) he would feel uncomfortable if they saw that he, the father of our little Ruth Tannenbaum, was caught and beaten in the street. (...) it would be worse than any torture. Because if they stop seeing him as Ruth's father, then Moni really becomes a nobody. (...) so they walked two steps away from Solomon, who they had beaten many times with a chain and crushed his bones, and turned a living man into something else, into bloody human scrap stuck to the asphalt of Zagreb (Jergović, 2008, 285–286).

Solomon himself denies his own identity; neither does he call for nor expect help, does not want to be recognised and wants his acquaintances to move on as quickly as possible. Mikoči does not recognise Solomon or at least pretends not to "and turned his head to cover Mrs Ferenčak-Malinski's face from the cruel view" (Jergović, 2008, 286).

In the world depicted in *Ruth Tannenbaum* the story of the Holocaust illustrates the condition of humanity, an irrational spectre possessing human minds, depriving us of empathy, a world out of frame. We learn about the many tools and mechanisms of killing and also of humiliating Jews as second-class citizens (Buryła, 2016, 147, 154). The introduction of the racial laws had drastic consequences: Jews were not allowed to live

north of the Illya and they were obliged to wear a yellow armband with the Star of David. Jews were no longer welcome in parks, on benches, at the theatre, the cinema, the patisserie; they were pushed off the pavements by other passers-by directly onto the road. "Jews became transparent and you could see through them to the chocolate meringues on display" (Jergović, 2008, 313). They were forbidden to beg and even to get food out of the rubbish bins, crimes for which they faced the death penalty. In the last scene the despairing Ivka senses an impending evil, the end of her and Ruth. The fear she felt on 10th April 1941 comes to pass: "(...) like a new ointment for smallpox, like dates from Constantinople, like the latest Parisian perfume with added cinnamon and a hint of challenge, came after Colonel Kvaternik's speech<sup>18</sup> (...) fear, hitherto unknown in the rich catalogue of Zagreb's fears" (Jergović, 2008, 265). Fourteen-year-old Ruth, unwilling to wear the yellow armband, is only allowed to go out into the courtyard: "(...) as if her life depended on this piece of cloth, because she did not wear the armband when everyone loved her, when she was the Croatian Shirley Temple, so she will not wear it now either, when she is only a Jew for these people" (Jergović, 2008, 317). She therefore plays out on the courtyard stage the last acts of her own life, imaginary scenarios, invented characters, in front of an invisible audience:

She imagined herself to be Betty Bloomberg, a New York actress, a femme fatale with very little life left. Every man who ever met Betty Bloomberg fell fatally in love with her, and every man she left behind died in terrible agony, abandoned, lonely and miserable. (...) she stared at the sun for as long as she could, until the pain in her eyes became unbearable, and then she blindly drove to Berlin and had all sorts of adventures until she finally reached Hitler. —*Oh, mein lieber Führer!*—cried Betty, happy because she was saving the world... She fell on the wet and cold concrete, smashed her knees and elbows and repeated the cry a multitude of times, because she was not sure if she was doing it right and

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<sup>18</sup> Slavko Kvaternik (1878–1947), one of the leaders of the Ustasha movement, head of the NDH armed forces, father of Eugen Dida Kvaternik (1910–1962), Croatian nationalist activist.

if Hitler would really die when he saw her. (...) The leader of the great German Reich felt that he was sinking and suffocating, and knew that soon the universe would be cramped for him for one single breath (Jergović, 2008, 319–322).

The silence and indifference of the neighbours slowly initiate Ruth's erasure from Zagreb, and consequently her physical annihilation: "When she collapsed (...) she could not have known that no-one was looking out of the windows onto the courtyard anymore, and all the doors were closed. Two men with rifles, leaning against a Mercedes, wait for Ruth to notice them" (Jergović, 2008, 322).

## 5. The curtain falls

Ruth Tannenbaum's literary representation of the Holocaust is reduced to a fictionalised reconstruction of the biography of Lea Deutsch, who perished in Auschwitz. The story of the Jewish actress has been erased from the topography of Zagreb, condemning her to oblivion, and the story of Ruth is a tribute to Lea, who "has no other grave"<sup>19</sup>. The piece also recalls the history of the Jewish diaspora in interwar Zagreb and during the dark years of the Independent State of Croatia, dominated by fascism, anti-Semitism and the exclusion of outsiders. Jergović does not shy away from recalling the tragic politics of national-religious *revanchism* that had been continuing for centuries in the Balkan Peninsula, resulting in the Jasenovac camp. Jergović represents a new generation of authors for whom "the Holocaust is not a personal experience, he does not create under the rigour of giving testimony, that fundamental indication of Holocaust literature" (Kwieciński, 2012, 7). Jergović's novel exposes the topos of the eternally wandering Jew and dismantles the

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19 Jambrešić Kirin writes about the restoration of the collective memory of Lea Deutsch's silhouette through Branka Ivanda's film *Lea i Darija* (2011), which led to an increased interest in her fate among Croatian youth and educators, and even the inclusion of the child theatre star's biography in the history curriculum (Jambrešić Kirin, 2017, 186).

myth of the promised land in the history of the Jews, scattered throughout Europe, carrying the burden of otherness and alienation in their wandering bundles, facing local exclusion, anti-Semitism and ghettoisation. *Ruth Tannenbaum* is a critique of the Zagreb bourgeoisie, and the Croatian capital appears as a “little doll’s house where little people with little souls live” (Jergović, 2008, 218), by acquiescing to anti-Semitism, by remaining silent, by turning their heads away, by closing their windows. The people of the Croatian capital are failing through their passivity and their delight in the illusion of an independent state under the auspices of fascist ideology. Miljenko Jergović’s work publicises the subject of the Shoah in a broad context, as a kind of popular culture topic, a literary topos that is a constant signalling of knowledge and memory addressed to the next generation, when the generation of direct witnesses and survivors has passed away. The medium, form and language of expression seem to be a secondary issue, although anyone wishing to speak on the subject of the Holocaust continues to grapple with this problem.

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