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Returns from Concentration Camps

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The article is concentrated on the Czech post-war literature, especially on the Czech treatment of the theme regarding returns from concentration camps in the novels written in the second half of 20th century and in contemporary literature. The presented novels, thematizing the mentioned topic, are viewed as representations of those days discourses shaped by the "course of history". Therefore, the article follows variation of the theme as well as the modification of heroes in connection with the transformation of discourses, and tries to describe the reasons of the changing.

KEYWORDS: Czech literature; Holocaust; identity; memory; Viktor Fischl; Arnošt Lustig; Karel Josef Beneš; Zeno Dostál; Radka Denemarková

This paper presents the theme of the character moving from one era to another, the character searching for its identity, the character that inevitably has to compare the pre-war, wartime, and peacetime worlds. The novels *Píseň o lítosti* (Song of Pity, 1947) by Viktor Fischl, *Ohnivě písmo* (Letters of Fire, 1950) by Karel Josef Beneš, *Dita Saxová* (Dita Saxova, 1962) by Arnošt Lustig, *Štír* (Scorpio, 1983) by Zeno Dostál, and *Peníze od Hitlera* (Money from Hitler, 2006) by Radka Denemarková present the Czech treatment of the theme, how the "course of history" formed it; i.e. how the contemporary discourses of the latter half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century formed this theme in Czech literature. We may thus say that these novels represent contemporary discourses, since they depict the ideas of these discourses, their formative practices and forms of knowledge, which have shaped these novels.

It was Paul Ricoeur, in his book *Time and Narrative*, who dealt with the crossover of the relevant referential intentions of history and narrative. At the end of the third part, he describes the mutual crossover of the

process of fictionalizing history and historicizing fiction (Ricoeur 2007: 349). Despite a number of differences between the narration in literature and narration of real stories, he perceives literary fiction as a huge laboratory for understanding the link between the act and the actor (Ricoeur 2016: 175–176). Consequently, he also arrives at the question of identity, or narrative identity, which is a kind of bridge between the real and fictional worlds, since, as he says, every identity is formed in the tissue of narrated stories. In the analysed literary text the identity of characters will be viewed not only on the level of story, but it will also be pointed out how the contemporary discourse treats philosophical and ethical categories, such as subject, truth, idea, freedom, power, which are essential for the formation of the identity of the individual. They will be thus used to describe the contemporary discourse that created these characters.

In the Czech post-war literature, there was, particularly between 1945 and 1948, a boom in documentary literature giving an account of the suffering in the concentration camps. In contrast to these documentary efforts, fiction contributing a mere fictitious testimony was in decline in this period. Then, literature sought (and, in fact, is still seeking) a way to depict the Holocaust. Viktor Fischl in this period also sought for the manner, in which he would continue writing. Owing to his Jewish origin, he was aware of his public role and his task to advocate universal values, such as the truth or freedom. In his book *The Jews of Czechoslovakia*, he states that “in practically every nation which still has to fight for its freedom, its writers are more politically minded than writers of politically independent states” (Dagan 1968: 466). Thus even for him, before the war and even more so in wartime exile in England, the role of poet without the necessity of involvement was unthinkable. He believed that a return to universal values is the only possible defence against the constant violations of justice and oppression of people.

Although *Píseň o lítosti* is his first prose, Fischl already develops in it his life-long theme – the existential conflict of an individual with the crumbling or vanished world and the attempt to find it again. The world in its encounter with the war and the Holocaust has lost its balance and one cannot understand it; one can only give testimony and convey it in a story. This is perhaps why he resorts to a story, which, unlike poetry, allows this.

Fischl wrote *Píseň o lítosti* in 1947¹, a few months after his return to Czechoslovakia. It is possible that the story of Daniel returning home in its own way concerned the author himself; nevertheless, Fischl conceived Daniel's story as the return of a man who had survived the Holocaust. The prologue of the book begins with Daniel returning to his hometown. His character is first introduced through a train dispatcher, who is unable to recognize the passenger although he looks familiar.

For a moment he felt he knew that face from somewhere, but, as his mother used to say, for the life of him he didn't know where to place it. One thing was certain. The stranger came for a short time only. Apparently he didn't intend to stay, he arrived with one piece of luggage only, a small suitcase, in which travelling salesmen used to carry their samples (Fischl 1992: 5)².

From the dispatcher's perspective, Daniel is a true stranger. He belongs neither to the town nor beyond it, as if his existence was denied. There is actually no one in the town, who would recognize him. As we learn from the following pages, out of the whole Jewish community he was the only one to survive the Holocaust. The severity of his solitude becomes even more pronounced as he begins to recall the world before deportation, his world filled with people, their fortunes and mutual solidarity. All these small characters represent a world, which suddenly disappeared, world that was built on traditional values. These were connected with faith, religious holidays, and regular worship services in the synagogue. Shaped by the community for generations, in one moment, with one transport, this routine disappeared.

The above mentioned quotation suggests to the reader that Daniel's return is not meant to be permanent. It is a return after many years. Daniel is described rather vaguely; the narrator points out that it was impossible to tell the age of the man. The return home is evidently connected with searching for identity, as his character has been through a series of existential losses. These losses are not explicitly presented in the text, but the story and historical context make it apparent that Daniel, on the road of searching for himself, first had to overcome the identity of a prisoner in

¹ The book was first published in Hebrew in 1953 in Tel Aviv; in Czech in 1982 by Sixty-Eight Publishers in Toronto.

² All quotations translated by Petr Kos.

the concentration camp. If Paul Ricoeur describes the existence of man as an end in himself, “not merely as a means for arbitrary use by this or that will” (Ricoeur 2016: 249), which may be understood as a characterization of a thing, it is clear that in this bestial world the existence of man was actually denied. After the necessarily burdensome post-war period, when he had to accept the loss of his family as well as the Jewish genocide, he now returns home and in his memory tries to map both the lost world and lost identity. However, this time it is not only about identifying himself with Jewish values; the arduously sought identity of a Czech Jew from the First-Republic period necessarily conflicts with the historical experience of the Holocaust and the difficult entry into the post-war life. His newly formed identity also includes the question of whether it is possible to forgive the Holocaust. He eventually seeks the answer to this question in the world of his childhood and adolescence, trying to find again the values, with which he used to identify himself.

About his return to the town he asks in his memories his deceased grandfather, whom he considered a symbol of wisdom, about the possibility of forgiveness.

He remembered every one of Grandfather’s words. He had forgotten none of them. ‘Pity, pity, pity for others.’ But the others were murderers. They killed Grandfather and Uncle Jakub as well as all the others. And Grandfather Filip felt pity for them, and yet they killed him too. Thus regret did not help either. Yet, he heard Grandfather repeat the word over and over again: ‘Pity, pity, pity. In our lives, there is nothing stronger, nothing more beautiful, nothing better’ (Fischl 1992: 179–180).

Considering forgiveness seems to be important even in the context of the author’s later work, as it may help one avoid being thrown into a non-causal and chaotic modern world lacking metaphysics, the world, which seems to be an answer to the Holocaust. The Jewish faith accented in the story is what offers this possibility of forgiveness to Daniel. A similar vision of the world after the war is shared by H.G. Adler, a Jewish writer, philosopher, and Holocaust survivor. He says that we must not fail in our efforts because “man is everything in his history. (...) Man becomes a prophet of a higher mission and is shaped by history, which he further shapes” (Adler 2007: 69). This awareness was expressed in a somewhat simpler manner by Viktor Fischl in his book *Ulice zvaná Mamila*, in which he says that one

has to “hold onto something”, one has to have some meaning in life, otherwise one could also, as the text puts it, “hang on a nail in the wall”. Therefore, we cannot live in a world lacking vision, in a boundless deep forest of disappointment. This idea is also valued by, for instance, Jacques Derrida, who admires the possibility of forgiveness or reconciliation with the fate of Jews precisely in view of the huge suffering of their nation (Derrida 2000: 15–18). The return to his hometown helped Daniel dig up fragments of his pre-war Jewish identity in the discourse, of which all-embracing forgiveness was also to be found.

After the war and even more at the beginning of the 1950s, Viktor Fischl, like other European intellectuals, was aware of the parallels between the Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianisms and was thus convinced of the need to keep pointing out the necessity of the humanization of society, as he also showed in the manuscript of the book *The Poet and the Cage*, in which he presented his vision of “the redemption of the world”. It was the artistic text or quality art that he generally regarded as the medium through which it is possible to humanize the world. For the post-war world, according to Fischl, it was necessary to show ideals, on which we must fix our attention, and conversely warn against totalitarizing ideas. This is probably the reason why the heroes of his prose were to try to bridge the Holocaust rift and strive to achieve the integrity of their personalities. According to Fischl, the post-war world is unequivocally determined by this rift, and overcoming it represents a genuinely existential question for contemporary man.

The author submitted the manuscript of *Píseň o lítosti* to the European Literary Club contest at the end of 1947. The book emerged victorious in the contest, or came second as the first position was not awarded. Although Fischl signed a contract for two publications of the book, edition of the book was after Communist *coup d'état* in February 1948 forbidden. He only received a message from the publisher that the Readers Council of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia did not recommend his manuscript for publication. In *The Poet and the Cage*, Viktor Fischl uses the example of the non-publication of this book to demonstrate how the communist apparatus after February 1948 completely dominated cultural life and cultural organizations, including the Syndicate of Czech Writers and the Ministry of Information and Public Culture (Fischl 1951: unpagged). He himself did not consider the book to be political. It apparently

did not fit the post-February discourse particularly due to the type of character. It is a weak Jewish hero, and such a character did not become more common in prose with war themes until the mid-1950s and did not become naturalized until the 1960s. Viktor Fischl considered the non-publication of his novel as a kind of litmus test, through which he made a finer distinction of the situation in post-war Czechoslovakia and its transformation to a satellite state of the Soviet Union. As he stated in one of his interviews, the non-publication of the book and the death of Jan Masaryk³ were the final impetus for him to leave Czechoslovakia⁴.

Such a Jewish character is not an ideal role model for the building up of the state. His preoccupation with the past, particularly the past connected with faith, and his complicated search for himself was not desirable after Communist *coup d'état* in February 1948. This is supported by the following words from the novel *Ohnivé písmo* by Karel Josef Beneš, published in 1950:

What are we to do? There is no return to the past (...) The world and life which he is going to enter will have nothing to do with the world and life twenty-seven years ago. It will not be a world of carefree pleasures of peace, freedom, and prosperity for a few. It will no longer be the old world – the one that lit up in front of him in such lavish colours on a country road in Lázy for the last time on that blue and sunny day in September 1938, on the day of mobilization. Already then and just then he was fully seized by an amazingly clear, as if carved from shining crystal, premonition that an epoch also ends in this autumn finale and that the ship of history is inevitably, without the blinded world noticing, turning in another direction. Yes, nothing repeats itself and he has to go forward to face the tough and hard struggle for transforming the world – as well as for completing the transformation of himself. He feared it. (...) It will not be a return to tranquility and the selfish enjoyment of private happiness because the meaning of this war is everything but this. Communism! (Beneš 1975: 68).

These are the words of Antonín Belda, a character in the novel *Ohnivé písmo*, who belonged to an illegal group during the war and was sentenced to death. Eventually he survived Nazi imprisonment in Grüntal also surviving a death march, and despite his described wretched condition, he

³ Jan Masaryk, the son of Czechoslovakia's first president Tomáš Gariggue Masaryk, was the Foreign Minister of Czechoslovakia from 1940 to 1948. He was murdered two weeks after the Communist Party came to power, presumably on Stalin's orders.

⁴ In 1949, he moved with his family to Israel and adopted the Hebraic name Avigdor Dagan. For more information v. Kadŕůrková 2002: 59.

even found enough strength to consider helping the people of Prague in the days of the Prague uprising in May 1945. This bold plan to get from Germany to Prague was not feasible; nevertheless, immediately after the death march, Antonín had enough strength to be aware of the obligations awaiting him after the war. Of the same mind-set, still in the occupied protectorate, is also his wife. Although she, just as her husband, is aware of the moral superiority of their family (apart from her husband's hardships, both her sons are partisans), and they do not want to profit from this position. "To throw it off and go further, forward, and not to keep going and looking back, to think that one can just live off the gloss of what has passed and done its task" (Beneš 1975: 190). Thus his wife is not a weak character without a sense of duty to build a new socialist society alongside her husband either.

In comparison to those in Fischl's novel *Píseň o lítosti*, the protagonists of the novel *Ohnivě písmo* are presented in a completely different discourse of thought. There is not so much emphasis on personal feelings. These are outweighed by concerns about the fate of the nation and the future. Despite their physical or mental suffering, these characters even have the capacity of political analyses and predict the course of history. Their strength and ability to endure and survive imprisonment by the Nazis or the death march prove that they are chosen to do the "great task"; they are chosen to be followed by others. The literature of socialist realism did not need a credible character; it needed role models worth following. In accordance with the official Marxist-Leninist philosophy, it heads for an idealized future. The power of discourse also controls the perception of time, i.e. the present is just a moment of transfer to happy tomorrows. Thus it is not desirable to adhere to the past. The characters are not derived from reality; they are idealized signs reflecting the discourse, which created the characters. They are not meant, as living beings, to search for their identity with the help of a return to the past and ask who they are now. These characters do not need it. Their identity is given to them by the discourse, which created them. They are paragons of the socialist man and looking back is undesirable.

In contrast to Beneš's novel, Lustig in *Dita Saxová* emphasizes the search for one's own identity, as only this path provides life with some meaning. This process is mediated to the reader by an illusion of immediacy,

documentarity, and introspection of the main protagonist. The reader is thus a witness to Dita's for a return to life, which happens in the inevitable confrontation of the pre-war, Holocaust, and post-war worlds. Like Daniel in *Píseň o lítosti*, Dita, a Jewish girl, was standing on the threshold of adulthood when she was thrown into the hell of the Holocaust. Her personality was thus formed in a completely abnormal world and this made the return of all these orphaned young people to the normal world even more complicated, "because they were too young to be left alone and too mature to allow anyone to take care of them" (Lustig 1969: 221).

Despite the efforts to live and forget, there is always some kind soul that reminds her everyday what a miracle it is that she has survived. She herself is surprised that it cannot be erased from memory, that it will take as long as one can remember it. Dita Saxová would like to erase her identity as the prisoner. Although she erases it, this identity remains in its negation. Dita tries to drown it out with a new life. She asks how to fill it and what to identify herself with. Identity is considered a construct, which is bound to a discourse in which one lives. The peaceful world is not yet born, it is not anchored, and it is not easy to find one's feet in it. When she wants to turn to the pre-war world in her memories, she searches for herself in the security of her family. However, it had disappeared with the death of her parents in the concentration camp and it only exacerbates the wounds of the erased identity. There is nowhere she could hide her heart or find refuge for it. When she tries to find an intimate friend, she finds him for her body but not for her heart. Others do not understand her, as she seems to be too complicated. All the girls from 53 Ljubljana Street, where they live together, have had the same history; they all find their lives oppressive and search for a new one "with capital letters". To achieve this, they opt for different paths, but Dita does not believe that they will be very successful. She can see more clearly, who she is not but fails to find, who she really is.

The concept of identity is built on what we think of ourselves at a certain moment. The process of the formation of identity also includes the aspect of self-esteem and self-respect. Paul Ricoeur relates it to the norms, in which an individual exists. After the destroyed self-respect in the Nazi camp, the latter half of the 1940s, when the story is set, fails to offer any great prospects, either. The book itself does not present the post-war chaos and gradual orientation to socialism and vassalage to the Soviet Union.

What can be felt, however, is the value emptiness of society. It lacks ideals and visions one could identify with. In the latter half of the 1940s, Czech society began to highlight war heroes, while it did not know or did not want to know about the suffering of Jews in concentration camps; the anti-Semitic stereotypes often mingled with indifference or incomprehension of the surviving Jews. When Dita fails to find her own construction of identity, she is sometimes willing to accept someone else's projection regarding her identity:

I was once leaving our hostel and some people spilled out of the local pub. (...) One of them suddenly spat in front of me. Well, that's all, my dear. If I'd told anyone, they would've definitely laughed at me, and I would've also laughed at everyone who would've seen it as a remnant of what we had during the war. There are so many people in the world and I just think of the only one who spat (Lustig 1969: 132).

And she said to herself that probably she'd already been born a whore, that she didn't know how to live properly and would never do so, and that she should've stayed there. She would've choked a little and it would at least be behind her (Lustig 1969: 162).

The impossibility of finding herself in the new world led to a kind of vacuum in which she got stuck:

It always seems to me that everything is as if provisional. As if I kept waiting for something, for some satisfaction, for something that will set me in a place where I will feel I am somebody and that will bring me something definite. (...) Perhaps the feeling of provisionality is what is definite. Our whole life is provisional after all. I have always wanted everything with capital letters (Lustig 1969: 214).

Dita could not find the meaning of life, so she put an end to it.

The novel *Dita Saxová*, published in 1962, already represents a change in the reflection of the wartime experience, which gradually started on a large scale from the second half of the 1950s. With the gradual release of the political situation in Czechoslovakia, the depiction of wartime themes also changes in comparison to the 1950s⁵. Simply put, the authors find this theme still relevant, as they experienced it or it somehow affected them, but the crimes have already been documented. At this point, they are rather

⁵ The trauma of the return from the concentration camp in the post-war literature is elaborated on in more detail by Jiří Holý in his study *Trauma návratu a šoa v literatuře „druhé generace“*, and also in his study *Židé a šoa v české a slovenské literatuře po druhé světové válce* (Holý 2011: 169–201, 7–65).

interested in existential questions, which actually helped the contemporary prose to gradually break away from the existing stereotypes. As pointed out by Aleš Haman in his book *Arnošt Lustig*, it was especially by Lustig's texts depicting the Holocaust that this theme won recognition in Czech literature of the 1950s and 1960s.

Later, during the normalization period of the 1970–1980s, the official prose broadly focused on historical novels because the authors could thus avoid the requirements for depicting socialist reality. At the same time, this trend also allowed them to comment on the present allegorically. Although literature also focused on the recent wartime past, the theme of return from the concentration camp is not frequent in this period. The ideological discourse of the normalization era deprives life as well as literature of their right to subjectivity. However, the theme of return from the concentration camp, if literature is to deal with this theme profoundly, a priori requires a subjective and introspective view, which remains, however in conflict with the normalization type of hero.

A subjectivized view on shaping the history at the end of the war was incorporated by Zeno Dostál into a story depicting the return of four prisoners from the concentration camp of Ravensbrück in his novel *Štír*, published in 1983. It is about friends, who are released from the camp at the end of the war, and they return home from Germany to Bohemia in the complicated historical situation. They first help deliver food to other concentration camps, and they are confronted with the evidence of German violence both in the camps and during the death marches. On their way home, they follow the Russian army, and they meet the German population or their abandoned houses. The whole journey is actually evidence of the guilt of Germans. Vojta Grmela, the main character of the story, along with his three friends have a clear view of the guilt of Germans – they are all guilty. The guilt of Germans is not doubted regarding the Nazis or soldiers, but the protagonists also perceive the common people through this lens in villages they go through at the end of the war. This is attested by their comments and observations about these people. Vojta Grmela, who was a Moravian peasant before the war, is able to appreciate people's commitment to animals and the soil on the one hand, but on the other, when he encounters a German farm, he comments on it saying "The farmer used to be good here. It's a pity he was a German" (Dostál 1983: 280). Beside the collective guilt, the book also

touches upon the post-war expulsion of Germans from Czechoslovakia. The characters assume that there will have to be a committee, which will determine who will remain a citizen of the country and who will not. “We should expel the Germans to Germany. From the Sudetenland. If they wished to be there so much” (Dostál 1983: 282).

By thematizing the collective guilt and the expulsion of Germans, the book meets the standards of the normalization ideological discourse. At the same time, Vojta Grmela is not used for the active role in building the new, socialist, world. Vojta Grmela wants to return to his field and his wife and to father a child. He leaves the vengeance, or justice, to others. Nevertheless, the vision of his personal life is not fulfilled, as he hits a mine while ploughing for the first time and dies. Also with this ending, the story complements the main idea of Dostál’s cycle named after the signs of the zodiac, which shows that one bears no chance to succeed in an encounter with great history. The cycle, depicting events from the 1930s, thus was not allowed to be published under titles referring to the zodiac after the first six texts.

A new perspective on the theme of Czech-German relations and collective guilt is brought by the period after 1989, when along with the changes in the political situation after the Velvet Revolution and allegiance to democratic processes, Czech society feels the need to deal with the issue of the expulsion of Germans from post-war Czechoslovakia. It was the novel *Vyhnaní Gerty Schnirch* (*The Expulsion of Gerta Schnirch*) by Kateřina Tučková, whose title already directly refers to the need to give reality true names, that becomes iconic in this respect. The actual return from the concentration camp to the post-war reality is depicted in the novel *Peníze od Hitlera*, published in 2006. Radka Denemarková actually returns to the type of a weak Jewish character of the 1960s. While in the concept of a weak Jewish character in *Píseň o lítosti* or *Dita Saxová*, the emphasis is placed on the regret over “the loss” of one’s own life, in her book Radka Denemarková also adds other themes that seem relevant for our time and our search for the post-revolutionary identity. At the same time, the reviews of the time pointed out the author’s excessive emphasis on the moral aspect of the story, which could have decreased its credibility (Haman 2006: 2; Fialová-Šporková 2006: 2).

Radka Denemarková shows that history did not end with the war or the Velvet Revolution in 1989. In her view, it is impossible to draw thick lines,

beyond which history does not exist. The very slow transformation of our thinking thus also afflicts institutions, which shape and guard the power of the discourse. As a result, it was not until 2005 when Gita Lauschmann, the main character of the novel, received a decision that her father and mother had not been collaborators and that the confiscation of their property was illegal. Gita Lauschmann could thus require the return of the property. It is not the property, though, that is important to her; in her native village of Puklice she would like to build a monument to her serving at least symbolically return their home. Gita Lauschmann comes from a Czech-German-Jewish family and both her parents died in a concentration camp. She survived the Nazi terror, for whom she was a Jew, and then suffered terror at the hands of Czechs in her native village, for whom she was a German that was inconvenient because her family's property meanwhile had been taken over by the villagers. For Gita Lauschmann, the restitution, or the erection of the monument, meant returning her life to its original state with the possibility of forgiveness and thus overcoming this burdensome lifelong trauma.

Forgiveness, however, requires the admission of guilt by the culprits. The culprits, the torturers of the young Gita Lauschmann, are already dead. But she sees the same hatred in their sons. Jacques Derrida during his visit to the Yad Vashem Memorial in Jerusalem in 1998 mentioned that the question of guilt and forgiveness goes hand in hand with the events of the Holocaust and these questions still remain relevant for us. According to him, we are the heirs of the victims as well as the heirs of the torturers. Gita Lauschmann thus calls the son of her torturer Stolař a murderer. He is not a mere heir of his father's guilt; he himself does not want to allow her or her parents to return home, and he buries her right to the present. He tried to find dishonouring and misinterpreting information against the verdict of the court proving that the property should not be issued to her, nor did he agree with the possibility of building a memorial. However, without him admitting his guilt, Gita Lauschmann cannot reach forgiveness and find the much needed peace and integrity of her personality. The only one who feels guilty is Denis, the son of the people, who took over Gita Lauschmann's house. He cannot forgive his living mother nor Stolař, since "once one forgives, he conspires with them" (Denemarková 2009: 122).

She waits for the admission of guilt by the Czechs in vain. The local

Czechs in fact lived in the captivity of the discourse that they built during the war and that was confirmed in the following decades until 1989 through the communist ideology, which reflected the political orientation of the Soviet Union. They shaped it and at the same time lived in its captivity. This discourse thus intentionally worked with collective guilt and the abuse of power against otherness. Even after 1989, the behavioural stereotypes, which the discourse formed, were difficult to break. The whole village of Puklice is against the return of the property to Gita, though not only due to the property itself.

All her life, Gita lived in the captivity of horrors, which she had experienced in the camp during the war, in her native village after the liberation, and finally in the peace of the 1950s. These parallel concepts of evil thus point that some elements of Nazism or xenophobia also survive in democracy and that there is a danger of the revival of fascism or other radical sentiments, unless we eliminate the objective social conditions, from which fascism emerged and developed. The book thus points to the ongoing xenophobic sentiments, which survive in society constantly.

The Holocaust was a huge rift in the humanity of Western civilization. It has changed the world, thinking, and philosophy. The latter gradually withdrew into seclusion because values and concepts were dissolved. Jacques Derrida does not want to reduce the exceptional events of the Holocaust to symbolic designations, such as Auschwitz or Holocaust itself (Derrida 2000: 8–12). Interestingly, *Píseň o lítosti, Dita Saxová*, and *Peníze od Hitlera*, in other words texts, which were not written under the paradigm of the socialist realism, do not use a specific name for the camp from which the characters return. They are aware of the pain of the millions of victims, where each pain is unique.

The presented artistic texts depicting one specific theme have been a probe to contemporary discourses or they have been perceived as representations of contemporary Czech society and its thinking. The above mentioned texts illustrate how the aesthetic norms were formed in the context of the norms of society, which reflected the political events. Socialist realism as the official artistic movement of the 1950s and the 1970–1980s shaped the tone of the literary texts towards clear answers to the questions of guilt, truth, and the moral credit of the characters. At the same time, while comparing *Ohnivě písmo* from the 1950s and *Štír* from the 1980s,

one can notice a distinct shift in the conception of the officially proclaimed socialist realism. Although in the 1970–1980s, this term continued to be used for official work, its content was variously modified. Thus also in *Štír*, the concentration camp past of the main character is not abused to create a standardized character of a builder of socialism.

In the texts untouched by the totalitarian discourse, the characters are not part of the masses, and therefore may turn to themselves and their identity; also, the texts explore collective identity as is the case of the book by Radka Denemarková. The book *Peníze od Hitlera* shows that making the past topical is important for recognizing minor parallels and nuances, which may lead to a new escalation of violence and xenophobia. Out of the outlined parallels of evil, one can even read worries about the future. It seems that contemporary Czech literature sets out on a long journey of searching, when on the background of the deconstructed world it longs for the reconstruction of philosophical concepts, such as idea, subject, and truth. At the same time, it is obvious that they cannot be denied by a heterogeneous character, as is evident in the category of truth in Radka Denemarková's text when on the last page Gita Lauschmann remembers the moment when she discovered a swastika on her father's clothes, suggesting the possibility of supplementing the story with other truths.

From Czech translated by Petr Kos

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