

Jiří Holý  
Charles University in Prague  
jiri.holy@ff.cuni.cz

## Conventions of Radka Denemarková's Novel *Peníze od Hitlera (Money from Hitler)* along with its Reception\*

ABSTRACT: Holý Jiří, *Conventions of Radka Denemarková's Novel Peníze od Hitlera (Money from Hitler) along with its Reception*. "Poznańskie Studia Slawistyczne" 12. Poznań 2017. Publishing House of the Poznań Society for the Advancement of the Arts and Sciences, pp. 371–379. ISSN 2084-3011.

Radka Denemarková's *Peníze od Hitlera (Money from Hitler)*, edited in 2006, is a successful novel. It has been perceived by critics as a significant work and translated into ten languages. Despite this positive response, it is my belief that the novel is not an outstanding work. The construction of the text is full of stereotypes. It uses well-worn narrative procedures, conventional images and symbols as well as banal metaphors. That is why the credibility of the characters and situations presented in *Peníze od Hitlera* disappears very often. There is also a preexisting model of this novel, the play *Der Besuch der alten Dame* (1956, *The Visit of the Old Lady*), written by Friedrich Dürrenmatt. Unlike Dürrenmatt, Denemarková emphasizes the dark scenes and the melodramatic emotionality of her novel. Therefore, her work is close to conventional clichés.

KEYWORDS: Radka Denemarková; Holocaust literature; Czech-German relations; Friedrich Dürrenmatt's play *Der Besuch der alten Dame* (The Visit of the Old Lady)

### 1.

The novel *Peníze od Hitlera (Money from Hitler)*, written by Radka Denemarková, was published in 2006. Denemarková has worked as a researcher, lecturer, and theatrical advisor. She has translated numerous works from German into Czech, including those of Nobel Laureate Herta Müller. *Money from Hitler* was her second novel following *A já*

---

\* This article was supported by programme Progres Q1 – Literatura a performativita.

*pořád kdo to tluče* (2005) and later she published the novels *Kobold aneb Přebytky něhy* (2011) as well as *My 2* (2014). This last prose was based on a screenplay she has written for Slobodanka Radun' film of the same title.

*Money from Hitler* is a successful novel. It has received many reviews from readers and critics. So in "Lidové noviny" Ondřej Horák wrote that Denemarková is a very good stylist (Horák 2006: 16). According to Alena Fialová-Šporková, Denemarková described the mental states of her main figure very impressively (cf. Fialová-Šporková 2006: 2). Joanna Derdowska compared her narrative style to those of Louis-Ferdinand Celine or Thomas Bernhard. She wrote that readers are gradually absorbed and amazed by the bitter truth of the novel. Its plot raises real worries in them (cf. Derdowska 2006). On the other side, some negative critical comments have been expressed too. Aleš Haman has written about the dangerous proximity of journalism in her work (cf. Haman 2006: 2). Other critics have judged, that some situations in the novel tend to be exaggerated and lose their credibility. Nevertheless, the novel is perceived as a significant work. It won the Czech Republic's prestigious Magnesia Litera award for Czech Literature in the Category of Prose for 2007. It was also made into a theatre performance (directed by Michal Lang, Švandovo divadlo in Prague, 2010; with an outstanding actress Marie Málková in the main role). In 2014 *Peníze od Hitlera* was included in 31 Czech contemporary works of prose, which were analyzed in the literary handbook of the last decade *V souřadnicích volnosti* (Where Freedom Can Be Found). Here Michaela Bečková described this novel as a picture of the current Czech society that is living only in the present-day while completely forgetting about its past (Bečková 2014).

The article *Trauma in Denemarková's Buch Peníze od Hitlera* (2014) by Tereza Tomášová was presented at a workshop in Giessen in November 2012. It focused on the language of this novel. The style should express the trauma of Gita, the main female character. Tereza Tomášová quotes from Denemarková that the novel was a story of a woman in a masculine world (Tomášová 2014). Also later, in 2014 in an interview with Zuzana Uličianská Denemarková said: "The status of women and men is what I regard as the key problem. It still makes a difference whether you are born in a woman's skin or a man's. The world sees you differently, you have

different opportunities. In sum – half of mankind doesn't enjoy the same opportunities" (Uličianská 2014).

Another paper dedicated to *Peníze od Hitlera* was given at the same workshop in Giessen in 2012 by Wolfgang Schwarz. It was also published in 2014. According to Schwarz, Denemarková constructed a kind of "holocaust after the Holocaust". The novel deals with the impact of trauma on a victim (Schwarz 2014).

The book has been translated into ten languages: Polish (2009), Hungarian (2009), German (2009, 2011 and 2014), English (2009), Slovenian (2010), Italian (2012), Bulgarian (2013), Spanish (2015), Macedonian (2016) and Swedish (2016). Radka Denemarková's novel was praised mainly in Germany: It has been awarded the Usedom Literary Prize and the Georg Dehio Literary Prize.

## 2.

Despite this positive response, it is my belief that the novel *Peníze od Hitlera* is not an outstanding work. It uses well-worn narrative devices and banal metaphors. The motifs of the novel, brutality and trauma, are typical motifs of conventional literary and film works dedicated to the topic of WWII and the Holocaust.

*Peníze od Hitlera* was set in the village named Puklice. In Czech this word is close to "puklina" (crack or rift). According to Bečková, it means an allusion to the space from where the dark shadows of the past stand out (Bečková 2014). The seemingly quiet Czech village of Puklice with small white houses and apple orchards, changes into a place of murder and torture.

The novel tells the story of Gita Lauschmannová in two parts and two different time-periods. The first half of the novel is set in the summer of 1945. It is a first-person (*ich-Form*) narrative, all situations are presented from Gita's point of view. Gita, a young girl, leaves a concentration camp as an orphan. Her Jewish parents and her sister Rozálka have perished in an extermination camp and she doesn't know anything about her older brother Adolf/Adin. Gita decides to go home to the provincial village Puklice, but she does not exactly receive a warm welcome from

the village people. Other people are living in her family's home and Gita is seen as an intruder. Before the War the rich Lauschmann family had been treated with dignity. Now the locals declare that Mr. Lauschmann was an exploiter and a collaborator with the Germans. They are afraid Gita will want the family property back. For the village residents, Gita is not returning as a victim, but as a perpetrator. However, her family was bilingual. "I went to Czech schools. I spoke Czech with my mum, and German with my dad" "Chodila jsem do českých škol, doma český s maminkou, německy s tátou..." (Denemarková 2006: 58). But her father preferred German culture and language. Gita is regarded as a German, not as a Jewish victim of the Nazis.

Here isn't your home. It isn't any house of yours. You don't own anything here. You lost the war. (...) We confiscated anything by right.

Tady nejní žádný tvoje doma. Žádněj haus už nejní tvůj. Tady už není tvýho nic. Válku jste prohráli. (...) Všechno jsme po právu zabavili (Denemarková 2006: 34)<sup>1</sup>.

Gita is sixteen years old, exhausted and depressed after surviving the Nazi camps. She wants to stay in her home, because she doesn't have any other place to go. She also hopes to meet her brother. The villagers want to get rid of her at any cost. They treat her inhumanely by beating her, forcing her to do slave labour and trying to starve her. She finds herself on the brink of death. The pregnant woman living in her former family house (in novel named only *Žena*, [Woman]) helps her to escape and to save her life. Gita is placed in a detention camp for Germans. Here she is a witness to cruel and violent scenes. German people are robbed and beaten by Czech "Revolutionary Guards", women are raped. The conditions of life in the camp are similar to the Nazi concentration camps. Gita meets a honest Czech officer who believes she was innocent.

During the war, the Nazis forced a Jewish identity onto Gita and her family, although they don't perceive themselves as Jewish. After the war, Czech people force a German identity upon Gita. They do it against her will again. With the help of the Czech officer, she is released from the camp and goes to her Czech aunt Ottla in Prague.

The second part of the novel is set sixty years later, in 2005 and 2006.

<sup>1</sup> All quotations translated by Jiří Holý.

Gita returns to the village of Puklice. In the process of restitution, she has gained the family property back. Her family has been exonerated. Now she lives in Germany as a well-off woman. However, she is marked by the traumas that she has experienced. Her wish is to erect a memorial to her father in the village. She does not care for possessions. Firstly she wants justice; moral compensation. However, the village welcomes her with hostility again. Not only the older generation is hostile, those who had wanted to liquidate her, but the younger people are also xenophobic. They try to disavow Gita and her family. It turns out, her brother Adin had returned from the camp and had been brutally murdered by the villagers. During the Nazi occupation, one of the locals had denounced her father as a Jew. Gita rarely finds any understanding or compassion. Therefore, she decides to fight back hard:

Gentlemen, now the situation has changed, because of the mayor of the parish council. I want all my property back. With interest. And you can believe me, it'll be a hard fight, mein kampf for a change. It's going to make your hair stand on end.

Ale teď, pánové, teď se situace díky panu starostovi radikálně změnila. Budu chtít zpátky všechny majetek. I s úroky. A věřte mi, že to bude tvrdý boj, pro změnu mein kampf. Až vám budou vstávat vlasy hrůzou na hlavě (Denemarková 2006: 135).

Nevertheless, before the situation is resolved, Gita is dying of a broken heart (“s puklinou v srdci”, which is a clear allusion for the village of Puklice).

### 3.

Radka Denemarková presented her work in interviews with the media as a daring assault on taboos of the Czech society.

Bohemia is ill from head to toe. And what's worse, that it doesn't want to heal. (...) The things we don't speak about, rot under the carpet where all the crap are swept.

Čechy jsou od hlavy po paty nemocné a co je horší, nechtějí se léčit. (...) Nepojmenované hnije pod kobercem, kam všechna svinstva zametáme (Kolouchová 2010).

She said about her later work “My novel encompasses a plethora of themes, including totalitarianism. However, I understand this term not just in the sense of communist or Nazi totalitarianism. More than anything else

I am concerned with totalitarian patterns within the family and in human relationships” (Uličianská 2014).

The construction of the novel is full of stereotypes. From time to time the text borders on being kitsch. Not only during the War and immediately after it, Gita Lauschmann goes through many drastic experiences. After she is rescued from the postwar internment camp for Germans, she lives in Prague, marries and has a child. One day, when she is home alone with her baby, three drunk young men burst into her flat. They all three rape her. When she tries to defend herself, they break her arms. And, moreover, they kill her four-month old boy. This scene is described in her memory in the *ich-Form* in a melodramatic style. She compares herself to a crippled bird whos wings have been broken.

They broke my left arm. (...) Then the right. It's a strange feeling. Lying with broken arms. A crippled bird. A bird that can't flap its wings. I didn't faint. I didn't scream. My four month old son was sleeping in the next room. (...) But my little boy woke up. I heard his whimpering. I began to wail to drown out his howling, but he called me louder, again and again (...). And they heard his soft crying... They brought him... They brought him and... They killed him right in front of me. Before the eyes of the crippled bird. The bird who couldn't protect its young. It didn't fly up. It couldn't move its wings.

Zlomili mi levou ruku. (...) Pak pravou. Je to zvláštní pocit. Ležet se zlomenýma rukama. Ochromený pták. Co nemůže máchat křídly. Nemůže se pohnout z místa. Neomdlela jsem. Nekřičela. Vedle spal čtyřměsíční syn. (...) Jenomže můj chlapec se probudil. Zasllechla jsem jeho vrnění. Začala jsem kvílet, abych přehlušila jeho pláč, ale volal mne hlasitěji, znovu a znovu (...). A ten jemný pláč zaslechli... Přinesli ho... Přinesli ho a... Zabili. Před mýma očima. Před očima ochromeného ptáka. Který svoje mládě neochránil. Nevzlétl. Ani nemohl pohnout křídly (Denemarková 2006: 111).

The melodramatic brutality of the scene is intensified even more. After a few minutes, the knife, red from the blood of the child whose head has been cut off, is used by the killer to cut some bacon and bread for the perpetrators to eat. And then they play football with her son's decapitated head while “spikes of immobilizing pain keep her nailed to the bed” (Denemarková 2006: 123). Only on the next page do we find out that back in the present day time, Gita has had stigmata, the crucifixion marks of Jesus. These cruel and violent scenes are very emotionally perceived. The author uses common stereotypes and well-worn clichés. That is why the credibility of

the characters and situations presented in *Peníze od Hitlera* disappears very often. And some scenes lose all plausibility. Why would brutal rapists keep Gita alive and kill the little baby? She could identify them and get revenge for the murder of her baby.

Gita's reminiscence of the Terezín Ghetto in the first part of the novel is similarly implausible. She remembers that after her arrival at Terezín, her mother

...was selected as a nurse for 1,260 Jewish children from the Polish town of Białystok which had been chosen for an exchange. (...) A secret operation was undertaken during the night of October the fifth. These children were deported to Auschwitz and immediately murdered in gas chambers upon arrival. The fifty three caretakers were gassed together with them...

Vybrali ji jako ošetřovatelku k 1260 židovským dětem z polského Białystocku, určeným pro výměnnou akci. (...) Děti byly 5. října 1943 během tajné noční akce odvezeny do Osvětimi a hned po příjezdu zavražděny v plynových komorách. Spolu s nimi také jejich třiapadesát ošetřovatelů... (Denemarková 2006: 55).

A well-known historical event is evoked here. After the Białystok Ghetto Uprising in August 1943, 1,265 children ages 6–12 survived, and by order of Adolf Eichmann were taken by train to Terezín. They were placed in strict isolation in special barracks until the fifth October. During this time, complicated negotiations took place between Jewish organisations and Germans to save the children through some sort of exchange for money and transfer to Switzerland or Palestine. When negotiations failed, the children and their adult caretakers were taken to Auschwitz where they were gassed. There was no way of anybody knowing about these events during the war, except for a few high-ranking Nazi officials; much less a young Jewish girl who was an ordinary inmate in Terezín. Knowledge of this affair was not discovered until years after the war. How could Gita know the exact number of children and adult victims? Of course, each novel with historical themes can build imaginative scenes and situations. But the authenticity of characters and situations should be respected.

Denemarková's narrative uses conventional images and symbols as well as implausible situations and reminiscences. Moreover, there is a pre-existing model of this novel; a master narrative that hasn't been mentioned by either the author nor the critics exists. This work was probably the

inspiration to *Peníze od Hitlera*. It is the play *Der Besuch einer alten Dame* (1956, *The Visit of an Old Lady*), written by Swiss dramatist Friedrich Dürrenmatt. It seems almost impossible to me, that Radka Denemarková, a German translator and theatremaker, did not know this famous work. In Czech cultural *milieu*, it was updated as a TV movie in Zdeněk Zelenka's adaptation and direction in 1999. The main role was played by the famous Czech actress Jiřina Bohdalová.

It is the story of a wealthy older woman named Claire that returns after decades to her small home town, a seemingly idyllic place called Gullen. She comes back to get justice and vengeance. The locals had once expelled her as a loose woman. Her lover Anton had refused to admit their child was his and married another rich woman. Meanwhile Claire moved to Hamburg and became a prostitute, her child died after one year. But step by step she got among the elite. Now Claire offers one billion francs to the town that urgently needs financial help. With the condition someone should kill Anton, who is nowadays the most popular man in the town. According to Dürrenmatt, this play should be staged as a grotesque comedy. Nothing would do damage more to this play than a dead serious performance.

Unlike Dürrenmatt, Denemarková emphasizes the serious, dark scenes as well as the melodramatic emotionality of her novel. The characters and situations of *Peníze od Hitlera* are close to conventional clichés.

### Literature

- Bečková M., 2014, *Radka Denemarková: Peníze od Hitlera*, in: *V souřadnicích mnohosti. Česká literatura první dekády jednadvacátého století v souvislostech a interpretacích*, ed. A. Fialová, Praha, pp. 499–505.
- Denemarková R., 2006, *Peníze od Hitlera (Letní mozaika)*, Brno.
- Derdowska J., 2006, *O obtížných dějinách – vznětlivě nebo umírněně?*, “iLiteratura.cz”, <<http://www.iliteratura.cz/clanek.asp?polozkaID=19551>> 18.09.2015.
- Fialová-Šporková A., 2006, *Méně by bylo více*, “Tvar” No. 18, p. 2.
- Haman A., 2006, *Život jako krimi*, “Tvar” No. 18, p. 2.
- Horák O., 2006, *Posílám nějaké peníze, s úctou Hitler*, “Lidové noviny”, 28.07., p. 16.
- Kolouchová L., 2010, *Rozhovor s Radkou Denemarkovou*, “Ticketpro”, <[http://www.ticketpro.cz/jnp/divadlo/cinohra/306541-penize-od-hitlera\\$743-showMonth.html?>](http://www.ticketpro.cz/jnp/divadlo/cinohra/306541-penize-od-hitlera$743-showMonth.html?>), 12.02.2016.
- Schwarz W.F., 2014, *Holocaust und KZ im Fokus tschechischer Literatur nach 2000*.



- Zu Arnošt Goldflams *Doma u Hitlerů* und Radka Denemarková's *Peníze od Hitlera*, in: *Der Holocaust in den mitteleuropäischen Literaturen und Kulturen seit 1989. The Holocaust in the Central European Literatures and Cultures since 1989*, ed. R. Ibler, Stuttgart, pp. 157–171.
- Tomášová T., 2014, *Trauma in Denemarková's Buch Peníze od Hitlera*, in: *Der Holocaust in den mitteleuropäischen Literaturen und Kulturen seit 1989. The Holocaust in the Central European Literatures and Cultures since 1989*, ed. R. Ibler, Stuttgart, pp. 291–302.
- Uličianská Z., 2014, *Spotlight Writer: Radka Denemarková. Interview*, "The Missing Slate", <<http://themissingslate.com/2014/11/01/spotlight-writer-radka-denemarkova/view-all/>>, 18.09.2015.