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THE JEWS AND THE SHOAH IN CZECH LITERATURE AFTER WORLD WAR II¹

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to present a concise insight into the Shoah topics in Czech literature. The images of the Shoah went through various phases within Czech literature. Immediately after World War II, it primarily centered on documentary accounts of those who had lived through Nazi camps (*The Death Factory* by Ota Kraus and Erich Schön/Kulka about Auschwitz). Jiří Weil's novel *Life with a Star* (1949) not only presented the horrible brutality of the Shoah, but also its seemingly banal, even profane side. This novel is considered the most important work on this theme in Czech literature and has inspired a multitude of other works. Arnošt Lustig, who survived both Theresienstadt and Auschwitz, entered the literary scene at the end of the 1950s. The Shoah became the topic of his life's work (for instance *A Prayer for Katarina Horovitzova*). Arnošt Lustig, Ladislav Fuks (*Mr. Theodor Mundstock*) and other authors used persecution and extermination of the Jews also as a metaphor for man caught in the machinery of the totalitarian regime. Some of these works also became famous in film versions like *The Shop on Main Street*, which was inspired by the story of Ladislav Grossman and received a foreign-language Academy Award in 1965. From the end of the 1960s onwards, this theme did not play such a key role in Czech literature as it had previously. So the Shoah appears in the background of several books by Viktor Fischl who emigrated from Czechoslovakia to Israel. For the generation which had never experienced World War II, they primarily understood this theme in terms of set images and stark Holocaust iconography. Some younger authors attempted to push these borders

through representing the Shoah in an unusual way, fusing the grotesque, horror, vulgarity and banality (Arnošt Goldflam, Jáchym Topol).

Keywords: *Czech and Slovak Literature; Jews; Shoah; World War II; Jiří Weil; Arnošt Lustig; Josef Škvorecký; Ladislav Fuks; Jáchym Topol; Film*

1. We must take various non-literary recollections into account when we seek to evaluate the depiction of the Holocaust/Shoah in Czech literature. Naturally, this topic can never be a purely aesthetic issue. Considering the lack of secondary literature in English dealing with this theme, it should introduce non-Czech speaking readers to the most important works in this field.

In Czech literature,² the theme of the Shoah is not as frequent or intense as it may perhaps be in Hebrew, German or Polish literature. This is understandable given that the Jews were oppressed, the German Nazis were the guilty party and the extermination camps were located in Poland. In addition, the majority of the victims were Polish Jews and even today the question is still controversial as to how much anti-Semitism on the part of the Poles contributed to their fate.

Little attention has been paid to the images of the Shoah in Czech literature. The topic of Jews remained on the periphery of research after World War II. The main reason was the marginalization of Jewish topics during the Communist regime, which took power in Czechoslovakia in 1948 and evidently showed signs of anti-Semitism, often masked as anti-Zionism and as fight against Jewish bourgeois nationalism. The situation began to change a few decades ago, after the Velvet Revolution in 1989. Since then, several important historical studies have been published but the Shoah literature had not yet been researched at that time. Not a single study was published until 2005. In that year, an international symposium “The Holocaust in Czech, Slovak and Polish Literatures” took place in Prague at Charles University’s Faculty of Arts. The resulting collection of papers was the first book on this theme published in the Czech Republic.³ In 2011 a second book related to this subject followed, the collectively authored monograph edited by Jiří Holý, Petr Málek, Michael Špirit and Filip Tomáš.⁴ The last book publication was released recently in 2013. It was written by Eva Kalousová and Ivana Bednaříková-Procházková from the Kurt and Ursula Schubert’s Centre of Jewish Studies at Palacký’s University in Olomouc.⁵

The Centre for the Study of the Holocaust and Jewish Literature was established at Prague Faculty of Arts in 2010. The Centre organizes a series of workshops with Czech, German and Polish researchers focusing on fiction and documentary literature devoted to the Shoah in Central Europe.⁶ All of these studies and papers summarize and classify the relevant material and attempt to do first analysis. At the moment the main methodological problem

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