

ALENA ŠIDÁKOVÁ FIALOVÁ
Akademie věd České republiky

Returning to the Past: The Germans as a Historical Trauma in Contemporary Czech Prose¹

Contemporary Czech literature, i.e. output since the start of the new millennium, has only changed slowly since the 1989 watershed and the 1990s: debts have slowly been repayed, as books that were prohibited under the Communists have finally been published, prose works on private human dramas and relationship problems have also been published, as have the prominent older and younger generation authors with distinctive poetics (Jáchym Topol, Miloš Urban, Ludvík Vaculík, Ivan Klíma and the like). Although we have seen a boom in bizarre ludic postmodern prose works, these postmodern elements have come to be unsurprising in individual literary styles. The retreat from stories of unbridled fantasy has opened up a greater space for works focusing on specific times and places.

Contemporary Czech Literature has also slowly begun to focus on neighbours both near and far. A minority of work of this kind focused on the quest for oneself within Europe, primarily Western Europe, in which the characters

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deal with more or less the same issues in similarly civilized environments. A much stronger trend focused on the exotic, which had previously remained distinct. Hence, Petra Hůlová achieved great popularity (in her Mongolian family saga *Paměť mojí babičce* (*All This Belongs to Me*) (2002), as did *Cesty na Sibiř* (*Journeys to Siberia*) (2008) by Martin Ryšavý, Hana Androniková's novel *Nebe nemá dno* (*Heaven Has no Floor*) (2010) with its quest for a medicine and the meaning of life in the primeval forests of South America, and Josef Pánek's "Indian" novella *Láska v době globálních klimatických změn* (*Love in the Time of Global Climatic Change*) (2017).

Reflections of Czech prose on the last decade or two indicate that the civilized West has its attractions for Czech writers, but not as much as the exotic East and South, though they do not find our close neighbours in Central Europe to be such an attractive topic.² In line with older traditions, Czech literature more or less fails to reflect on the issues surrounding Poland, Hungary or the nearest neighbour Slovakia—and their Central European links. This is not only due to Czech society's (self)imposed isolation (or its simple absorption in its own problems), which has always looked up more to the West and the South, particularly to French culture; it is particularly due to the age-old intense confrontation with the German population. On the other hand, the subject of the Germans and their crucial influence on the history of Czechoslovakia has very often been present, its attraction being constant if not actually trending upwards since the beginning of the new millennium.

Central Europe has never been clearly defined, particularly in the case of its boundaries and areas of transition, whereas the states that formed what used to be the Austro-Hungarian Empire are more or less automatically included, and Germany is often given all sorts of positions inside and outside it. However, it is not only Czech literature that tells us that the symbolic "heart" of Europe is fatefully tied to the Germans, Germany and its history-creating political role in the twentieth century.

2 On the other hand, specialist literature has repeatedly broached the subject of Central Europe in recent years: in addition to contemporary historians and politologists literary historians and theorists have also dealt with this subject: important developments include the publication of the anthology *V kleštích dějin. Střední Evropa jako pojem a problém* (*In the Pincers of History: Central Europe as a Concept and a Problem*) (2009), compiled by Jiří Trávníček, which summarizes the most important texts dealing at the cultural and political level with the concept of Central Europe, as well as a study by Martin C. Putna published in *Obrazy z kulturních dějin Střední Evropy* (*Images from the Cultural History of Central Europe*) (2018).

The subject of Germany came to be a prime element in the most prominent stream of Czech prose to emerge during the new millennium, i.e. those works focusing thematically on contemporary history. Works of this kind achieved broad popularity as well as positive critical acclaim and the recognition of the experts. They offered a strong, often painfully reflected plot full of fateful twists and painful reflection, a hero who has to bear real-life hardships and deal with such serious ethical issues as guilt, punishment, forgiveness and the like. The attraction of these plots for readers was bolstered not only by the factography of historical events and the inspiration of real-life figures and their actions, but also by a story revealing the fictional family secrets of the protagonists, primarily brought about by the cruelty of impersonal history and moral dilemmas translated into family relations, as well as romantic and parental twists and turns over several generations. All of this is intensified by the fact that the subject of macrohistory and its impact on the microworld of the family constantly resonated with the passed-down family memories of a large proportion of Czech readers, in spite of the distance in time from the events depicted.

Works of this kind had been coming out sporadically in the 1990s, but it was only the advent of the new millennium (associated inter alia with natural generational replacement of the writers and the passage of time since the fall of the Communist regime) that brought about a quantitative leap. This was closely associated with society reflecting on the legacy left behind by the twentieth century, which made itself felt in the literary output, thanks in particular to prestigious literary prizes awarded to such books (the State Award for Literature, Magnesia litera and Book of the Year in a *Lidové noviny* pre-Christmas poll), extensive literary-critical reflections and the subsequent drama and film adaptations of works on this subject.³

3 The fact that the subject of traumatic (primarily) wartime and immediately postwar Czech history was a much broader social phenomenon is confirmed by other artistic output: film works in particular were made in close association with contemporary prose works. Květa Legátová's *Želary* and in particular her *Jozova Hanule* (*Joza's Hanule*) were taken as the basis for the epic film *Želary* (2003) by Ondřej Trojan set during the German occupation, *Habermannův mlýn* (*Habermann's Mill*) (2010) by Juraj Herz on the violence and lawlessness at the end of the war was based on a book by Josef Urban published in 2001. The filmscript for *Krev zmizelého* (*Blood of the Disappeared*, directed by Milan Cieslar, 2005), dealt with wartime and postwar traumas, again reflecting the cruelty of Czech-German relations. It was published the following year as a novel by Vladimír Körner. The subject of Germanness and old injustices from the end of the war has also emerged in Jaroslav Rudiš's fiction, which served as the ba-

1. Changing Reflections of the German Issue and Historical Traumas

The Second World War, the postwar expulsion of the Germans, the Communist takeover and their most brutal period during the 1950s, i.e. the events in which most of the violence, cruelty, traumas and injustices was concentrated, have traditionally been seen as the fateful milestones in twentieth century Czech and Czechoslovak history, while their literary depiction at various times has involved narrative schemes and methods of portraying often stereotypical literary figures that were popular at the time.

Socialist realism and the Communist interpretation of history as presented not only by the history textbooks of the time but also by the literature and film of the era explained the national and ultimately the political dimension of the Czech-German conflict in unambiguous terms: this exposition attributed the role of culprits to the Germans, who fully deserved their fate and postwar expulsion from the country. This expulsion was the natural and logical outcome of political and ideological changes in society, even though it was not dealt with in any greater detail. The subsequent colonization of the border areas was supposed to have completed these changes in society, as the Sudetenland turned into the place where the historical injustice was expiated, and which together with its new population awaiting the birth of a new social order. Nationality here was not problematized in any way, and the polarization of the victor, i.e. the honest working Czech versus the defeated, i.e. the perfidious Nazi German, was not complicated and served to strengthen national self-confidence and the political line that had just been laid down.

Post-1989 literary output came out strongly against this paradigm, as characterized by efforts to disrupt such schemas; for example, one of the first to do so was a novel by Zdeněk Šmíd entitled *Cejch (Brand)*, which reassessed and at the same time de-tabooized the hushed-up events of Czechoslovak history.

The prose work of the new millennium often began to create opposing schemas on the subject of wartime and postwar history. Negative Communist characters, often with a collaborationist past, repeatedly made appearances, as did Germans who, despite the prevailing Nazism, retained their humanity and morality. The depiction of the torture and suffering endured by the Czech population was thus superseded by an image of the Germans' suffering.

Whereas at the beginning of the period under review, i.e. in the first few years of the new millennium, works came out that more prominently reflected the early period of Communist Czechoslovakia, specifically the political repres-

sis for films by David Ondříček (*Grandhotel*, 2006) and Tomáš Luňák (*Alois Nebel*, 2011), while 2011 saw the production of *Lidice*, a film directed by Petr Nikolaev.

sions, imprisonments and collectivization, as well as the “disorderly” expulsion of the Germans, with the emphasis on the cruelty committed on the Germans by the Czechs, in the last decade attention has shifted rather more frequently to the Second World War and the Second Republic, the Munich trauma and, in particular, the fate of the border areas and their inhabitants. The Holocaust consistently emerges as a subject, appearing most frequently as part of a broadly branching multigenerational story within a family saga, as we shall subsequently point out in detail.

Prose works dealing with modern history, the issue of the Germans and Germany, and the advent of Communism can be characterized generally and classified by their genre and narrative method: at one pole we can place works aiming to narrate an actual life and to present a personal witness and the methods used by an individual to cope with his/her own existence in the forced circumstances of the ruling totalitarian regime. Authors most frequently published such works in diary or memoir form. After 2000 we encounter more frequently “memoiromania,” a work situated on the boundary between fiction and documentary, dealing with both personal and historical fact from a distinctly reflective standpoint (particularly in works by the older generation of authors such as Ivan Klíma, Pavel Kohout and Ota Filip). However, the prose works that we shall deal with in the following review, which make up most of the output on this subject, are actually located at the opposite pole, where we can place social and social-historical novels, whose protagonists are normally characters from life, whose main function is to demonstrate the historical traumas and the confrontations between micro- and macro-history. These are typified by the family chronicle genre and the social novel, often with detective elements.

As regards the artistic value and demands on the readers, on an axis from lowbrow popular genres to highbrow elite literature, we can most frequently categorize these works somewhere in the middle, in the “literary mainstream.” It is not by chance that several of them are among the most commercially successful bestsellers (typically books by female authors, who combine historical subjects with family histories, such as Kateřina Tučková and Alena Mornštajnová).

Only a few stories of personal/textbook history have utilized the postmodern legacy, making use of such elements as the unreliable narrator, bizarre and fantastic motifs, original intertextual allusions and the like (Pavel Brycz, Jáchym Topol). The great majority of authors who reflect on modern Czech history recognize the traditional realist story format, spiced up at most by merging time levels, retrospective passages and perhaps some anticipatory insertions by the personal narrator who knows how “everything ended up,” as well as repeated leaps in time to keep the reader in suspense.

2. Nationality as a Central European Issue

The basic question of prose works in which the protagonists remark upon the fact that they are from Central Europe—a place formed by nations that throughout history have had to struggle for their independence and stand up against the great powers—is the issue of identification with a nationality (and thus state citizenship). Here, nationality involves a status which hitherto, in the politically quiescent years, did not appear to be essential, because along with the character of the particular individual, what was more important was to belong to a particular place. The traditional Czech-German confrontation is only reflected in fiction in connection with the aggravation of the situation following the arrival of Adolf Hitler and in particular the outbreak of the Second World War, i.e. at times of historical upheavals: it is then more important what an individual is formally and officially registered as, whether voluntarily or otherwise.

In Czech literature, this set of stories concerning the paradoxes behind private and public history, and the effects of the Second World War in particular on individual human fates, sees its beginnings and culmination in the works of Ota Filip from the 1960s and 1970s—*Cesta ke hřbitovu* (*Road to the Cemetery*) (1968) and *Nanebevstoupení Lojzka Lapáčka ze Slezské Ostravy* (*The Ascension of Lojzek Lapáček from Silesian Ostrava*) (1974–1975)—i.e. at the time the original Socialist Realist idea of the way Czech history was to be interpreted no longer held sway. This story of an ordinary person embroiled in the maelstrom of history through no fault of his own plays out characteristically in the border area between Czechoslovakia and Poland, which has always been one of the most socially and ethnically complex regions in the entire country.⁴ However, the cohabitation of the Czechs and Silesians, Poles, Germans and Jews is forever disrupted by the Second World War; and the violence and murders, revenge and punishments do not impact the protagonists due to their actual deeds, but in accordance with the official political decisions and the official documents determining their nationality.

In contemporary literary prose that has aroused readers' and critics' interest and won prestigious literary awards, such history and national identifications passed down through the generations mould the Ukrainian-German-Czech

4 A similar position on the border of several Central European states and cultures was also chosen by Petr Čichoň as the setting for his *Slezský román* (*Silesian Novel*) in 2011, although the subject of the Germans and Central Europe within the tumult of history recedes to the level of an attractive historical backdrop that only serves as a formal space for free storytelling, which was not received too well by the critics.

family in the State Prize for Literature winning novel by Pavel Brycz *Patriarchátu dávno zašlá sláva* (*The Long Lost Glory of the Patriarchy*) (2003). The male descendants seek their role in the family and the world at large, but their complex multiethnic origins doom them to wasted lives of suffering (“Roland had renounced the world, as he did not want to leave with the Germans or stay with the Czechs, and like a rabid dog struggling with its collar he struggled with his surname Berezinko, which his grandfather had brought with him from Ozer in Ukraine”; Brycz 49). German nationality also takes on fateful importance for a Jewish woman who comes back from a concentration camp in the novel *Peníze od Hitlera* (*Money from Hitler*) (2006)⁵ by Radka Denemarková. Just because the chief protagonist is officially a German, she almost loses her life in liberated Czechoslovakia, in her native village inhabited by “ordinary people,” the unobtrusive citizenry in times of war but now cruel avengers. She devotes the last part of her life to an attempt to build a memorial to her murdered father and thus to erase this historic injustice, even though the novel’s conclusion shows that evidently it had all happened in a completely different way.

Bizarre, almost comical, complications are caused towards the end of the war in Germany and Bohemia by the unclear ethnicity of two friends, the chief protagonists of a novel by Josef Moník *Schweik it easy* (2011): these native sons of German-Czech Karlovy Vary/Carlsbad are officially Germans (according to the narrator “due to an unfortunate start, caused by his father, when he signed a Volkslist and became a German”; Moník 13), so they have to enlist and eventually end up in a POW camp, where, because of the similarity of their native Czech to Russian, they are selected for collaboration with the victorious Soviets. Hence, all their conduct is constantly confronted with misunderstandings and official directives that do not take into account the complexity and fragility of something as obvious (from a remote, non-Central European viewpoint) as nationality and state citizenship. Emancipation from the vexed question of nationality and citizenship in the eternally fluctuating and insecure area of Central Europe normally involves emigration to another continent, most frequently America, where such differences are erased.

Kateřina Tučková’s novel *Vyhnání Gerty Schnirch* (*The Expulsion of Gerta Schnirch*) (2009) was published to great acclaim: its protagonist is half-German by descent, but in her native Brno she feels herself to be more Czech after her beloved mother. At the end of the war, she is caught up in the disorderly expulsion of Germans from Brno and has to take part in the “death march” from Brno

5 English edition: *Money from Hitler*. Trans. Andrew Oakland. Toronto: Women’s Press, 2009.

to a village on the Czech-Austrian border, during which she witnesses violence and brutality committed primarily upon innocent German women and children. Although she is eventually permitted to stay in Czechoslovakia, she can never get rid of her stigma and status as a victim, remaining a passive figure until her old age (i.e. the present), accepting what fate and history have had in store for them. Here, hope is represented by her daughter, who gets involved in an organization that commemorates the forgotten injustices and endeavours to attain a Czech-German settlement, with an apology from the Czechs and forgiveness from the Germans. As in the case of Radka Denemarková's prose work, this is not just a matter of raising the visibility of long-past events, but of acknowledging Czech guilt and undermining certain stereotypes in the perception of the Czech past.⁶

Shifts in space and in nationality are also of decisive importance for the characters in Jakub Katalpa's novel *Němci* (*The Germans*): the chief protagonist, Reichsdeutsch Klára, goes off to teach in a Sudeten village, but in the disarray at the end of the war she finds herself without documentation, thus for a time ceasing to exist for the authorities and for "history at large." This release from the system subsequently enables her to save her newborn child (by giving him to a Czech family), whom she thereby ultimately loses, as Europe is subsequently divided by the Iron Curtain. The resultant trauma again envelops several generations, which goes to prove that this is still a real and painful subject despite the distance in time.

The search for old family secrets and a meditation on them by a member of the subsequent generation is also a key narrative line in the novels of writer Alena Mornštajnová, who has gained considerable popularity among the reading public in recent times. Popular elements from "women's reading" such as the motifs of love, betrayal, infidelity and passion, children born in and out of wedlock, fateful meetings and partings combine here with the traumas of war and the Communist state, both at the level of the storytelling, in the choice of motifs, figures and plot twists, and at the compositional level: the chapter introductions often provide a clear summary of the known textbook facts and their impact on the population, followed by a depiction of the individual characters' private sufferings. For example, the fifth chapter of her novel *Slepá mapa* (*Blind Map*) (2013), which is mostly set in the border region, where his-

6 In numerous literary critical responses, however, we find reservations towards the almost unnatural stereotyping, particularly of the title character, the contrasting vision of the world and the schematic reflection of the historical events, see e.g. Jiří Peňás: "Her Gerta in the novel never acquires any more convincing contours and remains more of an abstract symbol of fate, whom the author does not succeed in fleshing out" (Peňás 29).

tory has given individual fates a particularly good shuffle, begins with a lyrical depiction of the surroundings: “The woods in the hills surrounding the little town were just as dense and impenetrable, despite the efforts of the owners supplying timber to the local sawmill; the mountains were steep and mysterious, the stream was cold and sparkling, but in the air there hung a tension that did not augur well” (24).

Thereupon, the narrator presents a brief sketch of the situation during the First Republic: “People remembered the First World War very well, many forty-year-olds and fifty-year-olds had fought in it, while it had robbed others of their friends and those close to them, so that together they had lived through the difficult years of scarcity in the 1920s and 1930s, whose aftermath they had felt ever since, though at that time they were brought together by a common fear and by the hope of change. “But then suddenly it was as if the world had been enshrouded in a haze of circumspection, which when inhaled made it no longer important whether people were good or bad, but what was important was whether they were Czechs, Jews or Germans.” which is then dealt with for the rest of the chapter: “Even indifferent Alžběta, determined to be happy in life whatever might happen, could not fail to notice the weight coming down from the western mountains. Just like everything else, however, she refused to give it a single thought” (Mornštajnová 2013: 73).

Characteristically, the author has chosen those characters and places that clearly illustrate the historical twists and turns, ideally at a level that matches the anticipated reader’s average “school” knowledge of Czech history. Her story is thus set in a small Sudeten town in which the Czechs, Germans and Jews live side by side, but then suddenly they have to leave their homes, depending on which regime is in power. Hence, the narrator follows the fortunes of a poor seamstress, who works her way up through her own industriousness, but then loses her husband during an air raid and after the Communist putsch in 1948 the new ruling class takes over her well-established tailor’s salon. She also follows her sister, a Czech, who marries a German and so after the war prefers to leave her homeland, as she can guess what fate would await her; a resistance fighter, who after all the horrors he has lived through idealistically wants to build a new society in a new Socialist state, but is ultimately condemned as a traitor in a show trial; and a German, who answered the call of adventure and volunteered for the army and the front, where he came up against the harsh reality of the war; as well as another German, at first glance a decent one, who loses his mind when as a guard in a concentration camp he bears witness to, and is forced to participate in, bestial murders; as well as their other relatives and friends, as all of these characters are simultaneously interconnected by family, romantic and

marital ties, which do not so much give rise to the usual relationship conflicts as the cruel interventions of the higher spheres of “history with a capital H.”

It is hard to assess whether this was just a calculation made by the author as she attempted to extract some freshness from a topic that has already received ample literary treatment or an overall social shift, but it is interesting that just as in Mornštajnová’s latest and so far most successful novel, *Hana* (2017), *Blind Map* highlights the prewar and wartime events from a different standpoint to that of her previous work. The author no longer deals with the expulsion and the injustices committed by the Czechs on the Germans, but describes in detail the events of the late 1930s, i.e. the injustices committed by the Germans on the Czechs, which have hitherto only received minimal literary treatment. As an example, let us quote the beginning of the seventh chapter, which reflects the events following the Munich Agreement:

Over the last few days of October the worst forecasts came true. The mist hanging over the border area turned into darkness, which fell on the land to cast out the intruders from the little town for many long years. The alleged intruders were rather surprised and confused, because many of them had spent their whole lives in the mining town, as had their parents and grandparents, and considered it to be their home. (Mornštajnová 2013: 137)

The issue of the Sudetenland and the borderland in general also cropped up at the start of the new millennium in a group of smaller, more intimate prose works in which the original German inhabitants are present more in legends, recollections and the memory of a place that will now always be abandoned and empty, as it is being populated by people who have not integrated with the country. The Sudeten area, perceived as no man’s land, and its dark mysteries are reflected in the novel *Grandhotel* (2006) and the three-part comics entitled *Alois Nebel* (published as a collection, 2006) by Jaroslav Rudiš, the novel *Aussiger* (2004) and the novella *Anděl odešel* (*The Angel Has Gone*) (2008) by North Bohemian writer Martin Fibiger, *Poslední promítač ze Sudet* (*The Last Projectionist from the Sudetenland*) (2010) by Dalibor Funda, *Jizvy* (*Scars*) (2007) by Evita Naušová and *Cukrový klaun* (*Sugar Clown*) (2007) by Martin Sichinger. On the other hand a more humorous tone can be found in a collection of short stories about the inhabitants of a former German village entitled *Lesk a bída Čekání* (*The Splendour and Misery of Čekání*) (2001) by Zdeněk Šmíd.⁷

7 The Sudetenland and in particular three prose works dealing with this area (*Grandhotel* by Jaroslav Rudiš, *Money from Hitler* by Radka Denemarková, *Habermann’s Mill*

3. Jews, Germans and Central Europe

“No other part of the world has been so deeply affected by the influence of the Jewish genius. Foreigners everywhere yet at home everywhere too, the Jews were the primary cosmopolitan, integrating element in Central Europe during the twentieth century,” Milan Kundera wrote in his famous essay from the 1980s “A Kidnapped West,” thus highlighting one of the characteristic features of Central Europe.⁸ The Holocaust, which from a modern historical perspective is a constant theme in postwar Czech literature, tells us more about the setting of Czechia within Central Europe than the (missing) reflections of our immediate neighbours. Much like the Germans, the Jews are also associated with the issue of national (or religious) identification, violent expulsions and thus the transformation of what was once a jointly inhabited space. Whereas Jewish secondary characters and references to their fate commonly appear in post-1989 prose work, only several large novels with a primary focus on the Holocaust have come out. Paradoxically, it is only here that we come across the thematization of the “East,” with reference to the Terezín transports, primarily to Nazi extermination camps. Everything that is even just allusively Central European here is again perceived through the prism of German activities and German influence in this area.

In 2001 Hana Androniková attracted attention with her family saga *Zvuk slunečních hodin* (*Sound of the Sundial*) with its story of characters whose fortunes form and interweave in prewar Czechoslovakia, India, wartime Terezín and postwar America. In 2006 Magdalena Platzová based her narrative in *Aaronův skok* (*Aaron's Leap*) on a depiction of the fortunes of two female protagonists from the 1920s to the 1940s, fatefully disrupted by one of their deaths in the Holocaust. This merges with the search for old family secrets by the granddaughter of one of them. This representative of the youngest, contemporary generation is here again the one who after all those years is finally going to uncover and understand them, and thus to let ancient guilt and traumas dissipate. In his novel *Sidra Noach* (2010), David Jan Novotný follows several male Jewish characters who meet in a Prague apartment during the great flood of 2002. Whatever they talk about, whatever they remember and however they assess it, they are always referring to the Holocaust as the pivotal event that has formed their view of the world, a fateful mark that can never be eluded.

by Josef Urban) were analysed in detail by Lenka Németh Vítová in her study “Odkrywanie na nowo ‘Kraju Sudeckiego’ w czechkiej literaturze po roku 1989.” (Re-discovering the Sudetenland in Czech Literature after 1989).

8 The text from 1983 was published several times in various languages and periodicals and is quoted here from Jiří Trávníček’s “Zrození střední Evropy z ducha ...” (278).

A family saga spanning several generations, but this time more focused on one particular fate, namely that of a Jewish girl who survived Terezín and Auschwitz (as well as a typhoid epidemic in the city of her birth during the 1950s, which killed almost all of her surviving family), was published in 2017 by the aforementioned Alena Mornštajnová under the title *Hana*. What moves the story along towards the tragic twists and turns in the plot is a combination of fateful coincidences (that stem from the women's feelings and emotions) and the interventions of "history with a capital H," political decisions and the inalterable family origins:

When four years later Elsa Helerová and her parents were staggering in front of the trench they had dug, which was already almost full of the bodies of those who had stood in that place before them, she closed her eyes firmly and thought that it was fate that had set this test for her. But it was Hana, who at the end of 1938 had changed fate, deciding she would do everything to put off her departure till as late as possible, for Hana had not done what her mother had asked of her. (Mornštajnová 2017: 161)

One special case outside all genre restrictions, contrasting with emotive and emotion-inducing stories of female protagonists, is the work of one of the most prominent authors over the last thirty years, Jáchym Topol. His image of the Terezín ghetto both in his earlier novel *Sestra* (Sister, 1993), and in the novella *Chladnou zemí* (*The Devil's Workshop*) (2009)⁹ does not fit into traditional story formats, but becomes more of a bizarre human tragic-comedy, a breakneck postmodern tour around the incomprehensibility of human actions and history. Exceptionally, *The Devil's Workshop* has a setting that is not Czech (or Czech-German), but based in the lands of the former Soviet Union, particularly Belarus. In spite of the generally declared incomprehensibility of Central Europe, Topol's protagonists here, the "searcher," who are looking for traces left over from Nazi and Communist atrocities, vainly seek the "East," while everyone tells them they are still in Central Europe:

Where is the actual East?, I ask, because all the Slovaks tell me I've blundered in my search, as they're not in Eastern but in Central Europe, just like, alas, those stupid Czechs a bit further on, not to mention the Hungarians, who don't even live in Europe..., though when

9 English edition: *The Devil's Workshop*. Trans. Alex Zucker. London: Portobello, 2014.

I insisted, they admitted that real Eastern Europe starts just a short way away from Slovakia, but I had to get out there among the wolves and bears of Subcarpathian Ruthenia, aha, the Carpathians, have a look at the map and off you go, said Sára ... but in Subcarpathian Ruthenia the people get annoyed when they hear they're supposed to be in the East, they consider that to be nonsense ... and they send you off to the real East, to Galicia! (Topol 2009: 42–43)

In another text, in which he describes travels through Galicia and Transcarpathian Ukraine (in the collection *Supermarket sovětských hrdinů* (*A Supermarket of Soviet Heroes*) (2007)) Topol comes out with a quote that actually characterizes Central Europe in terms of the historical atrocities that have been committed there: “Central European death is death in the prisons and the camps, mass death, Massenmord, purges” (Topol 2007: 39).

4. Line of Resistance

Apart from the output on the Germans and the Second World War, focusing on the Holocaust, the expulsion, the Sudetenland and the issues surrounding nationality and citizenry (i.e. subjects in which a fundamental role is played by space, the movements within it, and its abandonment), there another trend that should be mentioned, as it particularly resonates within the latest output, namely, the treatment of the anti-Nazi resistance, especially the most significant event of the Protectorate period, the assassination of Acting Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich. This appeared to involve a different line of writing, in which emotions and passions are replaced by action, tension, plot and a thrilling detective investigation into how things really happened. The uncertainties over the inhabited space or inherited ethnicity no longer play a role in these works: the enemy is clearly identified (German, Nazi) and the questions raised by this type of work are different: what was the point of the resistance action? Should one resort to violence, giving rise to further violence? How strong was the conviction behind the fight against a tyrant even at the cost of the sacrifice of lives and the like?

The gripping drama of the anti-Nazi and anti-Communist resistance was presented by Jan Novák in his novel *Zatím dobrý* (*So Far So Good*) (2004), which tells the story of the resistance activities carried out by the Mašín family, a father and his sons, with the first part focusing on the bravery of the father, Josef Mašín Snr. during the Second World War, and the second part focusing on the dramatic escape by his sons, Ctirad and Josef, from Communist Czechoslovakia. A more self-reflexive and documentary stance is provided

by the untraditional narrator of Marek Toman's novel *Chvála oportunismu* (*In Praise of Opportunism*) (2016), namely the Černín Palace, the seat of the key state authorities, which keeps coming back periodically to memories of its most important inhabitants, Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich and the postwar Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk (whose previously unresolved death provides a link to various considerations of the political regimes involved and an attempt at an investigation to find the culprit). In Arnošt Lustig's *Příběh Marie Navarové* (*The Story of Marie Navarová*) (2010), an individual from real life, who gave the injured Heydrich first aid in a purely humane way as a healthcare worker, despite her activities in the domestic resistance, and was sentenced after the war to several years in prison). Lustig deals only in a marginal manner with his usual subject of the Holocaust, focusing instead on the issues surrounding the resistance, collaboration and historical injustices, moving from one inhuman regime to another. A more lyrical and intimate note was sounded in the story of the assassins by Czech-American author Mark Slouka in his novel *Viditelný svět* (*The Visible World*) (2008): he added to the famous story of the hidden assassins the fictional character of another person from the group, who only escapes their tragic end by chance—but he cannot bear life in his dead friends' shadow and so voluntarily puts an end to it. Several other works are on the borderline between fiction and non-fiction.¹⁰

Another fateful milestone in Czech history was 1948 and the Communist takeover, judicial murders, imprisonment of innocent people, ruined lives, confiscated property, collectivization and other resettlements of the population from their original homes. These traumas are perceived in contemporary fiction to be a purely Czech issue, while the influence of other powers, in this case primarily the Soviet Union and not Germany any more, is basically mediated. This is a problem that we have brought upon ourselves: not the tragedy of history writ large, but warped characters and the urge for power have led to the greatest demoralization and downfall of the nation in its history. A deeper analysis of neighbouring literatures is required to determine whether or not this is a perception of the entire shared Central European space, or just a specifically Czech characteristic.

Translated by Melvyn Clarke

10 In 2007 Jiří Šulc's novel *Dva proti Říši* (*Two Against the Reich*) achieved great success among readers, followed three years later by a French author Laurent Binet's work *HHhH*, but in 2017 Lubomír Kubík's prose work *Proč Gabčík nestřílel?* (*Why Didn't Gabčík Shoot?*) (2017) attracted attention, but did not achieve the popularity of the previous two works. A large number of contemporary works deal with the subject from a purely factological standpoint.

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| **Abstrakt**

ALENA ŠIDÁKOVÁ FIALOVÁ

Powrót do przeszłości. Niemcy jako trauma historyczna we współczesnej literaturze czeskiej

Artykuł przedstawia zawarte we współczesnej czeskiej prozie odbicia traum związanych z II wojną światową i wydarzeniami powojennymi, uwzględniając problematykę Europy Środkowej, w której tradycyjnie dominuje konfrontacja czeskiego żywiołu z niemieckim. Autorka podsumowuje rozwój refleksji nad tematyką Niemców i Niemiec, II wojny światowej oraz następującego po niej przesiedlenia w prozie nowego tysiąclecia, a jako zagadnienia wspólne wskazuje kwestie niejednoznacznej identyfikacji narodowej bohaterów literackich, detabuizację przemilczanych wcześniej tematów oraz Zagładę Żydów (szczególnie w odniesieniu do gatunku sagi rodzinnej). Zwraca uwagę także na utwory dotyczące antyniemieckiego ruchu oporu (książki z elementami powieści kryminalnej i z pogranicza literatury pięknej i literatury faktu).

Keywords: współczesna proza czeska; historia najnowsza; II wojna światowa; wysiedlenie Niemców; Zagłada Żydów; zamach na Reinharda Heydricha

| **Abstract**

ALENA ŠIDÁKOVÁ FIALOVÁ

Returning to the Past: The Germans as a Historical Trauma in Contemporary Czech Prose

This study describes reflections of wartime and postwar historical trauma in contemporary Czech prose, taking into account the issues surrounding Central Europe, which entirely overlap with the traditional confrontation between the Czechs and Germans. It also includes the changing reflections on Germany and the Germans, the Second World War and the subsequent expulsion found in the prose work of the new millennium, the unifying topic being deemed to be the issue of the ambiguous national identification of the protagonists, the detabooization of previously hushed-up subjects and the subject of the Holocaust, particularly in the family saga genre. It also takes into account groups of texts focusing on reflections of anti-German resistance activities, both in the genre of the novel

(with detective elements) and in output on the boundaries between fiction and factographic prose.

Keywords: contemporary Czech prose; reflections of modern history; Second World War; expulsion of the Germans; Holocaust; Heydrich assassination

| About the Author

Alena Šidáková Fialová, Ph.D. works at the Institute of Czech Literature of the Czech Academy of Sciences. She deals with post-war literature (monograph *Poučení z krizového vývoje. Poválečná česká společnost v reflexi normalizační prózy*, 2014), and participates in the forthcoming History of Czech Literature in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.

E-mail: fialova@ucl.cas.cz