THURSDAY OCTOBER 14, 1999
AFTERNOON SESSION B 16:30 – 18:00

The Holocaust in Czech Literature
by
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In the 1950s, the Czech official school education concerning the Second World War was oriented primarily at the significance of the Communist resistance against the German occupation of Czechoslovakia. The fact that most of the Czech victims of Nazism were of Jewish origin was largely ignored. In the pedagogical process within the school subjects of history and literature education, substantial information about the relations between Czech and Jewish culture was not provided, even in the historical period between the two World Wars.

The situation improved in the second half of the 1960s. Students were informed more about Jewish culture and the Holocaust, not primarily in history lessons but rather in the lessons of Czech literature. We can speak about the great development of Czech literature and culture in the 1960s, aiming to overcome the limitations of Stalinist ideology. The great inspiring moments for the Czech literature of that time (concerning Second World War thematics) were the events and destinies of Jewish citizens in concentration camps and the picture of a human being in a situation of helplessness and despair. The destiny of Jewish people during the Holocaust has been used in Czech literature to symbolize and typify the human being as the victim of injustice, cruelty and barbarous machinery. These novels are often autobiographic, as it is in the case of Jiri Weil (1900-1956) and Arnost Lustig (1926-).

Jiri Weil’s novel, *The Life with the Star* (1949), depicts the atmosphere of fear and the life of Jews in Prague before the transports to the concentration camps. Also depicted is the resistance of a simple Jewish bank official against the absurdity of the world commanded by Nazi ideology. This book was sharply denounced by Stalinist literary critics for its alleged subjectivism and Kafkian alienation. For that reason it could be used in literary education only after the 1960s.

Arnost Lustig, as a young boy, had suffered in the infernos of Theresienstadt, Auschwitz and Buchenwald. His collections of short stories, *Night and Hope* (1957), *The Diamonds of the Night* (1958) and *Bitter Smell of Almonds* (1968) represent the ghastly and powerful witness of Jewish suffering connected with the Holocaust. But they also express the imperishable value of human dignity and solidarity in the most difficult situations human life has faced. His novel, *The Prayer for Katerina Horowitz* (1964) was inspired by the true story of a Jewish girl who was able to resist and revenge the deaths of her friends.

The psychological novels and short stories of Ladislav Fuks (1923-1994) excel in their ability to express profoundly and in a masterful way the anxiety of Jewish people who were threatened by the Holocaust. His novel, *Mr. Theodor Mundstock* (1963) is the tragic-comic life-story of an old Jew, haunted by the visions of possible transport, who vainly prepares for all situations awaiting him in the concentration camp. The collection of stories, *My Black-Haired Brothers* (1964) is devoted to the destinies of Jewish people during the Holocaust. The psychological novel, *The Stoker of Dead
Bodies (1967) depicts the transformation of the title character, deformed by racial prejudices, from the harmless eccentric to Gestapo informer, murderer and active participant in the Holocaust.

Due to very complex reasons, we cannot find significant works concerning the Holocaust in the Czech literature since the 1970s. Only sporadically (in some poems of J. Seifert), are there motifs connected with the feeling of guilt that Czech people were the mute witnesses of the persecution of Jews in the years 1938-1945.