

P. ZÁVADA'S STRATEGY OF REMEMBRANCE: SOME REMARKS ON THE NOVEL *NATURAL LIGHT*

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ABSTRACT: The paper aims to highlight the innovativeness of the literary representation of the war years, including the antagonistic attitudes towards Jews in the selected novel by Pál Závada. By its very title, the novel indicates the work's reception as a penetration into a little-known space, the need to overcome the silence about certain "indelible traces", events we do not like to confront. In addition to reflecting on the credibility and narrative power of the letters and photographs in a retrospective view of history, the analysis of the manifestations of antisemitism, its determinants, and the degree of its representation reveals the necessity to pay attention to stereotypes and prejudices, representing the "underbelly" of various forms of intolerance.

KEYWORDS: P. Závada. *Natural Light*. Oral history. Memory. Antisemitism.

Pál Závada is one of those contemporary Hungarian authors whose work resonates with the events of the 20th century.¹ They and the resulting apprehension, the sense of shame and guilt, as the author mentions, for example, in a round table discussion at the Slovak Institute in Budapest² or in a documentary prepared by Czech Television³, become the creative impulse of his work to understand Hungarian and European history (Krause 2021, 291). This can also be documented in the novel *Természetes fény* [Natural Light], in which, along with the depiction of the horrors of war, the question of the extent of Hungary's responsibility in the Second World War and the "liquidation" of the Jewish population resonates. This is also because the Holocaust, like the Treaty of Trianon, which settled the borders of the Hungarian state after the First World War, the occupation of the state by the Soviet army in 1945, the Communist dictatorship, and the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, are usually ranked among the traumatic events in Hungarian collective memory⁴ (Kisantal 2020, 48). Historical events society perceives as traumatic need to be re-evaluated for social relations, peaceful coexistence between ethnic groups, and mutual understanding (Závada 2021). The novel's title indicates the work's reception

¹ Text was translated by Orsolya Hegedűs.

² "What selects or what controls [...] is the shame. That stirs my conscience and does not let me rest. So sometimes a person – whether guilty of it or not – suddenly comes across some problem, event, or a life history phase, which comes across some paper, document, I do not know what, and they are filled with shame. What is most embarrassing to dissect, what is most challenging to say, what I am least willing to admit about myself, my family, my village, my country, my blood, Hungarians and non-Hungarians, excites me. And, of course, the shame is somehow dissolved if you approach it in such a creative way, then you get a kind of work fever, and you feel something else" (Németh et al. 2015, 58 – 59).

³ See *Pál Závada* (ČR 2021).

⁴ The society's attitude towards the respective historical event is determined by its consequences for the further direction/development of the society. An event in which the company, or the previous generation suffered great losses, experienced helplessness, humiliation or gained a sense of shame during a conflict with another group, it can be described as traumatizing (Volkan 2001, 87) and so is its mental representation. As the American sociologist J. C. Alexander points out, the events themselves do not yet create collective trauma, they are not inherently traumatic. They become so because of the way they are presented, because they are attributed a negative impact on collective identity (Alexander 2012, 13).

as a “penetration” into a little-known space, i.e., overcoming the silence about certain “unerasable traces”, events that we do not like to confront. The peculiarity of Závada’s approach to the past in his novel *Természetes fény*, however, lies not only in the opening of “sensitive and taboo” themes but especially in the way of their artistic depiction. The author provides “insight” into the life of the village of T.⁵ between 1931 and 1947 and the “traumatic” experiences of its inhabitants through the method of oral history⁶ and the recollections of the characters involved, or – as he puts it – “our” and “your narrator” (ibid., 505). Multiplying “narrative voices” resembles Bakhtin’s polyphonic novel, in which every experience or thought of the narrator is internally dialogical and polemically coloured (Bakhtin 1971, 241). Závada thereby leads the reader to a constant dialogue with different ways of (literary) presentation of the past; at the same time, by looking into the inner transformations of a person, he makes it possible to realise that *“it is not only their physical and mental personality, their name and craft that make one a human being, but also their environment, memories and past, acquaintances, friends, and even enemies. [...] Every written and unwritten relationship defines man, every connection and invisible pact, that is, everything that defines his life and personality”* (Závada 2021, 52 – 53).

REMEMBRANCE AND THE PAST (MEMORY) FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE NOVEL

The importance of memory in the reconstruction of the past or the self-definition of a group has been addressed by several theorists, for example, J. Assman (2001), A. Assmann (2018), and others.⁷ P. Závada thoughtfully reveals the close connection of these phenomena at the beginning of the novel through a literary image of the space in which one of the main characters, the narrator, Ján Semetka’s “memory unfolds”, who moved to Czechoslovakia with his daughter at the turn of the 1940s and 1950s. The story unfolds with the arrival of a visitor from his native village: *“Well, for whose sake was there a need to leave home? I wish I could understand that! Once a person was at home where they were, how could they be convinced that they would be more at home elsewhere, blimey?!”* (Závada 2021, 30). Representative symbols of “lived space” (homemade bread made of new wheat and sausage which *“reminds us of ancient dew-wet girls by the fire and women drenched in sweat by the hot oven”*, ibid., 18 – 19) stimulate the narrator’s recollections: *“It is as if the distant past has passed through him again. Immersed in the depths of vivid memories, he could also smell the familiar aroma of a freshly baked delicacy that had not yet been smoked, and then he imagined himself pulling out of the oven in the house on Nagy Street in T. a baking tray full of sausages, rolled into snail rings. [...] Semetka feels that he would be able to recall every single dinner in his memory – from*

⁵ It is most remarkable that the fictitious environment, whose characters are at the centre of the narrative, is indicated only by the initials T. and after Semetka’s moving, it is the village of M. It can only be assumed that the author intends to express through referentiality/representation the disruption of the bond with space, the forgetting and dissolution of identity.

⁶ As an example, P. Vilikovsky also uses the oral history method of recalling destructive events related to the Holocaust in his works. See Antošová 2022, 37 – 43.

⁷ Other authors, such as K. Jakubovská and V. Jakubovská, also address the problem of remembering and forgetting in connection with individual and collective memory. In the article *Culture of reminiscence as a part of cultural education* they write that “Our individual memory relies on the collective memory of the group of people to which we belong (family, school, interest groups, etc.). Individual memory is formed by each individual during his socialisation. Although collective memory derives its permanence and strength from a whole group of individuals, only individuals are the ones who remember. Collective memory differs from individual memory in that collective consciousness cannot be explained merely on the basis of knowledge about the individual psyche, because the society that creates it greatly exceeds human individual capabilities” (Jakubovská – Jakubovská 2023, 33 – 52).

the act of preparing it through the way of dining to the repertoire of the brass band, finding out who was gossiping about what, who had quarrelled about what and who had got drunk how” (ibid., 20 – 21). The past and the “traces of lived space” are already contoured through the description of the interior of the room in which the narrator, ninety-seven-year-old J. Semetka, receives a visitor: “*On the scrubbed, unpainted deck floor, woven carpets lie spread out, Semetka’s work and writing desk with drawers stands by the window on the right, and a smaller loom has been placed in the left corner – although it is not obvious that it has been recently used for weaving, it is obvious that it is not a decorative item, as this instrument has been in use here for decades. There is no furniture in the spacious room other than the old bed, table, and looms, but in both the right and left corners of the front door there are smaller or larger wooden crates with fittings, lids and turn-locks stacked almost to the ceiling in unbelievable abundance*” (ibid., 30). By describing the room as half-empty, similar to a prison cell, Závada evokes both the “emptiness of the intimate world” (Hrbata 2005, 357) and the image of a “lost” existence/“inauthentic” being of the inhabitants of the house. Not only the bed, with its symptomatic central position and its “reference to the idea of being and peace” (ibid., 355), but also the table, with its drawers, or the wooden crates can be seen in the above context as “organs of psychological life”, “mixed object-subjects” that have the meaning of intimacy (Bachelard 2009, 94). They are not mundane, everyday furniture but keys to souls, to fragments of the past through the objects they hold inside.

The topos of the room as one of the fundamental places of human existence (Hodrová 1997, 217) is joined by the semantics of space as a place of (self-)reflection (ibid.), of “remembering the past and rediscovering one’s identity” (ibid., 232). It happens when touching a familiar space when encountering people and objects from that very place. In this respect, Semetka’s sleep and his awakening from it becomes particularly significant: “*For when one of us leans against the sill of the window which overlooks the garden and peeps in through the two sashes of the curtain, he sees the old man’s bed in the middle of the room. The body lies motionless on its back and unusually high up like a catafalque, the head resting on a large pillow pokes out between the two windows facing the street. [...] Well, how could I not eat a homemade sausage?! It was as if Semetka had indignantly awakened from his slumber, bringing eternal sleep. His anxious wailing, which suddenly echoed inside, so astonished us that all further words froze within us*” (Závada 2021, 18 – 19). The bed in the middle of the room refers to the metaphysical and ontological sense of being, but also to “healing by witnessing”, by narrating the circumstances of the experiences they have tasted or had to experience.

The topos of the window is thus effectively incorporated into this spatial representation. The window not only allows a glimpse into the room’s space, but by connecting with the motif of light, it manifests the promise of possible communication and learning (Hodrová 1994, 115). The author multiplies this meaning with the motif of the door. The topos of the entrance symbolically indicate the partition between two worlds – between the present and the past. Similarly, P. Závada works with other images, which, by their descriptions, participate in the development of the thematic scope of the novel. This also applies to the exterior of the house. Together with the garden, it evokes the biblical image of the Garden of Eden and the expulsion from it; thus, the author expresses the tragic feeling/perception of the presence of Jan Semetka and his daughter. Facing each other stands the house-apartment, the home, the “*larger [...], with six windows, with a sprawling extension, with granaries, with sheds, stables, with a long garden running down to the stream*” (Závada 2021, 15), and a house-a strange, transitory one, “*made of clinker decorative bricks, with four windows*” (ibid.), a large garden “*cultivated only in a semblance of a way*” (ibid.).

The interior of the house and the room with its furnishings are thus constructed in a way that its figurative dimension underlines the close connection with memory, becoming a verbalised

“reservoir” of time and a visual representation of personal memories. Contrary to the house currently “inhabited”, the “house of memories” creates an “illusion of stability” and certainty.

Závada's novel is not only characterised by the sensitivity of the house image in the title chapter but the isolation or outlined “closedness” of the narrator gives a hint of a “secret knowledge” that remains hidden from the outsiders (Biedermann 1992, 23). Among such, we might include the memory of and relationship to the Jews.

ANTAGONISTIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE JEWISH POPULATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NOVEL *NATURAL LIGHT*

The reasons for antagonistic attitudes and actions towards Jews have varied throughout history. They may have been motivated by the social status of Jews, the political position of the state or nationalism⁸, but also by other circumstances, which were subsequently reflected in the existence of different ideological variants of antisemitism. Of these, relatively three can be identified in P. Závada's literary reflection: religious, racial, and political antisemitism. We speak of relativity for the reason that the forms/manifestations of a hateful attitude mentioned above are intertwined in Závada's literary reflection, just as cultural, religious and racial aspects are intertwined in “Judaism”.

Anti-Judaism or religiously motivated antisemitism is considered the oldest form of antisemitism; it finds the cause of the “negative morals” of Jews and all misfortunes in the Jewish religion and the Talmud. It can be perceived as negative attitudes towards the way of life and behaviour of Jews, which are determined by religious rules and regulations about diet and cleanliness (Danics – Kamín 2008, 130).

The aspect of confessional difference is present in Závada's work, depending on the individual parts of the novel. In the pre-war period, the coexistence of Jewish and non-Jewish populations does not appear to be problematic from the point of view of “religious identity”. Jews are an integral part of the village of T., and religious distinctions with the rest of the population are illuminated minimally, briefly mentioning the characters' religious affiliations. The fact that they are “infidels” (adherent of a different faith; remark by O.H.) is conveyed to us by one of the narrators – Mária Semetková, for example, in a letter addressed to her friend: “*After all, almost all of my friends play in the girls' evangelical mandolin orchestra – except for Juci Weisz, who is deaf as a doornail and is Jewish, and also for our community piano artist Anna Ágoston, who is a pianist. ... You know, my Bözsika, ever since the Slovak theatre group performed the play A tót menyecske, that is, The Slovak Bride, the official copy of which was obtained by the honourable lady, and we have been strumming Slovak folk songs in it, we have been frequent guests at subsequent rehearsals – with or without the mandolin, as musicians, singing dancers, and even as actresses. [...] Nevertheless, a few boys also got on stage in the same meandering way I did – more out of social requirement than out of a desire to stand on stage. Such as the painter's assistant Bandi Ackermann, who paints the props but is also an extra, although he has no singing voice and, as an Israeli, he does not even speak Slovak*” (Závada 2021, 38 – 39). The above excerpt documents that the narrator communicates the religious identity of the characters in a neutral “mode” when describing events or when portraying the characters – residents of the village of T., although, in their early days, even the members of the Hungarian political parties did not see the limited practice of religion as problematic. P. Závada refers to the March Front movement and its press organ, the magazine *Válasz* [Answer], in order to draw attention to the strengthening of the ruling policy and the “Fascization” of Hungarian society by reflecting on the “rhetoric” of the members of the March Front movement: “*And if it comes to the*

⁸ See Benz 2010.

point that those as mentioned earlier (the Jewish population – noted by the author) get their hands not on weapons, but on work tools, let our youth take it with the understanding that in their spare time, they are always coming together to practice their faith, and then we will not snatch their holy scriptures out of their hands for no reason” (ibid., 84). Although it is only one of the “Hungarian political groupings”, his choice is intentional in order to signal fundamental changes in Hungarian social life: the adoption of a new press law in 1938 and a law limiting the representation of the Jewish population in the state and public administration in 1938 (Bata 1974, 956 – 957; Vargová 2011, 53 – 54). The change in the political climate thus influenced the position of the Jewish ethnic group in Hungary in 1938. Despite the anti-Jewish legislation⁹, however, it took some time for the mobilising potential of ideas activating hatred and anti-Jewish ethnicity to result in open violence. However, changing the Jewish ethnic group’s religious beliefs was not the goal of the growing influence of Germany and its Nazi regime. Religion was applied only as a distinctive marker to differentiate a Christian from a Jew.

However, the phenomena of religious life are present in the novel to show the difference between the Jews themselves, some of whom already had more liberal attitudes towards religious (dietary) habits. The Ackermann family still represents “conservative” Judaism: “It is good that she (Éva Koleszár – noted by the author) no longer thinks of Bandi Ackermann, his father at that time was portioning and measuring kosher meat and from time immemorial he observed all religious principles – including the fact that he could ride in a wagon with his son for a ritual bath as far as the Mures River” (Závada 2021, 120). Religious affiliation in the first part, unlike the second, does not become a kind of stigma. However, “it is the observance of the rules of kashrut that separates the Jew from their social surroundings and prevents them from assimilating... It should be noted, however, that kashrut did not and does not mean social isolation, because Jews everywhere, wherever they are accepted and respected, strive for the well-being of the country, and they have friends among non-Jews as well” (Slivka et al. 2013, 70).

Antagonistic attitudes towards the Jewish population only escalated due to the German occupation of Hungary. The second part of the novel consists of István Semetka’s memories of the Eastern Front and the battles of the Hungarian army alongside Nazi Germany. The memoirs confront us not only with the relationship to the Jewish labour servants, given over to the Hungarian officers’ “will or ill-will” [“One unexpected memory comes to the surface: on the way here, while handing out lunches to the labour servants, I slapped a Jew for insolent back talk” (Závada 2021, 155)], but also to Hungary’s participation in the liquidation of the Jewish population. There is no shortage of detailed and naturalistic descriptions of the physical liquidation of the “Transcarpathian Jewish community” (ibid., 201) or mention of this human ruthlessness and cruelty recorded through photographs: “Two pictures show people being forced to undress at the head of a large snaking mass, another shows the naked victims in groups of ten, one group standing on the left, a second group in the middle just approaching the pit, and a third group on the right being ordered to lie down on top of the naked corpses lying in the half-full pit. In the fourth picture, lying people are being shot in the back of their heads, and in the fifth, you can see a close-up of a pit with corpses, and some are still raising their heads or hands. [...] I wondered what if the eyewitnesses would tell all this one day” (ibid., 174).

Belonging to Judaism is revealed through an insinuation of the typical Jewish man’s appearance with payot. Payots or sidelocks are characteristic primarily of Orthodox Jews. Having them is based on the Third Book of Moses and “symbolises the edges of the fields at harvest time, which,

⁹ The first anti-Jewish law in Europe was adopted in Hungary (it restricted the admission of Jewish students to universities as early as 1920). However, it may be noted that it was the Hungarian Jews who were the most closely aligned with the majority nation (Vargová 2011, 53).

according to tradition, were not reaped so that widows, orphans, and strangers could gather the remains of the produce. Cutting off the payots meant turning away from orthodox dogmas and the will to assimilate with the outside world" (Hradská – Molnárová 2006, 119). Along with the image of the Jew – a devotee of Judaism – the presence of religiously motivated antisemitism is also identifiable in the novel's second part. We can speak of four forms of it here.

In the first case, it is the image of the Jew as a morally inferior "element", causing not only general indignation by his behaviour but also violating the religious rules established by the Old Testament. Thus, for example, in the novel, we are confronted with the image of the violation of eating habits¹⁰, the prohibition against eating meat from a horse and carcasses: "*and this here is a frozen horse, the soldiers and Jews used to go to it for days, pick it, gnaw on it and sometimes when they had just managed to build a fire, they cooked a piece of it*" (Závada 2021, 262). An image/contrast is thus formed between the Jew and the moral man.

The second form is the ridiculing of the Jews for their religious customs, specifically the covenant of circumcision, which originated in God's covenant with Abraham.¹¹ P. Závada here draws attention, among other things, to the cruelty and practices by which the Hungarian soldiers did not lag behind the German officers. "*In the second case, only the Hungarian Raven unit was present. Near the lake at the edge of the village, they dragged about a dozen naked Jewish men, supposedly partisans, up into the trees with fallen crowns. However, the two corporals were not satisfied with this; they stripped the corpses of their genitals, cut the skin on the lower abdomen on two sides and – as if in jest – put their hands 'in their pockets'*" (ibid., 172).

The narrator presents the third one through the emphasised confessional affiliation of the majority and their antagonistic attitudes in the gathering and transfer of Jews to the ghettos: "*When fellow Christian citizens rushed to the streets and in the language of the commandants started shouting, Jews out, deploy quickly, one-two and so on, logically it was supposed to speed up the whole process, but it was the other way around, these unnecessary spiteful remarks, shouting and rushing somewhat disrupted the smooth course of the evacuation*" (ibid., 377).

However, the fact of setting fire to Jewish synagogues as symbols of Jewish faith and culture, as well as the indifference of the inhabitants to their rescue, cannot be overlooked either. "*One night, at the beginning of October, when the arrival of the Russians – [...] – was only a few days away, a fire broke out in the centre of Sarvaš. [...] It was a synagogue that burned to the ground; only ruins remained; many watched, but the firefighters did not come, and no one even moved to put out the fire. [...] After all, their domination, which persecuted us and evicted us from our homes, will finally come to an end; the moment is approaching when they will have to come out with colour and say where that many people have disappeared, but instead of bitterly regretting it, instead of being at least additionally horrified at what they have done, [...] at the last moment they will still burn down the synagogue. Moreover, in Sarvas, it hardly bothers anyone anymore. Who should be concerned? They shrug because there are no Jews in Sarvas anymore*" (ibid., 487).

Antisemitism concerning religious traditions and customs in the post-war years remains outside the author's attention in the last part of the novel, perhaps because "*those who were classified as Jews could no longer return home, and those who could also prefer to go away*" (ibid., 525).

Although antisemitism initially had a religious character, it gradually took on the character of racial discrimination, which the Nazis used as an instrument of mobilisation. They could transform the concrete Jew into an abstract Jew and, against negative connotations, perceived them as a socio-political problem that had to be solved. They were inspired by the works of authors who defined the racial characteristics of Jews, such as R. Knox (*The Races of Men*, 1850), J. A. Gobineau

¹⁰ See Lv 11, 1 – 47.

¹¹ See Gn 17, 9 – 13.

(*Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*, 1853 – 1855), or drew attention to the fateful encounter and struggle of the Aryans with the Jews, such as E. Drumont (*La France juive* 1886; *La France juive devant l'opinion* 1886; *Le Testament d'un antisémite* 1891) and H. S. Chamberlaine (*Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* 1899).¹²

In a situation where confessional segregation was gradually losing its justification¹³ in terms of Jewish identification, the racial discourse was used to emphasise the superiority of the Aryan race and the danger of degeneration due to the mixing of races, and thus the racist justification of the need for anti-Jewish measures. The racial overtone was not decisive for the novel's antagonistic attitudes towards the Jewish population. Instead, it was a deliberate conflation of ethnic and racial differences. We assume that the reason for this lies in the fact that in the interwar period, the feeling of Hungarian ethnic awareness¹⁴ was dominant among Jews, and the process of cultural assimilation to which P. Závada refers is also traceable: “*And I will be honest, my Klárka, Margó continues, the most incomprehensible thing for me is that my parents from Nagyvárad and I have long since freed ourselves from the outdated Jewish rules, not to mention Dezső, who is a complete atheist, and yet they consider us to be the same Jews as those who go around bearded in a kaftan or a wig and observe all the religious rules, I do not understand this, I do not understand why*” (ibid., 353). Unlike religiously motivated antisemitism, Jews, according to the racist idea, could never get rid of their “Jewishness”; it was given by their origin, appearance, and clothing, determined by faith and government regulations. In Hungary, the “Race Protection Act” defined “Jews” more broadly than the Nuremberg Laws (Iacu 2014, 149), which inadvertently gives the impression that “*the Hungarians were more ruthless than the Germans themselves*” (ibid., 405). Despite the primacy of the legislative anchoring of discrimination¹⁵ motivated by antisemitism, the “reality of everyday life” was different. As Paul Lendvai, an Austrian journalist of Jewish descent born in Budapest, notes, “*Despite Jewish laws, nowhere in Central and Eastern Europe could more than 800,000 Jews (including converts) have lived as long and in such relative safety as in Hungary at that time*” (Lendvai 2002, 336), although, on the other hand, “*Nowhere in Central and Eastern Europe, however, were Jews so quickly and so brutally sent to their deaths as in Hungary*” (ibid., 405). Anti-Jewish sentiments were primarily conditioned by the political situation in the country, which appears to be “*the land of the Jews*” (Závada 2021, 641). In his novel, Závada indirectly and casually encourages us to reflect on the “reality of the war years” and the relationship of the majority to the Jewish population in the individual Central European states with notes as if on the margin, the narrator's little significant “inputs” from the point of view of plot development or employing the characters' speeches. The passage exemplifies this: “*Will they [occupiers – noted by the author] observe any civilised standards? Personal property, personal freedom, expertise, Christian faith and morals, culture and, in general, basic human contact, honesty or decency? And what behaviour is recommended if there is no satisfactory answer to these doubts? There is no guaranteed recipe, my dears; from now on, one can behave as one pleases, and the unpredictable adversity of fate often decides here*” (ibid., 461).

Antisemitism became an ideological tool that could very quickly unite against the “supposed evil” and demand that Hungarian youth – as the novel also captures – “*love their breed even more than they hate Jewry*” (ibid., 84).

¹² See Budil et al. 2013, 227 – 229.

¹³ This categorization faded as Jews converted to save themselves from deportation.

¹⁴ As a result of this ethnic identification, some Hungarian historians, such as Gy. Ránki, consider the tragedy of the Jewish population is also the tragedy of the Hungarians (Lendvai 2002, 337).

¹⁵ As a result, for Jews, including the “fictional Juci Weisz”, for example, “*a teaching career becomes only a longed-for dream*” (Závada 2021, 279).

P. Závada “revives” several negative Jewish heterostereotypes in the novel, including the stereotype of Judeo-Bolshevism as a complot of world Jewry (Slivka et al. 2013, 193). The Jews’ inclination to communism and membership in communist organisations was conditioned by the idea of a social system guaranteeing equality for all people. This very circumstance was perceived as a threat in the 1930s, and Jews were accused of trying to take over the world. This stereotype enters the novel through an ironically tinged conversation between Jakab Weisz and Matyi Koleszár: “Listen, Kóbi, pokes Koleszar under Jakab Weisz’s rib while we are waiting for the bus to Makó, the guys here say you are a Marxist. [...] He has not read a line from the person in question, but why couldn’t he be a Marxist? [...] And when asked whether this Marxmania is any characteristic racial trait among them, he replies that, of course, it shows up clearly in the examination of the foreskin and the blood; it is now even an organic part of the Talmud. [...] Jakab knows very well that this Marx is just an ordinary, well-built backstabber and, in our way, a horrible, unpleasant Jew. [...] Well, Mr Weisz, I am not looking forward to it. You would better give everyone the same respect, please, whether someone is a stinking Jew or not” (Závada 2021, 79). Závada reinforces the stereotype of the Jew as a communist/socialist citizen here with the attribute of the stinking man as the originator of many problems/diseases of the individual and society, but also as a parasite.

The image of the smelly Jew is anchored in multiple dimensions. It also refers to the inhumane treatment of Jews during the transports to the extermination camps, their “cramming” into freight cars without the possibility of personal hygiene. “We assume that Jakab, who tries to board an overcrowded carriage to his parents in Csaba, is pushed away with a stick by the policeman, to whom Erna will later approach with a plea in Debrecen. She said she saw her son on the train that had just arrived, so she begged the commander nicely to be so good as to allow her to meet him so they could exchange at least a few words. [...] Erna can approach Jakab’s carriage; she can shout at him, and soon he appears in the deflected doorway. [...] The policeman commands, ‘Forward and march’; when only five steps separate Jakab and Erna, the command ‘Halt, stinking Jew’ is heard. And the filthy bastard gets orders to take his pants off. Did he go deaf? Pants. And if he needs to be petitioned to take his shitty pants off. Or maybe they should have some Jewish whore brought in. And then Jakab Weisz is ordered to grab his circumcised dick. Jakab clutches his penis in his palm, and the policeman immediately hits him with a wooden club, after which Jakab falls to the ground; Erna jumps up to him with a scream, she manages to touch her son, but two armed men immediately drag the prisoner away, and he, while he is being pushed into the carriage, shouts, it is okay, mom, do not worry, nothing is wrong, mom” (ibid., 398). In this realistic depiction, Závada confronts us with a devastating dishonesty of human existence, making the inhumanity of the conditions visible, referring to the rhetoric of the time and the portrayal of Judaism as a contagious disease or “parasites of civilisation”.

SUMMARY

P. Závada uses the method of oral history to provide an innovative literary representation of the trauma of the war years, the tragedy of the individuals’ human fate (e.g., J. Semetka, his daughter and others) and groups (inhabitants of the village of T., Jews/Jewish people), the amorality of acts, including the absurdity of racial, ethnic and cultural intolerance. However, he does not explicitly name the perpetrators of the (Central) European cataclysm of unprecedented proportions: “But why do they lie to us so much? Why did we have to come here, and for whom did so many people die? Who are the perpetrators? We, commanders, who, according to the German Major General Brinzei, were sparing the blood of conscripts? We, with the lowest rank, who suffered together with the foot soldiers [...]? Is that why we are Azazels, fallen angels?” (Závada 2021, 518 – 519). However, it is not only a manifestation of trauma but also its treatment, which is presented as (re)finding identity:

one's own, but also that of the group, i.e., residents of the village of T. Restoring this identity is connected with the relationship to the space perceived as home, which cannot be forced or ordered but through talking and remembering. It can be documented through one of the narrators – J. Semetka. Through the chosen “technique” of “polyphony”, P. Závada provides not only a “truer” – even if not unambiguous – statement about the world, which can find justification for amoral acts, about the survival strategy, about the meaning of human being anchored in the “spatial”, “cultural binding” and in moral “equipment”, but instinctively it also creates an opportunity for the reader to participate in this process, to form an awareness of the depicted period of history.

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