# SPIRITUAL AND ANTISEMITIC MOTIFS IN THE WORK OF MILAN RICHTER

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**ABSTRACT:** The paper presents an analysis and interpretation of the poetry of Milan Richter, which is deeply marked by the tragedy of the mass extermination of the Jewish community during the wartime Slovak state. As the author belongs to the second generation of Holocaust survivors, the paper focuses on the transformations of Jewish identity across three generations of survivors. Particular attention is also devoted to antisemitic and anti-Zionist discourses, as well as to dominant spiritual and biblical motifs – specifically questions of faith, the search for lost faith in the Jewish God after personal traumas caused by the Holocaust, and the interplay of theistic, deistic, and atheistic perspectives. These three lines intertwine throughout Richter's work, along with the recurring motif of the angel, accompanied by the contrasting colour symbolism of white and black.

**KEYWORDS:** Antisemitism. Holocaust. Poetry. Biblical motifs. Semiotics.

## POST-WAR IDENTITY OF SLOVAK JEWRY

Since Milan Richter (1948) belongs to the second generation of Holocaust survivors, it is essential to focus primarily on the transformations of Jewish identity across three generations of survivors, or rather on the reflection of the feelings of the second generation, which the author embodied in his poems based on personal experience. This poetic representation functions as a *pars pro toto* of the transformation of Central European Jewish identity after the Second World War.

Judaism is today regarded as one of the characteristic phenomena of the Central European space. Jewish identity itself, however, is not only the consequence of life in the diaspora, but also derives from ancient Jewish concepts: "the idea of the Jews as a nation with its own destiny, for which it must fight" (Segerová 2003, 147). The Jews were perceived as "a dispersed nation, a 'supranational nation,' and yet a 'nation of no one'" (Vargová 2011, 52). If we accept the fact that Jews lived for centuries in the diaspora, shaped by the conditions of the country in which they resided, their identity oscillated between the cultural patterns inherited from their ancestors, which preserved the continuity of the Jewish people, and the cultural traditions adopted from the majority ethnicity, which produced significant ethnographic differences among individual Jewish groups in the diaspora. For this reason, a dual identity gradually developed among Jews (Segerová 2003, 150 – 151).

1. Geographical identity: derived from the country in which they lived.
2. A type of identity based on ideology, external image, and cultural practices.

In general, it may be argued that traditional Jewish identity gradually disintegrated over the centuries, a process that reached its culmination in the 20th century through mass migration, the Holocaust, and assimilation. These developments resulted in a significant decline in the Jewish population, accompanied by the rise of Zionism and the establishment of the State of Israel.

The initial impetus for the disruption of traditional identity, however, lay in a transformation of the very understanding of Jewishness. While Judaism had originally been conceived as both

a religion and an ethnicity, during the 20th century – already before the Second World War, and even more distinctly in the postwar period – Jewishness came to be identified primarily with religiosity, while the ethnicity of a practicing Jew could be diverse. As noted: "From a global perspective, Jewishness is thus today a voluntary act of self-identification, whereas loyalty to the majority nation is given" (ibid., 151 – 152).

After the Second World War, the tragedy of the Shoah became a defining aspect of identity for a certain segment of European Jewry, since, as has been observed, "the Holocaust is not an event that happened, but a phenomenon that, to some extent, continues even after it has been historically concluded" (Klementová 2008, 193). The Holocaust thus became a distinctive attribute through which some Jews experienced their ethnic, or ethno-religious, self-identification – an experience they might not have otherwise had.

A representative example is Juraj Špitzer (1919 – 1995), a Slovak literary historian and journalist of Jewish origin. From 1938, he studied medicine at Comenius University in Bratislava, but his studies were interrupted for racial reasons. In 1942, he was interned in the labor camp at Nováky. Following the outbreak of the Slovak National Uprising, he became the commander of a Jewish partisan unit. After the war, he studied French and philosophy at Comenius University, later serving as editor-in-chief of Kultúrny život and as secretary of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers. After 1969, he was expelled from the writers' association, dismissed from his employment, and banned from publishing.

Špitzer exemplifies a figure whose life oscillated between the identity of a Slovak Jew and that of a Jewish Slovak. His inclination toward a Slovak identity effectively resolved the dilemma faced by many Slovak Jews – whether to remain in Europe or to emigrate to Israel: "*He 'did not want to be a Jew,' although at the time he had not yet formulated it in such a stark manner*" (Baláž 2019, 69). In his book *Svitá, až keď je celkom tma* [Dawn Breaks Only When It Is Completely Dark], published posthumously, Špitzer writes:

> "*A Slovak Jew or a Jewish Slovak. Throughout my life, I had to live with this dilemma – and not only I. Jews in other countries ask themselves the same question. I experienced both poles of this dilemma very acutely, for in my life I encountered both anti-Slovak and anti-Jewish insults. I eventually adapted my answer freely according to Freud: As long as I was forced to acknowledge the growth of antisemitic prejudice, I considered myself intellectually a Slovak. Since then, however, I prefer to be called a Jew*" (Špitzer 1996, 41).

In this respect, Juraj Špitzer represents the so-called first, wartime generation of Jewry. In her study *Postholokaustová židovská identita* [Post-Holocaust Jewish Identity], Klementová distinguishes a total of three generations (Klementová 2008, 196 – 197):

1. The generation that survived the war: For this generation, the Holocaust represented a profound rupture in their previous lives, involving human, psychological, and material losses that significantly shaped their postwar existence and identity. The subject of the Holocaust was often deliberately suppressed in their perception, and with it their Jewish identity, which was frequently concealed even from their descendants.
2. The second generation of survivors: This is the generation that grew up in the "silence" of the Holocaust. In many households, however, this silence was eventually broken, and the children of survivors came to learn about the suppressed family Jewish identity. The outcome of these processes was often a fragmented identity, resulting from the tensions between the previously established identity and the one that was subsequently rediscovered. Identification with Jewish identity in the postwar period was further complicated by the communist regime, which suppressed religious, ethnic, and other expressions perceived as "different". The communist theoretician Karl Marx understood religion as the "opium of the

people," a sedative that dulls the pain and alienation of the oppressed, while simultaneously preventing individuals from changing their fate of their own accord, since responsibility is transferred to God as a supreme being outside of history. Marx assumed that religion would disappear on its own under communism, since it was merely a tool for manipulating people and a substitute for realities they could not confront on their own – for example, the death of loved ones. Together with Engels, he wrote in their work *On Religion*: *"Man, who has found only the reflection of himself in the fantastic reality of heaven, where he sought a superman, will no longer be willing to find only the mere appearance of himself, only the 'non-man', there where he seeks and must seek his true reality. The foundation of irreligious criticism is this: man makes religion; religion does not make man. Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-feeling of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man – state, society.* [...] *Religion is the fantastic realisation of the human essence, because the human essence has no true reality"* (Marx – Engels 1959, 39 – 40).

3. The third generation of survivors: This generation consists of the grandchildren of survivors, who grow up in a qualitatively different environment. The previously mentioned "silence" has already been broken, and family memory is gradually being filled with recollections of suffering and of those relatives who perished in the Shoah. In some families, this process has led to a renewed inclination to establish contact with the Jewish religious community.

An example of the third generation's return to the culture of their ancestors in Slovakia is the communal celebration of various Jewish holidays in public spaces. Hanukkah was celebrated in more modest conditions already shortly before November 1989 in the village of Stará Kuchyňa. In the 1990s, however, the celebration moved into larger venues and began to include a formal welcome for those present, an explanation of the holiday's significance, the lighting of candles, singing, performances by children from the community, and a concluding concert of traditional Jewish and Yiddish songs.

At present, the celebration typically features, in addition to candle lighting and the singing of the traditional hymn Maoz Tzur[1], a performance by children from the Lauder Gan Menachem kindergarten (directed by Rabbi Myers's wife). In 1993, after assuming the rabbinical post, Rabbi Myers decided to light a large hanukkiah in the streets of the city. The candelabrum, constructed from steel pipes by the sculptor Valerián Trubalko, was first lit in a public ceremony attended by the then-President of the Slovak Republic, Michal Kováč, and was placed on Zámocká Street in Bratislava, on the site where an Orthodox synagogue had stood until 1959. The candle lighting is accompanied by the consumption of traditional Hanukkah foods, including doughnuts and potato pancakes. In 2017, a public Hanukkah celebration was also held in Košice (Salner 2018, 78).

Today, there also exists in Bratislava a kindergarten for Jewish children, run by Rabbi Myers's wife, Mrs Chana Myers. Here, preschoolers are introduced to the fundamentals of Judaism, learn to read and write, and become acquainted with Hebrew and the Jewish alphabet. In addition, Chana Myers directs a cheder (Jewish elementary school) for older children.[2]

[1] See https://www.chabadslovakia.com/templates/articlecco_cdo/aid/949481/jewish/Maoz-Cur.htm.

[2] See https://www.chabadslovakia.com/templates/articlecco_cdo/aid/629222/jewish/SM-Lauder-Gan-Menachem.htm.

## MILAN RICHTER

Although the author was born only in the early postwar years and was therefore not directly affected by the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question", a significant part of his family on both his father's and mother's side perished in the Shoah. "*Both of my parents came from Jewish families. My father's family was, to a certain extent, orthodox – at least if we judge by the fact that in my grandmother Deutsch's household everything had to be cooked and baked kosher.* [...] *My mother came from Olomouc, from a secular bourgeois family. Her father was a merchant – they had their own shop, where they sold foodstuffs.*"[3] The maternal grandparents died in Auschwitz: "*By all accounts, both of them were immediately sent to the gas chambers by Dr Mengele during the selection on the ramp. Their names are now inscribed on the wall of the Pinkas Synagogue in Prague, together with the date of death: 9 October 1944.*"[4]

The events of the Second World War, as mentioned above, had a direct impact on the postwar life of his family and fundamentally shaped the author's poetics. The theme of racial persecution during both the wartime and postwar totalitarian regimes is captured in his poetry collection *Vo mne zbúraný chrám* [The Wrecked Temple in Me], published in 2002. Because antisemitism was associated with the socialist regime, a number of the poems included in this collection could not be published before 1989. The selection comprises 33 poems in Slovak, 11 of which were also translated by the author into English and seven into German. The poems span the period from 1972 to 2002, in addition to texts previously published in the collections *Peľ* [Pollen] (1972), *Bezpečné miesto* [A Safe Place] (1987), *Korene vo vzduchu* [Roots in the Air] (1992), *Spoza zamatových opôn* [From Behind Velvet Curtains] (1997), and *Anjel s čiernym perím* [The Angel with Black Feathers] (2000). The volume also includes poems that had never before appeared in print.

In 2008, a second, more comprehensive selection of Richter's work was published under the title *Tajomstvá dokorán* [Secrets Wide Open]. In addition to poems from eight previous collections, the volume also included previously unpublished poems from the years 1970 – 1990, as well as the poetic cycle *Poďte, vyrážame* [Come On, Let's Go], written between 2000 and 2008. The turbulent events and dramatic history of the twentieth century are likewise reflected in the collection *Storočie, kruté stoočie* [Century, Cruel Hundred-Eye Century] (2019), in which the author, from the perspective of a Jewish boy and later a man, responds to the events of the century that shaped him. In contrast to his earlier work, this collection is characterised by a stronger epic dimension. Several poems may be classified as prose poems, and in their testimonial value from the perspective of a witness, they approach the method of oral history, since, as Hajko observes, "it is precisely facts – real and undeniable – that here constitute and shape the structure of the poem: not images, but unequivocally facts" (Hajko 2020, 122).

The issue of antisemitism is also addressed in the collection *Na nádvorí smrti* [In the Courtyard of Death] (2023), which presents a more selective compilation of poems previously published in earlier volumes. Its central motif is antisemitism approached from various perspectives, focusing on its roots, causes, and impact on the Jewish community. The collection does not concentrate solely on the Holocaust as the most extreme manifestation of anti-Jewish tendencies, but also reflects postwar attitudes within Slovak society and contemporary attempts to question or relativise the events of the twentieth century in relation to Slovak Jewry.

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[3] The given citation is from an interview with Milan Richter for the organization Post Bellum. The interview is part of the online database Memory of Nations and is accessible to registered users. See https://www.memoryofnations.sk/sk.

[4] Memory of Nations.

In his poetic expression, Richter interweaves the intimate with the public, linking personal and familial traumas to broader societal issues. His own fate, together with that of his family members, becomes entwined with the destinies of prominent figures of the time, and in this way, he seeks to answer fundamental questions: what it means to be a Jew, and more generally, what it means to be human. His poetry holds up a moral mirror to the cruelty of the world and to human indifference, drawing above all on the practices of the two totalitarian systems that shaped – and profoundly scarred – the history of the twentieth century: fascism and socialism.

The themes of antisemitism and the stereotyping of Jewishness also entered Richter's dramatic work, specifically into two plays about Franz Kafka, published in book form in 2016 under the title *Kafka a Kafka* [Kafka and Kafka]. Although both plays were written between 2006 and 2007, they have not yet been staged by any Slovak theatre (for audiences of the J. Palárik Theatre in Trnava, they were presented only as staged readings in 2007). Selected scenes from the play *Z Kafkovho Pekloraja* [From Kafka's Hell-Paradise] were performed at the Kafka's Matliare Festival in 2008 and 2009. The author's intention in both plays was to map the essential biographical and artistic attributes of Kafka's personality and literary activity. Whereas the first play, *Z Kafkovho Pekloraja*, focuses more intensively on the psychological experience of the protagonist, the second directs attention to the social atmosphere of the period in which Kafka lived and worked, as well as to the era following his death.

## ANTISEMITIC DISCOURSES AND HOLOCAUST REMINISCENCES

Milan Richter's poetry is profoundly marked by the tragedy of the mass extermination of the Jewish minority during the wartime Slovak state. It may even be argued that his oeuvre constitutes the most extensive and complex body of Holocaust- and antisemitism-themed poetry in Slovak literature. His work is saturated with antisemitic discourses, not only through allusions to the wartime Slovak state but also in poems thematising the postwar period with chronological extensions into the present era of Holocaust denial.

Considerable space is devoted to the themes of antisemitism and the stereotyping of Slovak Jewry. The poem *Zločincova matka* [The Criminal's Mother] builds upon the stereotype of the Jew's biological difference from the "pure Aryan race": "*Away with the vermin with hair like coal / with eyes like bitter almonds / with a nose like a vulture's gaze*" (Richter 2023, 71). At the same time, the poet underscores Jewish otherness as a pretext for the creation and dissemination of antisemitic ideas: "*To be different is always a challenge, to be a Jew among / Catholics in a small Záhorie village was a challenge at the dawn / of a cruel century*" (*Súmrak a úsvit* [Twilight and Dawn]) (ibid., 85). These verses explicitly reflect a folk form of antisemitism. A similarly pejorative tone emerges in *Grandmother Deutsch*, which functions as a direct accusation of local inhabitants – often neighbours – who either actively participated in the tragedy of the Jewish minority or silently looked on: "*That lousy wayr, in the village / no one felt guilty*" (Richter 2002, 39). From this folk antisemitism of the prewar and wartime periods, Richter transitions seamlessly to postwar expressions of hatred toward Jews, where pejoratives are replaced with vulgarities to capture the heightened xenophobic atmosphere of Slovak society: "'*Herr Richter!' they call you. / Or: 'You bastard!' / 'You should all have been gassed!' / 'Don't pretend to be God around here...*'" (*Čo zmyje zmije? Petrovi Jarošovi s vďakou* [What Will Wash Away the Vipers? With Thanks to Peter Jaroš]) (ibid., 48). In his reflections on the causes and consequences of antisemitism, Richter does not omit the so-called "White Jews" (similar to Righteous Among the Nations) who contributed to the rescue of Slovak Jewry during the period of racial persecution. In the poem *Koniec obchodu dobytkom a koňmi v Uníne* [The End of the Cattle and Horse Trade in Unín] (1941), he recalls Štefánia Vlková, who saved part of his father's family from deportation. As the

poet admits, it was precisely "*thanks to the unknown Štefánia that I am here too, a pest, a vermin / one who does not forgive*" (Richter 2019, 19).

For Richter, antisemitism did not end with the war or with the expiration of the racial laws; rather, it continued during the second totalitarian regime in Czechoslovakia and, in his view, persists to the present day. As he writes, the Holocaust "*did not perish in the camps, like lice it nested / in the skins of informers, of guardsmen, in the skin of communists*" (*Stretnutie na nádvorí smrti* [Encounter in the Courtyard of Death] (Richter 2023, 72). In this case, he explicitly portrays the political dimension of antisemitism, whose most striking manifestation in the period he depicts was the early 1950s show trials against the so-called "state conspiratorial centre." These events are represented in the poem *The Wrecked Temple in Me*, where he speaks of the "*Holocaust of the 1950s...*" (Richter 2002, 66). The "*song*" of the Holocaust, as he underscores, "*is far from being sung to the end*" (*Heydrich*) (Richter 2023, 97).

In addressing antisemitism in contemporary society, Richter focuses particularly on Holocaust deniers, who claim that "*the thing with the gas / was made up by the Jews*" (*Wetzler a šesťdesiat noriek* [Wetzler and Sixty Sables]) (Richter 2019, 68). With biting irony, he confronts such views in the poem *A Holocaust Denier Asked Me for Asylum*, which openly mocks those who cast doubt: "*Yes, young man, I know, Grandpa Emil and Grandma Amálie / invented it all, when in Auschwitz they had nothing else to do. / Pensioners were not sent to work, / so in winter they went to warm their old bones / by the glowing furnaces that educated Germans / proudly called Krematorien*" (Richter 2019, 110).

When depicting the spread of nationalist ideas in contemporary Slovak society, Richter generalises further, pointing out that expressions of hatred are not limited to the small Jewish community that remains. Verses from the poem *Monológ prezidentovho roztlieskavača* [Monologue of the President's Cheerleader] allude to the statements of a Slovak politician, directed against Hungarians, which incited the crowd to climb "*into tanks*" and "*crush the enemy*" (Richter 2023, 61).[5]

In a number of poems, Richter shifts from a general to a more specific level, moving from anonymous bearers of xenophobia to concrete figures of twentieth-century history who personify the totalitarian regimes of that century. Often, however, he refers to them only obliquely – through nicknames or pseudonyms – or allows the reader to identify the historical protagonist from descriptive hints. In the poem *Kobova rozohraná partia* [Koba's Played-Out Game], he brings together two ideologues of European nationalist movements: "*The draftsman tosses his hair defiantly: / 'I will make my own revolution, wenn der Tag kommt*[6]*'*" (Richter 2019, 6). He subsequently describes the draftsman's voice: "*that familiar / hysterical one, that hysterically familiar one: 'Fremder Herr, hören Sie, / Sie werden von mir noch hören!*[7]*'*" (ibid., 7). In this poem, the "draftsman" is a designation for Adolf Hitler, who was unable to bring his plans to completion and died at the end of the war, together with his ideology. His counterpart is Stalin, who appears here under his prerevolutionary nickname Koba and who had his "*game played out more successfully*" (ibid.).

Alongside Hitler, two of his close collaborators – Adolf Eichmann and Joseph Goebbels – also come into focus. The latter, in the poem *Od Dr Goebbelsa s láskou* [From Dr Goebbels with Love] (Richter 2019, 14), becomes for Richter a symbol of both the devil on earth and the flames of the crematoria, the one not excluding but rather complementing the other. The execution of Adolf Eichmann is addressed in two separate poems. In *Po nás popol* [After Us, Ashes], the poet

5 Cf. https://domov.sme.sk/c/2181806/slota-pojdeme-do-tankov-a-zrovname-budapest.html.

6 [when the time comes]

7 [Stranger – listen, / you will yet hear of me.]

juxtaposes the small handful of ash left from Eichmann with the mountains of ash left from the victims of the Shoah (Richter 2002, 58), offering a meditation on the enormity of human loss during the Holocaust. The poem *Vrahovia, milenci a zlodeji cudzích rozkoší* [Murderers, Lovers, and Thieves of Others' Pleasures] provides an explicit depiction of Eichmann's execution, witnessed by "*millions of burned eyes*" (Richter 2019, 47). May, the final month of his life, symbolically associated with spring and renewal, stands in stark contrast not only to the execution itself but also to the deaths in the concentration camps.

In response to the Holocaust, the dominant motif of Richter's verse is death as the only certainty in a world devoid of God. Written in a tone that is mournful, melancholic, and at times overtly depressive, his poems return in memory to his dead – those who left the world at the will of others and now lie buried, though no one knows where "*in the air above Auschwitz, over there / in the air they lie*" (*Korene vo vzduchu*) (Richter 2002, 15). He employed an identical motif also in the poem *Sväté miesta* [Holy Places]: "*An unimaginable place in Auschwitz / where your grandparents were transfigured into smoke, / the holy place somewhere in the air...*" (ibid., 42).

To evoke the atmosphere of the period and the tragedy of the Holocaust, Richter often draws on the figure of his mother, whom the war deprived "*of her girlhood in the truest sense of the word*."[8] When the conflict began, she was only nineteen: "*She had to wear the yellow star, she could not go out with friends to cafés or parks, and certainly not to the cinema or the theatre*."[9] Richter identifies himself in his reminiscences with "*that nineteen-year-old / whose hopes were frozen that early spring*" (*Nádeje* [Hopes]) (Richter 2002, 23). He subsequently portrays her death with great sensitivity against the backdrop of the myth of Eurydice, "*as she forever enters the darkness of the underworld*" (*Nohy odchádzajú zo sveta* [Feet Depart from the World]) (ibid., 41), as it was captured in Rainer Maria Rilke's work. Even at the close of life, when Erika's (Eurydice's) feet depart from the earthly realm, they return "*into the twilight of the ghetto, / where they tremble and run, run to the first games, / to the fall*" (ibid.). These verses simultaneously suggest the existential impact of the Shoah on the lives of survivors, a theme that Richter develops in greater detail in other poems.

For Richter, the figure of his mother becomes a symbol of the lost generation – a girl forced into premature adulthood by the horrors she experienced. With psychological precision, he conveys this in the poem *Matka* [Mother]: "*For long she has been a woman in whom a blind age / tormented girlhood with waiting / for death or for survival / with a crushed soul.* [...] *Her body timidly knocks at the gate / of love*" (ibid., 12). Throughout her life, she was haunted by guilt for having survived, for "*three times she escaped death, / when she was each time removed from the transport to Auschwitz. / To this day she is burdened by those three lives*" (*Tri životy* [Three Lives]) (ibid., 28). Richter's mother was, in fact, listed three times for transport to Auschwitz, yet each time she was removed from the list: "*In most cases, it was people connected to the Jewish self-administration who, as she later learned after the war, knew that the transports were going to Auschwitz, that there was a selection, and that people might not survive – or, more often, did not survive for long. Until the end of her life, she told me that she was tormented by those three lives, because the number of deportees always had to match*."[10] Her feelings of guilt were further intensified by the loss of her parents, who never returned from Auschwitz. Richter subsequently develops this motif to its extreme form, reflecting on which fate had been the lesser evil for the Jews – freedom or gas: "*... where will it be better for us? / To freedom, or to the gas?*" (*Tri životy*) (Richter 2002, 28). In this single line, he encapsulates the trauma of an entire postwar generation of survivors – the metaphorical seventh

8 Memory of Nations.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.

million of Holocaust victims, those who lived through it yet did not truly exist after the war. Their existence bore within it the indelible mark of the six million dead.

While the focus of Richter's poetry is most often on adult figures and children appear only sporadically, the poem *Dva detské príbehy* [Two Children's Stories] encapsulates the entire weight of the Shoah as borne by the child protagonists of its time. Alongside the poem's narrative dimension, its dominant element is a reflection on the causal relationship between war and the life of a child in whom "*something dead / has lodged at the bottom of the heart's chambers*" (ibid., 60). The tattooed numbers become a symbol of trauma that does not fade with time: "*The numbers will grow, the skin will stretch, it will be fed, / the numbers will not disappear, they will only shrink / in the end*" (ibid.).

In addition to the traumas of Auschwitz, Richter also addresses the trauma of the second generation of survivors – a subject that has in recent years become the focus of numerous studies exploring how the tragedy of the Shoah was transmitted to the children of survivors and, by extension, to subsequent generations. In this respect, Richter's poems function as reflections of his soul, revealing an inner world marked by anxiety over the loss of relatives he never had the chance to know. "*... Those stacks of silenced lips that fill my room, / their defenceless voices in my silence*" (*Nádeje*) (ibid., 25) continually return to him, reminding him that they remain an inseparable part of his life. In the poem *Smrť si nás vyšíva* [Death Is Embroidering Us] the dead relatives are symbolized by the fine ashes that serve as the only proof of their existence: "*On the grey cortex of my brain, / on my grey skin, / on my beard / falls fine ash / from crematoria. (So many years / it's fallen.) The fine ash / of what has not endured...*" (ibid., 31). While in some poems the deceased return to him in dreams and in his daily experience, in the poem *Ja-kvark odprevádza starých rodičov* [I–Quark Accompanies his Grandparents] relives the tragedy of his family through his mother's eyes, replaying the traumatic events she endured: "*I look at them / through my mother's eyes, and at the same time I am with them, / concealed in her stifled sob I see / how the three of us sit down on battered suitcases in the wagon*" (Richter 2019, 28). The unspeakable weight of the daughter's (Erika's, Richter's mother's) farewell to her parents distorts space and time, allowing Richter to find himself, at least imaginatively, in a moment four years before his birth, so that he might bid a symbolic farewell to his grandparents. The second generation of survivors was, after all, deeply marked by the loss of family continuity, as older generations were often annihilated in extermination camps. Richter responds to these circumstances with the words:

"*At least in that poem, I had the chance to be with them and to stroke their hands until they reached Auschwitz. The children of those who survived the Holocaust have this problem – that they never had the opportunity to touch the hands of their grandparents. I have called this, for myself, the syndrome of the un-stroked hand. When a grandfather or grandmother reaches a certain old age, and it seems that they are about to leave this world, I have the feeling – only a feeling, since I have never experienced it – that a grandchild should somehow show how much they have loved them in life. And this can be expressed, at least, by stroking their hand in farewell. This is something we, whose grandparents perished in the Holocaust, have never experienced.*"[11]

Through the verses of the poem *Ja-kvark odprevádza starých rodičov* oscillating between dream and lived experience, the poem simultaneously binds the poet's own destiny to that of Slovak Jewry deported to the German death camps and stands as the most powerful expression of the trauma of the second generation of survivors. The culmination of these reflections is found in the poem *Veci okolo mňa* [Things Around Me], whose verses remind him that he belongs "*more to death than to life*" (Richter 2002, 64).

[11] Memory of Nations.

## BIBLICAL THEMES AND QUESTIONS OF FAITH

A dominant aspect of Richter's oeuvre lies in its spiritual and biblical motifs – specifically in the exploration of faith, of the loss and search for faith in the Jewish God after the personal traumas caused by the Holocaust. The poet moves along a continuum between theism, deism, and atheism, intertwining these three lines of thought throughout his work. In the poem *Remember Sarajevo*, influenced by magical realism and built upon the contrast between the real and the fantastic (a fictional dialogue with God), Richter brings together all these forms of belief in God. He speaks to God in a theistic mode, yet simultaneously believes that God no longer exists. He entertains the deistic hope that God merely created the world but no longer intervenes in it, portraying Him as "*only the light of a star / that went out millions of years ago*" (Richter 2008, 274). This inner conflict of faith is resolved at the end of the poem through a decisive turn toward atheism: "*Only for me, a non-believer, / you are dead...*" (ibid., 275). In contemplating God in the modern world, Richter reflects both on faith as a profitable enterprise and on God as the primordial cause of interconfessional hatred: "*On this planet, Your children, conceived / in three attempts, are killing one another, for You, Lord, are great business*" (ibid.).

The poems that most clearly express Richter's disbelief in God are those whose verses resound as direct accusations against the divine for the tragedy of the Holocaust. They perhaps most vividly embody the author's personal stance on faith, for indeed, "*God / truly is not!*" (*Ten, ktorý prežil* [The One Who Survived]) (Richter 2023, 15). His poems simultaneously serve as reflections on the very cause of the Holocaust – on how God could have allowed such horror to befall His chosen people. In the poem *Non serviam?* [I Will Not Serve?], Richter interprets this as God's testing of humanity – whether humankind would "survive / in the role of slave" and continue to "*bless Him*" (ibid., 70). In contrast, in *Zlom palicu, Mojžiš* [Break the Rod, Moses], God becomes a dead God who allowed His people "*to be gassed*" and "*did not send a plague upon Satan's / mercenaries*" (ibid., 74). Such reflections lead to the conclusion that many Jews lost their faith, for how could anything remain "*sacred now / when so much desecration has left / this world bereft?*" (*Sväté miesta*) (ibid., 39). According to Richter, the source of all human injustice might lie in a hypothetical twenty-fourth pair of chromosomes (humans possess only twenty-three), which God originally embedded in the human genome as seeds of love. Yet, as he writes, "*someone spoiled something back there at the beginning*" (*Pokazená báseň* [Spoiled Poem]) (ibid., 18). Was it humanity that, through the original sin, chose the path of knowing both good and evil? Did an error occur in the original divine design, turning love into hatred? Richter leaves the answers to these questions to the reader.

Just as in his poetic depictions of historical events, where collective and personal histories intertwine, Richter's treatment of faith in God also moves from the universal to the intimate. This shift often occurs through the figure of his mother, who once asked, "*Where were You, Lord, when they were being gassed?*" (*Pri Múre nárekov* [At the Wailing Wall]) (Richter 2002, 44), or through his own rhetorical question: "*Father, why have You forsaken me?*" (*Stále na rozhraní* [Always on the Threshold]) (ibid., 11). The latter verse is an unmistakable echo of Christ's final words on the cross: "*My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?*"(Mark 15:34). However, since the poem also portrays the death of the poet's own father, whom he lost as a child, the term "Father" need not refer solely to the divine entity; it may equally express a reproach toward his earthly father and toward death itself for having taken him too soon. In this way, Richter draws a parallel between his father and Christ – one of the three persons of the Christian Trinity. Just as God abandoned His children, so too did his father leave his own, albeit not by choice. Notably, Richter employs this *New Testament* motif despite his Jewish background, revealing a syncretic spiritual perspective that transcends confessional boundaries.

Despite his atheistic stance on questions of faith, Richter frequently employs biblical symbolism in his work – both on the level of characters and in his reworking of stories drawn from the *Book of Books*. As Žilka observes, the *Bible* as a model or inspiration for art long "served as the foundation for the creation of new literary texts without the possibility of significant deviation from the original thematic structure" (Žilka 2015, 39). Yet Žilka also points out that with the advent of modernism, literature turns away from allegation – that is, from the binding adherence to biblical canon and its moral imperatives – since modernism disrupts ethical principles and rejects the obligation to reproduce the moral mission of biblical pretexts. Consequently, "postmodernism relies more on the deconstruction of the pretext through the posttext" (ibid., 41).

Richter draws equally from both the *Old* and *New Testaments*, even though the Jewish religion itself is founded solely on *Old Testament* teaching. A prominent example of this dual approach is his use of female biblical symbolism: the *Old Testament* figures of Rachel, Ruth, and Esther (*Vo mne zbúraný chrám*, *Príď pred polnocou* [Come Before Midnight]), as well as the *New Testament* Salome (*Sväté miesta*). Biblical motifs find their most striking expression in the poems *Príď pred polnocou* and *Štyri postavy v ohnivej peci* [Four Figures in the Fiery Furnace], which represent Richter's personal reinterpretations of scriptural narratives. Among the *New Testament*-inspired themes, he also engages with the legend of Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew – an archetype that evolved into one of the most enduring stereotypes of the Jewish people as eternally displaced, homeless, and incapable of assimilation into foreign lands. While the stereotype of the Wandering Jew originates in the *New Testament* story of the man who refused to help Christ on his way to Golgotha and was consequently condemned to eternal wandering, Richter's pretext derives instead from an *Old Testament* motif in the *Book of Esther* – the punishment for refusing to show reverence to the king, whose principal figures are King Ahasuerus and his wife Vashti. The poet reinterprets this symbol of loyalty and blind obedience, which the king demanded of the Israelites, by inverting it: "*The Jews laid their hands on those / who were preparing calamity for them. Smoke / from the furnaces ceased, the spirit returned to men...*" (*Príď pred polnocou*) (ibid., 54). By rejecting the obedience to which, according to the biblical story, they were condemned, the Jews could have, in the wartime context, reversed the course of history. Vashti thus becomes for Richter an onomastic symbol of revolt – a quality that, in the view of some non-Jewish observers, was absent among Jews in the turbulent twentieth century. In all of the aforementioned poems – *Príď pred polnocou, Štyri postavy v ohnivej peci*, *Vo mne zbúraný chrám*, and *Sväté miesta* – the author does not undermine the ethical foundations of the biblical narratives. Rather, his engagement with the biblical text is based on the comparison of *Old Testament* Jewish stories (accentuating the theme of antisemitism) with Jewish stories of the twentieth century, thereby implicitly revealing their causal interconnectedness.

In addition to allusions to biblical figures and narratives, Richter frequently paraphrases sacred texts of both Jewish and Christian traditions. In the poem *Uprostred noci, na kraji vesmíru* [In the Middle of the Night, at the Edge of the Universe], he adapts the well-known biblical phrase "*for dust you are and to dust you shall return*" (Genesis 3:19) into "*for gas you are and into gas you shall be transformed*" (Richter 2008, 228), thereby evoking the method of execution of Jews in Auschwitz. Other verses serve as a paraphrase of the Decalogue – the Ten Commandments that God gave to Moses as the fundamental ethical code for the faithful: "*We have stolen and we know what it is / to fear for all our possessions. We have coveted the wives of those / destined for transport... and we know what it is / to sleep with a Jewish woman. We have not yet killed anyone*" (*Monológ prezidentovho roztlieskavača*) (Richter 2002, 49). Through such biblical symbolism, Richter exposes the clerofascist politics of the wartime Slovak Republic and its most conspicuous manifestations in the aryanization of Jewish property and the deportations to the death camps. The poems *Remember Sarajevo* and *Zločincova matka* [The Criminal's Mother] also function as paraphrases

or allusions to the *New Testament* motif of the Annunciation. In the former, an angel appears to the poet with the message: "*And the Lord shall appear to you, / to reveal to you the mystery...*" (Richter 2008, 274). In the latter, however, the announced birth is that of Hitler. Here, the moment of revelation is inverted: "*no angel proclaimed his coming*," but rather "*someone laughed satanically once, and she started from her sleep in terror*" (Richter 2023, 71). As the preceding verses suggest, one of the dominant and recurrent motifs derived from biblical theology in Richter's poetry is that of the angel – a servant of God and spiritual being whose mission is to minister to those destined for salvation and to guide them along the path of faith. The symbolism of the angel is founded upon the contrast between white, representing "the untouched and unstained innocence of the primaeval paradise" (Biedermann 1992, 33), and black, symbolising "*darkness, primordial chaos, and death*" (Becker 2002, 42). In his treatment of the colour white, Richter remains faithful to its biblical meaning, or rather, to the symbolic value attributed to it by the authors of both the *Old* and *New Testaments*: he preserves it as the colour of "*ethical purity and perfection*" (Farkaš 2003, 85), the colour of angelic entities and divine messengers[12]. Yet whereas the conventional symbolism of colour would suggest that the black angel embodies death or the fallen angel who defied God, Richter does not adhere to this primary semantic interpretation. Instead, he adopts a derivative meaning of black – as the colour of desperate sorrow (Farkaš 2003, 90). The white angel, and white in general, naturally symbolises the purity of a child's soul, "*something white, a cloudlet of breath*" (*Dva detské príbehy*) (Richter 2002, 60). The black angel, or the angel with black feathers, by contrast, serves as the guardian and protector of those who suffer, even though "*you never saw him / in the dark moments of your life*" (*Tieň svetla – pierko z anjela?* [The Shadow of Light – a Little Feather from an Angel?]) (Richter 2002, 62). Richter's black angel identifies his emotions with those of humankind: when a human being suffers, so too does the angel. His torment is further intensified by his own impotence – his inability to help those he is meant to protect.

The symbolism of colour in Richter's poetry arises not only from the direct reference to angels with white and black feathers but also from the opposition between light and darkness. However, light does not always signify something positive, innocent, or life-preserving; on the contrary, it becomes an instrument of destruction – a symbol of death and annihilation: "*O light in the furnaces of crematoria, / light of lamps on the tables of interrogators, / light over Nagasaki, / light of assassinations, invasions, and coups, / O light beneath the cloaks of titans and the SS!*" (*Svetlo?* [Light?]) (Richter 2023, 32). According to the *Bible*, God Himself is the inextinguishable light of the faithful, and darkness represents His opposite. The dualism God–Satan, light–darkness, thus parallels the tension between life and death – the ultimate drama of the earthly world. While God, at the beginning of creation, separated light from darkness, good from evil, in Richter's understanding it is Auschwitz that shattered this primordial balance: good and evil merge into one. The "*light in the furnaces of crematoria*" (ibid.) further evokes the image of fire – a symbol that unites these opposing entities: God, who revealed Himself to Abraham in the burning bush, and Satan, associated with hell as a place of eternal damnation and fire (Matthew 25:41), as well as "*the outer darkness*" (Matthew 25:30). In his depiction of hell, Richter not only draws upon the biblical architext but also invokes the literary pretext of Dante's *Inferno*, as in the poem *Dva sny o mŕtvych* [Two Dreams of the Dead], where he writes of "*... Dante's meadow in the fore-hell, / where Europe lays down its victims, a drink for its feast*" (Richter 2008, 77).

However pessimistic, disillusioned, and hopeless many of Richter's poems may sound, in the poem *Zázrak nájdeného (pokus o ekumenickú báseň)* [The Miracle of the Found One (An Attempt

[12] Cf. Jn 20: 12: „a videla dvoch anjelov v bielom sedieť tam, kde bolo predtým uložené Ježišovo telo, jedného pri hlave, druhého pri nohách" [She saw two angels in white sitting where Jesus' body had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet].

at an Ecumenical Poem)] the author changes his rhetoric. The hope for transformation and for the overcoming of religious intolerance toward "the others" lies, for Richter, in ecumenism – when "the eighth candle on the Hanukkah menorah" (Richter 2023, 133), as a symbol of light, becomes equal to the star in the sky (which, for example, appeared at the birth of Christ). Both deities bear their share of guilt for the deportations of Slovak Jews: the Christian God, through the clerofascist ideology and the figure of the priest-president, sent the Jews to the gas chambers, while the Jewish God did nothing to save them. Yet ecumenism offers a glimmer of hope – a light "from beneath the ruin" (ibid.) – and the possibility of transcending this age-old rivalry: "*She smiled, and – it was Christmas. / Hanukkah, the miracle of the found one*" (ibid.).

## SUMMARY

Milan Richter's poetry is profoundly shaped by the tragedy of the Jewish minority's extermination during the wartime Slovak state, although he was born only in the immediate postwar years and did not directly experience the Final Solution. As part of the second generation of survivors – the children of Holocaust survivors – he grew up in an environment marked by silence about Jewish origins and the Shoah, producing fractured identity and disrupted family continuity. His oeuvre functions as a trauma narrative, permeated by Holocaust and antisemitism, not only in references to the wartime Slovak state but also in depictions of the postwar period and the present era of Holocaust denial. Beyond Auschwitz-related trauma, Richter gives voice to the "secondary trauma" of the second generation, reflecting inner anxiety over the loss of unknown relatives. A dominant feature of his work is the intertwining of spiritual and biblical motifs with questions of faith after Auschwitz, moving between theism, deism, and atheism. His writing thus joins the corpus of post-Holocaust literature, where testimony, memory, and theology converge.

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