

Jewish Children's Literature in Czechoslovakia: A Report from the Front Lines*

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Introduction

A couple of years after graduating from Charles University in Prague—already as a grown-up—I started learning Hebrew. At that time, Czechoslovakia maintained no diplomatic relations with Israel, and Israeli citizens were allowed to come to Prague only on special occasions (usually to attend international congresses or symposia), when keeping them out would have been too much of an embarrassment.

What I am now about to narrate happened one winter day. It was freezing cold and I was in a hurry to get to the Old-New Synagogue in time for the beginning of the Sabbath. Close to the entrance to the synagogue I caught up with an elderly man. Suddenly, he slipped on an ice-patch and fell. As I was helping him get up, he muttered with a matter-of-factness typical of someone speaking his mother tongue: "Todah. Todah Rabah." At that moment, something utterly bizarre occurred to me, something that might be hard for you to understand. "That was Hebrew," I told myself. "That language really does exist."

On Being a Jew

Later on, I often remembered this encounter with a genuine Israeli. Had I ever doubted the very existence of Hebrew? Or did I need proof that I had not been taking lessons in a made-up language? Of course not. I was simply surprised. The Hebrew language, the country where that language was actually spoken—all that was real. But in the Prague of the 1970s that reality was distant, and my own life was separated from it by thousands of barriers. Why am I bringing this up now? Simply because I had been familiar with this notion of hidden existence, of something which needed to be liberated, released into "real" life, even before this incident. I

*Address delivered at the International Symposium on Jewish Children's Literature, Jerusalem, July 1990.

always knew this feeling, ever since my childhood; this was exactly how I used to perceive everything that had to do with my Jewishness. Whenever I heard any mention of Jews, my first response tended to be a surprised "Them," which was then immediately followed, from somewhere deep inside of me, by a realization—uncertain, as if waiting for confirmation—that it was actually "Us." And books are such a confirmation. Any living human community, whether religious, national, or merely cultural, sees books as something that defines it, holds it together and affirms its very existence.

Jewish Children's Books in Czechoslovakia

I was born in 1950. Throughout my childhood and adolescence, I don't remember seeing a Jewish children's book either in Czech or Slovak. Such books were hardly ever published in Bohemia, and are still not being published today.

The Czechoslovak Republic that was formed in October 1918 on the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was a country with a fairly numerous, highly varied Jewish minority. Jews in Bohemia, Moravia, and to a large extent also in Slovakia, tended in their majority toward assimilation. It was in the easternmost section of the country, Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia, that the traditional, strictly religious Jewish community survived.

The truly democratic character of the Republic, built upon the humanistic ideals of its first president, T. G. Masaryk, reinforced the assimilationist trends. "Jewishness" was perceived only in "lukewarm," religious terms, and, especially in Bohemia and Moravia, it acquired the character of a nostalgic memory of something long gone. This, however, was not a short-term process. Its philosophical background lies in the Czech-Jewish movement, the beginnings of which can be traced back to the middle of the 19th century. The aim of this

movement was to merge Jewish culture with the culture of the host country in a manner that would be enriching for all those involved. This idea attracted more followers among Czech Jews than did Zionism.

Literature, and that includes children's literature, clearly reflected this trend. Only literature based on traditional, religious sources translated from Hebrew and adapted for children, was unequivocally identified with Jewishness. This was moralistic literature without any artistic ambitions. Not incidentally, these books were written by rabbis, such as Dr. Richard Feder in Bohemia, and Eliezer Schweiger and Izidor Schwarz in Slovakia. There were not many books of this kind, however. Between 1912 and 1924, Rabbi Feder published three volumes of *Jewish Get-Togethers*, collections of short texts by different authors. Feder himself contributed several stories from the Talmud and the Midrash. In 1937, Rabbi Schwarz published two slim collections of stories from the Talmud and the Midrash. Five years earlier, the same sources were used by E. Schweiger in his book *Beruria: Jewish Stories and Tales*. There were no other Jewish authors writing for children and youth in a country where 360,000 Jews lived with the exception of some writers for Jewish magazines. The most remarkable of these contributions were written in German for the bimonthly (and later monthly) *Jung Juda*, published between 1900 and 1937 by Filip Lebenhart.

Of course, Jewish themes, adapted for children, were employed by a number of Czech authors, whose names are mostly forgotten now: J. Svátek, V. V. Tomek, A. Jirásek, A. Wenig. These authors' books, published in much larger editions than the above-mentioned religiously oriented works, reflected a tendency that most Czech Jews accepted as their own: they referred to the age-old bond tying Jews to the land in which they now lived, to the distant, and legendary past. These books

were not original, however; invariably, they drew on earlier works by Jewish authors writing in German. The oldest Czech edition of Prague Jewish legends that included some tales of the Golem—the man-made being created by Wonder Rabbi Judah Löw, dates back to 1883, while its German original was older by several decades. These *Sippurim*, or legends and myths from the Jewish ghetto, edited by G. L. Weisel and Salomon Kohn, were published in five volumes between 1847 and 1864. They included contributions by authors other than those already mentioned. Within the Czech context, the *Sippurim* may be considered the oldest collection of writings on Jewish themes, likely based on oral tradition.

Weisel and Kohn lived in the Prague ghetto, and thus they encountered the traditional accounts firsthand. The way these legends and tales were presented, however, was not the result of a sensitive, folkloristic approach. The stories are highly stylized and strongly influenced by romanticism. In addition, there is an obvious political undertone: the overall tenor reflects the efforts of the recently emancipated Jews, adherents of the Haskalah, to draw closer to the contemporary Czech national movement.

The *Sippurim*, just like the *Nifle'ot Maharal* published in 1909 and made famous in the German translation by Chaim Bloch, were devoted exclusively to the Golem legends. These legends have been sufficiently dealt with elsewhere in literature; therefore, I shall limit myself to one comment only, a very significant one, though. A comparison of the original German text with the later Czech versions shows a definite shift in orientation. Whereas the *Sippurim* were undoubtedly written exclusively for the Jewish public, the Czech text addresses both assimilated Jews and Czech readers. This is reflected in the fact that a number of specific details of Jewish life and institutions, as well as some references that in the original are written in Hebrew, are omitted. The originally Jewish legends were thus transformed into specifically Czech legends, without making the Jewish public view this as something unnatural. This is reflected in D. Filip's afterword to his book *King Solomon's Magic Ring*, published in 1937. This book, which unlike the above legends was written for young children, ends with the following words: "This is the poetry of a nation, the fragments of which live here among us. It is beautiful and, as such, deserves to be read by Czech children."

Legacies of Theresienstadt

The Second World War, the years of murderous antisemitism, brought destruction to most Czechoslovak Jews. After November 1941, Jews from Bohemia and Moravia, like Jews from many other countries, were brought to the Theresienstadt ghetto, about 80 km north of Prague. This "assembly camp" was merely a transfer point on their way to the gas chambers in the East. It has been estimated that about 15,000 children passed through Theresienstadt; of these, less than a hundred survived. It is well known that for Jewish boys and girls between the ages of 10 and 15, a clandestine school was organized. Some teachers at this school—prisoners themselves—conducted lessons, some in the spirit of Czech nationalism, some in the spirit of Zionism.

Books were compiled for these schools, and they contained texts remembered by individuals. According to some testimony, these included themes from Jewish history as well as "updated" stories that were designed to give people more strength and help them forget the horrible reality. None of these books has been preserved. However, the Nazis failed to destroy one great testimony from the Theresienstadt Ghetto: a picture book by Prague artist Bedřich Fritta, which he gave to his son in 1944 for his third birthday. A facsimile of the work, whose author was murdered shortly after it had been completed, is well known in the West. The pictures are accompanied by the author's brief captions—witty, subtle, moving, full of pain and fatherly love.

In 1982, 38 years after the end of WW II, Ivan Klíma—who, along with Milan Kundera and B. Hrabal, is one of the best-known Czech writers—returned to Fritta's illustrations. He gave the book a new title: *A Boy Who Did Not Become a Number*, and accompanied the pictures with his own text. Ivan Klíma, who spent several years in Theresienstadt himself when he was a boy, was inspired by the pictures to write a story filled with dreams of an imprisoned child. In this slim volume, two artists—one dead, the other alive—meet to give joint testimony: longing for freedom cannot be killed, no number can be tattooed on the human spirit; no idea can be bound.

The fate of the book in Klíma's own country confirms this message with an ironic twist. When in 1968 the armies of the Warsaw Pact marched into Czechoslovakia,

hundreds of thousands of citizens—mainly intellectuals—were persecuted and discriminated against by the newly installed regime. Ivan Klíma, like many of his friends, refused to collaborate with the new regime and became a dissident, subjected to all sorts of harassment typical of the police state that Czechoslovakia had become: surveillance, occasional interrogations, forced unskilled manual labor, a publication ban. The book *A Boy Who Did Not Become a Number* was thus not published in Czech, Klíma's mother tongue, but in Swedish. It is only now, after the November revolution, that the Czech version is being prepared for publication.

Children's Books Under Communism

I have already mentioned 1968. However, the persecution of free-spirited citizens was not launched with this military intervention. Its origins date back to 1948, when the Communists took over the government. They created a system of government that willfully interfered in the lives of Czechoslovak Jews for over 40 years. To meet their own goals, the Communists controlled and directed Jewish institutions and formed public attitudes hostile towards Jews and Judaism.

Right after World War II, however, several books were published that contained evidence of the atrocities of the Holocaust. It seemed at that time that the endeavors of the practicing Jews, at least, to save the spiritual heritage of their forefathers for future generations, would be met with sympathy and understanding. In 1948 Rabbi Richard Feder edited *New Jewish Get-Togethers*, dedicated to the memory of Jewish children martyred in German concentration camps. The book was published by the Council of Jewish Religious Communities in the Czech Lands, as the first volume of a series; no other volumes ever came out, however, as the community was forbidden to publish them. Let me stress that fact once again: since 1948 only *one* Czech book expressly written for Jewish children has been published in Czechoslovakia.

This is not to say, however, that there have been no other children's books with a more or less Jewish theme. But there have not been many of them. I went through a list of publications and books published after 1949 by Albatros, the largest publishing house specializing in books for children, and came up with the following: As late as 1964, two books were published in editions

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of 10,000 copies each: *Escaping the Yellow Star* and *Wandering in a Circle*, by J. Martinec and K. Friedrich, respectively. These are the only original works that try to explain to young readers the war tragedy of the Jews. The story itself, an adventure of a Jewish boy fleeing his country from the Nazis, is supplemented by historical commentary.

Adaptations of old legends fared better with Czech publishers. This genre has already been dealt with elsewhere in this paper. As before the war, Jewish legends were published after the war, together with other Prague legends and tales. Apart from this—and rather exceptionally—several Jewish legends were included in books on folk literature collected in other parts of Bohemia and Moravia.

Among Czech authors of children's books who dealt with Jewish themes, one name stands out: E. Petiška. In 1968, the year of political thaw, Petiška collected legends about the Golem in a book called *Golem*. A year earlier, he published a book about ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, in which he included several Jewish myths. The book was called *Stories Warmed Up by the Sun*. The second edition came out in 1979, with one slight change: the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Socialist Republic ordered the editor to leave out the Jewish myths, as they were not desirable for young readers.

It is no coincidence that this happened after the reforms of 1968 had been crushed. After diplomatic relations with Israel were severed in 1967, and after the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, everything that was connected with "Jewishness" was stigmatized. On the contrary, free rein was given to anti-Jewish outbursts, referred to as the "struggle against Zionism." This was also reflected in editorial plans—Jewish themes ceased to exist. For example, the famous *Diary of Anne Frank*, published in 1968, when censorship was relaxed for a brief period, has never seen its second edition. No new Jewish titles could even be considered.

Clandestine Works

From my own experience, I can provide another example. When, in 1985, I handed in the manuscript of *Eight Lights*, a book of Jewish fairy tales, legends, and fables, to the Czechoslovak publishing house Artia, I was told that the book would be published in foreign languages, but never in Czech, i.e., in the language in which it was originally written. Czech children were supposed to be protected from such a "dangerous" book. As a result, the book was eventually published—like so many other books—through *samizdat* [secret private publication]. It was one of several books published in the Alef series, which brought together the works of several young Jewish intellectuals. Books published in this series were all produced clandestinely on typewriters, or were otherwise mechanically copied. They included almost twenty titles, among them Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Zlateh the Goat*.

The events that followed the student demonstrations of November 17, 1989 brought

a fall of the Communist government in Czechoslovakia. The free elections held in June 1990 indicated that there is no future for a totalitarian regime of any kind in my country. Czechoslovakia became free. There is freedom for all—even for the few Czech, Moravian, and Slovak Jews. Diplomatic relations with Israel have been resumed, all the taboos imposed by the former administration have ceased to apply. In the new situation, a number of books with Jewish themes are being prepared for publication, and, as far as I have been informed, books for children will be included.

In my opening remarks I spoke of the elderly man from Israel and about my surprise at hearing him speak Hebrew. One thing is certain: Our children will not be surprised when they hear Hebrew spoken. The Jewish world is open to them, and I only hope that they have the most beautiful books to help them get to know it.

Dr. Leo Pavlát is an editor at the Albatros Publishing House for children's and adolescent literature in Prague, Czechoslovakia, where he has translated and edited many children's books, including some with Jewish themes. He is also an author of children's books, which have been translated into several languages. Among them are The Secret of Book[!], Eight Lights, and The Old Testament for Children. Since 1978, Dr. Pavlát has translated stories and articles from French for two Czech Jewish publications. In September 1993 he was appointed cultural attaché to Israel in the Embassy of Czechoslovakia.

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