

Peroutková, Michaela; Tylečková, Lea

On the literary depiction of identity in post-war Czechoslovakia

Brünner Beiträge zur Germanistik und Nordistik. 2013, vol. 27, iss. 1-2, pp. [169]-178

ISBN 978-80-210-6409-6

ISSN 1803-7380 (print); ISSN 2336-4408 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/128423>

Access Date: 17. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

MICHAELA PEROUTKOVÁ, LEA TYLEČKOVÁ

ON THE LITERARY DEPICTION OF IDENTITY IN POST-WAR CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Abstract:

*The present paper deals with the question of identity and its formation in post-war Czechoslovakia as depicted in two chosen literary works. It compares a Czech novel *Město na hranici* by Zdeněk Ptáčník with a German novella *Božena* by a German author Peter Härtling focusing on the main literary characters and their existence in the Czech society immediately after the second world war. Paradoxically, the main protagonist of the Czech novel is a German woman (Käthe) while a Czech woman (Božena) is the central character of the German novella. Both characters differ from the vast majority of people living in Czechoslovakia. Käthe is of German origin and has been active in the anti-fascist movement in the German Reich, and Božena has had a deep affection for a German lawyer, her employer. Consequently, Käthe and Božena are both stigmatized and excluded from the society ending up on its fringe. The paper analyses the reasons for their social exclusion as well as the influence of the society and the family members on the literary characters' self-perception within the "otherness" discourse of that time. Last but not least, it examines how the Czech society perceived otherness of its individuals, i.e. being of different origin or character, and whether the Czech society was willing to accept pluralist identities.*

The aim of this paper is to examine the transformation of identity resulting from the Czech post-war nationalism as analysed in two literary works, a Czech and a German one. Both writings being the subject of analysis have one thing in common – the notion of paradox: in the novella *Božena* (1994) by a German author Peter HÄRTLING, a Czech woman is forced to change her identity and is eventually persecuted. The Czech novel *City on the border* (1958) by Karel PTÁČNÍK depicts the life of a German woman who is also discriminated after 1945 due to her identity by the Czech society. Examining the two above mentioned literary characters the authors of the paper strive to explore possible pluralities of identities in post-war Czechoslovakia as they were perceived by the Czech society.

The literary analysis is based on the post-structural conception of identity perceiving the identity as a notion made within the interaction with the outer

world. The identity of a subject is not thus given or innate, it constantly evolves in the interaction with the outside world. This process is determined by cultural, national, political and social factors. As described in the works of Maurice HALBWACHS, Madan SARUP, Peter CAWS and Stuart HALL¹, the identity is not homogenous and fixed; it is plural and dynamic since it is formed by a number of various aspects. The identity may therefore be perceived as a social construction that is not based solely on an individual but on the social interaction within the world surrounding the individual. In the literary analysis, the construction of identity of the main literary characters of the two above mentioned writings is examined within the context of post-war Czechoslovakia. The theoretical framework for analysis is based on FOUCAULT'S notion of discourse and GEERTZ' concept of nationalism.²

The novel *City on the border* is remarkable thanks to the ambivalence of its political meaning: political engagement of the author resulting from the post-war ideology of the Czech Communist Party on one hand and a clearly stated criticism of the communist ideology and the disruption of ideological taboos of that time on the other hand. Karel Ptáčník, the author of the novel *City on the border*, was an adherent of the communist ideological movement of the 1920s and 1930s which differs in many ways from the communism of the Stalinist type that Ptáčník is strictly opposed to. Criticism and rejection of the communism of the Stalinist type are visible not only in his novel but also in his personal attitudes and beliefs that he openly expressed in the 1960s. Being a reform communist Ptáčník could not publish any of his literary works from 1968 to 1984.

However, the present paper does not examine the author of *City on the border* and his political engagement. It focuses on particular paradoxes in the Czech post-war society depicted in the novel. The novel *City on the Border* can be considered as a literary testimony to the post-war time which is to a certain extent still relevant to our present.

Therefore, the following questions are raised: How do Czechs remember the post-war period? What role does Czech nationalism play in the collective

¹ Maurice HALBWACHS, *On Collective memory*. The University of Chicago Press, 1992. Peter Caws, "Identity: Cultural, Transcultural, and Multicultural." *Multiculturalism*. Ed. David Theo Goldberg. Cambridge, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1995. 371–388. Madan Sarup, *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*. Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. 392–404. Stuart Hall, "Ethnicity: Identity and Difference." *Becoming National*. Ed. Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. 339–352.

² Michel FOUCAULT, "The Order of Discourse." *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*. Ed. Robert Young. Boston: Routledge&Kegan Paul, 1981. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

memory of Czechs? And what is the perception of the role of the communist party in the post-war Czechoslovakia? Authors of the paper hold that the issue of nationalism in the Czech collective memory has not been a subject of any serious critical discourse. Nevertheless, the above mentioned literary works present a different view of the critical past. Analysing the story of Käthe, the main literary character of the novel *City on the Border*, who finds herself in the Czech border area immediately after the war, it will be shown that the Czech post-war society was not shaped by the communist ideology but by nationalism becoming one of the most significant features of the communist regime.

In his novel *City on the border* PTÁČNÍK depicts the period of one year, namely from the end of the war to the year 1946, in which elections take place. The plot is most probably set in Bruntál, a town in the Czech border area traditionally inhabited by Germans. After the war, this area is gradually populated by Czechs from the interior who come to the town as they are offered to gain possessions easily without any effort.

Honzík Kovář, a district secretary of the Communist party, and his wife Käthe, a German anti-fascist from the former German Reich, also come to Bruntál. Kovář met Käthe in forced labour in the German Reich and married her immediately after the war.

Taking account of the fact that Ptáčník's novel clearly reflects the communist ideology and justifies the resettlement of Germans it might appear rather surprising that Kovář's wife of the German origin settles down in the border area where all the German population is being expelled from. What does this circumstance mean to Käthe? What situation is she to be found in?

Being married to a German woman is not any burden to Kovář as Käthe has been imprisoned for her anti-fascist engagement. However, a great majority of Czechs seem to ignore this fact and perceive Käthe as a German and thus a fascist. Their hatred towards Germans is so strong that they refuse to see the differences between them. *"The people were thinking of Germans and the dreadful moments they experienced. They were thinking of regaining their freedom. It was so spontaneous and it was such enthusiastic sensation when they realized it.... isn't there any difference between them (Germans and Nazis)?"* (308–309)³ Kovář strives to answer this question by marrying a German woman. He hopes people will be able to perceive the difference between Nazi Germans and German anti-fascists and thus the issue of nationality would no longer be of any importance.

³ "mysleli na Němce, na prožité hrůzy, a mysleli na to, že se dočkali svobody. Tak živelně, s takovým nadšením si to ještě nikdy neuvědomili...cožpak je mezi nimi [Němci. Nacisty.] rozdíl?" (308–309) Translated by the authors of the paper.

Käthe ends up on the fringe of the society as a result of the Czech escalating nationalist tensions affecting all the political parties and the Czech population. Not only Czech people but also Sudeten Germans feel hatred for her. Due to her anti-fascist engagement Sudeten Germans consider her a traitor as she betrayed the German nation.

Käthe works in a textile factory where she strives to get in touch with Sudeten German women. However, this effort results in a physical conflict and her colleagues are immediately transported to a detention camp for Germans. As for Czechs, Käthe is not acceptable either owing to her nationality and cultural affiliation. This hostile approach towards Käthe culminates in a conflict with the chairperson of the local district authority and a police commissioner Garšic (both adherents of the communist party). They attempt to get Käthe by force to the transport of Sudeten Germans to Germany.

PTÁČNÍK'S story shows that Käthe has been segregated twice, i.e. first by Czechs due to her nationality and cultural affiliation and second by Sudeten Germans due to her political affiliation. Having been put into prison for her anti-fascist engagement is of no significance not only for Germans but also for the majority of Czechs. On the contrary, Käthe's political attitudes are seen as something negative and result in her exclusion from the public life. *“She became lonely; she felt strange tenseness around her. She was under suspicion but she believed it could be eventually removed. As it turned out, however, it was hatred people felt towards her and it was similar to the feelings of hatred German women harboured to her during the first days she was working on the weaving loom. They wanted to drive her out. They assigned her the toughest work and she got the lowest wages.”* (577)⁴

Apart from Käthe, a member of the communist party, there are two German social democrats that are not acceptable for the society either. Therefore, they insist on being put in the transport to Germany even though they should not be affected by resettlement. PTÁČNÍK'S novel does not depict Germans only as fascists, although it is true for a great number of them. Nonetheless, a majority of Czechs do not differentiate between Germans and Nazis. Language and cultural affiliation is so important to them that they are blind to Käthe's and other Germans' anti-fascist activities.

Consequently, Käthe has to abandon her national and cultural identity in order to be integrated into the Czech society. Being a communist, she can only preserve her political identity as she is supported by Czech pre-war communists who

⁴ “Osaměla, cítila kolem sebe podivné napětí. Domnívala se, že jde o počáteční nedůvěru, kterou možno překlenout, odstranit, ale byla to nenávisť, podobná oné, kterou k ní pociťovali Němky v prvních dnech po jejím příchodu ke stavu. Chtěli ji vyštvať. Dostávala nejhorší práci a nejmenší mzdu.” (577) Translated by the authors of the paper.

acknowledge German anti-fascists and attempt not to judge people according to their nationality. However, they are in the minority and their views on Germans dissolve in the atmosphere of generally shared nationalism. In fact, the communist party is the only party that is full of contradiction when it comes to taking a stand on Käthe's fate. On one hand, some communists try to perceive her beyond her nationality and accept her for her political affiliation. On the other hand, others stigmatize her for being of German origin. This identification factor is the most decisive factor for all major political parties in order to exclude Käthe from the public life. The novel shows there was no tolerance towards any Germans or German speaking people in the public discourse of that time.

Similarly to Käthe's fate, Božena, the main Czech character of the German novella of the same name by Peter HÄRTLING, also ends up on the fringe of the society.

Božena Kostka lives in a town in North Moravia, most probably in Olomouc, and she is of Czech origin. Despite her undisputed Czech national and cultural identity she is perceived as a German resulting in discrimination in all spheres of her life.

Božena's alleged collaboration with her former German employer and her interest in the German literature and the German language make her German as seen by the community Božena lives in.

During the war, Božena works for a German lawyer who comes to the town from the Reich. He takes over the legal practice of his predecessor, probably of Jewish origin whose original clients were Germans, Czechs and Jewish people. Božena works there until 1944 when the lawyer is called to arms and thus he has to close his practice.

Božena falls in platonic love with the lawyer and she hopes he will come back one day after the war and she will be able to confess her love to him. Neither will happen. She is eventually stigmatized as „*a Nazi slut, a fancy woman of Germans and a collaborator*” (83)⁵ by the community of people around her.

Owing to her former employment she is questioned by the police after the war. At first, she strives to resist false allegations and takes pain to explain the lawyer she worked for is not a Nazi and that she had no intimate relationship with him. Nevertheless, after some time she finds out her questioning is not serious as the only thing she is asked for is to plead guilty⁶. During the police interrogation the police deals with her as if she was a German. She is asked a number of pre-

⁵ “Nazihure, Deutschenliebste und Kollaborateurin.” (83) Translated by the authors of the paper.

⁶ The acceptance of guilt without knowing and understanding its reason reminds of KAFKA'S Prozess. This resemblance evokes the question whether there exists a power structure embedded in the cultural and political spheres of the Czech state administration. However, pursuing such a question would require a separate study.

posterior questions such as: “*Do you speak Czech or German at home?*” (84)⁷. She feels disconcerted by the question. Božena has never perceived the German language as her mother tongue. She learned German for her studies which she had to suspend due to the occupation. “*She also wanted to read Rilke, Goethe and Tomas Mann in the original version.*” (85)⁸ She can hardly understand why she is maltreated by the community. Her neighbours are so full of hatred to her that they kill Božena’s dog. The dog’s name is Moritz, which is of German origin. Božena finds the dog dead with a painted swastika on his body.

Božena’s father makes right predictions about the post-war situation even before the end of the war. “*Should it come to reckoning, they won’t be making any differences.*” (27)⁹ He thus expresses the general view of the Czech people on Germans. However, Božena hardly feels worried and does not see any reason for denying her former employment as well as her positive attitude to German culture. She does not share the popularly held anti-German beliefs. Therefore, her father even bids her to flee with Germans to Germany.

At first, Božena is not aware of being gradually excluded from the family and the community. She rejoices over the end of the war and she hopes to be able to resume her studies.

However, Božena is rejected by the society for not agreeing with anti-German manifestations. She sinned against the rigid perception of the national identity in post-war Czechoslovakia. This collective perception of identity is defined by nationalism and thus any other different perceptions of identity cannot be accepted. Božena perceives her national identity in a much broader way, which seems dubious and untrustworthy to the society. There is no scope for any diversity in defining one’s cultural and national identity. According to HABERMAS, this is a typical feature of nationalism which is rooted in homogenous cultural community. Božena feels culturally different, which is not accepted in the public discourse. In order to exclude her totally from the society she is labelled as a prostitute and a collaborator. This is a rather stereotyped way the society perceives her; however, this categorization is justified by state authorities eliminating any possible cultural and national differences. And this is how Božena’s identity is being formed by the society.¹⁰ People conform to stereotypes easily, spontaneously and mindlessly because there is no other al-

⁷ “Sprechen Sie zu Haus tschechisch oder deutsch?” (84) Translated by the authors of the paper.

⁸ “Sie wollte Bücher von Rilke oder Goethe oder Thomas Mann im Original lesen.” (85) Translated by the authors of the paper.

⁹ “Wenn abgerechnet werde, käme es auf Unterscheidungen nicht mehr an.” (27) Translated by the authors of the paper.

¹⁰ The Czech historian STANĚK refers to the widespread stereotyped view of a Czech woman considered a prostitute for keeping in touch with a German during the occupation. He presents several extreme cases of Czech women of mixed marriages being regarded as prostitutes,

ternative in the public discourse. No one tries to disprove Božena's stigma, not even her family does. "*The vehicles of nationalism are not only those that produce and spread the culture of nationalism but also consumers of that culture, those that consider this discourse to be intelligible and meaningful and whose behaviour is motivated by it.*" (12)¹¹

Although Božena strives to resist the false allegations at first, she gradually surrenders, which results in the transformation of her personality. Being under the power structure and political pressure she passes through a personal crisis and tries to flee from the outer world to her inner world. Since the Czech society excludes Božena, she starts to doubt her national identity: "*As a good Czech I have been banned from resuming my studies by Germans. And now I belong nowhere. Czechs, my compatriots, will be quick to condemn me, and the German responsible for my suffering has disappeared from my life.*" (73)¹²

In her isolation, she starts writing letters to her former employer whom she considers her lover. Being labelled a prostitute she can now freely enjoy her lover in her fantasies.

Božena is sentenced to labour „for common good“ in the town. She has to work in the barracks that need to be rebuilt so that they could serve as a school building again. The working party consists of people that "*allegedly have been in touch with Germans.*" (104)¹³ Božena does not feel excluded for the first time. "*It's the first time Božena has not been feeling excluded.*" (104)¹⁴ Paradoxically, it is only on the fringe of the society that she can express her positive attitude to German culture and feel free.

She is questioned again by the police and state authorities and is forced to acknowledge being „a Nazi slut“. Eventually, she is to work for an agricultural cooperative near the town Přerov. Having intended to become a lawyer, Božena

their personal belongings were confiscated. Some of them were even expelled. Tomáš Staněk, *Poválečné "excesy" v českých zemích v roce 1945 a jejich vyšetřování*. Praha, 2005.

11 „Nositeli nacionalismu nejsou pouze ti, kdo produkují a rozšiřují kulturu nacionalismu, ale i konzumenti této kultury, ti, pro něž je tento diskurs srozumitelný, smysluplný a jejichž jednání motivuje.“ Csaba SZALO, „Sociální inkluze a předpoklad kulturní zakotvenosti politické identity občanství“ *Sborník prací Fakulty sociálních studií Brněnské univerzity, Sociální studia* 9. Brno, 2003. (12) Translated by the authors of the paper.

12 „Ich, als gute Tschechin, der die Deutschen das Studium unmöglich gemacht haben. Und nun gehöre ich zu keinem mehr. Die Tschechen, meine Landsleute, werden mich irgendwann verurteilen, und der Deutsche, der mein Elend verschuldet, ist aus meinem Leben verschwunden.“ (73) Translated by the authors of the paper.

13 „Wahrscheinlich hatten [sie alle] sich in irgendeiner Weise mit Deutschen eingelassen.“ (104) Translated by the authors of the paper.

14 „Zum ersten Mal fühlte sich Božena nicht ausgeschlossen.“ (104) Translated by the authors of the paper.

now ends up as „a pig girl“. She lives in isolation; she does not seem to perceive what is happening around her. Another dog of hers named Moritz is the only memento of her “Germanness”.

Her rather resigned approach to life alters in 1989 due to the political changes in Czechoslovakia that cause partial modifications of the interpretation of the past. Božena finds out that “*people were supposedly talking about her doctor, a German lawyer, who had been helping peasants from Haná and Jews from Prostějov.*” (186)¹⁵ She is too old and too exhausted to rejoice over something that she has never doubted.

What makes HÄRTLING’S novella different from the majority of literary works dealing with Czech post-war themes is the fact that not only Germans but also Czech people were victims of the Czech nationalism and anti-German attitudes. As a result, Czechs were unjustly accused of collaboration with Germans. Božena Kostka’s story proves how easy it was to bring a charge against Czechs that did not share the biased anti-German approach and did not comply with post-war national identity criteria.

The Czech national identity was very rigidly defined and aimed at forming a homogeneous ethnic society. Božena was not able to embrace such a conception of the national identity. As a result of that, she was obliged to take consequences of her cultural ambivalence for the rest of her life.

Božena ends up as a victim. According to some literary critics Božena might have been assigned a role of a victim by the author to a certain extent.¹⁶ Peter GRAVE considers Božena to be a dependent, schematic character. “...*The central character remains somewhat schematic, and there is a sense too that, in presenting her solely in terms of the relationship with his father, Härtling is making her once again the victim of forces beyond her control, not this time the movements of history but the manipulation of a novelist*”¹⁷. Božena is depicted as a victim; nevertheless, it is not clear whether it is the author who assigns her such a role or whether it is the result of the post-war nationalist sentiments in Czechoslovakia. Authors of the paper hold that Božena’s fate corresponds with post-war nationalism which was the predominant ideology of the Czech political and cultural discourse.

¹⁵ „Es sei über ihren Herrn Doktor geredet worden, den deutschen Advokaten, der den Bauern aus Hana und den Juden von Proßnitz beigestanden habe.“ (186) Translated by the authors of the paper.

¹⁶ HENGST, Marlene. „Zwischen den Fronten.“ Rev. of Božena, by Peter Härtling. Berliner LeseZeichen 4 H.5 (1996): 70–71.

¹⁷ Peter GRAVES, „The Swastika on the Dog,“ The Times Literary Supplement N. 4847 (23. Febr. 1996): 30–67.

Božena is undoubtedly a rather passive character without any resistance, which strengthens her feelings of helplessness. However, would it be appropriate to criticize her for being passive? And is the community around her entitled to take their revenge on her for her solecisms? Or did the majority of the society simply use Božena's passiveness to punish any kind of disloyalty to the Czech national feeling?

The story of Božena by HÄRTLING illustrates the way power structures represented by the authorities and people around Božena acted in accordance with the conception of homogenous cultural and national identity in the post-war Czechoslovak society.

Considering the lives of both Käthe (*City on the border*) and Božena (*Božena*), it may be well seen that both literary characters were excluded from the Czech society due to their affinity for "Germanness" without any willingness to examine the circumstances of their pro-German feelings.

Käthe is an ethnic German and an active anti-fascist. Božena is a Czech woman employed by a German lawyer whose clients were not only Nazis but also Czechs and Jews whom the lawyer tried to help. The lawyer's practice investigations carried out after the war ignore any ambivalence. Nationality is the only decisive criterion. Thus, being of German origin means being a Nazi at the same time as perceived by Czech interrogators: „*there must not exist any single German that has not been a Nazi.*” (91)¹⁸

Similarly, the perception of Božena's "Germanness" is also formed on the basis of nationalism, which results in her segregation from the society.

Käthe's nationality is also the only decisive factor of discrimination although she holds the same political opinions as the majority of Czechs. Despite Käthe's rejection of the Nazi ideology, her active anti-fascist engagement and her imprisonment during the war, Käthe is refused by the society. The Czech post-war society does not distinguish between the political, national and cultural identity.

Even though Božena is not an adherent of the Nazi ideology and she perceives herself as a Czech, Božena is not accepted by the community due to her affinity with German culture. Consequently, Božena's personality is degraded and her social statue is relegated, too.

According to the government resolution on German anti-fascists passed in 1945¹⁹ Käthe should be treated equally as Czech anti-fascists thanks to her political identity. Nonetheless, only a few communists take her anti-fascist engagement into account. And yet, Käthe cannot be integrated into the Czech society. She is sacked from work, she cannot take part in any social or political

18 „Es [darf] weil es jetzt nicht einen Deutschen geben, der kein Nazi gewesen ist.“ (91) Translated by the authors of the paper.

19 Košický vládní program, 5. 4. 1945.

events. She only sees a family in the town. It is obvious that Käthe has to be Czechified and detached from the German culture.

In conclusion, both literary works point out that in post-war Czechoslovakia there were no mechanisms that could moderate manifestations of the nationalist sentiment and the non-selective anti-German approach. On the contrary, these phenomena seem to be a part of political strategies of all political parties.

In both writings there is some evidence of a certain disruption of stereotypes on both the German and Czech side. In HÄRTLING'S novella it concerns a (Sudeten)German stereotype about (Sudeten) Germans being victims of expulsion. HÄRTLING depicts the story of a Czech woman persecuted by her own people, which disrupts (Sudeten)German perception of victims of expulsion. It points out that in some cases not only Germans fell victim to Czech excesses. It also disproves the Czech myth that only Germans and Czechs proven to have collaborated with Nazis were persecuted.

PTÁČNÍK'S novel *City on the border* shows that the Czech Communist Party was not the only vehicle of Czech post-war nationalism. The nationalist sentiment could be detected across all the political parties and in the major society. Although the communist party was in some cases helpful to German antifascists, being a member of it could not guarantee a successful integration into the Czech society. This discrepancy can also be well seen in a rather fragmentary depiction of Käthe in the novel. She gradually disappears from the story and so the reader learns nothing about her future. This aesthetic deficiency corresponds to the trend of the post-war era during which people tried to ignore or even deny the existence of non-expelled Germans.

Both literary works prove that the intolerance of any variations in the Czech national identity was a strong taboo in the political and cultural discourse of the post-war era. This trend resulting from nationalism has become a prevailing trait in the Czech society.

Mgr. Michaela Peroutková, Ph.D., Mgr. Lea Tylečková, Ph.D.

Lecturer in German

Department of Languages

Czech University of Agriculture in Prague

Kamýcká 129

165 21 Praha 6 – Suchbát