

***LEXA'S TALE' IN ŠKVORECKÝ'S THE COWARDS [ZBABĚLCI]:
NATIONALITY, EROTICISM AND THE LIMITS OF
COMMUNICATION AND RECONCILIATION***

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Abstract: *His personal presence as a teenage observer in Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia was the formative influence on the novels and thought of the émigré writer Josef Škvorecký, mainstay of the Sixty-Eight dissident publishing house and professor of film and American literature at the University of Toronto. Notable among his early works, which the Communist puppet regime suppressed because of their joyous hedonism, is Zbabělci [The Cowards], written when he was only 24, in 1948. It is a antiheroic first-person diary-like narrative, intensely human and not without its hilarious moments, of the confused and crucial seven days, which the author himself lived through, spanning the withdrawal of Nazi troops from, and the arrival of Soviet troops in, Škvorecký's birthplace of Náchod in Bohemia, lightly fictionalized as 'Kostelec', a small town at the centre of the present Czech Republic. The novel intertwines with great originality the themes of the universal, nationality and race, unreal love, and unreal heroics. Central to its structure and the state of being which it advocates is a conte-like passage of a dozen pages, in which a minor character, Lexa, the narrator's friend and co-jazzman, describes his own unsuccessful attempt to get off with a beautiful but bigoted Nazi woman government employee. This attempt - 'to break through to happiness and everything that makes life worth living' - founders on her indoctrination and his savage joy in his just vengeance.*

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