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

**Keywords:** *enemy; reconciliation; nationality; communication; love; universality*

**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.*

Certain literary names from the former Comecon half of Europe, such as Gunter Grass and Milan Kundera in prose or Vaclav Havel, Czesław Miłosz and Miroslav Holub in poetry, are common coin among English and Cultural Studies departments the world over. Others, for no apparent reason except the economics and whims of publishers, have clearly failed to make it to the podium of academic teachability.

One such name is that of Josef Škvorecký, born at Náchod in Czechoslovakia in 1924, founder of the dissident publishing house Sixty-Eight (1971-1993), emeritus Professor of English Literature at the University of Toronto, and happily still in the land of the living. His English was learned— a familiar story in Eastern Europe and Russia - from that classic source the BBC News, the one foreign broadcast unjammed. Its announcer “enunciated slowly, clearly and with precise pronunciation”; not necessarily true nowadays.

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Just from his photographs on the Internet, which please see, Škvorecký is quite obviously what an interviewer of his calls him: “a man of warmth of generosity”, mellow and humorous, with “a mischievous twinkle in his eyes” and a proper Bohemian fondness for well-brewed beer (Glusman 2). A man’s character is his destiny, said Heraclitus. Škvorecký’s place in the jazz band of European literature is arguably less prominent than he deserves. Very much of the Second World War generation, and the founder of the dissident literary magazine 68, which introduced Kundera and Holub to the West and can perhaps be compared for impact with the Beograd philosophical journal Praxis, Škvorecký commits the unforgivable sin of being intensely readable. His writings - and there are a lot of them, novels, plays, detective stories, a hundred and twenty articles on (for instance) Saul Bellow, King Kong, Orwell, and Zhan Xianliang (have you read this Chinese dissident poet? nor have I), miscellaneous radio talks, TV scripts - are bursting with life, music, and mischief. Typical is his novella Bassaxofon [The Bass Saxophone] awarded the adjective ‘superb’ by Graham Greene, no less, and just as fine in its way as Patrick Süskind’s comparable Kontrabass.

It is a very early work of Škvorecký’s that I want to home in on here, his first full novel *Zbabělci* – in English, *The Cowards*. Its coming to being should be of interest to historians of Eastern European culture and politics: written in 1948-9, it was published in Prague in 1954, 1964 and 1966, but with the coming of the Prague Spring was suppressed by the regime, for it is very subversive indeed. Its publication meant that the author risked a probable ban, possible arrest, and the end of his own (not to mention his employer’s) job at the firm World Literature. Kafka, too, was regarded as ‘decadent’.

Thanks to the translators, with whom by the way Škvorecký, an able translator himself, is well pleased (Hansen 3), the subversive novel popped up like Jack-in-the-Box in Yugoslavia in 1967, and in Hungary and East Germany in 1968. Rizzoli in Italy issued it in 1969, and Grove Press in America, land of the free, in 1970. The left-wing London publisher Gollancz snapped it up immediately, and in a couple of years it had made the big time in Penguin Modern Classics. It gives me a certain pleasure to report that French readers had to wait a further six years before Gallimard supplied them with their copies. I should add that it was superbly translated by Jeanne Němcová, even if she was unable to convey in English what Škvorecký himself comments on, the erotic flavour of the final –á in Czech. (And à propos, he quotes with learned glee the remark of an Israeli novelist that translation from Hebrew into English is like making love to a woman through a blanket).

*The Cowards* – I shall use the English title, which translates ‘those who run away’ – is recognizably in the tradition of Laurence Sterne, or more closely of Good Soldier Schweik. As well as being subversive, it is finely ironic, and it says important things about war, deception, jazz, love, and the vanity of idealism, which makes it a very suitable text for the present conference. If it seems to strike out in a rather different direction from the author’s earliest work, three novellas written in the bitter aftermath of the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia, *Divák v únorové noci* [Spectator on a February Night: the allusion is to the February 1948 Communist coup], *Zákony džungle* [Laws of the Jungle: note the wit of the plural], and *Špinavý, krutý svět* [Filthy, Cruel

World], one must hold in mind the throughgoing offbeat irony that seems to come as second nature to Czech writers.

The action of the book is organized with an effectiveness and self-assurance remarkable for a writer just 24 years old. One Swedish advocate of the author says that it gave him a better insight into European history than any other source (Kristenson 1). The narrative occupies exactly a week, in a small town in Czechoslovakia – the country that was the last but one cause of the Second World War, as you will recall. The plot is simple: the occupying German troops are retreating, defeated, the about-to-occupy Russian troops are advancing, victorious. (Of course with hindsight the one will turn out to be as destructive to the town as the other: ‘like two peas in a pod’, to quote the title of one of Škvorecký’s articles). Caught in the middle are the townspeople, with their various political alignments – ‘loyalties’ is not a word in the spirit of the book. The eponymous ‘cowards’ are the narrator and his friends; or the retreating Germans; or collectively the townspeople themselves. The landscape is one that will also form the basis of a later novel, *Prima Sezóna* [*The Swell Season*].

Škvorecký’s own experience of war - of the Second World War – was direct and localized. By the time that he finished high school at the age of eighteen in 1943, his homeland of Czechoslovakia, the original *casus belli*, had been an occupied country for four years; thus where a present-day teenager would talk about music and football, a major part of Škvorecký’s horizon was the behaviour of the occupying Nazi soldiery and its infrastructure. He then worked compulsorily for two years in the factories producing Messerschmidt aircraft parts at Náchod and at Nové Mesto. From here he was transferred, again without choice, to the Todt Organization, an ironic enough name, digging trenches for the already losing German army. In the increasingly fluid situation he was able to make his escape from spadework and for the final two months until Liberation he worked in a cotton mill. All this is vividly woven into his novel; far from being concerned to distance himself from his material, he rushes to embrace it. As he explained to an interviewer:

The end of the war was my inspiration for *The Cowards*.... You see, the last days of the war in Kostelec...were really very exciting. It was the first time I experienced real danger, and I wanted to recreate that period of my life and make it, simply, magical. (Glusman 5)

Here Škvorecký, as professor, is invoking literary theory. He contrasts with ‘traditional realism’ the different ‘magical realism’ popularized by Marquez, but actually in existence in Czech literary theory, both as a notion and as a technical term, long before Marquez.

*The Cowards*, which embraces the tragic mode – ‘scraps of blue cloth and blood and then all that was left of her in her flowered dress’ - as well as the comic, is intensely autobiographical. It introduces as narrator, protagonist and antihero an exuberant character, Danny, who dominates the book, possibly a little too much. Danny will reappear in other books by Škvorecký, notably in *Prima Sezóna*. He is the author’s splendidly vainglorious non-persona (‘I could play the tenor sax better than anyone’), and it is by pure accident that he becomes a public hero.

As a counterpoint to what would otherwise be simply a very vivid documentary of the Soviet ‘liberation’ of provincial Czechoslovakia – ‘liberation’ in the same sense as China’s ‘peaceful liberation’ of Tibet – there are two ontological themes that intertwine: jazz and its near relative, sexual longing.

As regards jazz, Swing and Dixieland were the music that Škvorecký grew up with. He told Julia Hansen that when listening to Chick Webb he thought that he was hearing the music of the spheres that Kepler wrote about (Hansen 4). It is a commonplace that in the Communist satellite countries and in Russia itself, jazz channelled the dissenting voice of a generation. And all over the world, youth jazz bands found their way to an unimpeded enjoyment of living, the thirst later to be satisfied by the Beatles.

The book’s second theme is the central character’s ruefully hilarious male carnality. It is waiting to be awakened at all times: Danny, who uses the memorable phrase, ‘I flashed my Clark Gable smile’, experiences unrequited lust for his best friend’s girlfriend, continuously, and intermittently for any other desirable women in the vicinity: a dislocation between what the man wants and what the woman wants. For Škvorecký it is by no means a given thing that the male chase after the feminine mystique, *das Ewigweibliche*, is necessarily pointless: his motto for Bassaxofon is Ezra Pound’s doctrine that ‘what thou lov’st well is thy true heritage’, and his novel *Veselý sen o Dvořákovi* [Dvorak in Love] is both tender and optimistic. Nevertheless, in *The Cowards* Danny spends a lot of time in fruitless and consuming lust:

...and I watched her swimming, slender and nearly naked in the translucent water of the pool and then standing under the shower....and then going into the changing room and I knew that there, behind that white door, she was undressing and drying herself with a towel and I swam madly around the pool and suffered because I wanted her so. (The Cowards 215)

His doom of disappointment is illustrated and amplified in a tale, a conte, told by one of his friends, taking up 13 pages, and placed pivotally at approximately the centre of the 500-page narrative, cut from an original 800 pages. *Copia rerum* has never been a problem with Škvorecký; the challenge for him has been to organize his material into conventional novel form, in a ‘counterpoint’ (Glusman 14).

The style of this tale, which we are warned is ‘not dirty, not even spicy’, is that of the *Decameron*. It is introduced with breathtaking narrative impudence: “‘Just cut the crap and tell your story’” said Haryk.’ The teller, the raconteur, is another member of Danny’s jazz band, Lexa. It would be wrong to call him a minor character, since a jazz band is a democracy where each instrument in turn stands forth and makes a statement. So this conte is effectively Lexa’s solo break. Lexa’s first appearance places him musically - ‘He wailed shrilly in the highest register of his clarinet’ – but there is also of course a sexual innuendo. And again:

...he’d always been pretty tough and ironic and a fast guy with women, but now [after the episode described in the conte] he’s been really thrown off balance. (The Cowards 183)

We are told incidentally, twice, that Lexa's father had been betrayed to the Germans, who had executed him. Elsewhere Lexa and another jazzman Benno walk across the main square with a ladder with which to help dethrone German symbols and substitute Czech ones. The flavour of Škvorecký's irony is strong, with or without hindsight, in this very funny passage, where note that red and white were the old Czechoslovak colours, and that President Benes was vanished by the Communists during the takeover:

An incredibly long flag was already hanging from one church steeple like a red and white noodle. Another was just being hung from another steeple... It was a yellow and white flag. Some guy next to me started to cheer.  
'Long live the Czechoslovak Republic! Long live President Benes!  
He looked drunk. When the yellow and white flag flapped out, he stopped and stared.  
'What's that?', he said.  
I leaned over and said 'It's the Pope's flag'.  
'That?', he said, turning towards me. 'So that's the Pope's flag, is it?'  
'Yes'.  
Then the guy began to cheer again. 'Long live the Pope! Long live Jesus Christ!  
Long live the  
Czechoslovak Republic!' (*The Cowards* 55)

And it may easily have been like that, in reality.

Having featured in the climactic episode of the destroyed German tank, Lexa briefly appears in the celebratory jam session at the end of the book, then only as a ghostly memory, as an Alpinist in ski pants, and when 'goofing on his clarinet because his fingers froze'. It is hard to avoid the feeling that his prime function in the book is inorganic, as a convenient mouthpiece for what is effectively a meditation on otherness and reconciliation.

Now to summarize the conte, quoting as we go. Lexa speaks:

It was in May, 1943, in Kolin. One night – one of those nice, warm May nights when all the stars look wet – I was hanging around down by the railway station when suddenly I see this woman in the shadows. There was a great big suitcase and she must just have set it down because she was still catching her breath. (*The Cowards* 156)

Lexa, a practised erotist like all his buddies in the jazzband, can just make out that the woman has a good figure. The second thoughts of his ego about the suitcase are overcome by his superego when he sees that she is a natural blonde. He offers to help. Watching him with intense suspicion, she replied 'Versteh nicht Tschechisch', a first intimation of the theme of otherness. Her German establishes her as a Luftwaffehilfefrauenfunkerschülerin, a noun with which the 24-year-old Škvorecký predictably has fun, and which his translator renders in English (without capitals) as airforcewomenassistantradioschool. Lexa appreciates first, as a jazzman, the music in her voice, and second, carnally, the way she holds herself. He says:

This girl was a real beauty and besides, what I had in mind was to have her just once and then off I'd go... (*The Cowards* 156)

As he carries the girl's suitcase and they chat, he learns what he calls her 'horrible' name, Trudy. He utters one of the great truths: 'The fact that this pretty girl beside me spoke a foreign language gave her a special kind of charm.' Škvorecký the future Professor of English adds a mischievous authorial comment: 'A scholar would probably say that, in this case, language assumed a secondary erotic function.'

When they reach the Nazi headquarters he asks Trudy to promise to see him again. Her face hardens and she says, 'Unmöglich'. Lexa asks her, intending irony, 'Is it race?' – 'Is es die Rasse?' She snaps back at him, 'Yes it is, if you want to know.' When the baulked Lexa gets back to his room and reflects, he finds that the race question actually appears to add spice to the affair. He has a dream about her.

Next day he revisits the Radio School, hanging about in the park with nothing better to do. At five in the afternoon he returns to the School, arm in arm with an 'ugly, dumpy, freckled redhead', put there by the author to set off Trudy's classic Aryan blond beauty. Lexa, a snappy dresser, is wearing a zoot suit, a great pair of shoes with thick white rubber soles, and, he adds, 'my trousers were so tight I could almost feel them stretching' – shades of Elvis! Nevertheless, she ignores him. It is now his turn, in this offbeat dance of courtship, to ignore her, staying put even when two Nazi officers come on the scene. 'I was glad I hadn't run away', comments Lexa, hinting at the novel's title *Zbabělci*.

The fat girl disappears, and Lexa makes straight for Trudy. To her question, put in not an unfriendly but a sad voice, 'Why are you following me?' he replies with the promptness of an erotic automaton, 'Ich liebe Sie' (O, the advantages of a language which distinguishes between second person singular and plural!). She tells him it's pointless. He asks again, 'Is it race, is it The Nation?' Her answer is still 'yes', very short and sweet, but she looks at him sympathetically. In the standard ploy, he tells her he'll go mad, and she gives in: 'Tomorrow night at eight'. Lexa experiences the universal male feeling of conquest after making a date: what he wants is not just her surrender but her capitulation, a hackneyed metaphor finely retuned to the actual military situation. There is an authorial aside here: 'Even to this day I don't believe a German's really all that different or that the difference had to get in our way.'

At the date, on a bench by the river in the moonlight under the willow tree, clichés of German Romanticism, he tells Trudy that Czechs can't take Nazi propaganda seriously and asks her whether she really believes it. Intellectually unable to debate with him, she treats his question as a symptom of belonging to an inferior race: Czechs and Jews. Since Lexa is not a Jew, she describes him as an Aryan; the only difference being that 'your racial mixture is of an inferior kind', after which she talks what Lexa calls 'nonsense' at some length. He asks her what she would do if he were a Jew, and establishes that she knows nothing about Jewish culture ('Have you read Rosenberg? ...or at least even Streicher'). She dismisses the subject with a remark whose chilling and casual stupidity infuriates Lexa: 'All the Jews have already been isolated'. Her beauty

suddenly seems monstrous to him. He thinks of his Jewish friends who may be dead or being tortured at that very moment, and he cannot contain himself and his vengefulness any longer:

I blurted it out, and it was a pleasure to feel the venom flow. 'I'm one', I said satanically. (*The Cowards* 169)

And he squeezes her hand and manages to put an arm round her waist as she stiffens in horror.

Then he says to her: 'I am a half-Jew – ein Halbjude.' In a memorable simile, the author tells us that she shuddered, as if she had just touched a toad.

Trudy has risen; she turns, and runs away – again the Zbabělci riff – 'that Nordic head of hers shining from time to time as she ran out of the shadows into the moonlight'. Lexa sums up laconically:

I sat there on the bench and didn't feel like ever getting up again. A real beauty, the picture of happiness and everything that makes life worth living, and that's what they'd done to her. (*The Cowards* 170)

That is Lexa's and the author's specific moral lesson; and I would like to add half a dozen others that stem from this conte and from the novel in general, and that have intimately to do with the experience of war and the emotions it generates. They intertwine in a manner characteristic of this author, for whom there exists a moral obligation more subtle than mere ideology:

Each moral question...has to be questioned in its entirety... Many issues can't be solved simply, and the duty of the writer is to present the complexity of an issue. (Gusman 16)

One lesson is that reconciliation cannot occur unless both sides move towards it. Another is the age-old Platonic antithesis of appearance and reality. Danny is outwardly a hero, inwardly a coward, a runner-away. Trudy is outwardly a dizzy blonde, inwardly a fool. Then there is the theme, a constant one throughout Škvorecký's writing, of the male as too optimistic hunter after the female, and the hierarchy of desire, moving on from the less to the more attractive: a street version of Goethe's principle *das Ewigweibliche zieht uns hinan*. The tale implies the necessity, if the world is to work well, of respect for otherness, exactly the value which war obliterates. Opposed to this is the sheer physical power of feelings of revenge, welling up from deep within one: "it was a pleasure to feel the venom flow". Lexa's ironic attitude exemplifies another timeless main theme of *Zbabělci*, the value of intellectual humour in undercutting stereotypes, blocking the stultifying action of ideologies, and liberation through love and longing.

But, the author's motive for writing the book, and the defiant justification of its splendidly provocative title, reaches out wider still, appealing to that core of human experience that remains essentially the same at all times and in all places. It is of an



ontological nature and it is implicit in the subtitle of *Prima Sezóna*: 'a text on the most important things in life'. Kristenson sums it up well:

Fighting [against the Nazis] was essential, but they were not important in themselves. The sound of a bass saxophone, however, all the beauty of this world, love and human relations – that is what matters. (Kristenson 2)

War and the suffering that war brings are at their worst an accident, a passing scourge. The final message of *The Cowards* resounds throughout the book. War is no match for the enduring and tangible reality of the girls, and the music.

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