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Czech Films about the Holocaust before and after 1968

Jaromil Jireš's *And Give My Love to the Swallows* (*....a pozdravuji vlastovky*, 1972)

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In 1948, Alfréd Radok, the son of a Jewish man executed in Theresienstadt, shot a film about the fate of Prague's Jews in the same city where his father was murdered. The film recounted a fictional story of a Jewish doctor and her Czech husband who manage to survive the war, but the film was most powerful in showing the decimation of the entire Jewish community. Combining grotesque expressionism with documentary footage, Radok's film *Distant Journey* (*Daleká cesta*) was one of the earliest attempts in Central Europe to speak of the Holocaust. But its formal experiments and emphasis on the persecution of Jews did not please the newly Stalinist Czechoslovak state, who, in a few years, would engage in anti-Semitic persecutions of its own. Czechoslovak directors would not again treat the subject of the country's vanished Jews until the 1960s, where portrayals of Nazi barbarity, Jewish suffering and even Czech collaboration were resurrected in some of the best-known films of the decade.

The year 1968, when Soviet tanks rolled into Prague to repress the Czechs' bid for "socialism with a human face," heralded the end of the Czechoslovak New Wave's flourishing cinematic creativity. But the Nazi occupation remained a viable subject for filmmakers, with an emphasis on the nobility of the Communists who died for the Resistants.

In 1972, Jaromil Jireš made *And Give My Love to the Swallows* (*...a pozdravují vlastovky*), based on the prison diary of Czech Resistant Maruška Kudeříková. Jireš was one of the great talents of the New Wave. In 1968, he filmed an adaptation of Milan Kundera's *The Joke* (*Žert*), a cry of anger and disillusionment at both the totalitarianism of the 1950s and the moral aimlessness of the generation that followed. The new authorities after the

Prague Spring could not abide this portrait of the brutalities and hypocrisies of Stalinism. *The Joke* officially ceased to exist until its re-release in 1990.

The Joke's critical stance is all the more surprising given that Jireš's first film was lauded by "the protectors of the status quo," to quote Antonin J. Liehm. The director himself was a young Communist. But Jireš was disgusted with the "degeneration of public life in Czechoslovakia," the younger generation's lack of ideals and refusal to believe "in the power of the truth," as he lamented to Liehm in a 1968 interview.

This background is important to any viewer of *And Give My Love to the Swallows*. These two films differ in more than setting and content: they show the marked difference between what was possible to show during the period of liberty and during the normalization period. In the background of *The Joke* lurks Radok's *Distant Journey*, its acknowledgment of the everyday betrayal and dehumanization which enables the imprisonment of people guilty of holding the wrong ideas, making the wrong jokes, or being born into the wrong religion. *And Give My Love to the Swallows*, as we shall see, touches on human evil without capturing its capriciousness. Because of its preference for idealized martyrdom over arbitrary suffering, the film further ruptures the link established by New Wave filmmakers and dissident authors between the Jewish outcast and the "little Czech," playthings in equal measure of the forces of history.

And Give My Love to the Swallows

Like *The Joke*, the 1972 film's basis is a first-person text from which Jireš's camera departs in flights of lyrical subjectivity. We are taken through Maruška's memories of growing up on a Moravian farm (although she was a student in the city of Brno, we don't see much of this part of her life), of her righteous anger at the Germans' occupation of her small town, of her increasingly dangerous Resistance activities as the sole woman in her brave little Communist group, and finally her capture and interrogation.

These scenes criss-cross strangely lyrical scenes of prison life. The authorities put the condemned girl to work painting eyes on lead toy soldiers – to her delight, because the availability of ink allows her to keep her secret diary. Life is regimented and bleak, yet there are many happy moments in the film. Indeed, its strongest moments fall on that instantly recognizable Czech theme of resistance through laughter. Only, rather than the hysterical laughter that accompanies the explosion of the German supply train at the end of Jiři Menzel's *Closely Watched Trains* (*Ostře sledované vlaky*, 1966), or the political prisoners' delight at their fellow inmate's bawdy drawings in one great scene of *The Joke*, Maruška's laughter is appealingly girlish, if not always free of irony. Next to the gaunt-faced prison matrons, Maruška and her jailed friends seem

blessed with an irrepressible vitality. “Did they tell you that you were too young to be mixed up in this?” Maruška asks another girl accused of treason at sixteen, and the two burst into sly, complicit giggles.

At another point in the film, Maruška languishes with a half-mad German inmate, a woman whose crimes remain obscure for a time. But it is clear that Maruška does not appreciate her cellmate’s droning on in German about her French lover (the offense of sleeping with a Frenchman is perhaps her crime, although this is never clearly explained). Then, a frightening moment: the guard swings open the heavy door and orders Maruška to take her belongings and follow. Terrified that her execution has come early, Maruška complies and is conducted in silence to wait outside another cell. The guard pushes the door open. A pretty young woman meets Maruška’s gaze with bewilderment. “New orders,” says the guard in German. “Jews with Jews, Czechs with Czechs.” She locks the two girls in together. A moment’s quiet, and then Maruška and her new co-citizen cellmate shriek with relieved laughter and seize each other in a ferociously happy embrace.

We warm to their joy, but something about the sequence leaves an elusive, disturbing aftertaste. The boredom of being locked in with an unknown, the absurdity of the words exchanged…it’s as if for a moment we could glimpse at *Distant Journey* behind this ode to a Czech patriot. The German woman does not reappear. By the final shot – Maruška going to her beheading, eyes leveled calmly toward the camera – we have probably forgotten this vulgar stranger.

As far as films on the Second World War go, Jireš’s film recalls somewhat *A Man Escaped* by Robert Bresson. There are many stylistic differences, but the same feel of imprisonment as a spiritual ordeal. A more visible influence is Carl Theodor Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. When the actress Magdaléna Vášáryová’s looks up into the light leaking into her cell, it’s nearly impossible not to associate her lovely face with Maria Falconetti’s. Maruška enjoys a heady, innocent flirtation with one of her fellow Resistance members even as her dangerous activities estrange her from her former boyfriend, but she refuses to make love until “after the war.” Like Joan of Arc, she understands that love is a form of earthly attachment that will compromise her mission.

Of course, if Maruška is a saint she is also an atheist, a position she does not need to defend to her cellmate Julinka. Rather than deprive the younger girl of her source of comfort, she simply says, “You’ll see for yourself.” And in her final, movingly portrayed moments, she refuses the ministrations of the German priest with a shake of her head. Nonetheless, even without religious trappings, her outlook is essentially hopeful. She believes “not in God but in people,” she tells Julinka, who responds incredulously, “All people? The Germans too?”

It is actually possible to think “Yes, even these Germans” while watching *And Give My Love to the Swallows*. In comparison to the real occupiers of the

Bohemian Protectorate, the German captors are almost gentlemanly. True, Maruška and her fellow Resistants are brutally beaten and eventually killed. But Maruška's family is not threatened. Nazi "justice" is evil here, but it is not arbitrary, in contrast to the execution of virtually the entire population of Lidice in "retribution" for the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich. The guards and interrogators play no significant moral role; they are merely obstacles between Maruška and her faith. They are, in a way, that which allows her to transcend an ordinary Moravian girlhood.

The scene in which Maruška exchanges a German cellmate for a Czech is the only scene in which Jews are mentioned in any capacity, and the only scene which evokes the ideology behind the German system of imprisonment and execution. Even with its veneer of subjective, freeform cinema, *And Give My Love to the Swallows* portrays a logical world. The Nazis capture and kill only those Czechs who have committed acts of sabotage. On the other side, Maruška's humanistic patriotism drives all of her actions, from her distribution of tracts to her silence under torture. The film escapes being pro-Communist propaganda because of its respect of Maruška's fear and recklessness as well as her more heroic qualities. But the film never risks evoking the reason-annihilating horror that the true Holocaust film tries to suggest.

"Distant Journey" and Holocaust films of the New Wave

Just after the Second World War, Alfréd Radok's *Distant Journey* conjured the murderous grotesque of the recent past. His version of Theresienstadt is not a strictly realistic portrayal, but a projection of nightmarish chaos that distorts human values beyond all recognition: young Jewish girls become stooges for Nazi guards in exchange for cigarettes; once-generous mothers hide their illicit crust of bread from other women's children; a benevolent doctor urges terrified children into what she doesn't realize is a gas chamber. Those who die in this inverted world may have chosen to risk their lives, but more probably they simply didn't have the tremendous luck it took to survive.

The New Wave of the 1960s was able to take up the theme of the Holocaust without neglecting the monstrosity of Nazi logic. The title character of Juraj Herz's *The Cremator* (*Spolovač mrtvol*, 1969) is a bourgeois family man whose creepy, self-satisfied benevolence prompts him to murder his own Jewish wife and son to spare them "suffering." This man's madness seems to distort even the camera angles and the voices on the soundtrack. The same grotesqueness appears, though in a subtler way, in the absurd group of old drunkards who track down and kill the Jewish fugitives of *Diamonds of the Night* (*Démanty noci*, 1964) by Jan Němec. One hunted boy's flight into fantasy and memory acts as the only leaven to this merciless story, but his death remains cruelly pointless. Horror springs directly from ordinary life without elevating people into the realm of martyrdom and principles.

To these examples, we can add the *The Boxer and Death* (*Boxer a smrt*, 1962) by Peter Solan and *The Shop on High Street* (*Obchod na korze*, 1965) by Jan Kádár and Elmar Klos, as well as the more peripheral spectres of anti-Jewish persecution in *The Ear* (*Ucho*, 1970) by Karel Kachyňa and *All My Good Countrymen* (*Všichní dobrí rodáci*, 1969) by Vojtěch Jasný. When the New Wave filmmakers' focus shift from the Holocaust, echoes of these films persist, even if the setting is abstracted from history. Němec's famous *The Party and the Guests* (*O slavnosti a hostech*, 1966) ends with another absurd manhunt, no less sinister for its participants' lightheartedness. Marta, one of several orphans in a brutalized country in Juraj Jakubisko's surrealist *Birds, Orphans and Fools* (*Vtáčkovia, siroty a blazni*, 1969) is a child of concentration camp victims (incidentally, Marta is played by Vášáryová, aka Maruška.) The persistence of the Holocaust as a visual and thematic reference shows to what extent it lingered in Czechoslovak cultural consciousness as a shorthand for arbitrary cruelty, meted out systematically.

At times, the Jew became a metonymic figure for the despised outcast, the victim of external hostile forces – a position the Czechoslovaks identified with, conscious of their own tumultuous history. In *Le passé présent*, Antonín Liehm quotes the Jewish folk figure Mr. Kohn: "We live, alas, in historic times!" and adds, "Thousands, hundreds of thousands of Czech and Slovak lips exhaled the same sigh" during the 1950s.[1] And Kundera speaks of "Sarah" in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*: the girl who mocks the blissful unity of those who dissolve in ideology and idealism. "Sarah is out there somewhere, I know she is, my Jewish sister Sarah. But where can I find her?"[2]

The guard's contemptuous "Czechs with Czechs, Jews with Jews" would seem to continue this acknowledgment of brother – or sisterhood. But in *And Give My Love to the Swallows*, Maruška finds sisterhood only with her other countrywomen. More than twenty years earlier, *Distant Journey* had shown the complex relationships between Czechs and Jews during the war: the loyal husband persecuted for his Jewish wife's sake, the greedy townspeople raiding the homes of their arrested neighbors bound for the camps. In *And Give My Love to the Swallows*, these relationships simply do not exist. We do see the collaboration of one pro-Nazi interrogator. Apart from him, there are only courageous or resigned Czechs on one side, ruthless and vulgar Germans on the other. By 1972, then, the world of *Distant Journey* had vanished into an atmosphere of solemn, nationalistic unity.

Yet Jireš conformed to this unity as gracefully as he could. If the lovely Czech martyr as he imagines her eclipses less poetic sufferers, she is still a subtle and moving heroine. Moreover, Jireš'ss tribute to the courageous Communist Resistants rings utterly sincere. Maruška's love of humanity reflects that of the filmmaker who retained faith in the possibilities of socialism despite his criticism of its implementation.

References

Liehm, Antonín, Le passé présent, 1974, p. 11; Transl. by author.

Kundera, Milan, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, Penguin Books, 1981, p. 76.