

A Box of Lives (Krabice živých)

Author: Norbert Frýd

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Translations: Russian (*Kartoteka živých*, 1958); German (*Kartei der Lebenden*, 1959); Slovak (*Truhlica živých*, 1959); Slovenian (*Kartoteka živih*, 1959); Bulgarian (*Kartoteka na živito*, 1960); Latvian (*Dzīvības kartoteka*, 1960); Hungarian (*Élők doboza*, 1961); English (*A Box of Lives*, 1962); Tajik (*Kabristoni zindache*, 1962); Polish (W bloku żywych, in part in *Razem, w imieniu życia*, 1980).

About the Author: Norbert Frýd (also Norbert Fried and Nora Fried; 1913–1976) was a Czech writer, poet, writer for cabaret, theatre, and film. He was born in České Budějovice in Southern Bohemia, his father came from a Czech-Jewish and his mother from a German-Jewish family. His family history and the life of Jews in the Czech lands were later described by Frýd in the trilogy *The Last Hundred Years*. He studied law and literary science at Charles University (doctorate 1945). Before the war, he wrote for cabaret, theatre and film, cooperated with the Czech avant-garde director E. F. Burian. In November of 1941, Frýd was transported to the Theresienstadt Ghetto where he worked as a tutor of children and was involved in the cultural life of the Jewish community (among others, he directed the play *Esther*). In the autumn of 1944 he was deported to Auschwitz and subsequently to Dachau in Bavaria, and located in the Kaufering IV concentration subcamp near Landsberg. In April of 1945, as the German guard were starting to evacuate the camp, he managed to escape. Frýd's father, brother and his wife all died in concentration camps. In 1946, he changed his name from Fried to Frýd. In 1947 Frýd became a cultural diplomatic attaché in Mexico and later worked in various diplomatic posts in the United States and Latin America. From 1953 to his death he was a freelance writer.

Further Important Publications: *Meč archandělů* (1954, Archangels' Sword; short stories); *Vzorek bez ceny a pan biskup aneb Začátek posledních sto let* (1966, A Sample without Value and Mister Bishop or The Beginning of the Last Hundred Years; first part of his family history); *Hedvábné starosti aneb Uprostřed posledních sto let* (1968, Small Worries or in the Middle of the Last Hundred Years; second part of his family history); *Lahvová pošta aneb Konec posledních sto let* (1971, A Message in the Bottle or The End of the Last Hundred Years; third part of his family history).

Content and Interpretation

The novel is divided into three parts, each containing twelve chapters. It is set in the fictitious concentration camp of Gigling in Bavaria, in October and November of 1944. At the beginning, a mass of new prisoners are deported to Gigling from Ausch-

witz. Among others, Zdeněk Roubík, a 32-year-old Prague intellectual, writer and filmmaker of Jewish origin. He becomes an assistant of the *Lagerschreiber*, camp typist, the Austrian prisoner Erich Frosch (nicknamed “Toad”, Žabák). Zdeněk had to leave his pregnant wife Hanka in Theresienstadt. After this, and his stay in Auschwitz, he is exhausted and deprived. He is “numb and stupefied, they had made him into a thing to be unloaded and loaded into trucks by the thousands” (Frýd, 1962, p. 20). Nevertheless, in Gigling he gains self-confidence and courage – thanks to his better position in the camp, and thanks to his fellow prisoners (like the Greek communist Fredo or the Czech Jewish doctor Oscar nicknamed “Chin”, Brada). At the end of the novel, Zdeněk’s older brother Jirka comes to Gigling. Jirka is a communist and a determined fighter against the Nazis, but he is seriously ill and dies. Zdeněk decides to continue his brother’s fight and to be a part of the resistance group in the camp. “...to go in living in Jirka’s stead, to see that he left no empty gap, to take his place as well as he could, and to carry on his life’s work under Jirka’s name...” (p. 446).

The title of the novel hints at two boxes with the prisoners’ cards that Zdeněk has to manage: a box of the dead and a box of lives. First, he tries to keep his own card but later also as many cards as possible in the box of lives. It means helping his fellow prisoners to survive. His efforts clash with the German SS guards but also with some prominent prisoners who are capos and often German professional criminals.

Nevertheless, the presentation of the characters in the novel is rather nuanced. The SS commanders are very complex and also the behaviour of the prisoners is varied. Some of them are unscrupulous and want to exploit their position at the expense of others (the German criminals Fritz and Paul and the Greek cook Motika), while the others are anxious and only want to survive (the Jewish barber Jenkele is compared to a small mouse). The bravest prisoners are cohesively helping their fellows (Greece Fredo, Spaniard Diego or German Willy).

In terms of the status of the Jews in the camp, their position is not significantly worse in comparison with other prisoners. So the Jewish doctor Oscar is the head of the revier (infirmary) and Zdeněk Roubík is the assistant of the *Lagerschreiber* and later even *Lagerschreiber* himself.

The author presents many dramatic situations in the camp using devices of adventurous and crime novels. The figures are also characterised through their languages: spoken Czech, vulgar German, French, Spanish, Hungarian or Yiddish.

Main Topics and Problems

Frýd’s inspiration for the camp Gigling was the real camp Kaufering where he was imprisoned. He already depicted this location in the short story *Archangels’ Sword* in the eponymous book (1954). Significantly for the beginning of the 1950s, in *Archangels’ Sword*, none of the prisoners were identified as being Jews. Two years later, in *A Box of Lives*, Frýd reaches beyond the limits of the schematic socialist realism that was obligatory for writers in Czech literature in the 1950s. His novel avoids black-and-white

descriptions. On the other hand, “his book does retain its traces, the communist prisoner Fredo can do no wrong, and the hero Zdeněk matures along the standard trajectory from self-absorbed egotist to politically conscious” (Bolton, 2010). Later in *A Message in the Bottle* (1971) the theme of the Jewishness and Holocaust is dealt more explicitly and without any ideological concessions within the framework of the family chronicle. Here Frýd writes authentically about his imprisonment in Theresienstadt, Auschwitz and Kaufering and notes differences to his depiction in *A Box of Lives* (Balík, 2012, pp. 43–50).

A Box of Lives contains some motifs typical for Holocaust literature. For instance, the persecution of the Jews is compared to a circus. See Jiří Weil’s → *Life with a Star*. The prisoners are not people but trained animals or numbers. “Next number on the programme... there you are, you see, a number! The prisoners are only numbers – and now I’m to be a number as well” (Frýd, 1962, pp. 117–118). The SS-man Leuthold says these words to himself, because he is also a part of this circus performance. Leuthold comes to the camp from the Eastern Front and is astounded by the situation in Gilling. He feels like he is in a wild animals’ cage, “[...] here in the dark, in the middle of this cage of wild animals filled with inhuman screaming” (p. 298). Leuthold’s relationship with the Hungarian Jewish woman Juliska grows into a compassionate love. However, it ends unhappily in the inhuman conditions of the camp. Juliska is arrested and will probably be executed.

The homosexuality in the camp appears as a new motif in the Czech Holocaust literature. Nevertheless, it is connected with the negative figure Karlchen and portrayed as something repulsive. Karlchen abuses his *capo* position in Gilling and seduces young boys, such as the Jewish teenager Berl.

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