

The Fourth Language (Štvrtá reč)

Author: Pavel Vilikovský

First Published: 2013

Translation: Hungarian (in: *Első és utolsó szerelem*, 2016).

About the Author: Pavel Vilikovský (1941–2020) was a Slovak novelist, translator and essayist. He is the son of literary historian Jan Vilikovský (1904–1946) and the brother of translator Ján Vilikovský. He belonged to a generation of authors who debuted in the 1960s. He studied Slovak and English philology at the Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava (1960–1965). He was employed as an editor working for reviews and publishers. After the onset of normalisation in the 1970s, he hardly published anything. At that time, he became a renowned translator of English and American prose (Joseph Conrad, E. L. Doctorow, William Faulkner, J. C. Oates, Kurt Vonnegut and Virginia Woolf). Since 1989 he has consistently published prose and essays and is one of the best known Slovak authors.

His first book, *Sentimental Education in March* (1965), captivated readers with its richness of language, imagination, existential view of human coexistence and social empathy. The following episodes often feature an epic story concentrated around a criminal plot. The author interprets the plots ambiguously, showing their secret motifs (for example *Horse on the Floor*, *Blind Man in Vrábce* or *Pedestrian Story*). Another line of Vilikovský's work is creating sophisticated plays with conventional language, especially the language of ideology, and the deconstruction of various iconic themes (family, love, home vs. abroad, or the countryside) and myths (for example, the Slovak national tradition).

Further Important Publications: *Prózy* (2005, ed. P. Zajac, Stories; collected stories); *Vlastný životopis zla* (2009, The Autobiography of Evil; novel).

Content and Interpretation

The title of the work refers to the motto by the Jewish poet Tuvio Rübner. Born in Bratislava, Rübner managed to leave for Palestine in 1941, but all his family members were deported from Slovakia to Auschwitz in 1942, where they all died. He writes that in Bratislava (Pressburg) three languages were spoken, Slovak, Hungarian and German. But in times of the war, silence was the fourth language. "Pressburg was a city of three languages. The fourth language is silence." (Vilikovský, 2013, p. 137)

The Fourth Language was published along with the novella *On the Left Bank of Memory* in the book *The First and the Last Love* (Prvá a posledná láska). *On the Left Bank of Memory* is basically an autobiographical memory of childhood, but literally stylised. *The Fourth Language* handles the experience of the Holocaust.

The novella is in a sense the author's key text. It is related to its theme, the historical appearance of the Holocaust during World War II. Here, Vilikovský follows in a specific way on his previous works, which presented the forms and limits of perpetration. It is a crime as an offence against the natural course of life and human existence. It is not an immediate, authentic experience. Vilikovský uses memory and its several reflections in the novella *The Fourth Language*. This suggests the complex meaning of the text. The way of narration shows a complicated reference between the Holocaust event and the possibilities of its depiction and expression in language.

The crucial event is the transport of Jewish women and girls from Slovakia T 6 transport to the Auschwitz concentration camp in the spring of 1942. It is an event that forms the core of the prose and can hardly be described. It took place in the district of Patrónka in Bratislava. The author uses several historically specific, documentary sources as well as his own experience in reading lists dedicated to Jewish Holocaust victims. He puts all these specifically verifiable facts into the narrative that the event perceives from the side – through the eyes of Gabriel, a present day pensioner. He is a random observer, a former Slovak teacher who, as a volunteer, is devoted to oral history. He overhears and records the memories of a very old man who is over 90 years old speaking about the events of the twentieth century – also about World War II and the fate of the Jews. This narration is also commented on by the author as the narrator. Another layer of the narrative is quotes from the conversations of Nazi generals in British captivity, who were bugged and recorded without their knowledge. They bring appalling testimonies of brutal murder while downplaying the Holocaust (in English Neitzel, 2013).

Main Topics and Problems

In the novella, readers gradually become acquainted with the “great story” of war violence from several different sides. There are ten Jewish women and girls from the T 6 transport. The names have an urgent effect on the narrator's conscience, but also on his empathic participation. He tries to put himself into the life of one of them, 36-year-old Ema Schlesinger. But he finds it impossible. “Gabriel understood that even if Ema Schlesinger were alive, she would have nothing to tell him. So have a good time and nothing more. They would not find common ground, for the abyss between them, the pit of corpses, cannot be crossed – full of the hungry and the dead, they do not believe the living. Gabriel, it cannot be denied, gave up and left Ema still lying there, burnt in an unknown mass grave” (Vilikovský, 2013, p. 191).

In the novella, Vilikovský methodologically precisely shows the limits and limited contexts of the epic representation of the topic of inexplicable genocide. He also draws attention to the exemplary boundaries of imagination and the imagination associated with this theme. Beyond this limit, there are other, exclusively existential decisions. The author recalls this in the text of the allusion to the experience of the Polish writer Tadeusz Borowski. “The Polish writer Tadeusz Borowski boasted that at some point he saw twenty-eight thousand naked women in a concentration camp on

apelplac. The sight of a naked woman usually has an uplifting, even inspirational, effect on men, and with a larger number of women the effect should logically be even greater, but twenty-eight thousand were probably too much. Tadeusz found himself unable to speak for everyone and committed suicide soon after the liberation. He was not even thirty years old” (pp. 196–197).

Cited Work

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