

The Holocaust (Holokaust)

Author: Viliam Klimáček

First Published: 2012

Theatre Adaptation: Divadlo Aréna, Bratislava (2012).

Translation: Czech (*Holokaust*, 2013).

About the Author: Viliam Klimáček (1958) is a playwright, theatre director and actor, poet and novelist. He graduated from the Medical Faculty at Comenius University in Bratislava and worked as an anaesthesiologist in Bratislava. In 1985 he co-founded the alternative creative GUnaGU Theatre in Bratislava and has been the artistic director and screenwriter of the theatre since that time. In 1992, he left his medical profession and began his professional career in theatre. He uses absurdity and the grotesque in his works, often inspired by the British comedy group Monty Python.

Further Important Publications: *Námestie kozmonautov* (2007, The Square of Cosmonauts; novel); *Aupairky* (premiere 2008, Au Pairs; play); *Díleri* (premiere 2009, Dealers; play); *Sado* (premiere 2013, Sado; play).

Content and Interpretation

The play, divided in two acts, bears the subtitle “A Story which Slovakia Would Rather Forget”. It depicts in a controversial way the modern period of Slovak history. The plot begins after the Velvet Revolution, in 1991, in an unknown Slovakian town. Anna Králiková, the daughter of Slovak emigrants, returns from Argentina to the native country of her parents. She wants to restore her parent’s property, the café Rose, that had been confiscated by the Communist regime. However, she learns the original owner of the café was a Jewess Rosa Rozenfeldová and Anna’s father, Ambros Králik, didn’t get it until 1940, after the Jewish property in Slovakia was “aryanised”. In the following scenes of the first act, located in the Café Rose, historical reminiscences blend with the then present (1991). In the prewar time, several acquaintances often meet in the café: the Catholic Slovak poet Ambros Králik, the Lutheran cinema projectionist Jano Pujdes as well as Jews, namely the young lawyer Jacob Weiss, the owner of the café Rosa Rozenfeldová and her daughter Esther. After the establishing of the clerofascist Slovak State (1939) the positions and behaviour of protagonists change. Králik becomes a high ranking official in the ministry and an awarded poet. He acquires the whole house due to the so-called aryanisation. Pujdes becomes a member of the Hlinka Guard, a Slovak Fascist organisation. Jacob Weiss flees to exile in Britain and fights in the Czechoslovak foreign army against Germany. Esther and her friend Lily Weiss, the sister of Jacob, have to board the transport to Auschwitz. At the same time Králik

and his wife Hana, Mrs Rozenfeld's former maid, attend the premiere of Králík's film *Svätopluk*, Slovakia's first spectacular historical movie.

In the second act, dramatic dialogues are substituted by the monologues of the characters. They talk about their life from 1942 onwards. Esther has survived the concentration camps and Lily in hiding but no other members of their families have survived. They are traumatised, Lily commits suicide, Esther, prevented from studying, emigrates to Israel. Králík tries to please the postwar Communist regime. Nevertheless, he is refused and emigrates with his wife to Argentina. Kristína Majerová, a simple woman who had hidden Lily during the war, is accused of being an "exploiter" and dies during questioning. Pujdes works as a street sweeper while former prominent members of the Hlinka Guard now also make a career for themselves in the new regime.

Main Topics and Problems

The Holocaust forms a part of Aréna Theatre's "Civic Cycle", that began with the production of *Tiso* (2005, docudrama about the Slovak clerofascist president written by Rastislav Ballek). It continued with two plays by Viliam Klimáček, *Dr Gustáv Husák* (2006, Husák was the leader of the Communist Party and the Czechoslovak president during the normalisation in the 1970s and 1980s) and *Communism* (2008) as well with other works. All the plays combine political themes with the desire to provoke historical reflection and contemporary social discussion by means of theatre. In this sense, Klimáček continues with the tradition of playwrights from Germany (Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy*, 1963; Peter Weiss' *The Investigation*, 1965) or Austria (Thomas Bernhard's *Heldenplatz*, 1984; Elfriede Jelinek's *Rechnitz*, 2010) who questioned conventional images of their lands in relationship to the Holocaust. In the contemporary Slovakian context, *The Holocaust* has common features with the play → *The Woman Rabbi* written by Anna Grusková or Denisa Fulmeková's novels → *Lily of the Valley* and → *Doctor Mráz* as well as with the Czech author Radka Denemarková and her → *Money from Hitler*.

Female Jewish characters in *The Holocaust* are based on the memoirs of Hilda Hrabovecká (1924–2015; *Arm with a Tattooed Number*, 1998; in English 2002), who survived the first girls' transport from the territory of the Fascist Slovak Republic to Auschwitz in 1942. The author also studied other historical documents concerning the persecution and extermination of Slovak Jews during the war and the responsibility of the majority of society for it. The mercenary and pragmatic behaviour of Slovaks is embodied in characters of Ambros Králík and Jano Pujdes. Radio plays a special role in the story. A radio is placed in Café Rose and the sound of popular music, advertisements, current political news and propaganda of the gradually changing regimes are all heard here. On the other hand, the plot contains fictional events and situations, e.g. the Slovak historical film *Svätopluk* about the ancient Moravian and Slovakian king from the 9th century.

At the beginning, Anna Králiková hoping to get back the café is surprised that it was owned by the Jews before the war. She asks the audience "How far backwards do

you want to look? Into prehistory?!” (Klimáček, 2015, p. 425) She wants to draw “a thick line” between the past and the present. At the end of the play, Esther polemises with “thick lines” blocking the past. She does not want revenge, but at the same time she does not want to forget.

In each performance in Aréna Theatre in Bratislava, for the entire second act of the play, the audience traded places with the actors. The audience was moved onto the stage and the actors proceeded to give their monologues from different locations throughout the seating area of the auditorium. “The empty seats evoke the empty graves of the victims who haven’t been buried, a silent and unpunished guilt. Audiences are no longer just observers, but they become actors of the painful history” (Hanzelová, 2016, p. 175). In this manner, the actual meaning of the play, the role of the historical memory, was stressed.

Cited Work

Hanzelová, J. (2016). Téma: Holokaust. *Slovenské divadlo*, 64(2), pp. 165–179. Available at: <https://www.sav.sk/journals/uploads/10191115SD02-2016-165.pdf> [Accessed: 28.2.2020]. Klimáček, V. (2015). *Trinášť hier*. Bratislava: Divadelný ústav.

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