

# Money from Hitler (Peníze od Hitlera)

**Author:** Radka Denemarková

**First Published:** 2006

**Theatre Adaptation:** Praha, Švandovo divadlo (Švanda Theatre), 2010.

**Translations:** Polish (*Pieniądze od Hitlera*, 2008); English (*Money from Hitler*, 2009); German (*Ein herrlicher Flecken Erde*, 2009); Hungarian (*Hitler pénzé*, 2009); Slovenian (*Denar od Hitlerja*, 2010); Italian (*I soldi di Hitler*, 2012); Bulgarian (*Pari ot Chitler*, 2013); Spanish (*El dinero de Hitler*, 2015); Macedonian (*Parite od Chitler*, 2016); Swedish (*Pengar från Hitler*, 2016); Serbian (*Novac od Hitlera*, 2018); Croatian (*Novac od Hitlera*, 2018).

**About the Author:** Radka Denemarková (1968) is among the most prominent authors of contemporary Czech literature. She is known as a novelist, playwright, translator and essayist. After Czech and German studies, she graduated from the Faculty of Arts at Charles University in Prague and holds a Ph.D. (1997). From 1998 to 2004, she was employed at the Institute of Czech Literature at the Academy of Sciences and simultaneously as a dramaturg at Prague Theatre Na zábradlí (Theatre on the Balustrade). Since 2004 she has been a freelance writer and translator. She translated from German into Czech, e.g. Herta Müller's novels or Georg Tabori's and Thomas Bernhard's plays.

**Further Important Publications:** *A já pořád kdo to tuče* (2005, *The Devil by the Nose*, novel); *Kobold* (2011, *Kobold*, novel); *Spací vady* (2012, *Sleeping Disorders*, play).

## Content and Interpretation

The novel is comprised of six chapters, so-called “returns”, surrounded by a prologue and a short epilogue. Denemarková brings together two chains of events which have a traumatic impact on the main character Gita Lauschmannová. She has survived the Holocaust, but is no longer accepted at her former home in the Czech village of Puklice which she comes back to in her first return in “Summer 1945”, as a 16-year-old girl. Not only that Gita, the daughter of a German speaking Jewish landowner, lost her parents and sister in the Holocaust, and she has no trace of her brother. The prologue however, leads the reader to suppose that her wish to find him alive will be brutally disappointing. As Jews – even though they were “assimilated” Jews (Denemarková, 2006, p. 64) – her family was deported to Nazi ghettos and concentration camps (Theresienstadt and Auschwitz are mentioned, p. 55). By the end of the war, the Lauschmanns' estate had been confiscated (p. 71). The Czech inhabitants who have taken over the land and houses and divided them among themselves, treat Gita hatefully like the child of an old adversary and do not shy away from mistreating her in or-

der to rid themselves of her. Eventually, she is able to escape (pp. 30–54) to a collecting camp, and from there to her aunt Ottla in Prague. Gita's rescue from Puklice is due to the unexpected help by a – up to that point unknown to her – pregnant young woman („Žena“, pp. 43ff.), who acts as a kind of paradoxical *deus ex machina*, at the same time saving Gita's life and executing her expulsion.

The second return, in “Summer 2005”, shifts the storyline to the now 76-year-old doctor (Gita) Lauschmannová, a retired physician. In the meantime, the Czech government has rehabilitated her parents (p. 82–83). Seeking reconciliation, she plans to build a museum and a monument for her father (which might be supported by grants from the German-Czech Fund for the Future). This in mind, she returns to Puklice (like Dürrenmatt's “Old Lady” in a luxury limousine; cf. his play *The Visit*, 1956), accompanied by her granddaughter Barbora and a lawyer. But there, the prejudices and false insinuations are still alive, and she is confronted with the old hate. The village people refuse mediation; any attempt at a solution is futile.

But some hope seems to sprout, when Denis, the son of the woman who had once taken the risk to let Gita escape, appears. Over the course of the next four chapters (“returns” 3–6), he understands the incredible injustice that has come upon Lauschmannová more and more (Strebel, 2014). Both become friends and Denis supports her fight for justice. She still suffers from horrible flashbacks recalling her suffering. Trying to cope with the flood of traumatic memories and the still unfortunate situation in Puklice, all of sudden she passes away while writing of her memories. Denis and Barbora organise her burial in Prague. In the epilogue, Denis' mother dies of a stroke. He is left with Lauschmannová's manuscript and the Lauschmann's unsettled legacy.

Denemarková's novel is a tragedy in prose. In the end, the conflict is still smouldering after the death of the main protagonist, and “catharsis is kept in suspense, handed over to future.” (Schwarz, 2014, p. 170)

### Main Topics and Problems

The story was inspired by the life of Eliška Fábryová whose Jewish father Richard Fischmann, murdered in Auschwitz, owned the castle and manor farm in Puklice village near Jihlava. After the war, the family was designated as Germans despite the fact they declared Jewish nationality and Czechoslovak citizenship. The estate was confiscated. In the 1990s, Fischmann was rehabilitated and Eliška Fábryová, almost 80 years old, demanded to restore her parents possessions. The villagers refused to hand over this property, and the whole case was not decided until 2012, six years after Eliška Fábryová's death (Koumar, 2018).

The novel deals with the fate of a “twofold victim” (term from Laruelle, 2015, p. 149). Reconstructed chronologically, Lauschmannová is first a victim of the Holocaust, and then she has to suffer from displacement in consequence of the expropriation according to President Beneš's “decree nr 12” (Denemarková, 2006, p. 216).

[...] Here is no *haus* which belongs to you. [...] In the name of the President of the Republic the whole estate of your family was transferred to the state. [...] The guilt of your *famílije* [family] is irrefutable. The essential point was and is the language people use among themselves. And *ausger-echnet* [just] at your home, behind closed doors *se šprechtílo* [they spoke] one hundred percent German. (p. 34; germanisms in italics)

Ironically, the accusation that Gita's family spoke German, is uttered in a local common Czech idiom, interspersed with germanisms. Displacement has more than just a spacial dimension: It begins and happens by discrimination, be it through language, by racial (antisemitic) prejudice and social exclusion or marginalisation, nourished by missing cultural empathy and nationalistic chauvinism. The novel exposes conjunction of trouble spots: the conflict-clusters of postwar expulsions, German-Czech-Jewish history and the Holocaust. This connection appears quite often in Czech literature in the last decades, see Josef Urban's novel *The Mill of Habermann* (2001) or Miroslav Bambušek's play *Porta Apostolorum* (2004). All over the narrative, the reader can trace the idea of a hard-to-cope-with presence of the past (comp. e.g. the serious documentation of the crimes committed during the end of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (Padevět, 2015), or in a wider frame, the reports about the *Ghosts of Europe* (Porter, 2010). The events in *Money from Hitler* reach up to 2005 in their consequences, thus letting the reader discover a prolonged chain of injustice.

Another notable point is the special aesthetic design which gives the protagonist in this conflict-ridden historic constellation her literary voice. The attempt to penetrate into her traumatic world, into this "holocaust after the Holocaust" (term by Zajac, 2010), generates sequences of surrealistic images. What happens in the "returns" is conveyed through Gita's, later doctor Lauschmannová's, mind, and is realised as something immediately experienced. She persists as an unmasked central reflector. The main narrative instance is remarkably folded: While the narration runs in third-person, there is another voice interfering in first-person (as *I/my* or *we/our*). For contrast, the first-person elements in the next example are put in italics:

They found the woman [...] in an oak locker [...]. And they raped her. With a machine gun. [...] *I am* grinning, and pictures are flickering before *my* eyes. The woman gets pregnant, she puffs up and bears a tiny machine gun, a whole family of small trembling machine guns pushing their way out of her, like little frozen metal snakes. They are tawing in *our* hands and at her breasts, and glittering bullets are dropping down from her nipples. (Denemarková, 2006, p. 66)

With its hard-edged imagery opening the narration to the grotesque, this work explores a method to show how traumatising historical events and apories are inscribed into a literary person's mind, body and life. It stands to mention that Michal Lang's stage adaptation of *Money from Hitler* was a success, too. At Prague Švanda Theatre, it ran for two years (2010–2012).

### Cited Works

Denemarková, R. (2006). *Peníze od Hitlera. (Letní mozaika)*. Brno: Host. Koumar, J. (2018). Konfiskace majetku českých Židů v poválečném Československu na příkladu zámku a velkostatku Puklice. *Historická sociologie*, 10(2), pp. 83–99. Available at: [https://historicalsociology.cuni.cz/HS-39-version1-hs\\_2\\_2018\\_koumar.pdf](https://historicalsociology.cuni.cz/HS-39-version1-hs_2_2018_koumar.pdf) [Accessed: 19.04.2020]. Laruelle, F. (2015). *General Theory of Victims*. Malden: Polity Press. Padevět, J. (2015). *Krvavé finále. Jaro 1945 v českých zemích*. Praha: Academia. Porter, A. (2010). *The Ghosts of Europe: Journeys through Central Europe's Troubled Past and Uncertain Future*. Vancouver, Toronto: D&M. Schwarz, W. F. (2014): Holocaust und KZ im Fokus tschechischer Literatur nach 2000. Zu Arnošt Goldflams „Doma u Hitlerů“ und Radka Denemarková's „Peníze od Hitlera“. In: R. Ibler, ed., *Der Holocaust in den mitteleuropäischen Literaturen und Kulturen seit 1989. The Holocaust in the Central European Literatures and Cultures since 1989*. Stuttgart: ibidem, pp. 157–171. Strelbel, V. (2014). Das Knistern der Stille. Radka Denemarková's Roman erzählt vom schwierigen Umgang mit der Vergangenheit. *Prager Zeitung*, 34, 25.09. Available at: <https://www.pragerzeitung.cz/das-knistern-der-stille/>. [Accessed: 17.02.2020] Zajac, P. (2010). Der Holocaust nach dem Holocaust. In: M. Marszalek, A. Molisak, eds., *Nach dem Vergessen. Rekurse auf den Holocaust in Ostmitteleuropa nach 1989*. Berlin: Kadmos, pp. 97–114.

### Further References

Demetz, P. (2010). Das Dorf und die Deutsche. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 62(17), 21.1., p. 30. Holý, J. (2017). Conventions of Radka Denemarková's Novel *Peníze od Hitlera* (Money from Hitler) along with its Reception. *Poznańskie Studia Slawistyczne*, 12, pp. 371–380. Pynsent, R. B. (2007). Conclusory Essay: Activists, Jews, the Little Czech Man, and Germans. *Central Europe*, 5(2), pp. 211–333. Tomášová, T. (2014). Trauma in Denemarková's Buch „Peníze od Hitlera“. In: R. Ibler, ed., *Der Holocaust in den mitteleuropäischen Literaturen und Kulturen seit 1989. The Holocaust in the Central European Literatures and Cultures since 1989*. Stuttgart: ibidem, pp. 291–302.

WFS