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If I Met a Jew – What Would I talk to Him/Her About? The Possibilities of Creative Writing and Post Shoah Literature in the Czech Language

GDYBYM SPOTKAŁ ŻYDA – O CZYM BYM Z NIM ROZMAWIAŁ? MOŻLIWOŚCI KREATYWNEGO PISANIA
I LITERATURY O HOLOKAUŚCIE W JĘZYKU CZESKIM

Streszczenie: Niniejszy artykuł bada możliwość wykorzystania praktyk kreatywnego pisania do nauczania studentów międzynarodowych o holokauście w literaturze. Konkretni autorzy poddani analizie to Egon Hostovský, Jiří Weil i Josef Škvorecký. Omówiono również konkretne praktyki twórczego pisania widoczne w indywidualnych pracach studentów.

Słowa kluczowe: holokaust, shoah, twórcze pisanie, dydaktyka, nauczanie

ЕСЛИ БЫ Я ВСТРЕТИЛ ЕВРЕЯ – О ЧЕМ БЫ Я С НИМ ГОВОРИЛ? ВОЗМОЖНОСТИ ТВОРЧЕСКОГО ПИСЬМА
И ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ О ХОЛОКОСТЕ НА ЧЕШСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ

Резюме: В статье рассматривается возможность использования практики писательского мастерства для преподавания иностранным студентам темы Холокоста в литературе. Анализируются такие конкретные авторы, как Эгон Хостовский, Иржи Вайль и Йозеф Шкворецкий. Также обсуждаются конкретные практики творческого писательского мастерства, проявляющиеся в индивидуальных работах студентов.

Ключевые слова: Холокост, Шоа, писательское мастерство, дидактика, преподавание

Motto:

*The angels wings is white as snow,
O, white as snow,
White
as
snow.
The angels wings is white as snow,
But I drug ma wings
In the dirty mire.*

O, I drug ma wings
All through the fire.
But the angels wings is white as snow,
White
as
snow.

(Langston Hughes, *Angels Wings*)

Didactics of Creative Writing with Regard to Didactic Practice¹

The aim of our paper is to show how the topic of the Holocaust can be dealt with in the classroom, beyond the numerous existing literary competitions on the topic of the Shoah². Our paper is thus interdisciplinary in nature, combining both the didactics of creative writing and imagology³ or, in a broader sense, literary science. We want to show how, through creative writing, the theme of Shoah can be brought closer and updated to our times.

Creative writing is one of the disciplines where several methodological approaches meet. On the one hand, one can find an artistic line, educating future writers and journalists,⁴ on the other

¹ This subchapter is based on the article by Eva Maria Hrdinová “*Hic sunt leones nebo Lvičata řvou po kořisti? Využití potenciálu tvůrčího psaní ve výuce církevní slovanštiny*” (*Hic sunt leones or Lion Cubs Roaring for Prey? Harnessing the Potential of Creative Writing in the Teaching of Church Slavonic*), held on the conference *Literatúra vo výučbe – vyučovať literatúru* (Literature in teaching – Teaching literature), 11.11.2022 in Prešov (Slovakia), where it was presented in abbreviated form. The paper is now in print and will appear in the conference publication.

² We use the terms “Holocaust” and “Shoah” synonymously. In our paper we focus on the post-Shoah period, that is, after 1945, cf. Jiří Holý, “*Obraz šoa v české literatuře*,” in *Česká literatura – rozhraní a okraje*, ed. Lenka Jungmannová (Praha: Ústav pro českou literaturu AV ČR, 2010), 100–108, https://service.ucl.cas.cz/edicee/images/data/sborniky/kongres/Česká%20literatura%20-%20rozhraní%20a%20okraje/009_jiri_holy.pdf.

³ Cf. K. Berwanger in: Katrin Berwanger and Peter Kosta, eds., *Stereotyp und Geschichtsmythos in Kunst und Sprache* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang 2005), Einleitung, XIII–XXXII; Martin Kanovský, *Luďské druhy a luďská myseľ – kognitívne základy etnických klasifikácií a stereotypov*, *Etnické stereotypy z pohľadu rôznych viedních oborů* (Brno: Etnologický ústav AV ČR, 2001), 9–15. cf. on the topic also Miloš Zelenka and Lenka Tkáč-Zabáková, eds., *Imagológia ako výskum obrazov kultúry: k reflexii etnických stereotypov krajín V4* (Nitra: Univerzita Konštantína Filozofa v Nitre, 2018). On the religious aspect of imagology cf. Zsófia Bárczi, Ján Gallik, Dominika Hlavinková-Tekeliová, and Lenka Tkáč-Zabáková, *Spiritual-Religious Literature. Through the Lens of Comparative Imagology* (Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2020). On the imagological analysis of specific literary works cf. Malgorzata Swiderska, *Theorie und Methode einer literaturwissenschaftlichen Imagologie, dargestellt am Beispiel Russlands im literarischen Werk Heimato von Doderers* (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2013). On the terminology of comparatist imagology, however, in view of the author’s primarily Germanic focus, cf. Michaela Voltrová, *Terminologie, Methodologie und Perspektiven der komparatistischen Imagologie* (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2015). In this paper, we come in *implicite* closest to M. Voltrová (cf. comparing, borders, image) with respect to the starting points, of course taking into account certain sources. However, given the practical focus of the paper, we do not deepen the imagological theoretical base.

⁴ Markéta Dočekalová, *Tvůrčí psaní pro každého: Jak psát pro noviny a časopisy, jak vymyslet dobrý příběh*,

hand, creative writing is applied in teaching⁵, either as a learning activity during foreign language classes or as a procedure during mother tongue classes (Czech in the case of the Czech Republic).

In the aforementioned fields in German- and English-speaking countries as well as in the Czech environment, there are a number of authors who emphasize that the art of writing consists solely in developing the imagination (Smithová,⁶ Kochová⁷) or in practicing exact, careful stylistic procedures for writing texts.⁸

Another group of authors emphasizes the psychological aspects. The therapeutic potential of creative writing is indisputable and has been considered by many authors. Šárka Gjuričová explicitly mentions this potential as essential for her own therapeutic work.⁹ The students' own artistic activity is rather an added value that can be achieved. Our approach to teaching creative writing is a synthesis of the approaches of Dočekalová, Smith, and Gjuričová¹⁰ in the sense that we encouraged students' creativity and imagination in our own teaching. We draw on our experience of teaching creative writing to German language learners, as well as English language learners. We have taken as our goal a maxim based on the above theoretical approaches.¹¹

It is not an artistic performance, for example, the preparation of a poetic form such as a haiku, sonnet, etc. This may be created, but is not our primary goal, moreover, at the time of using AI, its authentic performance is not guaranteed.

This idea applies not only to the inclusion of creative writing as an activity in secondary school, which we have in mind, but also to

praktická cvičení (Praha: Grada, 2006); Markéta Dočekalová, *Tvůrčí psaní pro každého 2: Naučte se vyprávět příběhy! Jak se píše povídka, novela a román?, Praktická cvičení 1.* (Praha: Grada, 2009); Alžběta Bublanová, Andrea Selzerová, *Cvičebnice tvůrčího psaní* (Praha: Grada, 2021); Dorothea Brande, *Schriftsteller werden* (Berlin: Autorenhaus, 2006); John Gardner, *On Becoming a Novelist* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co 1983); Fritz Gensing, *Kreativ Schreiben. Handwerk und Techniken des Erzählens* (Köln: DuMont 2004).

⁵ Cf. Josef Maňák, "Aktivizující výukové metody," 2011, accessed February 6, 2023, <https://clanky.rvp.cz/clanek/c/Z/14483/aktivizujici-?rate=4>.

⁶ Keri Smithová, *Destrukční deník* (Praha: CoBo, 2022) and other works by this author. We use Czech translations of Keri Smith's works not only because of their availability, but also because they can be used in the classroom by our students who mostly teach students whose mother tongue is Czech.

⁷ Blanka Kochová, *Fantazník* (Brno: ZonerPress, 2020).

⁸ Dočekalová, *Tvůrčí psaní 1, 2*; Lutz von Werder, *Lehrbuch des kreativen Schreibens* (Wiesbaden: Marix Verlag, 2016).

⁹ Šárka Gjuričová and Jiří Kubička, *Rodinná terapie: systemické a narativní přístupy* (Praha: Grada, 2009). As a psychologist, Gjuričová is involved in family therapy. According to her, narration takes place either through spoken text (especially in the therapeutic conversation) or through written text.

¹⁰ Dočekalová, *Tvůrčí psaní 1, 2*; Smithová, *Destrukční deník*; Gjuričová, Kubička, *Rodinná terapie*.

¹¹ However, as the teaching does not take place in a therapeutic environment, Gjuričová's approach is only mentioned in a framework and some procedures are not implemented.

teaching of creative writing in college, where students themselves create the assignments that they will eventually give to their students.

In creative writing classes, different kinds of texts can be considered as outputs in foreign language teaching: depending on the level of the pupils, short poetic pieces (e.g. acrostic, haiku), but also the completion of a real story, the description of a picture or different kinds of free writing techniques (*"describe in a paragraph what made you happy, what made you angry,"* etc.),¹² or project-based practices in which a group of pupils/students or a class participates together (collaboratively written short story, horror, detective story, comic book, etc.).¹³

The creative writing assignment is done either at home (this needs to be revised with the advent of artificial intelligence and efforts should be made to limit writing longer essay-type pieces) or in class. Traditionally, these assignments include short speaking or writing exercises (icebreaker), where you have to respond spontaneously to a given question (*"time machine" – where would I want to be, what would I do if I woke up with only a mobile phone in a dark forest, if I woke up as an animal,* etc.). Creative writing tasks should always be subordinated to the curriculum in particular, textbooks, vocabulary level, etc. Another very popular option is to create your own text on a picture or a follow-up text on a text beginning either created by the teacher or taken from an existing text. As a variant, an abbreviated retelling of an already known literary story (work) from the position of, for example, a minor character, a pet, etc. can be used.

Thus, a creative writing class at the university¹⁴ may begin with a few icebreakers and then move on to other writing assignments in class or to the presentation and discussion of homework. The syllabus for the course tends to be focused, progressing from simpler assignments to more complex ones. Discussion of the written output includes discussion of the possibilities of direct didactic application and links with other didactic disciplines, for instance, grammar didactics,¹⁵ etc.

¹² Cf. Walter Epp, *Die besten 25 Übungen für kreative Texten* (undated), accessed January 13, 2023, <https://www.schreibsuchti.de/2017/08/03/kreatives-schreiben>.

¹³ Cf. Silke Traub, *Projektarbeit erfolgreich gestalten. Über individualisiertes, kooperatives Lernen zum selbst-gesteuerten Kleingruppenprojekt* (Bad Heilbrunn: UTB, 2012); Ivona Dömischová, "Metody a techniky zvyšování motivace ve výuce cizího jazyka na VŠ," in *Vysokoškolský pedagog: člověk nebo počítač? aneb Výukové metody na vysokých školách* (Olomouc: Moravská vysoká škola, 2008), 53–58.

¹⁴ We draw primarily on our own teaching at the Institute of Foreign Languages (Faculty of Education at the Palacký University in Olomouc), using German and English text material.

¹⁵ Cf. Anna Reeder, *Ausgewählte Fragender Deutschdidaktik*, 2011, accessed February 12, 2003, https://janus.ttk.pte.hu/tamop/tananyagok/dig_jegy_nemet/96_linguistische_und_didaktische_pedagogische_grammatik.html.

Creative Writing and the Shoah Theme

We keep in mind that the theme of Shoah can be shown in conjunction with creative writing in many different ways. In this subsection, we will show how creative writing practices have been applied to the teaching of so-called post Shoah literature, as we call literature on this topic, but which was written after 1945 in the Czech Republic. For a group of foreign students, a so-called *Compendium* (A Compendium of Educational, Social and Human Sciences, PDF/YCESH) opens every semester, with weekly lectures in English on different topics: didactic, linguistic and literary. Traditionally, they also include a lecture on the above-mentioned literature.¹⁶ The course is led by Eva Maria Hrdinová. A group of about six students regularly attends the classes. For this article we consider two semesters of the academic year 2022/2023, winter and summer.

In the lessons with the international students,¹⁷ three works were exemplarily discussed: *The House Without a Master* [Dům bez pána]¹⁸ by Egon Hostovský, *Life with a Star* [Život s hvězdou] by Jiří Weil and, last but not least, *The Lion Cub* [Lvíče], known also as *Flirt se slečnou Stříbrnou* [Flirt with Miss Silver/Miss Silver's Past]¹⁹ by Josef Škvorecký.

In the classroom we work with excerpts of texts, mostly in our own translations, because apart from Škvorecký's *The Lion Cub*, the other texts have not been translated into English. The texts are interpreted according to the standard structuralistic method, taking into account the individual motifs and the interpretive principles of Vladimir Propp.²⁰ We also marginally use Talmudic texts as an interpretive key with regard to the motifs (cf. below for the six names of the lion). The lesson is constructed in ascending order, from simpler to more complex, according to Comenius' well-known principle from *Didactica Magna*. It begins with an excerpt from Hostovsky's *The House Without a Master*. Before the excerpt,

¹⁶ The students will also receive a lecture on Prague German Literature (Jan Kubica, Ph.D.) as part of the compendium. However, they will have an introductory discussion on Judaism and the Jewish way of life in our class devoted to post-Shoah literature. The course includes an introductory discussion of Jewish symbols and realities, essential in the interpretation of all the works analyzed as motifs: star, menorah, mezuzah, Torah, etc.

¹⁷ Students consent to the publication of their work in this paper. We would like to thank all of them.

¹⁸ This work is ahead of our specified time frame of post-Shoah literature – it has been classified as an *Auftakt*, a beginning, a reminder, and at the same time it already implies something terrible, even though it does not yet write about the war situation or its beginnings.

¹⁹ A film from the book from 1969.

²⁰ Cf. Vladimír J. Propp, *Morfologie pohádky a jiné studie* (Jinočany: H&H, 1999).

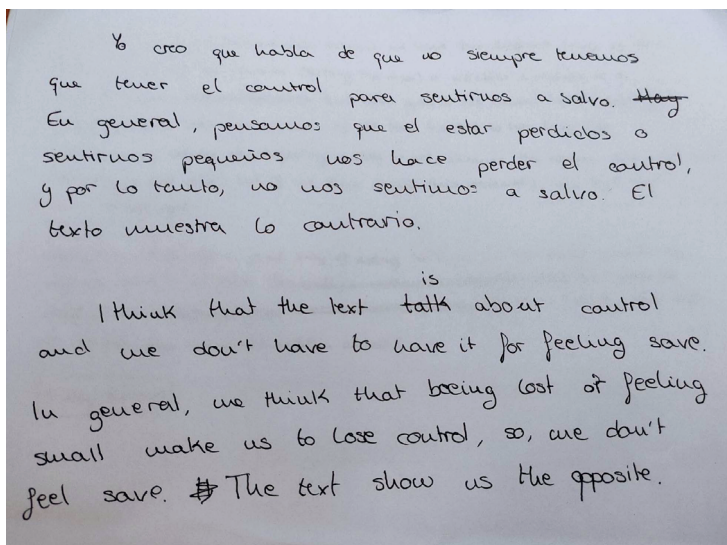
the content of the novel is briefly presented with the basic features of interpretation according to Propp, namely with regard to the figure of the deceased father, the God of the father, or the God of the Jews, and the life of the three remaining siblings and their search for reality, including the reality of love or “virtual” reality (one of the sons is a drug addict).

The students then discuss the atmosphere of the city: pleasant, nice, existential, with danger at its back, etc., or write briefly about their impression (roughly a paragraph or two of text).²¹

Text 1. Egon Hostovský, *A House without a Master* in our own English Translation:

In the suddenly expanded space, the earth curled in on itself and the buildings, people and trees shrank. In the tumult of the fair and the music of the two carousels, my city shrank into a miniature kingdom, delightful and comical in its impossible colourful busyness. Everything around seemed tiny and tiny. I, too, felt as tiny as a grain of sand, and childishly rejoiced at being childishly lost in this ant kingdom.

Text 2. Student's work



²¹ We do not give a detailed interpretation of this literary work at this point, as it is beyond the scope of our article.

This student's text thematizes certainty and uncertainty in the context of Hostovsky's text. It is worth noting the first version, written in the student's mother tongue, and the next version, which is obviously a translation.

Other students repeatedly mentioned the contrast between the idyll of the small-town human anthill and the threat of an impending world war.

Then the lesson moves on to two more texts, namely Weil's autobiographical novel *Life with a Star*. There, an excerpt is discussed that reports on the solitude of the protagonist, Josef Roubíček. We focus on the moment when Josef Roubíček is alone in the house, hiding, remembering earlier and seemingly commonplace things (a walk, a coffee in a café with his girlfriend, a visit to the theatre, etc.), the motif of the star is discussed (the Jewish star on his clothes, the stars outside the windows, which Roubíček can only look out of in the dark), the name of the main character (Josef Roubíček is a popular name in Jewish anecdotes, so it could be *jedermann*, an everyman), or his own experiences of loneliness. In particular, the recent covid pandemic offers a parallel to Roubíček's feelings. The discussion, which may or may not include a brief written reflection on this loneliness, "quarantine," etc., ends with a reminder of the liberation and the questions that arose after the liberation and the Shoah period (e.g., Primo Levi, Elias Canetti, or more recently Rabbi Harold Kushner or psychiatrist and Shoah survivor Viktor Frankl). First, we consider who is actually a Jew in the eyes of the students. What is he/she like, what are his/her characteristics? Can we generalize? The students' initial answers are mostly based on their autopsic ignorance of people with Jewish origins or religion, but they report on perceived presuppositions, for example, the trauma of the Holocaust. What would I talk about with a Jewish person? The answer to this question is also not simple, many international students, for instance, from East Asian countries, have not had and do not have direct experience with Jews at all, according to their own words. This makes the interest in the topic all the greater. It is not infrequent that even the teacher of the course is asked about possible family ties to the Jewish ethnicity. From this "warm-up round" she moves on to more existential questions.²²

²² During the duration of the course, thirty students participated, two of whom were of German nationality. Both of them (in different courses) were characterized by a great awareness of the subject and a great respect for it. Given the atmosphere of mutual tolerance, "German guilt" was not explicitly addressed, although it was mentioned by one German student. In this context, various international reconciliation efforts were briefly discussed, such as the work of German citizens in kibbutzim and even the religious

Can a Holocaust survivor still rejoice after the Shoah? Can one still go to the cinema, laugh, go to the swimming pool? What did the shame of survival look like when others died in the gas chambers? Where was God in Terezín? These questions remain unanswered during the lesson, bringing to the proverbial stage the third text under discussion, Škvorecký's *The Lion Cub*.

This text from 1969 is set in the late 1950s in a post-war publishing environment. The analysis focuses on the death of the boss, the head of the publishing house and the character of Lenka Stříbrná, in the English translation Lenka Silver (Leona Silbernagelová), who takes revenge on the boss for the death of her sister in a concentration camp. The analysis focuses not only on Lenka and the male characters around her, but also on the stylistic transformations (the impersonal language of communist meetings vs. the lyrical passages of Karel, one coworker of her, dedicated to Lenka):

And then I understood. Ah, my dearest lily, forgive me, if you can.

I moved. I felt a stab of pain in my heart; perhaps a blood clot was beginning to claim its right to that tormented muscle. The night was dark, moonless, tattered clouds sailed among the stars, rain began to fall over the distant silhouette of Prague. Through my half-closed lids the lights of the city had dissolved into a wavy golden surface. It was Thursday night, the end of my love affair with the beautiful Lenka Silver.²³

Important are also the unrevealed murder and, last but not least, the Jewish motifs: the menorah, the star, but also, for example, the lion to which Lenka is compared:

[...]the cat has jumped off her lap, hissed like snake. I said: "And her first name was not Lenka. It was Leona. A Lioness."

I looked at the small, dark figure.

"But she was really a cub. A lion cub that had survived to grow up beautiful. A lion cub which that stupid hypocrite, that editor, wanted to hunt down."²⁴

The motif of the lion, lion cub or lioness brings us to the following interpretive key, and that is the six names of the lion according to the Talmud. These six names of the lion (in *Torah*) vary from the very young lion (lion cub: *gur/ari*), the young adult lion (*kefir*), through the lion in poetic texts (*lavi*), the older lion in neutral usage (*layish*), and then the lion as a mighty beast (*shakhal*) to the

conversion of some of these workers to Judaism.

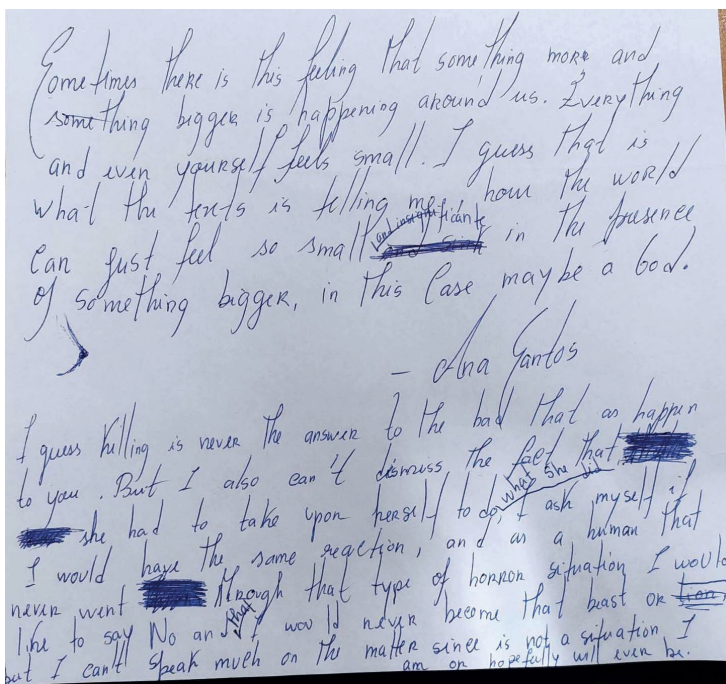
²³ Josef Škvorecký: *Miss Silver's Past*, trans. Peter Kussi (New York: Ecco Press, 1985), 251.

²⁴ Škvorecký: *Miss Silver's Past*, 250.

lion as a majestic, strong, but negatively connoted beast of prey (*shakhatz*). According to the Talmud, Rabbi Yohanan says: "There are six names for the lion, and they are: *ari, kefir, lavi, layish, shahal, shahatz*" (Sanhedrin 95a).²⁵ The students' task is to find out which type of lion relates to the female protagonist Lenka, her behaviour, her actions.

Subsequently, in the text samples Text 3, Text 4 and Text 5, we present short written outputs of the students, which in the first paragraph still refer to the small-town atmosphere of Egon Hostovský and in the second paragraph they respond to the questions of guilt and punishment, respectively to Lenka's revenge. Text 5 explicitly mentions the change of Lenka from *gur* to *shakhatz*. The term *shakhatz*, however, is also mentioned in Text 4 in an incorrect form of notation.

Text 3. Student's work



Text 3 explicitly mentions something, someone higher, namely God. In the second paragraph, it defines itself against the murder of a person.

²⁵ Cf. also the midrashic statement: "The lion has six names: *Aryeh, Kefir, Lavi, Layish, Shakhhal, and Shakhatz*" (Avot d'rabbi Nathan, 39), as quoted according to translations in Sefaria.org, accessed February 8, 2023.

Text 5 in the first paragraph, dedicated to Egon Hostovsky, recalls the motif of the carousel, a reduced human anthill and a city, and colors in the context of childhood memories that can influence the perspective of an already grown-up narrator in various ways. In the second paragraph, the text apart from the lion's motive, goes on to refer to a murder of a tyrant that can serve society. This topic is also often discussed when reading works, including ones connected with Czech history, such as the resistance to Nazism, or the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich.

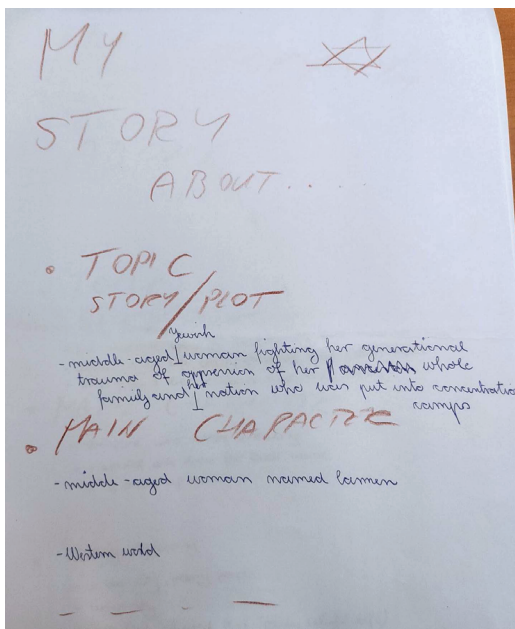
For all the presented works, the following consensus occurs as to the theme: whether the murder of the tyrant can be justified (possibly with reference to other literary works). Next, students comment on the character of the lion according to the mentioned Talmudic interpretive key. The texts are then read and discussed. The response to the (un)justifiability of murder on the tyrant is varied, just as the assignment of the lion's characteristic to the character of Lena varies – between a young lioness, lion cub Lenka (*gur, kefir*) to a dangerous and destroying beast (*shakhal, shakhatz*) after the murder.

Subsequently, other authors of the period from 1945 to the present day (Ladislav Fuks, Viktor Fischl, Arnošt Lustig, Vlasta Ruth Sidonová, Magda Stárková) are discussed, with attention to the changes in some of the motifs and plot lines. At the very end (about the last half hour of the lesson), students are asked to identify very briefly who their Jewish hero/heroine would be and what the text dedicated to him/her would be about.

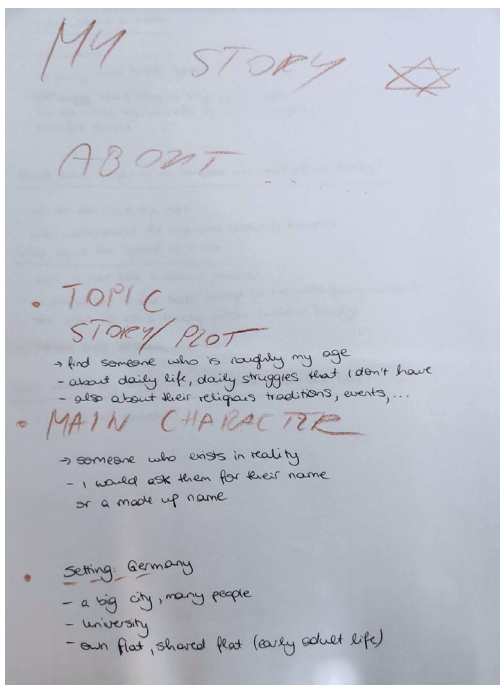
Here we arrive at very diverse results and possibilities. The students produced only an outline of a future literary text, if any, and the outline was subsequently discussed.

Text 6. Student's work

Text 6 chooses a middle-aged woman suffering from the so-called generational trauma of descendants in relation to the Holocaust as the main heroine. While the woman tries to live her life in society, the trauma continues to overtake her. The text thus attempts to answer the question of the possible life of survivors after the Holocaust. The main heroine, in the author's words, should address questions of the legitimacy of joy, career, family and other things of life, when she is the descendant of survivors from the Jewish people. We personally believe that although such stories are possible in both reality and literature, the topic would fit more into the context of postwar literature.



Text 7. Student's work



Text 7 chooses a young Jewish girl as its heroine, living an urbane way of life in a large German city, such as Berlin or Munich. The author herself wondered how she would grasp her Jewishness in a non-Jewish environment of peers, for example by describing scenes of grandparents' lives, holidays and customs. Jewishness would be themed against the background of the heroine's normal life, her studies, love life and dreams. The author was thus moving closer to the literary works of the already existing German young writer Lena Gorelik, a Jewish-Russian-German novelist. The student was unfamiliar with Gorelik's work, and expressed interest in reading any of her novels in the discussion.

Conclusions

If I met a Jew... Even after our lesson, the encounter with Jews, or rather with literature written about them and by them, takes on clearer contours. The Holocaust thus appears not only as an unfortunate historical event, but as an existential, pressing, and generational problem.

It is noteworthy that when planning one's own possible literary text with a Jewish character or a Jewish hero (an *image* of a Jewish person), one suddenly finds opinions like "he/she would be a person like me" (cf. Text 6), etc. We then consider as a positive outcome not only a greater awareness of the Jewish history and realities present in literary works, but also a certain intercultural opening of the Jewish theme from experienced presuppositions and clichés to a thoughtful openness²⁶ and consideration of some universal existential themes. Parallel to this, however, is the fact that in the works analyzed Jewish characters live their particular lives against the backdrop of the *big history*, the so-called *small history*²⁷.

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²⁶ We also arrive at the motto of our study, the angel wings. This was seen as a metaphor for this mutual understanding.

²⁷ By *small history/small histories* we mean the stories of specific people or literary heroes, such as Roubíček or Lenka Stříbrná. These small people then encounter the events of history (the so-called *big history*) that change their lives beyond recognition. This circumstance is more than important for students of creative writing.

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