

The Clerical Republic (Farská republika)

Author: Dominik Tatarka

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Translations: Czech (*Farská republika*, 1949; new translation 1961), Hungarian (*A plébános köztársasága*, 1951; new translation *Reverendás köztársaság*, 1997), German (*Die Pfaffenrepublik*, 1960), Ukrainian (*Popivs'ka respublika*, 1961), Russian (*Respublika popov*, 1966)

About the Author: Dominik Tatarka (1913–1989) was born in Drienové in the Kysuce region of North-Western Slovakia into a large family of peasants. His father was killed in the First World War, his mother had to take care of him and his five sisters alone. He studied French and Czech at Charles University in Prague and at Sorbonne in Paris (1934–1939). During WW II he taught in high schools in Žilina (1939–1941) and Martin (1941–1944). In 1944 Tatarka became a member of the Communist Party and took part in the → **Slovak National Uprising** against Nazi Germany. After the War he worked for newspapers as a journalist, for the Czechoslovak Writers's Union as a official, and for Slovak Film in Bratislava as a scriptwriter. He became a professional writer in 1964. His works often reflect his personal experiences. His first pieces of prose were influenced by Surrealism and the avant-garde. At the beginning of the 1950s, Tatarka accepted the norms of → **Socialist Realism**. He translated French works (Musset, Maupassant, Vercors) into Slovak. In 1956, he wrote a satirical short story *The Demon of Conformism* against Stalinism (it was published in the journal *Kultúrny život* in 1956, but it couldn't be edited into a book until 1963). Tatarka protested against the Warsaw Pact occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and resigned from membership in the Communist Party. In 1970s and 1980s he was persecuted by the Communist regime, banned from public life and not allowed to publish anymore. From 1970 he worked as a forest labourer. Later he lived as a permanently disabled pensioner, his works were edited only in → **samizdat** or → **exiled publishing houses**. He was one of the few Slovak signatories of → **Charter 77**. In October 1987 he signed as the first Charter's Declaration on the → **Deportation of Jews from Slovakia** (to the 45th anniversary of the deportations organized by the Slovak government). His late works, written in isolation and solitude, are based on intimate records, dreams, descriptions of erotic experiences, spiritual visions etc. (the trilogy *Letters of Eternity*, *Alone Against the Night* and *Scribbles*).

Further Important Publications: *Panna Zázračnica* (1942, The Miraculous Virgin, novelette); *Démon súhlasu* (1963, The Demon of Conformism, satirical short stories); *Prútené kreslá* (1963, Wicker Armchairs, prose); *Proti démonom* (1968, Against the Demons, essays); *Písачky* (samizdat 1979, Köln 1984, Scribbles; reflections, reports and letters), *Sám proti noci* (in the Czech translation,

München 1984, *Alone Against the Night*; reflections); *Navrávačky* (samizdat 1987, Köln 1988, Recordings, memoir); *Hovory o kultúre a obcovaní* (posthumously 1995, *Conversations on Culture and Discourse*, essays).

Content and Interpretation

The story is set in Žilina, a town in North-Western Slovakia, and its surroundings in the years between 1939 and 1941. These years are the first of the → Slovak clerofascist republic that is mentioned in the title of the novel. The main character is Tomáš Menkina, a young teacher who has some of the same features as those found in the author's autobiography.

Tomáš came from a nearby village. His father died when Tomáš was a child and his mother had to manage the children and to work to make money. Fortunately, they had an uncle in the U.S., John, Menkina, who supported the family and paid for Tomáš's studies.

The plot of the novel begins at the moment when John Menkina returns home from America after several decades. On the way, he spends a few days in detention in Germany, as a suspicious American citizen. At the same time Tomáš returns from his military service in Poland where the Slovak army has helped the Germans in the war against the Poles. Both of them do not like the governing of → **Slovak clerofascist and national regime**, an ally of Hitler's Germany, that persecutes leftist intellectuals, and workers as well as Jews.

The director of the high school where Tomáš teaches, Belo Kovál', a coward and a hypocrite, enforces the clerofascist ideology. Tomáš and his colleagues, Darina Introbusová, a daughter of the Lutheran pastor, and Fraňo Lašut, "a quarter Jew", all have intense feelings of disgust and annoyance. Tomáš admires Darina, but he sleeps with the publican's wife Achinka. Fraňo decides to save a Jewish girl Edita Soláni from the persecution and convinces Darina's father to → **falsify her baptismal letter**.

Fraňo wants to marry her, but they are revealed. All the names of the baptized Jews are in the newspapers and the pastor is arrested. Tomáš revolts against the obligatory visit to the church, spiritual exercises and confession. He leaves the school and works in a nearby village on a farm. Nevertheless, he returns a few days later, after his director visits him and persuades him to come back.

The real change in Tomáš's life and persuasion comes as a result of his later imprisonment. He unknowingly carried suitcases with leaflets which had been given to him by his communist friend Lyčka. He is detained. Tomáš's mother, a pious and simple Christian woman, wants to help him and visits a Roman Catholic priest named → **Jozef Tiso**, who is also the Slovak president, with a request for mercy. She complains to him that her son is a heathen and a communist, because she thinks that everyone who does not go to church is a communist. Tiso orders a rigorous investigation, and so she has harmed his son. He is strictly interrogated and maltreated, because the police are convinced he is a member of the communist resistance. He spends ten months in prison. As a consequence of this, Tomáš becomes a conscious communist and a regime opponent.

At the same time, On the contrary, Tomáš's uncle John Menkina changes into a conformist. He → "aryanizes" → **Aryanization** the hotel and the pub which were confiscated from Jewish owners, and hosts agents of the fascist regime there. He praises "our Slovak state" (Tatarka, 1948, p. 230).

Returning from prison, Tomáš separates from his mother and his uncle. "With loss of these two people he loved above all, he lost his home and childhood" (p. 227). He helps his communist friend Lyčka to escape from the police. Hitler's war against the Soviet Union breaks out and the Slovak army, as one of a Germany's allies, takes part in it. Tomáš receives his orders and departs to the front.

The first version of *The Clerical Republik* was written during the War (Olonovová, 1993, p. 300). In the early 1950s, when Stalinist communists established the doctrine of → **Socialist Realism**, Tatarka was criticized for "naturalism" and "underestimation of the role of Communist Party" in this novel. He was forced to eliminate some scenes of sexual intercourse between Tomáš and Achinka (Petřík 2013). The novel depicts real historical characters and places, brings autobiographical motifs (see above) but is also fictive. Some characters are ironized and caricatured (the Slovak president and priest → **Jozef Tiso**, director of the school and military guards).

The novel utilizes modernist and avant-garde devices. The plot is not presented in traditionally realistic narration, but in hints, abbreviations, metaphors using fantastic and imaginative scenes. For instance, in scenes in the prison violence and brutality are not broadly described but only indicated in some small details (Hudymač 2008). Or the communist orientation of the workers is suggested by the red colour on the dirt on their finger nails (Tatarka, 1948, p. 173) and the red signs marking the trails in the mountains (p. 248). Nevertheless, at the same time, the main character rather simply adopts the utopian ideas of Communism. His friend, the communist Lyčko, is stylized in the form of a righteous heroic robber (Hamada, 1994, p. 50). On the other hand, Tomáš's uncle John becomes his antagonist, and in the end he is indifferent to everybody else, only thinking only about his own profit.

Main Topics and Problems

Motifs of disgust, depression, nausea and annoyance as well as "hygienic love" (Tomáš's relationship with Achinka was only physical) may be inspired by the famous works of French literary existentialists, J. P. Sartre's novel *La Nausée* (1939, Nausea) or by Albert Camus's novel *L'Étrange* (1942, The Stranger). The language of ideology in periodicals, radio or politicians' speeches are depicted in snippets, like in modernist collages. It also concerns official anti-semitic propaganda: the "radical solution to the Jewish question in Slovakia, Jews were removed from public services (...) the end of international Jewish Bolshevism [...] the Jew will always remain a Jew" etc. (Tatarka, 1948, pp. 127, 132 and 135)

Jewish characters play an important role in the novel. After anti-Jewish laws were enacted, most of them are outsiders in society. They are "people without a future" living in the "bubble" (p. 125). Some of them resign themselves and accept their fate, for instance the old married couple Klapovcovci, whose hotel and café are expropriated, "aryanized" by John Malkina. They are happy to have a small

room in their former big house. Or Edita Solani's father who is a stonemason. His shop is painted with tar and he gives up his job.

Other Jews try to save themselves. The old Jewish attorney Werner offers John Melkina a large sum for his American passport which is a guarantee of freedom. The rich family of the former factory director Friedmann converts to Lutheranism. Edita hopes to be rescued through → "Aryan papers", a false confirmation of baptism and marriage to Fraňo Lašut. → *St. Elizabeth's Square*. She jokes with Fraňo about her → **large Jewish nose**. But at the same time she undergoes plastic surgery for fear of being found out. The narrator describes the result as a grotesque scene:

The express train arrived from Bratislava, that was coming only on festive days. A blond beauty leaned out of the window. Fraňo Lašut recognized her, others did not. [...] If it was Lašut's dear Edita, she looked like a mask. (p. 152)

Later, Edita, a former student of medicine, moves to Bratislava. She works in a pharmacy and is involved in the resistance

On the other hand, Slovak Roman Catholic nationalists and officers of the → **Hlinka Guard** (the Slovak military Fascist organization) proclaim their struggle against the Jews. But actually they use their services and want to get their property.

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