

## Death Is Called Engelchen (Smrt' sa volá Engelchen)

**Author:** Ladislav Mňačko

**First Published:** 1959

**Translations:** Czech (*Smrt si říká Engelchen*, 1960); Hungarian (*Az itélét ejszakája*, 1961; another translation *A halál neve Engelchen*, 1961), Polish (*Śmierć nazywa się Engelchen*, 1962); Russian (*Smert' zovetsja Engelchen*, 1962), German (*Der Tod heißt Engelchen*, 1962); Romanian (*Moartea se numește Engelchen*, 1962), Ukrainian (*Smert' zvet'sja Engel'chen*, an other translation *Smert' zvet'sja Engel'chen*, 1966), English (*Death Is Called Engelchen*, 1963); Dutch (*De doot heet Engelchen*, 1963), Lithuanian (*Mirties vardas Engelchen*, 1963), Latvian (*Naves vards ir Englitis*, 1964), French (*La mort s'appelle Engelchen*, 1964), Italian (*La morte si chiama Engelchen*, 1964), Spanish (*La muerte se llama Engelchen*, 1964), Portuguese (*Nos confins do mal*, 1964), Bulgarian (*Smärtta se nariča Engelchen*, 1964), Croatian (*Smrt se zove Engelchen*, 1965), Slovenian (*Smrt se imenuje Engelchen*, 1965)

**Film Adaptations:** *Smrt' sa volá Engelchen* (Death Is Called Engelchen), TV film, screenplay Ladislav Mňačko and Daniel Michaeli; film director Ivan Balad'a, premiered 1960; *Smrt si říká Engelchen* (Death Is Called Engelchen), screenplay and film directors Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos, premiered 3 May 1963

**About the Author:** Ladislav Mňačko (1919–1994) was the Slovak writer and journalist. He became the most translated Slovak author in the world. His parents were Czechs living in Moravia. He spent his childhood and youth in the town of Martin in Central Slovakia who his father worked as a postmaster. He did not finish his studies at high school and instead got training to work in a drugstore. In 1940, he tried to cross the border between Germany and the Netherlands; he was detained and imprisoned. In 1944 Mňačko escaped from the forced labor camp in the Ruhr region in Germany and took part in the partisan movement in East Moravia. After the war, he was at first a staunch supporter of the Czechoslovak Communist regime and one of its most prominent journalists. He travelled both in Czechoslovakia and abroad and wrote many reports (for instance books about Israel, Albany, China, Mongolia and Vietnam). His works of fiction were also based on actual events and real characters. In 1961, Mňačko took part in the Eichmann Trial in Jerusalem (see his book *I, Adolf Eichmann*). In 1960s, he became a vocal critic of the Communist regime, for which he was censored. Due to the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, he emigrated, first to Israel, later to Austria, where he lived for the next 20 years. His works were forbidden in Czechoslovakia. In Austria, Mňačko wrote screenplays for TV and published books in German. After the fall of the Communist regime in November 1989, he returned and lived in Slovakia. But subsequent political developments and the growth of nationalism in Slovakia disappointed him. After the dissolution of Czechoslovakia (1992), he moved to Prague. Mňačko died suddenly due to cardiac weakness during a short visit to Slovakia in 1994.

**Further Important Publications:** *Izrael* (Israel, 1949; reportages), *Ja, Adolf Eichmann* (I, Adolf Eichmann, 1961, Czech 1961; a report about Eichmann and the Eichmann Trial), *Oneskorené reportáže* (Delayed Reportages, 1963, in Czech 1964, Japanese 1990; reports about victims of Stalinist justice), *Nočný rozhovor* (Dialogue in the Night, 1966, Hungarian 1966, Italian as *La notte di Dresda*, 1968, German as *Die Nacht von Dresden*, 1969, novel), *Ako chutí moc* (first in Czech in journal *Plamen* 1966, Slovak 1968, English *The Taste of Power*, 1967, German 1967, Danish 1967, French 1968, Italian 1968, Swedish 1968,

Portuguese 1968, Slovenian 1968, Croatian 1969; novel), *Súdruh Münchhausen* (Comrade Munchausen, in exile 1972, German 1973, in Czech as *Soudruh Prášil*, 1997; novel).

### **Content and Interpretation**

The novel is divided into ten chapters and set in Moravian Wallachia (Valašsko) in East Moravia in the last months of WW II and first months after it. The author used the frame narrative. The narrator and main character is Volod'a, a 24 year old partisan fighting against the Nazis who was seriously injured and after the war must spend four months in the hospital in Vsetín. Volod'a is his name in the partisan troop, the reader doesn't know his real name; nothing is known about his past except he says he had been imprisoned in Germany in a concentration camp and has escaped. He has some autobiographical features, and the whole novel is based on real events. The story (actual time of the narration) is set around Volod'a's stay in the hospital, his dialogues with the doctor, his visitors and mainly the nurse Eliška with whom he falls in love. However, the main storyline takes place in the past, through flashbacks of Volod'a's memories. There are partisan fights with Germans, Volod'a's fatal love for the young woman Martha (Marta) and the village of Ploština in the mountains that is a base for the partisans. However the partisan unit is infiltrated by traitors and Ploština is set ablaze by the Germans for helping partisans; the village men are burned alive. On that day, the partisans are absent and can not defend the village. Volod'a and his co-fighters are stricken with deep remorse while innocent people are dying because of them. At the end of the novel, the healed Volod'a leaves the hospital to find and punish the SS officer Engelchen (Engelchen means a small angel in German) who is responsible for the massacre in Ploština.

The Jewish topic is connected with the character of Martha. She is a beautiful and mysterious woman. She works for the Gestapo as a secretary and sleeps with Nazi officers to gain information that she then provides to the partisans. Volod'a gets to know her in the partisan base of Ploština and is sent to accompany her to the town Zlín. They spend the night together there and become lovers. The Nazis humiliate Martha; one general scars her back with a riding crop. The partisans take revenge, by assaulting the general and his unit. Martha kills the general herself and the partisans also kill other high ranking officers. Nevertheless, this attack sets the Germans against them and the villagers. Only gradually is it revealed to Volod'a, that Martha is a Jewess and has a double identity. An indication of it may be that she quotes the Old Testament *Book of Ruth* while they making love for the first time. After the war, Martha is traumatized by the events that she has experienced and commits suicide.

Martha: "I had to go the way of all Jews. The way to Auschwitz..."

[...]

I said to her, "Martha, you can go to Auschwitz, to tell millions of the Jews, you are a Jewess, you slept with the Germans, but only for the few of the Jews was it as hard as it was for you..." (Mňačko, 2016, p. 37)

The Holocaust is implied in a scene where the partisans capture a German unit. Soldiers are disarmed and released but the officer should be executed. Volod'a is supposed to shoot him dead. The German officer is a calm, distinguished man, who constantly carries a book under his arm. He tells Volod'a that he has never killed anyone in the war while being a part of a technical rear guard unit. The officer gives him his book which he is reading, Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga*, is actually a forbidden book in Germany. When Volod'a opens the novel, he finds the name of its former owner, Armin Weiss, a Jew. In a fit of rage, Volod'a shoots the German officer. This chapter is introduced by the epigraph, the slogan of the Nazi anti-Semitic magazine *Der Stürmer*: "Die Juden sind unser Unglück." (The Jews are our disaster.)

The novel uses the same devices as thrillers. The author keeps readers in tension, dramatic events are disclosed step by step in flashbacks. The character of Martha includes the features of a *femme fatale*, while the nurse Eliška is calm, patient and devoted. On one hand, the story deheroizes the partisan movement in Czechoslovakia authentically depicting the fight against the Nazis including the topic of the Jews what did not appear in the literature in 1950s in Czechoslovakia. On the other hand, in several ways the novel is still schematic (the role of the Soviet soldiers and Communist Party as well as the criticism against the First Czechoslovak Republic).

### **Real Background of the Story and Film Adaptation**

The novel was firstly published in Czech in the daily *Mladá fronta* (1959). Then it was edited as a book in Slovak in the same year. It received a great acclaim and was translated in many languages.

Ploština was a small settlement in Moravian Wallachia. On April 19, 1945, at the end of World War II, it was burned and its people were massacred by the Nazis in response to their support of the partisan movement. It was the result of the denunciation caused by agents of the Gestapo who wormed themselves into the Partisan Brigade of Jan Žižka of which Ladislav Mňačko was also a member. Nevertheless, Mňačko didn't know and describe the whole background of the events. He supposed that the German operation in Ploština was initiated by the famous SS *oberststurmbannführer* Otto Skorzeny (1908–1975) who led some risky military actions during the war, and that afterwards escaped from the post-war interment camp and later served as a military advisor in Egypt and Argentina. For that reason, Skorzeny and the fictitious SS officer Engelchen are mentioned in the novel. But Skorzeny's participation in the Ploština massacre has not been proven. The real commander of this operation was the SS *oberscharführer* Werner Tutter (1909–1983) who was sentenced to six years in prison in 1948. In 1953, he became an agent of the Czechoslovak State Security Police (StB) and worked as a collaborator in West Germany. Mňačko also did not know that the most important agent of the Gestapo in his partisan troop was Vladimír Hájek. After the war, Hájek shifted the guilt for an another Czech working for the Gestapo (Oldřich Baťa) who was then executed. Hájek became a member of the Communist Party and an officer of the State Security Police. In 1951, his crimes came to light, he was detained and two years later he committed suicide. His case was kept in secret, not to tarnish the reputation of partisans and Communist Party. Only after 1989 was possible to give true testimony about these events (Novák, 2003; Pospíšil, 2003).

Mňačko's interest in Jewish topics were undoubtedly peaked through his first wife Hedwiga, a Jewess, who he met in Germany during the war. He presented a positive image of the Jewish nation in his reportage book *Israel* (1949). Later, as an eyewitness, Mňačko described the Eichmann Trial in Jerusalem, and in 1967 he went to Israel protesting against the official statement of the Soviet Bloc regarding to the Six-Day Arab-Israeli War.

The novel *Smrt' sa volá Engelchen* was first filmed in 1960 by the Slovak director Ivan Balad'a as a TV film. The second adaptation, made in 1963 by directors Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos in Czech, became world-renowned. This film won the Golden Prize at the Moscow International Film Festival and the Czechoslovak State Prize. The filmmakers preserved the main line of the plot. Like in the novel, various narrative times interweaved, the present is followed by various events from different points in the past. Several names, characters and situations were changed. The partisan and narrator was named Pavel Kubec, the nurse in the hospital is Elizabeth (Alžběta), a nun, and her love relationship to Pavel was downplayed. At the beginning of the film, Martha seems to be dead having committed suicide immediately after the liberation of Zlín. Astonishingly, she later visits Pavel in the hospital to tell him goodbye. (In Mňačko's novel, Martha also visits Volod'a in the hospital, she allegedly takes

off to Canada. However, she commits suicide.) The village which is burned by the Nazis is called Paseky, a fictitious place, not the authentic Ploština. The book that is carried by the “good” German officer, originally owned by a Jew, is Thomas Mann’s novel *Buddenbrooks*. Earlier, Pavel had found this work in Marta’s library. Generally, the film is more compact and impressive.

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