Richard (Rick)

Author: Alena Mornštajnová

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About the Author: Alena Mornštajnová (1963) comes from a Czech family in Valašské Meziříčí in Moravia. She graduated from English and Czech Studies at the University of Ostrava and taught English at the Business Academy in Valašské Meziříčí. Since 2000, she has devoted most of her time to translation and writing. She translates popular novels centered on women. Her first book was published in 2013 when she was fifty. Her novels often focus on the impressive or tragic fates of several generations of women in the Czech Lands during the 20th century (WW I, WW II and the Nazi occupation as well as the Communist regime). Her work has gained popularity, mainly thanks to her novel Hannah. It has become a top-selling book and has achieved massive success on social networks.

Further Important Publications: Slepá mapa (Blind Map, 2013, novel), Hotýlek (The Dosshouse, 2015, novel), Tiché vody (Still Waters, 2019, novel)

Content and Interpretation
The novel consists of three parts. Each of them is set in a different time period and is narrated in different way. The first part, “I, Mira: 1954–1963”, is written in the first person narrated by the young girl Miroslava (Mira) Karášková. At the beginning of the story she is seven. She lives in the Moravian town Valašské Meziříčí with her parents and two younger siblings. In February of 1954, the family celebrates her mother’s 30th birthday and after dinner, dessert is served, “yolk wreaths” (a sweet pastry with vanilla cream). Mira, despite her parents forbidding it, was playing on the frozen river a day before and fell into the icy water. Now she doesn’t get the dessert as a punishment for her disobedience. Paradoxically it saves her life. The whole family gets infected with typhoid, because the water in the confectionery was contaminated. A typhoid epidemic breaks out in the town. All the members of the Karášek family die, except for Mira and her aunt Hannah (Hana). Hannah, who has survived the concentrations camps and suffers from depression, also gets ill and falls from the window of the hospital in a delirium. Nevertheless, Hannah is saved at last, because she went through typhoid fever in Auschwitz. After becoming an orphan, Mira first lives with the family of her mother’s friend Ivana Horáčková. But Ivana’s husband is unenthusiastic about it and Horáček’s children, primarily the daughter Ida, chase and victimize her. This is why Mira is moved to her odd aunt Hannah. Hannah is thirty-five years old but she is physically and mentally ruined and unable to work and speak with people. Living together is complicated for both of them and Ida feels very lonely. She finds a good school friend Jarmila, however, Ida steals her away from Mira. Mira learns for the first time that she is a Jew. Mira gets closer to Ida’s brother Gusta, a very clever boy who becomes her lover and later husband. They are expecting a baby but Gusta is expelled from study and is drafted into military service. The second part of the novel, “People before Me: 1933–1945”, is narrated also by Mira, but she returns to the life of her relatives prior to her birth. Mira’s mother Rosa and her aunt Hannah grow up in the secularized Jewish Heler family in Valašské Meziříčí. After the early death of Mira’s grandfather, her grandmother Elsa manages the family stationary shop and raises her daughters alone. Hannah falls in love with Jaroslav Horáček, a regular soldier, and they secretly plan to live together. In the autumn of 1938, after the German army has taken a
Main Topics and Problems

Some situations depicted in Hannah were inspired by real persons and events. In 1954 a typhoid epidemic did break out in Valašské Meziříčí. There was no city water supply in the town and sewage seeped into the local wells. Several hundred people were infected and twenty of them died. The town was isolated, a strict quarantine was declared; schools and businesses were closed. Similar to the novel, the town’s public address system announced the names of the gravely ill people, the slightly ill, the healed and the dead every evening. Also the author’s grandmother was among the sick. Being in the hospital she was unbalanced by the sickness and jumped out of the window – just like Hannah in the novel.

Alena Mornštajnová originally intended to write a fictional story just on the basis of this event (see Kubíková, 2018). Later she decided to add an another story line, the life of the Jews and their persecution in their hometown Valašské Meziříčí. About 200 Jews lived in the 1930s there but none of them returned after the War. The local synagogue was destroyed in the 1950s. In 2004, a Memorial to the Holocaust was built where the synagogue once stood.

Nevertheless, some of the Jews in Meziříčí survived and emigrated to the West or to Israel, like Michael Honey (formerly Misa Honigswachs, 1929–2013) whose family lived in Nový Jičín and fled 15 kilometers south to Valašské Meziříčí after the annexation of the Sudetenland. A son Otík and Hanna knits caps and small sweaters for him. “My memories visit me all the time. Many of them are thorny, but more and more come those that make me to want to live.” (p. 306)
by the Germans. His testimony, which was recorded by the UCS Shoah Foundation (Honey, 1997) inspired Alena Mornštajnová.

Some ever present motifs of Czech and Central European Holocaust literature can be found in the novel. Like many other survivors, Hannah feels guilty to have survived at the expense of her loved ones. The Czech name Hana sounds identical to the Czech word „hana“ (which means “slur” in English). Hannah feels guilty to have survived at the expense of her loved ones. Another motif is the naivety of the Jews believing in the middle of the 20th century it was impossible massively to kill the Jews. They argued that the time of pogroms had gone or that Czechoslovakia was not Germany (pp. 127 and 139). Another common motif is the anxious relation to eating among survivors. Hannah hides slices of bread in her apartment as well as in her pockets. The postwar “forgetting” of the Jews is also symptomatic. Mira, a teenager, doesn’t know what the word “Jew” means, although her mother was Jewish.

The novel uses some conventional devices. It escalates drama by combining two main catastrophic events, the War and the Holocaust as well as the post-war typhoid epidemic. The character of Hannah seems to be somewhat stereotypical and implausible. She experiences too many tragic, harsh situations and desperations: the killing of most of her relatives including her boyfriend and newborn baby during the War, the death of her sister and her family (except for Mira) after the War, severe injuries after falling out of the window etc.

Cited Works

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7gFU8PbK9Q [Accessed 21 May 2019]

Further References