

Sidra Noach (Sidra Noach)

Author: David Jan Novotný

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Translations: Slovenian (*Noetova sidra*, 2013)

About the Author: David Jan Novotný (1947) comes from a Protestant family, his father was a graphic designer and cartoonist. Novotný studied at the Film Academy in Prague and worked as a screenwriter in the state Film Studio in Barrandov. He has published short stories and novels. In 1990s he began to teach at Film Academy as well as at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, both in Prague. In 2001 he was appointed as a Professor. As a screenwriter, he took part among others in films like *How a Man Gives Birth* (1979), *Shy Stories* (1982, Karel Čapek's short stories adaptations) and TV series *Motel Anathema* (Motel Anathema, 1998, horror).

Further Important Publications: *Jak rodí chlap* (1981, How a Man Gives Birth; short stories), *Jak nevyloupit poštu* (1987, How Do Not Rob the Post Office; criminal short stories), *Vasarelyho kříž* (The Cross of Vasarely, 2007; novel)

Content and Interpretation

The novel begins with the dedication “For those who survived, for their children and their children’s children...” (Novotný, 2010, p. 5) It suggests the topic of the Holocaust, nevertheless, the Holocaust is only in the background as a reminiscence of several characters. The actual story takes place in Prague during the great flood of August 2002. Some areas of the city near the Vltava river including a part of the Old Town are flooded and the inhabitants must be evacuated. The Jewish Council organizes assistance mainly for old Jewish citizens providing them alternative accommodation. For that reason, ten Jewish men meet in one large apartment in Prague’s Vinohrady district for a few days. The narration depicts their behavior, their mentality and coexistence but also their memories of the past. On the whole, each of the characters represents a different kind of Czech Jewishness after 1989.

The three oldest of them are Avigdor (Avi) Kolman, Egon Hruška and Leo Klein who survived WW II. Avi, his brother and his parents escaped from Czechoslovakia in 1939 but the Nazis detained them in Hungary and sent them to Auschwitz. Only Avi survived. After the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August of 1968, Avi, his wife and their two sons fled to the U.S. Later the younger son Danny emigrated to Israel and was killed there during a terrorist attack. The rest of the family returned to Czechoslovakia after the Velvet Revolution 1989. After some time Avi’s wife Róza died. At night, Avi leads dialogues with her and Danny.

Egon Hruška survived the War with false “Aryan papers”. He had to work in Berlin sewing uniforms for Nazi soldiers. His wife Eva survived the camps but suffers from traumas, for instance, she cannot stand showering because all showers remain her at the gas chambers. In the 1950s, Egon was sentenced by the Communist justice system as a “zionist” and spent ten years in uranium mines, where he befriended another prisoner, Jakub Kolář, who had been arrested for his Catholic faith. Later Egon’s daughter Anna and Jakub’s son Petr fell in love and married each other. Nevertheless neither Anna nor Petr believe in God, neither Jewish nor Christian.

As a teenager Leo Klein fled with his brother to Britain in 1939. They fought in the British Army against the Germans. After the War they returned but found that their parents and all

relatives dad been murdered during the Holocaust. Eduard Černý, a Communist of Jewish origin, saved them from depression. In August 1948, after the Communist takeover, the Klein brothers fled to Britain again. After 1989, Leo and his family visited Prague and the Czech Republic every year in August. However, some years later, the trip began to bore his children. In August of 2002, just before leaving for Prague, Leo learns that his wife left him for another man. So Leo goes to Prague for the first time alone and witnesses the catastrophic flood. The Jewish men from the younger generation temporarily living in the Vinohrady apartment, are also marked by the past. The parents of Rudolf Reich survived the Holocaust. While his father often visited the Theresienstadt Ghetto with him after the War, his mother suppressed all memories from the War. Eliáš Szalai whose grandparents survived Nazi camps, learned about his Jewishness when he was fifteen. During the Communist regime, his parents were afraid of admitting it. Miloš Katz, a student, experienced an anti-Jewish riot of Czech skinheads. The youngest Jewish boy in the Vinohrady apartment is the fifteen year old Petr Klimeš. At first he doesn't care about the past.

When Petr Klimeš was ten, he heard about the Holocaust for the first time. He didn't want to believe that something like this could have happened. However, his eighty year old great-grandfather showed him a faded but still legible number that was tattooed on his left forearm. His great-grandfather told him hard-to-believe stories that had simply really happened. [...] But Petr didn't want to deal with it. The past is the past. Now is over and it is the twenty-first century. (p. 363)

Gradually Petr realizes that the past of the Jewish community can also be important for him. On Friday, 16th August 2002, ten Jewish men and one woman (Rudolf Reich's wife Milena Reichová) meet together at a festive Shabbat dinner. Despite all the differences among the generations and their opinions, this event indicates their mutual understanding and solidarity. The following day the flood culminates and the water begins to recede. The men leave the apartment one by one.

Main Topics and Problems

Sidra Noach, the title of the novel, is a part of the *Torah* that is regularly read in synagogues. It tells the story of the Flood of the World and Noah and his ark. Mostly mottos of the twelve chapters in the novel (in Hebrew and Czech) refer to Noah's story. The whole of Novotný's novel can be understood as a parallel to this disaster – and also other disasters of the Jewish folk, like the Shoah or persecution during the Communist regime – and rescue from them. The numbers twelve (chapters in the novel) as well as ten (number of Jewish men in the apartment) also refer to the Jewish tradition. For instance, twelve months are in the Jewish year, twelve are the tribes of Israel. Ten adult Jewish men constitute a *minyan* for public prayer or other religious obligations.

All of the main characters in *Sidra Noach* are fictional. But some of the other characters or mentioned figures are real people, as a part of the fictional world. Among others, the playwright and actor → Arnošt Goldflam, the Chief Rabbi of the Czech Republic and writer Karol Efraim Sidon or the Protestant pastor Jiří Štorek who has led gatherings with homosexual Christians. The authentic background of the story also includes a grotesque event which was experienced by Egon Hruška. In August of 1978 he wants to visit his old friend Jakub Kolář in the town of Příbram in Central Bohemia. Kolář only tells him he can find his house behind the statue of Klement Gottwald on the square. Klement Gottwald was the first Communist president in Czechoslovakia, a symbol of the regime. On Wednesday, the 23rd of August Hruška comes to Příbram and can't find the statue. He has no idea and asks a policeman where Gottwald's statue is. He is immediately beaten up and arrested as a

provocateur. Moreover the police find out Hruška is a former political prisoner. All this happens, because during the previous night someone has blown up the statue. This scene is based on real events. The bronze statue of Klement Gottwald in Příbram was really blown up during the night from the 22nd to the 23rd August, 1978. It was a shock to the Communist government. A few days later, the young miner Ondřej Stavinoha was arrested. He confessed to the act and was sentenced to nine years in prison. The statue was repaired and later removed in December 1989.

Vít Kremlíčka wrote in his article in the review *Tvar*, that D. J. Novotný had plagiarized Kremlíčka's own novelette *Manael* published in 2005 (Kremlíčka 2010). Both works combine motifs of a flood and the Holocaust. Nevertheless, in Kremlíčka's novelette there are many other motifs and allusions that can't be found in *Sidra Noach*, and vice versa, *Sidra Noach* contains many situations which are not in *Manael*. Moreover, Kremlíčka's style and language are full of symbols and hints while *Sidra Noach* having been narrated more or less in a traditional realistic way.

Sidra Noach begins and ends with scenes that are similar to each other. In both Avi Kolman, a survivor of the Holocaust, speaks to himself:

Avi Kolman was seventy-six. Someone thought it was too much, someone thought to little. According to some he should not exist at all. He himself felt just right. Neither too much nor to little. This spring, like every day, when he woke up and found out he is still alive, he sat on the bed and laughed. With some malice, with some bitterness

“Yeah, yeah, I shouldn't have even been here for sixty years. Where are you [the Nazis, J.H.] and where am I?” he said in a half-voice. He looked up at the ceiling and sighed. “And where are the others?” (Novotný, 2010, p. 16)

“Yeah, yeah, I shouldn't have even been here for sixty years,” declared Avi Kolman. He looked around the room, watched the Old Jewish Cemetery through the half open window and saw the cloudy sky. He waited if he could see someone up there. “None from us should have been here for sixty years ...” (p. 381)

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