

## **Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Spolek pro ochranu zvířat)**

**Author:** Jiří Robert Pick (1925–1983)

**First Published:** 1969

**Translations:** Hungarian (*Állatvédő liga*, 1986); German (*Der Tierschutzverein*, 2013); Polish (*Towarzystwo opieki nad zwierzętami*, 2015), English (*Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals*, 2018)

**About the Author:** J. R. Pick came from a Czech-Jewish family, his father was a chemistry engineer and entrepreneur. In 1939, after the Nazi occupation, Pick had to interrupt his studies at high school. In 1943 he and his family were transported to the Theresienstadt Ghetto. His father was killed in 1944, Pick, his mother and his sister survived. Returning from the ghetto in 1945, Pick was treated for lung disease. In 1948 his mother and his sister emigrated to Argentina. Later his sister Zuzana Justman (born 1931) gained reputation as a documentary filmmaker and writer – among others she filmed the documentaries *Terezin Diary* (1989) and *Voices of the Children* (1997) with the topics of the Shoah, and *A Trial in Prague* (2001) about the great show trial in 1952. In 2006 she adapted her brother's play *The Unlucky Man in the Yellow Cap* that was performed at the Fringe-Fringe NYC festival in August 2006.

After WW II, J. R. Pick became a member of the Communist Party. From 1950 to 1954 he studied at the School of Political and Economic Sciences in Prague. In this time he began to write texts for theatre scenes and cabarets. In 1959 he founded the Paravan Theatre in Prague. He was its chief author and artistic director. He also wrote many lyrics for songs and some opera librettos (the only one which was performed was *The Football Oper* in 1991, composed by Miroslav Raichl).

Due to the suppression of the Prague Spring, during so called Normalization in the 1970s, Pick was not allowed to publish again until 1980. At the beginning of 1980s two his plays were staged: *A Dream about Distant Lakes* and *The Unlucky Man in the Yellow Cap*. They are set in the Theresienstadt Ghetto and their black humour continues in tragicomic scenes of the novelette *Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals* (1969).

**Further Important Publications:** *7 kytic pro buvola* (1966, 7 Bouquets for the Buffalo; satirical poems and proses), *Sen o vzdálených jezerech* (1981, premiered 1980, A Dream about Distant Lakes; play), *Smolař ve žluté čepici* (1982, premiered 1982, The Unlucky Man in the Yellow Cap; play), *Pickanterie: Koláž ze života a díla J. R. Picka* (Picquancy: A Collage from J. R.

Pick's Life and Work, 1995, ed. E. Světlík), *Příliš mnoho příbuzných* (1996, To Many Relatives; novelette)

### **Content and Interpretation**

The story, divided in eleven chapters, takes place in the Theresienstadt Ghetto in the autumn of 1944. At that time, in September and October, the last big wave of transports from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz was going on. The story is narrated in the third person mainly from the point of view of the main character, the fourteen year old boy Tony (Toni in the Czech original). He is lying in a hospital with a mild form of tuberculosis. Tony is placed in a room with some older men, among others, the German violinist and Communist Brisch, the former factory owner Glaser or the former owner of a grocery store Löwy. Sometimes his mother Líza visits him; he had lived with her in the ghetto for two years. He also often meets Líza's friends, young people about twenty, the cook Ernie (Erna) Jelínek, Alba Feld, "the best goalkeeper in the ghetto", Jenda Schleim, "the butcher and actor", the Nurse Lili and the ghetto cook who had been a rich nobleman Ledecký.

Tony is bored in the hospital and gets excited with an idea to establish the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in the ghetto. However, there are almost no animals in the ghetto. It is forbidden for Jews to keep pets. Tony's friends think up the plan that they will take care of the dog of the Nazi SS-sturmbannführer, a commander in the ghetto. They kidnap the dog and nevertheless, against Tony's expectations, they killed and eat it. They want to help Alba Feld who has gotten a summons to the transport to the East. Later another one of Tony's friends, Ledecký, brings him a mouse into the hospital. Ledecký announces that he and Jenda Schleim are also leaving with the transport. Tony holds the mouse in a box, takes care of it and calls it Helga. The ghetto is more and more depopulated, almost all of Tony's friends, as well as most of the patients receive summons to the transports. Ernie Jelínek decides not to enter the transport and to escape from the ghetto. Tony wants to flee with him but he is too late, because the nurse didn't let him out of the hospital. Ernie is shot by a German guard. Eventually the transport threatens Tony and his mother Líza. Tony pretends to spew blood and so they are both saved. The novelette ends with Tony's first love experience with the Nurse Lili.

The book bears the subtitle "A Humorous – Insofar as That Is Possible – Novella from Theresienstadt" (in the 3rd and 4th editions "A Humorous – Insofar as That Is Possible – Novella from the Ghetto"). Its specific feature is just humour – it manifests itself in situations and in language. Even starting from the beginning, long chapter titles are stylized in the manner of a humorous novel.

Chapter 1, in which Tony teaches Mr. Brisch to sing and gets an outstanding idea in the process

Chapter 2, in which Tony tells Ernie about his idea for an SPCA (Pick, 2018, pp. 9 and 27)

Tony is naive, he does not realize the seriousness of the circumstances. His interest in animal protection is in contrast to the harsh, often tragic existence of the Jews in the ghetto. Irrespective of it, many situations in Theresistadt are absurd or grotesque. For instance, one such set of orders is a directive that disallows the Jews from walking along the banks of the Ohře river with a dog. At the same time, it has been forbidden for a long time for the Jews to own pets, and it has also been forbidden to visit the banks of the river.

Humour in language is manifested in the speeches of Mr. Brisch. He is a German but refuses to use Hitler's language. Therefore he speaks garbled and broken Czech. Tony teaches Brisch Czech folk songs.

Other comic and curious characters are also inmates in the ghetto. For instance the German teenager and unwavering Nazi Horst Munther, a former member of *Hitlerjugend*. He was sent to the ghetto because it was found out his grandfather was a Jew. Or Mr. Kohn who articulates anti-Semitic opinions:

“The Jews”, said Mr. Kohn, “aren't even a real nation. No wonder Hitler hates them so much. In fact, I'd be surprised if he left them alone. He'd have to be cracked in the head.” (pp. 32–33)

Nevertheless, not only Tony is naive, but also many adult Jews in the ghetto. So Professor Steinbach, a patient in the hospital, declares that Theresienstadt is just a transfer station to travel to the Promised Land. He is assured that everyone will soon reach Palestine. He plans to teach Czech literature at the Tel Aviv University without being able to speak or understand Hebrew or Yiddish. This situation is on the border of black humour because Steinbach is transported within a few days to Auschwitz.

The atmosphere of the Theresienstadt Ghetto is presented in many slang expressions indicating life, customs and institutions in Theresienstadt: “šučlista / Schutzliste”, “eltestenrát / Ältestenrat”, “altershajm / Altersheim” (Old Age Home) and “jugenhajm / Jugendheim” (Youth Home), “šlojzka / Schleuse”. The author explains some of them in the footnotes:

The Schutzlisten (“protection lists”) contained the names of people who were supposedly protected from the transports. But since nobody knew who put together the transport lists, of course nobody knew who put together the protection lists either. It was also entirely possible that there were no protection lists at all. (pp. 23–24)

Moreover, several Yiddish words are mixed in dialogues of the characters: “chonte” (woman of ill repute), “ganef” (thief, rascal) or “nebach” (poor man).

## Main Topics and Problems

J. R. Pick is one of the first authors to use the perspective of a *child narrator* in Czech Holocaust literature. See Arnošt Lustig's → *Diamonds of the Night* or Josef Škvorecký's → *The Menorah*; In the Polish literature see Henryk Grynberg's → *The Jewish War* and Wilhelm Dichter's → *Lord God's Horse*; in the Slovak literature Vincent Šikula's → *Lilies of Erika*. Children are generally considered to be naive, innocent, honest and unburdened by the value judgements of adults. On the other hand, child narrators are often incapable of understanding and putting things into a broader context. He or she distorts facts, focuses on detail instead of essential things. All this is visible in *Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals*. Tony's thinking seems to be often too naive in view of his age of fourteen (Sladovnicková. 2016, p. 807), because it is also known that children grew up prematurely in ghettos and camps.

From time to time, the author exchanges Tony's childish perspective for the perspective of an adult narrator. So it is written at the beginning that Tony "was neither smart nor stupid" (Pick, 2018, p. 7). Prof. Steinbach's naive attitude and opinion (see above) is characterized as "salon-style Zionism" (p. 118).

Some of the topics in *Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals* are erotica and sex. Historian Anna Hájková researched the sexual behavior of Jewish inhabitants in the Theresienstadt Ghetto. She came to the conclusion that young prisoners in Theresienstadt perceived romantic erotic relationships and sex as a beautiful, relevant and legitimate way to spend time there (Hájková 2013). Also some diaries from Theresienstadt testify to it (Hana Bořkovcová, Eva Rodenová or the unpublished diary of Willy Mahler).

The walk to the Catholic church in the ghetto that ends with a "little party" can serve as an example. Tony is sent back to the hospital and so he learns about everything a few days later during Jenda Schleim's visit:

"Ledecký served as priest", he said, "and every ten minutes he paired off another two couples. Almost everyone there got a chance to be married to all the girls".

"But a priest can only do weddings, not divorces", Tony said.

Clearly he picked up some knowledge from the learned gentlemen in room 26.

"No one really took it that seriously", said Jenda. "Then, at the end, I took over from Ledecký, so he could –"

"So he could what", Tony asked.

"So he could get married too", Jenda said with some hesitation.

(p. 70)

The open presentation of erotic and sexual situations was in the Holocaust literature in 1960s - unlike contemporary literary works in last decades – very

rarely. Compared for instance with late novels of Arnošt Lustig, *Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals* depicts this topic gently and only in hints. J. R. Pick used his own experience from the Theresienstadt Ghetto. He also thematized Theresienstadt in his plays *A Dream about Distant Lakes* (1980) and *The Unlucky Man in the Yellow Cap* (1982). The story about Tony continues in the early 1950s in Prague in his novellette *Too Many Relatives* (written 1971, edited 1996) where as a student Tony is confronted with the Stalinist anti-Semitism and is expelled from university. All of these works mix tragic, comic and erotic situations. In comparison with other literary works about the Theresienstadt Ghetto, Pick's works are unconventional, close only to → Arnošt Goldflam.

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