

## St. Elizabeth's Square (Námestie svätej Alžbety)

**Author:** Rudolf Jašík

**First Published:** 1958

**Translations:** Czech (*Náměstí svaté Alžběty*, 1960); English (*St. Elizabeth's Square*, 1964); French (*Place Sainte-Elisabeth*, 1966); Ukrainian (*Majdan svjatoji Al'žbety*, 1971); German (*Die Liebenden vom St. Elisabeth Platz*, 1974)

**Film Adaptation:** *Námestie svätej Alžbety* (St. Elizabeth's Square), feature film, screenplay Štefan Sokol; film director Vladimír Bahna, premiered 28 January 1966

**About the Author:** Rudolf Jašík (1919–1960) was born in Turzovka in the Northwestern Slovakian region of Kysuce. He grew up in a poor family without a father. He studied at high school, but he had to interrupt his studies for financial reasons. He worked as a labourer in Zlín (1935–1938). In 1938–1940 he was unemployed and imprisoned for Communist agitation. From 1940 he had to serve in the Slovakian army. 1941 he was taken to the Eastern Front where Slovakia, as an ally of Germany fought, against the Russians (he served in Crimea and Caucasus, these experiences are reflected in his unfinished trilogy *The Dead Don't Sing*). The Slovak army sentenced him to death in Russia for sabotage, but then he received amnesty. From 1943 to 1944 he worked for the Slovakian radio. In 1944 he participated in the Slovak National Uprising against the Nazis and the collaborationist government. After WW II, he worked as a journalist in Slovakia, museum inspector in Nitra etc. He held important positions in public and in the Communist party. In his prose, he often returned to his childhood in Kysuce and to the War.

**Further Important Works:** *Mŕtvi nespievajú* (1961, *The Dead Don't Sing*; novel); *Čierne a biele kruhy* (1961, *Black and White Circles*; short stories).

### Content and Interpretation

The novel is set in a small town in Slovakia during WW II. The town “under the hill with a vineyard” suggests Nitra in Southern Slovakia. The temporal setting of the story is from the summer to autumn 1941.

In the foreground of the novel is a tragic love story of two young people, the eighteen-year-old Slovak Igor Hamor and seventeen-year-old Jew Eva Weimannová. The motto at the beginning of the novel reads: “Love is immortal. It does not die. It goes with us into the grave” (Jašík, 1979, p. 454; the motto is not in the English translation). At the end, while Eva is killed by a German soldier, the motto repeats in two variations: “Love is immortal. It does not die. It goes with us into the grave” (p. 296). And „Love is immortal, it goes behind the grave” (ibid.). The pure love of two young people on the one hand, and “rusty time” of Slovak clerical Fascist regime supported by the Nazis on the other hand.

Igor and Eva stay close each other at the edge of the town and like to meet in the tower of the church at St. Elizabeth's Square. Igor comes from a very poor family, he lives with his sick mother and survives on occasional side jobs, for instance for the barber Flórik, that becomes

the officer of the local Hlinka Guard (the Slovak Fascist organization). He admires his school fellow „Yellow Dodo” (wearing a yellow cap) from the underworld, but feels disgust about his dishonesty. Eva’s father Samko and his partner Maxi, the Jews, own a little carriage. The situation changes when the Slovak government declares hard anti-Jewish regulations. Jews are marked with a yellow star, they lose their civil rights and the “arization” begins, the expropriation of Jewish property. Igor asked naively – with a potential allusion to Shakespeare’s Shylock – how it is possible.

“...it is anybody’s fault that he was born as a Jew?” (p. 46)

“... a Jew isn’t a human being?” (p. 127)

Because Igor is a good person at heart and loves Eva, he tries to save her. He wants to marry her, but laws prohibit “mixed marriages”. The Roman Catholic priest is willing to give her confirmation, that Eva has been baptized. Nevertheless, he demands a bribe of 10 thousand crowns.

“Yellow Dodo” becomes an informer. He denounces wealthy Jews, which allegedly don’t wear the yellow star. The secretary of the guard acquires their property.

The desperate Igor is looking for a big amount of money. He attempts to get money by stealing some jewelery. However, the bracelet that he has taken is only from gypsum. The young rich woman Erna Summerová that once seduced Igor, refuses to help him, as well as Eva’s father Samko who is too stingy. Eva leaves her family and moves in with Igor. After Igor’s mother dies, Maxi, Samko’s business partner, sells his two horses, and helps Igor. But now the priest refuses to baptize Eva. Shoemaker Maguš, a socialist, advises the young couple to escape into the mountains where Maguš’s brother will provide housing and where no one knows them. However, it is too late, the first 300 Jews from the town are gathered for the transport and Eva is among them.

Most Slovak guards try to avoid this action, therefore the Jews are watched by the German SS-men. Igor can only look helplessly on, as the German Major shoots a little Jewish boy to whom the officer has cunningly offered chocolate. Eva and two young Jewish men decide to take the boy’s body away. They are also all shot dead. (This scene is not in the film version. In the film Igor pulls Eva out of the closed wagon. They run away and Eva is shot by the guards.)

Flórik cheats the rich Jew Heller with a promise to take him across the border. Flórik murders him and his family to take possession of their house and property. Eva’s desperate father Samko, his wife and their son poison themselves with the strychnine. Igor wants to avenge Eva’s death and kills Flórik with an iron rod. He then intends to kill himself, but the shoemaker Maguš saves him.

The novel is based on a romantic stylization. It can be labeled as a ballad or a tragic romance. That’s why the characters are quite clearly divided into positive and negative. Igor, Eva, Maguš and also Maxi on the one hand, the Slovak guards and German soldiers, Yellow Dodo, the rich Jews like Heller as well as the stingy Samko (who likes money more than his own daughter) are on the other hand. The Jews except for Maxi wear their stars humble like sheep. “The outcasts had learnt obedience. There was no resistance over there, in the corner,

in the sheep-fold ” (p. 244). Most Slovaks laugh at guards and Hitler, but they behave passively. Igor did the only act of rebellion by killing the repulsive collaborator Flórik.

### **Main Topics and Problems**

The novel was inspired in part on by an autobiographical experience. In September of 1941 the so called “Jewish Codex” was declared in Slovakia. The rights of the Jews were substantially restricted. The figure of Yellow Dodo could be based on many different informers who reported Jews to the Slovak authorities to get money and property (Lôňčiková and Nižňanský 2016). After the first edition of the novel in 1958 in Slovak, the author shortened and modified the text for the Czech edition in 1960.

The story is presented by an authorial narrator. The narrator knows everything about the past and future events in the fictional world, he comments situations and behavior of the characters, asks rhetorical questions and anticipates the development of the story:

“... love, the purest and clearest water of all!” (p. 123)

“Igor was still far from seeing the town as one great sheep-fold, but one day, quite soon, he would comprehend, see with amazement and curse” (p. 65)

The inner voices of the characters are also used. Unlike dialogues, they are clarified by only single quotation marks ( , ‘). Non-living objects and things are often personified, like the tower and bells on St. Elizabeth’s Square: the tower “slim and wise” is happy “to harbor the lovers”. On the other hand, people are frequently compared to animals. So Yellow Dodo has “snake eyes“, is similar to a wolf; also Erna has “snake eyes”, “snake green eyes”; Flórik has “devilish black” vlasý. Germans are spiders, wolves, insects. Jews resemble sheep, kittens, mice; Eva is similar to a caught little mouse. The whole town is depicted as ugly, black and dangerous. It seems to be a jungle where it is impossible to hide from the hunters. Against all this, the pure, exalted and glorified love of both protagonists is presented.

The novel was successful with critics and readers, because it overcame the schematic images of WW II depicted a heroic struggle against fascism. The characters of the Slovaks and Jews are perceived differently, the positive Igor and Maguš vs. the negative Flórik and Dodo; the positive Eva and Maxi vs. the negative Guttman and Heller.

Some critics have pointed out that the imaginative symbolism of the novel is often conventional and only decorative (Mráz, 1969, pp. 210 and 213). Flórik’s triple robbery murder and burying of bodies at the end of the novel is inconsistent with his cowardly and cautious nature. Also the sneaky murder of a small Jewish child by the German Major is not believable. Nevertheless, it can be a part of the romantic baladic nature of the story. *St. Elizabeth’s Square* continues the topic of some previous Slovak novels, mainly Dominik Tatarka’s → *The Clerical Republic* (1948). However, Jewish characters don’t play such an important role in Tatarka’s work. Jan Otčenášek’s Czech novelette → *Romeo, Juliet and Darkness* was published 1958, in the same year as *St. Elizabeth’s Square*. It also depicts a love between an Aryan (Czech) boy and a Jewish girl in the time of the War and Shoah with a tragic end: the death of the girl. Both authors focus on personal stories and the feeling of their protagonists, on the background of the horrible time (Forst, 1974). Compared to Otčenášek,

Jašík emphasizes the important role of Jewish property and arization. While in the Czech Lands the Germans gained through arization, in Slovakia the Slovaks did the same.

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