

The Cremator (Spalovač mrtvol)

Author: Ladislav Fuks

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Translations: Hungarian (*A hullaégető*, 1971, 1980); Italian (*Il bruciacadaveri*, 1972), Polish (*Palcz zwłok*, 1979, 2003, 2011); English (*The Cremator*, 1984, 2016); Swedish (*Brännaren*, 1986), German (*Der Leichenverbrenner*, 1987); Croatian (*Spaljivač leševa*, 1987); French (*L'incinérateur de cadavres*, 2004); Lithuanian (*Lavonų degintojas*, 2007); Slovenian (*Sežigalec trupel*, 2008); Japanese (*Kasōnin*, 2012); Hebrew (2015) and Bulgarian (*Krematorāt*, 2015).

Theatrical Adaptations: Disk, Prague (2008); Národní divadlo (National Theatre), Prague (2016); Divadlo Petra Bezruče (Petr Bezruč Theatre), Ostrava (2016).

Film Adaptation: *Spalovač mrtvol* (The Cremator), feature film, screenplay Ladislav Fuks and Juraj Herz; film director Juraj Herz, premiered 14 March 1969.

About the Author: Ladislav Fuks (1923–1994) was born in Prague as the son of a high ranking police officer. In high school, he witnessed the Nazi persecution of his Jewish friends. In 1942 he was forced to work on a farm in Moravia. After WW II, he studied philosophy, psychology and art history at Charles University in Prague. He became a professional writer in the 1960s, after his successful debut of → *Mr. Theodor Mundstock*. Jewish figures and the Holocaust play an important role in his works from the 1960s.

Further Important Publications: *Pan Theodor Mundstock* (1963, in English *Mr. Theodore Mundstock*, 1968; novel); *Variace pro temnou strunu* (1966, Variations on a Dark Chord; novel); *Smrt morčete* (1969, Death of the Guinea Pig, in German *Reise ins gelobte Land*, 1990; short stories); *Vévodkyně a kuchařka* (1983, The Duchess and the Cook, novel).

Content and Interpretation

The plot of the novel takes place in Prague at the end of the 1930s with a short coda set in May 1945. The main character, Karel Kopfrkingl, is an employee at a crematorium. At first he seems to be a conscientious worker and attentive father for his family, but with somewhat quirky interests. Kopfrkingl likes to read sensational morbid news. He calls the crematorium “the Temple of Death”. A “timetable of death” (a schedule of funerals from the crematorium) hangs in his apartment. He invites his daughter to play Mahler’s *Songs on the Death of Children* on the piano. He likes reading the Buddhist *Tibetan Book of the Dead* about reincarnation and rebirth or transmigration and believes he liberates the souls of the dead during cremation. He speaks about his “blessed home” and caring for his family, but secretly visits prostitutes. He emphasizes that 1930s Czechoslovakia is a humane country. Nevertheless, his main argument for this opinion is the law allowing for cremation. Kopfrkingl’s darker nature rises to the surface under the influence of his friend, Nazi Willi Reinke, and after the Munich Agreement, when an authoritarian regime was installed that would soon become a totalitarian one. Kopfrkingl professes German nationality and becomes a member of the Nazi party. His pontifications about respect for the law and about humanity take on another character; they become the justification for his acceptance of the racist ideology. He informs on his Jewish fellow citizens and colleagues in the crematorium and

murders his own wife and son, whose Jewish origins would stand in the way of his career. He interprets these murderous acts as a liberation of their souls. Kopfrkingl believes that he has been visited by a messenger from Tibet and has been selected as the new Dalai Lama. In the last chambre of the novel he is assigned the task of building large cremation furnaces and chambers that were supposed to “liberate” the Jews from their earthly life. However, he then goes completely insane and has to be taken away to a mental institute. The novel ends with a short scene in May 1945 where Kopfrkingl appears in a hospital train going from Germany to Prague and watches haggard Jewish prisoners returning from camps.

The novel is based on stylization and complicated construction. The entire text is full of intimation, codes and figures recalling puppets, which repeat and vary. It is a refined third- person narrative, which is however perceived from the personal perspective of the protagonist Karel Kopfrkingl. Readers though cannot see his inner workings, so for a long time Kopfrkingl seems to be a good crematorium worker and an attentive husband and father, only with somewhat bizarre inclinations.

From this point of view, it is interesting that the first version of chapter 10 of the novel, published in 1963 in a review (Fuks 1963), was written in the first-person narrative. Here, Kopfrkingl formulates open his hatred of the Jews and adds to Hitler’s plan to exterminate them. In the final version, Kopfrkingl’s motives and emotions are concealed. That’s why the construction of the text became more sophisticated and impressive.

Fuks’ novel skillfully, and even monstrously, paints a fun-house atmosphere as solemnity and stark ornamentation devolved into horror. The author’s schedule of the novel, deposited in his estate, testifies to it. Motifs and emerging characters for every chapter are recorded here. The author kept them exactly (Gilk, 2013, p. 61). For instance, the second chapter depicts the Kopfrkingl family as they visit a carnival, including a fun-house with frightening scenes from the Great Plague of 1680 in Prague. The dying and killing which are demonstrated here (hanging, death by battering with a rod) foreshadow Kopfrkingl’s own actions in chapters 13 and 14, when he hangs his wife in the bathroom and batters his son, Mili, with an iron rod in the crematorium. An iron rod can be found several times in the novel.

Kopfrkingl seems to be a decent, respectable, peaceful man. “He rules over his family with a loving hand, with traces of despotism wrapped up in kind words.” (Sladovniková, 2018, 59) But in fact he has a pathological personality. He lacks individuality, and thus is a complete conformist. Characteristically, Kopfrkingl accepts the thoughts and empty phrases which he has previously heard. His hardness and aggressivity is lurking behind all these phrases. He likes to manipulate his family and other people. He respects the law, he says “peace, justice and happiness should reign” and “suffering is evil we ought to do everything in our power to alleviate it at least” (Fuks, 2016, p. 50). But he abuses all these words and becomes an informer and murderer.

“We must make sacrifices...” “We live in great, revolutionary times and we still a lot of worries. We all lose. [...] All Jews in the German Reich are, irrevocably, excluded [...] it’s the law, and as you know, we have to respect the law...” (pp. 169–170).

This rhetorical strategy is very similar to that of the Nazi but also to that of the Communist perpetrators.

Willi Reinke, his friend and former fellow fighter, a Czech German, entices him to become a Nazi. “Hitler is an ingenious politician who rids a nation of one hundred million people of its hardships, poverty, unemployment” (p. 38), he says, “we are going to establish a new,

happier, and just order in Europe” (p. 106). Kopfrkingl rejects Reinke at first and repeats the words of his Jewish doctor, Dr. Bettelheim: “Violence does not reward anybody for long. [...] After all, we live in a civilized world, in Europe in the twentieth century.” (p. 54) After the Munich Agreement and German occupation, he repeats Reinke’s words and joins the Nazi party. He becomes “a poor Germanic soul” (p. 125). Now he can visit the German Casino in Prague and the gorgeous blonde beauties in it. “The Führer is building a paradise.”

In the novel the Kopfrkingl family meets several characters in almost every chapter. They are similar to figurines or puppets: an “little old fat man in a stiff white collar with a red bow tie”, a “very young pink-faced girl in a black dress”, sometimes with her boyfriend, an “elderly woman in spectacles with a foaming glass of beer”, and an arguing couple, a bad-tempered man with a stick accompanying his hysteric wife with a long feather in her hat. The omnipresence of these characters evokes the impression of a fictional world that is closed like a cage (in the first chapter, “cage” is mentioned twice, and once again in chapter 12).

The system of names of the protagonists is also curious. The names Strauss, Dvořák, Rubinstein, Janáček and Wagner suggest composers and music. The employees in the crematorium are: Vrána (Crow), Fenek (Desert Fox), Pelikán (Pelican), Lišková (Miss Fox), director Srnec (Roe Deer), Beran (Ram), Zajíc (Hare) and Špaček (Starling), the dead people among others Vlk (Wolf), Sýkorová (Ms. Chickadee), Daněk (Fallow Deer), Piskoř (Weather Loach), Veverka (Squirrel) and Kalous (Eared Owl)... Also these names may suggest an inhumane and bizarre characteristic of the entire fictional space.

Kopfrkingl is delighted with death. He admires the young dead women in the crematorium. He kills his wife with a smile. Before the murder, she had to put on her black dress and listen to funeral music. “It’s such perfect funeral music. [...] What if I hanged you, my dear?” (pp. 154–155)

Angels and paradise are another leitmotif of Fuks’ novel. Kopfrkingl says that white cars are heavenly, for angels. A blonde German prostitute in the Casino is also an “angel” and the Casino itself a “paradise”. He also interprets confiscation of Jewish property that he wants to appropriate, as a “paradise”, “for ever” (p. 170). In the last chapter, three “angels” lead Kopfrkingl out of his apartment house (in fact to a mental institute), “with a car standing in front of it. A white car, the car for angels...” (p. 173).

However bizarre, psychologically disturbed and insane, Kopfrkingl is not the embodiment of the traditional villain. In essence, he has a *petite bourgeois* mentality, works carefully, loves music (opera melodies waft from the crematorium), cares for his family, does not drink or smoke, and enjoys speaking in a flowery manner (he calls his cat “enchanted-beauty” and his wife Marie “Lakmé” and “heavenly”). Similar to Tono Brtko → *The Shop on Main Street* and other figures, he is a *little man* exposed to an extreme situation. The question of responsibility of ordinary citizens is put here. While, however Brtko faces the aggression of the outside world, Kopfrkingl himself becomes an aggressor and killer. Brtko accepts responsibility and commits suicide, Kopfrkingl, on the contrary, covers his crimes with pontifications.

Film Adaptation

The novel was soon filmed after its release. Ladislav Fuks participated in the script, the film director was Juraj Herz who had survived the Holocaust as a child. One of the best Czech films in the 1960s was created. It was premiered in Spring of 1969, but was then banned after

just a few weeks, and audiences did not get another chance to see it again until in the late 1980s.

The film intensifies the story's elements of horror as well as the protagonist's cruel malice and brutality. In the end, Kopfrkingl is not taken away to an institute; he leaves to fulfill his "calling". Thus, as part of the Nazi plan to exterminate the Jews, the main character can put his perverted leanings into action on a large scale.

Rudolf Hrušínský played the role of Kopfrkingl with a smiling face and a seductive, monotonous tone of voice. He calls his family "my angels", his profession "noble", his home "beautiful" and "blessed". He's obsessed with death and sexual perversity. The film version in black-and-white underlines these hidden attributes of his. The camera operator Stanislav Milota often used an extreme close-up and a special "fish-eye" lens that deforms Kopfrkingl's face and intensifies his morbidity.

For instance, Kopfrkingl delivers the funeral oration for his wife in the crematorium. This scene is only in the film version. His sentimental words about death as a blessing escalate to aggressive Nazi propaganda: "...only death and the implementation of a propitious new order. The Führer's new, fortunate Europe and death!"

Kopfrkingl's perversity is evident in the film version in the dialogue with a high ranking Nazi officer (chief of the *Sicherheitsdienst*, the Nazi secret police, in Prague). He has to prepare "the gas furnace of the future – the equipment for incinerating as many people as possible". Kopfrkingl says: "If we had enormous, mass furnaces, where one hundred, five hundred, a thousand, would all fit at once, it could be done in ten minutes perhaps. [...] In this way, all of humanity, the entire world, could be liberated very quickly. [...] In an enormous hall like that, constantly in operation for a thousand people, once you entered, you wouldn't come back to life".

In a similar way, before he takes his daughter Zina into the crematorium to murder her, he meets her boyfriend Kája and asks: "Do you have your camera? A pity, you could have taken a snapshot as an everlasting keepsake".

The original intention was to move the plot of *The Cremator* into the Sixties and to present the protagonist in the then current political and social situation including the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. (Poláček, 2013, p. 158) This original intention couldn't be fulfilled, and the film was banned.

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