

The Land of Forgetting (Krajina zabudnutia)

Author: Anton Baláž

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Translations: Hungarian (*A feledés földje*, 2016), Hebrew (*Erec hašichecha*, 2015)

About the Author: Anton Baláž (1943) is a Slovak prose writer, television and film screenwriter, radio playwright and publicist. After 1989 he started to work as the Editor-in-Chief of Slovenský denník. In the first year of the independent Slovak Republic (1993) he worked in the office of the President of the Slovak Republic. Baláž's work is very varied, but one important trend can be observed – it is preoccupied with topics of Slovak history that are little known. In the second half of the 1990s, Baláž returned thematically to the Jewish past, specifically to the Holocaust of the Slovak Jewish community. His work focuses on the first postwar years. It concentrates on the fate of the Jews who survived the horrors of concentration camps and then tried to reintegrate into ordinary life and to find a new sense of life. He had known the fates of the Jews since the 1960s, but did not decide to write about this topic until the second half of the 1990s. In 2008 he was awarded the State Prize Rád Ľudovíta Štúra by the president of the Slovak Republic.

Further Important Publications: *Sklenikova Venuša* (1980, Greenhouse Venus, novel), *Chirurgický Dekameron* (1989, Surgical Decameron, short stories), *Tábor padlých žien* (1993, The Camp of Fallen Women, novel), *Ofélia nie je mŕtva* (2003, Ophelia Is not Dead, radio play), *Transporty nádeje* (2010, Transports of Hope, non-fiction), *Prehovor, Ezachiel* (2012, Speak Out, Ezechiel, novel), *Portréty prežitia* (2014, Portraits of Survival, short stories), *Vyniesť na svetlo dňa príbehy dlhej noci: Rozhovory s Rudolfom Dobiášom* (2014, Bring Out a Long Night Stories in the Light of Day. Interviews with Rudolf Dobiáš, book of interviews), *Povedz slovo čisté* (2017, Say It Clearly, novel)

Content and Interpretation

The novel is set in the first years after World War II. The plot of the novel mainly takes place in Bratislava, in a Jewish quarter, but also in Vienna, where one of the main characters (Miriam) regularly goes to equip groups of Jews emigrating to Israel. On the basis of the

description of the events, it can be assumed that it is 1949, when the trial with László Rajk (a Hungarian Communist minister, sentenced to death) took place, and at the same time it is the period when Hungarian Jewish refugees were passing through Slovakia. The plot only takes place for a few days in the summer of 1949, but according to the historian Ivan Kamenec, the author put historical events in this short period as well as the events that took place one to two years after 1949 (Kamenec, 2015, p. 78). In retrospect, the author described the war and Holocaust memoirs of Erna and Miriam which these two characters personally experienced. And in the postwar years, they have to deal with the traumas that they still carried from the War.

The main characters are Erna and Miriam, two young Jews who survived the horror of the Holocaust in the concentration camp Auschwitz. Miriam thanks Erna for her survival. During the Holocaust, Miriam lost her entire family and the apartment they had lived in before the War. After the War, she returned to their apartment in Bratislava, but the new owner of this flat was their former maid. Miriam got employed by the Palestinian Office to help the surviving Jews find a new home in the new land of the Jews in Israel. She tried to justify her own survival, to get rid of her guilt towards her dead family members. Erna decided to leave Slovakia in the post-war period when changing the population between Hungary and Slovakia, and she moved to Hungary. Now she tries to escape from Hungary to Vienna through Slovakia, because she was forced to testify against László Rajk. In the trial with Rajk she had to testify that she was receiving information from him which she handed over to the Israeli Secret Service.

The other character is Albert Kalina (Aaron Katz) who is the head of the Palestinian Office. Although he is a character inspired by the real person Ľudovít Kalina, the novel is a fictitious depiction of the destiny of this Jew. According to Baláž, when he was writing the novel *The Land of Forgetting*, he only had the information that Ľudovít Kalina was the head of the Palestinian Office. The Kalina in the novel is only a fictional character. Baláž devised his story on the basis of the probable fate of Jews, who were threatened by a long-term prison sentence for Zionism. Therefore the fictional Kalina ended his life by suicide. The real Ľudovít Kalina worked as the head of the Palestinian Authority, but he had left Czechoslovakia with his wife and daughter before the emigrations to Israel were stopped. In the novel Kalina lost his family in a concentration camp where he sent them, because he did not know that the camps were the camps of death. The real and the fictional Kalina both share the same original Jewish name, Aaron Katz. What these two people associate with is the

original Jewish name, Aaron Katz, as well as a delight in wine. The author calls it his author's intuition. "My author's intuition created Aaron Katz and I gave him a real image in *Transports of Hope*" (personal interview, 3rd March 2017).

In the novel, the author deals with the topic of the post-War fates of the Slovak Jews, who, after returning from the concentration camps, were trying to re-enter normal life. At the same time, he deals with the post-War emigration of the Jews from Slovakia to Israel; in which the Palestinian Office in Bratislava participated. It was not just about the emigration of Slovak Jews but also Jews from Hungary after the exodus from Hungary had been stopped.

The novel begins at the Palestinian Office where a photographer named Jakub brings photographs of a Jewish wedding for Miriam. However, the Palestinian Office is already being watched by the State Security at that time, so Jakub is also interviewed by the State Security staff. Miriam works in the Palestinian Office and she often travels to Vienna to arrange passage for Jews to Israel. But it is already at a time when the Iron Curtain is starting to emerge across Europe, and emigration is becoming more and more complicated. Jakub soon finds out that he is under surveillance by the State Security after the inspectors and cultural consultants appear in his apartment, an open studio, and warn him of topics that are banned.

Miriam meets Erna with whom she had spent eight months in Auschwitz, while working with Hungarian Jewish refugees. They have been separated during the death march. In the case of Erna, who suffers from a phobia of dirt after being in Auschwitz. And Miriam decides to help her with her emigration to America. Erna spends a night in Jakub's apartment and between Jakub, Erna, and Miriam, a kind of love triangle appears.

Jewish transports to Israel begin to be complicated by the fact that people were convinced that the Jews were exporting gold and jewelry from Slovakia, so they are cruelly checked at the border. It means yet another dishonor and degradation for them. "Yes, again, they went away with humiliation and submission. But all the emigrants believed that it was the last time, that they would forget it in Israel" (Baláž, 2000, p. 117).

After Jakub accepts the position as a government photographer, to the humiliation of the Jews, he feels resistance to the state and to himself that he had contributed to the decrial of the Jews. After destroying this state order, he decides to escape from Slovakia. Jakub and Miriam join the German transport from Slovakia to Germany. Miriam does not leave to Erec Israel like the other Jews, but to Germany, which might remind her of the horrors of the Holocaust.

But she realizes that Auschwitz would go with her anywhere. “I will still bring Auschwitz with me...” (p. 152). Kalina decides to end his life by suicide.

Main Topics and Problems

The author's books with the topic of Jewry were based on the archival documents of Ministry of the Interior, personal experience of those who survived and who he personally met, as well as the case files of some participants in the Zionist Trial. (The Zionist Trial was a political trial with the employees of the Ministry of Interior and Palestinian Office who were involved in organising → alija. They were prosecuted in years 1952 and 1953 in the trials against bourgeois nationalists, accused of treason and other crimes against the socialist regime. They were imprisoned for nine to eighteen years.) He has written a radio drama, *Ophelia Is Not Dead* (Ofélia nie je mŕtva), a novel, *The Land of Forgetting* (Krajina zabudnutia), a non-fiction *The Transports of Hope* (Transporty nádeje), and a book, *Portraits of Survival* (Portréty prežitia). Besides the novel, *The Land of Forgetting*, it includes two short stories, *The Rift* (Trhlina) and *Šimon the Pilgrim* (Šimon Pútnik). In the case of non-fiction, the author deals with the issue factually. In the case of the novel and short stories, the real facts which the stories come from, are changed and fictionalized.

The novel *The Land of Forgetting* is, according to the literary scientist and critic of **Mária Bátorová**, unique to its kind in the Slovak literature, whether from the point of view of Jewish history in Slovakia, or describing the practical life of Orthodox Jews, their customs, traditions, the status of men and women. In the Slovak literature there is not another novel which would include all these circumstances of Jewry in Slovakia. From this point of view, this novel is exceptional.

His novel was inspired by the story of sisters Pavla and Eugenia Schreiber who survived Auschwitz. Pavla Schreiber, later Rodan, was the mother of Martin Rodan, one of his classmate at the Comenius University in Bratislava. The sisters were taken in the first transport from Slovakia (Poprad) on 25th March 1942. The memoirs of the fictional characters Miriam and Erna on the Holocaust are the real memoirs of the Schreiber sisters. Their personal experience from the death camp was also reflected in the trauma of nudity, a topic that is an important part of the novel.

The sisters were the first ones who managed to report from Auschwitz what was happening in the camp. As a part of a propaganda event for the Red Cross in 1943, they could send gifts to relatives. The sisters made a wooden box with a secret bottom into which they put a report

Komentár [J1]: Zařadit do literatury

Komentár [EaM2]: Recenziu od p. Bátorovej som dostala od pána Baláza, ale len samotný text, preto neviem, bohužiaľ, kde to bolo publikované

about the camp. In the box they put a doily embroidery with the inscription “What's important is always inside”. The gift was sent to Budapest, where they understood their message and read the report in the main Budapest synagogue.

In the novel Baláž depicted the issue of the emigration action of Slovak and Hungarian Jews to Israel. It was already the period when the Iron Curtain was beginning to close over Czechoslovakia, and emigration became more and more complicated until it was completely stopped. The author portrays this situation throughout the characters who were working at the Palestinian Office, Miriam and Dr. Kalina, as well as through Jews who decided to move abroad, including Erna or the Rothman family. His novel is not only about the years of the War, but there is evidence that “the fates of the Jews had their difficult continuation, even though Baláž does not touch the most drastic episodes, but, as he states in his comment, often come from the lives of his acquaintances” (Pospíšil, 2016, p. 149).

In the novel, the author deals extensively with the traumas that the surviving Jews had taken away from the concentration camps. In the case of Miriam, it is a phobia of nudity, in the case of Erna it is a phobia of dirt.

Miriam's phobia of nudity prevents her from being a full-fledged woman, preventing her from touching a man. Her phobia stems from the forced nudity she was exposed to in Auschwitz. It was the nudity of the young women, many of whom who had never been naked in front of any man, and now they were forced to undress before the guardians, the camp officials. With the help of Erna, in Auschwitz she learned to use her naked body only as a tool for survival.

Miriam survives, but the feeling of the forced nudity marks her so much that she feels like a a broken woman. However, she knows that she must overcome her trauma, get over the forced nudity. She must resurrect her own body after thousands of other Jewish bodies ended up in crematory furnaces. “It is not, it can not be dead yet, and her duty is to resurrect it, at least this one body, when the thousands of tortured bodies of the women of Auschwitz were left forever in the clouds” (Baláž, 2000, p. 21).

Her own irrational fear of being nude is in strong contrast to the voluntary nudity of willing prostitutes she sees on the streets of Bratislava after the War. “Miriam was irritated by their sensual laughs, decolettes, nudity for sale but unforced ... it reminded her of another, forced nudity of her own body from which she still cannot escape” (pp. 10–11). After the night spent with Jakub, she feels she is out of her trauma and phobia of nudity, she is a strong woman again. “At the same time, she feels that she is already a strong woman, that her body has

begun to live her own life, finally being released from the ashes of the ugly memory of Auschwitz” (p. 137).

Iboja Wandall-Holm, a Jewish writer who survived the Holocaust, also deals with the syndrome of the phobia of nudity. In her memoirs, *Moruša* (Mulberry, 1998), she writes: “All the items that testified to our identity were thrown into a large basket. They lay there, betrayed. We left the last rest of our identity with our clothes” (Wandall-Holm, 1998, p. 227). The only way to survive the embarrassing feeling of one’s own nudity was to separate the soul from the body, to use the body as a survival tool just as Erna did in Baláž’s novel.

Erna suffers from a different trauma, she does not care about her nudity because she did not experience the abhorrent nudity when she arrived in Auschwitz when only the skeletons of women were waiting. And she did not experience the mocking and abhorrent views of the German guards. However, Erna suffers from a phobia of dirt that prevents her from sleeping under her blanket. Again and again, she felt the horror of touching unclean things. After the War in Budapest, this fear was partly overcome, but her subsequent visit to Tel Aviv convinced her that dirt was not just about Auschwitz but it was related to culture, especially to the culture of the East. “She understood that there was something like ‘the dirt of the East’, that it was not just something that was associated with Auschwitz, but it was related to the landscape, the culture, the world has gotten so terribly dirty ...” (Baláž, 2000, p. 50). Under the influence of this trauma she is afraid of emigrating to Israel, it would be the death of her to live in such dirt. She decides to move to America. She overcomes her phobia in Jakub’s apartment when she is forced to cover herself with a blanket which is dirty in her opinion after the arrival of the inspectors, because she has to pretend she is his mistress. Then she finds out that if she decides to touch the dirty thing herself, it is not too bad, she can overcome it.

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