

World War I in the Czech Literature – Jaroslav Hašek



The most famous Czech novelist, who wrote about the WW1, was Jaroslav Hašek, a Czech writer, humourist, satirist, journalist, bohemian and anarchist. He is best known for his novel *The Fate of the Good Soldier Švejk during the World War*, an unfinished collection of farcical incidents about a soldier in WW1 and a satire on the ineptitude of authority figures.

Hašek was inspired to write the novel by his experiences during the WW1, especially his time in the ranks of the 91st Infantry Regiment of the Austro-Hungarian Army. The novel has been translated into about 60 languages, making it the most translated novel in Czech literature.

Švejk (Schweik) has been dramatized several times; the international adaptation was achieved by the adaptation of *Schweik in the Second World War* by the German playwright and director Bertold Brecht.

Many people associate Hašek's most important work with congenial illustrations by Josef Lada. Hašek did not manage to complete the book. However, Ivan Olbracht called it "It is one of the best books ever written in the Czech Republic, and Svejik is

quite a new type in world literature, equivalent to Don Quixote, Hamlet, Faust, Oblomov, Karamazov," Olbracht wrote.

Švejk also attracted non-Czech filmmakers; for example, in 1960 **Axel von Ambesser** made the film *Der Brave Soldat Schwejk*. Another German version dates to 1972. It is interesting that Prague native and Hašek's friend Max Brod participated in the screenplay. Švejk is quite popular in Finland, and in 1967, the ten-part series *Kunnon sotamies Svejkin seikkailuja* was created. In the Polish television film *Przygody dobrego wojaka Szwejka* of 1999, Švejk was portrayed by the popular Jerzy Stuhr. In 2009, Robert Crombie directed the British-Ukrainian animated film *The Good Soldier Shweik*.



Hašek came up with the idea to write a book about a volunteer who is slightly weak-minded in the spirit of his belief that the militant Austro-Hungarian Empire (and any totalitarian system in general) is best served by a moron who turns the stupidity of the representatives of such a system against themselves.

However, the stupidity of Švejk was already then somewhat different from the stupidity of an ordinary idiot. Švejk could cast such a "childlike bright look" at an officer that the officer did not know "whether to laugh or be angry." Svejk's stupidity could not only disarm, but also make him think about himself. Either this way of behaving reflects the type of Czech character that opposes fate by lamenting and criticizing, or on the contrary, by ironic humor, which often borders on the black humor. In the Czech Republic, such behaviour is called "švejkování".

‘You do make strange comparisons, I must say,’ said Bretschneider significantly. ‘First you talk about Ferdinand and then about a cattle-dealer.’

‘Oh, no, I don’t,’ Švejk defended himself. ‘God forbid my wanting to compare anyone to anybody else. Mr Palivec knows me very well. I’ve never compared anyone to anybody else, have I? But I wouldn’t for the life of me want to be in the skin of that Archduke’s widow. What’s she going to do now? The children are orphans and the family estate at Konopiště has no master. Marry a new Archduke? What would she get out of that? She’d only go with him to Sarajevo again and be widowed a second time.’



Watch the excerpt from the filmed version of the novel:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMehH5mCwd8&ab_channel=FACETS

Interview over the book *The Good Soldier Svejk*

(<https://english.radio.cz/czech-books-you-must-read-8506310/3>)

Tasks:

- 1) Read the interview and decide in which areas Abigail Weil probably misunderstood the Czech character.
- 2) What do you agree with in her statement the most?
- 3) To what extent is it possible for a non-native Czech to understand the specifics of Czech humour?
- 4) Do you feel that the author's views on Švejk are biased by the fact that she is a researcher of literature?

Here is an interview with with Abigail Weil, a Slavic Studies PhD from Harvard University who is currently working on a book about Hašek, a notorious prankster, anarchist and bohemian who was himself just as colourful a character as Švejk.

Do we have any knowledge of what Hašek was intending for the other volumes that we never got to see? What would have happened next, so to speak?

“No, because he didn’t do any pre-writing or planning. So there is no Hašek archive for one thing.

“He wrote by hand. He did very little editing. And once he moved to Lipnice, he dictated.

“So there aren’t notebooks or handwritten or typed notes of his plans, because he wasn’t that sort of writer.

“He really improvised the whole novel, as far as we know.

“He may have had a vision in his head, but he left no documentary evidence of it.”

Does it take away, do you think, from the overall work that we have four volumes of a projected six, that it’s an unfinished novel?

“In my experience working with the novel and teaching it, people basically only read the first volume anyway.

“And with the first volume, Hašek was in much better health when he wrote it; he wasn’t drinking as much, he wrote it in Prague.

“Structurally the first volume is very different from the others.

“The chapters are tight and concise and move in a more logical way. It follows more of a picaresque format, like Don Quixote.

“But then as the novel goes on the structure really unwinds, as Hašek moved from writing in a more controlled setting to dictating.

“It absolutely has an anti-war agenda, because a lot of the book is opposed to any sort of institutions that rely on human sacrifice to prop themselves up.”

“As his drinking habits got worse and worse, you sort of see a structural breakdown in the novel.

“That being said, there are some very famous sections later on in the novel, such as when Švejk finds the Russian officer’s uniform and puts it on and gets arrested by his own army, who think he’s a spy.

“But in any case, it takes a really dedicated reader of Hašek to make it through the later volumes [laughs].”

Švejk is always regarded as one of the first anti-war novels. Would you agree with that assessment?

“I think it absolutely has an anti-war agenda, because a lot of the book is – in my opinion – opposed to any sort of institutions that rely on human sacrifice to prop themselves up.

“That includes the church, that includes the monarchy, it includes history as a discipline – all these things that counter free will and critical thinking and reduce individuals to cannon fodder.

“So the military is, of course, sort of the most obvious example of that.

“And World War I, generally, unleashed this wave of not just literature but art too – if you think about the German Expressionist grotesque art that followed WWI and was created by a lot of veterans of WWI.

“Because Hašek didn’t really see himself in these high-falutin’ terms he’s not considered among the Modernists and among the Expressionists who were dealing with these themes.

“But he absolutely was.”

I was reading, I must confess on Wikipedia, a description of the book where the author says “the reader is unclear as to whether Švejk is genuinely incompetent or acting quite deliberately with dumb insolence”. Is that really the case? Is it not clear to people what Švejk’s real nature is? It seems to me very obvious that he’s acting with dumb insolence.

“Yes. I think it’s an open question.

“For me the ambiguity – and this is a sort of horrible, not very helpful thing to say – comes out best in the Czech.

“Once it’s translated, the translator will necessarily make some decisions.

“Translation is an interpretive art, so if you’ve read it in English translated by Cecil Parrott, then that idea that he’s very cunning and crafty does come across.

“I don’t speak Polish, but from what I’ve heard the Polish Švejk comes off very stupid, because the classic Polish translator made those choices, whether consciously or unconsciously.

“But ambiguity is a very hard concept to translate.

“To me the reason, I think, we can say it was an intentional decision – though we can’t say for sure – is because Švejk doesn’t have an internal monologue.

“F.X. Šalda, who was a very important literary critic, said that basically it’s important to find a way to love Švejk without idolising him or making him a hero or making him an emblem of the nation.”

“I think this was a very intentional choice on Hašek’s part. Other characters, minor characters, we hear what they’re thinking, we hear what their motivation is.

“But with Švejk all we get is his speech and his actions.

“And this too is sort of a classic technique of modernist literature – psychological fragmentation.

“You don’t know what’s at the core.”

It has often been suggested over the decades that Josef Švejk is in some ways emblematic of the frequently put-upon Czech nation. Indeed, there is a Czech verb švejkovat, to Švejk, meaning to pretend obedience and avoid disagreeable situations by feigning incomprehension. However, not all Czechs welcome the association, which Abigail Weil says she understands.

“Nobody wants to be a nation of malingerers and scapegraces, but that’s what Švejk is.

“F.X. Šalda, who was a very important late 19th, early 20th century literary critic, said that basically it’s important to find a way to love Švejk without idolising him or making him a hero or making him an emblem of the nation.

“I think during different moments in Czech history it has been more or less useful to think of Švejk as a national hero.

“You hear stories from the Russian invasion in 1968 where images of Švejk were drawn on the walls, graffiti-style, and stories about people turning the street signs around so the tanks would get confused.

“These are sort of gestures of shouting into the void, where you don’t have any power.

“You know you can’t turn around a tank. But what can you do to maintain your own free will and your sense of humour and at least not let yourself be oppressed in your mind and in your heart?”

“And I think Švejk is a really useful symbol of a way to resist these powerful, oppressive measures, even when you’re sort of stuck in the system.

“There’s no sort of person whose life is more dictated by the state than a soldier.

“So how do can you be subversive, even when your choices are very limited?”

“I think it’s sort of a question of in what way is Švejk an emblem of the nation – not as a dunce, not as someone cunning or crafty, but as someone who no matter what the external structures and powers are at play maintains his own identity and individuality.”

When I was preparing to speak to you, I re-read Cecil Parrott’s introduction to his own translation and what really comes across is just how wild and anarchic a character Hašek himself was. I was wondering if you think that his biography in a way adds to the appeal of Švejk, that people know that it was this wild Prague writer who created Švejk?

“Yes, for me absolutely.

“Hašek is really one of those authors whose life and legend is inextricable from the appeal of his work.”

“That’s very much the centre of my research of the Hašek legend, which he helped to create but wasn’t the only person to disseminate.

“A lot of the stories that his fans today tell about him and his life are the same stories that his friends were telling about him in his lifetime, more than 100 years ago.

“A really interesting phenomenon, I think, about the global enduring popularity of Švejk is that when fans meet and talk about it we only talk about the novel for a small period of time and then inevitably we switch and start telling these Hašek anecdotes.

“I think Cecil Parrott is an interesting case. He did write scholarly analyses of Hašek’s works, but then he sort of couldn’t help himself and would write also about the anecdotes, which are unverifiable but are such interesting stories.

“Radko Pytlík, the great Czech haškolog, did the same thing. He wrote a scholarly biography and then three years later he published a book of anecdotes.

“So to me Hašek is really one of those authors whose life and legend is inextricable from the appeal of his work.

“Because Hašek was a prankster and a performance artist, I see the stories about him as a body of texts, a body of work that stands on equal footing with what he wrote.”

“I actually don’t know the Selver translation. I know of it, but I’ve worked with Parrott translation whenever I needed to produce the quotes in English.

Apparently it’s the most translated of Czech books, with 50 or 60 different language versions. It’s almost a century old now. What do you think gives it its longevity?

“It’s interesting, because I think while that statistic is true, as far as I know, I don’t think too many people read it today.

“I think in its time it was hugely popular.

“It’s the funniest book I’ve ever read and every time I read it different parts make me laugh.”

“It had a resurgence in popularity in the ‘60s and ‘70s in the United States.

“There was Catch 22, which was itself inspired by Švejk, and the US was embroiled in this ridiculous conflict in Vietnam for decades.

“As I’ve travelled through the world and spoken to other Hašek fans, the young people I meet who are Hašek fans often tend to be veterans.

“I think there’s an appeal of this book for people who see the absurdities of the military.

“Other than that, I think young people read it when they’re assigned it in college – and how many colleges offer Czech literature, or offer Modernist literature? It’s very rare.

“So I actually have this fear that Hašek fans are sort of an aging demographic.

“I hope that the new translation can boost its numbers again, at least among English speakers.

“Where Hašek remains popular, including among young people, is Russia.

“That’s a totally different story that has to do with the time that Hašek spent in Russia, spent in the Red Army. He was never censored by the Communist government.”

How funny do you find the book, Abigail? I think it’s very amusing but it doesn’t make me laugh out loud. How funny do you find it?

“Oh, it makes me laugh out loud. It’s the funniest book I’ve ever read and every time I read it different parts make me laugh.

“I wrote an entire dissertation on Hašek, which I’m now adapting to be a book, and never once did Hašek stop making me laugh.

“Part of that is because I love potty humour, and there’s a lot of that. Part of it that I’m very anti-establishment and the agenda is that, very much.

“But I also think that Hašek has this talent for tapping into people’s hypocrisies and the way they try to cover those up, and people’s fears and the way they try to cover them up. And their vulnerabilities.

“He just has this great eye for absurdity and detail and this great ear for language.

“To me it’s the funniest book.”

Sources:

- <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/world-war-i-history>
- <https://english.radio.cz/czech-books-you-must-read-8506310/3>