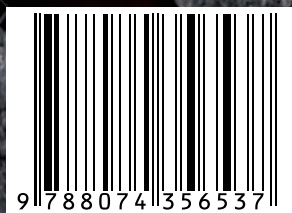




Univerzita Hradec Králové

IVAN ŠUŠA

AREAL INTERSECTIONS IN SLOVAK
AND ITALIAN MEMOIR LITERATURE



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**AREAL INTERSECTIONS
IN SLOVAK AND ITALIAN
MEMOIR LITERATURE**

Vědecká monografie

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INTRODUCTION

Memoirs as a genre have a steady place in the history of literature. Their authors depict an authentic experience and objective factual data are often alternated with a personal viewpoint, which besides objective reality express certain subjective feelings, perception or opinions. For this reason, they are also popular for the reader. The classification of memoirs from the viewpoint of literary science as a whole, is, however, more difficult, because memoirs do not operate as a clearly defined genre, but are “enriched” with other aspects – a traditional artistic (aesthetic) aspect related to documentariness and factuality, and for this reason belong to the so-called cross-genres. In our monograph, we will try to define the term memoirs; we will emphasize the genre and field crossing as well. Memoirs do not serve only as an object of research in literary science, but their character allows them to enter into other scientific fields. The memoirs of the people who survived the holocaust are a typical example – they materialized their traumatizing experience into memories that often suppress artistic value, but present valuable testimony from the historical or political (of political science) point of view. Some authors managed to unite both aspects, artistic and factual, creating works that became a part of the history of literature. In our study, we will focus on the memoirs from the environment of the about concentration camps. Regarding our specialization (Slovakist, Italianist) they will be mostly related to authors – memoirists – from Slovakia and Italy.

The missing or voluntary semantic motivation can thus lead to wrong interpretation and to the vagueness of a given term. In our works, we prefer the term “memoir literature from the environment of concentration camps”. In the Italian context, the authors distinguish, for instance, the terms “concentration literature” (i.e. literature written during internment in the concentration camp) and “memoir literature” (works written after the liberation). Franca Mariani, Francesco Guerre and Raul Mordenti in the work *Literary Forms in History* consider the terms “memoir writing” and “recollection writing” or “literature of testimony”. The works of Giorgio Bassani or Natalie Ginsburg belong to the first group, the works of Primo Levi to the second. Peter Valček, the Slovak specialist in literary science and the author of *Slovník literárnej teórie* (Dictionary of Literary Theory), sees memoirs in a binary relationship factuality – weakened accuracy, i.e. in the sense that the factual

description of a situation in a specific period has a clear literary-historical significance (regardless of the author's stylistics or style). The same artificially valuable work can arise on the condition that the accuracy of data and relations presented will be weakened.

A traumatizing experience, an inability to change a situation, becoming bitter, loss (in some cases on the contrary – strengthening) of faith (mostly aiming to publish after war), often blending personal and socio-historical aspects, and an attempt to describe this phenomenon from a few, frequently scientific aspects as power and evil machinery. It is possible to observe these specifics in a majority of the published memoirs from the environment of the concentration camps so far. Besides, it is necessary to mention important time aspect – meanwhile some works were published as detailed diaries or reports (regarding their creation during the internment – it is an absolute minority), the others (majority) are memories of the specific period, some with interval of several decades (they are often timely, causally, and factually uncertain, but more suggestive and personal). The ideological aspect is also problematic, because in Slovakia, a lot of works were banned from publishing in the post-war period (not to speak of the war period), and had to wait till the change of socio-political situation after 1989.

This work also contains a chapter by Dr. Patrizia Prando, PhD. (Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations of Matej Bel University, Banská Bystrica), focused mainly on the racial and anti-Semitic aspect of Italian fascism through the magazine *La Difesa della Razza* (*The Defence of Race*). The magazine had to form an awareness among Italian citizens and raise them in the sense of returning to the big ancient (Roman) hegemony. *La Difesa della Razza* (as its name indicates) had the main propaganda line – the doctrine of biological racism and value of so-called pure blood. They depicted biological, anthropological or ethnic methods along with characteristics and the study of races (racism in thought of J. Evola and L. F. Clauss), trying to differentiate them and classify them in an asymmetric dominant/subordinate relation of individual races. They recalled nation-race and law-race relations. These opinions allowed them to legitimize their own political agenda and ideology by hiding behind the ideas of the others, mainly non-living authors, that could not approve or disprove their original (and not intentionally transformed) ideas.

In the monograph, we will draw on the ideas of reputable authors – historians, specialists in literary or political science. In the research part, we will offer analyses of the chosen memoirs; we will relate them to terminology and highlight the specific aspects of individual texts. We will use mostly synthetic, analytical and interpretative methods and, in several cases, a comparative approach. We will blend multiple scientific fields – literary, translation, historical and political.



The research of the Holocaust as an undemocratic, anti-Semitic and anti-minority phenomenon is carried out in several areas of science – the research is differentiated from the point of view of their methods or objectives. Where they touch and concern the same topic of the research, they overlap each other, inferences are sought and they are finally related to each other. From the point of view of literary science, there is usually only a little interest in the Holocaust, although, after the change in the socio-political situation in, as it is called, Eastern Bloc after 1989, there is a positive turn not only qualitatively but also quantitatively. It is a phenomenon that is, from the point of view of literary science, perceived as minority, i.e. outside the main literary-historical stream across the period researched (as to the history of literature, or literatures) or literary groupings (not to mention that many Jewish writers were not even a part of mainstream culture or, from the point of view of this contribution, of Slovak nationality). A purely literary-theoretical approach marginalizes this topic, particularly because of the absence of "literary facts", or "literary phenomena" (within the meaning of the comparative literature concept of literary and historical units), genre ambiguity (e.g. memoir on the border between art and nonfiction) or because of the emphasis on the historical principle that usually expels the Holocaust to the realm of historical research – *in primis*, partly to the realm of psychological or sociological research (particularly towards the research of anti-Semitism in the society, empirical manifestations with tragedy, level of indoctrination of the so called Auschwitz lie, types of personalities and their attitude to transports, manifestations of authoritarianism, etc.)

Undoubtedly, the Holocaust inherently interferes in several areas, not only from the geographical point of view, but also from the point of view of overlapping to several scientific fields or disciplines, which create its interdisciplinary character. As a Czech Slavist and expert on comparative literature Ivo Pospíšil reminds us, the theory

of areal studies itself is perceived as a process and process-structured phenomenon, as a multidimensional search of their various positions, as a phenomenon multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary. In the context of the phenomenon of the Holocaust, it is the connection of the several disciplines that deal with it, possible overlaps between them and the subject of research itself (though using different methods or conceptual instrumentarium), that allow the scientists to use the specific facts and analyses according to the specific disciplines as well as to generalize them (e.g. for didactic needs), transform them from scientific writing to the artistic genres (i.e. bring them closer to the wider audience) and so on. Many memoirs are the depiction and reflection of the suffering in the most critical and verge situations in a human's life – as the individual fates concretized into the wider psychologic and sociologic framework (for the issue of personality as an organic and active unit of physical, psychological, volitional and emotional features in the socio-cultural context see also one chapter of Ivan Šuša and Patrizia Prando in collective monograph “Kultúrne paralely a diverzity Slovenska a južnej Európy”, 2013). Pospíšil considers especially the axis of philological and social science. “The need of complementarity of both wide scientific disciplines is perceived as extremely actual: philologists who study primarily and traditionally language and literature in particular, feel the need for deeper engagement not only in terms of the study of culture in the broad sense, but also of social-science aspects of the areas where the relevant language is spoken: the earlier concept of the so called realities (*life and institutions*), i.e. of the conglomerate of basic information about the life in the given area, the social structures and the like is, due to its superficiality, not sufficient anymore. On the other hand, the social scientists feel certain blind spots in the knowledge of traditionally philological views on given area: it is not just a practical knowledge of the language, but the deeper penetration into the thoughts, literature and culture through the language, which may be the useful starting point for the study of social sciences” (Pospíšil, 2014, page 26).

It is thus important that this phenomenon also remains, in addition to the previously mentioned social sciences, a part of the literary science researches, especially from the point of view of genre studies or comparative literature. It is the comparative literature that can, considering its primary function, reveal not only the specifications of the national Holocaust in literature (authors, works and their components, relationship between the life and work, experiential complex, inclusion

into the wider literary-historical framework and the like), but also the analogies and differences in the interliterary context, thus the subject acquires "transnational" character. In the both cases we can (and it would be desirable), indeed, build on historical and literary interferences of two or more compared phenomena. It is the national (specific, concrete) character of the Holocaust in particular that creates, together with the transnational (general, common), the basic prerequisite for the interliterariness – for example in the context of translation.

Let us look at the topic of the Holocaust in the national and transnational context in relation to the Italian and Slovak area. We can find several parallels based on the characteristics of the Italian and Slovak Holocaust as an historical phenomenon (of course, it is a phenomenon that cannot be limited only to one or two states; it had, by its very nature and ideology, affected virtually the whole of Europe), but mainly particularities. The Italian Holocaust emphasized especially "the predominance of the Italic race and historic orientation of the country to the Roman Empire" (Prando, 2006), hence it was evidently of racist character, which was misused frequently by exponents of fascism for their aggressive (colonial) goals. As Patrizia Prando, the Italian political scientist working in Slovakia, further reminds us, "the basic elements for the racial doctrine of the Italian fascistic citizen were tradition, strong imperial history, concept of Italic nation"...] with the objective to re-create the antic splendor and to purge the Italic culture from the racial impurity, decadent philosophical thinking"...] and the Jewish degeneration" (Prando, 2011).

The phenomenon of the Slovak Holocaust was also marked (besides the common features that were characterized by the undemocratic policy in virtually all areas of state) by certain specific contours. Although the then regime that came to power in 1945 (not to mention the situation since 1948, when the power was taken over by the totalitarian regime) negatively valued the period of the Slovak State and its representatives as well as the involvement of the Church into political life by Catholic priest Jozef Tiso, credited with a specific share of the tragedy of the Jewish population. Nevertheless, the traumas of the Holocaust did not become the most appropriate themes for the communist regime, not only in the memoir literature, but in the literature as such. Even though the reasons were mostly of ideological and socio-political character, they logically affected the literary environment too. In this regard, Ivan Kamenec considers the following "Slovak specificities, from which we choose":

1. The wartime Slovak Republic was a satellite of the Third Reich, but it was not occupied by the German troops until the autumn 1944. All anti-Jewish measures, including the first wave of deportations in 1942, were executed by domestic political and administrative elite.
2. The first Slovak Republic ostentatiously manifested its belonging to the Christian ideology by all its official documents. The state was headed, from the very beginning of its existence, by a Catholic priest. (Kamenec, 2011)

Moreover, the Jewish and Slovak citizens often found themselves in a binary, even opposing relationship. It is often forgotten, that it was not always the antagonism against the Jewish, but against the Hungarian minority, to which the significant proportion of the "Slovak" Jews claimed to belong. As Hungarian historian Gyorgy Ránki mentions in this context (Paul Lendvai's citation), "nowhere else in Europe the Jews identified themselves so much with some nation as they did in Hungary". But this love relationship stood on the same fatal error: "it remained one-sided" (Lendvai, 2011). In the Slovak context, the relationship of the separated minority, i. e. we-they (we Jews – they Slovaks), appears most significantly in the memoirs of Blanka Berger. Just for comparison - it cannot be said that the Jewish minority in Italy became familiar with the hegemonic policy of the ideal of the Italic race presented by the fascist regime – even there the Jews were selected and "lost" from the official statistical tables. In the Italian context, however – compared to Slovakia – the internationality of the Jewish community was clearly much more reflected, as demonstrated by Marcello Pezzetti in the book of collected memories (in the form of so-called oral history, which we will discuss later) of several survivors *The Book of Italian Shoah (Il libro della Shoah italiana)* – for example Ottaviano Danelon tells here about his mother who came from Graz, Loredana Tisminienzky about her mother from Odesa, Adolfo Gruner about his father who came from Poland and so on.

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