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**JAN ZAHRADNÍČEK (1905–60):
THE TRAGEDY OF A POET AND PRISONER
OF THE COMMUNIST REGIME***

Abstract

The article deals with an outstanding Czech poet Jan Zahradníček (1905–60), who was arrested in 1951 and sentenced for 13 years of prison in a show trial. He was released during the general amnesty in 1960 and died in the same year. His tragic fate is depicted in several collections of poems written in prisons (Pankrác, Brno, Mírov, Leopoldov). The collections were saved and published and his poetic diary was found in Leopoldov prison 55 years after his death. Zahradníček's poems in combination with the memories of contemporary witnesses and published interpretations of his work (Zdeněk Rotrekl, Rio Preisner, Radovan Zejda, Martin Putna) allow an exceptional view of the inner life of a person who was unjustly imprisoned in the times of communist purges in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s.

Keywords: Czech Catholicism, twentieth century, imprisoned writers, religious faith

I
INTRODUCTION

Nearly three decades on from 1989, there is still much in the life of the Czech poets who publicly embraced Christianity and were almost forgotten that is hidden and has not been made public. Their work is often published, their anniversaries are commemorated, and their texts are found in anthologies. The same is certainly true of Jan Zahradníček. The poet is living a full-blown 'second' life in the

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renewed memory of this country's academic institutions and in the memory of poetry lovers – thanks to the publication of his collected works as well as separate poetry collections, thanks to numerous radio programmes, conferences, collections of proceedings and separate monographs.¹ He entered the general consciousness as a translator and occasional journalist as well as a poet for adults and children. Today even secondary-school students know of his studies in Prague; his stay with his friend Emanuel Frynta in Slapy; his friends František Halas, Jan Dokulil and Jan Čep; his time as editor of the famous Brno magazine *Akord* (1940–8); his arrest and nine-year imprisonment for alleged treason. Not even his tragic personal life, especially the death of his two young daughters during his incarceration (1956), remained hidden in the dust of the prison cells or in the family memory: through the later publication of poems depicting this human tragedy, it became a reminder of communist despotism and proof of the power of human dignity subjected to such violent attacks.² It could be said that the literary reference books have produced certain stereotypes that are associated with Jan Zahradníček. It is claimed that his first poems are characterized by sadness and a fascination with death, that the poet later overcame the vicious circle of melancholy

¹ In particular, I would like to mention the publication of *Dílo Jana Zahradníčka*, organized into four volumes, which was compiled by Mojmir Trávníček and Radovan Zejda based on Bedřich Fučík's samizdat edition, Praha 1991–5 (which is cited in this text); the complete edition of Zahradníček's poetry: Jan Zahradníček, *Knihy básní*, ed. by Jitka Bednářová and Mojmir Trávníček (Praha, 2001); Radovan Zejda's monograph *Byl básníkem! Život a dílo Jana Zahradníčka* (Tišnov, 2004), and a set of conference proceedings entitled *Víra a výraz*, ed. by Tomáš Kubíček and Jan Wiendl (Brno, 2005). However, it would be unfair to ignore the interest in Jan Zahradníček in the years 1948–89 both as part of the cultural activities of the Czech exile community (Karel Vrána, Antonín Kratochvíl, Josef Škvorecký, Rio Preisner, Josef Benáček and others) and during the Prague Spring (publication of the collection *Čtyři léta*), which was carried on and supplemented by many samizdat and then post-revolution attempts to make the poet's work accessible, based on samizdat initiatives.

² In 1956, when Jan Zahradníček was in prison in Mírov, the news reached him that his wife and children Jan, Zdislava and Klára were dying of mushroom poisoning in a hospital in Třebíč. Both girls died, while his wife and son were saved. Zahradníček was temporarily released with a promise of being released from prison, but he had to return to prison – he was escorted from Mírov to Leopoldov, where he spent the next four years until the amnesty of 12 May 1960 (hence the title of the collection, 'Four Years').

through the Christian faith, that his poetic compositions *La Saletta* (La Salette) and *Znamení moci* (Signs of Power) are prefiguration of totalitarian power, that his poems from prison are a highly personal account of life in communist prisons, and so on. This process was not even halted by occasional new discoveries published at the turn of the millennium or later – in the case of Jan Zahradníček, these included several poems written in prison in Mírov and found more or less by serendipity in a volume belonging to Zahradníček's former cellmate (for example, a poem entitled *Večer s rorejsy* [Evening with Swifts] and *Vzpomínka na Znojmo* [Memory of Znojmo]), but above all the extraordinary discovery of his poetic prison diary at Leopoldov, a diary which was recently published.³ On the other hand, this process of 'renewing and consolidating memory' can be viewed in a positive way. It represents a generally shared background against which the poet's books of verses can be re-opened again and again and newly interpreted.

II

POETRY AS ONE'S LOT IN LIFE

Zahradníček discovered poetry as his means of self-expression early on, while at grammar school in Třebíč. He went on to develop a substantial body of work in Prague, the Mecca of Czech poets, from the first verses printed in the revue *Sever a východ* to the publication of his own successful and positively evaluated collections. What poetry came to mean to him at that time was expressed by Zahradníček twelve years later in his essays *Oslice Balaámova*.⁴ Poetry became a way for the author to fill the void that he sensed around him and within him, a responsible way of handling the word, which can heal or kill. Soon, however, his verse became anchored and 'grounded', mainly thanks to the inspiration of the poet–priest Jakub Deml, a lifelong role model.

³ Jan Zahradníček's poetry diary was discovered in Leopoldov prison in 2016 and, thanks to Jan Wiendl, Jan Jakub Zahradníček and Tomáš Kubíček, was published the following year (Moravian Library, Brno, 2017). These are the poems that form the basis of the collection compiled by Bedřich Fučík based on texts which Zahradníček reconstructed (from memory!) after his return from prison, which was entitled *Čtyři léta*. In contrast to the reconstructed collection (45 poems), the Leopoldov notebook contains 38 poems, some of which were unknown until the year of discovery.

⁴ These essays were first published in Pour's edition in Prague in 1940 and comprise three articles and one speech.

But it was a fairly long journey to get to this point. First there was his intoxication with poetic expression and even more so with Prague's cultural life, full of discussions about poetry and its significance, culture and politics, his first attempts at translating (Thomas Mann and others), the formation of his opinions, and – above all – constant, avid reading.

Much can be learned about this period from his published correspondence with the poet František Halas, especially the first part from the turn of the 1930s.⁵ It richly illustrates the bohemian Prague life of the two friends and other individuals close to them, their reading, their wait for the first reviews of their works of poetry and the judgements of the literary critics. In the case of Jan Zahradníček, there is already evidence of a painful thorn in his side resulting from the tension between Prague life and a traditional Christian upbringing. When he arrives in the village where he was born – from where he writes to his friend Halas most often – this conflict takes on a specific, very open form: “You write that you envy me, but that is because a person is never at home and is always longing to be elsewhere. Oh, one is always having to hold oneself back and wrestle with oneself, with that wild desert that is inside a person, with the monsters of one's own senses, and the only way to escape oneself is by that narrow and arduous trail of bitter moments, so narrow that a thin rivulet could barely flow along it, and so far that is our life, those sensationalist bitter feelings – oh, František, perhaps one day it will be better”.⁶ On the one hand, the correspondence clearly reveals his longing to find the love of his life; on the other hand, he has a certain ‘reclusive quality’ which manifests itself in his isolated stays outside Prague. In any case, for Zahradníček, as ultimately for his friend František Halas, then a proponent of an avant-garde conception of communism, it is poetry that is his consolation and challenger and his lot in life.

Zahradníček's contradictory existence from the period of his stay in Prague was captured best by his friend the literary critic Bedřich Fučík, a patron of writers who were in constant financial difficulties. In his successful portrait entitled *Bujará chudoba* [Exuberant Poverty], he depicted Zahradníček as a simple and very sensitive countryman

⁵ Jan Wiendl and Jan Komárek (eds.), *Není dálky... Vzájemná korespondence Františka Halase a Jana Zahradníčka z let 1930–1949* (Praha and Litomyšl, 2003).

⁶ *Ibidem*, 19.

who found himself in the bustling environment of Prague, which drew him into the vortex of its literary cafes and the writers' life in general with its abundant discussions – and prodigious drinking sprees. Zahradníček, who was of a rather delicate physical constitution, tried to keep up with his more robust friends, and his sensitivity caused him to oscillate between a 'exuberant and sarcastic' lifestyle and a 'poverty-stricken', simple and timid way of life. Fučík even refers to a 'tempting devil' that would surface in Zahradníček from time to time and cause late-night outbursts of carousing in the good though high-spirited company of friends. Fučík also captured the extraordinary interaction between the inseparable duo of Zahradníček and Halas, a duo with completely different temperaments and personalities, and yet opposites that complemented each other. The image recalled by Fučík of František and Jan's domestic squabbles (when they were sharing a flat in Dejvice) has become an indelible part of literary anecdotes: "For some time they went in for a remarkable game, of which they said nothing in front of others, but which I came to hear of through indiscretion: Halas had a metal relief of Lenin above his bed, Zahradníček an image of the Virgin Mary. As long as both of the artists were at home, both of the portraits were where they were supposed to be. But as soon as one of them went out, he could expect the other to take down his idol and fling it somewhere. František got the worst of it, because he regularly went out to work and often stayed out afterwards until late at night".⁷ However, this story also provides evidence of the essentially tolerant, albeit teasing atmosphere among artists in Prague with different worldviews. What linked them – i.e. poetry and their relationship to it – was much stronger than what divided them – i.e. political ideas. Of course, even their different ideological positions had much in common: for example, a strong social emphasis and frequently radical style of speech.⁸ However, in the end Prague and its atmosphere did not win Zahradníček over. The rural way of life with its calmer rhythms was probably too deeply

⁷ Bedřich Fučík, *Čtrnáctero zastavení* (Praha, 1992), 242.

⁸ It is certainly worth considering that at the turn of the 1930s, young Catholics and young communists were linked by criticism of the so-called bourgeois way of life – 'bourgeois' was a symbol of decline, mediocrity and the inability to achieve higher goals. In relation to Catholics, it is significant that this emphasis was expressed very strongly by Léon Bloy, who was becoming a 'reference point' for Josef Florian and his Stará Říše cultural circle.

ingrained within him, and the second aspect of his personality, that of a calm character anchored in tradition – which he occasionally forgot about in the wine bars of Prague – gradually gained the upper hand (according to Fučík, probably from 1932, when Zahradníček began to change artistically too). This was probably due in part to the significant support given to him by the then guru of the younger Czech literary generation and implacable judge of all poetry František Xaver Šalda. His intercession led to Zahradníček being awarded first prize in a poetry competition run by the Melantrich publishing house and helped the more positive chord in the life and poetry of the young artist to triumph. Even though Zahradníček never entirely turned his back on Prague and his experiences there, city life with its fast-moving, discontinuous atmosphere clearly predetermined many images in his work – images of cities that are only civilized on the surface. Within, all the unbridled elements and oppressive contradictions of modern culture are manifested. This was expressed very convincingly by the historian Zdeněk Kalista, who spent several years in prison with Zahradníček – at Cejl in Brno and then in Leopoldov:

The Czech capital was too fast-moving for him. He hated the atmosphere in which various kinds of stimuli intersected and intermingled without any kind of continuity: thoughts, ideas, encounters, noises, conversations and rushing around. I don't know whether he read Max Picard's book *Hitler in uns selbst...* But the reproach of discontinuity which Picard hurled with full force into the face of contemporary life, seeing in this the main root of the successes of Hitler's demagogy and other contemporary forms of demagogy, may even have been present in Zahradníček's thoughts before Picard's treatise came out.⁹

Eventually, Zahradníček came to despise the profligate life he had led in Prague. When he wrote to Jan Čep in November 1933 about his visit to Prague and the National Café there, he had only self-critical words for his past misdemeanours in coffeehouses.¹⁰ What endured was his love of poetry. The city and its modern life, including its attractions, were seen as a menacing opposite to a calm and balanced life based on the traditional Christian order. Zahradníček's gravitation 'outside the centre' also meant an inclination towards friends who

⁹ Zdeněk Kalista, *Vzpomínání na Jana Zahradníčka* (Mnichovo, 1988), 15.

¹⁰ Jan Čep – Jan Zahradníček, *Korespondence I, 1931–1943*, ed. by Mojmír Trávníček (Praha, 1995), 39.

were by no means enemies of good wine and company and yet still created a calmer living environment through their religious anchoring. This second circle of acquaintances defined by Catholicism included Bedřich Fučík, Jan Čep, Miloš Dvořák, Jan Dokulil, Albert Vyskočil, Jakub Deml, Jan Franz, Josef Vašica and Otto F. Babler, i.e. people who ended up in prison, in exile, or at least with no possibility of publishing after 1948.

III

A QUIXOTIC STRUGGLE TO BELONG TO ONE'S OWN NATION

The paradox in the life of Jan Zahradníček and other writers close to him was the accusation of anti-national interests. After the liberation in 1945, he was criticized for his activities during the so-called Second Republic (1938–9) and even accused of collaborating with the Nazis – primarily in the communist press (*Tvorba*, *Kulturní politika*, *Rudé právo*). During this initial post-war period, some writers were even excluded from the Syndicate of Czech Writers or were ‘distanced’, which meant that membership was deferred – in 1945 Václav Renč was distanced for a period of two years and Jan Zahradníček was given a reprimand.¹¹ During the war and immediately after it, Zahradníček’s major opponents included the Marxist-oriented writers and journalists Jan Drda, Emil František Burian and Václav Běhounek. The arguments used against Zahradníček were mainly based on his journalism from the years 1938–9, especially his post-Munich pamphlets. Zahradníček’s worst ‘crimes’ included a pamphlet entitled ‘Pláč koruny svatováclavské’, printed on 15 October 1938 in the weekly publication *Obnova*, which he also edited. In this text, the author launched a harsh attack, without mincing words, on ‘twenty years of the blithe foolhardiness of the nation’”, Benešian politics (he described Beneš as a ‘bright-red Russian sun’), the Protestant and humanistic tradition of the First Republic, socialism and communism.¹² It was this pamphlet (along with Zahradníček’s other transgressions against the new socialist culture, such as his collection *La Saletta*), perhaps in truth the most

¹¹ Cf. Michal Bauer, ‘Jan Zahradníček v době kolektivní paměti’, in *Víra a výraz*, 53–5.

¹² The text was printed in the magazine *Obnova* on 15 Oct. 1938 as a reaction to the signing of the Munich Agreement.

concentrated expression of Catholic contempt for humanistic and enlightenment traditions, that later led to the poet's sentencing. It would obviously be wrong to see these works by Zahradníček as expressions of political activity. Zahradníček was never expressly politically engaged; his interests were chiefly literary. The few articles and pamphlets from the post-1938 period are more of a helpless reaction to the painfully felt reality of the disintegration of the state and the national threat, which proves his sympathy with the nation as a whole – obviously in addition to his 'war collections' *Korouhve*, *Svatý Václav* and *Stará země* and his specific assistance to the family of Ludvík Svoboda. Politics lies right on the margins of his basic interests. On the other hand, we can regard this fierce pamphlet and several other paragraphs from *Obnova* as an extreme expression of a Catholic view that had taken shape over decades of a threat to the nation and indeed the whole of civilization by forces which had powerful resources at their disposal (democrats, masons, Jews) and were fundamentally hostile to Christianity. Even here it is necessary to make a distinction, since the text by Zahradníček containing an anti-Jewish subtext is not equal in intensity to, for example, texts by Jakub Deml¹³ from this period or politicizing articles by Jaroslav Durych, who openly sympathized with the authoritative Spanish regime of General Franco.¹⁴ So, overall it could be said that in the years 1938–9 Zahradníček and some of his companions – non-politicians – were experiencing two intense feelings which went on to accompany them throughout the war and

¹³ As an aside, a quote from an interesting interview by Martin Valášek and Václav Petrbok with the literary historian and editor Jiří Brabec: JB: "From Deml's texts I can identify which sources his antisemitism grew out of. You shake your head, but you do find some kind of explanation. But what I don't understand is that in October 1940 this poet is writing about the arch enemy of the Czech nation, i.e. Jews, about ritual murder as a proven fact, about Jewish vermin. And he is doing so with reference to Otokar Březina. According to Březina, Adolf Hitler had apparently taken action to eliminate a deadly disease, i.e. the Jews. And then there was that horrific aphorism – If somebody tells you that Jews are people too, knock out four of his teeth straight away... Not to mention the attacks on Josef Florian and Alfréd Fuch, who was already destined for a martyr's death. Now that is something you can't explain, understand or excuse". Cf. *Rozhovor s Jiřím Brabcem*, *Souvislosti*, xxvi, 4 (1995), 6.

¹⁴ Jaroslav Durych's journalism, including his texts from the magazines *Řád* and *Obnova*, was published under the name Jaroslav Durych, *Polemiky a skandály*, ed. by Karel Komárek (Olomouc, 2002).

the three post-war years of so-called limited democracy (1945–8). The first feeling was a painful sense of gratification stemming from the long-standing criticism of the weaknesses of Czechoslovak democracy and certain democratic (party-political) practices.¹⁵ The second feeling, also continually growing, was the almost obsessive impression that the Czech nation was threatened at the very roots of its existence and it was necessary to work for the restoration of its Christian traditions. Even here, though, it is essential to differentiate: between 1941 and 1945, Jan Zahradníček once again devoted himself exclusively to literature, with his struggle with the censors, in which he was aided by his old friend Bedřich Fučík, being well known and described.

Jan Zahradníček's concentrated conversion to traditions and his sense of national threat can be found in the poem *Svatý Václav*, which was written in 1944 but could not be published until after the war, in autumn 1945 (through a private press). In it Jan Zahradníček invokes the Czech prince and once again attempts to align the whole nation with his legacy. However, we can observe a certain poetic transformation in these wartime verses. Jan Zahradníček did not become a politician, but he did not become a political journalist either. He remained a poet – but his verses gained a new dimension, an *appellative, prophetic* dimension. Together with Milan Exner, we can also speak of a dimension of authentic *messianism*, fed by a heightened sense of a threat to Christian roots and the nation as a whole and a feeling of personal anxiety.¹⁶

Jan Zahradníček was aptly termed a modern Jeremiah by the literary historian Jaroslav Med in his study on the poetic composition *La Saletta*. His assertion is based on this work from the war years, in which “in the universal order of God's creation, the nation [is] perceived as a being that has certain virtues and sins; the drama of the nation is judged by the same standards as the drama of the individual, his tragedy, vices and greatness, embodied primarily by the greatness of his saints ..., are constantly measured and weighed by the court of God's justice and mercy”.¹⁷ This is already present in works which grew out of the experience of war but is fully developed

¹⁵ This longevity can be documented by the polemics about democracy that the so-called Catholic authors of the association around the magazine *Řád* in the 1930s conducted with Karel Čapek, Ferdinand Peroutka, Jan Slavík and other authors.

¹⁶ Milan Exner, 'I kdybych sám jen zbyl jak Ezechiél', *Tvar*, 1 (1996).

¹⁷ Jaroslav Med, *Spisovatelé ve stínu* (Praha, 2004), 104.

in the post-war verses. In addition – according to Jaroslav Med – the prophetic self-stylization has several significant features. First of all, it is a certain baroquely antithetical apocalyptic form of the post-war world that the poet abhors: he himself then experiences loneliness and despair over the powerlessness of his words, through which he tries to influence the course of things, essentially in vain. Secondly, there is the ‘angry dimension’ of Zahradníček’s poetic gesture, in which “the poet enters the territory of the everyday and mercilessly reveals the materialistic face of the contemporary world”.¹⁸ The poet cries out, begs, entreats and even threatens, since destruction is already almost inevitable. This emphasis can also explain the thematic shift, since the *La Saletta* revelation from the mid-nineteenth century (elaborated by the Marian-oriented Zahradníček in the 1920s on the basis of an interest in the ‘teacher and inspiration’ of Czech Catholics from Stará Říše, Josef Florian) contains within it almost all the elements that chime with his attitude to life at the time: the revelation of hidden facts which reveal the poverty of the modern world, the rural nature of the recipients of the revelation, who are the only ones capable of receiving and spreading the message, and last but not least the biblical notion of a punitive God (or even Christ!), whose mother can no longer restrain his punishing arm.

Zahradníček’s visions become planetary, or even cosmic – however, there is still the possibility of applying these visions to a particular national destiny through poetic images. For this reason, *La Saletta* was certainly unambiguously incriminating material during the preparation of the trial of Jan Zahradníček, as were the verses from *Znamení moci*.

However, the history of Zahradníček’s work confirms that the poet revealed this emotional aspect without abandoning genuine artistic interpretation and creative authenticity. His work from the years 1946–50 can indeed be read not only as an image of an anti-civilization and anti-modernist mentality, but above all as a premonition of the horrors visited upon his native country and its inhabitants after the communist coup in 1948, especially in the first, terror-filled phase of the communist regime.

IV

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 107.

A TEST OF FAITH

Jan Zahradníček's arrest in 1951 was the beginning of a period of harsh tests. Although he may have initially felt a certain 'satisfaction' that his worst predictions concerning the nation had come true, this would quickly have been superseded by the existential worries relating to his detention and being separated from his beloved wife Marie and his family (at the time of his arrest his youngest daughter was only 14 days old!), and being unable to devote himself to his favourite activities – the freedom to write and edit. In a huge show trial, which took place between 2 and 4 July 1952 in the rooms of the then Provincial National Council in Brno, Zahradníček, along with his close friends and other famous figures, was sentenced to thirteen years' imprisonment. It is still uncertain which criteria were most important behind this punishment. What is clear is that there were several factors in play: the relationship between the accused during the pre-war period, their publishing and creative activities during the Second Republic (the weekly *Obnova*, later *Národní obnova*), the hatred and envy of some writers who supported the communist ideology at the time, specific denouncements for 'anti-state speeches',¹⁹ the need for the newly installed state to intimidate potential opponents and the necessity to show specific cases of 'class enemies'. The absurd and theatrical show trial of 'Václav Prokůpek *et al.*' was held almost after a year's imprisonment with severe interrogations, which proved to be exceptionally deleterious for the physical and mental health of the weaker Zahradníček, as was described by Ladislav Jehlička who was sentenced in the same trial:

I was a little upset by Fučík and Zahradníček; knowing them as I did, I expected them to be somewhat more provocative. However, they were evidently too worn out and exhausted, so they restricted themselves to one-syllable answers. During Zahradníček's hearing, the StB [Secret Police] investigators sitting on the podium across from the bench of the accused warned me that 'I was laughing again'. At that moment, they were reading out a brave and heroic letter from General Ludvík Svoboda stating that

¹⁹ For example, there was a meeting of Catholic friends in Jakubov in September 1948, where they talked about politics as well as literature. The meeting turned into a sociable gathering with jokes and even a poetry parody in the form of "The Association of Red Socialists". Unfortunately, an untrustworthy source found out about this party.

during the war Zahradníček had hidden and fed his wife and daughter. Zahradníček obviously wasn't aware of the fact, though I was, that Svoboda was working as an accountant for some agricultural cooperative, and so his intercession was as good as useless.²⁰

The verdict was issued in Brno on 4 July 1952, stating that: "The accused, Jan Zahradníček, comes from a kulak family, and after graduating from the faculty of arts he became a poet who used this sophisticated form to spread the Vatican's most reactionary views. The accused, Jan Zahradníček, has been a thorn in the side of socialism and progress, in his views he has been a faithful lackey of the Vatican, admiring feudalism and despising the working class".²¹

There is no doubting the fact that his arrest and subsequent long-term imprisonment was a hard lesson for the sensitive poet and he had to develop strategies for survival. Ladislav Jehlička described an interesting event that occurred sometime during the summer months in prison on Cejl street in Brno:

One Saturday afternoon the screws had us banged up in our cells and as they had heard that Zahradníček was a poet (!) they forced him to get onto a table and recite. The small, hunchbacked Zahradníček recited his verses from heart for about 2–3 hours. Difficult verse, but whenever he stopped, everyone shouted: 'More, more!' They were enchanted by this poetry, which they were probably hearing for the first time in their lives, breathlessly they listened, and I swear to God they forgot their surroundings and the joyless circumstances they were in.²²

Naturally, it is only possible to partially recreate Jan Zahradníček's time in prison and the manner in which he came to terms with this difficult personal situation. However, there are testimonies which should be taken into account due to their attempts at a more sophisticated characterization of the poet's fate. Of those memoirs mentioned, Josef Knap's is undoubtedly one of the best. Knap spent several months in the same Pankrác cell with Zahradníček and he recounted that even in the depressing, confined space of a cell there was no hint of

²⁰ Ladislav Jehlička, *Vzpomínky: Katolíci a republika, Politické procesy, samizdat* (Library Libri Prohibiti) (Prague), 105.

²¹ Quoted from Zdeněk Rotrekl's book, also a prisoner of communist justice, in Zdeněk Rotrekl, *Skryté tváře*, Spisy 5 (Brno, 2005), 136.

²² *Ibidem*, 101–2.

antagonism between him and Zahradníček or their fellow inmates (including the writer František Křelina in Pankrác). Knap also pithily and succinctly described the way in which Zahradníček attempted to maintain some remnants of privacy in their joint cell (in the evening he pulled a sheet over his head) and how during this period his only contact with his loved ones was the one photograph he had been allowed to keep. Knap describes the time when he had to surrender even this photograph due to the withdrawal of privileges. He handed it over to the wardens without hesitation, though with noticeable contempt. We can see in this example one of Zahradníček's typical characteristics – his 'noble severity' and his contemptuous attitude concerning the degradation of human dignity. There are similar testimonies from Zdeněk Kalista, who met Zahradníček in jail in several different prisons. His observant eye picked up on details which can help us build our portrait of Zahradníček: his relationship towards his homeland, his great admiration of simple blossom on a stop on his way from a Prague prison to one in Brno, his desire to write not only personal poetry, but also to write songs which could be sung by all of church society, and most importantly, his heightened sensitivity after the deaths of his daughters in 1956, which resulted in the cooling of his relationship with Kalista due to his internal 'imprisonment' brought on by the family tragedy. There are also some interesting recollections of the poet in the form of interviews with the monk Bohumil Vít Tajovský,²³ and several other witness-prisoners who remembered Zahradníček's intense pain at the loss of his children, but also as his ability to memorize his own verse, his shyness, as well as his concern not to spoil someone else's fun. Antonín Bradna's recollections are also very absorbing, where he recounts Zahradníček's profound piety in Leopoldov Prison when asking Bradna the priest for his blessing.²⁴ It is very difficult to comment on the changes in Zahradníček's faith and his internal experience of those matters touching on his personal relationship with God. There are a few indications from his prison poetry (the collection *Čtyři léta*, and his Leopoldov diary) and from his letters home which show that he did

²³ Bohumil Vít Tajovský, *Člověk musí hořeti. Rozhovor Aleše Palána a Jana Paulase s opatem želivského kláštera* (Praha, 2001).

²⁴ Antonín Bradna, 'Já jsem Bradna, kaplan z Podřipska', in Miloš Doležal, *Cesty božím (ne)časem* (Kostelní Vydří, 2003), 168–80.

not completely hide certain doubts about the meaning of suffering in life, which became particularly pertinent in 1956 and the following period. The autumn of that year undoubtedly marked a great turning point in Zahradníček's life. However, his religious experience, which consisted of a deep traditionalism, as well as a personal, inner dimension, protected him from dramatic trauma, or even from a loss of faith following the deaths of his young daughters. The last four years of Zahradníček's life, though, are marked by the wounds of his traumatic fate, which is viewed with humility and balanced by faith. The most important symbol which presented a way to overcome these terrible blows is perhaps the most characteristically paradoxical Christian image of divine suffering – the voluntary and helpless suffering of an omnipotent God on the cross. Related to this, it is appropriate to quote Mojmir Trávníček when several of Zahradníček's poems were discovered in 1999: "... he went beyond the dimension of his own suffering and the family tragedy of his deceased children and was spurred on to write incredible Biblical and cosmic poetry such as *Oběť Abrahamova* and *Obloha*". Trávníček's observation that the poet identified with the "weakest and most numerous victims of historical cruelty" is also noteworthy.²⁵

V

THE MÁCHA VARIATION: THE PRISONER MOTIF

Jan Zahradníček's experiences from the 1950s obviously have a wider literary-historical context, as was shown by Mojmir Trávníček in his study of the prisoner motif in Czech poetry.²⁶ The beginnings of Czech modern poetry can be traced back to Karel Hynek Mácha's poem *Máj* [May], with the character of the prisoner contemplating his fate at the end of his time in prison on the way to the scaffold. For a long time this exceptional poetic vision "almost codified the image of the prisoner in Czech poetry as a meditating man awaiting death; we can also consider it as a vision of the threat to Czech poets more than one hundred years on to our time".²⁷ Over the course of the

²⁵ Mojmir Trávníček, "Můj život byl a bude, aniž se jen zdál", *Literární noviny* (19 Jan. 2000).

²⁶ Mojmir Trávníček, *Eseje, portréty, vyznání* (Vsetín, 2007), 38–46.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 39.

twentieth century this model of Czech poetry was greatly expanded upon, naturally based on specific historic situations, which were less than favourable to creative work that was free and independent of the ideologies of the time. This motif extends from Stanislav Kostka Neumann with his almost pleasant ten-month stay in an Austrian prison where he read Russian authors, meditating over his sonnets in a cloud of cigarette smoke, to the writers Petr Bezruč, Viktor Dyk and Josef Čapek, to Josef Palivec and Zahradníček's generation. There were, of course, significant differences between the Nazi and communist camps:

In the German prisons and concentration camps Josef Čapek and other poets could record their works with the basic tools – paper and pencil – and their manuscripts were even preserved after their deaths. During the cruellest years of the communist persecution system, even this was generally not permitted. Poems were only retained in the minds of their creators or their fellow inmates, and the opportunity to record them might take years or even until release. The phenomenal memories of some of the prisoners (Antonín Mandl was famous for being able to faultlessly recite the long cycles of Václav Renč) meant that some poems could be shared at a time when their authors had many years of prison still in front of them.²⁸

Unfortunately, the 1950s were something of a low point in the history of Czech prisons, though not the end of Mácha's sorrowful lineage. Although during the period of Normalization (after the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968) the regime was no longer able to condemn representatives of its own intelligentsia and culture to life imprisonment or decades of punishment, basically this sad state – the arbitrary application of paragraphs from criminal law, imprisonment on fabricated charges or for artistic activities which were interpreted as being hostile towards socialism – changed very little.²⁹ It is also interesting to compare prison correspondence from the 1950s (e.g. Jan Zahradníček) with the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Ivan Martin Jirous). The two poets are not only linked by their imprisonment, but

²⁸ *Ibidem*, 45.

²⁹ On the differences and similarities of the prison system in the 1950s and Normalization cf. Karel Bartošek, *Český vězeň. Svědectví politických vězeňkyň a vězňů let padesátých, šedesátých a sedmdesátých* (Praha, 2001). Includes the testimony of Bedřich Fučík, Zahradníček's friend.

also by their works shaped by Christianity and their Czech Catholic cultural traditions (the legacy of Josef Florian).³⁰ Although very different in character, their surviving correspondence testified to a similar way of coping with an unjust conviction, and we might even say that Ivan M. Jirous was a ‘Zahradníček model’, particularly with regard to his children who had to grow up without their father:

I often think about Jan Zahradníček and his misfortune; the more I see through his life how the Lord is merciful towards us, the more I should thank him, night and day, if I could. Despite all of the uncertainty and worry, the fact that we have children gives life meaning and prospects for the future. By that I don’t mean that those who don’t have children have no meaning in life, but it is only with them that life has depth and clarity. Anyway, this is just daft chatter – children are a mercy and a miracle and there’s no need to go on about it.³¹

Although Jan Zahradníček would have chosen different expressions – his letters could not have been as ‘meandering’ as Jirous’s in any case due to the strictness of the prison regime in the 1950s – the two writers are linked by their relationship towards their children, based on the awareness that they are the greatest gift a person can receive in life. It would be possible to find more similarities, and perhaps not only through their shared faith, but also in their views of the world. The suffering and destitution of prison life also had positive effects in the form of new friendships and the discovery of new connections which emerged from existential issues and worries about the family home.

³⁰ Ivan Martin Jirous (b. 1944), poet, music critic and organiser of the Czech underground, was first sentenced to ten months in prison in 1973–4 for a pub brawl, where a secret-police major was present. In 1976 he was sentenced (again with several of his friends) to 18 months in prison – this time for his cultural activities (“disturbing the peace”). This second trial led directly to the establishment of Charter 77. Afterwards, he was sent to prison another two times. As for his imprisonment in Mírov, the lives of Jan Zahradníček and Ivan Martin Jirous are linked as Jirous was an inmate of Mírov prison and in his memoirs he described the changes which the Czech prison service underwent in the 1970s. Cf. Ivan Martin Jirous, *Magorův zápisník* (Praha, 1997), 562–86.

³¹ Ivan M. Jirous, *Magorovy dopisy* (Praha, 2005), 372.

VI

PRISON CORRESPONDENCE: POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS

The surviving prison correspondence with his wife Marie³² can be read from several perspectives. We can start by mentioning what is missing there, what cannot be there. In the first place it is ‘just’ a one-sided affair – unfortunately the letters from Maria Zahradníčková (1919–2012, née Bradáčová) have not been preserved. Therefore, we have to use our imagination to fill in the gaps of the second part. This is not entirely unfeasible as we know what was happening in the poet’s home during his absence. His wife and children had been ruthlessly forced out of their flat in Brno and sent to her home village, where she lived a very modest life as the ‘wife of a political prisoner’, burdened with everyday worries about her own livelihood and her husband’s health. It is also possible to imagine many requests for her husband’s release,³³ anxiously following various verified reports of possible amnesties, keeping track of the changes in the policies of the ‘party and government’. Thanks to the memoirs of Maria Zahradníčková it is possible to sense at least some of the flashes of hope as well as the moments of desperation from the period.³⁴ However, there is more to it than that. It is a general rule for prison correspondence (and even more so for ‘political prisoners’) that not only is privacy of correspondence forbidden, but that in fact the firm hand of the censor is at work. If there was a sentence which merely hinted at something other than what was allowed – something which was seen as too

³² Jan Zahradníček, *Mezi nás prostřena noc... Dopisy z vězení ženě Marii*, ed. Martina Sendlarová and Milan Řepa (Brno, 2008).

³³ Contemporary literary scholars have looked at the requests for the poet’s release or for a reduction in his sentence. Michal Bauer examined the meetings of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers from 1951–2. He noticed that while in 1951 and spring 1952 the Union decided to act on the poet’s behalf – albeit distancing itself from his opinions (a letter to the minister of national security, Karel Bacílek, was signed by Václav Pekárek and Vítězslav Nezval), in the summer of 1952 (after the show trial) the Union’s functionaries acted unambiguously against their colleague in this matter. The Union was dominated by ‘hawks’ such as Jan Drda, Karel Nový, Lumír Čivrný and Ladislav Štoll. Cf. Michal Bauer, ‘Žádost o vyšetřování Jana Zahradníčka na svobodě v roce 1952’, *Tvar*, 8 (2000), 6–7. Other requests throughout the 1950s are also examined in an article by the same author of Jan Zahradníček, ‘V době kolektivní paměti’ in the collection *Víra a výraz*, 153–66.

³⁴ Cf. Marie Zahradníčková, *Řezala jsem dříví a otevřela se vrátka*, in Miloš Doležal, *Cesty božím (ne)časem*, 8–19.

personal and might mention the reality of prison life, or conversely, mentioned a broader theme – would be ruthlessly scored out. However, Jan Zahradníček's correspondence from Brno, Znojmo, Prague, Mírov and Leopoldov is certainly all the more valuable for what it contains. There was a great deal of important information from Jitka Bednářová's analysis of his correspondence at a conference on Zahradníček in Brno in 2005. According to this researcher, there are several areas which can be taken into account from this epistolographical collection: most importantly, it is possible to establish a link between Zahradníček's prison poetry and his letters. We find a rare reference to his written poetry (Pozdrav from the collection *Čtyři léta*), though in most cases there are indirect hints, references and symbols – for example, in the form of reminiscences about the family countryside and childhood which appear in his letters as well as the poems he was working on. Jitka Bednářová also pertinently highlighted a repeating motif in his poetry and letters – that of his wife's hands: "A key motif of his romantic and even erotic universe was his lover's hands. As a motif shimmering through some of Zahradníček's other poetry (e.g. *Ruce Mariiny* in *Zíznivém létě* [Marie's Hands in The Arid Summer]), but it is also possible to read the poem *Ruce ženy* from *Čtyři léta* (Woman's Hands) as a direct ode. Their main attribute is a refreshing coolness and humidity 'like leaves' (12 July 1959). Her hands "awaken the ebb and flow of light in my mind" and in Zahradníček's eyes they are something basic and seemingly ordinary, yet at the same time literally lead you through everyday life".³⁵ The author also places interesting emphasis on the poet's thoughts on the meaning of imprisonment which occasionally appear in his correspondence.

The prison, the area in which the prisoner is worn down time after time by the lack of news about their loved ones, is characterized by Zahradníček as a permanent pendulum swinging between hope and hopelessness: within it he sees a cruel, albeit privileged path towards one's own truth. 'I have been sorting out my whole life', he wrote to his wife a few months after his arrest, on 5 September 1951.

Zahradníček thought (both in prison and after his return to normal life) that one of the preconditions for survival was a certain change in personality, similar to that which he underwent in his thirties. This idea is developed

³⁵ Jitka Bednářová, 'Něha a míjení: Vězeňská korespondence Jana Zahradníčka', in *Víra a výraz*, 70.

in the pages of his diary as well as in the letters he feverishly wrote to his friends upon his return, and in which he formulated his assessment of his prison anabasis and aspects of his credo in almost identical words.³⁶

If it is possible to talk of a kind of high point in Jan Zahradníček's correspondence which most clearly reveals his anxieties and worries and search for new hope, then it is unquestionably within several autumn letters from Mírov in 1956. In a letter from 21 November we find Zahradníček at his lowest ebb. He had suffered a double trauma (the death of his loved ones and his return to prison), and it seemed as though he would not drag himself out of it:

Most of the time I am depressed and despondent, and I'm preparing myself for whatever might come next. Sometimes I am furious at myself for being so easily taken in by their comforting promises and not worrying about anything else. But believe me, I had become so apathetic because of our misfortunes that it was as though I had been hit on the head by a club. The fact that I'm still sitting here doesn't surprise me, nor does it bother me, but that you two are sitting at home alone, and will perhaps have to sit like that for a long time still, for me this is a source of terrible psychological torment. My two dear, unfortunate ones, how you are there so terribly alone. I sometimes turn to our two angels to ask them to look after both you and me and to remind the appropriate authorities, as they'd say officially, how confusing things are down here and how we need help and protection. For they are still ours, they came from our love and we lost them to heaven, so they can intercede there on our behalf.

The following letter from December brought some calm. Zahradníček described his dream in which his mother appeared to him and comforted him. In a letter from 8 December of the same year Zahradníček expressed his delight at the news he had received the previous day – that they were to have another child.

And now suddenly so much joy! At first, I couldn't understand it, but when it sank in I couldn't even sleep for happiness. I would so like to tell someone, but I don't have anyone, and so I will be excited by myself and thank God for sending you, Jakoubek and me a replacement for our girls. You are right that these circumstances are strange and unusual – full of tears and sorrow, but don't worry and stay clear-headed. Now so much depends on you for everything to turn out well. Promise me that you'll no longer

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 74.

say that nothing matters to you. It would be a sin. You have the two of us and now this unknown little creature who is coming to cheer us up in our time of despair. It is something so incredibly beautiful that I never dared hope, and when I looked at the sun rising this morning beyond Mohelnice and the dawn of sparkling gold swam like fairy-tale fish in the cobalt sea of the sky, it seemed to me that the splendour of all of these beautifully changing colours was like a symphony being played, expressing my joy and my gratitude for this holy day. I rejoice for both you and Jakoubek, but also for myself, as it is as though God has compassionately extended my youth into these advanced years, life and death take us both by the hand and I would like to, and need to, write so much more. Songs, songs and immense joy which come along to transcend grief, as they sing now in Advent". (8 November 1956)

All three of these letters contain almost everything that can be said about Zahradníček's situation at the time: the unbelievable harshness of the regime sending the poet back behind bars, the pain of both parents at the loss of their children and the deep depression from the unbearable 'weight of being', the rediscovered joy at the prospect of a new start and, therefore, at least the partial ability to overcome the worst suffering. It could be said that if these three letters were all that remained of Zahradníček's correspondence, then they would not only be his most important 'messages', but also some of the most moving to be found in modern Czech literary history.

VII

ONE FORGOTTEN INTERPRETATION: RIO PREISNER

As was mentioned in the introduction to this study, Jan Zahradníček's life and work have been subject to a wide range of interpretations. Some of these studies have aimed to provide the basic information about the poet's life (Zdeněk Rotrekl, Antonín Kratochvíl), some have given a clear portrait of Zahradníček (Radovan Zejda), while others have simply reminded us of the poet's work during a period which was not inclined towards his Christian poetry (Bedřich Fučík, Jiří Trávníček, Josef Škvorecký, Mikuláš Lobkowicz). However, the most complete interpretation came from the exile writer Rio Preisner (1925–2007), who left Czechoslovakia after the August occupation in 1968 and worked in the USA at Pennsylvania State University as a lecturer in German Studies. However, his interest in Czech culture,

in particular poetry, did not end with exile, which can be seen in his own poetry works written in Czech,³⁷ and his interest in some of the giants of Czech literature: František Halas, Vladimír Holan and Jan Zahradníček. He looks at the third of these poets in his book *Když myslím na Evropu*, which is a collection that was published in his homeland containing articles and meditations from various Czech and exile journals from the 1960s to the 1990s.³⁸ This publication contains the article 'K návratu básníka', in which Preisner highlights three of the main links in Zahradníček's works. The first of these is the historical link. Preisner showed the persecution of poets as a phenomenon of the totalitarian age, in particular the 'destruction of the memory', which occurred in the USSR during the period when poets like Zahradníček could still freely publish in Czechoslovakia (Osip Mandelstam is mentioned here as a European-style poet). The second is the philosophical link. Preisner mentions a specific philosophy, 'the history of forgetting', which is seen in the negation of Christian theological history from Augustin to Bossuet, the basis of which is the 'permanent dialectical negation of historical reality'. According to Preisner, communist totalitarian regimes are not only nihilistic by nature, but they also represent the attempt to destroy real history and replace it with their utopian (basically gnostic) idea of how to build a new society and the new man. He characterizes the third, Zahradníček's later prison poetry, as an 'internal description' of what happened in Czechoslovakia in 1948.

Zahradníček's poem *Znamení moci* is a kind of 'record' for Preisner, terrifying not only through its content but also through the method of an almost timeless description of the destruction of not just Czech literature and culture, but of the "Judaean-Christian concept of being, nature, fundamental human values and people's humanity". Preisner then assesses Zahradníček's later work as a 'poetic theology of history', as dramatically condensing 'the theatre of the world and God', as the struggle between Christ and the anti-Christ, which is not merely a return to the Baroque dichotomy in the sense of the old Passion Plays, but rather a basic description of the spiritual battle which was taking place in Zahradníček's life and which could not be recorded

³⁷ Rio Preisner, *Básně* (Praha, 1997).

³⁸ Rio Preisner, 'K návratu básníka', in *Když myslím na Evropu II* (Praha, 2004), 635–48.

using grandiose spiritual syntheses (Aurelius Augustine and his work *The City of God*), but ‘merely’ through poetic visions.

Preisner, naturally, wrote more than one treatise on the subject: his admiration of Jan Zahradníček’s poetry and belief in its importance were also expressed in other works such as the trilogy *Kritika totalitarismu* (*Kritika totalitarismu*, 1973; *Česká existence*, 1984; *Až na konec Česka*, 1987).³⁹ It is also worth mentioning that Preisner in exile promoted the works of his favourite poet through the journals *Nové obzory* and *Rozmluvy*, alongside other heavyweight poets (František Halas, Vladimír Holan). It is also inherent within Preisner that he did not only criticize communist regimes for their harsh treatment of Christian artists – he was just as critical of the ‘Occident’, where “they do not yet destroy poets physically, but they are judged by how much they contribute towards an allegedly inherently flourishing technotronic civilization”.⁴⁰

VIII

“I RETURNED FROM BELOW WHERE THERE WERE NO STALKS OR LEAVES...”

It is possible to symbolically call Jan Zahradníček the ‘poet of the return’. Return is a word which describes the crucial times in his life and work. We can speak of a return in relation to extricating himself from the bohemian scene in Prague and becoming attached to the family environment in Moravia; it is possible to describe his poetry from his late thirties to his late forties as a return to Christian traditions (back to spiritual values, to the saints and to God), his returns from prison (1956, 1960) represent his greatest pain as well as hope. After his final return from Leopoldov he was able to express his deepest feelings: the universe is populated by the living, the dead and the unborn; the beauty of creation can also be experienced in the outermost reaches of civilization where human dignity is degraded; suffering is the sibling of faithfulness and the holy unrest within ourselves.

Jan Zahradníček is often considered to be a traditionalist – and this label might appear to be correct, but only to a certain extent.

³⁹ For a brief overview of the works of Rio Preisner cf.: Martin C. Putna, *Česká katolická literatura 1945–1989*, iii (Praha, 2017), 819–26.

⁴⁰ Preisner, ‘K návratu básníka’, 635.

If this were the whole truth, then ‘return’ would not be the key word to describe the nature of this poet. Return is also for someone who has wandered, who has experienced the painful dilemma of modernity, and who although is returning to a place they may have once known, can no longer foresee (like Odysseus returning home) the state in which they will find their home. A return does not have to be, and is usually not, a direct, simple journey. It is a complicated process of searching, accompanied by the tribulations of a pilgrimage. The poet’s human and, at the same time, Christian existence is marked by a deep contradiction. His Christian faith is primarily determined by the need for a creative gesture which is the innermost instrument for building his own identity.⁴¹ When the opportunity for creative energy does not exist or is restricted (prison), this can lead to profound trauma if it is accompanied by other misfortunes in life. Jan Zahradníček – as is clearly shown in his correspondence – lived between the devil and the deep blue sea for a substantial part of his life. Therefore, in accordance with Christian symbolism, a return, no matter from what perspective we look at it, must contain some elements of tragedy. And finally, the creative Christian figure is not expressed by the Odysseus metaphor, but above all by the story of Christ.

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⁴¹ This is based on the “phenomenological” concept of Christianity as characterized by Mircea Eliade and the interpretation of this approach by the theologian Karel Skalický: “According to Eliade, there existed something more in Christianity (than in Judaism – author’s note). If we define Abraham’s belief in the sense that God is *everything possible*, the Christian faith means that everything is possible for humanity”, and Eliade quotes a passage from the *Gospel of St Mark*: “For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith” (11,23). In this context, faith means a complete liberation from any kind of natural law, and thus it is the highest freedom that humanity can imagine: “the freedom to act on the ontological state of the world. Consequently, it is *creative* freedom above all else...”, Karel Skalický, *Po stopách neznámého Boha* (Praha, 1994), 155–6.

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