

# **Czech and Slovak Holocaust Films Before and After the Velvet Revolution: A Comparative Study**

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## **ABSTRAKT**

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá vývojem zobrazování holocaustu v českých a slovenských filmech. Generace režisérů ve svých filmech o holocaustu totiž zobrazovaly nejen zřůdnosti páchané za druhé světové války, ale využívaly tento žánr i jako účinný nástroj ke zkoumání lidského chování ve zlomových okamžicích. V období těsně po válce byly rány ještě příliš čerstvé. Filmaři si nebrali servítky a kritizovali lidi za jejich morální laxnost a to nejen v době holocaustu, ale i komunismu. Po revoluci se poselství těchto filmů změnilo. Filmaři měli možnost nahlédnout na události druhé světové války s větším časovým odstupem a naopak došli k závěru, že vše nebylo jen černé a bílé a že existovali i lidé, kteří dali v risk i svůj život, aby ostatním pomohli.

Klíčová slova:

Téma holocaustu, kritika, mravnost, skryté poselství

## **ABSTRACT**

This bachelor thesis deals with the development of representations of Holocaust in the Czech and Slovak films. Generations of Czech and Slovak filmmakers have used the Holocaust genre not only to remind viewers of the gruesomeness of World War II events but also as a means to explore people's behaviour in crucial situations. However the depictions were not always the same. The communist-era filmmakers chose to focus on the negative side; they criticized people for their moral laxity. Democratic-era filmmakers took a more detached viewpoint and pragmatically suggest that events were not so clear cut, that there were people who risked life and limb to do the right thing even in the worst of times.

Keywords:

Holocaust genre, criticism, morality, hidden message

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## INTRODUCTION

"You wouldn't believe what abnormal times do to normal people."<sup>1</sup>

The Holocaust, or the Shoa in Hebrew, was a dreadful human event that portrays two completely different sides of man. It testifies to the cruelty of which is man capable but also to a deep invincible humanity. Without doubt, it is of utmost importance to maintain the events of the Holocaust in our collective memory and learn from them. One method of doing so is the Holocaust film.

Film is a very powerful device. Many people easily believe that what is on the screen is reality. The Nazis along with the Communists were both well aware of this fact and exploited film as an effective means to manipulate the masses and to use it for propaganda purposes. Czech and Slovak filmmakers were aware of this too and also decided to utilize film, but for them it was a viable tool of criticism. They could not longer stand by and watch what was happening to Czech and Slovak moral standards.

The Holocaust genre, which has played an important role in both Czech and Slovak cinema, not only stresses the monstrosity of the concentration camps but during the communist era was utilized to criticize participants, collaborators and even enablers. As this thesis will demonstrate, Czech and Slovak filmmakers as “moralists” endeavoured to change people’s thinking, to make them feel guilty and ashamed. They tried to tell them that they were not innocent. Even if they did not collaborate and did not do anything wrong, they were still culpable, because doing nothing to stop a crime is complicity in that crime. Czech director Zbyněk Brynych in his film *Transport from Paradise* (1965) sent the audience a very clear message: “Never again like sheep”. This message was soon adopted by other Czech and Slovak communist-era filmmakers. However, after the fall of communism, younger filmmakers, born after World War II, took a more detached viewpoint and portrayed a different moral of the story. With Hřebejk’s film *Divided We Fall* (2000), the message changed to “Let’s be human beings.”, Czech and Slovak filmmakers then began to encourage viewers to be conciliatory and to forgive. They also focused on the goodness of people.

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Hřebejk and Petr Jarchovský, *Musíme si pomáhat* (2000), dvd, Directed by Jan Hřebejk, Česká republika, Bonton, 2000.

Therefore it is clear that generations of Czech and Slovak filmmakers have used the Holocaust genre not only to remind viewers of the gruesomeness of World War II events but also as a means to explore people's behaviour in crucial situations. Yet, the depictions were not always the same, with communist-era filmmakers choosing to focus on the negative and democratic-era filmmakers pragmatically suggesting that events were not so clear cut that there were people who risked life and limb to do the right thing even in the worst of times.

## 1 HISTORY OF CZECH AND SLOVAK HOLOCAUST FILMS

The Czech and Slovak film industries were from the beginning influenced by historical events. The initial boom of Czechoslovak cinema and its promising future was strangled by the Nazi occupation, which meant the end of independent filmmaking. The Germans took over the Barrandov film studio in Prague and used the studio to produce propaganda. Subtitles and posters had to be in Czech-German language and films with Jewish actors were not allowed to be screened. The Communist era was not much better and did not indicate, especially at the beginning, any liberation as rigid centralization and censorship took place. The first attempt to free the regime and speed up the process of liberalization came in 1968 with the Prague Spring. Artists had their freedom back, but only for a while. This favorable movement did not meet understanding on Soviet side and was suppressed by Warsaw Pact forces, the following period called “Normalization” was probably the most painful in the Czech and Slovak history.<sup>2</sup> The Velvet Revolution of 1989, on one hand, meant liberalization and led to decentralization but on the other hand along with massive funding cuts brought existential problems for many filmmakers. All these facts combined with historical events had a strong impact not only on the development of filmmaking but also on Czech and Slovak societies. Only one thing was worse than all these years under occupation: the demoralization of society during it. People learned that an “only take care of yourself” attitude is the best way to survive. This statement applies both to those who collaborated with the regime and tried to enrich themselves and also to those who locked themselves at home and were indifferent to what was happening outside. Such behaviour provoked a wave of criticism.

As film historian Amos Vogel wrote, “Where politics is inhibited, art tends to assume its function.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore filmmakers started to look for an effective means to give people a lecture. They had to be especially imaginative because their situation was complicated by censorship, and thus it was necessary to find a way to outsmart these “vigilant censors”.<sup>4</sup> Historical themes, especially the Holocaust genre became the most suitable means. As Isaac claims “The fate of the Jews became a coded symbol for aspects of the contemporary

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<sup>2</sup> Tomáš Vlček, “Pražské jaro 1968”, <http://www.totalita.cz/vysvetlivky/jaro68.php> (accessed April 16 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Amos Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art* (New York: Random House, 1974), 139.

<sup>4</sup> Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of the Other Europe: The Industry and Artistry of East Central European Film* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 35.

political malaise that could not be given in direct and detailed expression.”<sup>5</sup> However, as will be demonstrated, not all generations of filmmakers shared this critical attitude. After World War II, four main periods in Czech and Slovak cinema can be distinguished, each with their own unique characteristics as well as their own interpretations of the Holocaust.<sup>6</sup>

### 1.1 Totalitarianism and isolation (1949-1956)

The first period is dated from 1949; the time when the Communist Party consolidated the power and began to control all aspects of life.<sup>7</sup> This totalitarian atmosphere was not favourable for Czech and Slovak culture and especially in the film industry was reflected by a shrinkage of film production. Nonetheless it was during this period that the first Czechoslovak Holocaust film, *Daleká cesta* (1949), was produced.

First of all it is necessary to mention two important events which influenced Czechoslovak cinema immediately after the liberation from occupation. The first was the decree of the President Edvard Beneš from August 1945 about nationalizing the Czechoslovak film industry. This event was rather positive for filmmakers, because it meant that they did not have to care about money anymore and could fully concentrate on making films. The second significant moment was the foundation of F.A.M.U. (Film Academy of Fine Arts) in 1946. Students of this school were afforded a great opportunity to see old Czech films as well as contemporary Western films, which were mostly not available to an ordinary audience. Therefore, they were well informed about new trends in Western culture. Later most students take advantage of it.<sup>8</sup>

A crucial turning point which influenced for a few decades not only Czechoslovak film and literature, but also the whole society, was 1948, when the Communist Party gained power over the government. Klement Gottwald, who became the new president, loyally adhered to the Stalin-Zhadov formula that films should be used for educating people, for spreading the idea of Socialism and pointing out its successes in citizens' life. These types of films belong to an art form known as Socialist Realism.<sup>9</sup> The Communist Party, which was acquainted with the power of film, took control of the film industry and exploited it as

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<sup>5</sup> Dan Isaac, "Film and the Holocaust," *Centerpoint* 4, 1 (1980): 137.

<sup>6</sup> Jordanova, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ludvík Havel, *Český film 1945-1998* (Brno: Akademické nakladatelství, 1998), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Hames, *The Czechoslovak New Wave* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 32.

an efficient device for manipulating the masses.<sup>10</sup> However, the requirement of making predominantly (soon changed to “only”) realistic, folksy, revolutionary and optimistic party films, did not meet its expectations and was not efficient in practise. It is true that some filmmakers wanted to fulfil these expectations, but the majority of their production was distinguished by schematization and a stereotypical approach. People stopped to be people on the screen and became just pegs for ideas, types blessed only with black or white character. On the other hand there were fortunately many filmmakers who wanted to avoid these contemporary themes and resorted to biographies or else to film versions of literary works.<sup>11</sup>

### ***1.1.1 Distant Journey (1949)***

The requirements mentioned above were not set by the Central Committee until April 1950, so it is still possible to find some very good pieces in 1948-1949. One of them was the first Czechoslovak Holocaust film, Alfréd Radock's *Distant Journey*<sup>12</sup>, which is “something of a legend in the Czech Republic”.<sup>13</sup> The drama tells the story of a Jewish family, the Kaufmans, and their involuntary stay in the Theresienstadt concentration camp during the German occupation.<sup>14</sup> The plot was set first in Prague - in “the ghetto without walls”- and after that in the Theresienstadt. The choice of this placement was personal for Radock, because his father died there.<sup>15</sup> The film deals with the question of collaboration when the director of the hospital recommends to the main protagonist that he quit his job.<sup>16</sup>

Radock once revealed his inspiration for making the film:

The name “Hitler” evokes a picture in my mind: A little girl, all sugar and spice, is handing Hitler a bunch of flowers. Hitler bends over her and smiles a benevolent smile. To me this image is linked with the awareness of what National Socialism meant, but just because the image conceals something. I can't imagine how it would

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<sup>10</sup> Jan Šiman, “Ideologické filmy padesátých let a normalizační kinematografie”, <http://www.volny.cz/czfilm/Kapitoly/Sorela.htm> (accessed February 22, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Havel, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Havel, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Jiří Ciesar, “Living with the Long Journey: Alfréd Radock's *Daleká cesta*”, [http://www.ce-review.org/01/20/kinoeye20\\_cieslar.html](http://www.ce-review.org/01/20/kinoeye20_cieslar.html) (accessed February 23, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Erik Kolár, Mojmir Drvota and Alfréd Radok, *The Distant Journey* (1949), dvd, Directed by Alfréd Radok, Czechoslovakia, Facets, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Ciesar.

<sup>16</sup> Kolár, Drvota, and Radock.

be possible to describe the war, Hitler, National Socialism, and concentration camps without this image.<sup>17</sup>

Further, Radock once told a reporter that he “wanted to stress the paradox that so many people – and this was true later of many in Communist Czechoslovakia – simply don’t see things, don’t want to see them, or see only the picture of Hitler with the little girl. And that is the horror of it.”<sup>18</sup>

Radock captured the period of occupation with a new form of art and looked at the Theresienstadt in a highly stylized and metaphoric way, influenced by expressionist imagination. He connected documentary shots with a concrete story of a concrete family and reached an extraordinary impression. As a result, the totalitarian regime with its anti-Semitic attitude and strict requirements did not accept this film, not only for its content but also for its formality. The rhythmic gradation of every scene and the “too pessimistic” ending irritated the official censors.<sup>19</sup> Thus the film was after a “brief run” completely excluded from distribution and locked away.<sup>20</sup> Škvorecký wrote that *Distant Journey* was “a revelation to all of us,” but “it was tragically premature.”<sup>21</sup> The early 50s was a time of renewed anti-Semitism in the country, and it was ten years before another Holocaust film was attempted.<sup>22</sup>

After Stalin’s death in March 1953 and then the death of Klement Gottwald, hopes rose among artists for a loosening of conditions. The first indications of change were visible in the second half of 1953 when political authorities began to talk at least about certain schematization and frozen art, and there also appeared slight attempts to discuss the situation. The period known as the “Thaw” began after the Twentieth Soviet Communist Party Congress, where Nikita Khrushchev gave a speech about illegalities perpetrated by Stalin and sentenced the form of Stalinism as a departure from proper communism. The year 1956 is therefore significant for two reasons. The first is “the official end of

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<sup>17</sup> Ilan Avisar, *Screening the Holocaust: Cinema’s Images of the Unimaginable* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 65.

<sup>18</sup> Antonín J. Liehm, *Closely Watched Films: The Czechoslovak Experience* (White Plains, NY: International Arts and Sciences Press, Inc., 1974), 45.

<sup>19</sup> Briana Čechová, “Alfréd Radock: Daleká cesta, 1949”, <http://www.nfa.cz/res/data/007/001009.pdf> (accessed February 24, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Hameš, 40-41.

<sup>21</sup> Josef Škvorecký, *All the Bright Young Men and Women: A Personal History of the Czech Cinema* (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1971), 41.

<sup>22</sup> Liehm, *Closely...*, 405.

Stalinism” and beginning of “the Thaw”, and the second is a failed anti-Communist uprising in Hungary, which sped up the process of liberalisation.<sup>23</sup>

## 1.2 Period after 1956 (The “Thaw”)

Following period “between two revolutions” (the Hungarian and the Velvet one) or so called “golden age” of Czech and Slovak cinematography is distinguished by gradual transition and liberalization “in respect to theme and style”.<sup>24</sup> A lot of directors consider this era as the most ideal for filmmaking because as filmmaker Jiří Menzel characterizes it, “on one side there was an ideological ease and plenty of topics for films, but on the other side there wasn’t total freedom, so there was a stimulus for creativity to break the ideological barrier.”<sup>25</sup> It is hardly surprising, that it was in this time, when Czech and Slovak films started to garner one international acclaim after another. The key theme of this era became historical events. It was because, as David W. Pauls observed, “history becomes more than just an evocation of the past. It is manner of discourse, in which the portrayal of past events is a medium through which the filmmaker speaks to the audience of today about realities that concern them”<sup>26</sup>

After assuming power, Khrushchev allowed a slight amount of freedom in the arts introducing a program of “radical increase in film production”. He was inspired by Lenin’s viewpoint that “of all the arts the cinema is the most important for us.”<sup>27</sup> This decision led to decentralization of film industry, which means that filmmaking was in hands of directors but was still funding by government.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, first graduates left the doors of FAMU and full of enthusiasm and new ideas were ready to manifest their skills. This “sensational outburst of young talent and the detectable influence of French New Wave led critics to name it ‘the Czech New Wave’”.<sup>29</sup> Quality education combined with favourable conditions gave birth to Czech and Slovak cinema transformation to source of provocative, creative and memorable filmmaking, however, what is important that according to Jiří Weiss Czechoslovak cinema “evolved organically” this means that there were no

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<sup>23</sup> Iordanova, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Iordanova, 10.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Buchar, *Sametová kocovina*, (Brno: Host, 2001), 38.

<sup>26</sup> Avisar, 86.

<sup>27</sup> Toeplitz, “Cinema in Eastern Europe,” *Cinema Journal*, 8, 1 (Autumn 1968): 4.

<sup>28</sup> Toeplitz, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Avisar, 54.

generation conflicts because “all artist those with experience and those without it, realized their dependence on each other”.<sup>30</sup> In other words, even though young filmmakers master the Czech and Slovak scene, there were still very good filmmakers among older generation, who adapted to new conditions and were able to make outstanding pieces.<sup>31</sup>

### 1.2.1 *Romeo Juliet and Darkness (1956)*

Many of these historical films closely depend on literature. Directors used these sources as a model and co-operated with the writers to adapt the work to their own needs. One such example was the second Holocaust film Jiří Weiss’s *Romeo, Juliet and Darkness* (1959), which is based on novel by the same name written by Jan Otcenášek.<sup>32</sup> The film is an autobiographical story depicting instinctive fear of one’s own livelihood and protection of it for any price as well as participation of ordinary people in persecutions.

The scene is set in the period of occupation and tells the story about a Jewish girl, Hana, who escaped from a transport. Fortunately, she finds a helping hand from a young student, Pavel, who sheltered her in the apartment attic even though such activity was punishable by the death penalty. Despite the dangerous situation, they fall in love with each other. The problem occurs when Pavel’s mom and neighbours discover that a Jewish refugee is hiding above them and expel Hana from the building towards Nazi sub-machine guns.<sup>33</sup>

With this film Jiří Weiss “sets a precedent by using the Holocaust genre film as an effective means to criticise both Communism and the moral laxity of Czechs and Slovaks.”<sup>34</sup> The best explanation, why the choice of this genre was the most suitable one, is given by Liehm in following lines:

The occupation film is the first genre . . . in which the establishment philosophy can be attacked. The producer, the state, remains silent because the main criterion – an ideology that is increasingly vague – remains untouched. . . . The fact that a basic shift has taken place that the genre has become the bearer of new reflections and doubts, the

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<sup>30</sup> Liehm, 70.

<sup>31</sup> Gregory Jason Bell, "Exposing Flaws': Holocaust Films Made in Czechoslovakia Prior to 1970" (paper presented at the conference “European Cinema: Revisiting Histories and Identities,” University of Cincinnati, May 2005)., 8.

<sup>32</sup> Jordanova, 48.

<sup>33</sup> Jan Otcenášek and Jiří Weiss, *Romeo, Juliet and Darkness* (1959), dvd, directed by Jiří Weiss, Czechoslovakia, Second Run Productions, 2007.

<sup>34</sup> Bell, 9.



relativization of the myth is something the producer doesn't even sense when reads the script.<sup>35</sup>

Censors and political authorities believed that in Holocaust films people would see “the evil consequences of western capitalism” as well as “Russia as a force of liberation.”<sup>36</sup> This naivety was a flaw in censorship, and Czech and Slovak filmmakers were well aware of it. However, to utilize this flaw, they would have to wait for a while, as “the Thaw” proved short lived.

In 1959 in Banská Bystrica the Communist Party publicly denounced some films which were inconsistent with the regime. Attacks were generally on “themes taken almost exclusively from private life.”<sup>37</sup> The following period, 1959-1962 was, therefore, marked by increased censorship and the professional suspension of some directors, for example Jan Kadar and Elmer Klos.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, this era foreshadowed the commencement of a much stronger liberal movement, the Czechoslovak “First New Wave”.

“There was no manifesto or theoretical writings that the group, which was never a formal one, drew on, and it's hard to pin the Wave down to any one style”<sup>39</sup> The only thing the group had in common was disillusionment with the current regime. Films of this era are typified by their innovative point of view, allegory, long dialogues, absurd humour and non-professional actors.

Once again, the Holocaust and WW2 became appropriate genres. A total of eleven full-length “New Wave” films dealt with the wartime period. One other reason for this, Dan Isaac stated, was that in contrast to previous years under Stalinism, people in the late 50s “viewed anti-Semitism as one of the evils of fascism, and therefore- officially, at least- were interested in portraying what had happened to the Jews at the hands of the Nazis. The fate of the Jews in the death camps, then, was an aspect of recent political history that socialist filmmakers were permitted to portray and explore.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Liehm, *Closely...*, 74.

<sup>36</sup> Avisar, 53.

<sup>37</sup> Antonín J. Liehm and Mira Liehm, *The Most Important Art: Eastern European Film After 1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 228.

<sup>38</sup> Škvorecký, 226.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew James Horton, “Czech and Slovak Cinema,”

<http://www.greencine.com/static/primers/czech-slovak-1.jsp> (accessed March 18, 2012).

<sup>40</sup> Isaac, 137.

Another signal for this new direction was also given by literature, namely the book *Cowards* written by Josef Škvorecký. In this book he depicts how several young people obsessed with Jazz spent the last days of the war. This picture was so different from the official historiography and made so big an impression that despite its immediate banning, the book became a symbol of artistic revival. According to writer Jan Procházka, artists realized that they have to adopt a different attitude and portray the new picture of the reality.<sup>41</sup>

The commencement of the new movement meant that characters in the films were no longer portrayed as heroes and the stories depict rather “ordinary people” in critical situations. The behaviour of the protagonist is defined to a “great extent by an overall satellite attitude, to them history often comes across as a burden, as a something adverse that one needs to outsmart.”<sup>42</sup>

Czech and Slovak cinema “applied its historical consciousness.” Directors began to “return to recent history . . . and tried to judge the forces, moral values, as well as the weaknesses and mental pitfalls and ideological forces to the present age.” They also “turned back to the distant national history to trace what lessons individual figures and whole epochs could teach the present age.”<sup>43</sup> The aim of filmmakers was to make Czech and Slovak people aware that they were not innocent but were participants in that system of oppression. Ivan Passer stated, “We were living under pressure. The political situation was forcing us to take a stand.”<sup>44</sup>

### ***1.2.2 Transport from Paradise (1962)***

Zbyněk Brynych was the first filmmaker who did not keep silent any longer and started to “call things their right names”.<sup>45</sup> With his film *Transport from Paradise* (1962) he picks up the threads of Alfred Radock’s work in both theme and style. But in contrast to Radock’s film, he exploited the genre to give people a lecture. Impressive shots from the Theresienstadt concentration camp were created according to Arnošt Lustig’s book *Night*

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<sup>41</sup> Jan Žalman, *Umlčený film: Kapitoly z bojů o lidskou tvář československého filmu*, (Praha: Národní filmový archiv, 1993), 173.

<sup>42</sup> Jordanova, 58-59.

<sup>43</sup> Jaroslav Bocek, *Modern Czechoslovak Film, 1945-1965* (Brno: Artia, 1965), pages unnumbered.

<sup>44</sup> Buchar, 128.

<sup>45</sup> Liehm, *The most...*, 279.

*and Hope*.<sup>46</sup> As Avisar declared, “Bryných and Lustig focus on one of the most notorious episodes associated with the Nazi special plans for the Theresienstadt, the production of a propaganda movie on the ghetto entitled *Hitler Presents a Town to the Jews*”.<sup>47</sup> The film has no main plot. It is rather a mosaic of human destinies capturing the gloomy ambience of the ghetto. Individual stories are framed with the fear of the last transport to Auschwitz. The appellation “Paradise” is obvious: only the ones not chosen for transport and who get to stay in Theresienstadt will survive. On the contrary to the previous Holocaust films there are also no clear cut “black and white characters”, with the servile chairman of the Jewish Council of Elders, Marmulsuab, who obliges Nazis more than he actually has to, as well as Nazi soldiers who help Jews.<sup>48</sup> What was the most astounding fact in the film at all was the passivity of victims, the absolute absence of will to resist, the resignation on any fight for human dignity.<sup>49</sup> In this regard Bryných sends at the end of the film a clear message “Never again like sheep”, which the audience, as noted by Bell, could interpret in several ways:

first, it suggests to the viewers that they should follow their own consciences and not blindly follow others; second, it suggests that Czechs and Slovaks should not allow similar things that happened under the Nazi regime to happen under the Communist government; and third, it is a message to the Stalinists that Czechs and Slovaks, including filmmakers, will not willingly return to the oppressive conditions of the early 50s.<sup>50</sup>

Prior to the next Holocaust film, there was another event, which is considered as a turning point in the cultural life of Czechs and Slovaks. It was a symposium held in Libice in 1963 where political authorities came to the decision about “the rehabilitation” of the works of Franz Kafka, a German Jewish author living in Prague, whose “works had been banned under Stalinism.”<sup>51</sup> Journalist and writer Wagnerová characterized his work as follows: “Kafka described the situation of people in reality, which we were familiar with, but no one

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<sup>46</sup> Zbyněk Bryných and Arnošt Lustig, *Transport From Paradise* (1962), vhs, Directed by Zbyněk Bryných, Czechoslovakia, Facets, 1998.

<sup>47</sup> Avisar, 65.

<sup>48</sup> Avisar, 69.

<sup>49</sup> Žalman, 196.

<sup>50</sup> Bell, 19.

<sup>51</sup> Hames, 158.

wrote about it like him.”<sup>52</sup> In hindsight, Kafka’s rehabilitation seems to be a symbol of rebirth of intellectual and artistic freedom under the Communist regime.<sup>53</sup>

### 1.2.3 *The Fifth Horseman is Fear (1964)*

In 1964 Brynych adds to his first Holocaust film another outstanding piece called *The Fifth Horseman is Fear*. It tells the story about Jewish doctor Armin Braun, who shelters a resistance fighter in his apartment. When it comes to the danger of revelation and persecution of all his neighbours, he commits suicide to protect them. However, heroism of Czechs and Slovaks during occupation is demythologized as Doctor Veselý being asked by his son “Who is a hero?” replied “The man, who dies unnecessarily in opposite to them, who unnecessarily live.”<sup>54</sup>

As Liehm stated, Brynych “used the stories of the inhabitants of an apartment house in Prague during the Nazi occupation as a framework for an . . . entirely contemporary commentary on how man acts in a situation where police terrorism makes ordinary honesty and decency a matter of life and death.”<sup>55</sup> The film is thus considered as “ahistorical”, costumes and hairstyles do not reflect the time; the currentness of the 1960s is also raised by monologues of the main protagonist about the impossibility of any regime to change people’ thinking. The main purpose of this film is to portray “the effective use of fear by the Communist regime to keep its citizens cowed and suspicious of each other, in order to avoid any and all government reprisals”<sup>56</sup>

### 1.2.4 *Diamonds of the Night (1964)*

Simultaneously with Brynych, Jan Němč released his *Diamonds of the Night* (1964). There again circumstances of WW2 create only a vague backdrop. It is a cold and depressing film with elements of surrealism dealing with the destiny of two young boys who escaped from transport. After a long and exhausting run through the forest they find a

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<sup>52</sup>Linda Tichotová Fryčová, “Co přinesla Kafkovská konference?”  
<http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/ct24/kultura/33692-co-prinesla-kafkovska-konference/> (accessed March 10 2012).

<sup>53</sup> Martin Endres, “Libická konference v roce 1963,”  
<http://www.projekt-zipp.de/cz/kafka/konference/> (accessed March 24, 2012).

<sup>54</sup> Hana Bělohorská, *The Fifth Horseman is Fear* (1964), dvd, Directed by Zbyněk Brynych, Czechoslovakia, Facets, 2010.

<sup>55</sup> Liehm, *The most...* 293-294.

<sup>56</sup> Independent Film Quarterly Magazine, “The Fifth Horseman Is Fear”,  
<http://www.independentfilmquarterly.com/ifq/reviews/thefifthhorseman.htm> (accessed April 1, 2012).

secluded house and ask its occupier for a loaf of bread. The old woman being afraid of her own life gives them food but subsequently reports them to local “head hunters”.<sup>57</sup> Jan Němec commented on the film as follows: “Everybody is feeling very optimistic in Czechoslovakia and I’m trying to show the opposite of human nature: that people are not good, but bad. I am trying . . . to show what is our experience . . . to shock the Czechs.” Jordanová commented on the film and stated that the most important feature of this film is not “its direct, grim narrative”, but:

The remarkable cinematic portrayal of chilling fear and daydreams of salvation, expressed in the viscerally rough representation of the escapees, whose psychological state is largely defined by the doomed hope that they may succeed to break loose from a bleak fate. The extreme exhaustion impairs their ability to distinguish between reality of miserable confinement and the vision of glorious redemption.<sup>58</sup>

### 1.2.5 *The Shop on Main Street (1965)*

Reputedly the first sentence of one nameless person, who read the script for the next, critically well-acclaimed Holocaust film *The Shop on Main Street* (1965), was “What loony wants to film that?” These “loonies” were Jan Kadár and Elmer Klos. They belong to the generation which started working in the early fifties and “after New Wave’s aesthetic revolution were stimulated toward the creation of their best works”<sup>59</sup>

Kadár and Klos did not pull their punches. The film was something like a personal mission for Kadár. His parents and sister died in Auschwitz, so it is of little wonder that he wanted to express his deep disgust and disillusionment. He wanted to do “a picture about the truth of our past, because nobody wanted to touch it. We always spoke about the Germans . . . but nobody wanted to speak about our own weak points.”<sup>60</sup> In this regard Jan Kadár and Elmar Klos did not make a film about the deportation of Jews. They were aiming at the innocent who stood by. “It hurts much more.” In arguably the most criticizing film *The Shop on Mainstreet* they presented “the tragedy not only of millions who died but of the millions who stood witness to their murder in term of a handful and epitomized it in a couple – adoltish, dim-witted carpenter and an elderly, doddering shopkeeper – a foolish,

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<sup>57</sup> Škvorecký, 116.

<sup>58</sup> Jordanová, 76.

<sup>59</sup> Skvorecky, 223

<sup>60</sup> James Reid Paris, *Classic Foreign Films: From 1960 to Today* (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing Group, 1993), 92.

well-intentioned young man and a sweet harmless old lady.”<sup>61</sup> They stuck the axe into the most painful place in Czechoslovak history and won Czechoslovakia’s first Academy Awards for Best Foreign Language Film.<sup>62</sup>

The plot is set in Slovakia in the small town of Sabinov during Nazi occupation. The main protagonist, carpenter Brtko, is asked by his brother-in-law to be a shopkeeper of the shop of an old Jewish woman. Although Brtko does not sympathize with Nazism, he submitted to his wife’s demands and accepts this offer.<sup>63</sup> The problem was that the old woman does not understand the situation and thinks that the authorities sent her an assistant to help her with her business. Brtko does not want to give up the chance of being an aryanizer but also does not have enough determination to say to the old woman the brutal truth. So he rather makes his superiors believe that he is the boss and also makes the Jewish lady believe she is still the boss. He deceives, prevaricates and gathers the courage to take action as long as right in front of the shop, Jews are mustered for transport to a concentration camp. In panic and fear from possible consequences, if someone finds a Jewish woman in his company, Brtko pushes the poor old lady so fiercely that he causes her to have a fatal injury.<sup>64</sup>

This picture, among others, indicates that the regime did not have to order many Czechs and Slovaks to aryanize, they often did that for profit, mostly with the excuse that “everybody does that, so why couldn’t we?” According to David W. Paul, the film “indicted Czech and Slovaks for complicity in the persecution of Jews during the Second World War, but it also reminded them of their complicity in post-war totalitarianism”.<sup>65</sup>

### 1.2.6 *The Cremator (1969)*

There were two more films which dealt with Holocaust gruesomeness *A Prayer for Kateřina Horowitzová* (1965) and *Dita Saxová* (1967), both made under the baton of Antonín Moskalyk, based on novel of Arnošt Lustig. However the climax of this fruitful period comes with release Juraj Herz’s *The Cremator* in 1969.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Avisar, 86.

<sup>62</sup> Ladislav Grosman, *The Shop on Main Street* (1965), dvd, Directed by Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos, Czechoslovakia, Criterion, 2001.

<sup>63</sup> Grosman, Kadár and Klos

<sup>64</sup> Žalman, 40.

<sup>65</sup> David W. Paul, ed., *Politics, Art and Commitment in the East European Cinema* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983), 58.

<sup>66</sup> Bell, 23.

As time passed, “the slow and contradictory process of liberalization and transition” resulted in the “emergence of Prague Spring” in 1968. This first step toward democracy led to the abolition of censorship. Juraj Herz was aware of the favourable situation which the end of the sixties offered him and was ready to utilize it. According to his own words he “had absolute liberty” in his work and had the feeling “that the whole Czech nation braved against Russians”. Not surprisingly, he considers *The Cremator* as his only film which was made completely according to his ideas, except the ending, where the main character stood on the street while Soviet tanks passing by.<sup>67</sup>

The main character of the film is Buddhist, exemplary husband and father, Karl Kopfrkingl. He is obsessed with his job as a cremator and believes that his mission is to liberate the souls of descendents. Influenced by his friend and several other aspects, Kopfrkingl comes to believe that the only obstacle between him and his dream career is the half-Jewish origin of his wife and without hesitation begins with the successive slaughter of his own family.<sup>68</sup> The film combines horror with elements of comedy. As Herz revealed in one interview it was not coincidence because “Humor was also a way to smuggle the film into approbation and projection. So it was very deliberate to combine horror with humour.”<sup>69</sup>

Herz criticizes collaborators and demonstrates how an ordinary decent man could become a “flunkey” of Nazism, a murderer, and also how words can have different meanings in different contexts (“death” and “rescue” are interchangeable in this instance). Similar to Brynych’s *The Fifth Horseman is Fear*, historical events create only a backdrop. The message of the film is timeless, applicable for any ideology.<sup>70</sup>

However, filmmakers should have known from the previous experiences that, as Drahomíra Vilhemová stated, “the communists would always give us enough slack to hang ourselves” and added that they were too foolish and just “didn’t think they would pull the rope”.<sup>71</sup> And so it happened that the popular movement of Prague Spring “became too radical to be acceptable to the Soviet Union and it was promptly suppressed via the

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<sup>67</sup> Ivana Košuličová, “Drowning the Bad Times: Juraj Herz Interviewed,” <http://www.kinoeye.org/02/01/kosulicova01.php>, (accessed 20 March 2012).

<sup>68</sup> Ladislav Fuks and Juraj Herz, *The Cremator* (1969), dvd, Directed by Juraj Herz, Czechoslovakia, Dark Sky Films, 2009.

<sup>69</sup> Košuličová

<sup>70</sup> Žalmnan, 210.

<sup>71</sup> Buchar, 122.

invasion of Warsaw Pact forces”.<sup>72</sup> Therefore Herz’s *The Cremator* did not avoid the censor’s vaults either.

### 1.3 Normalization

The period ironically called “Normalization” was a return to a rigid Stalinism and was distinguished by the disposal of democratic ideas and non-traditional filmmaking methods. The Czech and Slovak film industries were completely re-organized with massive ramifications especially during 1969 and 1970. Liberal films both made and planned not only during the Prague Spring were locked in the vault.<sup>73</sup> They were condemned as “decadent” or “anti-socialist”, their success at international festivals was explained by a “Zionist lobby”, and lastly their representatives were accused of defamation of Socialism. In fact, “more films were banned in 1970 than during the previous 20 years of communism.”<sup>74</sup> But on the other hand, the Soviet-led invasion “did not slow the pace of the film industry and on the contrary, 1969 was the most productive year. Many of best films of the Czech New Wave were shot then. It was climax of the whole movement before its sudden death in January 1970.”<sup>75</sup> Filmmakers including Passer, Jasný, Němec, Kádár, Radock and many others, either voluntarily or involuntarily, left the country. Some of them tried working from abroad, some of them even under pseudonyms, but for all of them it was a personal tragedy and bitter experience. No wonder that between 1970 and 1989 this exodus along with censorship caused a loss of films containing the author’s artistic expression and Czech and Slovak cinema ceased to receive positive feedback and appreciation from abroad.

Moreover as the Liehm confirmed “1969 became the year in which the efforts of the years past came to fruition, and simultaneously the year in which they were frustrated.”<sup>76</sup> Poor “New Wave” filmmakers realized that their attempts to remedy society were futile. They wanted to save society and to make it learn from its mistakes, however, in the end they not only ended up with the label “persona non grata” but also lost their faith that people could be better. “The idea that film can change the world, or at least influence the

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<sup>72</sup> Jordanova, 9.

<sup>73</sup> Horton.

<sup>74</sup> Buchar, 13.

<sup>75</sup> Buchar, 12.

<sup>76</sup> Liehm, The most...302.



reality, is gone.”<sup>77</sup> Jiří Menzel describes his experience as follows: “Until 1968 I strongly believed that everything bad was doomed. I believed that as human knowledge and intellect progressed people would become more educated and because of that also better”, but he added with bitterness that after the Russian invasion he gave it up, “I lost my faith that people would one day become better.”<sup>78</sup> Another evidence that Brynych’s “Never again like sheep” was not clear enough and the audience did not understand it properly was what Čulík describes in following lines:

It is a characteristic feature of life in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and 1980s that communist oppression did not need to be particularly intense. Practically nothing happened to most people in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and 1980s: the secret police and the communist authorities simply held them in subjugation by intentionally creating an atmosphere of fear. People did not show opposition to the regime not because of what the regime did to its citizens, but because of what it “might” *do* to them.<sup>79</sup>

### 1.3.1 *Night Caught Up with Me (1985)*

Hardly any Holocaust films were made during this era as this theme was considered as dangerous. In fact only two Holocaust film were made before the Velvet Revolution.<sup>80</sup> One of them was another Juraj Herz film, *Night Caught Up with Me* (1985). It is biographical film about the Communist journalist Jozka Jabůrková, who died in a concentration camp. Herz assumes this film as his “greatest horror”, because as he says, “There is no blood, but it is unwatchable for people with weak nerves.”<sup>81</sup>

The economic situation in Czechoslovakia was – compared to Poland or Hungary – quite prosperous, which ensured a degree of stability of the regime. The opposition was thus constantly maintained around a small group of people associated with Charter 77 led by Václav Havel. Although most experts did not expect that the Communist regime would fall in 1989, the end of 1980s carried the sign of inconspicuous liberalization and in fact,

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<sup>77</sup> Buchar, 7.

<sup>78</sup> Buchar, 45.

<sup>79</sup> Jan Čulík, *Jací jsme: Česká společnost v hraném filmu devadesátých a nultých let*, (Brno: Host, 2007), 173.

<sup>80</sup> Horton.

<sup>81</sup> Košuličová

while ruling authorities conducted a struggle for power, among the citizens was increasing dissatisfaction.<sup>82</sup>

## 1.4 Post Velvet Revolution

The Post-Communist era brought big changes but primarily the end of the state interference in film-making, unfortunately along with the end of government funding. “The shift to a market economy affected every level of the film industry from its basic infrastructure to its mode of financing and administration.”<sup>83</sup> Filmmaking was subjected to market forces while genuinely original movies were pushed into the background.

Directors, who hoped that conditions of 1960s might reappear, were naïve. Věra Chytilová stated that after revolution everything turned in the opposite direction “anything, just not what was previously, if Lenin proclaimed ‘film is the most important for us’, therefore now they will kick in the film, kick in the culture.” She then added “formerly ruled the ideology of propaganda, now dominates the ideology of money.”<sup>84</sup> Saša Gedeon agrees that in the 1960s “the film was source of some ideas” but now “everyone expects amusement from it”.

### 1.4.1 *All My Loved Ones* (1999)

Historical themes became tedious. Karel Kachyňa released his *Last Butterfly* (1990) but society was overburdened with quantum of vault films, including those with Holocaust genre, so it is of little wonder that interest in this historical period did not return sooner than at the end of the decay with Matej Minac’s *All my loved ones* (1999). As he says he believes that there are still people, who are curious about this tough period, because “the last survivors of the Holocaust are simply dying out - and it is actually the last chance to talk with first-hand witnesses; to record their stories and try to understand why those things happened, because it is still - even today - a total mystery. One can explain it in many ways; on the other hand, there is no explanation.”<sup>85</sup> His film portrays the legendary Nicholas Winton, who saved hundreds of Jewish children during the WW2. It deals with

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<sup>82</sup> David Clay, *Konec Evropské éry: Dějiny Evropy 1890-1990* (Praha: Mladá Fronta, 2003), 594.

<sup>83</sup> Jordanova, 9.

<sup>84</sup> Buchar, 46.

<sup>85</sup> Martin Mikule, “Collaborators, Heroes and Victims: the Holocaust as Portrayed in Czech Film,” <http://www.radio.cz/en/print/article/62846> (accessed April 1, 2012).

war only marginally and is rather an intimate story about a fictional family, whose life was changed by war.<sup>86</sup>

The fall of the Communism brought the chance for filmmakers to look at the present and the past with a more detached viewpoint and a new honesty. For some of them it is still painful picture and for example Jan Němec expresses his disillusionment with statement “Czech society is (there is only one way to say it) fucked up”<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, there are also those, who do not view things so pessimistically. One of them is Jan Hřebejk, who disputes “Wavers negative perceptions” and decided to explore the Czech and Slovak morality again and, of course, again with the Holocaust genre as a backdrop for his film.

#### 1.4.2 *Divided We Fall* (2001)

*Divided We Fall* (2001) is similar to Weiss's *Romeo, Juliet and Darkness* as the main character hiding a Jewish refugee. Josef Čížek and his wife Marie are childless because Josef is infertile. Under the pressure of accidental circumstances, they decide to provide a shelter in their apartment for David, who escaped from a concentration camp. The Čížeks, or in fact his wife, are frequently attended by collaborator Horst Prohaska, whose presence increases the possibility of disclosure of David. To deflect attention from their house and to avert the threat of death penalty for the whole street, Čížek begins to collaborate. Dangerous situation occurs when Marie rejects Hort's courtship and he decides to revenge the Čížeks by attempt to move into their house Albrecht Kepke, Nazi official. In this hopeless situation Čížek compels Marie to get pregnant with hidden Jew. The story culminates in May 1945 when a baby is about to be born. In the final absurd scene there are Czech warrior from Buzuluk, Russian soldier, Slovak partisan, Jewish refugee David, collaborator Prohaska and antihero, father against his will, Čížek assisting at the birth.<sup>88</sup>

“Hřebejk deliberately avoids portraying people as black-and-white, positive or negative characters, so he cannot associate anyone, whose behaviour he understands, with any actual instance of violence” The most important statement of the film is probably the ending when Čížek exclaims “Let's be human beings!” to discourage military commander from shooting him. It is safe to say that by this exclamation Hřebejk prods audience to be

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<sup>86</sup> Luboš Ptáček, “Současný český a slovenský film-pluralita estetických, kulturních a ideových konceptů”, <http://www.filmadivadlo.cz/down/sbornik.pdf>, (accessed April 9 2012), 88.

<sup>87</sup> Buchar, 27.

<sup>88</sup> Hřebejk, Jarchovský.

sympathetic and do not judge anyone for what they did, because one can never know all the circumstances of their situation.<sup>89</sup>

In comparison with historical facts there are some factual inaccuracies which prove that Hřebejk uses the historical event as a means to convey his subjective opinion about general moral problem. Which he also admits in an interview with Martin Mikule “I think that more than about Jews it is about Czechs - or rather about the coexistence of Czechs, Germans and Jews before and during the war. I think it is about a Czech mentality, Czech cowardice, but also decency.”<sup>90</sup>

### 1.4.3 *Last Train (2007)*

Another film which is definitely worth mentioning is *Last Train* (2007). Directors German Joseph Vilmaier and his Czech wife Dana Vávrová return to Holocaust genre with a specific viewpoint of the Jews involuntarily imprisoned in “train of death”. During apocalyptic ride, Jews realizes that at the end of this journey does not wait the “comfort” of work camp but certain death.<sup>91</sup> Ivo Pavelek as quoted by Milan Kalina stated the aim of this film is not to depict the big history but “dramatic fates of defenceless victims, who only due to their origins lost the right to live”.<sup>92</sup> For Czech audience, however, the scene set in German railway station could seem at least strange, rather unbelievable. Jews there beg for some food and water and Nazis soldiers take a stand against SS man to help them and feed them with everything what they have in pockets. The fact that not all Germans were Nazi fanatic or anti-Semitic could have been depicted otherwise, more trustworthy.<sup>93</sup>

This film does not explore human personalities and does not judge anyone but it is still valuable because in some way fills a gap in Holocaust genre. Up to this film Czech and Slovak audience was only given a picture of Jews before transport to concentration camp or after breakout from it. Violence was impersonal and “takes place somewhere else behind the scenes”<sup>94</sup> *Last Train* is depicted with all the monstrosities and some scenes can cause inconveniences for a man with weak nerves.

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<sup>89</sup> Čulík, 169.

<sup>90</sup> Mikule.

<sup>91</sup> Joseph Vilmaier and Dana Vávrová, *Last Train*, dvd, directed by Joseph Vilmaier, Bonton 2007.

<sup>92</sup> Milan Kalina, “Poslední vlak.” <http://www.maskil.cz/5768/2.pdf> (accessed April 10 2012), 17.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Čulík, 172,

#### 1.4.4 *Broken Promise* (2009)

With this film, director Jiří Chlumský also avoids moralization and rubbing salt into old wounds. The picture is based on the real-life story of a Slovak Jewish man, Martin Friedmann, and consequently the director strictly adheres to Friedmann's experiences and does not put forward his own opinions about the period and people's behaviour. The main protagonist was a young talented soccer player, who was lucky enough to escape deportation to a concentration camp. However he is haunted by omnipresent anti-Semitism.<sup>95</sup> While the scenes of war and suffering from concentration camp are portrayed traditionally, in the final scene Chlumský depicts that the hero has to conceal his origins even before partisans. It was very disconcerting. Another interesting thing in the film is the theme of the positive and practically-minded father of Martin, who until the last moment does not believe in the threat of the pogrom and refuses to leave the property and position which he built and therefore rejects emigration to Palestine.<sup>96</sup>

#### 1.4.5 *Protector* (2009)

“A Czech is a cyclist, who hunches over as he pedals.” (Adolf Hitler)

Quotation mentioned above in other words means, “determined but directionless”. This became a motto of the Marek Najbrt's drama about the Nazi occupation of Prague, which draws specifically about what a man is willing to do in different times for his own benefit.<sup>97</sup> The last Holocaust film of this period and simultaneously of Czech and Slovak cinema, *Protector* (2009) portrays a rising actor, Jewish woman Hana, and her husband, radio editor Emil, who was formerly over-shadowed by the fame of his wife, but after he accepted the Norymber Laws he utilizes the offer to build his career on the shoulders of occupation.<sup>98</sup>

“Najbrt presents the collaborators and resisters as neither saints nor sinners, but something in between - ordinary people trapped in an unbearable situation” and therefore the intention of the film *Protector* is not only to capture the struggle of a human with

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<sup>95</sup> Jiří Chlumský, *Nedodržený slib*, dvd, directed by Jiří Chlumský, Bonton 2009.

<sup>96</sup> Jakub Leníček, “Nedodržený slib”, [http://www.rozhlas.cz/kultura/film/\\_zprava/600843](http://www.rozhlas.cz/kultura/film/_zprava/600843), (accessed April 11 2012).

<sup>97</sup> Mhairi Brennan, “Protektor,” <http://www.lostinfilmmmonthly.com/024-r-protektor.html>, (accessed 10 April 2012).

<sup>98</sup> Marek Najbrt, *Protektor*, dvd, directed by Marek Najbrt, Bonton 2009.

power, but also with himself. Instead of showing black and white point of view, it encourages people to wonder what they would do in similar tense situation.<sup>99</sup>

As could be seen from the characterization of the films and from their intentions, it is clear that filmmakers still return to the Holocaust genre but they do not tend to use it for exploration of Czech and Slovak morality and for giving people a lecture about the cowardly behaviour of their ancestors. They rather describe the reality and monstrosities of the war and its consequences. It can also be sensed that most films of the current era are made for audience favour. The violence, brutality, blood, action and tense atmosphere are very desired aspects in films nowadays, so why don't give audience these all combined in one, notoriously known and still favourable, genre?

Hřebejk was one of the exceptions, who with the film *Divided We Fall* follows his predecessors by judging people's behaviour in dangerous situations. As he says "First-during communism – we heard that we were big heroes or that we were – on the contrary – collaborators, which is rubbish as well. So I thought the subject could be interesting for today's viewers, especially due to ambiguities of how Czechs behaved in the war."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Brennan.

<sup>100</sup> Mikule.

## 2 COMPARISON

Looking back, it is safe to say that the interpretation of Holocaust underwent big changes. Films and their message during the Communist era are, in comparison to films made after the Velvet revolution, different. As complete opposites, let's consider the two most famous Czech and Slovak Holocaust films: *The Shop on Main Street* (1965) and *Divided We Fall* (2001). These films which deal with the same theme, with the same part of Czech and Slovak history, with exploration of the same people and their morality but which are at the same time completely different. One is full of emotions, anger and disillusion, the other one seems to be conciliatory, even optimistic.

### 2.1 Analysis of Czech and Slovak society via Holocaust genre

Kadár's statement was that "The basis of violence consist for the most part of harmless, kind people who are indifferent toward brutality" and added "Without these good people as the bearers of an ideology of brutality, there would be no brutality."<sup>101</sup> But Hřebejk point of view is different, "In times of oppression things are so difficult and complex that none of us has the right to judge. . . . In difficult situations people always behave ambiguously"<sup>102</sup>

Both directors take up the position of analyst of Czech society and their morality. As was mentioned, Kadár's family died in concentration camp, so he could not forgive their "murderers". He experienced this terrible period and knew very well how some people behaved. How they cared only of themselves and were too terrified to do something against the oppression. Hřebejk did not live in that time, he was born in 1967 so he interprets the story based on his own experience from Normalization and "puts forward his own arguments and view of the problem" and doing so "creates subjective fiction replacing historical fact."<sup>103</sup>

### 2.2 "Good guys" and "bad guys"

Both the mood of directors and the tone of their films are nicely portrayed in the main protagonists and their personalities. In *Divided We Fall* there are mostly contradictory characters. This is because Hřebejk tried to prove that "human soul is unpredictable", that even the most coward person or collaborator is capable of heroism at certain time and

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<sup>101</sup> Liehm, *Closely...*, 407.

<sup>102</sup> Čulík, 168.

contrariwise.<sup>104</sup> In accordance with Hřebejk's argument, there are practically no clear culprits in the film. For example, the antihero Čížek finds himself in an absurd situation, when in order to conceal the fact that with his wife they are hiding Jewish refugee David, he decides to collaborate and confiscate Jewish properties.<sup>105</sup> His friend Czech-German Horst Prohaska is a collaborator and in one moment wants to take revenge on the Čížeks, nonetheless he did not reveal that the Čížeks hide a Jew and he saves their lives during a "Gestapo raid" by telling the Nazi soldier that there is no need to search their house because they are loyal citizens. On the other hand, Šimáček, "a Czech patriot and resistance fighter", is so scared when sees David in their street that he decided to sacrifice him and calls to a German guard. A rather tragic than negative character in the film is German Alfred Kepka, who is confiscating Jewish property. He sends his sons to the war, but when two of them die at the front and the youngest, who is barely fourteen, is shot for desertion, Kepka suffers a stroke. According to Čulík, "Hřebejk points out, using Kepka as an example, that the mistake of being an ardent supporter of totalitarian ideology brings automatic retribution – the ideology to which they have pledged themselves is destructive and in fact that was what brought about the final end of the Third Reich." The only exception and only "black character" in the film might be Dr. Fischer-Rybář, who according to one Nazi officer "made sterilization of more than one hundred gypsy plebs"<sup>106</sup>

In contrast to Hřebejk, Kadár and Klos hold the opinion that "no one can dodge responsibility" and that the bystanders "may overcome their indifference, but then it is usually too late."<sup>107</sup> The main protagonist in *The Shop on Main Street*, Tóno Brtko, is a decent citizen but as Avisar stated, "Tóno's major flaw is rooted in his attempt to escape moral responsibility." From one side he is pressed by his own decency and from the other by his fanatic brother-in-law Kolkocký, money obsessed wife Evelína and the Norymber Laws. Avisar added that "Tóno's attitudes were all too common during World War II, as people everywhere concerned themselves with personal comfort or safety and ignored the erupting evil of Nazism, although the failure to resist Nazism was often followed by actual

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Čulík, 170.

<sup>105</sup> Čulík, 171; An antihero is described as "the ordinary man who, to his surprise and even horror, finds himself cast in the unlikely role of the hero."

<sup>106</sup> Hřebejk, Jarchovský.

<sup>107</sup> Liehm, Closely..., 406.



complicity.”<sup>108</sup> At the end Tóno’s statement, “It’s not my fault, Mrs.Lautmann. It’s either you or me.” speaks for itself. At first he wanted to sacrifice her. And although Tóno finally decides to save Mrs. Lautmann, the film still has a tragic end. He is so blinded with fear that he accidentally kills her.

Another of Avisar’s statements is that Evelína “represents the prevailing form of societal anti-Semitism, rooted in greed and petty envy of the Jews, which, in its own way, fuelled the implementation of the Final Solution.”<sup>109</sup> Therefore the only normal person in the film can be considered the “deaf old woman, right up to the point where she calls upon the organizers of the pogrom, the police, to protect her”<sup>110</sup>

It is hard to say to what extent is the time interval between these films useful for reflection of historical events or turning points, what interval guarantees cool head enough from too personal, intense and painful experience or lastly what is the power and value of reflection made hot. As could be seen, both films portray the same reality but, of course, for Czech and Slovak society it is more comfortable and favourable to incline to Hřebejk’s version of representation of Holocaust as people want to believe that their ancestors behaved bravely that things were not so clear cut and after all they can be proud of their nation.

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<sup>108</sup> Avisar, 82

<sup>109</sup> Avisar, 82..

<sup>110</sup> Liehm, Closely..., 407.

## CONCLUSION

The Holocaust genre during the Communist era was utilized to criticize participants, collaborators and even enablers. Filmmakers decided to make a change by giving a lecture to people. However, during Normalization they realized that their efforts were futile and people did not change at all and that demoralization, which started with the Nazi occupation, continued. Historian Robert Buchar was disillusioned and expressed as follows: “people would one day become better, . . . but greed, cheating, a lack of responsibility, and an ‘only take care of yourself’ attitude are characteristics that many Czechs and Slovaks still share.”<sup>111</sup>

Moreover, after the fall of communism younger filmmakers, born after World War II, took a more detached viewpoint and made Holocaust films in different ways. They did not rub salt into old wounds and digress to the portrayal of the reality of concentration camps and the suffering of Jews, and few films contained a hidden message. Some modified the genre to gain audience favour and to earn money. And to the amazement or rather dismay of filmmakers of the 60s, some did not have a negative attitude. Jan Hřebejk with his film *Divided We Fall* (2001) decided to explore people’s morality again and sends the audience also a very clear but completely different message “Let’s be human beings”, where people are encouraged to be conciliatory and forgive their ancestors.

So as it happens, filmmakers of the 60s ended up failing. They feel hopeless and angry, but they should realize that if they had not tried, they would not have known the results. And also if they had done nothing, they would have been like their protagonists whom they criticized.

At the end of this thesis, a dialogue between two film historians is worth noting. Liehm states, “I can then imagine what abnormal times do to normal people but is it still possible that such monstrosities could happen again in the future?” To which Culik responds, “Yes it can, as long as harmless, kind people, who are indifferent toward brutality exist...but it is not certain at the same time, because human soul is so unpredictable”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Buchar, 8.

<sup>112</sup> Liehm, *Closely...*, 407; Čulík, 170.

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