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When Night Passes and When Day Breaks – Between the Past and the Present. Borderlines of Holocaust in Filip David's Works

Abstract

The primary objective of the text is the analysis of Filip David's latest work. The Serbian writer is the author of the novel *House of Memories and Oblivions* (*Kuća sećanja i zaborava*, 2014), award for Best Novel of the Year by the *NIN* weekly (*Nedeljne Informativne Novine*)¹. On the one hand, the output of this Serbian novelist is of interest to us as a continuation and representation of the contemporary discourse on the Holocaust in Serbia. On the other – we look at the

¹ *NIN* (Serbian Cyrillic: НИИ) is a weekly newsmagazine published in Belgrade. Its name is an acronym for *Nedeljne informativne novine* (Недељне информативне новине) which roughly translates into *Weekly Informational Newspaper*. The *NIN* Award (Serbian: Ninova nagrada, Нинова награда), officially Award for Best Novel of the Year is a prestigious Serbian (and previously Yugoslavian) literary award established in 1954 by the *NIN* weekly and is given annually for the best newly published novel in Serbian literature, previously Yugoslav literature.

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literary realization of the Holocaust topic. The fortunes of the main characters in the novel (children who survived the Holocaust) serve as the cases on which we present where the author draws the borderline of the ever-present Holocaust in their lives; how much and in what way the past affects their present; where the borderline of memory, forgetting and oblivion is.

Keywords: Holocaust, literature, Serbia, Filip David, memory, identity.

Introduction

The concentration camp Sajmište (*Judenlager Semlin*) that functioned in Belgrade during World War II is one of the most significant symbols of Holocaust in Serbia. Due to ethnic cleansings – predominantly the one between March and May 1942, during which circa 7000 prisoners of Jewish origin (mostly women, children and the elderly) were annihilated in the gas vans – Serbia became the second state after Estonia that was proclaimed *Judenfrei*. Christopher R. Browning states that because of its history, the Sajmište camp occupies a specific place on the map of the memory of the Holocaust, not only in Serbia but in the entire Europe (Browning, 2012, p. 104), and constitutes an important topic within the Holocaust studies.²

Although studying Holocaust in Serbia does not constitute a separate and specialized academic field, there are numerous scholars and monographs dealing with this issue. In his 2011 book *The Holocaust Historiography in Yugoslavia (Историографија холокауста у Југославији)*,³ Jovan Ćulibrk painstakingly analyses the development stages of this topic within the academic discourse and its popularity in Yugoslavia. In the studies on *Shoah*, the author explicitly distinguishes between the historiographic and cultural discourses. Within the context of historiography, he confronts the various standpoints: those describing the taboo surrounding the Holocaust

² The history of this camp is thoroughly described in Milan Koljanin's monograph entitled *The German Camp at the Belgrade Fair (Sajmište) 1941-1944 (Nemački logor na Beogradskom Sajmištu 1941-1944, see Koljanin, 1992)*; in Jovan Byford's [Bajford's] study *Staro sajmište. A Site Remembered, Forgotten, Contested (Staro sajmište. Mesto sećanja, zaborava i sporenja, see Byford [Bajford], 2011)*, see also the Bajford-administrated English and Serbian bilingual webpage <http://www.semclin.info/>, financed by the British Academy; in the volume *Places of Suffering and Anti-Fascist Struggle in Belgrade 1941-1944. A Handbook for Reading the City (Mesta stradanja i antifašističke borbe u Beogradu 1941-1944. Priručnik za čitanje grada, see Rädle & Pisarri, 2013)* edited by Rena Rädle and Milovan Pisarri; in Jaša Almulji's *The Suffering and Rescue of Serbian Jews (Страдање и спасавање српских Јевреја, see Алмули, 2010)*. Owing to the usage of mobile trucks instead of stationary gas chambers, the Sajmište camp can be compared to the death camp in Chełmno, Poland; see Montague (2014).

³ Published in English in 2014.

topic and those emphasizing the multitude of publications on this problem; he critically comments on the experts' discussions as well as individual reports; he highlights the turning moment in the entire camp discourse centered around the publication of the collection of documents edited by Antun Miletić entitled *The Jasenovac Concentration Camp 1941-1945: Documents* (*Koncentracioni logor Jasenovac 1941-1945: dokumenta*), whose first volume appeared in 1986. At the same time, Ćulibrk demonstrates that the first article with the word "Holocaust" in its title was only published in 1996 in the esteemed periodical "Jugoslovenski istorijski časopis" (Ђулибрк, 2011, p. 11).⁴ According to Ćulibrk, unlike the historiographic discourse, culture constitutes the territory on which as early as the end of the 1950s "Холокауст је био »код куће« у југословенској култури" (Ђулибрк, 2011, p. 17),⁵ which can be seen on the example of the 1959 film adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, directed by Mirjana Samardžić. The scholar notes that the Jewish topic was approached from various angles by Yugoslav artists. Among them he enumerates the three post-war prose writers who are both significant and internationally recognized, and who have written about the fate of Jews during WWII: the Nobel Prize winner Ivo Andrić, Aleksander Tišma and Danilo Kiš. In 1979 Andrić's short story *Buffet Titanic* (*Bife Titanik*) was even made into a movie by Emir Kusturica. Yet even though it may appear that we do not lack the literary representations of the Holocaust, it would not be justified to agree fully with the Serbian expert's opinion.

The term "Holocaust literature," which David G. Roskies uses in reference to the Congress Library, Washington, comprises "... all writing forms, both documentary and dramatized, in every language which has shaped the communal memory on *Shoah* and has been shaped by it" (Roskies, 2014, p. 26).⁶ No doubt, within Yugoslav and Serbian literatures constituting the main concern of this article, we can find numerous examples inscribed in the aforementioned definition. This literary category may include various kinds of texts: theme-based (feature performances, testimonies), created at the subsequent historical moments, rediscovering the topic of *Shoah*, including drama (Ђорђе Лебовић, Aleksandar Obrenović, *Heavenly Troop* [*Nebeski odred*], 1957; Danilo Kiš, *The Wooden Chest of Thomas Wolfe*

⁴ Ćulibrk also shows that in other mainstream historical periodicals it happened even later on: in "Istorija XX veka" in 1997, and in "Istorijski časopis" in 2003 (Ђулибрк, 2011, p. 11). It is worth adding that – according to Barel Lang's research – the entry "Holocaust" appeared in the New York Times Index in 1970 (Lang, 2006, p. 23).

⁵ "The Holocaust had been 'settled down' in the Yugoslav culture."

⁶ In her article *Literature toward Writing on Shoah* (*Literaturoznawstwo wobec piśmiennictwa o Zagładzie*) Dorota Krawczyńska approaches the complications regarding the methodological term and the difficulties in systemizing the texts on *Shoah* (Krawczyńska, 2009).

[*Drveni sanduk Tomasa Vulfa*], 1973); prose (in the latest Serbian prose these are Borivoje Adašević, *In the Old Sajmište [Na starom Sajmištu]*, 2000; Zoran Penevski, *Less Important Crimes [Manje važni zločini]*, 2005; Saša Ilić, *Berlin Window [Berlinsko okno]*, 2006 and *Casablanca Blue*, 2015 [the short story from the collection *Hedgehog Hunting (Lov na ježeve)*]; Dušan Savić, *Porajmos*, 2013); and memoirs (Ženi Lebl writing in the name of her mother, *Diary of a Judith [Dnevnik jedne Judite]*, 1990; Nevena Simin writing together with her mother Magda Simin-Bošan, *Why Were They Silent? The Mother and The Daughter about the Same War [Zašto su ćutale? Majka i ćerka o istom ratu]*, 2009).

However, we think that the diverse literature on *Shoah*, earlier in Yugoslavia and now in Serbia, is not accompanied by equally extensive literary research. What is especially visible is the insufficient presence of studies on the literature describing the nation's past. Those publications which contain considerations on the Holocaust are usually limited to the analysis of a single author's works, and appear on the margins of some other considerations.⁷ Those concentrating on the issue of *Shoah* within the field of literature are simply scarce.⁸ In reference to domestic works it is worth distinguishing here Dina Katan Ben Zion's *Presence and Disappearance: Jews and Judaism in Former Yugoslavia in the Mirror of Literature* (2002), in which the author investigates the modes in which the Jews' fortunes during *Shoah* are represented in Yugoslav literature. Nevertheless, the reception of this book has been rather limited as it was published only in Israel in Hebrew (there is still no English or Serbian translation). Another publication that needs to be mentioned is Gordana M. Todorović's 2012 article *Representation of the Holocaust in Serbian Literature (Predstavljanje Holokausta u srpskoj književnosti)*, in which the scholar places the Holocaust in the center of her interests analyzing it through several of the

⁷ It would be interesting to employ here the term "književna logorologija" ("literary campology") coined by Jovica Aćin (Aćin, 1993, pp. 135–136). See the theme issue (4/5) of the "Delo" periodical from 1986 which is entirely devoted to this term and its scope.

⁸ It seems that the problem of Holocaust absence is detectable in Serbia also within other realms of culture. It can be demonstrated by a number of recent educational activities, (e.g. the 2012 publication of *The Textbook on the Study of Holocaust [Приручник за учење о Холокаусту]*; Лучић et al., 2012); the project *Dual Burden – Learning about National Socialism and the Holocaust in Europe [Dvostruki teret – učenje o nacionalsocijalizmu i Holokaustu u Evropi]*, implemented between April 2014 and September 2015 and initiated by the Zagreb Goethe Institut; the foundation of the non-government Center for Holocaust Research and Education [CIEH, <http://cieh-chre.org/>] in 2014; the conference *Representation of the Holocaust in the Balkans in Arts and Media* held 2-3 October 2014), as well as artistic ones (2014, Gallery of Historical Archive of Belgrade, *Jews in Belgrade – Life and Holocaust [Beogradski Jevreji – život i Holokaust]*; 2015, Museum of Yugoslav History, *Holocaust in Serbia 1941-1944 [Holokaust u Srbiji 1941-1944]*).

most famous representations. In the Serbian culture, this “fundamental lack, absence and loss” (Molisak, 2008, p. 407) of the *Shoah* experience within the collective memory has not been – as we assume – noticed yet. And the trauma connected with the annihilation of the Jewish community still awaits reworking. Referring to the, crucial here, category of borderline, one can even say that it is particularly so in the literary studies that the turning point has not occurred. Neither has there appeared a text (literary or journalistic) which would induce a broader discussion on memory (or rather its absence) about the Jewish victims who died in the Sajmište camp, and which would subsequently provide an impetus to a revision of the previous mode of representing the Holocaust in Serbian literature. Paraphrasing Predrag Finci’s metaphor (Finci, 2005, p. 9), one might say that the theme of *Shoah* in Serbian literary studies resembles “a living, open wound” which the scholars seem to overlook.

The main goal of this article is to analyze Filip David’s latest novel *House of Memories and Oblivion* (*Kuća sećanja i zaborava*), which won the Serbian Award for Best Novel (the NIN Award) of 2014.⁹ On the one hand, the Serbian novelist’s output interests us as the representation of the contemporary discourse about the Holocaust in Serbia. On the other, we investigate its literary realization. The fortunes of the characters (mostly the Jewish children who survived the Holocaust) will serve to demonstrate where the borderline of the Holocaust existence in their lives lies, as drawn by the author. Using Dariusz Czaja’s words, it would be justified to label David’s piece as an entirely liminal text (Czaja, 2009, p. 66).¹⁰ It is so, because the novelist explores and crosses diverse borderlines. We, however, concentrate on how and in what way the characters’ past influences their present, and where the borderline between memory, oblivion and forgetting lies in the novel. David’s novel, whose fragments (the story of Miša Brankov/Miša Volf¹¹) were used by Goran Paskaljević as the screenplay for his 2012 film *When Day Breaks* (*Kad svane dan*), thanks to its presence in the mainstream media could have proven to be an important point of reference and a contribution to the debate on the Jewish issues in Serbia. And yet, it did not happen so. Only a handful of

⁹ We are aware of the crisis touching the literary awards in Serbia described e.g. by Jelena Matijević in the article meaningfully entitled *The “Flood” of Awards: 400 Awards for 365 Days* („Poplava” dodela: za 365 dana – 400 nagrada, see Matijević, 2014). However, in our view the NIN Award is still considered one of the most important and most prestigious ones.

¹⁰ Dariusz Czaja uses this term in reference to W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* (Czaja, 2009, p. 66).

¹¹ In this article, the characters’ surnames appear in the same form as in the novel. It is compatible with the phonetic recording of both first names and surnames of foreign origins, typical of the Serbian language.

reviews have been published,¹² which demonstrates the fact that critics are divided in their appreciation of the novel's quality. Additionally, no serious academic study of this text has appeared in Serbia so far. It is certainly debatable whether David's attempts to confront the topic of the Holocaust were successful. Nonetheless, *House of Memories and Oblivion*, entirely devoted to the suffering of the representatives of the Jewish nation, which – thanks to the aforementioned prize – reached the wider public,¹³ had a chance (and maybe still has) to become a turning point in the Serbian consideration on *Shoah*, a moment of “awareness of culture and history's mutilation” (Molisak, 2008, p. 407).

Borderlines of the Text

Nowadays, it is a cliché to state that *Shoah* sets the turning point in the history of humankind. However, one has to be reminded that its consequences touch upon not only those who experienced it directly, but also those for whom it is an event known from history, artistic representations and philosophical considerations. The Holocaust continuously lingers in the contemporary culture in which it functions as a liminal experience, the one after which it is impossible to think about a human being in the categories used prior to its occurrence.

Filip David, whose literary output occupies a central place in these considerations, was born in 1940 in Kragujevac. He survived WWII as a child under an alias.¹⁴ This autobiographical motif has become one of the elements of the analyzed novel. Miša Volf, one of the characters of *House...*,

¹² The most important ones include: Željko Milanović, *The Phantasmagoric Dimension of the Real in the Representation of the Ultimate Evil* (Фантасмагорична димензија истинитог у представи крајњег зла, see Милановић, 2015); Dragana V. Todoroskov, *When the Day Breaks and the Night Passes* (Кад сване дан и прође ноћ, see Тодоресков, 2015); Tomislav Đokić, *Enclosing the Circle of Evil* (Затварање круга зла, see Ђокић, 2015); Vladimir Stojnić, *Metaphysics of Evil for Beginners* (Метафизика зла за почетнике, see Стојнић, 2015).

¹³ The book was published by Laguna, a Serbian publishing house mainly, yet not only, associated with popular literature. In recent years Laguna has started publishing the Serbian classics; they usually appear in the slightly gaudy and kitschy artwork characteristic of this publisher. It is not a coincidence that the third edition of the novel, the one we use in this article, was sold at newsagents' (occupying an exposed place there) at a relatively low price.

¹⁴ In the interview with the writer conducted by Dušan Komarčević, we can read: “Moja porodica, majka i ja, smo se krili u jednom fruškogorskom selu pod lažnim identitetom. Sećam se da su mi roditelji rekli: nemoj nikad da kažeš svoje pravo ime, ti si od sada Fića Kalinić” (Komarčević, 2014, “My family, mother and I were hiding in one of the villages of Fruška gora under a false name. I still remember that my parents told me: never reveal your real name; from now on you're Fića Kalinić”).

spent his early childhood under the protection of a Serbian family who raised him as their own son. Simultaneously, his Jewish identity was kept a secret from him (we return to this issue later on). Moreover, the parents of Albert Vajs, another protagonist of the book, come from the Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews, with their marriage considered as a misalliance. This part of the plot parallels David's biography as his mother was a Sephardi, and his father an Ashkenazi. All these signs of the novel's autobiographic component are very discreet and their recognition depends on the reader's external knowledge. Realizing this, it can be stated that David's novel represents a liminal status, which is characteristic of the texts dealing with the Holocaust problem, since in all of them "as a rule ... one may trace either the signals of the author's entanglement with the depicted reality, or the plot's ingraining in the author's private life" (Wołk, 2005, p. 286).

This ambiguity, the text's liminal quality, its placement between (auto) biography and fiction, as well as the fragmented, nonadjacent narrative can be the sign of a literary consciousness of the problems connected to any representation of the Holocaust.¹⁵ This peculiar ontological uncertainty, the text's liminality, is intensified by its fragmented structure. It is extremely difficult to decide which discourse dominates the novel. There are excerpts from Albert Vajs's (a fictional character) diary, which is signaled in the subtitle of such parts ("iz dnevnika Alberta Vajsa"/"from Albert Vajs' diary") with the prevailing first-person narration. Besides, there are fragments told from the perspective of an auctorial narrator. What is more, we can find in *House...* journalistic texts – genuine or stylized – dealing with the displays of evil in the world ("vesti"/"news"). All these writing strategies influence the text's nonlinear structure, and their intermingling disautomates our reception. The heterogeneous and fractured form of the text composed of the several characters' stories (Albert Vajs's, Solomon Levi's, Miša Volf's and Urijel Koen's) can also be understood as the representation of the author's views on the inefficiency of the conventional forms in the face of the topic he approaches: "[i]ncompleteness and fragmentariness" of the structure is the expression of "the author's helplessness in the face of the historical experience" (Kaniewska, 2009, p. 183). Integrating the singular elements into a unity connotes with the collage technique. It also reflects the author's intention to write a text about the ever-regenerative evil (in its diverse aspects and expressions).

¹⁵ In this context, Aleksandra Ubertowska writes about "the anomalies of discourse" which prevent the reader from passive recreation, question their habits, do not allow to "tame" the problem (accordingly, ethics constitutes a vital part of such a strategy, see Ubertowska, 2002, p. 127).

Borderlines of Evil

Filip David's book focuses on the two topics widely explored in literature, i.e. the question about the nature of evil, and the problem of identity. *House of Memories and Oblivion* continues the considerations on evil's nature which in the contemporary culture have given birth to two antagonistic assumptions. According to one theory, the absolute evil (symbolized by Auschwitz) has a metaphysical and irrational character, and hence its roots are situated outside a human being, as the force creating and implementing evil exists regardless of us. The second set of concepts situates evil within a human being, pointing at its human roots and assuming that it is the result of certain societal (social, political or historical) conditions. Consequently, in this understanding the genesis of evil is empirical. And it is this opposition that resonates in David's novel. We believe that its author is closer to the hypothesis assuming the metaphysical origins of evil,¹⁶ but at the same time he tends to demonstrate that evil cannot exist on its own: to happen, it needs a human being who takes the part of its perpetrator.¹⁷

In the novel, these two concepts enter a dialogue. We read: "Da sam sebe mogao uveriti u ono u šta je Hana Arent poverovala, možda bih i ja mirno spavao. Ali, moj san je jedna grozna, neprekidna mora, jer takva

¹⁶ It is worth adding that the Serbian literary critics' opinions on this issue are divided. Stojnić seems certain that in his novel Filip David advocates the irrational nature of evil whereas Đokić underlines the fact that evil is the representation of banality, although he also writes about the lack of meaning in evil's emanations (which can be understood as his declaration on the metaphysical side). See Стојнић (2015, p. 175); Ђокић (2015, p. 107).

¹⁷ In one of the interviews with David we read: "Zlo [se] u mnogim svojim vidovima ... stalno ponavlja na različitim stranama zemaljske kugle. Zlo je nemoguće definisati jer ima bezbroj lica. Teorijske rasprave o »radikalnom« i »banalnom« zlu, teorije koje korene imaju u teološkom, političkom, ideološkom ili ekonomskom poreklu zla nisu nas nimalo približile rasvetljavanju ovog fenomena koji prati istoriju ljudske civilizacije od pamtiveka do danas" (Давид, 2015, p. 367, "Evil in plenty of its representations ... continues to repeat itself in different parts of the world. It is impossible to identify evil as it has an infinite number of faces. Theoretical treatises on 'radical' and 'banal' evil, the theories which have their roots in the theological, political, ideological or economic origins of evil haven't brought us any closer to understanding this phenomenon, which has been accompanying the history of human civilization since times immemorial"). This kind of thinking parallels Jerzy Nowosielski's recognitions as reconstructed by Dariusz Czaja. The latter writes that according to Nowosielski: "Zło jest wielkością stałą, że jest stałym składnikiem empirycznej rzeczywistości. ... Zło objawione w Oświęcimiu jest eksterioryzacją zła metafizycznego, nie da się go sprowadzić, bądź zredukować do żadnych determinant historycznych, socjologicznych czy psychologicznych. Ono »dzieje się« wciąż, powtarza w historii z dającą do myślenia intensywnością" (Czaja, 2009, p. 104, "Evil is a permanent quality, a constant ingredient of the empirical reality. ... Evil revealed in Auschwitz is the exteriorization of metaphysical evil: it cannot be limited or reduced to any historical, sociological or psychological determinants. It still 'continues,' it repeats itself in history with a thought-provoking intensity").

tvrdjenja nisu dokazana niti su čime potkrepljena, ona nas samo zavaravaju u našim iluzijama da smo zločin stavili pod kontrolu time da smo mu dali čisto ljudski lik” (David, 2014, p. 15).¹⁸ Evil – even if we assume that it is not produced by human beings – manifests itself through human actions (or their failure to act). It is comfortable to think it is somewhere far away, expedited outside our world. In the novel, such an attitude is represented by Johan Kraft, a *volksdeutsch* though whom evil manifests itself. He believes he takes no responsibility for anything. He indifferently accepts everything fate sends him, as a rule not engaging himself in anything and carrying out all his duties regardless of their nature.

Kraft’s approach corresponds with the numerous opinions of writers on the passive attitude of Belgrade’s residents towards their neighbors’ deaths.¹⁹ Extermination of the Jewish dwellers of Belgrade in the Sajmište concentration camp is an unquestionable historical fact. However, as noted in the more or less direct opinions of the writers of Jewish origin, this event barely touched the consciousness of the people of Belgrade. In *House...* it can be indirectly demonstrated by the following words:

“Prebacivanje žena i dece iz centra Beograda po hladnom vremenu u velike paviljone na beogradskom sajmištu bilo je **vidljivo** i Beograđanima. A kada je nastupila ostra zima, umiralo je sve više iscrpljenih zatočenika, pa se svakih nekoliko dana moglo **videti** kako Jevreji iz logora prevlače svoje umrle sunarodnike preko zaledene Save da bi ih predali radnicima beogradske opštine radi sahrana” (David, 2014, pp. 102–103).²⁰

Elsewhere in the book we read: “Beograđani su svakodnevno **gledali** kako se iz pravca Sajmišta preme Beogradu preko zaledene reke prenose na brzinu sklepani drveni kovčezi sa preminulim logorašima” (David, 2014, p. 125).²¹ In the cited excerpts, the regret over the lack of reaction and the Belgrade dwellers’ passivity is not expressed explicitly. It is uncertain whether

¹⁸ “If I could convince myself that what Hannah Arendt believed in was true, maybe then I too could sleep well. But my dream is a sort of a terrible, ever-lasting nightmare because such statements aren’t proven or supported by anything; they just confirm our illusions that we have evil under control since we’ve given it a human face.”

¹⁹ For example, referring to the Jews’ deaths in the Sajmište concentration camp, David Albahari writes about the Belgrade dwellers’ “shameless eyes **closing**” (Albahari, 2007, p. 114). All emphases are by the authors of the article, unless specified differently.

²⁰ “Moving women and children in cold from the Belgrade center to the great pavilions on the city markets was **visible** also to the residents. And when the severe winter came, more and more exhausted prisoners started to die, and every few days one could **see** how the Jews carried their dead fellow countrymen out of the camp across the frozen Sava to hand them over to the workers of the Jewish community in Belgrade so that they could be buried.”

²¹ “The Belgrade residents **watched** how from Sajmište towards Belgrade, through the frozen river, they carried the makeshift wooden coffins with dead prisoners inside.”

it is about “ordinary indifference” to crime, or its “passive acceptance” (Tych, 2009, p. 44). Nevertheless, watching without taking any action means accepting the role of a bystander who observes but remains passive. It is symptomatic that in all the critical accounts by those writing about Sajmište, there appear verbs associated with sight. Analyzing the attitude of the Poles passing through the Warsaw Ghetto, Jacek Leociak states: “external witnessing has ... its moral and existential value. To be outside means to be situated above and beyond the borderline of responsibility, and also outside the circle of experiencing the fate that ceases to be mutual” (Leociak, 2009, pp. 85–86). This external witnessing, which can also be called after Agamben “passive seeing,”²² results in (the Other’s) suffering that becomes absolutely transparent (it is watched but not seen). In this context two questions arise: the first one, already signaled by Leociak, is the question about the borderline between guilt and lack of guilt; about the borderline which separates responsibility for evil from innocence. The second one would be aimed at the phenomenon of the indelible stigma of otherness that characterizes the Jews, who are hardly recognized as “one of us”, which is revealed with extreme consequences at the moments of crisis. This alleged otherness suppresses the mechanism of compassion. In reference to what has been said here and the problems we would like to signal in this article, another question may arise. This would be the question regarding the Jews’ status within the Yugoslav society, and specifically the borderline of membership and the borderline between identities (Jewish and Yugoslav or Serbian).

Dragana V. Todoreskov considers most shocking those excerpts from David’s novel in which evil reveals itself in its pure form. At such points the novelist dismisses aesthetization procedures and concentrates on drily relating facts supported by (real or fictional) documents²³ (Тодоресков, 2015, p. 374). In this way the author reaches a kind of a literary distance to what he describes and what affects him on an individual basis. Here arises the question of representation itself and the borderline dividing these events that can be literarily shaped from those that should be presented through facts, in an ascetic tone that limits literariness to its minimum. *Shoah* is a topic which – according to many scholars – situates itself outside the borders of language and imagination. As already mentioned, attempting to infiltrate the nature of evil, in his novel David includes descriptions of its various manifestations, starting from the events rooted in the stigmatization of the

²² By contrasting - but also linking with each other - “passive seeing” and “active seeing”, Giorgio Agamben reinterprets Karl Kérenyi’s observations. See Agamben (2008, p. 109).

²³ These are the aforementioned chapters which, on the formal level, resemble newspaper clippings.

Jewish nation and the prosecutions associated with it, to the writer's (real or stylized) descriptions of unbelievable facts (e.g. Columbian birth of a child hailed the devil, someone using their son's rare illness to gain wealth, or a murder of one's own children). Hence, he uses his signature meshing of the "uncanny" with the real, interlacing the supernatural elements (specters, phantoms, monsters, crossing temporal dimensions) that are grounded in reality.

Additionally, the multitude of parallel universes within and outside of us, as Albert Vajs's father used to say, makes an escape from the worst circumstances – by closing our eyes – possible and provides deliverance (David, 2014, p. 37). However, next to the perspective that liberates from evil, the text contains another one from which there is no escape. Urijel Koen's fortunes may be an example here. Born during the war, he constantly lives "u senci sveobuhvatnog, moćnog zla" (David, 2014, p. 120).²⁴ He was born as a result of a rape committed by the Koens' neighbor. Hiding the Koens' daughter, a friend to the family, after her parents' death, the man had provided her with the only contact with the world, an advantage that he decided to brutally exploit one day. The girl was absolutely helpless in the face of her torturer/savior's physical and mental violence. Paradoxically, this occurrence resulting in a new life triggers in her the power to endure. Urijel saw the daylight only in the third year of his life, and his mother's traumatic experiences exerted an indelible impact on his existence.

It is also worth noticing that following evil, i.e. living constantly with its symptoms, may result in another tragedy. Solomon Levi, one of the characters, practically devoted his entire life to getting to the core of evil, an enterprise that devoured him completely. He collected materials documenting all manifestations and forms of evil. Since his childhood, which he spent in isolation due to his ill health, he had lived on the verge of two worlds: the real and the fictional one, built upon the numerous books he read. He even called himself "izdvojen iz života" (David, 2014, p. 160).²⁵ During all his life he was drowning in solitude and in his obsession to collect things and his endeavors to apprehend evil. His father, involved in collaboration with the occupier, was an important factor potentiating this research. Ultimately, Levi dies in uncertain circumstances which are interpreted as suicide.

²⁴ "In the shade of all-encompassing, powerful evil."

²⁵ "[d]isabled to live."

Borderlines of Identity

Albert Vajs dominates the novel as the character who links and bonds all the stories. His father threw him – and his brother – out of the cattle carriage heading for the concentration camp. Consequently, rescue comes thanks to the efforts of his father, who manages to push out through a hole in the floor the younger son (who instantly disappears and whose death becomes his brother's burden), and then the older one, i.e. Albert. But this rescue is also possible due to good luck, as he is found, frozen and hypothermic by the Banat German, the already mentioned Johan Kraft. It is difficult to unambiguously estimate whether rescuing the Jewish boy was an act of selfless compassion, or a possibly half-conscious attempt to save his wife and marriage. The Krafts had lost their own son, and Ingrid, Johan's wife, was not able to accept this loss. Only the Jewish boy's appearance in their home helped her to recover, as now she devoted herself fully to the care of the frozen and seriously ill child. As he regains his strength, the process of gradual identification of her late son with the found Jewish boy initiates. From the beginning, Albert expresses his impatience and reluctance towards Ingrid's efforts; she dresses him in the dead boy's clothes and combs his hair in the same style as she did her son's. Hans' birthday proves crucial to Albert's subsequent fortunes. When Ingrid lets him into her son's room, the Jewish boy can see his mirror reflection and in it he recognizes the dead child's double. At this moment he realizes that the borderline between likeness and complete identification has been crossed. The endeavor to appropriate his self, by erasing what is unique in him and limiting his sovereignty through the attempt to transfer it into somebody else, ends with an outburst of sheer rage and defiance, which are interpreted by Johan Kraft as the boy's ingratitude. In this furious outbreak Albert tears his German double's picture into pieces and escapes from his saviors to spend the following days on a rather terrifying island for dead and ill animals.

The topic of the identity "change" and the interrelated problem of discovering one's origins appear in the novel a number of times. It is one of David's central motifs in the novel, which is especially visible in this part of the book where the eponymous "house of memories and oblivion" appears. It is a place where the protagonist is given the possibility of a choice between memory and forgetting. Thus, Albert Vajs faces the dilemma whether to forget the past (which constitutes a burden that is difficult to carry) and, hence, to abandon his own identity, or to remember (regardless of the suffering that is interrelated with memory). We can assume that this

opposition contains a metaphysically understood borderline (extremely fluid and hard to apprehend) which separates us as individuals (our uniqueness, singularity and “selfness” which the past constitutes) from the other. For what defines us is memory, an endured experience, very frequently difficult and painful. Therefore, to abandon memory would mean to become someone else.

The concept of borderline in David’s work analyzed here is explored also in the context of the transition from the night into the day (from darkness to light), and from the past into the future, and specifically in the blurring of the border between these phenomena and temporal dimensions. The cancellation of borderline is directly evoked in the case of Miša Volf. As already mentioned, this character has survived the war under an alias, as his parents, sensing the approaching danger, entrusted him, two-year-old at that time, to their Serbian friends’ safekeeping. Long after the war, during the renovation works on the premises of the former Sajmište camp, the workers find a metal box with documents, photographs, and a letter to Miša the son. The box is delivered to the Jewish Historical Museum, Belgrade, and from there to its addressee. In the novel, the story about regaining the past, rediscovering the genuine identity, and reconciling with fate is subtitled in the novel as *When Day Breaks* (*Kad svane dan*, with the opposition of day and night in its center). In the context of this character, Barbara Kessel’s question about the problem of the identity change as the reaction to the information that “your parents are not who they seemed to you” (Kessel, 2000) becomes alarmingly valid.²⁶ The encounter with the unearthed secret forces Volf not only to reconsider his own origins but also to rethink and redefine his identity. He initially approaches the external form of identification with anxiety and denial. The situation becomes even more complicated by the fact that Miša learns about his family’s story when he is a completely shaped man in his prime. Yet the new information profoundly penetrates his thoughts and awakens the inner imperative to decode his origins. Volf’s fortunes turn into a recording of the process during which he fulfills the void, pursues the mystery of himself, builds up knowledge about the past, but, above all, slowly assimilates his Jewish identity.

The box Volf receives contains numerous artefacts of the past in which memory has been recorded and retained. Among them, there are the protagonist’s real parents’ photographs. Consequently, the pre-catastrophe

²⁶ Barbara Kessel’s studies are evoked and commented on by Tomasz Łysak in his analysis of Agata Tuszyńska’s autobiographical novel, *Family History of Fear* (*Rodzinna historia lęku*), see Łysak (2009, p. 197).

pictures, a very significant motif in the literature on the Holocaust,²⁷ become a means via which the bygone enters the current. It is the photograph that blurs the borderline between the dead and the living, and materializes the past. Through the rather naïve measure of a description of Volf's night meeting with the parents (an image also literally translated into Paskaljević's cinematographic language), a photograph becomes the visual allegory of resurrection.²⁸

The documents Avram (the father) left to his son include the most important artefact for the protagonist's story, i.e. a set of notes and words (partly paraphrased and reused by us in the title of this article), the unfinished music score with its accompanying text: "Kad svene dan/ I mrtvi probude se/ I zora nova dođe/ I prođe noć/ Bićemo tu/ Kad svane dan/ I prođe noć..." (David, 2014, p. 106).²⁹ In these few phrases we can hear the conviction that there is a possibility of communing with the dead, that the moment will come when the borderline between death and life will be erased. The father's unfinished score becomes Miša Volf's obsession, urging him to finish it. The protagonist perceives the finalization of his father's works as a promise to rediscover his belongingness which would provide him with a sense of growing roots. The work on the score becomes a task and – as Volf believes – a means to make contact with his late parents. And performing the ready piece will erase the borderline between day and night, between dream and waking, thus opening the space in which – as we read in the novel – the living can meet the dead (David, 2014, p. 109). In the book, the borderline between these two dimensions is literarily blurred, as one night the musician travels to the beginning of the 1940s and observes the rich Belgrade Jews being thrown out of their homes and transported to the camps; ultimately he can see his parents boarding the truck in which Jews were murdered with exhaust fumes. Thanks to the melody, the dead return to the living, climb onto "the surface of the present tense." The subjective experience, the real contact with the parents is possible due to the temporary access to past events, due to the materialization of what used to be. Personalization occurs thanks to a peculiar code, i.e. the language of music which is, according to its creator, the testimony of being.³⁰ On

²⁷ Aleksandra Ubertowska writes about it in her article *Literature and Memory about Shoah: Archives, Traces, Vaults (Literatura i pamięć o Zagładzie: archiwa, ślady, krypty)* (Ubertowska, 2005).

²⁸ Referring to Henryk Grynberg's mini-novel *The Jewish War (Żydowska wojna)*, Ubertowska points at a completely reversed meaning of a photograph (Ubertowska, 2005, p. 275).

²⁹ "When day breaks/ And the dead awaken/ And the new dawn comes/ And night passes/ We will be here/ When day breaks/ When night passes..."

³⁰ Music, everyday sounds (e.g. the sound of a train in motion), and silence play a very important part in the novel and can become the basis for an interesting research.

a slightly different level, the phenomenon of the times overlapping can be interpreted as a literal realization of the necessity to remember about the past in the form of melancholic presence, as a direct realization of the concept of retaining Holocaust in “now” (Ankersmit, 2004).

In the recurring motif of regaining memory we can trace David’s characteristic mode of shaping reality, where the borderline between the real and the created becomes blurred. It is the space built “upon the material of empirical everyday reality, but adequately thickened and effaced in their contours” (Speina, 2002, p. 144). At the same time, Božo Vukadinović labels David’s prose as fantasy realism which “hoće da kaže da smo okruženi realnim čudima, i da je stvarnost u kojoj živimo punija misterije i stravičnog od one iz doba vampira i demona,” and which links „moguće sa nemogućim, stvarno i irealno, naučno i pseudonaučno” (Vukadinović, 1969, pp. 282–283).³¹ Indirectly, Vukadinović’s words pinpoint the fact that evil which is impossible to apprehend with our mind does exist in the world. This, in turn, leads to the already analyzed motif of its metaphysical, irrational and apragmatic nature, which finds its culminating moment in the extermination of the entire Jewish nation.

* * *

It is impossible to categorically estimate the value of Filip David’s *House of Memories and Oblivion* for the formation of the collective memory about *Shoah* in Serbia, especially from today’s perspective. Our preliminary diagnosis on its marginal influence, expressed in the introduction to this article, do not raise much hope. However, it cannot be forgotten that we are discussing a relatively recent novel, published in 2014. Hope also stems from the fact that literature does not remain silent, i.e. there are authors who have continuously, for many years, explored the problem of painful events from the past. On the one hand, it is justified to emphasize the significant “traces of presence” that can be noticed in the context of the topic of the Holocaust in Serbian literature. And David’s novel is an excellent example here. Nowadays, in Serbia the struggle for memory is increasingly visible, and so is the struggle against (un)remembering in education, which aims to legitimize a certain vision of history. On the other hand,

³¹ “[w]ants to tell us that we are surrounded by real miracles, and that reality in which we live is even fuller of mystery and horror than the age of vampires and demons;” “the possible with the impossible, the real with the unreal, the scientific with the pseudo-scientific.” These quotations come from Ewa Stawczyk’s (2013) unpublished doctoral dissertation *From the Imaginarium of the Serbian Fantasy Fiction (Z imaginarijuma serbskiej fantastyki)*, written under the supervision of professor Magdalena Koch, and defended in 2013.

following Sławomir Buryła and Alina Molisak's remarks, we must witness the category of absence or insufficient presence connoted by the "traces of presence," which is "absolutely crucial for relating the Jewish thematics after the Shoah" (Buryła & Molisak, 2010, p. 9). It seems that in the context of Serbian literature, the main and noticeable dimension of absence is the lack of literary studies on the Holocaust in Serbia, i.e. a very limited number of studies devoted to the homegrown legacy and experiences. Definitely, the question why in a country driven by the fever of memory, there exists such a powerful syndrome of blocked and unprocessed memory about the Holocaust, requires investigation and answer in a separate article. Nonetheless, it is worth remembering that the necessity to describe, to name, and to understand the past never begins at zero point. The scale and importance of the topic, as well as its entanglement with the cultural context, always reveal themselves in the fullest way in confrontation with the prior legacy. Thus, we postulate interaction of individual pieces and comparative studies as a necessary stage of literary studies.

To conclude, let us return to Filip David's novel. In the recapitulation it seems crucial to emphasize that when undertaking Holocaust topics, the Serbian author does not formulate direct assessments. However, the distanced narration which dominates the novel is suspended when the characters refer to the present times. The power of the authorial message is revealed especially when the present-day perspective comes to the foreground, and together with it, the fact of the insufficient memory as well as the postulates of the need to fulfill the void left by the murdered (at least symbolically). Accordingly, Miša Volf notes that the post-camp premises of Sajmište still await proper forms of commemoration: "Nema nikakvog obeležja da su se ovde nekada nalazili, prvo logor za Jevreje, potom prolazni logor, iako su u njima stradale desetine hiljada ljudi" (David, 2014, p. 111).³² We believe it does not seem inappropriate to connect the fictional protagonist's words with the novelist's convictions. They resonate with vivid emotions, with a disagreement on "the dead memory," and the traumatic past itself calls for attention.³³

³² "Not a single sign tells us that here, in the past, there was a concentration camp for the Jews, then a transit camp, although thousands of people died there."

³³ The problem of commemorating the Sajmište camp is discussed, among others, by Olga Manojlović Pintar and Aleksandar Ignjatović in *Spaces of Selective Memories: The Old Fairground in Belgrade and Memory of World War II (Prostori selektivnih memorija: Staro sajmište u Beogradu i sećanje na drugi svetski rat*, see Manojlović Pintar & Ignjatović, 2008), and Heike Karge in *Sajmište, Jasenovac, and the Social Frames of Remembering and Forgetting* (Karge, 2012).

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***Kad padne noć i Kad svane dan* – między przeszłością a terażniejszością. Granice Holokaustu w twórczości Filipa Davida**

Podstawowym celem tekstu jest analiza najnowszej twórczości Filipa Davida, autora nagrodzonej Nagrodą Tygodnika NIN („Nedeljne Informativne Novine”) powieści *Dom pamięci i zapomnienia* (2014, *Kuća sećanja i zaborava*). Z jednej strony twórczość serbskiego prozaika interesować nas będzie jako kontynuacja i reprezentacja współczesnego dyskursu na temat Holokaustu w Serbii. Z drugiej zaś – przyjrzymy się jego literackiej realizacji. Na przykładzie losów głównych bohaterów powieści (dzieci, które przeżyły Zagładę) pokażemy, gdzie przebiega rysowana przez autora granica istnienia Shoah w ich życiu. Na ile i w jaki sposób przeszłość wpływa na ich terażniejszość, gdzie przebiega granica pamięci, niepamięci i zapomnienia oraz w jakim stopniu ich życie definiuje rozdzielenie rzeczywistości od fikcji.

Słowa kluczowe: Holokaust, literatura, Serbia, Filip David, pamięć, tożsamość.

Note

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