

# Narrating and Negotiating the Repressed City: Representations of Prague in Jiří Weil's Work<sup>1</sup>

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Prague, a city whose “primary narrative potential” is based on the shifts in collective and national history inscribed in its architectural and narrative heritage (Šmahelová 2005, p. 139), plays a specific role in Jiří Weil's novels *Life with a Star* (*Život s hvězdou*, 1948) and *Mendelssohn is on the Roof* (*Na střeše je Mendelssohn*, 1960). In *Life with a Star*, its recognizable architectural and natural landmarks, which represent the “stable and complex spatial domain” (Bílek 2005, p. 250) of the city-space, are repressed and replaced by a different set of spatial references, at first sight culturally and historically neutral. As my analysis shows, textual repression of these dominants reflects the trauma and existential crises of the main character, who becomes an outsider<sup>2</sup> in the city he calls home.<sup>3</sup> Although these dominants re-emerge in *Mendelssohn is on the Roof*, their stability and significance as powerful and seemingly undisputable symbols of identity and historical presence is still questioned. In contrast to the poetics of urban space in the post-war period—which, as Daniela Hodrová argues, either followed Socialist-Realist aesthetics, which looked to literary heritage in search of a patriotic representation of Prague, or relied on the existing allegorical imagination of the cityscape (1988, p. 326), I argue that, by subverting the intertextually recognizable codes of the

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<sup>2</sup> The phenomenon of outsiderism, which will be discussed in the article, should be understood both in terms of Hana Wirth-Nesher's definition of the term as one of the main strains of modern Jewish history as well as the urban Jewish experience (1978, p. 109), but also as an existential situation overcoming any identification with ethnic groups.

<sup>3</sup> Textual repression of cultural and historical references may be also interpreted in the context of Weil's specific position on the margins of the postwar poetics of Socialist Realism, which focused “not on victims, but on heroes,” when “grief was erased from public dictionaries” and “works, which themes already excluded any type of optimism” found themselves on the margins of the contemporary literary canon” (Ambros 2006, p. 400).

established “Prague text”<sup>4</sup> Weil defamiliarized the city’s identity and re-negotiated it, offering a testimony about a world which ceased to exist.

It has been already argued (Meyerhoff 1955; Barthes 1971; Gelley 1993) that instead of representing a static background in semiotic systems of literature and the arts, the city space enters into a dynamic and mutually dependent relationship with its residents; this notion may be easily applied to Weil’s novels.<sup>5</sup> However, as regards the representation of Prague in literature (e.g. Hodrová 1988; Bílek 2005; Šmahelová 2005), this topic has not yet received due scholarly attention. I maintain that in Weil’s work, the city does not function simply as a background for the narration of historical events, but that, by subverting the expected spatial representation, it may be examined as one of the dominant narrative categories. The examination of the representation of space demonstrates how the identity and destiny of the city’s inhabitants become inextricably linked to the destiny of the city, and how radical interventions in the city-space radically affect their lives.

Briefly, both novels deal with the trauma of Prague’s Jewish community during the period of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (1939–1945), the time when executions and deportations of Czech Jews were accompanied by “deliberate destruction of the symbols of Czech identity” (Sayer 1998, p. 233). During the war, Prague, as Weil’s place of birth, was not the city he could have called his home. As the center of the newly established Protectorate, the face of Prague was radically transformed: its civic characteristics (representing its identity) were completely erased, replaced with a military and bureaucratic structure that oppressed its communities. For example, Derek Sayer notes the destruction of books, appropriation of important historical and mythological personalities and the arts for the ideological purposes of the Third Reich, and changes to the visual character of the streets and buildings, especially the removal of statues representing the historical and cultural identity of the city (ibidem, p.233). Of the statues removed from public spaces, one seems particularly important: the statue of the Jewish composer Felix Mendelssohn that stood on the roof of the Rudolfinum concert hall, one of the historical landmarks of Prague. The grotesqueness of the search for Jewish features on the statue became a leitmotif of Weil’s novel *Mendelssohn is on the Roof*.

In this respect, both novels are important as representations of city life, offering “a setting for the exploration of the historical ambiguities of Jewish experience”

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Bobrakov-Timoškin (2006) uses this term in order to discuss the literary corpus that establishes the semiotic representation of Prague in literature.

<sup>5</sup> When discussing the representation of the city-space in the modern novel, Hana Wirth-Nesher draws a distinction between “a novel that takes place in the city, and where it functions merely as a background, and a novel about the city” where the interaction, tension between the space and its residents, as it will be illustrated on Weil’s example, represents the dominant of the narrative structure (Wirth-Nesher 1978, p. 92).

(Baumgarten 1982, p. 1) as testimonies of the Holocaust within the urban space,<sup>6</sup> but also as representations of urban space beyond its association with any particular ethnic group. The numerous and aggressive transformations Prague residents experience, such as restrictions of access to certain places, the changed character of public and private spaces, interventions with building facades and cultural monuments, or the annihilation of natural space within the city, alter residents' mental maps of the space and at the same time influence the way they come to terms with the identities imposed upon them—such as Jewish or Czech—as well as with their own self-identification. As a result of such mutually dependent transformations, the complex concept of the city as home, understood in “physical” terms as a place of one's own, as well as metaphorically—*home* defined as cultural and historical belonging—is subverted and becomes only the matter of memory. In this respect, Weil's novels may be analyzed not only as fictional accounts of literature witnessing extreme conditions and from the position of an ordinary person with no pretensions of heroic life narrative and actions (Todorov 1997), but also as a specific type of modern urban novel where “‘home’ itself is problematized, no longer a haven, no longer clearly demarcated” (Wirth-Nesher 2001, p. 57).<sup>7</sup> In Weil's work, the loss of home represents the ultimate subversion of what Umberto Eco defines as the “primary function” of architecture – architecture as “a form of inhabitation” (1971, p. 61), to be a dwelling. In both works, the absence of home is articulated in its extremes: it is not only that the home as a private

<sup>6</sup> Another fictional document of the period exploring the Holocaust within the urban space is Alfréd Radok's film *Distant Journey* (*Daleká cesta*, 1950). In Radok's film, the radical transformation of the city space pertains not only to Prague but also to Terezín (a former military fortress and adjacent walled garrison town which functioned as a concentration camp). In Radok's work, Prague is mainly represented through the visualization of personal spaces, such as flats, and anonymous streets, while the city's cultural dominants are visually absent. In fact, they appear clearly only once, when St Vitus Cathedral is used as a background (not in a passive sense of the word, but rather as a semantically powerful image) to apartment buildings with open windows which display dark interiors, emphasizing the absence of human presence (see Figure 1 appended at the end of this article). Terezín, which in Weil's work functions as a feared and distant, almost mythologized “Fortress Town” as a stopping point along the way to the narratively and spatially undetermined “East,” is concretized in Radok's film as a radically changed urban landscape where the difference between the private and the public is completely annihilated and different directional signposts (providing directions towards different institutions, such as a theatre) are used in a grotesque way: verbally and visually present, but devoid of their function.

<sup>7</sup> Daniela Hodrová considers the novel in general an “urban genre,” not only in terms of its origins in the urban milieu, but primarily because of the role of the city as a dominant choice of space. As she suggests, “the city becomes one of the central places in the novel” (1988, p. 315).

and intimate sphere is annulled by forceful interventions from the outside, but even the changed character of public spaces transform residents into wanderers, existentially homeless people, and internally exiled residents.

In the novel, this is evident upon examination of the spatial aspects that Hana Wirth-Nesher defines as crucial for the representation of the city-space in the modern urban novel: the natural, the built, the human, and the verbal. Natural environment<sup>8</sup> within the urban space, such as parks and gardens, not “outside the bounds of culture” (2001, p. 54), in Weil’s novels becomes a prohibited space, an ideological opposition to the extremely bureaucratized and alienated world of the city. The built environment, which represents the “city layout, architecture and other man-made objects” (ibidem), is characterized in Weil’s narratives by its radical change in function: What was once home now becomes an uncanny environment, and a possible space of refuge. The “human environment,” which Wirth-Nesher defines as having “human features, which constitute the city setting, such as commuter crowds,” as well as “types who are generic fixtures of cities in specific periods or locales: the doorman, the street musician, the beggar, etc.” (ibidem, p. 55), can be applied to the representation of collective identity, especially a sudden imposition of Jewishness as an identity, and isolation from other collectives due to both the visibility and absence of communication. Finally, the verbal environment comprises different linguistic signs, such as “the names of streets and places, and any other language which is visually inscribed into the cityscape – advertisements, announcements, graffiti” (ibidem, p. 56). Weil’s relationship with words is crucial for understanding his work (Grebeníčková 1995; Stolz-Hladká 2004, pp. 146–149), especially when it comes to the defamiliarization of their meaning; references to the verbal environment are scarce and centered on rare verbal signs, which emphasize existence of different types of restrictions placed upon the residents. As such, they will be given the least consideration in the examination of the narratives.

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<sup>8</sup> A complex (and often problematic) relationship between the urban and natural spaces underlines the history of literature with the theme of the city as its dominant. Although it is not the main subject of his book, in *The City in Literature* (1998) Robert Lehan touches on many different aspects of this relationship, including the complexity of the term “natural” itself, from early mythologies which “acknowledge that the city takes its being from the flow of the river” (1998, p. 14) to the struggle of cities to juxtapose themselves “against the wilderness and the frontier experience” (1998, p. 167) in American novels. Lehan argues primarily that “the city is the place where man and nature meet. The city promises a way of regulating the environment, subduing the elements and allowing a certain control over nature” (1998 p. 13).

### Narrating Repressed City: *Life with a Star* (1948)

*Life with a Star* (*Život s hvězdou*, 1948 depicts the life of Josef Roubíček, known by the nickname *Pepík*, a Prague Jew who becomes a *persona non grata* as a result of abstract and frequently senseless laws affecting his everyday life, restricting the restaurants he is allowed to visit, the food he is allowed to eat, and his ability to own a pet. It is a testimony of life in the city which, as Růžena Grebeníčková suggests, is given “aloud” and “paradoxically counts with the audience” (1995, p. 433), because it is predominantly structured either as *Pepík*’s internal narrative of a “non-present other as the only living being, the cat Tomáš, a lover, who exists for him [the narrator] only in his imagination” (ibidem, p. 31).<sup>9</sup> While addressing Růžena, Roubíček unveils details of their intimate history but also points to the existence of different simultaneous realities of the city, one representing a natural continuation of everyday life, and another its annihilation: “‘Ruzena,’ I said, ‘people are now drinking coffee, well, perhaps not real coffee, but they are sitting somewhere warm, after a satisfying lunch, and I am freezing, Ruzena, and I am hungry’” (Weil 1990, p. 11). Roubíček implies that for many residents of Prague life remains unchanged, while he is deprived of human company and basic necessities, such as food and warmth, for survival.

Roubíček’s feeling of isolation originates in the loss of the private space, which, due to constant forced interventions from the outside, is first minimalized and then annihilated. He defines a personal and an intimate space as his political right, somewhere he can be by himself without any intrusions from the outside world, which penetrates into his personal sphere in many different ways, such as by sound: “‘I wouldn’t care for prison. What I want is for them to leave me alone. I’d like to sleep through it all and only wake up when it’s all over. But that isn’t possible. The radio yells its news into my window. And messengers come with orders and circulars’” (ibidem, pp. 88–89). The flat where Roubíček lives is emptied of his belongings or any objects of intimate and personal value and whittled down to its basic physical shell: “They [the authorities] want to take away this bare room,

<sup>9</sup> When it comes to the narrative structure of the novel as based on the address of possible or even imagined audience, it is illustrative to compare Grebeníčková’s arguments on Weil with Michael G. Levine’s interpretation of Paul Celan’s poetry. Levine defines Celan’s work as a search for “an addressable you,” the possibility of finding a listener who would contribute to the dialogic experience: “It is this search for ‘an addressable you,’ for ‘an addressable reality’ that not only destines the speaking ‘I’ of his poetic testimony toward ‘something standing open’ but defines its own essentially *dialogical* structure. In other words, there will have been no ‘I,’ no witness without a witness to the witness, without an opening of that dialogically constituted ‘I’ to and by the essential *possibility* of address. This is why Celan speaks of ‘an addressable you, an addressable reality’ [emphasis added by Levine]. Like this ‘reality,’ the ‘I’ destined to search for it ‘is not simply there’” (2006, p. 4).

which rain drips into, take it away from me; they don't even want me to sit on the bare floor and read the same books over and over again. They will drag me off to a foreign country and perhaps they will kill me there" (ibidem, p. 28). As the private space loses its recognizable identity, the confiscation of property, one of the external interventions into the intimacy of one's own flat, makes Roubíček aware of the shifted roles and values of the human and the material. While in the eyes of the authorities any visual acknowledgement of humans is disregarded, property, once signifying the intimacy of the space, its identity, turns into marketable goods: "They only looked at the objects in the room [...] They looked about once more, as if counting all the objects in the room so that not a single one could escape them. [...] Only when they left did they look at us, but I noticed that they were actually looking at the teacups, spoons and sugar bowl" (ibidem, p. 66).

For Roubíček, who identifies himself as a (former) ordinary resident of Prague, the city was once the known space and one which he found impossible to leave: "I was afraid. The city was spread out before us. I was born here, I knew almost every street. I had my own café, my cinema, my news-stand and tobacco shop. I did not want to go anywhere else"<sup>10</sup> (ibidem, p. 31). However, although he is deprived of the intimate and personalized space of home, his hometown also becomes the space of his confinement, as there are legal prohibitions against his leaving: "I had come to the city limits, and beyond them lay a district I was not allowed to enter" (ibidem, p. 215). When the threat of deportation to a concentration camp becomes real, for Roubíček the city as space of confinement becomes a possible space of exile: "But I took a better look at the city. I looked at its streets and passageways. I imagined myself running away through its streets" (ibidem, p. 241). In this way the first-person narrator's intimate knowledge of the city is challenged and altered as the built environment begins to play a different role: What was once home now becomes a possible shelter for the city's displaced residents.

The absence of the city's cultural and natural dominants renegotiates the opposition between the center and the periphery as one of the main features of the Prague text. The opposition is not static, but, as Daniela Hodrová demonstrates, its hierarchical but also dynamic nature—in terms of the center generally representing the memory, history and national identity of the space and the periphery as a subversion of that history—changes and becomes ambiguous at times (1988, pp. 320, 326). Weil's novel subverts this difference in the extreme: the novel's only exact reference to Prague is not to its historical center but to Střešovice, the district where the Central Office for Jewish Emigration is situated. The former bourgeois villa preserves the anonymity and secrecy of bureaucratic world: "Stresovice was the word I was most afraid of. It meant an authority that could do as it liked

<sup>10</sup> In the Czech original, "anywhere else" refers to "abroad" – "do ciziny" (Weil 1999, p. 27).

with me, a mysterious office where people walked on tiptoe.<sup>11</sup> Many who had entered there had not come back, and those who did come back lay..." (Weil 1990, p. 21) Other sites within the city are stripped of their names and thus their identities: Josef's classmate Pavel, whom Roubíček went to visit, lives in "a well-to-do neighbourhood" (ibidem, p. 63), which is otherwise unnamed. Roubíček works in a cemetery, which, even though it plays a prominent role in semiotics of space, remains unidentifiable.

The opposition between the center and the periphery is most prominently established in the fact that Josef Roubíček refers to himself as a resident of the suburbs when he contemplates that "that would make for a much better ride [by tram] downtown [to Prague]" (ibidem, s. 16).<sup>12</sup> Roubíček's statement emphasizes that the suburb is not a part of the city as a whole but functions as an isolated spatial unit situated outside the imagined city space. As a built environment, the suburb is characteristic of the social isolation of the main character, as his contact with people is limited to small talk with messengers bringing him orders and updates on new regulations (restrictions) from the authorities: "I don't have anyone," I said. "If I died, no one would know for a long time. I have no friends; on the outskirts of the city, where I live, only messengers with notices come to see me" (ibidem, p. 109).<sup>13</sup> While Roubíček defines the suburb in terms of iso-

<sup>11</sup> While references to Kafka's portrayal of political and bureaucratic power—yet another Prague text—with scarce references to the city itself, are apparent here, Růžena Grebeníčková suggests that the anonymous bureaucratic world, characterized by its invisibility, alienation and detachment from the real world, but also a very "banal reality" which is visible in its emphasis on "vegetative and animalistic functions" as in intertextual references to Russian 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition, and another urban text, that of Saint Petersburg. Grebeníčková explicitly refers to Nikolai Gogol's short story "The Overcoat" (1842), the story of an impoverished government clerk Akakii Akakievich (1995, p. 431–432) and his experience with bureaucracy.

<sup>12</sup> The English translation omits two important semantic elements of the original narrative: the fact that Roubíček uses trams for his daily commute, and the fact that the difference between Prague as the center (a toponym "Prague" is replaced with "downtown") and its suburbs is emphasized: "Tak by se lépe jelo do Prahy tramvají" (Weil 1999, p.16). The trams are important as public spaces where Roubíček has to act according to the imposed regulations, which infringe upon communication with other commuters and emphasize his subordination as a citizen without rights. "Prague," as a reference to a narratively "absent" set of cultural and historical dominants, emphasizes the distance between Roubíček's residence and the seats of power which directly influence his life.

<sup>13</sup> The novel establishes a prominent difference between isolation and loneliness. While isolation is the result of historical and political events, loneliness is an intimate condition which Roubíček mentions when he recalls the past and his love for Růžena: "I told her that I came from the city but that I had always been alone" (Weil 1990, p. 23). By mentioning the city, Roubíček establishes another spatial opposition in the novel: that

lation, others perceive it as a matter of luck. For Roubíček's aunt and uncle, who live within the city, living in the suburbs represents an illusion of happiness and safety, which Roubíček is unable to grasp: "'They didn't come to you. You live far away, too far for them. You always have to be lucky,' called my aunt from the bedroom in a voice full of recrimination" (ibidem, p. 60). Hence the distances are subjective: they are defined by their proximity to the authorities, which seem to represent the centrality of the space and the lack of physical effort on the part of the authorities to reach so far away.

As seen from the perspective of the first-person narrator, the otherwise known city becomes the space of alienation. Exhausted and hungry, Roubíček fails to find directions and no longer remembers how to get anywhere or how long the journey took: "I found the house and rang the bell. I didn't know how long the trip took me. I only knew that twice I had to jump away from moving cars when I crossed the street. Perhaps I also ran into pedestrians. I didn't even remember the path I took. All I knew was that I had to reach the bridge that crossed to the district I was heading for" (ibidem, p. 63). The loss of memory is also caused by the imposed restrictions of movement he has to obey, which for him radically change the city and aggravate his feeling of displacement: "It was a spring day and there were a lot of people on the streets. I had to avoid the main streets and squares, which were off-limits for me on Sundays. I took a roundabout route through side streets, quickly slipping through the alley" (ibidem, p. 188). However, from the perspective of an internal outcast, whose life is ordered by a set of rules, and who would rather stand on the tram than risk, as a citizen without rights, being kicked out for occupying someone's seat, he sees the space from a different perspective. From his unprivileged perspective, he witnesses a demonstration of power and the existence of a parallel history that other residents are not aware of: "I had to pass by the Radio Mart, and I saw a lot from the tram I was standing in, while the others sat. I even saw a little of the compound over the fence. I also saw the gate that people with numbers<sup>14</sup> hanging around their necks passed through, bent over under the weight of their huge rucksacks. I saw *their* policeman standing by the gate, his feet wide apart. [...] I remember the silent, frozen expression of horror" (ibidem, p. 129).

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of the city and the countryside. Růžena comes from the countryside, as her "hands are rough" (ibidem), and she is married (ibidem). However, this opposition does not play a prominent role in the structure of the novel; it will be emphasized in *Mendelssohn is on the Roof*.

<sup>14</sup> As Veronika Ambros suggests, numbers again become concrete individuals in Weil's *Eulogy for 77,297 Victims* (*Žalozpěv za 77 297 obětí*, 1958): "Similar to a memorial in Pinkas synagogue, Weil's *Eulogy* also changes numbers into individuals, and resurrects their forgotten stories. In this way suffering ceases to be an abstract fact, it becomes reality experienced by concrete people, who the text laments" (Ambros 2006, p. 406).



The absence of the natural environment from the city reflects the restriction of the narrator's movement through the urban space: He is no longer allowed to use parks or other leisure and recreational facilities. His use of natural space is limited to the courtyard of the building where he lives, which he uses for growing vegetables, as well as the cemetery, where he is ordered to work alongside other Jews awaiting deportation to concentration camps. In his interpretation, the cemetery represents a self-sufficient space because it is divided from the city by walls. At the same time it also represents a safe haven, since the walls protect and isolate the workers from the outside world: "Doctors and nurses came as well, and we sometimes talked to them, as they always had news, something that we, who were at the cemetery, surrounded by a high wall, did not know" (ibidem, p. 183). In comparison with the surrounding space of the city, restrictions of movement do not apply at the cemetery: "There were people who enjoyed throwing others out of moving trams, kicking them and saying nasty words. They were on the look-out for [Jewish] stars so that they could demonstrate their power. I never knew if I would make it to work or back home, but at the cemetery all was peaceful. It wasn't possible to order the dead to spring from their graves and make room for someone else" (ibidem, pp. 92–93). Conversely, the activities at the cemetery also replicate everyday activities typical of the urban space as the narrator once knew it: "It's nice here in the summer. Pity you weren't here then. People come here in the summer – mothers with baby carriages, and on Sundays, people come to lie in the grass" (ibidem, p. 95). The cemetery also functions as an uncensored space, as people there discard (though with respect) books that are otherwise forbidden in the world "outside": "I found them [books] at the cemetery, nicely wrapped. Somebody had thrown them away there – good books, in hard covers, but forbidden books. The person who threw them away was probably afraid" (ibidem, pp. 100–101). However, the fluctuation of its residents also mirrors current happenings in the city and in some circumstances distorts its somewhat idyllic atmosphere: "Most of the people at the cemetery were new. Those who had left in transports were replaced by others. There was no difference; the stove was the same; you couldn't see the faces of people as they stared into the dust, through which the same roads led. The fact that Robert had disappeared and now lived in the fortress town [Terezín] didn't matter much. Someone else was always around who knew a lot of news" (ibidem, p. 141). Despite the constant change of people, whose arrivals and departures represent the only connection with the space of the city, the cemetery and its everyday regime remain undisturbed.

Most importantly, the cemetery functions as a space where life happens: It is similar to a garden where the narrator reconfirms his own identity as a human and not as a number because he witnesses that something is able to "grow according to its own laws" rather than diminish, subjected to regulations: "The main thing was that a new tree was going to grow, that I had replaced numbers with something

living, which would grow according to its own laws" (ibidem, p. 237). Rather than the world of humans, the notion of living and being alive is associated here with the botanical world:

We felt good at the cemetery when the spring sun shone. We planted vegetables and made furrows for seeds with wooden sticks. We felt good when we saw how the plants, full of energy, pushed through the earth, sometimes cracking it. We were happy to see the force of the plants and their desire to live. We watered them and happily watched the streams of water loosen the earth. We watched the drops on the leaves happily and felt good when we came to the cemetery and saw that our plants were growing taller all the time. We were free. It was good to be free and to be able to decide which plant would grow.  
(Ibidem, p. 177)

In this way, the natural in the narrative becomes synonymous with growth, and the cemetery with the safe haven, where the narrator feels that he may observe the cycle of life, which for him no longer exists in the surrounding city.

However, Roubíček's communication with other outcasts in the cemetery emphasizes his condition of un-belonging and his search for solitude, which, in different forms, reappears throughout the narrative. Roubíček, whose name is Czech, and who considered himself an anonymous part of a collective of people—"an ordinary bank clerk, one of the many walking about the city" (ibidem, p. 64)—is specific and estranged now: He is a Jew marked with a yellow star (ibidem, p. 84). However, he does not feel himself to be a part of the cultural/religious group to which, according to the authorities, he belongs, as he does not seem to be knowledgeable of Judaism's specific cultural traditions: "Well, that's our custom. Don't you [Roubíček] know it? Torn scrolls must be buried or destroyed in any other way. They must be buried in consecrated soil, like people. God's word is equal to a human being" (ibidem, p. 95). His problem with "his own collective" at the cemetery is that he does not want to hear news of detentions and persecutions as it aggravates his feeling of dehumanization, renders him incapable of escaping a collective fate, and associates him with a number waiting to be called for transportation. Conversely, he is aware that refusing to share the fate of his fellow Jews and trying to escape the threat of being transported would mean the ultimate internal exile: "I would accept extinction without fear or shame. Instead, the freedom I would now have to bear would be a heavy load. It was too much of a burden to be a different Josef Roubíček, to be a rebel who had a price on his head, who would go into hiding and have to prowl at night. Perhaps it would be better after all to become a number, a leaf carried by the wind until it falls to the ground and is trampled into the mud" (ibidem, p. 246).

### Negotiating Repressed City: *Mendelssohn is on the Roof*<sup>15</sup>

While *Life with a Star* begins with clear references to changes and subversion of the private and personal space, in *Mendelssohn is on the Roof*, the emphasis is on the changes that the public space undergoes. At the very beginning of the novel, a reference to statues, representations of the human form made of stone, introduces a relationship between the “built” and the “human” element. The main metaphor of people turning to stones is significant for both the historical and artistic depiction of space of Prague—Prague is the space where, in the absence of the “human” element, stone becomes personified. The concept of this transformation originates from mythology: being righteous, Deukalion and Pyrrha were the only human beings spared from Zeus’s wrath, brought about by the decline of humanity. However, isolated and alone on Mount Parnassus, they pleaded to the goddess Themis to teach them how to recreate the human species. The merciful goddess advised them to cover their faces and throw stones behind their backs: “They obeyed the Goddess. And when a stone fell against the hard ground, a man was born once again” (Weil 1991, unpaginated).

Depictions of these claims can be found in the introductory part of the novel. From the mythological encounter on Mount Parnassus (the center of the gods and symbol of the arts), the narration continues on the roof of Prague’s Rudolfinum Concert Hall. Local bureaucrat and junior SS officer Julius Schlesinger (along with two Czechs who were forced to assist) is trying to determine which of the statues in a line belongs to the Jewish composer Felix Mendelssohn. Schlesinger’s entire life depends on the success of the operation—if he does not destroy the statue, he could be sent to the Eastern Front and face death in the Russian steppes. Without proper musical training, relying solely on racial theories according to which Jews can easily be recognized by their noses, he soon mistakenly destroys the statue of Richard Wagner, who, according to Nazi propaganda, was a predecessor of the Third Reich (ibidem, p. 8).

In the context of the analysis of the city’s space, the position of the statue is significant because of its influence on perspective in the narrative structure. First, situated on the roof of one of the city’s landmarks, the statues see the whole city. Personified with the ability of sight and observation, they resemble humans, just as some characters in the novel start to resemble stone. As Růžena Grebeníčková observes, every narrative situation in the text is accompanied by a particular statue, and although this action does not offer any insight into psychological characterization, it contributes to parallelism in narration itself (1995, p. 428). From their elevated position, the anthropomorphized statues clearly identify the consequences of the new structure of power. Daily life in Prague is nonexistent,

<sup>15</sup> The discussion of *Mendelssohn is on the Roof* is partially based on my essay “Potret Praga u romanu Jiříja Weila *Mendelssohn je na krovu*” (2009).

and, as in *Life with a Star*, the city turns into a space of confinement: “There were many statues out here, each one representing a composer. They looked down at the street. Empty. Of course, it’s a weekday. Everybody’s at work. The universities are closed. Once in a while someone slips into the Museum of Industrial Design. People don’t like to walk around here with the SS barracks and the Jewish Bureau nearby. This is the SS zone” (Weil 1991, p. 5).<sup>16</sup>

The view of Prague from the vantage point of the statues shows how the city changed during the occupation and how the hierarchy of totalitarian rule was established. The position of the seats of power (like the Rudolfinum) within the city reflects their relationship with the city’s history: for instance, German military barracks are located in a former law school just opposite the Jewish Quarter in the center of the city. The buildings change their function—once civilian institutions, they become centers of totalitarian rule in the Protectorate. Also, as history is being revised, streets, passages, and neighborhoods are transformed into places of captivity and anonymity—certain parts of the city (such as the Jewish Quarter) become isolated units, aesthetic and political symbols of ruin, degradation, and loss. Descriptions of the facades and the names of certain streets do not exist in the novel, either. Walking through the city resembles travelling through a nameless space.

Similar to *Life with a Star*, the function of walking changes and weakens as a result of new rules and orders. There are no descriptions of pedestrians, and the

<sup>16</sup> Transformation of the human into stone and vice versa, along with some other aspects of the structure of the bureaucratized world (such as loss of distinction between the private and the public), resembles the work of Kafka, already established in scholarship (e.g. Grossman 1949). However, Weil’s approach to the structure of power is significantly different. Analyzing “Kafka’s World,” Milan Kundera argues that in Kafka’s work “institution is a mechanism that obeys its own laws” (1990, p. 101). As Kundera continues, power structure in Kafka’s work is based on mystery and anonymity: “no one knows now who programmed those laws or when; they have nothing to do with human concerns and are thus unintelligible” (ibidem). Contrary to Kafka, the totalitarian world in Weil’s novel is based upon a strict hierarchical structure. Although the oppressed individuals often deem imposed laws pointless (like the ban on using certain streets at certain hours or performing certain activities), everybody knows the law and is aware of its source. Furthermore, Weil’s depiction of both exterior and interior space is not a depiction of “the bureaucratization of social activity that turns all institutions into *boundless labyrinths*; and resulting depersonalization of the individual” (ibidem, p. 107), but a clearly defined hierarchy of power where everyone, including passers-by, doormen, and pedestrians, has their function. In Weil’s novel, Prague is easily recognized: the seat of the German administration is situated in the Rudolfinum Concert Hall and the Prague neighborhood of Střešovice. On the other hand, in both cases (Kafka’s and Weil’s) the historical and the individual are obliterated, and these portraits of the city both represent a world in which “the sense of the real is inexorably being lost” (ibidem).

side streets of Prague, its backyards and passages, are left out from the text. At the same time, these obvious absences signal the absence of *flânerie* as a possible insight into its everyday life and its history through walking and observing. People who do walk are limited to their (often military) profession. Moreover, as a part of the petrification process, people become functions: they are functionaries of the SS, military men, or rare individuals who are forced to abandon their homes due to urgent necessity. Their visual perspective becomes one-sided and restricted to the aims of their activities, too: "Schulze II marched along the street as if it were completely empty. He looked neither to the right nor to the left and headed straight for the door" (ibidem, p. 37).

Finally, the narrator proposes mechanized movement/motion as the only possible way of passing through the city and establishing contact with the outside world. While in *Life with a Star* trams represent a mode of mass transportation as well as the humiliation of the selected group of commuters, cars and vehicles in *Mendelssohn is on the Roof* showcase privatized power, spreading fear and unease while circling the city. They confirm that the residents are aware of the identity of the untouchable person who is the source of power: "The Mercedes-Benz flew along the highway through the desolate countryside. Not until he neared the city did he pass people on the streets. Even they jumped to the sides of the road as the car with the banners hurtled past them. Even they knew who was driving into the city at this hour" (ibidem, p. 17).

In the end, due to the loss of the manifold perspective on urban space, the anonymity of streets, and the disappearance of natural movement and its replacement with mechanized means of transportation, the city as a semantic unity loses its connection with the outside world and becomes an isolated unit. Its function as a closed and self-sufficient space culminates in the metaphor of the "fortress city," already mentioned in *Life with a Star*, which the narrator often uses instead of the real name of the city, Terezín. This toponym shows that, within the narrative, Prague was just one step between both Mount Parnassus (a divine place and a symbol of the arts) and, at the other extreme, a concentration camp. Moreover, as there is no relationship between Prague and the outside world, there is no connection between the fortified city of Terezín and its surroundings: "The town was enclosed by battlements and gates which were guarded night and day. Forcibly extracted from the countryside, closed off from the world, the once sleepy garrison town had been turned into a massive prison" (ibidem, p. 190).

The notion of mechanized motion as one of the segments of totalitarian society culminates in the image of trains packed with people being deported either to concentration camps. Dynamics of mechanized movement are emphasized with the use of various verbs of motion that accelerate the narrative rhythm and function in opposition to the passive, static spaces of the city: "The Gestapo men climbed in the car and sat there without a word" (ibidem, p. 9), "then they drove

through the dead, dark city" (ibidem), "But the black limousine was racing along, going somewhere terribly far away" (ibidem, pp. 9–10).

The suburbs also play an important part in the construction of external space in Prague. In contrast with those in *Life with a Star*, the suburbs are not characterized by isolation, which the characters interpret differently but always according to their relative feelings of proximity to the seat of power. In *Mendelssohn is on the Roof*, the suburbs are represented as animal dwellings, a metaphor with different connotations. Germans consider them places of decay, similar to the Jewish Quarter in the city center. People who live in the suburbs belong to the lower classes and resemble animals, "subhumans to slave in the factories and breed in their burrows, to provide a greater work force for the Reich" (ibidem, p. 17). Conversely, the suburbs are spaces close to nature, which is a positive opposition to the bureaucratized structure of the city, providing an increased possibility of survival. Czech Antonin Bečvář, one of the people who climbed the roof of the Rudolfinum Concert Hall in order to remove the statue of Mendelssohn, lives in Prosek, which was at that time on the outskirts of Prague, inaccessible from the city center: "Public transportation did not fully connect Prosek with Prague; one has to walk. However, living in the suburbs means access to food, as people keep domestic animals, such as rabbits and goats, in the backyards of their houses" (ibidem, p. 147).

As a part of natural environment, trees, similar to plants in *Life with a Star*, play an important role in Weil's work and symbolize eternity as opposed to death<sup>17</sup> and the annihilation of the human species. This is evident at the end of the novel, at the time of Adeline and Greta's death. Although tortured and beaten to death by the Gestapo, the two Jewish girls do not want to reveal the names of their protectors but claim they had been hiding in the woods. The picture of wood remains in their memory while they are dying. It symbolizes the resurrection of life and eternal life as the only real memory that surpasses death. It also invokes the eternal circle of life and death and the presence of the dead in the memory of those who are still alive. Finally, it represents a close relationship with the earth, which is eternal in its own right:

Nearby, just a few steps away, murmured the forest. Trees were growing out of seedlings, casting roots in the ground, holding fast against storms, against whirlwinds, against thunder and lightning [...] The trees kept growing, victorious and deathless. They held firm, they

<sup>17</sup> Even a mention of installing of wooden gallows in Terezín points to the opposition of the natural with annihilation: their designer, František Schönbaum, a Jew, is aware that their "T" shape resembles the cross, which itself, along with the statues of saints, was made of wood. He hopes the wooden gallows will become a symbol of suffering and remain in the memory of survivors who will not know their creator (Weil 1991, p. 171).

served, and when they were forced to die they died standing up. They weren't engraved in memory in cold stone, to threaten or remind. They were the life that overpowers death. 'In the forest,' whispered Adela and Greta, dying. They were there in the forest at the hour of death. (ibidem, pp. 227–228)

An important part of the natural environment is also the Vltava River. Its natural flow is in opposition with mechanized movement, a continual presence despite rapid development and change in history. As the possibility of walking and movement had been abolished, only the river symbolizes imagined freedom and escape. Rudolf Vorlitzer, a doctor who suffers from a rare ailment that petrifies human organs, is obsessed with rivers as symbols of unrestricted movements and freedom: "He loved the river and could listen to tales of it for hours. [...] He would imagine himself paddling from one bank to the other, cautiously avoiding the shallows, keeping the boat from scraping and damaging its canvas bottom on rocks. These were trips he could never manage alone – they called for too much strength and endurance" (ibidem, p. 55). His philosophical nature still treasures memories of Prague, different from German functionalistic and purist ideas about hygiene. Therefore, Vorlitzer is the only person aware of the importance of the natural element as an inherited aspect of the urban space and its history. He internalizes the river as his own vision of the city and thus preserves it in his memory: "Only after he climbed a hill with Jan [Jan Kruliš—an architect and Vorlitzer's friend] one day and looked down at the city through Jan's eyes, only after he saw the city rising and falling away, embracing the river with its quays and bridges, flowing with the current and against it, unshakable and indestructible, only then did he understand why Jan loved it so much" (ibidem, p. 58).

Just as Prague exteriors were historically narrowed to German cultural element, by the same token, in the imagination of the administration of the Protectorate the river becomes a mirror and a natural connection with Germany. Taking into consideration its geographical position inside Prague, the Vltava really did emphasize the position of the historical seat of the Bohemian kings, who are now regarded as Germanic rulers. Furthermore, the river divides the city into two parts: the Prague Castle, a historic center of power and identity, and the Old Town, home to the Jewish quarter and anonymous empty streets: "that river mirroring the royal castle and dividing the city into two parts is now a German river" (ibidem, p. 70). But the natural force of the river resists any ideological appropriation and represents a segment of the city which is clean and remote from human presence and influence. The narrator describes the water as a pristine work of nature that springs from the earth, hiding itself from human misery. In the end, the power of the river overpowers the human element: "The waters of the

river flooded the underground passageways, and tens of thousands died within, the wounded, women, children” (ibidem, p. 227).

The depiction of the interior spaces of Prague reflects the outside situation and calls to mind the above-mentioned negation of the civic aspects of the city’s exteriors. As in *Life with a Star*, former cultural and public institutions are utilized as seats of power, characterized by a strict hierarchic structure. The change in their function is strongly emphasized verbally, as a sign of appropriation of the urban space: “The villa was the headquarters of the Central Bureau [Zentralamt], a division of the Security Police [Sicherheitsdienst] with direct orders from Berlin for the solution of the Jewish question in the Czech and Moravian Protectorate. The ‘final solution’” (ibidem, p. 43).<sup>18</sup> Just as the city is isolated from the outside world, its interiors are distinctly separated from outside places since entrance is forbidden to outsiders. Freedom of movement from the outside into the inside world is allowed only to those who can prove their power and influence the bureaucratic structure that rules inside. Expression of that power to a doorman, therefore, becomes the test for those who want to come in and continue further inside, a demonstration of their power (ibidem, p. 38).

As already shown in the description of the city, different communities representing the human environment of the city also have different roles, especially in mutual interaction. They are not represented as homogenous,<sup>19</sup> and as in *Life with a Star*, their members display different attitudes towards their identity. Pressured to recognize which sculpture represents Mendelssohn, Dr Rabinovič feels guilty of committing the religious sin of mimicking human faces, which is strictly forbidden in Judaism. Nevertheless, a night visit and transportation to the concentration camp indicates that he cannot rely on the protection guaranteed by the Central Bureau (ibidem, p. 202), with whom he collaborates in order to save his family. Other Jewish characters like Otto Pokorný or František Schönbaum are secular, more interested in the fate of their community than in religious matters. Pokorný becomes a representative of a large, anonymous group of people because his name is just as common as the name Novák, a highly common Czech surname that can also be Jewish (ibidem, p. 132).<sup>20</sup> In this way his identity is neutralized, but by the authorities he is considered Jewish, and therefore an outcast.

<sup>18</sup> While the Czech original preserves German names for institutions, and does not accompany them with Czech names, in the English translation, they are treated as English terms. In this way the English translation disregards the semantic function these terms play in the original text.

<sup>19</sup> Heterogeneity, as one of the sources of tension among different communities and the city, is again one of the main features of the city space in modern urban novels (Wirth-Nesher 1978, p. 92).

<sup>20</sup> In the English translation, there is no reference to comparison with the Nováks: “The photographer had a common name—Otto Pokorný. Some of the many people with the



While the remnants of history are still visible in city's exteriors, the interiors carry memories of their previous owners. Just as the statues are, due to their elevated position, the landmarks of Prague exteriors, figurines become intrinsic and iconic features of the interiors. In the former villa, now the Central Bureau, the statues of animals become a natural representation of change in the function of space: A former children's bedroom becomes an office in which documents about Jewish citizens are filed. As in *Life with a Star*, the objects at the same time maintain intimate value for the former inhabitants and become metaphors of their dehumanization:

Over there, where the children's room had once been, where little animal figures could still be seen peeking out of the whitewashed plaster, was the 'Jewish room.' That's what they called it. Because Jews were working there, filling out forms, writing names on file cards, dispatching mail. But power over the abbreviations, initials, rubber stamps, and graphs belonged to others, those engaged in planning the journey to death with stops along the way.  
(Ibidem, p. 44)

The changed function of the interiors also results in a distorted relationship between the public and the private. This is an additional function of the interiors: Formerly spaces of intimacy, private spaces now function as shelters and refuge. The border between the exteriors and interiors are porous; their inhabitants must strive to be invisible as the police can come any time or the neighbors can report any unusual sound. Dr Rabinovič is captured having dinner with his family. The Czech Javůrek family, who hide two Jewish girls named Adela and Greta, receive an unexpected night visit: "In the middle of the night someone banged loudly at the Javůreks' door. You could hear the sound all through the building. People came running out of apartments in their night clothes" (ibidem, p. 219).

## Conclusion

By playing with the conventions of representations of urban space of Prague, Jiří Weil's novels *Life with a Star* and *Mendelssohn is on the Roof* represent a specific, yet insufficiently explored, contribution to the scholarship mapping Prague texts in literature. Their main feature is the extent to which Prague as a city is constructed as an easily recognizable, and perhaps expected, topos, with all of its cultural and historical significance for the establishment of the national and cultural identity.

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name Pokorný were Jews" (Weil 1991, p. 132).

As such, Prague is absent from *Life with a Star* and acquires a more concrete shape in *Mendelssohn is on the Roof*. This process has to do with a shift in narrative perspective—from the first-person narrator in the first novel—in search of an addressee, characteristic of testimonial literature and the act of witnessing as a mechanism of dealing with trauma—to the third-person narrator as a rather detached observer of collective history and individual destinies in the second novel. Along with a shift in narrative perspective, there is also a shift in focus on spatial aspects of the city: As its image becomes more concretized, and witnessing changes into observation, the focus on interiors move into the representation of the exterior, more detailed and concrete, layout of the city.

The tragedy of Czech Jewry, unquestionably the subject of Weil's work, should be approached, as I suggest, from the position of the modern urban novel, the main feature of which is the loss of home, with all of its possible connotations. It then becomes evident in the novel that, as Jan Grossman argues, "the tragedy of the Jewry is not [represented as] a paramount tragedy of Auschwitz gas: it is the tragedy of everyday painful negotiations and undermined humanity with enormous and as if invisible power, incomprehensible in its absurdity" (1949, p. 213). As the most common feature of both novels, the loss of home is most apparent in the way certain environments in the urban space radically change in the midst of a historical event of unforeseen proportions and become estranged from residents. As such, they call for further examination of various other related themes, such as the Holocaust and the Central European urban novel, and for reconsideration of the urban space of Prague in postwar literature and film. They also pose the theoretical question of how to analyze the city space and decode its history, memory, and identity at the moment when it becomes narratively inaccessible, hiding as an absent space before our eyes.

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## Appendix

Figure 1: A screenshot from *Distant Journey* by Alfred Radok (1950; 00:50:03)



## Resumé

### Vyprávění utlačovaného města: Reprezentace Prahy v díle Jiřího Weila

Romány Jiřího Weila *Život s hvězdou* (1948) a *Na střeše je Mendelssohn* (1960), které využívají a zároveň překračují konvence zobrazení městského prostoru Prahy, představují specifický, ale nedostatečně prozkoumaný příspěvek k mapování tzv. pražského textu v literatuře. Ústřední otázka při interpretaci románů zní, do jaké míry je Praha coby město konstruována jako snadno rozpoznatelný topos, s veškerým jeho historickým významem pro utváření národní a kulturní identity.

**Klíčová slova:** Romány Jiřího Weila, kategorie prostoru, literární reprezentace, topos Prahy

## Resumé

### Narrating and Negotiating the Repressed City: Representations of Prague in Jiří Weil's Work

By playing with the conventions of representations of urban space of Prague, Jiří Weil's novels *Life with a Star* and *Mendelssohn is on the Roof* represent a specific, yet insufficiently explored, contribution to the scholarship mapping Prague texts in literature. Their main feature is the extent to which Prague as a city is constructed as an easily recognizable, and perhaps expected, topos, with all of

its cultural and historical significance for the establishment of the national and cultural identity.

**Key words:** Novels by Jiří Weil, category of space, literary representation, topos of Prague

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