



(Un)Familiar Jewishness in the Work of Jiří Weil*

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SYNOPSIS

Jiří Weil (1900–1959), the Czech writer of Jewish origin, is known primarily for his works of fiction dealing with the experience of the Shoah, both in the form of short stories and his celebrated novels *Život s hvězdou* (Life with a Star, 1949) and *Na střeše je Mendelssohn* (Mendelssohn is on the Roof, 1960), as well as the text collage *Žalozpěv za 77 297 obětí* (Lamentation for 77 297 Victims, 1958). However, the fact that Weil presented the theme of Jewishness also from a different perspective is often overlooked — for example in the novel *Harfeník* (The Harpist, 1958) and in the unpublished texts ‘Perrotina, mašina chlebozlodějská’ (Perrotine, the Bread-Stealing Machine) and ‘Tiskařská romance’ (A Printer’s Romance), in which he linked the theme of Jewishness to that of the beginnings of the labour movement in the Czech lands in the 19th century. Although Weil’s post-war literary output is characterised by his focus on themes of Jewishness and the Shoah, we also find Jewish figures represented in his pre-war novel writing. Last but not least, it is necessary also to recall his texts of a non-fiction character, in which he dealt with Jewish themes in the course of his employment at the State Jewish Museum. The focal point of this contribution therefore resides in the presentation of Weil’s lesser-known texts, dealing with the theme of Jewishness other than through the prism of the Shoah, and in his uncovering of a complex of Jewish identities in his pre-war novel *Moskva-hranice* (Moscow-Border, 1937).

KEYWORDS

Czech Jewish Literature; Jiří Weil; Jewish identity; *Moskva-hranice* (Moscow-Border); *Harfeník* (The Harpist).

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.14712/23366680.2022.1.14>

Jiří Weil (1900–1959), the Czech writer, journalist, translator and scientist of Jewish origin, is known primarily for his works of fiction dealing with the experience of the Shoah — the apex of this part of his work is represented by the novels *Život s hvězdou* (Life with a Star, 1949) and *Na střeše je Mendelssohn* (Mendelssohn is on the Roof, 1960), as well as the text collage *Žalozpěv za 77 297 obětí* (Lamentation for 77 297

* During the work on this text, use was made of Czech Literary Bibliography resources/services — <https://clb.ucl.cas.cz/> (ORJ identifier: 90136).



Victims, 1958). Weil also dealt with the theme of the Shoah in a whole series of short stories, of which his collection of lyrically tinged poetry *Barvy* (Colours, 1946) may be considered the most accomplished work. However, both readers and scholars frequently overlook the fact that Weil had already focused on the theme of Jewishness previously, thus not only from the perspective of a survivor of the Shoah: we find Jewish characters also in his pre-war literary output, in his debut novel *Moskva-hranice* (Moscow-Border, 1937). In the novel *Harfeník* (The Harpist, 1958) and in the unpublished texts 'Perrotina, mašina chlebozlodějská' (Perrotine, the Bread-Stealing Machine) and 'Tiskařská romance' (A Printer's Romance), he linked the theme of Jewishness to that of the beginnings of the labour movement in the Czech lands in the 19th century. Last but not least, it is necessary also to recall shorter studies such as 'Pražské ghetto na počátku 19. století' (The Prague Ghetto at the Beginning of the 19th Century) and 'Současníci o Mordechajovi Mayzelovi' (Mordechai Maisel in the Words of His Contemporaries), which were written after the war, when Weil was employed as research worker at the State Jewish Museum, or the similarly discovered and as yet unpublished short story 'O krásné židovce z Bechyně' (On the Beautiful Jewess of Bechyně).¹ The focal point of this contribution therefore resides in the presentation of Weil's lesser known texts, dealing with the theme of Jewishness other than through the prism of the Shoah, and in the uncovering of this theme in his pre-war novel *Moskva-hranice* (1937).

First of all I shall present a few words on the Jewishness of the author himself. We know from the available materials² that Jiří Weil came from an originally well-to-do, assimilated Jewish family. His father Karel Weil was the owner of a business manufacturing frames in Praskolesy, near Hořovice. The family lived here until 1910, where Jiří Weil and both his siblings, his older brother Karel and his younger sister Hedvika, attended the municipal school; their school teaching also included lessons in Judaism. The Weil family later moved to Prague, where Jiří and his brother attended grammar school, initially in Křemencova street, and from 1915/16 in Truhlářská street. At both grammar schools the language of instruction was Czech, which all the students claimed as their mother tongue. Similarly as at the municipal school, at the grammar school also one of the subjects was religious education; throughout the time of their studies, the Weil brothers attended classes held by rabbi Bedřich Fritz

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- 1 In this short story, Weil portrayed the story of the Bechyně Jews, who according to the legend were driven out of the town upon the order of the ruthless administrator of the estate of Šternberk, Jan Jakub von Kostheim, as an act of revenge after they had prevented him from taking possession of the beautiful Jewish girl Róza (in Weil's manuscript the name Ester also appears). However, the administrator died at the moment when, shortly before the departure of the Jews, the local rabbi prayed for their salvation. The Bechyně Jews were therefore spared, and were able to remain in the town. This discovery is thanks to the scholar Hana Hříbková, see her as yet unpublished dissertation thesis *Život a dílo Jiřího Weila po roce 1939* (The Life and Work of Jiří Weil after 1939, 2019).
- 2 According to the publication *Židé v Hořovicích a okolí* (The Jews in Hořovice and Around), the Weil family set up a business manufacturing luxury picture frames. The company employed two dozen workers, and prospered to such a degree that the Weil family could afford to have a spacious villa built (Nedbal 1986, p. 34).



Knöpfelmacher at the grammar school in Žitná street. The young Weil's relationship towards his faith can be characterised as lukewarm, which is attested to not only by the unimpressive marks he received in the subject of religion, but also by the fact that during the winter semester in his second year of his studies at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University, he stated his religion as 'none'.³ He was not fully confronted with his Jewish origin until during the Shoah, which he was the only member of his family to survive, and he subsequently focused on this theme in the whole series of texts mentioned above. However, to a certain extent he did engage with his Jewish identity even before the Second World War, as documented by the set of Jewish characters which he depicted in his pre-war debut novel *Moskva-hranice*.

MOSKVA-HRANICE

In this novel, which Weil wrote immediately after his return from the Soviet Union in 1935, and which was published in December 1937 by the Družstevní práce press, three plot lines intertwine, depicting the life of foreigners in the Soviet Union in the mid-1930s. The first of these is the story of the half Jewess Ri, who goes to the USSR after her husband, a Polish engineer working in a Moscow factory. The second part is devoted to the Czech Jan Fischer, who works in a translation office in Moscow. Ri is initially afraid of life in the Soviet Union, and feels an antipathy towards the entire country, the capital Moscow and its inhabitants, but eventually integrates herself into the Soviet collective, becomes a 'shock worker' in a Soviet factory, and comes to lead a satisfied life there. By contrast, Fischer experiences an entirely opposite process, in which his dissatisfaction with life in the USSR grows and his inner feeling of lack of identification with the Soviet collective hardens to such an extent that, as the result of a 'purge', he is expelled from the communist party and therefore also from Soviet society. The third story unfolds around the Romanian communist Rudolf Herzog, who pays for his loyalty to the Communist Party with his life.

Moskva-hranice is generally examined and interpreted primarily as a witness testimony on the Soviet reality of the 1930s,⁴ and subsequently also as an object of contemporary reception (see Šidák 2018). However, a factor that has hitherto remained outside the focus of interest of scholars is the fact that Weil, through the means of characters in his novel who are linked to one of the main protagonists, namely Ri, uncovers a whole spectrum of identities that were made available to Jews in Czechoslovakia, and indeed the whole of Central and Eastern Europe in the period between the two World Wars, due to a process of emancipation and its accompanying phenomena:

3 See *Listy řádných filosofů* (Register of Regular Philosophy Students), registered during the winter semester of 1920/1921, Archives of Charles University, resource FF UK 1882–2012, student registers, 1920/21.

4 Of the range of critical receptions to *Moskva-hranice*, emphasising its documentary value, we may for example present Eisner's 'Český román o sovětech' (Czech Novel about the Soviets) in *Panorama*, 'Rusko čistek v české beletrii' (The Russian Purges in Czech Literature) in *Lidové noviny* by Václav Černý, 'Román o sovětské skutečnosti' (Novel about the Soviet Reality) by Václav Kaplický or 'Jiří Weil: Moskva-hranice' by Jaroslav Teichmann in *Slovanský přehled*.

The intellectual born in the Jewish environment of the 19th and 20th centuries was exposed to a far more complex entanglement of the identities on offer than his 'Jewish colleague', writing in Germany or France. It began with the question of whether he would write in Yiddish, or even in Hebrew, Polish, Czech, German, Hungarian, Russian or...? Which of the numerous identities would he take on (there were always more than two) [...] what mix and complex of various identities could he absorb into himself? Political stances could also differ to a maximum degree: neutral, engaged in one or another nationalist movement, a supporter of the monarchy or an adherent of socialism (Hahn 2000, p. 16).⁵



The fact that the incorporation of the theme of Jewishness into the novel *Moskva-branchice* was of crucial significance for Weil is attested to by the sheer volume of text devoted to the story of Ri: out of a total of 25 chapters, a full 12, thus half of the book, focus on her. In addition, it is only in Ri's story that we learn, in detail and in chronological order, about the life of the character before her arrival in the USSR, in which the theme of Jewishness appears in five whole chapters. The protagonist herself hails from an originally wealthy Moravian Jewish family, who felt an allegiance to the German-speaking population. Ri 'could speak differently' from the others in the building where she grew up, who 'spoke in another language, the language of coarse people' (Weil 1937, p. 12). Ri grows up a wealthy, pampered girl, surrounded by luxury — she plays tennis, skis, she receives a good education, and goes on trips to Vienna and spa towns. She does not dwell in any way on her Jewish origin, and attributes her difference from the surrounding population rather to her social standing (people doff their hats to her and her father, a wealthy industrialist) and her different mother tongue — German: Ri cannot speak Czech well, and as a consequence she is mocked by her fellow students at the Czech business academy she attends. The figure of Ri is a prototype of the assimilated, well-to-do Czechoslovak Jews without a close relationship to their faith and with an orientation towards the German-speaking community.⁶ It is necessary to emphasise that Ri is only half Jewish, while it is not stated explicitly whether her Jewish roots are on her mother's or father's side, even if there are intimations in the text that it was her mother who was Jewish. She is 'of the big world', unlike her father, whom she refers to as an 'ordinary man', and the unequal origin of her parents is a frequent cause of their quarrels. Weil here touches upon an extensive complex of discussions concerning the question of fundamental Jewish identity: who is actually a Jew? Is it, within the narrower, orthodox conception, a person who had a Jewish mother, or someone who has converted to Judaism? Or does the broader conception apply, thus a person who identifies with the Jewish culture and religion and declares himself or herself a Jew?

Ri is confronted for the first time by her Jewish identity when her friend persuades her to go to look at 'the local lunatics, Zionists, who call themselves Halutzim; they are learning Hebrew and preparing to emigrate to Palestine to live as farmers' (ibid.).

⁵ The text contains quotations from German originals, which were first of all translated by the author of the article into Czech, and subsequently translated into English.

⁶ In 1900 a total of 45 % of the Jewish population of Prague stated German as their mother tongue (Haumann 1995, p. 183).



At a meeting of these 'Halutzim' Ri meets her future first husband, the charismatic Zionist agitator Karel Geisinger. Through the device of this character, Weil presents another possible Jewish identity, in the form of adherents of the Zionist movements, in this case members of one of its branches — the youth organisation He-Halutz (literally 'pioneer' in Hebrew), which in the first half of the 20th century also found followers in Czechoslovakia. Geisinger, a former surgeon who has given up his practice and now devotes himself to promoting the Zionist movement, appears at meetings where he proselytises about the conditions in the promised land, which at the beginning of the 1930s is still under British administration in Palestine. He eventually succeeds in gathering together a community of young people (among them Ri), who follow him to Palestine in order to establish a 'kvutza'.⁷ Via the figure of Geisinger, but also of Ri herself, the narrator points to a further possibility of the Jewish inter-war existence — namely an attachment to the Zionist movement, thus a modern national revivalist movement, with the aim of rejuvenating the traditions of Jewish culture and reformulating Hebrew into a modern language. Through these characters, the narrator depicts the Jewish settlers, arriving in several waves referred to as 'aliyahs', repopulating their historic homeland and building the modern Israel. Ri and Geisinger represent settlers of the fifth aliyah, which took place during the period of 1929 to 1939.

Ri's gradual appreciation of her own Jewishness can be observed also in her changing perception of the Hebrew language. When she first hears exclamations in Hebrew at a meeting of the Halutzim, they come to her 'in some kind of foreign and wild language' (ibid., p. 14), but over the course of time she becomes acclimatised to the 'sombre and sublime Hebrew language' (ibid., p. 16). It is not until the course of her sojourn in Palestine that Hebrew finally becomes for her the 'holy tongue, regained after millennia', the 'sweet language of our halcyon homeland' (ibid., p. 26). Just as Ri adopts Hebrew, she also gradually falls in love with her new homeland — namely Palestine. Together with the other settlers and despite many obstacles, she reclaims the inhospitable desert and attempts to fulfil the dream of the resurrection of Israel.

A number of Russian, and thus Soviet elements are already integrated into Ri's sojourn in Palestine, foreshadowing her future destiny in the land of the Soviets. When the settlers sing songs in the evening, Ri is most taken with the song about 'some fellow named Trumpeldor' (ibid., p. 17). This is evidently a reference to the Jewish national hero Joseph Trumpeldor,⁸ in which a picture is presented of the Jew with a gun in his hand, actively fighting for his homeland.

Ri resides in Palestine during a time of growing unrest between the Jewish settlers and the Arabs. In addition to this, disturbances take place also within the Jewish

7 Weil here is undoubtedly referring to a smaller agricultural settlement known as a 'kvutza', which preceded the larger collective villages based on agriculture and industry, the 'kibbutzim' that function to this day.

8 Joseph Trumpeldor (1880–1920) was a Russian Jew, a Zionist activist and officer in the Russian army, who was engaged in combat in the Russo-Japanese war and in the British campaign at Gallipoli. In his time, Trumpeldor himself was president of the He-Halutz organisation, and was also the author of a pamphlet of the same name. He did not become a national hero until after his death, defending the Jewish settlement of Tel Hai against Arab raiders (Sachar 1998, pp. 103, 127).

colonies themselves, for which a certain Eisenfuss, a Polish Jew from Białystok and a communist, is held responsible. Karel considers him a dangerous man, a malcontent intent on undermining the great Jewish work. When Eisenfuss appears in Ri and Karel's colony, the inhabitants capture and beat him. Whereas Karel appeals to the colonists in a fiery speech to hand over Eisenfuss to the British on the grounds that he is an enemy who wished to burn down the colony, Ri cannot believe that this beaten and bloodied man, 'in broken shoes and ripped clothes, a small, hunched heap of misfortune, a knot of bones' (*ibid.*, p. 27), could possibly pose a threat to them. As a result, when Karel arranges a vote for the handing over of Eisenfuss to the British, Ri is the only one to abstain from voting, which further deepens the schism between her and Karel. The figure of the former tailor Eisenfuss, who is now spreading the ideas of communism among settlers in Palestine, can be read as a model identity of the Jewish Bolshevik.⁹ Ri's abstention from voting, and thus also her refusal to condemn the communist ideas presented by Eisenfuss can be viewed as the first signs of her later affinity with Soviet society.

Even though it may appear that Ri casts aside her Jewish identity upon her departure from Palestine and her separation from Karel, and returns to a state of unawareness of her Jewishness, there evidently remains in her a residual sense of solidarity with the Jewish community, since she again chooses a Jewish man as her second husband. She meets Robert, an engineer from Poland, in Vienna, where she is recovering from a difficult miscarriage following her return from Palestine. She often goes out with him in the company of his friends, Jewish poets who write in Yiddish. Robert has an excellent mastery of the language, since after all 'he was from Poland, his mother wore a wig and Robert learned the Talmud, in fact Robert was not even his real name, he had some strange name like Shimke or Shimkele' (*ibid.*, p. 35). It is therefore clearly evident that Robert hails from an orthodox Jewish family of Polish Hasidim, devout Jews who honour traditions: in accordance with the Torah, his mother as a married woman wears a 'Scheitel', i.e. a wig, and he himself attends a Yeshiva, where he studies the Talmud, the collection of texts of laws, teachings and traditions of the Jewish religion written in Hebrew. This world is completely incomprehensible to Ri, it is a world of 'shadows, a downtrodden world of squat people with long payots' (*ibid.*). Ri does not meet Robert until the time when he has left behind this dark world, and the former Shimkele has become a 'master of all things clear

⁹ After the victory of the Soviets, there were endeavours in Russia also to integrate the numerous Jewish population into the ranks of the adherents of communism. As a result, a Jewish section (*Yevsektsiya*) was established within the Communist Party, which from 1920, following the dissolution of all non-communist Jewish organisations, became the sole permitted Jewish political body. The communist programme targeted at the Jewish population included primarily anti-religious propaganda, a prohibition of Hebrew language, and conversely massive support for Yiddish, which was intended to become, at least temporarily, the chief language of communication and teaching, and in the 1920s led to a massive flourishing of Jewish culture in Soviet Russia. The dissolution of the *Yevsektsiya* in 1930 heralded the beginning of a new era, in which no regard was paid to Jewish existence, which was ultimately suppressed. When Ri arrives in Moscow in 1933, she does not proclaim her Jewishness in any way.



and real' (ibid.). It is precisely his directness, precision and clarity that are the qualities that attract Ri. As a result, when Robert receives an offer of the post of technical director in a cable factory in Moscow, she eventually agrees to go with him. The life trajectories of Ri and her second husband Robert follow a path which is characteristic of a whole range of European Jews, who were enthused by the ideas of communism and aspired to realise them in the Soviet Union.¹⁰

By means of a small number of characters in Ri's story, the narrator succeeds in depicting a whole series of Jewish identities that offered themselves to the Jewish population in Czechoslovakia and indeed the whole of Central and Eastern Europe in the period between the two World Wars: Czechoslovak assimilated Jews with an orientation towards German nationality, adherents of Zionism preparing to leave for Palestine to settle in the promised land and build the state of Israel, orthodox Polish Hasidim living in accordance with traditions and faith, Jews with gun in hand, fighting for their homeland, as well as Jews who had attached themselves to the ideas of communism.

A sense of belonging to a certain collective becomes an integral part of the identity of the individual, which Weil develops first of all in his Jewish characters, and later, in the remainder of the novel, also in the figures within the Soviet environment. This is most pronounced in the case of Ri, who integrates herself fully into Soviet society, and conversely in the case of Jan Fischer, who is excluded from it. In this process, an element signifying the acceptance of identity is language. Just as Ri in Palestine initially adopts the incomprehensible Hebrew, in the Soviet Union one of the tools of her acceptance of her new Soviet identity is the new Russian, 'whose words writhed in the convulsions of the new order, it was the language of abbreviations, febrile dreams and mathematical formulas' (ibid., p. 39). Existence within a certain community, essential for the shaping of the individual's identity, became a significant feature in the majority of Weil's novels; nevertheless, despite their endeavours to integrate, his characters predominantly experience rather a feeling of separation, isolation and exclusion from the collective (an example may be provided by the chief protagonist of *Život s hvězdou*, the Jewish character Roubíček, who under the Nazi Protectorate finds himself not only on the margins of legitimate society, but experiences isolation also among his Jewish co-religionists, who are persecuted just as he is).

TEXTS WITH A JEWISH THEME

If we leave to one side Weil's texts on the theme of the Shoah, which were widely acclaimed both at the time of their origin and in later years, there remains before us a complex of texts dedicated to Jewishness. These originated upon the background of

¹⁰ In contrast with the story of Ri and her husband Robert, life in the USSR did not bring a happy end for Weil's friends, the Jewess Helena Glassová and her husband Abram Frišer, who were prototypes of the characters of his novel. In November 1937, during the Stalinist purges, both were arrested and accused of spying; Frišer was executed in January 1938, and his wife Helena was sent to a Gulag in Siberia for ten years (Kryl 2005, p. 8; Machoninová 2017, pp. 238–274; Borák 2013, pp. 72–73).



Weil's activity in the State Jewish Museum in Prague, where he worked with brief interludes from 1943 until his death in 1959. They include the academic studies 'Pražské ghetto na počátku 19. století' and 'Současníci o Mordechajovi Mayzlovi', published in the second half of the 1950s in *Židovská ročenka* (Jewish Annual), which presented the results of Weil's research and outputs in forthcoming lectures and exhibitions. The first of these to be published, in 1956, was the sketch 'Pražské ghetto na počátku 19. století', with the subheading 'Náčrtek větší studie' (An Outline of a Larger Study). The text can be considered the foundation for the creation of his later unpublished works of fiction 'Perrotina, mašina chlebozlodějská' and 'Tiskařská romance', and of one published novel, *Harfeník*. Weil familiarises readers thoroughly with the onerous situation of the Jewish population in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy at the beginning of the 19th century, when Jews were subject to the Jewish patent (Judenpatent) of 1797, which classified them within the category of subjects without full rights, merely a tolerated minority. The core of the patent was the 'institution of familiants' (i.e. heads of families), who alone had the right of residence, which brought with it restrictions in the realm of movement, residence, marriage, employment and education (Adler 1933, pp. 191–221). At the beginning of the 19th century, the number of familiants in the Czech lands was set at 8 600 persons,¹¹ for whom 'it was decreed that only the oldest son of the familiant may marry, while the remaining sons must stay unmarried or leave the country. It was possible to acquire the status of familiant only if the position was vacated by death, or under special, exceptional conditions, which included also voluntary military service' (Weil 1956/57, p. 91). Weil presented a comprehensive image of the dismal conditions of the Prague ghetto, with thousands of paupers crowded into less than three hundred houses, contrasting sharply with the luxurious life of the few wealthy Jewish families. The merchant and industrialist families of the Hönigsbergs, Lämils and Zdekauers did not escape his interest; although he focuses especial attention on the Porges brothers — Moses and Leopold — the owners of Prague's largest cotton cloth manufacturer. Weil was interested in the Porges brothers for a number of reasons — unlike other wealthy Jews, Moses Porges of Portheim (1781–1870) originated from a poor ghetto family, spent several years during his youth in the court of a Frankist sect in the German city of Offenbach, from where he eventually fled, after which he established a small textile workshop in Prague, and achieved his wealthy status exclusively through his own diligence and hard work. In his research mapping Prague's Jewish quarter in the period around the turn of the 19th century, Weil furthermore came upon Porges's memoirs, which he considered a literary curiosity.¹²

It may be said that, through this study, Weil formed a solid foundation for his later novels: It is upon the backdrop of the Prague ghetto of the early 19th century that he set his novel *Harfeník*; in large part the fates of his chief protagonists are played out here — those of the beggarly harpist Itzig Fidele, an outcast *per se*, whose father was no longer a familiant, meaning that Itzig in fact did not even enjoy the right to life, and Moses Porges, the son of a poor liquor vendor, who later became

11 In 1725 the number of familiants was set at only 3 927; it was not raised to 8 600 until 1789 (Adler 1933, pp. 194, 216).

12 The memoirs of Moses Porges are available in English translation at http://www.porges.net/MosesPorgesMemoirs_English.html [27. 6. 2021].



a wealthy industrialist and a nobleman of Portheim. As Weil himself stated, the novel *Harfeník*, published a year before the author's death by the Československý spisovatel publishing house, was 'the third version of a novel whose original title had been "Perrotina, mašina chlebozlodějská"' (Weil 1958b, p. 30). It is necessary to add that even 'Perrotina' was not Weil's first work on a theme combining Jewishness with the beginnings of the labour movement; his original manuscript bore the title 'Tiskařská romance'. However, like 'Perrotina' after it, this was returned to Weil for revision, and was never published. Of 'Perrotina', only a part of the prologue was published in print in 1954, under the title of 'Na zázračném dvoře' (In the Court of Miracles) in *Židovská ročenka*, furnished with a relatively extensive commentary by the author, announcing the content of the work as follows:

Part of the prologue is formed by an excerpt from the historical novel 'Perrotina, mašina chlebozlodějská', about the first workers' uprisings and the class struggle of 1844 at a textile factory in Prague. It narrates the youth of Moses Porges, the founder of Prague's largest textile manufacturer, later a nobleman of Portheim, who operated a plant in the Smíchov district where the conditions of employment were worst of all, consequently giving rise to a labour protest movement which subsequently grew into workers' riots that spread throughout the whole of Prague, directed against the introduction of machines known as 'Perrotines'. This was the first labour movement in Central Europe, even if at the time it was not conscious of the fact.¹³ [...] The stories narrated in the prologue are based on archive material from the State Jewish Museum in Prague, hitherto unpublished in Czech literature¹⁴ (Weil 1954/55, p. 81).

A number of versions of 'Perrotina'¹⁵ have been preserved in Weil's estate. There is a virtually complete typescript version spanning 315 pages, in which only page 127 is missing. On the first page of the typescript, Weil wrote the title 'Perrotina, mašina chlebozlodějská' in his own hand, and commented: 'novel (unpublished), typescript 315 ll, 4, 1st version'. The actual text of the novel is preceded by a motto in the form of a quote from Marx and Engels: 'If the active movement of the middle class may be dated from 1840, that of the working class commences its advent by the insurrections of the Silesian and Bohemian factory operatives in 1844.'¹⁶ As in the case of *Harfeník*, the plot of the novel is set in Prague in the mid-19th century, when printing machinery was introduced into the textile factories, resulting in mass redundancies of workers and a subsequent wave of strikes. Although most of the characters who later appear

13 Here Weil ignores the fact that these were in fact anti-Jewish riots, and the disturbances which 'began in the 1840s as attacks against the newly introduced machines (perrotines) in the Jewish textile plants in Smíchov (Porges), Karlín (Schick and Lederer), Holešovice and Libeň (Epstein, Dormitzer), escalated in 1844 into direct attacks on the Prague ghetto and on Jewish houses outside of it [...]' (Pěkný 2001, p. 123n).

14 Printed in italics in the original.

15 Weil's estate, in a volume of 20 boxes, is stored for the most part in the Literary Archive of the Museum of National Literature in Prague. Other documents connected especially with Weil's academic activity are stored at the Jewish Museum in Prague.

16 LA PNP Praha, Jiří Weil archive, typescript 'Perrotina, mašina chlebozlodějská'.

in *Harfeník* (the wealthy Porges, the beggar Fidele, the Italian painter Manetta, the engraver Ulbrich and the factory manager Kurrer) are also featured in 'Perrotina', the plot is not linked to the stories of the two chief protagonists (Moses Porges and Itzig Fidele), but is broken down into several smaller narratives, in which the author places emphasis primarily on depicting the development of the labour movement, and not of individual human destinies. In 'Perrotina', Weil populates Prague during the times of the workers' strikes also with entirely new characters: in a number of places Karel Sabina and Count Schirding appear, and are assigned the role of commentators on the unfolding events; for the first time the Czech workers Celda Vobiš and Karel Linda enter the plot, taking part in the destruction of the machines and in the workers' protests.

Only a few fragments of the original version of the novel *Harfeník*, entitled 'Tiskařská romance', have been preserved in Weil's estate. From the largest part of the preserved text, numbering 114 pages, it is evident that the author developed the character of the Swiss engraver and foreman Josef Ulbrich, who in the later versions (*Harfeník*, 'Perrotina') became a merely peripheral figure. The first 36 pages recount Ulbrich's youth, his years as an apprentice in Geneva, his career, his love for a girl named Mariechen and finally his meeting with Wilhelm Weitling, an early German socialist and communist theoretician, to whose influence Ulbrich succumbs. The preserved concluding part of 'Tiskařská romance' is virtually identical to the text of 'Perrotina': the meeting of the workers at the midsummer celebrations, the arrival of the perrotines in Porges's textile plant, the advent of the strikes and Ulbrich's departure north for the purpose of recruiting support for the striking workers in Prague. 'Tiskařská romance' can be considered the original text upon which both the later 'Perrotina' and *Harfeník* are based. With regard to the fragmentary nature of the preserved texts, it is not possible to say with any certainty whether the plot, as in the case of 'Perrotina', was broken down into smaller sub-plots, or whether it unfolded in plot lines concentrated around the main protagonists, as in the case of *Harfeník*.

Whereas the Jewishness of the protagonists of 'Perrotina' and 'Tiskařská romance' was rather a peripheral matter, in *Harfeník* it forms one of the main elements shaping their identity. In the two starkly contrasting destinies of the poor Fidele and the wealthy Porges, who are nevertheless united by the fact that despite all their endeavours they remain perpetual 'outsiders', Weil follows on from a portrayal of Jewish identities which he had commenced in his earlier novel *Moskva-hranice*. This time he goes deeper into history, and depicts two possible forms of Jewish existence of the mid-19th century: the majority of Jews living in poverty either in the Czech countryside or cramped in the Prague ghetto, and the few wealthy Jewish families who used their money to buy themselves exceptions from the valid decrees and secure respect and a prestigious standing within society. As with the majority of the characters in Weil's novels, neither Fidele nor Porges feels any sense of belonging, either to the surrounding society or to the Jewish community: already as a child growing up in the only Jewish family in a small Bohemian village, who are shifted out to the 'Jew house', a ramshackle cottage on the periphery of the village, Fidele is excluded from events in the community, whether they be school attendance, religious services or village celebrations. Even after his departure for Prague his situation does not improve, since due to his origins as the son of a Jewish non-familiant, he is predestined to be





prohibited from leading a full life and making his mark within the Prague Jewish community. He experiences brief moments of happiness and belonging only as a soldier in the Napoleonic army, when he embarks upon a relationship with the Bavarian girl Rosalie. As in the case of many other male characters of Weil's novels (Roubíček, Ulbrich), for Fidele also Rosalie appears only as a dreamlike apparition. The other main protagonist of the novel *Harfeník*, Moses Porges, is also an outcast from the time of his childhood — he is the black sheep of the family:

he has run away from school, associates with Christian boys, [...] he takes forbidden food from them. Once he was brought home by a police constable — such a disgrace — [...] he goes out with boys to steal apples from the gardens (Weil 1958a, p. 9).

As the son of a heretic — an adherent of the Frankist sect — he is furthermore ostracised in the ghetto. When he arrives at the court of Eva Frank herself in Offenbach, he is consumed with doubts about the legitimacy of this sect. Even after he has acquired his immense wealth and been accepted as a member of the nobility, he still does not feel himself to be truly a part of high society; this is further compounded by his growing sense of alienation from his own sons.

Even if Weil did not publicly declare his Jewishness, and did not 'live' it, it is nonetheless evident from the study above that he engaged intensively with this theme. This study has shown that in addition to his better known post-war texts thematising the Shoah (*Barvy, Život s hvězdou, Na střeše je Mendelssohn, Žalozpěv za 77 297 obětí*), Weil touched upon the theme of Jewishness also in fictional texts focusing on the history of the Jews and the beginnings of the labour movement in Bohemia ('Tiskařská romance', 'Perrotina', *Harfeník*). Findings from his academic activity at the Jewish Museum, for example the studies 'Pražské ghetto na počátku 19. století' and 'Současníci o Mordechaji Mayselovi', served him as a foundation upon which he created these works of fiction. The aim of this study was not only to draw attention to the overlooked fact that Jewish themes appear already in Weil's output from before the Second World War, namely in the novel *Moskva-hranice*, but also to present the Jewish characters of Weil's fictional texts (Ri, Karel, Robert, Eisenfuss, Fidele, Porges), via whom he familiarises the reader with an entire array of potential identities which were on offer to Jews in Central Europe during the course of the 19th and 20th centuries.

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