



Picture: Natalia Kulka

Games with time, memory and history

About the prose of Milada Součková

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Abstract: The article discusses selected short stories written by the Czech avant-garde writer Milada Součková. The author presents a brief interpretation of certain primary themes in Součková's work, such as memory and history, as a kind of framework of her prose. Another aspect of the article indicates the themes related to specific historical events that constitute for Součková a backdrop for presenting an alternative history, which is combined with the microcosm of the characters in her stories.

Keywords: memory; history; prose; Czech literature; avant-garde.

Part I – Time and memory

Introduction

In her book, entitled *Mikrohistorie: Spotkania w międzyświatach* [Microhistories: Encounters in the worlds between] (Domańska, 2005) Ewa Domańska stresses the changes that have occurred in historical thinking (or perhaps better put, about historical thinking)

since the 1970s. The author notes that they might have resulted from a crisis of the traditional understanding of history, which has led to researchers becoming focused on the “secret dimensions of reality,” that is, for instance, on the history of everyday life, trade, food and so on. A clear shift can be observed from macro- to microhistory, or from an external to an internal perspective, from history as a process to the history as human experience.¹ Domańska also introduces the term “alternative history” in order to emphasize history’s existential dimension; to tell the story of a human thrown into a given reality rather than another one; to present less familiar aspects of being-in-the-world; and, finally, to talk about human experiencing of the world and the different ways of this experiencing. According to Domańska, alternative history is thus the history of experiences, feelings and private microcosms (Domańska, 2005, p. 62). History is strictly connected with memory, which evokes all the events that constitute a sense of individual and collective identity. History – memory – identity, this triad allows individuals to join the stream of life, the history of the nation, culture and religion, and – in microcosmic terms – the history of their own families and communities. Memory facilitates self-determination, rooting and binding what was with what is now (Braun, 2007, p. 49). Memory is a carrier of history and the foundation for constructing the above-mentioned identity.

Milada Součková – a forgotten writer

An excellent example of such a discourse is the work of Czech writer Milada Součková (1899–1983), a little-known author of prose, poetry and historical and literary essays. Součková (in private life married to the Czech painter, journalist and scenographer Zdeňek Rykr, who committed suicide in 1940 for fear of being arrested by the Gestapo²) collaborated with the Prague Linguistic Circle and Roman Jakobson. This facet of her interests was reflected in all her writing, which features the linguistic experiments that were the trademark of the avant-garde literature at the time. After World War II ended, Součková was appointed cultural attaché in the Czechoslovakian consulate in New York. In 1948, she stepped down and decided to remain in the United States. As a lecturer in Slavic literature, she collaborated with such renowned universities as Harvard, Chicago and Berkeley. She managed to develop a considerable collection of Czech and Slovak literature at Harvard University.

Being an avant-garde writer, Součková was not in the mainstream literary life in Czechoslovakia in the first half of the 20th century. This might have been due to the

1 “It [the change] can be viewed as a response to the crisis in the traditional understanding of history, which has manifested itself, among other things, in interest in the ‘secret dimension of reality’ (Levinas), in the turn from the macro to the micro, from the outside to the inside, from history as a process to history as human experience” (Domańska, 2005, pp. 270–271).

2 Rykr threw himself under a train on January 15 at 11:15 am. The reason for this decision could never be determined. Most likely, he feared being arrested for trying to protect the Jewish artists he employed as the head of PIRAS (the first advertising agency in Czechoslovakia) in the second half of the 1930s (after: “Vytvořil obal Kofily, hvězdu Orion a šlo po něm gestapo,” 2016).

innovative character of her prose, frequently described by critics as intellectual, exclusive and too sophisticated to suit the taste of average readers.³ Yet the primary reason for her being forgotten in her homeland after 1945 was her emigration to the United States. The punishment for this unacceptable “crime” against the new authorities was official silence. She no longer existed as a writer and her name was removed from historical and literary articles and books. Her earlier publications were tolerated only in used book stores (Milota, 1995, p. 90). According to Vladimír Papoušek (2001, p. 127), Součková arrived in the United States having virtually finished writing prose. While in emigration, she published only one collection of prose pieces (1962), which were actually written back at home in 1943, titled *Neznámý člověk* [Unknown man]. Before that, she wrote *První písmena* [First letters, 1934] – experimental prose, the novel *Amor a psyché* [Amor and psyche, 1937], the duology *Odkaz* [Legacy] and *Zakladatelé* [Founders] (both written in 1940), the novel *Bel canto* (1944) and another prose work *Hlava umělce* [Artist’s head] (also 1940), which Součková presented as a “study for a larger piece.” From the 1950s, Součková published only collections of poetry and literary essays (concerning, among other things, Czech Baroque).

Součková’s prose, in particular her short stories, which this text is about, frequently feature numerous microhistories told against the backdrop of great historical events of global significance. In this way, the author created her own alternative historical atlas, where she made references to different moments and places of memory which are crucial to evidence the being-in-the-world of the “unknown man” from the title of one of her books. This prose is the intersection point of three discourses: historical (grand politics, grand history), social (pictures from middle-class life) and intimate – autobiographical. History “brushes against” the everyday lives of her characters, who reflect not so much political changes as such, but rather what alterations these changes bring to their own, common lives. Narration plays a crucial role in how Součková approaches memory. Her texts most often employ an external narrator, third person narration and free indirect speech. The narrator is typically male, although there are also female narrators in several texts. Focalization is provided by the persons (frequently children) who have witnessed the events concerned. The external narrators are “voyeurs,” chroniclers of recollections; they re-construct and re-interpret the events as far as their memory allows them to do so. They evoke the facts, utterances and behavior of the witnesses of grand history. They refer to what they have heard, what they know and have witnessed themselves. Their recollections, divided according to the stages of their growing up, become the evidence of a kind of initiation which the narrators have undergone.

³ E.g., Vladimír Papoušek, Daniela Hodrová, Jindřich Chalupický.

Recesses of memory

Apart from the themes of historical events, Součková's entire oeuvre is permeated by the significant motif of memory, which assumes different shapes in different texts. Her 1981 collection of poetry, *Sešity Josephiny Rykové* [Notebooks of Josephina Rykr], is concluded with a prose section *Vlastní životopis Josephiny Rykové* [Autobiography of Josephina Rykr], where the author addresses the power and strength of what she calls "the first recollection," that is the recollection which refers us to the earliest manifestations of our consciousness (Součková, 2009, pp. 295–298). Yet this first recollection frequently is what others remember about us. It blends with our own personal experience later on, and the border between personal and collective memory is thereby blurred. Součková writes about it in many of her texts. In the above-mentioned publication, she notes:

These words are not my recollection, but a family recollection and a statement my grandma uttered. [...] A recollection anchored in memory is never unequivocal, it's composed of many different, selective experiences. Freud was right, the first recollections are not recollections but signals in the labyrinth of memory. [...] It rarely happens that a unique first recollection is not contaminated by interpretation [...]. Many are created through retrospection, through later recollections⁴ (Součková, 2009, pp. 297–298).

Marc Augé addressed the same subject in a more precise manner:

As soon as one risks making "remembrances" into a tale by bringing order and clarity to what at first were merely confused and unique impressions, one risks never to remember anything but the first tale or those that followed it. The trouble with childhood memories is that they are soon reshaped by the tales of all those who take charge of them: parents or friends who integrate them into their own legend. (Augé, 2004, p. 21–22).

Augé appears to be talking about biographical memory here, which is shaped by our recollections, remembrances, memories about ourselves and by the memories others have of us. Kaja Kazimierska (2012, p. 141) writes that biographical memory is strictly related to an intimate experience of place. In this experience, the subject constructs a relation with space and produces so-called memory spots, which organize this space in the context of evidence of the past (Kazimierska, 2012, p. 144). The prose by Součková abounds in such places, assigned a virtually sacral and nostalgic meaning by the narrators. Their focal points are provided by the objects or constructions which somehow emphasize the memory-related value of those places, for instance, a historical monument where the narrator encounters the soldiers who were injured during World War I, a windmill in front of the narrator's father's house which reminds of the Hradec Králové Battle, an ice-cream cake in the shape of a boat from the time of the Russo-Japanese

⁴ "Ta slova nejsou moje vzpomínka, ale rodinná vzpomínka i babiččin výrok. [...] Vzpomínka zakotvená v paměti není nikdy jednoznačná, je vytvořena z mnoha výběravých zážitků. [...] Freud má pravdu, první vzpomínky – nejsou vzpomínky, ale signály v labyrintu paměti. [...] Jen zřídka je jedinečná původní vzpomínka nezkažená interpretací [...]. Mnoho je navozováno retrospektivou, pozdějšími vzpomínkami!" The citations were translated from Czech to Polish by the author of this article and then from Polish to English for the purpose of this publication.

War, flowers collected in a herbarium, and so on. In a further part of the *Autobiography...*, Součková stresses the importance of the memory of place and of chronological memory. In her opinion, human minds are not able to maintain the chronology of memories; for this purpose, we create, alongside memory spots, places of memory, which have the characteristics of peculiar archives of memories, classified according to their kinds.

Memory – identity – time

Writing about the kinds of memory in the works of Milada Součková, Alena Zachová introduces the category of emblematic memory (Zachová, 2001, p. 16). According to her, emblematic memory produces maps: sui generis outlines or layers which accommodate memories collected throughout one's entire life. As has already been noted, among these layers it is impossible to separate our own memories from the memories other people have about us. Nevertheless, for the characters in Součková's prose, these maps determine their identity, ensuring a sense of continuity, permanence and unchangeability. Norbert Elias (2001) notes that

each of the people who pass each other as apparently unconnected strangers in the street is tied by invisible chains to other people, whether they are chains of work and property or of instincts and affects [...]. Each individual is born into a group of people who were there before him. Not only that: each individual is by nature so constituted that he needs other people who were there before him in order to be able to grow up. [...] each "I" is irrevocably embedded in a "we" (Elias, 2001, pp. 14, 21, 62).

In every text, the "I" of the subject is inseparably tied with the "we" of his or her family, the middle class environment and the community he or she lives in. Součková constructs this sense of identity in several ways, which include emphasizing the repetitive nature of certain situations, emotions, feelings and themes, stressing transience and inconstancy, and referring to historical events. This repetitiveness is typically manifested in the storyline. The narrator repeatedly expresses his or her own reflections on this subject. *Hlava umělce* [Artist's head], is an excellent example here, alongside the collection of short stories titled *Neznámý člověk* [Unknown man], which will be discussed later on.

Hlava umělce is exceptionally interesting. It features numerous metatextual, fictional and documentary themes reminiscent of autobiographical accounts. This text, occasionally referred to as an essay, may be a key to understanding all of Součková's works. It intertwines stories about the past of the main character/narrator, meditations on art and literature, and fragments pertaining to other texts by Součková, which the narrator (the author's alter ego) is only planning and outlining their storylines. The atmosphere of the whole thing, however, is tinted by the spirit of transience and nostalgia, evoked, for instance, by musing over a monument which is to become the main theme of an as yet unwritten short story. This melancholy is also evoked by the experience about the past (or, in other words, by the memory of the past events that one has not directly experienced

or witnessed) as opposed to experience of the past, which in its turn frequently arouses emotions and feelings related to trauma and strong personal experiences (cf., e.g., Ankersmit 1994, 2005; Sawicka, 2015, pp. 169–185). This text may be viewed as a reflection of the Aristotelian *mneme*, or the passive reception of images of the past. In this work, the past complements the present for the narrator, and his realizing the passage of time allows him (as well as other characters from other prose works) to accept his own transience. Součková writes:

I have always been attracted by this subject: on the one hand, childhood that is almost untouched by time and equipped with a full stock of the future, and on the other hand – a symbol of historical time petrified in its nonexistence, while simultaneously alive in ordinary thought⁵ (Součková, 2002, p. 21).

A childish reflection on transience and the passage of time can also be found in *Autobiografická povídka: Rusko-japonská válka 1904–1905* [Autobiographical story: The Russo-Japanese War, 1904–1905], included in the collection *Škola povídek* [School of storytelling]. The author introduces the main character – an adolescent girl – during her first “adult” birthday party for her schoolmates. The passage of time is clearly marked by the behavior of the protagonist and the outline of her internal emotions related to this event. The quick pace of a joyful girlish party – the descriptions of playing tag, sliding on the carpet and crazy chases through the rooms – all emphasize the course of thoughts of the main character. From the moment the party begins, the girl keeps thinking that it is going to end, that in a short while they will have to part, her mother will clean the table and the pastry shop workers will collect the ice-cream cake trays. When the party eventually comes to an end, Boženka keeps repeating in a resigned manner: “It’s all over now!” The author emphasizes and develops the theme of transience in a very subtle manner in this text. The protagonist’s present is overshadowed by the past, which appropriates everything; the elusive “here and now” rapidly becomes a memory.

Eternal returns

Paradoxically, Součková links transience with repetitiveness. The latter pertains to events and emotions; it is a permanent narrative element of the writer’s prose. It allows her to present the different interactions that her characters enter into and emphasize by this token that while all of them live in their own intimate narratives, they simultaneously become parts of other stories, which are further combined in one all-human story. The lamps shine during Boženka’s birthday party the same way they shone during the 1905 peace talks in Portsmouth (Součková, 1943, p. 179); a seventeen-year old girl described in a novel by Zola is most likely to feel the same sentiments the author experienced when writing about her; the narrator in *Hlava umělce* [Artist’s head] sees

⁵ “Vždy mě lákal ten námět: na jedné straně dětství, takřka nedotčené časem, s plnou zásobou budoucího času, a na druhé straně symbol historického času, ztrnulý do neživosti a zároveň žijící v pouhé myšlence.”

the wounded soldiers near the monument again, the same way he saw them after World War I ended (Součková, 2002, pp. 16–17, 31). Součková perceives life as the Nietzschean eternal return, as alternation, transience and repetition. This is also evidenced in the structure of her texts, where the same themes are linked, repeated and alternated.

Migrating themes

The already quoted Alena Zachová writes about migrating themes (Zachová, 2001, p. 17), that is the themes which recur in every piece by Součková. These recurrent themes pertain to the events presented in successive texts, which are, however, described from different points of view. Additionally, repetitiveness is manifested in the protagonists; the author introduces the same individuals in every text and mentions the same supporting characters. For example, she mentions the children's friends, the family doctor, the aunts, and tells all kinds of intimate stories from the life of the family, from its history. The writer designs a mosaic of themes and characters. Tying all her prose pieces in this way, she creates a kind of a total text which is made from smaller, mutually related elements – short stories, novels, also poetry. Making this literary patchwork, she draws her readers into her world and gives them a sense of illusory stability, which is shattered by the themes of transience. On the one hand, the author takes her readers on a complicated trip through different styles, events and galleries of characters; on the other, she makes them face the inevitability of what will be, what has been, and what is going to be repeated. Součková demands her readers to be attentive and meticulous, and to reflect on their own experiences, because it is only referring to our own past that allows us to fully understand and appreciate the meaning of the storyline and the different senses it conceals.

The diversity of themes and styles might be interpreted in terms of a peculiar game the author plays with her readers. By mixing fiction, autobiographical themes and fragments of documents, by including chains of associations, employing stream of consciousness and by playing with literary conventions, the writer creates a specific reality which is a conglomerate of truth and fiction. The theme of playing is repeatedly emphasized in her texts, for instance: “All art is nothing but playing with time, struggling with time, and let it be the time of marsh marigold or violet leaves”⁶ (Součková, 2002, p. 56).

Memory of the senses and of the body

Reminiscent of the prose of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf (a similarity which is frequently stressed by critics of Součková's work), the past is referred to and replayed in abundance by means of stream of consciousness, overlapping layers of time and interesting narrative techniques. When it comes to memory, which is the subject of this paper,

⁶ “Celé umění není nic jiného než tato hra s časem, tento zápas s časem, ať je to čas lístku orseje nebo fialky.”

among the means used by the writer to employ this theme throughout all her work is polysensory narration. Memory is triggered by different sensual and corporal sensations. Memories are brought on by smell, touch and taste. In successive stories, the narrators describe different sensations which they remember from a given moment in the past and which have aroused nostalgia and melancholy at present. In his intimist accounts of the past, one of the narrators mentions the sensual sensations triggered by the memory of the body:

It's cold, it's a spring chill; I do not have the courage to tell Augusta how much I love her – many years later, of course – I can see her face, pale and cold, she would look at me as if I were crazy, if I took her hand and told her: Augusta, do you remember this cold early evening, this trip aboard a steamer? Can you feel this sun revealing the secret of all those covertly engaged⁷ (Součková, 2002, pp. 25–26).

In this excerpt, the feeling of chill and the yellowness of the sun emphasize the feelings and elusiveness, as well as the uncertainty of the moment and of memory. Emotional memory is also tied with olfactory memory, which provides for a sense of a highly personal and intimate account of the past:

I often recall this moment, sometimes I am reminded of it by a smell you get in a room where the window has been open for several hours. For many long years, I always recalled Hanka in similar circumstances. I never examined what the image was composed of: Hanka at the desk, a quite little writing table, with Greek texts, dictionaries and notes spread in front of her. [...] Today I know precisely what this smell is composed of: it's the smell of a clean room that has been aired for half a day, overlooking the east, the backyard; [...] it's also the smell of timber, the smell of trees cut down for furniture, where Hanka hides her letters, dictionaries, Greek texts and notes; her childhood bed is here, a four poster with a canopy on each side. There is probably a smell of a Persian rug woven from the wool of sheep and lambs that were once alive⁸ (Součková, 2002, p. 28).

To conclude the topic of memory, which is such a crucial element of Součková's work, it is worth to mention once again the discourse of social collective memory (experience about the past), as it seems to be the best closure of the earlier considerations on memories. Social collective memory may be understood in sociological terms, as knowledge about the past which is not acquired by way of experiencing it in a direct manner, but passed indirectly, through the memories and reflections of others. What is important here is the generational distance, which creates a specific bond with the past. Although the images of the past thus obtained are, as it were, "second hand," they are treated by

7 "Je chladno, jarní chladno; netroufám si Augustě říci, jak ji miluji – ovšem o mnoho let později – vidím její tvář, bledou, prostydlou, podívala by se na mne jako na blázna, kdybych ji vzal za ruce a řekl jí: Augusto, pamatuješ se na ten chladný podvečer, na tu jízdu parníkem? Cítíš to žluté slunce, zjevující tajemství všech tajnosnubných."

8 "Často si připomenu tu chvíli; připomene mi ji někdy vůně, jaká bývá v pokoji, kde je po několik hodin otevřené okno. Dlouhá léta jsem si prostě při podobné příležitosti vždy vzpomněl na Hanku. Nepátral jsem, z čeho je složen ten obraz: Hanka u psacího stolu, poměrně malého sekretáře, s rozloženými řeckými texty, slovníky a poznámky před sebou. [...] Dnes vím přesně, z čeho se ta vůně skládá: je to vůně uklizeného, po celé půldne větraného pokoje, obráceného na východ, do dvora; [...] voní tu také dřevo, vůně stromů poražených na nábytek, v němž Hanka ukrývá své dopisy, slovníky, řecké texty, poznámky; je tu její postel z dětství, která má ze čtyř stran stahovací záclony. Snad je tu také vůně perského koberce, utkaného z vlny kdysi živých ovcí a beránků."

their recipients as their own memories and experiences. This kind of memory is present in Součková's prose. It constitutes a permanent element in the reflection of the narrators, who oftentimes ponder on the sources of the knowledge they have. This can be best seen in the above-mentioned story of Josephina Rykr's life, where the narrator meditates over the power of the first memory to emphasize later on that this is not her memory, but memories that others have about her. In every text, the narrator is haunted by an unspoken question: How do I know this? Is what I'm feeling right now, what I remember, my own memory and my emotion? Or is it only a transference of an event that has already happened in the past, of what others felt and thought, that my mind only captured, whether consciously or not? Somewhere between the lines, such reflections express the need to arrange into a whole the building blocks of the identity of the characters in Součková's texts. References to the collective (cultural) memory of a certain social group (family, the closest friends, schoolmates) imply the images of memory that bind this community together. One can talk here about a specific "microscale of a description limited to a closed, small community" (Kędzierzawski, 2009, p. 13). Similar reflections emerge also in the context of history, with which memory is inseparably connected.

Part II – Games with history

Next to the theme of memory, historical events constitute another ever-present and significant element of Součková's work. Interestingly, it is not the specific historical events that come to the fore, but microhistories, focusing the readers' attention on the internal world of the character, a world which great history enters at some moment. In her texts, the writer appears to give answer to the question, so frequently asked also today, about the specific moment, the time when the characters learn about seminal political events (the storylines of her texts typically span the events from the end of the 19th century to the early 1930s). This can be best seen in the collection of short stories *Neznámý člověk* [Unknown man], where this mechanism is evidenced by the mottos of successive stories. For instance, in the short story *Světová válka* [World war] Součková refers to the statements by Churchill and Masaryk: "I always take the greatest interest in reading accounts of how the war came upon different people; where they were, and what they were doing"⁹ (W. Churchill, *The World Crisis, 1911–1918*); 'I was on holiday with my family at Schandau, in Saxony, when the Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his wife were assassinated at Sarajevo'¹⁰ (T. G. Masaryk, *The Making of a State*)" (Součková, 1995a, p. 55). This makes this collection look more like a diary, which is further emphasized by the exact dates opening successive short stories. These are mainly day dates, sometimes only the weekday is noted. This trick results in creating an illusion of genuineness, of a document, a recollection of an eye witness.

9 In Czech translation: "Zajímají mne vždycky zprávy o tom, jak válka zastihla různé lidi, kde právě byli a co dělali."

10 "Byl jsem po sarajevském atentátu s rodinou na prázdninách v Žandově v Sasku u Labe." Žandov is the Czech name of a resort town otherwise known as Bad Schandau.

When Vladimír Papoušek discusses the works by Součková, and this collection of short stories in particular, he notes:

Great events are counterpointed with everyday events of a narrow and subjective significance which stand out among their commonness only by the fact that history encroaches them. In recollections, however, these trivial events appear more important than the actual course of history (Papoušek, 2001, p. 129).

This can be seen, for instance, in the short story entitled *Rusko-japonská válka 1904–1905* [Russo-Japanese war, 1904–1905], bearing the date February 8, 1904. The story starts with a sentence about the Japanese fleet launching an attack against Russian vessels in Port Arthur. Next, the narrator, a boy, talks about the birthday party of his sister (the above-mentioned Boženka), held on February 8, during which an ice-cream cake in the shape of the boat used during this war was served. Although the story starts with a short historical account, even the opening sentences emphasize what will be important for the narrator – namely, his sister’s birthday party – whereas the events of the war, which also occurred on February 8 and were brought to mind by the ice-cream boat, become only a small contribution to the child’s musings about this battle. The narration is conducted in the stream of consciousness mode and the credibility of the message is emphasized by the use of free indirect speech, which the author employs in majority of her short stories. Apart from the events related to the party, the narrator also recalls different types of news about the war that he had heard from adults. Seriousness alternates with childish naivety and joy. The accounts of the siege of Port Arthur alternate with the descriptions of the cake – a boat with sugar figurines of sailors, the participants in this war – and Japan and Korea are so exotic and remote that they appear unreal and fairytale-like to the narrator. The boy describes them in the context of what he saw in a colonial store at one of the streets in Prague, or of what he heard in the fragments of adults’ conversations. The narrator says:

The Russo-Japanese war! We heard that when the Japanese fall in combat, their plaits are cut off and women’s hair pads are made of them. Thank goodness, children don’t wear such things. The Russo-Japanese war. We know Japan from the *Maison Thé Staněk* in Ferdinand Alley. I can never quite tell whether the Japanese figure standing in front of the store’s entrance is a puppet or a living man that could start moving like in the *Queen of Puppets*. All Japan is made of kimonos, chopsticks and inlaid lacquered cabinets, like the one mom bought. When you put your head in, it smells. [...] Korea is made of sea, bamboo and crustaceans, like those painted on mom’s kimono, that white one with green prints, from the *Maison Thé Staněk* in Ferdinand Alley¹¹ (Součková, 1995a, pp. 31, 32).

One of the main sources of information about the war and the current political situation is uncle Žižka, whose opinions and assessments are repeatedly referred to throughout

11 “Rusko-japonská válka! Slyšeli jsme, že Japoncům padlým ve válce uřezávají copy a dělají z nich dámské podložky do vlasů. Dobře, že děti nic takového nenesí. Rusko-japonská válka. Známe Japonsko z *Maison Thé Staněk* na Ferdinandově třídě. Nikdy nevím jasně, zda ten Japonec, stojící před vchodem krámu, je loutka, nebo živý člověk, který by se mohl začít hýbat jako v *Královně loutek*. Celé Japonsko je uděláno z kimon, párátek, lýkových krabiček, vykládaných lakovaných skříněk, jakou si maminka koupila. Když do ní člověk vstrčí hlavu, voní. [...] Korea je z moře, z bambusů, koryšů, jaké jsou namalované na mamčině kimonu, celém bílém, zeleně potištěném, z *Maison Thé Staněk* na Ferdinandově třídě.”

the short story. The story told by the narrator makes occasional and fragmentary references to the facts about the Russo-Japanese war, as if they were only memory flashes which disappear, rapidly giving way to the child's impressions of playing and his sister's birthday party. The same topic approached from a different angle is also present in the collection *Škola povídek*, in a short story entitled *Autobiografická povídka: Rusko-japonská válka 1904–1905* [Autobiographical story: Russo-Japanese war, 1904–1905]. This text presents the perspective of the sister for whom the party was thrown. Compared to the former piece, greater emphasis is given to the theme of the passing of time. What is remembered here is the birthday cake again, which is the center of the chains of the narrator's associations. The melting ice-cream ship becomes a symbol of transience.

This migrating theme can be found in two more texts, whose main topic is related to the 1866 battle at Hradec Králové.¹² The narrator's father, who witnessed the events, is the central character in both of them. The collection *Škola povídek* features a text entitled *Historická povídka: Infanterie 1866* [Historical short story: The infantry 1866]. The narrator notes in the opening of the story that nobody remembers the name of her father, who fought in the battle, because he survived and, in her opinion, memory is typically linked to death: "memory needs blood to create lively pictures"¹³ (Součková, 1943, p. 151). The carrier of this blood are words, whose power constitutes the truth of memory. Words and the whole linguistic and narrative layer become a significant element of the composition in this story. This linguistic layer is based on the use of direct speech when citing the narrator's father's words. She introduces these words writing: "My father says..." or "My father talks about..." and she repeats these phrases throughout the entire story. These expressions impart a documentary property to the text, transforming it into a "living testimony." The narrator employs a Chinese-box narrative structure, introducing her own memories of her father and his stories about the titular battle, told in direct speech. All the flashbacks transition smoothly into descriptions of the battle, descriptions of her father and descriptions of what he talks about. Although both the temporal layer and the storyline are quite complicated, the tale unfolds smoothly and one theme morphs into another. The father's memories refer to the times of his boyhood. At a certain moment, the reader begins to wonder how a child can remember so many military details. This is explained in the second part of the text, where the narrator says that her father created his image of the battle at Hradec on the basis of his own memories, as well as the information he had heard or read in the course of his life. As in many other texts, also here, the author appears to ponder on the phenomenon of memory, on how much of what one remembers is the product of one's own experience and to what extent one's memory is a sui generis coded pattern or a reconstruction of something one has not witnessed. The same theme recurs in the collection *Neznámý člověk*, in the story titled *Rok šestašedesátý* [Eighteen sixty-six]. This text again emphasizes the power of words which record the memory of the past and are the building blocks of past images:

12 The Battle of Sadowa, also named the Battle of Königgrätz or Hradec Králové, on July 3, 1866; one of the battles in the Austro-Prussian war (Seven Weeks' War) in the time of Bismarck.

13 "Paměť potřebuje krev, aby vytvářela živé obrazy."

None of us will ever forget the words with which [father] talks about the well of red bricks, the granary and the neighbor's garden. We never had to enter them and yet we know them as if we had spent our own childhood in those places. We recognize the pond where the girls bathed in the summer, where father swam with horses, we recognize everything even with our eyes closed: the smell of meadowsweet is in our nostrils, oh, yes, we recognize everything: here's where they threw stones, here our cousins bathed, here they waited holding twigs to fend off the urchins who were eager to surprise them. We can see the entire neighborhood in front of our eyes, every smallest detail: a golden lily in the garden, the church on the hill where our father's parents, and our great grandparents, rest. We didn't know them, but when father talks, it suffices to close our eyes and we can see his mother [...]. Our father's memory for numbers was quite amazing! An amazing memory for words that are the only things able to preserve the stories of the past! Naturally, many of them have already been printed and these most resemble beautiful paintings and portraits¹⁴ (Součková, 1995a, pp. 10, 11).

These words are yet another representation of the discourse of memory. The generational experience of the past emerges on the basis of the account given by the narrator's father and what the narrator remembers from his story, which she heard when a child. The temporal distance creates the universal space of the memory of her family and the community she is a member of. This memory is also evoked by her sensual impressions: remembering a chilly morning, a certain smell, the texture of the bricks with which the well was built, and so on. This somapoetics plays a considerable role in Součková's writing. It allows her narrators to return to their past with all their body and soul, all their senses and thereby "totally" experience the past, which becomes like a movie screened in their mind. All that, the childhood memories of the father, the fields, the old windmill, "the orchards, wells, granaries, fences and everything else our father so eagerly told us about suddenly became a stage of historical events"¹⁵ (Součková, 1995a, p. 15). This world of childhood, harmony and tranquility is disrupted by the war and the 1866 battle mentioned in the title. Nevertheless, it is only the background to what is most important, namely, ordinary everyday life with all its ups and downs.

This ambiguity of historical events, which are clearly significant on the one hand, but which, on the other, are only an additional element to the characters' microhistories, can be seen in two further short stories from the *Neznámý člověk* collection: *Sarajevský atentát* [The Sarajevo assassination] and *Světová válka* [World war]. They are linked by the same period. The first one concerns the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand

14 "Nikdy nezapomene žádný z nás na slova, jimiž vypravuje [otec] o studni z červených cihel, o sýpce, o sousedově zahradě. Nemusili bychom tam nikdy vkročit a známe je přece tak dobře, jako kdybychom tam byli strávili dětství. Poznáváme rybník, kde se v létě koupávaly děvečky, kde otec plavil koně, poznáváme vše, i se zavřenýma očima: vůni tavolníků máme v chřípí: ach, ano, poznáváme vše: tady házeli kameny, tady se koupaly naše sestřenky, tady si počkaly s bičem na ty uličníky, co by je byli rádi překvapili. Vidíme před sebou celou krajinu, s každou nejmenší podrobností: se zlatou lilií, v záhradce, s kostelíkem na Kopečku, kde odpočívají otcovi rodiče, naši prarodiče. Neznali jsme je; při otcových slovech však stačí zavřítí oči a vidíme jeho matku [...]. Jak obdivuhodnou paměť pro čísla měl náš otec! Obdivuhodnou paměť pro slova, jež jedina mohou uchovat dávno minulé příběhy! Mnohá z nich ovšem byla již také vytištěna a ta se nejvíce podobají krásným obrazům a podobiznám."

15 "Sady, studně, sýpky, ploty, a vše, co tak rád vyprávěl náš otec, se stalo náhle dějištěm historických událostí."

Habsburg (June 28, 1914), which nevertheless is, again, only an interlude that provided variety to an otherwise mundane Sunday in a middle-class family. The child narrator starts his musings with the following statement: “There are people who dislike Sundays and holidays. I’m not really sure why”¹⁶ (Součková, 1995a, p. 45). This sentence foreshadows what the boy’s mind is occupied with. This is a tranquil, family Sunday, the father is reading a newspaper, the mother is blaming him for not having taken them anywhere despite the beautiful weather – and in between the lines, Součková mentions the assassination. This piece of news becomes a diversion on a boring Sunday. The child narrator is looking through the window, making note of the blue sky and sunrays, while noticing a sudden agitation in the street. He sees the newspaper seller, who should not be there on a Sunday. He notices the agitation of a neighbor who runs into the street and talks to his father. The narrator is trying to understand what he is witnessing:

Father threw his coat over his shoulder and ran downstairs. [...] He probably knows already what has happened. A crime, an awful crime they will write about in the newspapers for a long time. Dad talked to Mrs. Krejčíková for a while; she seems nervous, she is serious, probably something happened that she condemns and despises. Father keeps walking on, he probably wants to buy a newspaper, a special issue, to learn about it “from the source,” as he says. Tomorrow the newspapers will bring the details, this will be talked about at the table, tomorrow, on Monday, it’s good that Sunday is drawing to an end. Nobody can remember a boy running around with a stack of newspapers in his hand on an early Sunday evening just because of an ordinary murder. The streets are almost empty, everybody has gone to the races or for a walk. Nobody can remember a Sunday evening [...] when a newspaper man would run around with a package of newspapers under his arm, holding a copy in his hand, waving it around and shouting something. This can’t be because of an ordinary murder or calamity. [...] Today was a beautiful day, many people went for a trip, a race, on a steamer or a train. And a disaster occurred, many people lost their lives. [...] Good that this is the end of Sunday, that people are coming back from their trips, races and walks. This was not a disaster, a train wasn’t derailed, a steamer did not sink, thousands of people didn’t die as when the Titanic sank. [...] Not a disaster at all! [...] I’m looking at the sky, it is similar to the sea, where we go in the summer; there are tiny ripples at the seaside, they are created by the sea waves in the sky. The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand! [...] Sometimes when I look out of the window and the sky looks weird, I tell myself: I ought to remember this¹⁷ (Součková, 1995a, pp. 50, 51, 53)

The above quote illustrates how difficult it is for a child to understand the events of the assassination in Sarajevo. What matters is that they have resulted in breaking the

16 “Někdo nemá rád neděle a svátky. Nevím vlastně dobře proč.”

17 “Otec si přehodil kabát a sběhl dolů. [...] Už asi ví, co se stalo. Vražda, hrozná vražda, o níž se pak dlouho píše v novinách. Tatínek promluvil něco s paní Krejčíkovou; ona se tváří rozzlobeně, vážně, stalo se asi něco, co odsuzuje a neschvaluje. Otec jde dál, chce asi koupit noviny, to zvláštní vydání, aby se to dověděl “z gruntu,” jak říkává. Zítra budou v novinách podrobnosti, bude se o tom mluvit při stole, zítra v pondělí, dobře, že už je konec neděle. Přece se však nepamatují, aby kvůli obyčejné vraždě běžel v neděli kvečer mužský po ulici s balíkem novin v ruce. Ulice jsou skoro prázdné, všichni jsou na dostizích, na výletech, na procházkách. Nepamatují se, aby v neděli vpodvečer [...] běžel mužský s balíkem novin v podpaždí, držel jedny v ruce, mával jimi a něco křičel. To přece není kvůli obyčejné vraždě nebo neštěstí. [...] Bylo dnes krásně, mnoho lidí bylo na výletě, na dostizích, parníkem, vlakem. A stala se katastrofa, při níž mnoho lidí přišlo o život. [...] Dobře, že je konec neděle, že se lidé vracejí z výletů, z dostihů, z procházek. Nebyla to katastrofa, nevyšinul se vlak, nepotopil se parník, nezahynuly tisíce lidí, neutonuly jako při katastrofě *Titanicu*. [...] Žádná katastrofa! [...] Dívám se na oblohu, je podobná moři, kam jezdíme v letě; na mořském břehu jsou droboučké vlnky, dělají je mořské vlny na obloze. Atentát na arciknížete Ferdinanda! [...] Někdy, když se dívám z okna a nebe vypadá zvláštně, říkám si: tohle si musím zapamatovat.”

everyday routine, making this day different from ordinary, boring Sundays. Time accelerated for a moment before returning to its regular pace. In the child's eyes, the events in Sarajevo are nothing exceptionally great, they do not mean much in the context of other events taking thousand of people's lives. This insignificance, a momentarily exposed "crevice of existence," is grasped in another text by Součková – *Světová válka* [World war]. The narrator is the same child, the boy from the former story. The timeframe of the story is indicated by the dates: July 20 – August 4, 1914. Then the author quotes the words by Churchill and Masaryk, mentioned earlier in this study. In this way, she indicates the crucial theme of the text, namely a certain simultaneousness of the events and their impact on the present, on the given moment in the life of the characters. They are on holiday at the seaside. The outbreak of World War I makes them cut their holiday short and go back home. The events described by the author are seen from the perspective of a child, who notices only the things that are important for him. Towards the end of the text, he notes that he will always associate the outbreak of the war with those holidays, the people he met then, his sister's first love, the interior design of the dining room and walks along the boardwalk. These elements, rather than the events of the war, will constitute the foundation for his memories. This emphasis given to the significance of the microcosm and microhistory against the broader historical context aims, on the one hand, to raise the importance of this alternative history and, on the other, is an expression of the author's interest in humans, their lives and thoughts, albeit in terms of behavioral rather than psychological narration.

Milada Součková is an ambiguous writer. Reading her texts requires concentration and appreciation for the nuances of her specific type of writing. The author was a part of the avant-garde in her time, but she failed to be appreciated by the avant-garde movement. After the first perusal of her texts, critics foretold success and announced the rise of a new literary star of the First Republic, but they forgot her easily. She was also forgotten by her readers, especially after she migrated to the United States, when it became virtually impossible to buy her books. Her writing style diverged immensely from the literary fashion of the time. Her highly intellectual experimental prose, despite featuring a wide range of themes and metatextual references, did not become part of the Czech literary canon. Nevertheless, it is worth returning to, if only as to a source of abundant knowledge about the passing world and for its original handling of the themes of memory. Other features that deserve attention are the way she creates the presented world, narrating from different perspectives and employing stream of consciousness – all these methods, known since the early 20th century from works by Joyce and Woolf, did not find a better representation in Central European literature than in Součková's writing. As for her games with time, memory and history, indicated in the title of this paper, these primarily concern the games people play with their own existence, fate, transience and their specific self-awareness of existing in time – in the here and now, as well as in the past, by means of recollections and memory, which ensures immortality and continuity. Součková's characters refer to the past recorded in their memories, creating "private"

mythologies, which make up the picture of people living *in between*: after the events that marked the end of the 19th century and before the outbreak of World War I. This living in suspension, in a sui generis liminal state, makes them focus on the future and at the same time nostalgically review the memories of the past, selecting those that are the best expressions of their present emotional state, life conditions and everyday existence. Therefore they keep playing an ever-lasting game with time, memory and history; a game which reflects their “longing for what one has not experienced oneself” (Janiec-Nyitrai, 2017, p. 137). This allows them to form their own identity, as well as that of the community they live in.

Translated from Polish by Katarzyna Matschi

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Gry z czasem, pamięcią i historią: O prozie Milady Součkovéj

Abstrakt: W artykule omówione zostały wybrane opowiadania czeskiej pisarki awangardowej Milady Součkovéj. Autorka szkicu przedstawia interpretację stałych motywów w twórczości tej pisarki, takich jak motyw pamięci i historii jako swoistej klamry ujmującej pisarstwo Součkovéj. Kolejnym aspektem artykułu jest wskazanie na funkcjonowanie wątków związanych z konkretnymi wydarzeniami historycznymi, stanowiącymi tło do zaprezentowania tzw. historii alternatywnej, łączącej się z mikroświatem przedstawionych postaci.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: pamięć; historia; proza; literatura czeska; awangarda.



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