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## THE CZECH JEWISHNESS OF PROFESSOR JIŘÍ FRANĚK, OUTSTANDING PERSONALITY IN PRAGUE'S SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL LIFE

*Blanka Soukupová, Zdeňka Fraňková, Věra Dvořáková*

Jiří Franěk (Frischmann) (Nov. 24, 1922, Vysoké Mýto – December 30, 2007, Prague) – Charles University professor, leading Czech literary scholar, Russian studies specialist, publisher of literature and professional books, and the greatest expert on the works of Bohumil Mathesius – can be considered from various angles. In the English-German mutation of the journal *Urban People*, we will concentrate on his relation to the Jewish minority, with whom his fate was joined. It is in accordance with the main theoretical idea of this journal, a theme which accentuates the mutual bond between the character of a city and its inhabitants, and with the effort of postmodern anthropology to analyze the complex structure of collective and individual identity.

Jiří Franěk helped shape the cultural face of Prague as editor of leading Czech publishing houses (Svoboda [1949–1952], Odeon [1952–1954], Svět sovětů/Lidové nakladatelství [from 1957]). For a short time, he also worked for the journal *Sputnik* (from 1971). Besides all of that, however, he was also a distinguished university teacher: from 1959 to 1971, when he was forced to leave, and again from 1989 to 1992, he lectured at the Prague Philosophical Faculty, a position he considered to be the most prestigious. Prague Jews recognized him as a member of the Prague Jewish (religious) community, with whom he was connected for several decades: from his return from the concentration camps until his death, thus in the years of reconstruction, negotiations with the regime, the hopeful period of the Prague Spring, normalization and re-restoration after 1989. Against a background of the good and bad times of the Prague kehillah, the no-less dramatic professionally political life of Jiří Franěk also unwound: from 1945, he was a student at the Philosophical Faculty in Prague and, later, "docent" (assistant professor) (1963). In 1990, he was made professor and, meanwhile, worked his way up to the post of an exceptionally success-

ful editor, but he also had to resign himself to employment as a signalman at the Prague-Bubeneč railroad station. In order to be able to concentrate on his work, he retired in 1978 on an invalid's pension during the time of normalization and, in 1979, he received a full pension. His political convictions also went through reversals. During World War II in Theresienstadt (Terezín) he had become a devout communist, but when he was in Auschwitz he was excluded from the Czech Communist Party.<sup>1</sup> During the period of the so-called Slánský trials, he, like many other Jews, went through the painful process of disillusionment and inner distance from the party. Then, in the era of normalization (1970), the "hard core" of the Party, for the second time, excluded him from its ranks, although he was just as a formal member. (He admitted that he had stayed in the Party only because he did not want to harm his own family.) Probably it was mainly Franěk's successful working stay in the Federal German Republic in the second half of the 1960s, thus, paradoxically, his service as a Czech Russian studies specialist that was a thorn in their side.

However, the professor, who moved about in Jewish institutions, was mainly known to people as a lecturer and sometimes no less as an avid listener, because Jiří Franěk may have preferred discussing to being the only speaker. This passion for lectures as a unique form of education was connected with his role as an educator in Theresienstadt and Auschwitz during the war. In Theresienstadt he also met the literarily and visually creative Petr Ginz (1928–Sept. 1944, Auschwitz), the editor of the journal *Vedem*<sup>2</sup> in Auschwitz, where he was transported, according to the Theresienstadt memorial book of Dec. 15, 1943,<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This information, like the information concerning the course of Jiří Franěk's employment, his family background, the fate of his brother František, and the visit of the family to Auschwitz in 1972, comes from a half-structured interview (July 22, 2008) of Blanka Soukupová with Mgr. Zdeňka Fraňková, the wife of Jiří Franěk, in his Holešovice apartment study. Data regarding his employment were corrected according to transcribed (in a computer version) recorded recollections of Franěk from January 29, 2000. – Other information, if not otherwise mentioned, was chosen from a half-structured interview of J. Franěk with J. Dvořák, recorded on June 17, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Readers could make the acquaintance of Petr Ginz in recent times by means of the publication of his two diaries written between September 1941 and January 1942. Pressburger, S. (2004) *My Brother's Diary*. Prague: TRIGON. – Jiří Franěk could react to his talent circuitously: in 2006 he prepared an editorial about the contents of the war and military diary of Petr's father Oto (Otto) Ginz from 1915 to 1924, understandably looking at Ginz's relation to Šolochov, in whose family Oto Ginz lived for a while as a captive of the Russians. Franěk, J. 2006. *Ota Ginz*. Prague. Association of former prisoners of the Schwarzhöhe concentration camp.

<sup>3</sup> (1995) *Terezínská pamětní kniha Židovské oběti nacistických deportací z Čech a Moravy 1941–1945. (Theresienstadt Memorial Book. Jewish victims of Nazi deportations from Bohemia and Moravia 1941–1945)*. Vol. II. Praha: Melantrich, p. 1066.

with the legendary educator, the German Zionist Fredy Hirsch (1916 Cáchy – March 1944, Auschwitz).

The Holocaust theme indisputably became the basic focus of Franěk's life. His mother Hana (Nov. 13, 1896–Jan. 26, 1943), his brother František (Sept. 18, 1921–1943), his aunt Edita (Aug. 20, 1905–Jan. 26, 1943), his cousins Petr (July 1, 1936–Jan. 26, 1943) and Jan (May 14, 1938–Jan. 26, 1943)<sup>4</sup> and his cousin Eva died in Auschwitz. Franěk himself apparently survived mainly because of coincidences and the abilities he learned as a scout. In 1997, in a recording of his lecture on the place of Jews in Czech literature and the relation of Czech society and the literati to them, he added, "*To survive the Holocaust meant 99% luck... But of that one percent of the lucky ones, only every tenth survived and each of those tenths had enough physical and spiritual strength.*"<sup>5</sup> He felt that the possibility of concentrating on spiritual activity played an extraordinary role.

Jiří Franěk, however, was one of those who, after the Shoah, chose to lead an active life rather than dwell on destructive memories of terrible experiences. He explained his victory over bitter fate – which is not the same as forgetting (even if statistics of the suicide of Czech survivors who could not derive benefit from psychoanalysis before 1989 are non-existent, it can be presumed that very few were so strong) – by his scouting education and his rapid postwar anchorage in a new family that he "gained by marriage." He met his wife – which was typical for those times – during the May elections of 1946. Zdeňka, however, with unusual openness admits that the Jewishness of her husband was not important to her. With great self-criticism, she also judges her own outlook as a young girl who, during the Second World War, did not link the obvious facts together. Even if her school in Hradec Králové was closed for a short time (it was the collection place for the Jewish population for transports to Theresienstadt) and even if her teacher was disgraced in the anti-Semitic magazine *Aryan Combat*, she had no idea of what was happening to the Jews, nor did she ask. Jiří Franěk's daughter later remembers the rare time when, as an eleven-year-old girl, her father took her to Schwarzhöhe near Dresden, where he had worked after the liquidation of the family camp in Auschwitz. Later he also

<sup>4</sup> *Theresienstadt ...*, p. 1060. – Franěk left on a transport to Theresienstadt. Cf – Pardubice, Dec. 5, 1942. Of those in this transport, 603 people did not survive the war; 45 people were liberated (two fates were not ascertained). *Terezín...*, p. 1058. – Franěk's father had already died in 1931. His brother, according to witnesses, succumbed to pneumonia, probably thus got through the selection.

<sup>5</sup> Franěk, J. (1997). *Asimilace*. In Veber, V. *Židé v novodobých dějinách*. Praha: Karolinum, s. 41.

took her to visit Auschwitz and Sachsenhausen, the concentration camp from which, on April 20, 1945, he was liberated. Otherwise, however, she views her father's attendance at the Jewish Community in Prague on Rosh Hashanah, as she remembers with humor, like a road *to a secret land* from which her father brought back "Věstník" (Gazette).<sup>6</sup> Information conveyed by her two sons about the Shoah was occasional and incomplete. Franěk's fated closeness to his father-in-law was probably also extremely important: during the Second World War, the latter was sentenced for political reasons to six years in the Buchenwald concentration camp and thus shared with his son-in-law a key life experience which could not be communicated and shared with other members of the family, even if they probably attempted to understand.

Perhaps one can, in this case, discuss a certain form of phenomenon that the Bratislava ethnologist Peter Salner called a manifestation of endogamy of common experience: when Jewish survivors sought out Jewish partners, was it a question of Judaism or of finding a partner with the same life experience?<sup>7</sup> Here, probably, the father-in-law replaced a Jewish confidant. In the memories of Franěk's wife and daughter, the time in concentration camps of the husband and father was reduced to comments about Auschwitz weather, the constantly present stench and smoke from the high-power incinerators that swallowed up the bodies of murdered people, and comments about the ever-present Auschwitz mud. Even if these phenomena (wind, smoke, mud) were absolutely key, in the oral-history interview recorded in 2004 by my diploma-student Tomáš Dvořák, other aspects of Auschwitz also appear: initiations, a picture of the children's block. Franěk apparently, at least sub-consciously, tried to protect his wife and children (daughter and son) from the cruel reality. In no case, however, was it a question of concealment, which was described in scientific literature as one of the post-Holocaust Jewish strategies. All of her life, his daughter pointedly proclaimed her Jewishness; she joined the Jewish Liberal Union after its founding (2000), and, after the introduction of special membership in the Orthodox-administered Jewish Community of Prague (2003) she also accepted this status as a non-halachic Jew.<sup>8</sup> Franěk himself, then, in view of the possi-

bilities of the times, tried to discuss the Shoah publicly. He also ascribed great weight to symbolic places of memory. He and his daughter visited Theresienstadt in the mid-1960s and, as his daughter remembers it, he got very angry when their guide led the visitors only to the Small Fortress. After a September 6, 2002, visit to two stops on the death march from the Schwarzheide concentration camp, which he and his co-prisoner Richard Svoboda went on as members of a delegation of the Association of Former Prisoners of the Schwarzheide Concentration Camp, he wrote, "...every public reminder of the tragedy of the past has its importance." During a stop in Česká Lípa, the former prisoners discussed the erection of a new monument to the victims of the march.<sup>9</sup>

Jiří Franěk the fighter was victorious over his own fate. However, he never got the Auschwitz experience out of his system. His wife remembers the family visit to Auschwitz in 1972 which resulted in her husband's collapse. The night before the visit, which Franěk characterized as a real Auschwitz night, had already marked him: his whole body itched him after an alleged insect attack. The next day, he went round the camp. He could allegedly open the barracks doors; during "reprises" of the last part of the journey from the camp to "work," when the prisoners did not know whether they were going to the gas chambers, he allegedly thought only about himself. And, to his wife's surprise, he finally set the table and ate all his food with zest. This situation, however, is quite logical to anthropologists. Peter Salner, working on a project called *The fates of those who survived the Holocaust* (1995–1996), described it as follows: "*Physically people were with us in the study, but spiritually they were in an entirely other world.*"<sup>10</sup> It was also logical that, at the end, the former prisoner had to suppress his hunger "of that time," another distinct phenomenon of all the memories of the Shoah survivors.

Jiří Franěk experienced his Judaism as one of the elements of his identity. It seems, however, that it was even more meaningful than he himself admitted; he had told his future wife he was a Jew at their first meeting. He was proud of his family roots, of his famous ancestor Viktor Vohryzek; he went through the harsh concentration "school." He was not a religious Jew; he did not identify with Jewish society, with the Jewish nation, or with the religion. He kept his postwar membership in the kehillah allegedly only out of respect for his bond with the Jewish community that was threatened with anti-Semitism. The family

<sup>6</sup> This was a minority monthly. Interview with Mrs. Věra Dvořáková, July 22, 2008, in her father's study in Prague – Holešovice.

<sup>7</sup> Salner, P. *Židia na Slovensku medzi tradíciou a asimiláciou (Jews in Slovakia between tradition and assimilation)*. Bratislava: ZING PRINT 2000, pp. 49-50.

<sup>8</sup> In 1977, his son emigrated to Canada and probably thereby totally severed the line of handing down of memory.

<sup>9</sup> Franěk, J., Svoboda, R. (2002). Památce obětí pochodu smrti (Memories of victims of the death march). *Roš chodeš*, 11, p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> Salner, P. (1997). *Prežili holokaust (They survived the Holocaust)*. Bratislava: VEDA, p. 131.

he grew up in celebrated only the “main” Jewish holidays and then, after his father’s death, only Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, and Christmas. Jiří Franěk kept a considerable distance from Orthodoxy, for which faith is that abyss from which everything else originates. He repeatedly blamed it because it discouraged Czech Jews from joining the Community. He consequently also rejected the new Czech spelling rule, the writing of “Jew” with a capital letter. For him, Jewishness in the diaspora was not national Jewishness. In Franěk’s mind, the nation was formed by Moses in ancient times<sup>11</sup> and later lost this status as a nation.<sup>12</sup> Although he was brought up in Czech-Jewish tradition that rejected Zionism as hidden Germanness, after the Shoah he regarded the state of Israel and Zionism as a necessary reality, the only recourse for those Jews who could not get used to their host nation, particularly German-speaking Jews after the Second World War.<sup>13</sup> But for him, home was the Czech lands.

Franěk’s concept of Jewishness was very modern; it was fundamentally rooted in the thought of the Czech-Jewish movement. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Czech-Jewish writer Vojtěch Rakous had already come out against identification of Jewishness with Orthodoxy. According to the Czech-Jewish weekly *Rozvoj* (Development), the basis of Jewishness was a realistic view of the world and a specific ethic, not rituals. Viktor Vohryzek then leaned toward the opinion that visible religious otherness is an easy target of modern anti-Semitism. In contrast to his descendant, however, he considered the religious question or, more precisely, reform, extraordinarily important.<sup>14</sup> Rejection of Orthodoxy did not mean rejection of faith. For the ideology of the Czech-Jewish movement, the fight to implant Jewishness in the Czech soil was significant. Not even Vohryzek, understandably without the experience of the Shoah, considered Zionism as non-functional: he recognized it as a solution for Russian and Romanian Jews. But he considered that the source of national Jewishness

<sup>11</sup> Franěk, J. (2006). *Osudová pospolitost – mé vyznání* (A fated community – my confession). *Listy*, XXXVI, 5, p. 6, pp. 1-2 and p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> “*Even if I think that, in view of today’s situation, nobody (not only a Jew, but no decent person) has the right to turn his back on Israel and thereby, whether or not he means it, on Zionism, I suppose that just as nobody can actually take someone’s Czechness (Germanness, Americanness, etc.) at the end of that person’s life, so right after the war I understood that people who were not Czech enough had no place to go after the war and, for Jews of the German world, the only place left for them was Palestine.*” *Jiří Franěk wrote me in a letter dated Prague, February 6, 2003.*

<sup>14</sup> Soukupová, B. (2004). *Czech Jews: disillusion as an impulse for profiling the self-confidence of Czech Judaism*. Soukupová, B., Salner, P. *Modernizace, identita, stereotyp, konflikt. Společnost po hilsneriádě*. Bratislava: ZING PRINT, pp. 56-57.

was in anti-Semitism, which should fade away;<sup>15</sup> this was the optimistic idea of the Czech-Jewish movement. Just like him, Jiří Franěk also considered Zionism a certain form of assimilation in an effort to resemble “other” nations.<sup>16</sup>

Jiří and his brother, however, were brought up as Czechs and Czechoslovaks. They respected T. G. Masaryk, the first Czechoslovak president; both exercised in Sokol; they were boy scouts; his brother acted in theater. Just like representatives of the Czech-Jewish movement, Jiří Franěk also needed to emphasize his contact with rural Czechness in his youth (in his heart, though, this was a romantic construct of the Czech national movement with whose help Jews allegedly assimilated into the Czech nation) However, it is most likely that the inner Czech Jewishness of the family became fatal. That is to say, the Frischmanns also underestimated the danger of Hitler’s fascism and, on the other hand, overestimated the possibilities of the “Masaryk” First Republic. Although Franěk’s brother had an opportunity to emigrate to France, the family naively decided that he must graduate from high school first. Jiří also gave priority to his future graduation from the Jewish Reform Academic High School of Brno over a relatively safe escape.<sup>17</sup> But Franěk wrote a provocative appraisal of the phenomenon of Theresienstadt culture, which, after the Second World War, had become a controlled sort of myth. The controversial thesis of a basic work about Theresienstadt by sociologist and historian Hans Günther Adler, who saw the primary value of its culture in the support of Nazi propaganda about Theresienstadt, was officially rejected by Czechoslovak Jews.<sup>18</sup> Franěk’s interpretation of Theresienstadt culture was only slightly respectful of the legend. That is to say, in his view, the basic fact was that Theresienstadt was a transitional stop on the way to physical liquidation. He also considered toleration of the culture on the part of German Nazism was a means of pacification of people condemned to death. It is also typical that, in his memoirs, he wrote about his mother’s death in Auschwitz as if it were an execution. (But he erroneously gave the year as 1942).

Another of Franěk’s Holocaust themes was musings about resistance and survival. Similarly to Primo Levi, Jiří Franěk, who considered dignified survival

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 66.

<sup>16</sup> *Fateful...*, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> This information comes from Franěk’s memories of January 28, 2000. Also from this same source comes his evaluation of his mother’s death.

<sup>18</sup> Soukupová, B. (2007). *Židé na Moravě v padesátých letech 20. století (do zahájení destalinizace roku 1956)* (Jews in Moravia in the 1950s [to the start of de-Stalinization in 1956]). In Pálka, P. *Židé a Morava*. XIII. Kroměříž: Muzeum Kroměřížska, p. 263.

a type of resistance, also supposed that each prisoner survived at the expense of someone else. His position as a teacher was certainly also a better starting point for survival than the position of a slave doing manual labor. It was, perhaps, exactly for that reason that Jiří Franěk placed great emphasis on public communication about the fate of survivors and on scientific processing of the problem of active resistance in the concentration camps.<sup>19</sup>

Also quite unique was Franěk's editorial interest in Karel Poláček and Jiří Orten, with whom, thanks to his cousin Oto Reiner, who photographed his friend Orten, he could even shake hands.<sup>20</sup> This reference of Franěk's, which is another manifestation of his Jewishness, should be evaluated by a literary historian. In our brief musings we have concentrated only on the role Judaism played in the life of one brave, militant man who was born in the turbulent 20<sup>th</sup> century as a Jew.

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## "WE SIMPLY LAUGHED AT THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS"

**Professor Jiří FRANĚK (formerly Frischman)**

**Born in 1920 in Vysoké Mýto,**

**died on Dec. 30, 2007, in Prague, Czechoslovakia**

*June 27–30, 2004 recorded and transcribed (in Czech) by Jan Dvořák*

*August 2008, translated into English and commented by František Franěk and Jacob Franek*

### **Where do you come from? Tell us about your family.**

I come from Vysoké Mýto, which was then a little town of 15,000 souls in Eastern Bohemia, in the Pardubice<sup>1</sup> region. My father's given name was Frischmann. The whole family used the double "n"; however, one "n" fell off my name, probably the rabbi's mistake, in the registry record. I changed my name when I started Slavic studies<sup>2</sup> and learned that the Germanic names had been forcefully assigned by the Emperor Joseph II. A clerk assigned a Jew a name according to his [the Jew's] financial situation. Therefore, my ancestor was neither too poor, nor too rich. If he had been rich, he would have been named Goldschmidt.

My father's side of the family considered themselves Czech. For instance, my father knew Laufr, who was Jewish and the first sports commentator of Czechoslovak Radio. My father had a large collection of books and his favorite author was Bezruč<sup>3</sup>. All this indicates that the family felt Czech to a large extent. Not entirely though, since some of the relatives were Germans, more precisely German Jews. The Czech side, however, dominated. My father died when I was ten years old.

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<sup>19</sup> Manuscript in computer version, undated.

<sup>20</sup> In 1991, Jiří Franěk published *Citového průvodce po Kutné Hoře ve verších a fotografiích*. (An emotional guide through Kutná Hora in verse and photographs). Verses written by Orten (Jiří Jakubec), photographs provided by Oto Reiner (J. Hron).

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<sup>1</sup> the biggest city in Eastern Bohemia

<sup>2</sup> in North America now more commonly referred to as Eastern European studies

<sup>3</sup> Czech poet from the Ostrava region