

Lamentation for 77,297 Victims

Jiří Weil

Translated from the Czech by David Lightfoot

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

 $\mathbf{Ji\check{r}i}$ Weil (1900–1959) was a Jewish Czech writer, translator, and essavist.

Born into an upper-middle class family in the small Central Bohemian village of Praskolesy, Jiří Weil moved to Prague to study Slavic philology and comparative literature at Charles University; in 1928 he earned his doctorate. A committed leftist at the time, he translated for the press department of the Soviet trade representation in Prague when he was still a student.

In 1933 the Czechoslovak Communist Party sent Weil to Moscow to work as a translator for the Comintern. His harrowing experiences in the Soviet Union inspired him to write *From Moscow to the Border* (1937) upon his return; fiercely critical of Stalinism, the novel resulted in his expulsion from the Communist Party.

Having narrowly escaped Stalin's purges, Weil's life was again in jeopardy when Nazi Germany invaded Czechoslovakia the following year. During the occupation, Weil was assigned to work in Prague's Jewish Museum, where confiscated Jewish property was processed. To avoid being transported to the concentration camps, Weil faked his own suicide.

After the war, Weil would return to Prague's Jewish Museum to work as its senior librarian. Although Weil had mentioned Judaism only once in his writings before World War II, it now became the focus of his writing. His most famous novel, 1949's *Life with a Star*, was criticized both by the ruling Communists and by members of the Jewish community. This novel, as well as Weil's anti-Stalinist stances, led him to be expelled out of the Czechoslovak Writers' Union in 1951. *Life with a Star* is now considered a classic, championed by writers like Philip Roth.

Weil's oeuvre is notable for its range of styles, from the documentary fiction of *Memories of Julius Fučík* to the experimental prose poem *Lamentation for 77, 297 Victims*. A common thread in his work, however, is a brave stance against the horrors of totalitarianism.

Smoke from nearby factories shrouds a countryside as flat as a table, a countryside stretching off to infinity. It is covered by the ashes of millions of dead. Scattered throughout are fine pieces of bone that ovens were not able to burn. When the wind comes, ashes rise up to the sky the fragments of bone remain on the earth. And rain falls on the ashes, and rain turns them to good fertile soil, as befits the ashes of martyrs. And who can find the ashes of those from my native land; there were 77, 297 of them? I gather some ashes with my hand, for only a hand can touch them, and I pour them into a linen sack, just as those who once left for a foreign country would gather their native soil so as never to forget, to return to it always.

Paper boxes sit on a shelf of soft wood painted brown. In the boxes names are arranged in alphabetical order. There are 77,297. These are the names of victims from Bohemia and Moravia. Each name has a transport number, year of birth, last place of residence, and date and place of death. Sometimes the date and place of death are not given. No one knows when and where they died. The names are inscribed on the walls of the Pinkas Synagogue, which stands next to the Old Cemetery. Thus will their memory be preserved.

MOREOVER ALL THESE CURSES SHALL COME UPON THEE, AND SHALL PURSUE THEE, AND OVERTAKE THEE, TILL THOU BE DESTROYED -- Moses 28:45