

The Ups and Downs of Czech Letters

HUNDRED TOWERS. A Czechoslovak Anthology of Creative Writing. Edited by F. C. Weiskopf. New York: L. B. Fischer. 1945. 275 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by ROBERT PICK

IN ancient Czech the same word *jazyk* denotes both "nation" and "language." From their very historical beginnings the Czechs have always been a highly literary-minded people. In an introductory sketch (which somewhat oversimplifies historical matters) the editor of this slender anthology retraces the ups and downs of Czech letters, and tells of the amazing tenacity with which that westernmost Slav tribe for two, as indeed three, centuries withstood the denationalizing efforts of the Vienna court. From Comenius (whose name has recently been recalled to English-speaking people by a commemorative publication of Oxford University and Alexander Meiklejohn's magnificent study) to T. G. Masaryk, Czech learning and thinking have so greatly contributed to Western scholarship that the literature of that "unholy and rebellious nation" really deserves a place of its own among the writings of small European peoples.

The present anthology, confined to twentieth-century material, suffers from two shortcomings common to all such books. Space limits the contributors to a few pages each; and the enterprise itself as Mr. Weiskopf admits with disarming frankness is "by its very nature fragmentary and partial." Yet there is quite enough here to be thankful for. There is, above all, a piece by Jaroslav Hasek, the immortal author of "Good Soldier Schweik," one of the truly great writers of this century; there are two *feuilletons* by Carel Capek, better known as a playwright in this country—both dealing

with Masaryk; there are four pages of first-rate prose by Joseph Capek, Carel's brother and his collaborator on the famous "Life of Insects"; there is a short story by Egon Hostovsky who, now living in this country, is in many quarters regarded as one of the literary hopes of renascent Czechoslovakia; there is a poignant novelette by Jan Olbrecht, a social writer of typically Slav power; and there is a charming small-town tale by Vladislav Vancura, who in 1942 died at the hands of the German oppressors. Of the Slovak authors included, the late Martin Kucukin, with a sketch of village life under the Austro-Hungarian regime,

bears witness to the fact that Slovak writing has made strides since Count Tisza, in 1875, informed the Budapest parliament that there was "no such thing as a Slovak people." Samples of poetry, interspersed with the prose, may lift slightly the veil which necessarily covers foreign verse for strange readers.

It is not easy to find a common denominator for what is offered as representative in this volume—except, perhaps, a certain directness and that unaffected nearness to folk ways which was already noted in Czech literature by Herder and Goethe at a time when the *vlastenci*, the nineteenth-century "friends of the national language," had not yet begun to rebuild the literary heritage of Comenius's nation.

ANSWERS TO LITERARY QUIZ

1. "Horatius," by Thomas Macaulay.
2. Robert Jordan, in "For Whom the Bell Tolls," by Ernest Hemingway.
3. Peyton Farquhar, in "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," by Ambrose Bierce.
4. Brother Juniper, in "The Bridge of San Luis Rey," by Thornton Wilder.
5. Phileas Fogg, in "Around the World in Eighty Days," by Jules Verne.
6. "Lucy Gray," by William Wordsworth.
7. Sherlock Holmes, in "Thor Bridge," by Conan Doyle.
8. Nancy, in "Oliver Twist," by Charles Dickens.
9. Robin Hood.
10. "Chad Hanna," by Walter Edmonds.

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Woman Owns House and Vice Versa

MRS. HERIOT'S HOUSE. By Barbara Webster. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1945. 220 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by RICHARD A. CORDELL

THIS is a completely charming little story of a year on a farm in the beautiful hill country of Pennsylvania. Mrs. Heriot takes advantage of her widowhood and the death of her mother to realize her dream—a little house in the country where she can live simply and richly, and have time to savor the fruity dailiness of life. She finds what she wants—a crazy-built little stone house with a sturdy charm, surrounded by a hundred semi-tamed acres which are hers to stare at and tramp over. With the little estate comes Doris, a taciturn, enigmatic Negro girl, who has worked here before and who loves the house. Mrs. Heriot, dreaming of absolute independence, tries to rebuff her, but in vain; Doris can no more be ejected or dismissed than the roof or foundation. At the end of the novel she is as inexorably a part of the household as Mrs. Heriot herself.

There is little plot, for little is needed. Instead of accident and intrigue we have character and a subtle study of human relationships; and also a delightful chronicle of the four seasons in the lovely Pennsylvania valley. The novelist deftly steers her simple story past threatening dangers. The countryside, almost absurdly picturesque, never is banal in calendar-like prettiness; there is no italicized

local color; the homely narrative never flutters into idyl or pastoral. (To be sure, the immediate and almost miraculous success of the vegetable garden will be the envy of many a frustrated reader, but some gardens do flourish.) At one point the book threatens to turn sociological, but our interest is soon directed again towards Doris, not towards the race problem, for Doris is primarily a member of the human race.

Perhaps the chief negative virtue of "Mrs. Heriot's House" lies in the novelist's refusal to over-analyze the strange rapport between the aristocratic, sensible, esthetic mistress, and the uncommunicative, often slatternly servant, whose tastes run to zoot-suited bucks, books of comics, and radio serials. There is as little affection between the two as there is intellectual harmony, and Doris is no termite-like neurotic guest in the house who defies expulsion. Mrs. Heriot finally understands: Doris, too, loves the house—that common object of love forms their strange, inseparable bond. For it Doris rejects her zoot-suited Lee-roy; for it Mrs. Heriot rejects the wealthy colonel, whom she likes, but who scorns her little house and offers her instead a great house to preside over, and such minor horrors as receptions, bridge parties, the cult of the beauty-parlor, etc.

Excellent pen-and-ink drawings by Edward Shenton suggest the robust beauty of the valley, and help make understandable the devotion of the two women for Mrs. Heriot's house.

The Criminal Record

The Saturday Review's Guide to Detective Fiction

Title and Author	Crime, Place, and Sleuth	Summing Up	Verdict
WHATEVER GOES UP Bertram Millhauser (Crime Club: \$2.)	Face peering in window of air-plane scares California bound girl and involves her, indirectly, in very pretty murder case.	Rapidly moving and adequately plotted combination of murder and intrigue with Cal. police officer doing forthright job of detection.	Readable
FALLEN ANGEL Marty Holland (Dutton: \$2.)	Ex-insurance investigator hops bus at Cal. cafe and begins callous career which calls for his solution of two murders.	Fine bunch of unpleasant people—except rather stupid heroine—much tough talk and action, and a finish that isn't too unbelievable.	Forward-boiled addicts
THE RED RIGHT HAND Joel Townsley Rogers (Simon & Schuster: \$2.)	Journey from New York to New England ends fatally for prospective bridegroom. Doctor, who resembles chief suspect, elucidates.	Effective amalgam of terror and mystery, with accent on former. Gets out of hand occasionally but total effect is satisfactorily shiversome.	Good job
MURDER IN PLAIN SIGHT Gerald Brown (Phoenix Press: \$2.)	Fastidious Boston private-eye hired by old lady to watch wedding presents runs into double murder.	Family skeletons of precious crowd of Beacon Hill aristos get thorough overhauling before staccato yarn is finished.	Run-of-the-Common