

Jiří Kovtun: **Tajuplná vražda. Případ Leopolda Hilsnera (A Mysterious Murder. The Case of Leopold Hilsner)**  
Praha, Sefer 1994, 574 s.

At the beginning of this century, the state of Czech sociology could easily have been worse. In 1900, its foremost (and indeed almost only) representative entered the fight against so-called ritual superstitions, joining the struggle to save an unknown young Jew, Leopold Hilsner, who was accused of having killed 19-year-old Anežka Hrůzová in Polná on 29th March, 1899. Hilsner's accusers were unsure whether he had acted alone or with accomplices but had no doubt of the motive: to use Anežka Hrůzová's blood in their rituals. The murderer was never found and to this day the case has not been solved and has never failed to arouse interest in academics and journalists – whether from a pro-Masaryk, an anti-Masaryk a neutral or, inevitably, a radically anti-semitic perspective – and as the “history of real life”. It could well seem that there is nothing left to be said; Jiří Kovtun (a historian, poet, translator, Slavonic scholar and journalist born in 1927), however, disagrees. He took this story, which can be seen as a symbol of the “century of the holocaust”, and has produced a book of more than 550 sometimes dramatic and sometimes drawn-out but always compelling pages. The compulsion comes from its many layers, which (as with Umberto Eco's famous criteria) allow it to be read in many different ways and from various points of view – almost always a sign of a good book.

Kovtun's book can be read as a well-documented account of a relatively well-known history or as a book on Czech and European anti-semitism; it can also be read as a response to the atmosphere of the fin de siècle, as an important study of how ordinary people lived at the turn of the century, as a demonstration of how history and biography are interwoven and, of course, as yet another contribution to the almost never-ending series of works on Masaryk. Hana Housková's review in *Labyrint* examined the book's “Jewish” dimension in detail (“Opus magnum s píhami na kráse”, in *Labyrint*, 1995, no. 6), concentrating (a trifle unjustifiably) on Kovtun's misplaced moderni-

sation of the story, but primarily on the idea, probably first raised in Tramer's book *Prague – The City of Three Peoples* (London 1964), of the three nations living in the Czech Lands (Czechs, Germans and Jews) which arouses such interest today. Housková implies that Kovtun paid insufficient attention to the Jewish population's attempts to assimilate and particularly that he overlooked the Czech-Jewish element both in the Hilsner case and in general. These are serious reproofs, but Kovtun's failure to explain Zdeněk Auředníček's involvement in the case seems even more so. Kovtun fails to mention that Auředníček's wife was a Jew and in doing so, however unintentionally, helps to fabricate anti-semitism: if Kovtun has “concealed” Auředníček's motives then they cannot have been entirely honourable etc. As Kovtun himself describes it with reference to Gavin I. Langmuir, anti-semitism is a *socially significant chimera of hostility*, which is based on the commonly held idea that Jews are endowed with characteristics which have never in fact been demonstrated but are sufficiently repugnant that they invariably arouse resentment. This irrational position is beyond the limits of logic and faith and nothing should be done to support it in any way. In addition, it can be seen from one of the central moments of the trial that the Jews of Polná could quite easily have saved Hilsner if they had sworn a “simple declaration” that he was in the synagogue at the time the deed was done. They did not do this, however, simply because Hilsner was not in the synagogue at that time...

Kovtun's book is certainly a valuable contribution to the history of Czech Judaism and to the knowledge of the roots of anti-semitism and of the various forms it can take. He provides a more or less detailed account of both the theoreticians of anti-semitism (Rohling, Eisenmenger) and its practitioners (Leuger, Box or the Breznovský glove-makers). He did, however, overlook Karl Tschupik's important work *Die Christum seit Schatten*, which is an attempt to provide a theoretical grounding for Austrian anti-semitism and to legitimise catholic anti-semitism.

Kovtun's book can also be read in quite another light as its “Jewish” dimension has considerable sociological value in itself. It can

be read as a response to Masaryk's view of sociology as a science and at the same time as an "account" of Masaryk as a modern intellectual, "modern" in the post-modern sense and "intellectual" in the sense the word is understood by conservative critics of "social engineering".

Masaryk saw his role in the Hilsner trial simply and unqualifiedly as an organic part of his scientific work, and did not see his social commitment as being in conflict with his scientific concerns. Quite the reverse: he claimed that his criticism of the Polná trial was no less scientific than any other work he had done. He distinguished at least four sociological dimensions par excellence (as he termed them) in the Hilsner trial, which justified his involvement *as a sociologist*: 1) the phenomenon of prejudice (or superstition, as sociological theory of the period termed it) as a universal phenomenon which must be constantly struggled against ("superstition turns the human heart into stone and transforms the brain into sawdust, superstition blurs the vision and makes men blind, superstition lures people into injustice and dishonesty"); 2) the fact of the deformed national auto-stereotype (the Czechs' tendencies to self-idealisation and to self-flagellation – in this case, the former); 3) the process of forming public opinion and the idea of public opinion as the final arbiter of justice ("those people who are better and more prone to thought will ask themselves what in fact public opinion is and how indeed people create this public opinion, and they will openly ask whether the consent even of the whole nation is a guarantee of justice"); and 4) the role of the intelligentsia in the life of the nation in both a positive and a negative sense.

This last point is fundamental: Masaryk did not look at the superstition of ritual murder as a popular superstition but as a failure of the intelligentsia, which is under an obligation to use its mind for the interests both of itself and of its nation. The spur to the false "popular interpretation" of the fact of the murder was simply a medical opinion and the entry into the arena of lawyers, priests and journalists appearing entirely *within their own spheres*. It is important to remember this so that we should distinguish them from those chimerical intel-

lectuals so beloved in the Czech Lands today who move out of their original spheres and legitimise their public involvement with a narrow expertise that is not related to the matter in hand. The problem is not that the intellectuals failed at a point where they should not have, that is, on their own ground. Masaryk said that he was not concerned with the Jews but with the Czech intelligentsia and with our Czech conscience. For Masaryk, the Hilsner case was a symptom of the nation's pathological state and, in that sense, his involvement in the affair fell clearly into the overall context of his attempt to reform and revive the nation.

Masaryk himself emerged as a modern intellectual in this conflict, and however unwilling he may have been to see it in these terms, it was inevitable given that such categories were already used in journalism and in public debate. Paul Johnson, a not unknown authority in this field, described in his 1988 book *Intellectuals*, an intellectual as someone who believes that it is possible to change the world through the power of the intellect, someone who believes in the category of ideas, concept and truth, someone who is convinced that it is possible to create a better society through the power of ideas, someone who succumbs to the temptation to make use of the capital which they have acquired through an expert knowledge of their field in order to acquire a forum for their own ideas in public affairs. For Johnson, the prototypes of such intellectuals as Sartre, Russell, Brecht and Chomsky are, of course, mostly ranged on the political left. Johnson seeks to show that modern intellectuals have failed not only in what they believe but also because they have not lived in accordance with their own pronouncements, because they have not practised what they preach.

Masaryk, however, as the Hilsner case clearly showed and Kovtun convincingly demonstrates, was a prophet and founder, a national teacher by profession. It was because he believed in the power of rational behaviour over people that he became involved in the Hilsner affair, because for him "people must accept what is right". He wanted to solve the legal case like a "scientific" example, since he was convinced that belief in ritual murder cannot be dispelled by common cultural historical or

moral interpretations, but only by particular, precisely demonstrated examples. Masaryk did, however, use it as an instrument to demonstrate the power of Ideas, Truth and Reason against Superstition, Prejudice, Error and Untruth. For him it was not fundamentally – and this is one of the leitmotifs of the book – a matter of one man, but of principles and of the start of a great struggle. It was only this that left Masaryk with a sense of victory at the end of the affair, even though Hilsner's little world was for long decades turned into a microcosm of the whole. Kovtun maintains that the public did not really understand Masaryk's universalist point of view, which was not infrequently seen as intellectual arrogance: the concrete person was included in this standpoint but it was sometimes difficult to identify him, so well was he concealed behind great principles. Hilsner himself would have had great difficulty in understanding the role his personal fate played in Masaryk's intellectual victory and rethinking of culture...

There is no conflict between Masaryk's role in the Hilsner affair as the typical European intellectual, as the representative of modernity, and everything that goes with it: the "naive epistemology" of Truth, faith in the power of ideas and, of course, in the persuasiveness of reason, the conviction that human affairs could be changed for the better, the fixed, transcendently anchored morality

whose principles are not to be doubted, faith in the inevitability of progress... Masaryk was by no means uncritical either of his own time or of his own efforts, but nor was he a sceptic, a relativist or an individualistic egoist. There is one point in which he did not fulfil Johnson's (and not only Johnson's) idea of the modern intellectual: Masaryk was no hypocrite and his personal morality has never been cast in doubt. The question which Kovtun's book raised for me was whether Masaryk's involvement in the Hilsner process was a model case of a "modern intellectual" going beyond his own sphere of competence, or whether it was a model case of courageous civic and human involvement which was only superficially legitimised by the fact of scientific competence, its real legitimacy arising from a sense of responsibility towards national solidarity or towards the ideas of Reason, Truth and Justice. Or was it just an interesting episode in our national cultural history which, in hindsight, we have endowed with a much greater significance than it would have had without Masaryk's subsequent presidency and the holocaust.

I myself tend towards the idea that there is another lesson to be learned from Masaryk's commitment – and not only in the case of the Polná trial: things are very different with the modern intellectual. But in what way?

*Miloslav Petrušek*

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