



Rio Preisner
**Prague
in Thaw**

Praha za času plujících ker

MASARYKOVA
UNIVERZITA

RIO PREISNER

PRAGUE IN THAW

PRAHA ZA ČASU PLUJÍCÍCH KER

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Translated by Charles S. Kraszewski

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Afterword by Charles S. Kraszewski

Masaryk University Press
Brno 2025

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ISBN 978-80-280-0788-1 (online ; pdf)

ISBN 978-80-280-0787-4 (hardback)

Publisher's acknowledgements

The book is being published on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Rio Preisner's birth (1925–2007).

The poet's daughter, Mrs. Ruth Preisner Quinlan, provided tremendous support for the publication of this book.

We owe her a debt of gratitude.

We would also like to thank Prof. Charles S. Kraszewski and Prof. Jiří Hanuš for their inspiration for this bilingual edition.



Table of Contents

Foreword	10
Rio Preisner: Even the Czech Lyre Succumbed to the Jacobin Metre <i>By Jiří Hanuš</i>	
Prague in Thaw	19
Praha za času plujících ker	
Afterword	81
Dürer's Ritter, not Orpheus: Rio Preisner Returns to Prague... and Leaves Again <i>By Charles S. Kraszewski</i>	
Glossary	131

Foreword

Rio Preisner: Even the Czech Lyre Succumbed to the Jacobin Metre

Jiří Hanuš

When our Brno publishing house released a collection of poems in 2013 (previously included in *Proglas* and *Kontexty* magazines since 1989), edited by my colleague and friend František Mikš, he gave it the title *Co zůstává: malá antologie soudobé české poezie* [What Remains: A Little Anthology of Contemporary Czech Poetry]. For every author, this is an essential, existential question. What remains of those who dedicate themselves to writing? It hardly matters whether they produce poems, novels or philosophical treatises. It is an interesting question, not least because it has been addressed by giants of Czech and international culture (including F. X. Šalda). It can be answered in two ways – both are essentially optimistic, although the first makes certain assumptions. The first says that quality texts endure, though these might be few and far between. The assumption is that there is a criterion of evaluation and quality, which, likewise, is expected to be permanent, to endure. Strange though it may seem, this assumption works in practice, but only to a certain extent. Karel Hynek Mácha's *May* has been considered a first-rate work for nearly two centuries (*despite*

the fact that it is often featured in reading-books!), while works by other Czech Romantics have become so outdated and stale that no matter what waves of enthusiasm for Romanticism are yet to come, they are unlikely to be revived. The fact that people no longer read *May* or various other Czech poems of the National Revival period is a separate issue. The second, just as optimistic, option does not assume any criterion of value but rather emphasises the durability of material that will not yield – as the old saying goes – to fire or sword. Here we encounter the interesting phenomenon of the disobedient literary executor. For example, thanks to Max Brod, who refused to obey the wishes of his friend Franz Kafka and did not burn Kafka's life's work, generations of future readers have been, and will continue to be, enabled to rack their brains over Kafkaesque allegories and parables. Certainly, manuscripts can succumb to fire, and we can imagine some kind of technological blackout or computer virus that might, for example, erase all post-modern poetry from the world's servers – an apocalyptic vision that could well inspire a good many new (!) literary works. And so on ad infinitum. But setting that aside, the question can be put in concrete terms: What remains of the works of a particular author, in our case, the very varied body of texts by Rio Preisner, who was born in Subcarpathian Rus in 1925 and died in Pennsylvania in 2007?

First of all, we must admit that Preisner is not an author who has remained in the public consciousness. He is known by a few Germanists and literary scholars, as well as a handful of conservative and Christian intellectuals in Czechia who could be counted on two hands at best. Even

should we add collectors of early émigré publications and fans of any anti-communist literature, we might reach a total of 50 readers at most. That is not many – despite the fact that Preisner was a remarkable, original, and very industrious author who devoted his entire professional life to literature and original composition. (I leave aside here his translations from German into Czech, which are also outstanding but not exactly bestsellers.) We may expect his three large, original works to survive: his philosophical, historical and theological fragments, brought out in a comprehensive edition as *Kritika totalitarismu* [A Critique of Totalitarianism; CDK 2020], his studies of German literature collected under the title *Když myslím na Evropu* [When I Think of Europe; Torst 2003, 2004] and his *Americana* (Atlantis 1992, 1993), a Tocquevillian treatise on America for Central Europeans in the late 20th century. This is an estimate of these works' survivability according to the value criterion, one that is subjective and dubious in character, because, it could be objected, it is only my opinion. And since I have mentioned Alexis de Tocqueville, a liberal author of the first half of the 19th century who admired democracy while also warning of its obsession with the principle of equality, it may be that Preisner's works will share the fate of Tocqueville's, in the sense that he will be entirely forgotten and only read again 120 years after his death – with tremendous interest and to critical acclaim.

But what about Preisner's poetry? Almost all of it was published under the simple title *Básně* [Poems; Torst, 1997] with a fine afterword by Ivan Slavík, a Czech Catholic poet who has also drifted away from the consciousness of younger

readers. Preisner's poems are heavy reading, even for those used to the genre. The volume includes seven collections and stand-alone poems as well as some translations of poetry by Paul Celan, Friedrich Holderlin, T. S. Eliot and other poets dear to his heart. Preisner's collected poems were carefully edited by none other than Jan Šulc, who – perhaps it can now be said – had a hard time publishing Preisner's works. Yet published they were, so Czech readers do not have to patronise second-hand bookshops or wait for the doors of *Libri prohibiti*, the library of Czech exile literature, to open. They can just sit down and start reading.

For Preisner, poetry was a life-long struggle. Although he devoted a great deal of attention to it (seven collections is an impressive total), he knew that his metier was something else. And yet he could not stop himself from his poetic pursuits. I believe that this struggle was kept in motion by his life-long friendship with the poet Ivan Diviš (1924–1999), one of the most talented Czech lyricists of the second half of the 20th century. Preisner constantly measured himself against Diviš and was well aware that the muses had not granted the two men equal talents. This could be dismissed as undue modesty – yet that is how he recorded it in his diaries. He considered Diviš a poet by the grace of God, and tested by God by various sicknesses and sufferings. Certainly, this was a central element of Preisner's spiritual world: a Christian vision, according to which Christ redeemed the world by dying in pain on the Cross in the presence of the mocking crowd, ignored by the indifferent powerful. Still, despite Preisner's self-awareness of his inadequacy compared to Diviš, his poetry can be rated highly.

It is, first of all, writing that provides a very personal guide to its author's life story. There are exceptional poems from his childhood in Uzhhorod (which are my favourites), the mostly experimental poems written during the promisingly creative yet somewhat confused 1960s, and the later works – some full of an émigré longing for home and others full of bitterness for the post-communist legacy, beginning with the years following 1989, when Preisner occasionally returned to Prague, but never to stay. In his poetry, Preisner captured the long-lost world of the little people including the Jewish community in *Zvíře dětství* [The Animal of Childhood], the Kafkaesque atmosphere of Prague in *Kapiláry* [Capillaries], a topic he returned to repeatedly, including its post-1968 'normalisation' period in *Praha za času plujících ker* [Prague in Thaw]. But above all his poetry expresses his thinking about fallen human nature, the communist paradise on Earth, the loss of authentic Christianity and the general decay of the era in which he lived that had, he was convinced, a spiritual cause. If his fragments are the 'bloody lumps of this era', so similarly are some of his poems, only expressed in a different form:

The timelessness of the genocides began.
The theologian aborted the emerging god
anointed in a Finnish sauna
in the name of the father of progress, the whore of utopia
and the spirit of dialectics amen.
The new man proudly measured the length of his coccyx.
In the omega dungeon the Gallic goat stank.
The cloaca of liberation, Semperaperta,

spread the Orbis pictus.
Justice dreamed of the waters of waters
and cursed the rainbow.¹

Are these intellectual verses? Undoubtedly; that has been noted by Slavík. Are they difficult to understand? Certainly; but try reading Vladimír Holan. Are they poems of resistance (in this case, to the modern theology of Teilhard de Chardin whom Preisner detested for his Hegelianism and his underestimation of the problem of human suffering)? Yes, but this is how poets often treat their rationally-justified emotions: in artistic form. There is certainly ugliness, mockery and irony to be found in Preisner, who believed that the world had been submerged in a devastating *diamat* (for younger readers: dialectical materialism with its utopian spiritualism, combined with cynicism).

Prague in Thaw is dated October to November 1990. Contemporary witnesses of the era will be surprised at its contents, as were those who read the poems at the time. Instead of jubilation at the freedom won by the Czechs, there is an inspection of wounds, a remembrance of loss: those still fresh and some earlier, the impossibility of a simple coming to terms with the past. Harsh metaphors assign blame for the loss of the natural world, the weakening of Christian culture and the establishment of an omnipresent alienation. The adoption of a progressive, revolutionary and communist ideology, Preisner believed, caused unparalleled

¹ From the collection *Zasuto* [Buried Layers Deep], XXXII, and printed in *Rio Preisner, Básně* [Poems] (Praha: Torst, 1997), pp. 299–300.

devastation in Czechia that enthralled everything in its spell. In 1990 Preisner examined what remained of the ‘rule of the happy animal’ (Jan Zahradníček): the ruins of knowledge and the ruins of the city, ravaged houses and confused avant-gardes – vanity fair in short. We should remember that this was the time when the rejoicing and happiness of the Velvet Revolution still prevailed. This could not satisfy an old exile who saw communism as a radical offshoot of the Modernism that followed foreign gods instead of the Lord. It was clear how it would all end. The vineyards had gone to ruin, the cities were wrecked; all that was left of the Church was ‘an aethereal voice’.

Certainly, Preisner’s work does not make for easy reading, and not only because of his intellectuality; it is difficult to accept his message. People in Manhattan and Prague could not bear the gift of living truth and missed their invitation to the banquet. Even the Czech lyre succumbed to the Jacobin metre. Images of destruction pile up. I would say that his poems are psalms, most like those that lament the destruction of Jerusalem. Only a single hope, the last one, of the Second Coming, remains for Preisner:

Heaven send us the corrosive
dew of God’s mercy!

It is significant that the publication of *Prague in Thaw* in a bilingual, Czech-English edition comes at a time when we feel grateful for the life and works of Rio Preisner. The writer, philosopher and Germanist left traces on two continents, yet was unable to develop his talents as a teacher

in Prague, the city he adopted as his home, having more success in his second home and place of work, Penn State University, which also provided a refuge to his wife Olga, the art historian. The translation is by one of Rio's devoted students, who admires the exactitude and consistency of his thought, and remains grateful for his influence. Incidentally, the Czech émigré did use his fragments or poems in his teaching, and introduced his students to his favourites of German and Austrian literature – Goethe, Rilke, Werfel, Broch and Kafka. Preisner resisted his natural cultural pessimism not only by studying these figures, but, like all significant émigrés of the Stalinist and normalisation eras, in his consistent efforts to engage with Czech literature abroad. We should be grateful. Preisner was a man of integrity, even though he wrote in various genres and on difficult topics. He wrote in accordance with G. K. Chesterton's paradox: 'A dead thing can go with the stream, but only a living thing can go against it.'

What could be more valuable in our time? What else might be a basis for ethical behaviour? Preisner's oeuvre is an extraordinarily unified body of work that is unusual in Czech art.

Brno, 26 July 2025

Translated by Štěpán Kaňa



PRAHA ZA ČASU
PLUJÍCÍCH KER

PRAGUE IN THAW

Matička má drápy,
posteskl si poutník
přivítán růžemi ran,
když stanul na prahu města.
Na Prahu myslel,
na srdce Evropy
s nedomykavou chlopní dějin,
na malé Benátky vyschlé.
Nedávno ještě na Marjance
se tančilo o sobotách;
v mezích zákona,
nařídil komisař Hašek.
Brzy nato zlaté fasády
začaly padat
do hřbitovního kvítí.

This little Mama has claws,
the pilgrim lamented,
welcomed with roses of wounds,
as he paused at the city threshold.
He thought on Prague,
on the heart of Europe
with its noncoopting valve of history,
on Malé Benátky all dried up.
Not long ago on Marjánka
there was dancing on Saturdays;
within the bounds of the law
ruled Commissar Hašek.
Soon thereafter, the golden façades
began to crumble
into cemetery blossoms.

Sedmnáctého listopadu dnes

hrad je osvětlen více,
než sluší se pro turisty.
Možná že ve Vladislavském sále
rozžali další svíce,
jako bez se od Majlandu
vrátil duch Otce vlasti.
Ode dne kdy tam Hitler
z balkónů a oken vyhlížel
Tatary, tonul v pološeru.
To bylo poté, co na českou zemi
složili věnce pevnostního pásma.
Podél řeky se svíjí
tlustá a tenká Strana,
dva chvosty Leviathana.
Tataři ovšem přišli načas,
takříkajíc na zavalanou,
tryskem objeli katedrálu
a rouhavě zasedli k hodům.
Srkali ústřice
živých duší
s omáčkou častušek.
Po dlouhý čas praskaly
pod nohama chodců
skořápky na hlavách kočičích.
Na hoře Vítkově palcát
k novému míří tisíciletí
nad římem Žižkova.

Zatím myslíme na chorál,
malověrní, na Máchu,
jak umíral zády k ohni,
tváří v tvář tomu,
co se nic nazývá.

Seventeenth November today

the castle's lit up more
than tourists deserve.
Perhaps in the Vladislav Hall
they've lit additional candles,
as if the ghost of the Pater patriae
had come back home from Milano.
Since the day when Hitler stood on watch
now at the balcony now at the window
scanning for Tatars,
it's been sunken in twilight.
That was after they'd placed their futile wreaths
of fortress and battlement around the Czech lands.
Alongside the river squirm
the Fat and Thin Sides,
the two tails of Leviathan.
The Tatars of course came just in time,
you might even say they came right on cue,
tearing round the cathedral tyres squealing,
sitting down to a blasphemous feast.
They slurped the oysters
of living souls
with chastushka sauce.
For a long time thereafter
the discarded shells would crunch
on the cobbles beneath the feet of passers-by.
From the summit of Vítkov Hill, a mace

Vážení čtenáři, právě jste dočetli ukázkou z knihy Praha za času plujících ker.
Pokud se Vám ukázka líbila, na našem webu si můžete zakoupit celou knihu.