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ŠVEJK, JAN DÍTĚ, SAMKO TÁLE  
AND THE FIRST THAI ADAPTATION OF  
THE (NOT SO) GOOD SOLDIER *SHA-WAKE*:  
TRANSNATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF  
THE “SMALL” AND “CHILDLIKE”  
CHARACTERS IN CZECH AND SLOVAK  
LITERATURE



n Europe there are the large countries on one side and the small on the other; there are the nations seated in the negotiating chambers and those who wait all night in the antechambers,”<sup>1</sup> wrote Milan Kundera (1929– ). In his discussion of Neville Chamberlain’s description of Czechoslovakia as “[a] faraway country of which we know little,”<sup>2</sup> Kundera criticises the British Prime Minister’s justification of the Munich Pact and describes the signing away of Czechoslovakia as a shameless sacrifice of the small and insignificant [Czechoslovakia] for the greater [British] good. It can be said that Kundera’s *negotiating chambers versus* antechambers categorisation of world power complements his controversial notion of a particular “Czech destiny” [“Český úděl”]<sup>3</sup>, which led to his public row with Václav Havel (1936–2011), who believed one must be the master of one’s own political destiny. Kundera’s idea of how a small country can never escape its resigned and predestined fate of forever being small and powerless, has often been un-

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<sup>1</sup> M. Kundera, “Part Two: Die Weltliteratur,” in: *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts*, trans. L. Asher, New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006, 33.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> B. Herman, “The Debate that Won’t Die: Havel and Kundera on Whether Protest is Worthwhile,” in: *Radio Free Europe*. [http://www.rferl.org/content/debate\\_that\\_wont\\_die\\_havel\\_and\\_kundera\\_on\\_whether\\_protest\\_is\\_worthwhile/24448679.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/debate_that_wont_die_havel_and_kundera_on_whether_protest_is_worthwhile/24448679.html)

dermined and underrated by critics and scholars who, like Havel, view post-1989 future in Central Europe with utmost hope. I argue in this paper that Kundera's "negotiating chambers versus antechambers" metaphor can be seen as the metaphor which defines modernity and modernisation, as well as one of the ways in which writers and artists view and come to terms with the ongoing political crises in Central Europe and beyond. Twentieth-century Czech writers Jaroslav Hašek (1883–1923) and Bohumil Hrabal (1914–1997), as well as contemporary Slovak writer Daniela Kapitáňová (1956– ) translated Kundera's metaphor into their creation of the memorable "small" and "child-like" characters who, to appropriate Kundera's words, "are on the defensive against History, that force that is bigger than they, that does not take them into consideration, that does not even notice them."<sup>4</sup>

As a scholar from Thailand, I shall also provide in this research paper an example of the transnational significance and subversiveness of the politics of small and child-like characters which Czech and Slovak literatures have contributed to the literary as well as political world. Through English translation, the significantly insignificant/insignificantly significant characters, such as Švejk from Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk*, Jan Dítě from Bohumil Hrabal's *I Served the King of England*, and Samko Tále in Kapitáňová's novel entitled *Samko Tále's Cemetery Book*, pose pressing questions not only towards the nations, peoples and ideology of, in Kundera's sense, "the negotiating chambers" of uncaring political regimes, but also towards the nations, peoples and ideology of "the antechambers" who must await and comply to the commands, decrees and values imposed upon them.

## Jan Dítě: Mismatched desires and retarded modernisation

I shall begin my analysis with Hrabal's bitterly humorous/humorously bitter story of the lives of little people who constitute the "Grand Bohemian Hotel", to appropriate the title of the famous film *Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), which needs to open its doors, offers its best services and pledges its allegiance to the many changing regimes, from absolute monarchy to the Nazi regime and Soviet totalitarianism.

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<sup>4</sup> M. Kundera, "Part Two: Die Weltliteratur," in: *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts*, trans. L. Asher, New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006, 33.

Bohumil Hrabal, writer and survivor of the Nazi and Soviet occupations in Czechoslovakia, was born in 1914 in Brno, Moravia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He spent one year of his youth at a grammar school in Brno—the same school which one of his many admirers, Milan Kundera, would later attend as a boy. Having worked as a railway dispatcher during the Nazi occupation, a travelling salesman, a steelworker, a recycling mill worker and a stagehand, the author of the famous novel *Closely Watched Trains* (1965) paradoxically began his literary career as a poet writing “surrealist” lyrical poetry, which was immediately withdrawn from circulation when the communist regime came to full power in 1948. His other works have also been banned since then. *I Served the King of England* was written in one long draft and circulated as a rare samizdat in the 1970s. The novel was officially published in 1983 by the Jazz Section of the Czech Musicians’ Union.<sup>5</sup> Hrabal died in 1997 after having fallen from a fifth-floor window in a Prague hospital, apparently trying to feed the pigeons.

*I Served the King of England* is set in Prague in the 1940s, during the Nazi occupation and early communism. The main character’s name is Jan Ditě. True to the fact that *ditě* in Czech means “child”, this character is a minuscule waiter with not only remarkable inferiority complex, but also an obsessive appetite for women and money. Ditě works in various hotel restaurants. Then, after marrying a Czech-German woman, he serves the Nazis in various country hotels. After the war, having made his fortune because his wife stole from the dispossessed and persecuted Jews during the Second World War, he finally opens his own hotel. In 1948, however, when the communists take over, he is arrested as a millionaire. He loses everything. The novel ends with Ditě working as a road mender in a forest in the middle of nowhere. The message which can be derived from the novel is this: Everyone living in the Grand Bohemian Hotel of changing regimes can only be a lowly and subservient waiter. Vis-à-vis history and changing totalitarian regimes, one can only live and dream as a minor character. Though this message seems bleak, hopeless and nihilistic, what readers can celebrate is the clever ways in which Hrabal creates and utilises Jan Ditě, his main character, to question and challenge the discourses of totalitarianism. The novel begins with a paradox. Hrabal describes with humour and irony the role of a waiter expected of Ditě as someone who should NOT see anything and hear anything – and at the same

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<sup>5</sup> D. Jones, Ed., “Bohumil Hrabal: Czech Writer (1914-1997),” in: *Censorship: A World Encyclopedia*, Volume 1–4, New York: Routledge, 2015, 1109.

time – should INDEED see everything and hear everything.<sup>6</sup> Such contradictory instruction goes in line with Ditě's contradictory life and dreams. His “retarded” [a word which might also remind readers of the French *en retard* which means “belated”], mismatched desires and naïve aspirations outrageously go against the changing regime of his time. For example, Ditě only realises his capitalistic dream and desire to become a millionaire only in the time when the communist regime has taken control of his country and begins to “nationalise” all businesses, confiscating bourgeois properties and sending their rightful owners to prison.

What is the transnational significance of this “childlike” character created by Hrabal in his novel? In July 2015, the Central and Eastern European Studies Section of the Centre for European studies at Chulalongkorn University, of which I currently serve as Head, collaborated with the Czech Embassy in Bangkok in holding a screening of and seminar on the novel and film adaptation of *I Served the King of England* at Thai Knowledge Park (TK Park), which is a modern library in one of Bangkok's most popular shopping centres. The number of participants was overwhelming. What Thai audience seem to find in common with Hrabal's unforgettable character is the hopelessness and futility felt by the voiceless and powerless people towards a cold and indifferent totalitarian regime. Between 1930 and 2014, Thailand had had 13 successful coup d'états and currently ranks the 4th country with the most coup d'états in the world after Sudan, Iraq and Bolivia. Thai People, like Ditě, need to wait on the high table of a country where the military devours and hijacks the *lèse majesté* law, a law against an offence made against the dignity of a reigning sovereign. This law, endorsed since the year 1908, is reflected in all versions of the Thai Constitution since the 1932, which contain the following clauses: “The king shall be enthroned in a position of revered worship and shall not be violated. No person shall expose the king to any sort of accusation or action”<sup>7</sup>. This particular law is thus elaborated in section 112 of the Thai Criminal Code: “Whoever defames, insults or threatens the king, queen, heir-apparent, or regent shall be punished with imprisonment of three to fifteen years.” Missing from the code, however, is the exact definition of the particular words or actions which constitute such “threat”, “insult”, or “defamation”. Offenders are investigated and put on trial behind closed doors. Moreover, it is illegal for the media to repeat or report on what has been said or done by the accused as doing so is

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<sup>6</sup> B. Hrabal, *I Served the King of England*, trans. P. Wilson, New York: New Directions, 2007, 1.

<sup>7</sup> D. Streckfuss, *Truth on Trial in Thailand: Defamation, Treason, and Lèse Majesté*, ed. D. McCargo, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2011, 190.

considered a criminal offence. The obsolete law, particularly the abuse of such law, and Thailand's aspiration of becoming a modernised democratic country indeed form an absurd mismatched pair.

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### Czech film shows parallels of constantly-changing autocratic regimes: critics

Submitted by editor1 on Tue, 07/07/2015 - 15:08

Asaree Thairakulpanich

Film critics say a Czech film, set in 20th century Czechoslovakia, recently screened in a central Bangkok mall, reflects the role of autocratic regimes in everyday life and education and also sheds light on how constantly-changing autocratic regimes bear down upon normal people in their everyday lives, even on "non political" people.

The discussion after the special screening of *I Served the King of England* (2008) at the Central World on Saturday drew parallels between the film's 20th century Czechoslovakia setting and present-day Thailand while raising questions about the prevalence of mainstream historical narratives, especially in education.



Source: <http://prachatai.org/english/node/5274>

## Samko Tále: (Trans)national xenophobia

The Slovak writer Daniela Kapitáňová was born in 1956 in Komárno, a town on the Danube near the Hungarian border. Trained as a theatre director in Prague and having worked as a director in both Slovak and Czech theatres, she came to fiction fairly late in life. A crime fiction aficionada, Kapitáňová produces programmes on literature for the Slovak Radio, writes for the daily *Pravda*

and teaches creative writing at the University of Constantine the Philosopher in Nitra. In the similar manner as Hrabal's use of a childlike character exposes the absurdity of arbitrary laws and norms dictated by totalitarian regimes which are indifferent to the little and insignificant people, the Slovak writer Daniela Kapitáňová's painfully brilliant/brilliantly painful use of irony exposes xenophobia as the underlying force behind biases and discrimination against the non-Slovak as well as the "not-patriotic-enough" Slovak population in Slovakia and beyond. *Samko Tále's Cemetery Book* (2005) is set in the immediate years after the "Velvet Divorce" between Slovakia and the Czech Republic in 1993, when life was still under the shadow of the Communist Era and its legacy. The novel is a story about a 43-year-old boyish man/mannish boy named Samko Tále. It is worth to note the condescending diminutive in his name, which features and highlights his "childlike" quality. Samko is physically and mentally disabled. He spends his days collecting cardboards and wheeling them to the local Recycling Centre on his handcart. This novel reads like his memoir or journal.

The territory of Komárno, Samko's hometown, was drawn and defined in the Treaty of Trianon—a treat signed at the end of the First World War in 1920 as part of a peace agreement between the Allies and the Kingdom of Hungary. The newly created border cut the original territory of the Hungarian town in half. The smaller section is known in the present day as the Hungarian town of Komárom, where the Slovak-Hungarian community is strong. Samko is part of that community but ironically his views reflect a hand-me-down ultra-nationalist attitude towards the Hungarians:

But Grandmummy and Granddaddy were not German because they were in Slovakia, except that Grandmummy's grandmother was Hungarian and her name was Eszter Csonka, meaning that she had a Hungarian name too. And nobody liked that. I didn't like it, either.<sup>8</sup>

Samko's comments expose how illogical ultra-nationalism and racial prejudice sound in extreme. Samko can only justify his views by stating that he adopts, reiterates and repeats—like a parrot—the anti-Hungarian sentiment and glorification of so-called "Slovak-ness" from school and TV, mass media.

The transnational significance of characters such as Samko lies in how, when read in the Thai context, the character's tautologically ridiculous views can lead

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<sup>8</sup> D. Kapitáňová, *Samko Tále's Cemetery Book*, trans. J. Sherwood, London: Garnett Press, 2011, 14.

readers to question and challenge the hand-me-down right-wing discourses of xenophobia and the discrimination which ensues as a result. Samko's irrational hatred for his grandmother's Hungarian name and identity originated from and is sustained by the inexplicable sentiments of the people around him, the mass. By disliking and finding inexplicable fault with his own grandmother, he unwittingly dislikes and finds inexplicable fault with himself as well as his ethnic and cultural heritage. Such lack of logic can be seen reflected in Thailand's ultra-nationalist discourse which often equates Thainess to Royalism in the sense that to be a "good" Thai, a "patriotic-enough" Thai, means to uphold the *lèse majesté* law: "Just as under absolutism, neo-absolutism in Thailand has seen the emergence of its apologists who justify not just Thai-style monarchy, but the *lèse majesté* law itself as a unique cultural expression of Thainess."<sup>9</sup> The witch hunt for Thais who do not adequately demonstrate their love and affection for the monarchy and the purge of Thais who dare to criticise the *lèse majesté* law reflective of national(ist) xenophobia persist and reach its peak at the time when this article is being written (29 October 2016) shortly after the King's death.

## The good soldier Švejk begs to report in Thailand as the (not so) Good Soldier *sha-wake*

*The Good Soldier Švejk*, Jaroslav Hašek's satire of the senseless thirst for war and violence, is one of the first anti-war novels. The ambiguity which is Josef Švejk, at first glance a combination of the childlike Jan Dítě and the retarded Samko Tále, offers more space for interpretation. Is he a complete idiot, or a playful and highly intelligent dissident? In any case, Hašek shows us that the power of the shared condition of powerlessness lies in one's ability to laugh at and laugh with Švejk. The Czech verb *Švejkovat* "to Švejk", or "to act like Švejk,"<sup>10</sup> is a verb which means to rise triumphantly over tyranny using one's ambivalence to surprise and intimidate the authority which, lacking any sense of humour, wishes to put everyone

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<sup>9</sup> D. Streckfuss, "Freedom and Silencing under the Neo-Absolutist Monarchy Regime in Thailand, 2006–2011," in: "*Good Coup*" *Gone Bad: Thailand's Political Development since Thaksin's Downfall*, ed. P. Chachavalpongpun, Singapore: Institute of Asian Studies, 2014, 129.

<sup>10</sup> *Discourses of Collective Identity in Central and Southeast Europe (1770–1945): Texts and Commentaries*. Modernism—Representations of National Culture. Volume Three/2. Eds. A. Ersoy, M. Górný and V. Kechriotis, New York: Central European University Press, 2010, 208.



in fixed pigeonhole.

*The Good Soldier Švejk* saw its first Thai stage adaptation on 18 February 2016. The adaptation is entitled “A (not so) Good Evening with the (not so) Good Soldier Švejk [Thai pronunciation would be the two-syllable “Sha-Wake”]”. The performance was part of Thailand’s first ever Czech Arts & Culture Week organised by the Central and Eastern European Studies Section of the Centre for European Studies, in collaboration with the Embassy of the Czech Republic in Bangkok and the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University. It was a highly successful event, which enjoyed media attention.

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## First-ever Thai adaptation of Czech anti-war novel to be staged

Submitted by editor3 on Sun, 14/02/2016 - 18:54

**Asaree Thairakulpanich**

The first-ever Thai adaptation of a 1923 Czech anti-war novel will be coming to a stage near you at Chulalongkorn University this coming week, as part of the Czech Arts and Culture Week.



**Thursday 18 February 2016: A (not so) Good Evening with the (not so) Good Soldier Švejk**  
(The First Thai Stage Production Based on the Novel)  
18.30-20.00 "A (not so) Good Evening with the (not so) Good Soldier Švejk" Screenings and Comedy Sketches Performance: The Adaptation of Jaroslav Hasek's The Good Soldier Švejk (1923) directed by M. Mueang Srinakharinwirot

**A (not so) Good Evening with the (not so) Good Soldier Švejk**  
Date: Thursday 18 February 2016 (18.30-20.00)  
Venue: 9<sup>th</sup> Floor, Mahasarakham Srinakharinwirot Building, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University

**Registration and Refreshments:**  
18.30-19.00 Hasek and Švejk: An Overview  
His Excellency Dr. Vítězslav Giehl, Ambassador of the Czech Republic in Thailand  
19.00-19.20 "A (not so) Good Evening with the (not so) Good Soldier Švejk"  
Screenings and Comedy Sketches – The First Thai Adaptation of Jaroslav Hasek's The Good Soldier Švejk (1923), directed by Sasapin Sirirakwong of 8-Floor Group (English translation will be provided)  
19.20-20.00 Q&A and Post-Performance Discussion

Itinerary for "A (not so) Good Evening with the (not so) Good Soldier Švejk" (See larger image)

Source: <https://www.prachatai.com/english/node/5857>

The following is an extract of the English translation of the play's opening



scene:<sup>11</sup>

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## Part I

### **The Good Soldier Švejk Intervenes in the Great War**

#### Scene I

Setting: Švejk's home

Stage Direction: Švejk sits on a chair located in the middle of the stage. He is cutting his toe nails.

On the projector – These descriptions:

1. “Prague, Austro-Hungarian Empire, around 1914 (maybe) – Švejk has been released (or, perhaps, released himself) from military service many years ago, after the military doctors classified him as mentally “short of 1 baht” [note: Thai idiom – an imbecile is regarded as having a mind not fully reaching the amount of 1 baht]... oops... “short of one Koruna” (which is now, by the way, what we call the Czech currency – and not the famous brand of Mexican beer we all know) Profession: dyeing dogs and selling them (well, our Thai idiom is supposed to be “dyeing cats and selling them” [note: this idiom means, to decorate or gloss over a bad item/person in order to make it more presentable and fool others to buy/accept them]... erhm okay, this part is really from the book – we didn't make this up to fool you!)

2. Framed portrait of Emperor Franz Josef in the background

Charwoman: (holding a copy of the newspaper and a broom) “Dead, dead, dead, dead [in Thai, the word for the interjection “God!” or “Gosh!” is “Dead!”] – DEAD. Our dear Sir Fer [the word “tun” in Thai, an equivalent of “Sir” in English, can be used to refer to monarchs, monks, respected people] was shot to death!”

Švejk: (Aside) He must be totally absolutely dead. You said far too many “deads”. (Turns to Charwoman) “Which dear Sir Fer? In this short life I know only three Fers – 1. Ferrari – too fast and

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<sup>11</sup> V. Sriratana, “English Translation: A (not so) Good Evening with the (not so) Good Soldier Švejk”. Printed as Loose-Leaf Handouts distributed on 18 February 2016, Bangkok: Centre for European Studies at Chulalongkorn University, 2016.

furious to be shot down 2. Ferragamo – 100% leather, a gunshot won't penetrate it [note: referring to Thai's superstitious belief that once one's got a tattoo or amulet from famous monks, one's 100% leather = one's body is invincible. No knives and not even gunshots can leave a mark] 3. "Ferbie" – the world doesn't break if this thing's shot to death \*impersonates furbie [note: referring to Thai's obsession with collectibles like Furbies and now the angle dolls] –

- Charwoman: "Don't joke like this. It's not funny. I meant that dear Sir Fer!"
- Švejk: (is brought to a standstill – thinks deep and hard – until he finally gets it) "That Sir Fer!"
- Charwoman: "That Sir Fer!"
- Švejk: "That Sir Fer!"
- Charwoman: "That Sir Fer!"
- Švejk: "That Sir Fer!"
- Charwoman: "That Sir..." Whoa, stop it! An old lady's short of breath...
- Now, you know what this means, right?"
- Švejk: "Of course I know what this means."
- Charwoman: (whispering) WWWWWWWWWWWWWWWar! So this means you will have to go back to the army and serve our Emperor and our Empire, then.
- Švejk: "Of course, I'm up and ready to go. I had previously offered my service to the Emperor for years... Never thought the day would come... again"
- Charwoman: (Sadly – looking at the portrait) "Never thought it would."
- Švejk: "The Emperor must be feeling so depressed."
- Charwoman: (Sadly – still looking at the portrait) "The Emperor must be."
- Švejk: "Because the Emperor has always been supportive to Sir Fer."
- Charwoman: (Sadly – still looking at the portrait) "They love each other very much."
- Švejk: "Of course, they do. The Emperor is one of the disciples of the RED DEVIL [note: nickname of Manchester United FC]

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Caption: “WWWWWWWWWWWWWWar!”

A still image from Scene I of “A (not so) Good Evening with the (not so) Good Soldier Švejk”, adapted from Jaroslav Hašek’s *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války*, translated into Thai by Verita Sriratana, and staged at the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand, on 18 February 2016.

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From the extract, the Charwoman refers to Franz Ferdinand, while Sha-Wake—intentionally or/unintentionally—refers to Thai football fans’ favourite Manchester United FC coach, Sir Alex Ferguson. As seen in the selected passage, the Thai stage adaptation of *The Good Soldier Švejk* invites the audience to laugh at matters which are not laughable in the context of Thailand under Junta which, to name but a few, are the following: the death of a monarch, the absurdity of *lèse majesté*, Thai politicians’ use football to distract the mass, Thai people’s obsession with material things and their senseless superstition (placing faith in plastic dolls), the on-going war between the yellow shirts (ultra-royalists) and the red shirts (those who wish to see *lèse majesté* abolished).

In conclusion, through multiple readings and interpretations, as well as through translation and adaptation of literary texts, one can see how small, childlike and powerless characters bear tremendous transnational significance, inspiring and empowering the readers/audience to dare to imagine issues which have been censored and rendered “unimaginable”. With humour and

irony, these characters from Czech and Slovak literature not only transcend but also defamiliarise the discursive borders of nationalism and socio-political norms which have often been accepted without critical thinking. Through Arts & Humanities, particularly through the teaching and learning of culture and literature, the small and childlike characters, who have been deprived of the rights to enter the negotiation chamber and have been consigned to the dark antechamber, emerge victoriously in broad daylight and come together to form a transnational community of laughter. They constitute a community of laughter, however bitter-sweet, and an orchestra of critical and analytical voices which resound in our current of national and international political arena, thus propelling readers and viewers across the globe to reflect more on the absurdity of totalitarianism and politics of hate witnessed every single day.

This should be the legacy of Europe—the kind of legacy which fosters our critical thinking and which fuels our international joint venture towards peace and freedom from all forms of injustice and oppression.