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# **A Small Stone in a Big Mosaic: Arnošt Lustig on why he is more than just a writer on the Holocaust**

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**In talking about the Holocaust, Arnošt Lustig, one of the most celebrated Czech writers of the past century and himself an Auschwitz survivor asks, “Why is life precious for some people and for others it’s worthless?” Spanning nearly 50 years, Lustig’s writings, and the classic Czech films adapted from them, have informed an international audience about the horrors of evil and what people will do to survive.**

**After the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, Lustig emigrated to the United States, where he still lives, working as literature professor at the American University in Washington, DC. CER spoke to him in Washington earlier this month about his work in literature and film and what we can learn from the Holocaust.**

**Your books set to warn people about the Holocaust. Given that right-wing and often overtly racist views are spreading in Central Europe, does this mean that your books are not being read any more?**

No, not at all. On the contrary, I have to wonder how it is possible my stories appear in children's schoolbooks! Not that I am in the books, but that children read me—kids between the ages of 16 and 20 years of age. And, when thinking about this, I say to myself, it's still a riddle to me that I'm still a person of a leading generation like Kundera, Škvorecký and others. They say that since November 1989 about 20 new books have been published, which I don't understand.

So, I answer to myself that it's probably that young people deal with uncertainty—existential uncertainty. Existentialism, not in the sense of if they are going to have a job, but if they live or don't live.

Because my books are about survival in very difficult circumstances, because my books are about a man under pressure—different stories about people under pressure, that's the reason why people are reading my books.

### **But does constantly focusing on the Holocaust create a “victim culture” for Jews?**

Look, it came to be a human massacre in human history that was about Jews, but not only about Jews because as soon as they had killed all the Jews, it would have just repeated itself. They would have moved onto someone else. The killing would have just continued.

We can see that it was proven in Yugoslavia, Malaysia, Indonesia. It was proven everywhere. We could see it everywhere since 1945 in places where there were coup d'état massacres, all happening in places where things are politically unstable. Since 1945 we can see mass killings, but it didn't happen to such an extent before the Holocaust happened. The Holocaust set a precedent

for other forms of mass genocide and killings that would follow in the 20th century.

**Hmmm. So, you don't think that there were other forms of the Holocaust before 1945?**

Before there were the 40-day mass killings of Armenians by the Turks. They killed women and children and old people—1.5 million people—and the Turks denied it. And people didn't pay attention to it and the result was the Holocaust. So, I don't think it is [purely an aspect of] Jewish culture.

I of course understand that people can get fed up when you repeat the same story to them all of the time. For example, I remember when we used to hear about Stalin and Marx all the time, until people just stopped listening to it. So probably in this respect, less is more.

Of course the survivors want to be heard and also a reaction to something, for example a reaction to denial. I personally don't consider myself a Holocaust writer. I consider myself a writer about people under pressure.

**What if... ?**

**Do you think if the Holocaust had not happened, you would write about something else, or would you have even become a writer at all?**

Probably yes, even though it is a question. It's speculation. Why did I become a writer? I came home from the concentration camp when I was 18 and people asked me how it was. I saw my teacher and he asked me, "How was it? What was it like?" When I returned everybody asked me what it was like. When I tried to explain to

them what I'd experienced, they looked at me like I was telling them my hallucinations.

So, I realized that it's impossible to explain what happened. The only way I could convey what happened was through writing. Then everyone listened to me, well not everyone, only those who were interested. So that's why I became a writer on that subject.

But the subject is more aptly described as about people under pressure. Under certain circumstances this subject encompasses subjects like love, friendship, courage, cowardice, pride. So it doesn't limit me in any way. On the contrary, it opens up many possibilities to look into the characters of people; the mysteries of people are human.

The philosophy of my time was and I am amazed it still is: "To kill or be killed..." And that is why I am writing about it. I don't like the word "Holocaust." It is a label like Coca-Cola. It is a simplified view that I have to take, but it's not exact. I don't like the word Holocaust. It has a Greek origin—"burnt by fire." But before killing them they humiliated them, but of course they also robbed them.

## The Holocaust on celluloid

**About your books that were turned into films. How successful do you think they were in depicting your experience in the Holocaust?**

In terms of how they were depicted, they were very successful. I couldn't be happier. But, in terms of how the audience understands them, there are differences. For example, the best, *Démanty noci* [Diamonds of the Night, 1964, directed by Jan Němec], was the least comprehensible to the audience because it's surrealistic

and expressionist. It's not an audience-friendly film. But it is the best one.

I went to Singapore in September, and they were showing it in commercial movie theaters and they were full! It was followed by a very interesting discussion and I got the feeling that the Chinese, Asian, Malaysian and Indonesian people could understand what the film was all about. They understand the movie as if it were about them; that surprised me.

But, the films [based upon my writings] show what I wanted to say. But if I had been the director for Dita Saxová, [actually filmed by Antonín Moskalyk in 1967] I would make it depict her as happy all the time—at the end of the film she would have just jumped off a cliff, leaving the audience to question as they left the theater, “why?” So the viewer would finish the film's ending in their head. In the case of Dita Saxová, I think the book was better; the screen adaptation of *Démanty noci* is as good as the book; in *Transport z raje* [Transport from Paradise, 1962, by Zbynek Brynych] the movie sometimes goes beyond the book.

### Relating to the past

**It must be difficult to forget your experiences from Holocaust.**

No, not at all. I'm not thinking about it. I'm writing about it. It's very different. It's like you had two lives; one “literature...life as a writer” and one real, existential.

**So when you write about the Holocaust, it isn't a process of coming to terms with your experiences?**

I'm not writing about it. I write about a lot of other things. It's only set at that time. Look, every writer can write only about what he is

familiar with, what's under his skin. So I write about what I really know. I could write about anything. But why would I write about everything when I can write about something in-depth? Literature tries to discover something that is invisible in a man, something mysterious: his impulses, his incentives, the causes of his actions. Why he is acting the way he's acting. Unexplained things. In that case it doesn't matter if you write about a concentration camp.

A writer cannot cover the whole world; a writer is a small stone in a big mosaic that tries to reflect a panorama of life that is unusually broad. And so I have my small stone. For instance, Joseph Conrad writes only about a sea about people on the sea—you could also take it against him. There was a writer named Anderson and he wrote beautiful fairy tales and his friends told him stop writing fairy tales and write a novel. So he wrote six novels. Nobody knows about his novels but his fairy tales are still being read. So each writer needs to ask himself: "what is my best 'track' where do I run the fastest" ...so this is my track.

**About your opinion on the Holocaust: when you experienced it you were a young boy. Since then many books have been written about it, and many political analyses and films have been made. How has your outlook on the Holocaust changed?**

Well, the more I think about it the less I understand it because it's a mystery how one human being interacts with another human being. It is basically about human relationships. It's a problem about human interaction. I am really just a small stone in the mosaic. I try to be as honest as possible.

I'm sure some people get annoyed because of that. They must think that I'm crazy and narcissistic, but they are fools. Because it is unspeakable and because it's not understandable, I'm trying

to look at it from different angles. And I'm interested in young people; I am interested in love and erotica—how it can become perverse and vicious under certain circumstances. So something that should be the most beautiful becomes the most awful and something awful becomes beautiful. I'm interested in that. And also not everybody has to read it. Only those who want to read it should read it.

### **A legend in his own lifetime?**

#### **Which books do you read, and do they influence your own writing?**

I read classics because I'm still learning. That's the nice thing about being a writer because you never "graduate" so to speak—you are always learning. You write a book, it might be successful, but it doesn't mean that you can do a second one. You have to discover for yourself unseen obstacles or barriers, ideas, forms, inspiration. So, I read classics every day. I have to read every day; it is a drug for me. It's interesting for me how Turgenev or Conrad writes.

#### **And film?**

I was a guest at the Film Festival in Karlovy Vary, so I have seen a lot of movies. In Berlin, at the film festival, I saw the movie *Fighter* [1999, directed by Amir Bar-Lev] that is about my friend the pilot [Jan Weiner] and me. I have also seen Matej Mináč's film *Všichni moji blízcí* [All My Loved Ones, 1999]. I liked it because of the excellent cast. And I also saw *Musíme si pomáhat* [Divided We Fall, 2000, directed by Jan Hřebejk]. Both movies are very strong and require complete attention.

Now, I'm writing a script. I like it.

**How do you like *Fighter*, and how do you feel about the fact that there are movies about you now? It seems as if you are turning into a legend.**

Well, you cannot take it too seriously. It was adventurous. I got to go to Italy; it was interesting. But what surprised me was that they've just written about it in an article in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker* and in the *Village Voice*. I read it and automatically forgot about it because it doesn't have much meaning for my profession. But it's pleasant. I'll take it as a viewer and participant and I know that every fame in the US lasts 15 minutes.

And that's right, because it would prevent me from my work. I try to stay away from everything that could prevent me from writing, from trying to be the best I can be. I'll tell you what is the problem about time passing. When I wrote the first book and it was a success, I was lucky. I thought the book wasn't perfect in my eyes. I was saying to myself: "Just wait; I'll show you with my second book; this is only a beginning." But now, when so much time has passed by, I'm praying to the mysterious gods of literature to give me the strength to write my next book at least as relatively good as the first one, which I know could have been better.

So, that's how I look at that film [*Fighter*] as well. It's pleasant—if it helps my teaching, my writing career then, yes, it helps me. Already everybody is a little bit nicer to me, but it will pass, of course, because people won't give more than that person deserves, not even when it's about fame.

**Do you think you will go back to the Czech Republic or do you consider the USA to be your home?**

I live there [in the Czech Republic for] four months in a year. But if I'm not there physically I'm there in my thoughts. But also I don't



want to give up America because I have here a relatively comfortable life. I have a nice apartment with a view over a park. I can write there by the window. I write here more than in Prague. And because we live in the 21st century, I can get on a plane and be in Prague in eight hours, which is the time Metternich [Chancellor of the Austrian Empire from 1821 to 1848] needed to go from Prague to Košice.

**Thank you for the interview.**

You are welcome.