

## Emil Hakl

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Emil Hakl (real name Jan Beneš) is one of the most interesting writers of the post-communist era in the Czech Republic. Coming as he does from a semi-dissident environment, which existed in Czechoslovakia under the communist regime in the 1970s and 1980s, since the fall of communism, he has never been really able to relinquish the position of an outsider. Hakl's prose, in particular, is a highly authentic testimony about life in a post-communist democracy at the end of the 1990s and in the 2000s.

Jan Beneš calls himself a „neurotic since ever“. He was not academically successful at school, failing to pass his *maturita* (secondary school finals) at the Prague Gymnásium na Pražačce in 1977. Beneš stayed at the four-year secondary school for five years and deliberately avoided proper study in order to be able to repeat one year: he admits that he was afraid what would happen after leaving school, so he tried to stay there as long as possible. His study results were disappointing. He had a conflict with his form teacher who told him that the school would not admit him to the final exam if he does not have his long, „hippie“ hair cut. He refused to do so.

Someone brought drugs to the secondary school, phenobarbital, in particular. Jan Beneš and Ludvík Kandl were on these drugs during their secondary school studies for almost three and a half years. „Thus we lived in our own world. We were not interested in studying. The school was incredibly tolerant towards us.“

Under the communist regime, the Czech middle classes instilled in their sons and daughters the belief that the only way of retaining a modicum of freedom was to work hard at school, to have good academic results and to be admitted to university study. If a young person was forced to leave the educational system before graduating, he or she would become a „slave of the communist system“, would have to go to the army to do the two year national service, and then would become a menial worker without any rights.

Jan Beneš was also frightened by his parents who warned him that this would happen if he did not have good study results. His father wanted him to study anthropology at university. He took Jan for walks to Záběhlice at the outskirts of Prague where there is an old distillery in the fields. He would tell Jan that he was going to become a workman in such a factory „I had metaphysical terror of this,“ says Beneš, but in spite of that, he did not study well and was kicked out of school without a final examination.

Then he spent his two-year national service in Louny, in north-west Bohemia. He liked it there very much „because the skies are incredibly beautiful above the Czech Central Massif Mountains“. The army, „after the 15-year-long trauma of going to school, was a liberation“. He was offered a job of typist at headquarters on condition he learned to type overnight, and he did so. He sums up the experiences from the army: „We marched a lot, I wrote a lot of letters to various girls, so there must have been time, and we ate a lot.“

After the military service, there followed „ten, quite confused years of living,“ says Beneš. On returning from the army, Beneš went back to school, attending evening classes, and within about 18 months completed his secondary education, passing, belatedly, the secondary school-leaving exam. He wanted to go on studying at the Academy of Fine Arts and for that he needed the examination. But he was not accepted for study at the Academy in the communist 1980s, although he had applied three times. He tried again after the fall of communism when he was eventually admitted, but the professors took him aside and asked whether he really wanted to become a student at such an advanced age, in his late thirties. On the basis of this conversation, he realised he was no longer interested in painting.

He married three times, and divorced three times. His marriages usually lasted about 18 months. He does not feel that he was repeating the same mistake. Why did he need to marry his partners straight away? „Your grandmothers and your aunties want to experience a wedding.“ The first marriage took place because the couple were promised that they would be given an electric iron as a wedding gift.

Beneš's first marriage produced a child, but he did not learn about this until about twenty years later. His first wife was very sensible and practical and saw that the twenty-year-old Beneš would not be supportive of a family. One of the reasons why Beneš's wives left him was that he was frequently unfaithful to them.

He realised that ambiguity and unpredictability are the most salient characteristics of life.

Beneš first worked at the state-owned graphics firm Výstavnictví (Exhibitions) in Malešice, a suburb of Prague. He then left Výstavnictví to work as a librarian in the Municipal Library in Prague, on the recommendation of friends. This was, he says, a very good job. The work at the Municipal Library provided Beneš with early literary inspiration. As one of the Library employees, he had access to otherwise inaccessible stacks of banned literature.

Jan Beneš married Tereza Boučková, the daughter of dissident writer Pavel Kohout, as his second wife. Pavel Kohout, whom the Czechoslovak communist authorities had prevented from returning to his native country after a study stay in the West, in October 1979, tried to gatecrash back into Prague on 17<sup>th</sup> November 1982, during the state visit of Gustáv Husák, the then leader of the Czechoslovak communist state, to Austria. Kohout, a celebrity both in Czechoslovakia (where he was now a „non-person“) and in Austria, had bought an air ticket from Vienna to Berlin with a stop-over in Prague. When the aircraft landed in Prague, he got off the plane and refused to leave, informing Western journalists of his arrival to Prague and demanding to see Tereza, his daughter. The Czechoslovak authorities did not allow this, Kohout and his daughter only gesticulated to each other on different sides of glass. As a result of this publicity stunt, Husák's official visit to Austria was totally eclipsed in

the Austrian media by Kohout's escapade. Jan Beneš accompanied Kohout's daughter to Prague Airport during this incident. As a result, Beneš was interrogated several times and was sacked from his job at the Municipal Library because he refused to act as an informer for the secret police. He was given a job as a menial worker in the Municipal Waterworks.

At Lidová škola umění, (People's School of Art) at Malostranské náměstí (The Lesser Town Square) in Prague, Beneš attended classes of creative writing. The course taught students how to write lyrics for pop songs. Beneš produced his first literary pieces during his national service. From the time he was employed in the water works, he wrote poetry, for about ten years.

The creative writing course was run by Professor Marek Stašek. A number of well-known Czech writers such as Ivan Vyskočil, Jiří Suchý and Josef Brukner (the author of *Větší* and *Menší poetický slovník* [A Large and A Small Dictionary of Poetic Terms]) contributed to the teaching there. Jan Beneš attended this course for four years. Later on, the „People's School of Art“ was turned into The State Conservatory. Thus, in fact, Beneš had received a university degree by default.

The course provided its students with fairly thorough literary theoretical background. The course also provided literary inspiration to the students. It was important for Beneš to live in the literary environment of the Czech dissident community, especially at the time when he was married to Kohout's daughter. Through the dissidents, Beneš had access to samizdat literature, and, as he says: „I discovered amazing things in those samizdat editions, typed through carbon copies on flimsy bank paper.“ He became fascinated by the generation of the Czech literary underground, around Egon Bondy.

Thus Beneš is maybe a typical product of the post 1968 clamp-down, the so-called „normalisation“ period in Czechoslovakia, when, in the 1970s and the 1980s, the pro-Soviet collaborators tried to steer the cultural life of the country back towards Stalinism, after the flowering of Czechoslovak culture in the liberalisation period of the mid-1960s. Although people pretended to yield to these political pressures, Beneš is a telling example of how the Neostalinist regime of the 1970s and the 1980s never managed to master the intellectual life of the country. No one believed in Neostalinism any longer, after it had been discredited in the 1960s. After the Soviet-led invasion of August 1968, the whole communist system lost legitimacy. Beneš is a good example of a young intellectual who had grown up in denial towards the official attempts to re-impose communist totalitarianism on his country. It is remarkable that, in spite of intense censorship and ideological pressure, there seemed to be many sources of alternative information which young people like Beneš sought out avidly. His critical, anti-establishment, „underground“ attitude was formed by this strange period of Czechoslovakia's modern history. He admits that among arts-orientated „outsiders“ he did not know anyone during this period who would have been supportive of the „normalisation“ ethos. The fact that the official cultural establishment imposed ideological „nonsense“ on society, made young people like Jan Beneš actively seek out alternative sources of information. As was mentioned above, when Beneš worked in the Prague Municipal Library, he had access to books which were not normally available to the public.

He studied the works of Czech „alternative“ philosopher Ladislav Klíma as well as texts by Czech catholic interwar author Jakub Deml. Deml and Klíma were among fashionable alternative cult figures for the young, culturally aware individuals in Czechoslovakia in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

While the phenomenon remains practically unreflected, it seems to be the case that oppression in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and 1980s, in the wake of the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion produced a strange, somewhat pathological brand of consumerist culture. Unlike in the Stalinist 1950s, which were brutal, the „normalisation“ regime of Gustáv Husák in the 1970s and the 1980s did not expect Czechoslovak citizens actually to *believe* in communist ideology. The regime just required the citizens perfunctorily to perform certain prescribed political rituals, in order to reassure itself repeatedly that they were obedient. If the citizen was willing to conform, to give up independent thought and behave like everyone else, the regime rewarded him/her with a modest version of middle class consumerism which it was capable of producing (a car, TV set, a fridge, abundance of food, job security, a second home in the countryside). Large numbers of Czechoslovak citizens accepted this „contract“ with the authorities and an idiosyncratic cultural value system emerged in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and 1980s. When communism fell in 1989, the features of this cultural value system were further developed in the new, free-for-all society. Television broadcasting went for the lowest common denominator, consumerism flourished unhindered, with the influx of glittering products from the West, and conformity and avoidance of independent thought became a condition of *sine qua non* in the new capitalist society where „outsiders“ and „bearers of controversial views“ continued to be ostracised.

Jan Beneš states that he had practically no contact with the normalisation culture of the 1970s and 1980s because none of his intellectual friends accepted its values. At the same time, he admits, that, perhaps as a direct result of this, he and his friends have become outsiders in the „postcommunist“ society, in which it is quite difficult for him to make a living if he does not want to accept compromise.

It is, for instance, possible, to write copy for the contemporary Czech „lifestyle“ magazines: the formula for writing these texts can be „learnt within five minutes,“ says Beneš. Should, however, a self-respecting individual do this? Many of the people who were young in the 1970s and 1980s, in their formative years, seem to suffer from a crisis of self-confidence in the current „capitalist“ Czech society.

After the fall of communism, Beneš continued to work at the Prague Waterworks because he had been recruited by the new Czech „democratic“ secret service as an informer on one of his left-wing colleagues there. For the last two and a half years, in 1992 – 1995, Beneš was paid his salary by the Czech Secret Services as a secret agent.

„It was fun to begin with,“ says Beneš, „but soon, it stopped being so funny. I pretended to be a left-wing activist. I was supposed to spy upon one particular man, Mr. Jindra, and I am deeply ashamed of this because he was a decent, honest person. It took me some time to realise that the secret police of the new ‘democratic’ regime did not differ very much from the secret police of the old, communist regime.

Why did Beneš become a secret police informer? When he was six, his parents divorced and his mother married a military officer from Buštěhrad, who „undoubtedly worked for the communist secret police,” as Beneš says. He was not evil, but was morally corrupt. Beneš realised that the salient feature of communism was the creation of a thick network of corrupt personal relationships. Communism was based on such personal relationships. After the fall of communism, Beneš decided to work for the post communist secret service in order to exorcise his past, connected with his stepfather. Only then did he discover that the same type of people worked for the postcommunist secret police as did for the communists.

Then, Beneš received an offer to work for the advertising agency „BBK Time“. His work in various advertising agencies is reflected in Beneš's writing. To begin with, the advertising agency made a good profit. Then, during a recession, there had to be cutbacks and Beneš was forced to leave because he had an affair with a woman in whom the manager of the advertising agency was interested. Beneš then worked at other advertising agencies between 1995 – 2000. In 2001, he became a member of staff of the small literary biweekly *Tvar (Form)* where he stayed for a year. Since then, he has worked on and off for various magazines and periodicals. For 18 months he was employed at the tabloid lifestyle magazine *Instinkt*, for about a year he was the chief-editor of a magazine for women called *Glamour*, until its German owners decided to close it down, in the autumn of 2005 he started working for yet another start-up lifestyle magazine *Joy*.

„Of course it is a problem for me to work for such magazines,” says Beneš. „They actually employ anyone who is willing to write the tabloid material for them and to keep to a certain line, which it is quite easy to keep. There is nothing to be proud of, but one has to support oneself. A sensible person does something dignified.” He also works as a freelancer. He publishes his journalistic material under his real name; his literary texts are published under the pseudonym Emil Hakl.

First, Emil Hakl published two books of poems, *Rozpojená slova (Disconnected Words, 1991)* and *Zkušební trylky z Marsu (Trial-Run Trills from Mars, 2000)*. The poems are laconic, ironic and provocative. As Vladimír Novotný says in his afterword to the second collection, Beneš's poetry is based on semantic paradoxes, it mocks, it is grotesque. The „rebellious gesture of the anarchist poet“ „plays with the canon of absurdity“. The roots of Beneš's poetry lie in Poetism (a playful, lyrical literary trend of Czech literature of the 1920s), dadaism and expressionism. He is a sharp and caustic commentator. Just like his fiction, even the inspiration for his poetry comes from his observations of the plebeian, ordinary, working class world around him. Beneš uses direct localisations, he refers to concrete places, mostly in Prague. He uses experience from interpersonal relations. He takes in what he sees, describes it in words and then plays about with the semantic meaning of the words, reaching a general, philosophical, often paradoxical or resigned conclusion:

### **Wholesale memories (Part 2)**

In the end, we all throw up  
while sitting on the merry-go-round

because its owner has departed  
and has left us behind.

And I will no longer be able to hurl abuse  
or kiss the blurred, suprised faces

(of our grandfathers and mothers)  
because from this moment onwards

I am no longer the master  
of my own fate.

Hakl often mixes up abstract concepts with concrete expressions:

Joe sits at The Hag (this is the Kraus pub)  
drinking fernet stock and green liquor.

Hours go by  
along the Radlice footbridge...

The morning air is full of  
a floating swarm of reproaches and witches

And a postwoman with a big bottom  
walks along the Radlice footbridge to work.

Hakl's rebellion is tinged with resignation. Is there any point in any effort?

Thus the theoretical constantly  
contends with the practical. But

the only result is, as it would seem,  
the ever increasing boredom in the auditorium.

There are no values:

### **Poetry**

I am up shit creek  
with my moral code

and since the same situation prevails  
both within and without all things,

this leads me to the conclusion  
that the spectators and the actors

are quite up shit creek as well.

Hakl started writing prose as a member of the literary group „Moderní Analfabet“ (The Contemporary Illiterate) which was founded by Beneš and his friends (Markéta Hrbková, Jaroslav Jablonský, Oskar Ryba, Václav Kahuda, Vítězslav Čížek) around 1988. The group held public readings and this stimulated Hakl to write short stories.

Hakl's first volume of shorter fiction *Konec světa (The End of the World)* was published in 2001. Jan Beneš says that he is a great admirer of the American writer Charles Bukowski and this shows. Bukowski's fiction is a „detailed depiction of a certain taboo male fantasy: the uninhibited bachelor, slobby, anti-social, and utterly free. Chinaski's existence is an unending chronicle of farts, drunks, shits, fucks, brawls, and visits to the racetrack, punctuated by bouts of creativity for which he indifferently receives the world's adulation or reproach. His blurring succession of women are as crazy as he is: they get drunk together, snarl at each other, and screw like bobcats. And it all takes place in a comic and unpretentious prose that broadcasts Bukowski's impatience with trust funders, wannabes, feminists, bourgeois liberals, and almost every other writer in the world - a conception of the enemy that my friend at the courthouse enthusiastically shared,” wrote Michael Greenberg about Charles Bukowski in *The Boston Review* (June-September 1994, <http://bostonreview.net/BR19.3/fiction.html>). Up to a point, this applies to Hakl's fiction as well, but Bukowski's writing method is creatively developed in order to bear witness to post-communist Czech reality.

Hakl's fiction is written in the first person singular. The main character, who quite impassively observes reality around him, is an outsider. He disdains what he sees as the hypocrisy of the orderly, establishment, middle-class life, centred around the ideal of celebrity: „the smiling, confident young people“, successful in business. He hates and mocks social climbers and in successful business managers he detects an unsuppressible urge to control people. Hakl's hero defiantly embraces the attitudes of a social outcast. These are for him the embodiment of authenticity and integrity. Hakl couldn't identify himself with the communist establishment in Czechoslovakia, his main character finds it just as difficult to identify himself with the „successful“ managerial reality of post-communist Czech Republic. Towards the end of *Konec světa*, Hakl's semi-autobiographical hero begins working for a various advertising agencies. The director of one of them runs „the advertising agency as a sort of private bestiary, where he could freely experiment, while observing certain basic rules, with the lives of individual people“ (p. 237).

Hakl's hero finds it much more interesting to associate with dissolute ne'er-do-wells, antisocial characters. Like in Bukowski, there is a lot of pub talk, a lot of drinking and much promiscuous sex. However, Hakl's hero is semi-detached from all these activities. He is a reluctant observer. He does take part in collective drinking bouts, but he draws a line at group sex. (There are nevertheless detailed descriptions of sexual encounters the hero has with various individual women.) It is as though there was a limit to the self-indulgence around him. Hakl's hero observes it with interest, but does not indulge. Although his anti-social friends are much more interesting than the middle-class social climbers, they still make Hakl's hero's life hell.

Hakl's fiction is also strongly localised. There are frequent concrete references to places in Prague and in various places in the Czech Republic. Hakl has developed an impressive technique of inserting dynamic, lyrical, descriptive interludes into his narratives which depict the environment. In these interludes, everything happens in the plural. Maybe this underlines how mechanical and stereotyped the „collective“ existence is. Here are a couple of examples:

„The city creaked, wobbled and floated along the surface of the Earth. No one knew really why they were alive. Shots of liquor shone in pubs and tired old jokes were being made. Men tormented women with their incomprehensible silence. Women tormented men with their irrational reproaching. Even children in the kindergartens knew how to make life hell to each other. No one knew what was going to happen the next day.“(p. 82)

„High up at the top ants were swarming. Below us, the old volcanic landscape lay. Televisions were being switched on, people yawned and watched the „Your Friend“ programme. The chimney stacks, erected at the foot of the Ore Mountains, belched out ribbons of yellow smoke. In cities, water was being heated to make coffee and tea. Steaks were by now being prepared for roasting. Children were being slapped. Morning cigarettes were being lit. Girls were beginning to write letters to their boyfriends in the army. The boys in the army were long up and were yelling in their breaking voices: „’Don’t fuck about, prick, take the rag and wash the floor! Prepare for line-up! Get on with it!’“ (p. 222)

Hakl has an eye for grotesque detail. In a way, reminiscent of Bohumil Hrabal, one of the greatest Czech 20<sup>th</sup> century writers, Hakl also concentrates on eccentric events and characters which for him seem to constitute the essence of life. There is „no need to travel – it is enough to sit at home and listen.“ (p.226) Life is a constant struggle and a person, interested in authenticity and integrity of life is doomed to fail: „Day and night, the practical-minded majority waged a war against the impractical-minded minority.“ (p. 148) Often, Beneš is ironic: „A new day was beginning. Future wished to reveal many more, unbelievable mysteries to us. Somewhere beyond the horizon, the digital era was preparing itself to begin. But we were lying in a ditch and under no circumstances could we bring ourselves to becoming conscious.“ (p.149)

*Konec světa* is, in a way, a homage to the opening up of Eastern Europe since the fall of communism. Many foreigners arrive in Prague to disturb the staid Central-European reality. Most of these are eccentrics, criminals even. In the second text of the volume, Hakl’s hero’s flat is invaded by a group of boisterous „Arab-Danish“ young men: Hakl’s hero observes their antics with interest, but soon finds it rather difficult to cope with their occupation of his flat. After he manages to get rid of them, he finds a large supply of drugs. The police comes and looks for the visitors in connection with the theft of an automobile. These new arrivals represent the „grotesque, defunct, biedermeier image of Europe“ (p. 24). In a kind of mirror image of Central Europe opening up, in „Láďovo poslední tango (Láďa’s last tango)“ the hero travels to India on an impulse, to come to terms with the fact that his girlfriend has left him. But the kaleidoscope of Indian experiences is even more brutally grotesque than the reality of post-communist Central Europe. Life is weird everywhere.

There are eccentric Americans, Brits and Germans. The volume ends with a scene on a platform in the Prague underground where a ten-year-old, fair-haired son of an upper-middle class American tourists couple unexpectedly attacks the hero by punching him repeatedly in the stomach, quite without reason. „The parents smile with understanding: ‘Oh, ooh! We hope that it’s nothing. Our son is kind of lively. Please excuse him...’ Probably, he should be given a slap right now. But what then? The mother would faint, the ruddy father would suffer a heart-attack. Children are not physically punished in a country which wishes to enter NATO and the EU! So I stand there, the Nordic-looking boy hitting me in the stomach, his parents looking on, slightly embarrassed, maybe they would like to say or do something, but they don’t know what. Everyone waits to see what I might do. I do nothing. I look straight ahead and am silent. This is Central Europe.“ (abbreviated, p.246)



*Intimní schránka Sabriny Black* (*Sabrina Black's intimate mailbox*, 2002) is an autobiographical novel in which Emil Hakl again attempts to define his unhappy relationship to the reality which surrounds him. At the end of the novel, he realises that the only way to grapple with the traumas that he is experiencing is to write it out of himself. Thus he spends more than a year in front of his computer. There is no point writing about anything else but oneself. „I have begun to write to mask that terrible speed with which all those years have whirred by on the clock of the taxi.“ (p.283)

*Intimní schránka Sabriny Black* continues where *Konec světa* has left off. The autobiographical hero makes repeated attempts to relate to life around him. He is not succeeding because, mostly, life is *inauthentic*. The obsession with celebrity, the media-oriented value system and the superficiality, snobbery and hypocrisy of the business of advertising becomes again, even more strongly than in the previous work, for Hakl a metaphor of everything that is wrong with contemporary Czech life. „Sabrina Black's Intimate Mailbox“ is an explicit, voyeuristic sex column in a glossy magazine which the characters in Hakl's novel amuse themselves by reading while at work. Hakl treats the column with irony – but, paradoxically, at the same time, he also ironically subverts his own writing. By giving the novel the same name as that of the sex column, he hints that the novel is maybe just as unserious and tabloid as the material published in pornographic glossies.

In *Intimní schránka Sabriny Black* Hakl's hero again often works for advertising agencies. Advertising agencies need „well-informed idiots who go to see all the new American films, watch television, follow tennis and ice-hockey and politics and entertainment and know how to retell all this and distort it and abuse it and turn it into an even thinner brew.“ (p.23) Advertising executives need to prove their worth by breaking the speed limit on motorways in their fancy new cars. They are heartless cynics. Editors of glossy „art“ magazines are just the same. During an interview for a job in the editorial office of one of such periodicals, Hakl's hero looks at its editor-in-chief: „I watched him stir ice in his glass and I was on familiar territory: yes, he was one of *them*. One of those who even when they write something about a decent film, they break it to bits, mess it up, dilute it with coloured lights.“ (p.180)

Hakl again concentrates on eccentric events and phenomena, on zany contrasts, which enable him to get nearer the essence of life. Right at the beginning of the novel, he highlights the contrast between the gleaming, contemporary architecture (all glass and chrome, soothing shades of gray) of the building in which a nest of advertising agencies is housed, and an unreconstructed, slummy apartment, of a hostile, energetic and dishevelled old age pensioner whom the owners of the building have somehow not yet managed to evict. A metaphor of old communist ways, surviving in the „modern“ era? Hakl has an eye for weird occurrences, grizzly details. He stumbles upon two gays, passionately copulating in a busy public park at midday. He discovers that an old man, leaning against him on a seat in a Prague tram, is dead. He tells the story of a lady doctor who signed a death certificate of a young man, killed by a falling tree, which had taken off his face, so he was unrecognisable. Only later she realises the dead boy was her own son.

Most people that Hakl's hero feels close to because they live an authentic existence, are just as lost as he is. „I smile at everyone, I am trying to attract people because I cannot be on my

own. But when someone does come and begins to pour out his heart, I disconnect.“ (p.154)  
Most people are crazy. As Petronius says, „If you don't want to remain alone, you must rave along with the lunatics.“ (p.207)

Hakl comments on the national characteristics of the Czechs. One of the hero's Russian colleagues says: „I want to live here (ie. in the Czech Republic) because you are the same bastards as we Russians, but you are more cowardly than us and thus you are more human.“ (p.237)

Hakl finds it difficult to fit into the new, „managerial world“. After leaving the advertising agency where he works at the beginning of the novel, he and his friends try to set up their own business along similar lines, but it does not do well and Hakl is fired by his colleagues. Approximately at the same time, his girlfriend Petruše leaves him, apparently because he is a „no-hoper“, and goes back to the pseudish world of media and filmmaking, „who are not really people, they are just colour wrappers“ (p. 79).

The hero suffers a nervous breakdown. His attempts to come back to normal life, eventually with a help of a young female psychiatrist make the novel particularly interesting. From about half way through, the story really takes off. Predictably, the psychiatrist becomes the hero's lover - and turns out to be even more depressed than Hakl's hero is. (It is apparently easier to pull yourself out of depression if you see that someone is even worse off than you are.)

The narrative is again punctuated with the descriptions of numerous drunken parties and sexual encounters. Hakl's hero has many sexual conquests. Sex is for Hakl a way of examining reality – which, in his view, can only be assessed in terms of relationships. There are many observations about the mentality of women and about the relations between the sexes. In its second half, when the hero is trying to surface, the narrative is punctuated by nightmarish accounts of dreams. Wanton, primitive cruelty appears as a symbol of contemporary times:

„One of the stall owners caught a pigeon, covering him with a perforated plastic crate. The pigeon first flapped its wings for a bit and was frightened, then calmed down. The man gave him a bread roll, broken into small pieces. A young man in jeans and a hat on his head was hanging around.“

The young man insisted that the stall owner should let the pigeon go:

„In the end, the stall-owner relented.

‘Let him fly where he wants, no?’ said the young man.

‘Yes...’

..

‘But I will make it a little difficult for him,’ said the young man, took out a switch blade, caught the confused pigeon and with two moves of his hand cut off his feet. The pigeon moved about helplessly on the ground and was trying to fly away, but he couldn't. He was wobbling on his stumps. He always fell over to the front. He beat about with his wings and churned up dust. Everyone became interested. They stopped working and watched how the bird might cope.“ (p. 174)

*O rodičích a dětech* (*Of parents and their children*, 2002) is a short novel in fourteen chapters in which Jan Beneš is again making an attempt to understand his identity and his roots, now within the traumatising Central-European historical context, by talking to his father. The work is spurred on by the author's fear of aging, by his awareness of passing time. („I got a real fright when I saw how much greyer he [Father] had become over the past few weeks.“, p. 8)

At one point, the work links the experiences of three generations, when Hakl's hero talks about recently meeting for the first time, and befriending his illegitimate, twenty-year-old son. The hero feels that he does not understand anything about either himself or the world around him, and so he uses „one of the last remaining opportunities“ to talk to his father in order to gain at least some knowledge. A forty-two year old son looks back at all those years that have passed so quickly. He shares his experiences with his seventy-one year old father. He takes him on a pub crawl through his favourite parts of Prague. The walking in between the individual pubs as well as life within them is, again, concretely localised. The two men move about in the suburbia, where the slightly out-of-the way, posh diplomatic quarter gives way to the post-industrial landscape near the river Vltava. Hakl's hero is torn between wishing to relate to his father and being embarrassed by his insensitively loud pronouncements, by his quoting Shakespeare in public, etc.

In a distant echo of Robert Bly's book *Iron John*, *O rodičích a dětech* novel is a work about men, and about the „male values“, about the „meeting of the souls“ of two male characters, about typical male characteristics and male anxieties. Much is, again, said about women and about male-to-female relationships.

Hakl poses the question what it means to have a relationship to one's father. Who is this old, foolish man with so many memories, this man, who is obsessed with sex, which is now inaccessible to him, the man who is clinging to life at all cost? This old man is more important than any other because for the son, he is a repository of all available knowledge about the son's roots. The hero hopes the father can be an instrument of revealing at least a little bit of the son's personal identity.

The personal merges with the political. Hakl's personal experiences replay the cataclysmic twentieth-century history of Central Europe. Hakl's grandfather left Czechoslovakia for Croatia in the 1920s, in search for work. The family lived there until shortly before the communist take-over of Czechoslovakia in 1948, when they moved back to their native country. Hakl's fiction again concentrates on intensive, bizarre, extraordinary anecdotes. Cruelty often occurs in the father's testimony about life in Yugoslavia, especially during the Second World War. Several of his stories testify how personal friendships can be destroyed due to the ruthlessness of ideology. Both father and son are horrified by the casual cruelty of some of the other Slavonic nations, the Yugoslavs and the Russians. In comparison, the Czechs are again seen as cowardly, homey, antiheroic and devious. Hakl's hero wouldn't live anywhere else but in Prague:

„Here life goes on as though it was a comedy from the 1930s by the director Frič or some movingly stupid Italian porn film. It is like the assassination [of the Nazi governor of Bohemia and Moravia] Heydrich, as performed by children in a puppet show. I like the dimensions of

theatre, the constricted space. I like that a prisoner is socially so close to a government minister here. All those stories how people went for a beer with the president of the country and played cards with him.“ (p. 98)

Hakl's hero remembers the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia which he witnessed as a small boy. He was standing by the roadside with his grandfather who threatened the Russian tanks and theatrically, threw a stone at one them. The small boy was impressed by the technology and was waving to the Russian soldiers: „Although I was only ten, I knew very well how everyone was double dealing, how they were making sure that they would be acceptable for both sides, how they talked about socialism with a human face and yet were absolutely frightened, our family too, mother and Pepa disseminated some leaflets but were very careful that their neighbours would know nothing about this. It made me sick.“ (p.103-104)

More than any other of Hakl's work, *O rodičích a dětech* is reminiscent of the work of Bohumil Hrabal and Jaroslav Hašek. This is because the author uses the vehicle of *pub talk* as a major instrument for the construction of his narrative. Pub talk is a frequently used literary vehicle within the tradition of modern Czech literature and both Hašek and Hrabal are the most important representatives of this type of writing. Hašek's Švejk uses verbal games to free himself from hostile reality and to create an alternative, zany, virtual world in which he feels at home. There are echos of this approach in Hakl's work.

Hakl's latest, and to date, undoubtedly his most mature work is *O létajících objektech* (*On Flying Objects*), 2004. This is a collection of loosely related short stories, or sometimes just impressionistic texts, capturing a scene or a moment, again united by the lynchpin of the main, semi-autobiographical character. Most of the motifs from previous work by Hakl are present here, but they are now impressively complex and sophisticated.

The main theme of Hakl's *O létajících objektech* is the infantile, casual brutality which seems to be the principal characteristic feature of the post-communist world Hakl inhabits – and this world seems to be a *pars pro toto* for the whole, contemporary civilisation.

The first short story of the volume, „Blízká setkání (Close Encounters)“ is a perfect miniature, expressing cogently and in a nutshell what Hakl has in mind. The texts in this volume are even more precisely localised than in his previous work. „Blízká setkání“ starts with a description of a brand-new shopping mall, the „Flora Palace“ in Prague's district of Vinohrady. This is one of several huge shopping complexes that have cropped up in the Prague landscape recently. We encounter typical Haklesque lyrical passages where he describes, in grotesque terms, the intense consumerist involvement of the mindless crowds in this new „palace of self-indulgement“:

„Although it was after 10 pm, the shopping mall was full of life. Wildly gesticulating figures were travelling up and down the escalators. Music blared out from the shops. The coffee shops hummed with conversation. The young girls, trapped here as sales-assistants, having responded to newspaper adverts, yawned. Hundreds of jaws processed salads, potato fries, sandwiches, lips coloured with lipstick slurped spaghetti, the broken chelicers in the mouths of old men crushed chicken steaks...“ (p.10-11)

The hero has a snack, then joins the crowd to see a new, inane Czech film, discovers that his pockets are stuffed with advertising sticky labels for the movie, then finds out that the display of his mobile telephone is dead. Although the handset is under guarantee, the mobile telephone company refuses to deal with the fault and fends off the hero with superficial, polite clichés. The hero walks home, discovers a humble corner shop whose owner agrees to repair the mobile cheaply, quickly and without a fuss, and then has a „strange encounter“:

„A young girl with short hair, with a face full of reddish pimples was walking towards me along the pavement. In her arms she was carrying a big black dog. Her T-shirt was all besmirched with blood. There was an arrow protruding from a wound in the dog’s neck.

‘Someone has shot my dog,’ she said. The dog was shaking and was obviously dying.

‘Could you try to get it out?’ it occurred to the girl.

The arrow was short and strong, with plastic stabilisers at the end, probably from one of the cross-bows which are now sold everywhere. It was almost completely inside the wound. I tried to touch it. The dog gave out a terrible, wailing cry and the girl exclaimed.

‘It can’t be done,’ I said.

At that moment, the dog gave out a sound for which there is no description. Something between a despairing, almost human, mumbling and a futile attempt to speak. Then he obviously died. The girl kept stroking him.

‘You are all shit,’ she said quietly.

‘I know,’ I said.“ (Abbreviated, pp. 15-16)

The brutality of idiocy, cruelty perpetrated by mindless individuals who either do not know they are doing other creatures harm, or they don’t care, or they are positively enjoying it, is a major theme of this volume and it appears in various forms. A swan is trying to take off in one of the texts, but it cannot, because some children have attached a wire to one of its legs. The children are enjoying the spectacle of the helpless bird trying to free itself. But the „thrusting“ business spirit of the new entrepreneurs is just as brutal. Postmodernism rules and there are no values. So, even brutality loses its meaning. Hakl is being old-fashioned when he – implicitly and shyly – objects that, surely, certain things are not done.

However, elsewhere, he expresses relief that Man no longer needs to fight for „higher values“:

„Suddenly I realised that everything is absolutely fine. It is good that all those lured, cheap ideals for which people kept dying for several thousand years, good, evil, the truth, all those things, are gone now.“ (p. 158)

Unlike in fiction, narratives in reality have no point.

Hakl again examines the „outside world“ in a sexual encounter with a randy and uninhibited American „mother of two“, watching her behaviour with detached amusement. When, in another story, he travels in a car with a quarelling married couple to a party and they get lost, he records unperturbed, that an armed guard at a derelict industrial estate, which they

by mistake entered, begins shooting at them from his pistol. Brutality is casual – it is everywhere. It is the norm. Yet Haki likes his world:

„What do I like? Of course the rain which descends on the roofs outside, the glistening rails, the bird song at four in the morning. The shimmering stars over there above the Czech Central Massif Mountains. The dung-beetles clattering in the pine needles. My pals who are more and more the same as ever before. The soft, blonde ladies in the accounting offices. The pale girls from the housing estates. All those constantly irritated rum-sodden old men. All those arts-educated frog princes with whom it is so pleasant to chat and who then won't move a finger for you. And, after all, all those clever shits who will shaft you before you even notice them because that is their way of communicating...” (p.19—20)

The volume broadens the horizon beyond the Czech context to former Yugoslavia, where a couple of Haki's characters are on a hiking holiday in the mountains. The signs of the recent war are all around. Brutality is again, ever present, potent and threatening. There are ghosts. Inexplicable phenomena. The world is exotic, mysterious and frightening. So is (Central European) history: in another text the hero travels to Poland and a retired Polish fighter pilot tells him about cannibalism in the Nazi concentration camp where his father was imprisoned.

And the conclusion?

„I was filled with an unclear, but unexpectedly clear feeling of happiness that I am living at this, present time and not at some other time, that I am living at a time which is miraculous due to the fact that one can hear and feel under one's feet that thunderous noise with which everything breaks off with us at every other moment. We always fall a little further down, into an unknown territory.” (p.158)

Possibly the most characteristic feature of Haki's writing is unease, the feeling of discomfort. While assuming a semi-detached position with regard to the environment which he observes Haki produces surprisingly penetrating analysis of the current state of his society. What is particularly important is that his accounts of the Czech environment seems to function as a *pars pro toto* – it is a synecdoche which bears witness to the current state of the world.