Jiří Gruša

The Questionnaire, or Prayer for a Town and a Friend

Dotazník aneb Modlitba za jedno město a přítele

Presented by: Ingrid Hudabiunigg

“Dotazník aneb Modlitba za jedno město a přítele” is generally counted as one of the important Czech novels of its period — the 1970s, the deepest years of the communist government’ s period called “normalization” (“normalisace”), when serious literature was circulating only in typescript in samizdat (underground literature). The English version, *The Questionnaire, or Prayer for a Town and a Friend*, translated by Peter Kussi, appeared from Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 1982.

Jiří Gruša (1938-2011) grew up in a Czech family in Pardubice, East Bohemia and studied history and philosophy in Prague. Gruša began writing at an early age—primarily poetry—and, together with his friend Václav Havel (the later president), founded the journal “Tvař”. The opposition to Stalinist poetry expressed within its pages made the young editor a target of suspicion, eventually leading to an official ban on his literary activities. Following the release of his novel “Dotazník” he was accused of attempting to subvert the state order and was even imprisoned. As one of the first signatories of Charter 77—which demanded that the Czechoslovak government, then under Moscow’s dictate, uphold human rights—he was stripped of his citizenship in 1980 while on a reading tour in the United States and Germany, at the age of 42. There followed a period of great hardship, during which Gruša—cruelly deprived of his Czech-speaking readership—sought to forge a new life as a writer in the German language. The intense mental strain caused by translating his own works even led to a temporary loss of sight. After the regime was toppled by the Velvet Revolution in 1989, Gruša was appointed Czech ambassador to Germany by his former ally, Václav Havel. He subsequently served briefly as Minister of Education in Prague, later as the Czech government’s ambassador to Austria, and ultimately as president of PEN, the worldwide association of writers (2004-2009). He is the rare case of a writer whose state punished him as an enemy and later employed him as one of its highest representatives.

The novel’s protagonist Jan Chrysostom Kepka is the main character and the narrator. He is a landscape architect who has been unemployed for two years and is applying for his sixteenth job – this time at the company ‘Granit’. The condition for the application is a personal questionnaire, as required by the communist regime. Instead of filling in the fields briefly, Kepka begins to answer the questionnaire with absurd thoroughness. The answers are organized around the numbered items of the questionnaire, and the narrator keeps addressing Comrade Pavlenda, the official who processes the application. It is a one-sided conversation with the bureaucrat who never replies. Kepka refers to a specific question by number and then demonstrates, or more often improvises, how some episode of his life fits it. That device is what holds an otherwise anarchic mass of

material in place: it gives the digressions a spine, and it makes the state's categories the actual generating principle of the narrative. The rigid categories of the form – origin, class, political reliability – are broken down from within: the questionnaire is meant to make life transparent and controllable but instead becomes a place for self-reflection and self-discovery. The novel derives its tension from the fact that this kind of storytelling is already dangerous in a totalitarian system. The title formula ‘Prayer for a City and a Friend’ indicates that, alongside the accusation, the novel also deals with specific places, people and memories.

Kepka is not a hero in the classical sense. He does not want to conquer the world, but rather to grasp the meaning of life. Kepka’s ancestors and relatives appear as characters in the story: since his answers go back to his own conception, his parents, grandparents, and the family history that lies further back in time, all form a cast of characters reflecting centuries of Czech society.

The chronological reach is total. Kepka narrates his own conception in 1938 (with apparent familiarity — one of the book's running surreal jokes), his birth, which he tries to delay because the sun stood in the Eighth House, and continues past his own death. Between those poles sits his childhood in Chlumec, a mother's horoscopic "four-lamp" chrysoberyl eyes traced back through the family to the eighteenth century, adolescence, military service, the German occupation with Commissar Boldt using the former pleasure park as an execution ground, the Russian arrival after WW2, and finally the 1968 invasion by the troops of the Warsaw Pact— in which Jan is riddled with real Russian bullets and comes back unharmed.

Kepka’s family is shown as a web of complicities. The character set is built to resist moral sorting. Uncle Bonek collaborated with both the Nazis and the Socialists — the same behavior under two flags. Uncle Olin, the eccentric mentor, is arrested by the Russians. Edvin, the father, is an army deserter. Nobody in this book can be reduced to a category, which is precisely the argument.

The chapter on Kepka’s origins imitates an older Czech style of speech, and the text is salted throughout with English, German and Latin words and phrases. Both are deliberate texture rather than ornament: they belong to a novel arguing that a person is the accumulated layering of languages, times and voices, and cannot be itemised on one sheet.

What kind of novel is it? Mostly it is seen as an experimental work in grotesque and comic mode about the search for individual freedom in a ritualised society, stylised as an absurd attempt to compress the many-layeredness of life into the columns of a personnel questionnaire. Jan Kepka is a self-professed "chrononaut," drawing vitality from horoscopes and from the town's astral and mythic life. Fantasy here isn't escapism; it's the faculty the form cannot capture, deployed as a counter-archive to the personnel file.

The subtitle's "Prayer for a Town" is not sentimental. Chlumec,is the actual name of a town north of Pardubice, where the author grew up, but in the novel is an imaginative composite rather than a real place —an ancient settlement whose people have survived every invasion, occupation and regime. The town is the counter-unit to the individual: where the questionnaire atomises a person into items, the town preserves continuity across regimes. This is where the "prayer" in the subtitle does real work — the book is a blessing spoken over a place that keeps outlasting its rulers.

It could be read as a satirical exposé of Communist bureaucracy, but the book's argument is broader: *Dotazník* is a political novel that refuses to be a political tract. Its target is not a party or a policy but a habit of mind. Gruša's point is that any instrument designed to make a person legible to an institution will necessarily amputate the person.

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LANGUAGE: Czech / Český

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