

Michal Mareš, *Anděličkářka: Stručný román / The Angel-maker: A Czech-English Parallel-Text Concise Novel*. Transl. by David Short. <S. l.:> Jantar Publishing, 2011. 113pp. ISBN 978-0-9568890-0-3

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Jantar Publishing Ltd. is a new British enterprise established to translate works of Central and East European fiction into English. The name of the publishing house (meaning 'amber' in most, if not all, languages of the region) suggests that Jantar's strategy is to go for quirkily attractive cultural artefacts which have been preserved (and merit a further preservation) in time, just like peculiar creatures trapped in amber.

It is difficult to think of a more suitable way to start such a venture than to choose Michal Mareš's *Anděličkářka* for one of its first titles (the other two being Daniela Hodrová's *Město vidím...* (1992), also translated by David Short as *Prague, I See a City*; and *Učitel dějepisu* (2004) by Tereza Brdečková, translated by Elsa Morrison as *The History Teacher*). Mareš (1893, Teplice — 1971, Prague) — a writer of left-wing persuasions, once an associate of the Devětsil avant-garde movement<sup>1</sup> — until recently had been almost completely for-

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<sup>1</sup> Expelled from school at the age of seventeen for protesting against the execution of the Spanish Catalan anarchist Francisco Ferrer y Guardia, Mareš was a member of Jaroslav Hašek's Party of Moderate Progress within the Constraints of the Law, and of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (which expelled him too, in 1947). Born into a Czech-German family and equally fluent in both languages, Mareš wrote poems, novels and plays, as well as contributed to the *Tribuna*, *Prager Tagblatt*, *Rudé právo* and *Dnešek* newspapers. He knew Karel Čapek, Ferdinand Peroutka, Max Brod, Franz Kafka and Egon Erwin Kisch, among others. During World War I, Mareš tried to avoid bearing arms and eventually deserted from the army. During World War II, he became active in the underground resistance and tried to help Jews by organising secret postal communications with the Terezín ghetto. After World War II, Mareš raised the

gotten by his compatriots in the aftermath of his post-World War II seven-year-long imprisonment on false charges (in reality, for his journalistic articles criticising Czechoslovak and Soviet Communists).<sup>2</sup> A collection of some of these articles (*Přicházím z periferie republiky / I Come from the Outskirts of the Republic*, Prague 2009, edited by Michal Jareš), as well as his memoirs (*Ze vzpomínek anarchisty, reportéra a válečného zločince / From the Memoirs of an Anarchist, Reporter and War Criminal*, Prague 1999, edited by Pavel Koukal), have made a significant contribution towards re-establishing Mareš's name and reputation. Republishing *Anděličkářka* (which initially appeared 1922 in Prague) in Czech original alongside its English translation is yet another step in the same direction.

*Anděličkářka* tells the story of a clandestine Czech abortionist (herself a victim of a clandestine abortion) who selflessly (i.e. free of charge) helps women to get rid of unwanted pregnancies, and even sometimes kills their newly-born children for them, thus sending babies straight to heaven and turning them into little angels (hence the novel's title). Mareš does not consider this activity a crime. Far from it. The abortionist is provocatively portrayed as a modern-day saint righting the wrongs of society that has been ridden by overpopulation, social inequality, violent conflicts and sanctimonious treatment of extramarital affairs and illegitimate children. The novel has been written in an eclectic style that combines the odd striking image (‘she listened as if the talk was of the most wonderful trip to the mountains, which she was to join, while the friend who was inviting her had no idea that she had had her legs amputated’, pp. 45, 47) with quotes from Sophocles (on the desirability of dying as soon as possible, if you cannot help being born, pp. 54–55) and Jonathan Swift (on rich people with a taste for infants, pp. 60–61), while signs of political pamphletism (with a future Messiah depicted as an illegitimate child preaching ‘ruin everywhere and in all circumstances’, p. 103) can be found next to formal elements of sociological treatises (botched abortions are called a ‘risk to which almost one in two women is exposed, given the moral framework, mindset and issue of abuses carried out in the course of Sudeten Germans’ removal from Czechoslovakia).

<sup>2</sup> Released in 1955, he died in poverty in 1971. His name was cleared of accusations, by the Supreme Court of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, only in 1991.

legal system of modern society', p. 29), sheet music (pp. 76–77) and post office stationery (pp. 84–85).

The characters' individual stories are meant to serve as illustrations of typical trends in personal relationships in the Czech lands in late XIX- — early XX-century. Being very much a product of its time, Mareš's vocal support for women's rights to abortion is prompted by his 'own noble, anarchistic nature' (p. 49). Even Jesus Christ is referred to in the novel as a 'great anarchist' (p. 3). One may wish to question the wisdom of preferring *Anděličkářka* over all those countless masterpieces of Czech fiction still awaiting translation. Yet the book's topicality is not without its lasting relevance. Suffice it to mention a sympathetic portrayal of a backstreet abortionist in the 1950s' London in the award-winning and critically acclaimed British feature film *Vera Drake* by Mike Leigh, made as recently as 2004. Additionally, *Anděličkářka's* parallel bilingual format provides a distinct advantage as a self-help teaching aid for students of Czech language and literature, who may learn a great deal from a variety of stylistic registers Mareš uses in this compact, versatile and accessible novel. Those who know both English and Czech well enough, will be able to form their own judgement about the quality of David Short's translation. In any case, there is a notable lack of bilingual Czech books on the market, and Jantar should be praised for setting out to address this problem.

Jantar's noble endeavour did not come to pass without minor glitches. The note to pp. 10–11 of the parallel text can only be found on pp. 34–35, although all other references duly appear as footnotes, on the same pages as their reference numbers. Furthermore, the respective translation of footnotes 3 and 4 on page 61 is identical, although the corresponding Czech original on p. 60 is not. Let us hope that the first print of *Anděličkářka* will be sold out soon enough, and these and other imperfections will be corrected in subsequent editions.

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