Czech-Israeli Writer
Viktor Fischl in the
Context of World Events
During the 20th Century

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Viktor Fischl (Avigdor Dagan, 1912–2006) was an important writer, a journalist and a diplomat of Czech Jewish origin. During the inter-war period, he wrote about the topic of Judaism, during the WWII he helped to defend Czechoslovak interests in the service of Czechoslovak government-in-exile. In his second home Israel, holocaust and parallels between the Nazis and the Communist totality in Soviet satellites became his topic. He was active in public affairs as a writer and as a diplomat (he was Israeli chargé d’affaires in Japan, in Burma and ambassador in Poland, Yugoslavia, Norway and Austria). This study searches for the sources of Fischl’s life philosophy and describes the formation of his cultural and national identity while using his texts and analyzing the Czech cultural discourse.

Виктор Фишл (Авигдор Даган, 1912–2006) – известный писатель, журналист и дипломат чешско-еврейского происхождения. В период между мировыми войнами занимался еврейским вопросом, а во время Второй мировой войны помог защитить интересы чехословаков в чехословакском правительстве в изгнании. В Израиле большой темой для него стал холокост и параллели между нацистским и коммунистическим тоталитаризмом в странах-сателлитах СССР. В области литературы и дипломатии (был поверенным в делах Израиля в Японии и в Бирме, послом в Польше, Югославии, Норвегии и Австрии) он публично участвовал в решении современных социально-политических вопросов. На основе текстов Фиша и анализа чешского культурного дискурса мы ищем источники его философии жизни и формирования культурной и национальной идентичности.
From the semiotical viewpoint, any text is a sign that is to be decoded by the recipient. In this way, the semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce characterises the sign as “something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity.” (Peirce 17) Therefore a literary historian cogitating about the creations and poetics of an author cannot avoid questions about the author’s thought since his texts are representations of his ideas concretised through the social and political events of his time. Speculations on what a particular mode of representation tells about Fischl’s texts alone, about their relationship to history and their role in it would be futile if the examination of the author’s contemporary thought did not involve his cultural identity, which is revealed or transformed on the suture of epochs. The transformation of one’s identity is linked to the societal and cultural transformation, i.e. it is a discoursive construct that is shaped, moving or changing, in conformity with our culture and society.

Accordingly, a substantial influence on the formation of Fischl’s cultural and national identity was obviously the year 1933. It was then that, after Hitler’s seizing power, Germany and the whole of Europe witnessed a rising wave of anti-Semitism which, at the same time, induced a growing desire of Jewish people to manifest Judaism and appreciate the past and traditions of their ethnic community. As a young man, Viktor Fischl – like many others – had been rather a secularised Jew worshipping only on major religious holidays. By the same token, during the summer and autumn of 1930, he devoted himself to a very intensive study of the Bible, as well as theological tracts and literary texts inspired by its theme. His early poetry then offered a somewhat inconsistent view of God. It is evidenced by two poem cycles concerned with religious faith and composed at the time (Duha nad městem [The Rainbow above the City], Člověk na mezi [A Fence Sitter]). Further,
his search for creedal path may be conveyed in the article entitled Židovství a křesťanství [Judaism and Christianity] and published in 1930 in the periodical Křesťanská revue: “Moses or Jesus? That is the question posed probably by every young Jew seeking his way of life” (Fischl, “Židovství” 57). Concluding his article, Fischl forms the opinion that “even present-day Christians obey the ethical commands of Moses [and] even present-day Jews accept the teaching of Jesus” (“Židovství” 61). His attempt at a conciliatory interpretation of Jewish and Christian ideas may have resulted from the fact that Jesus’ personality was then closer to him than the chastising Lord God of the Old Testament, as noted in his diary. This view, however, is not implied in the above mentioned article, rather he sides there with Judaism. Presumably, his creedal orientation was not definite by then, or he may have preferred the implicit contemporary claim of Jewry to his own experience.

Under pressure of contemporary events, the Fischl family not only intensified their belief in Judaism, but they also thought more intensely of going back to the Holy Land. Many years later, Fischl described his drift towards Zionism as a natural vision he had had since time out of mind. Hence in Czechoslovakia in the 1930s, he was a leading personality in the Zionist organisation and an active member of the parliamentary Jewish Party; in addition, he chaired the Theodor Herzl Society, an association of Zionist academics, and also worked on the committee of the Human Rights League. From 1932, he was a contributor to Zionist Židovské zprávy, after 1933, on a regular basis (in 1936 he became its editor-in-chief). No wonder it was this periodical that saw him qualify as a Jewish author who emphasised, as early as the mid-1930s, the special role Jews had played in the spiritual development of Europe and observed the contemporary European events in relation to Jewry. His articles of 1933 already show him as a Zionist.

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2 The diary remained in manuscript and is archived in LA PNP [Literary archives of the Museum of Czech literature] Prague, the Viktor Fischl fund, manuscript of his diary from 1930, unp., the record dated 2nd July 1930.
So even in the years that preceded his emigration to Britain in 1939, he was manifestly involved in the Jewish issue as he commented on England’s attitudes to the formation of an independent Jewish state. This was a subject matter for an increasingly intense discussion not only for Fischl alone but the whole of Europe at the time when the Austrian Anschluss and the Munich Pact were harsh facts of life. While prior to the Munich Pact, Zionism was little more than a Jewish vision, following September 1938, not only Zionists began to consider the possibility of emigrating to Palestine. Although in his articles Viktor Fischl emphasizes that Zionist policy rejects restrictions on immigration into Palestine, he also points out that Palestine should be the homeland for the Jews, not just asylum (Fischl, “Asyl a domovina” 1).

Nevertheless, the tragic events of the late 1930s in Europe had their share in Viktor Fichl’s changing his national identity. No later than the second half of 1938, the editors of Zionist Židovské zprávy ceased to fill its pages with pronounced Jewish or Zionist stands as their fear about the fate of Jews changed into apprehension about the future of the Czechoslovak Republic. After the Munich Pact in September 1938 they declare their loyalty towards Czechoslovakia. Fischl makes reference to prominent Czech personalities, especially Comenius, Hus, Chelčický, and Havlíček Borovský. In them he sees the tradition upon which the Czechs should lean. As is also evident from these icons, Fischl’s commitment in Zionist issues came nearer to Masaryk’s conception of Czech history, on which Masaryk, as the first Czechoslovak president, built his state-forming ideas.

On a number of occasions, Fischl esteemed Masaryk’s supportive approach to Jews and Zionism, undoubtedly best represented by the latter’s defence of Leopold Hilsner, a Jew wrongfully convicted of ritual murder. Fischl derived Masaryk’s attitude towards Jewry from the
closeness of Masaryk’s humanist ethics and Judaism without asserting that Masaryk molded his world outlook from Judaism (“Masaryks Humanismus” 4). What Fischl discerns as the concurrence of Masaryk’s humanism and Jewish ethics is essentially Masaryk’s personal attitude to God because Jews, too – according to Fischl – do not find God under the dome of God’s house, rather they endeavor to bring every step in their daily life in harmony with God’s will. It is also Masaryk’s refusal of Nietzschean pessimism and fondness for martyrdom that Fischl interprets as a refusal of the Catholic cult of death which should deliver man from the earthly suffering. Masaryk’s optimism thus has more common ground with Messianism than the resignation of Christian humility.

As is apparent from Fischl’s commitment in political and social issues, he was a great admirer of T. G. Masaryk and his ‘humanist ideals’, and he tried, sometimes expediently, to draw them nearer to Jews, too. Fischl’s article Zum Masaryk-Tag [To Masaryk’s Day] of March 1936, where he labels the interwar period as ‘the time of Masaryk’, is no less explicit. Fischl apparently was, his Zionism notwithstanding, above all an interwar intellectual closely connected with Czech culture and loyal to Czechoslovakia because, among other things, it protected Jewish interests. In his journalism he particularly appreciated the President’s attitude to arts, for Masaryk – who perceived literature as a sphere “where projects and models of modern man and his society get developed” (Brabec 49) – helped to launch the paradigm in arts which was formed from the 1920s, especially within Karel Čapek’s circle, and aimed at close integration between arts and contemporary events. In the latter half of the 1930s, he had the greatest regard for Masaryk’s resistance to pessimism. In his article V Masarykově týdnu [In Masaryk’s Week], he says that Masaryk explained his resistance to pessimism not only in Ideály humanitní [Humanistic Ideals], but he
had always rejected it in literature as well. To Fischl, optimism in arts, whose function was to encourage positive thinking in the troubled late 1930s, complemented the contemporary paradigm of arts developed as a social phenomenon.

While prior to the establishment of Czechoslovakia, Karel Čapek, jointly with a group of the 1914 Almanac authors, had championed modern artistic movements in Czech culture, following the birth of the new republic, he changed his orientation towards pragmatism and practical viewpoints. According to Dějiny nové moderny [The History of New Modernity], this shift in Čapek’s poetics occurred around 1920, when he abandoned the corporate defensive unison of modern artistic movements in the Musaion anthology and departed in his drama Loupežník [The Robber] from the Čapek Brothers’ original plan for an uncompromising attitude to life, aiming instead at conciliatory assent to life experience. Čapek himself pondered upon this transformation of his literary endeavour in the column ‘Čapekian Generation’, calling it a lost generation. He says that, no matter how vigorously defended before the war, afterwards, the generation had their work snatched from them. For when the war was over, “practical life caught hold of them and pushed [them] into doing quite different feats” (Čapek, “Poznámky o tvorbě” 80-81). The post-war artistic endeavour of the avant-garde gradually fell into contradiction. Independent artistic expression was more and more in opposition to the contemporary concept of arts as a social phenomenon, with the ‘Čapekian generation’ of authors applying their interest in public affairs also in their second profession: journalism (namely Karel Čapek, Ferdinand Peroutka, Karel Poláček). They perceived the world of the 1930s as so full of dramatic tension that they could not realise that “dramatists can walk around involved in rather private affairs (Čapek, “Poznámky o tvorbě” 122).
The ‘Čapekian generation’ thus inclined to the traditional image of 
a poet as the man of letters who keeps reappearing in Czech literature 
when the nation is in danger. Having complied with their state-making 
obligation in the 1920s and shouldering the responsibility for maintain-
ing independence and peace in the 1930s, this generation now ceased 
to emphasise independent arts and the prewar defence of modern 
artistic movements so as to accentuate an impersonal subject and links 
between arts and reality. Ferdinand Peroutka set forth this shaping 
paradigm in 1927 in his article Sluší-li se být realistou [Is it good to be a 
realist], where he demands “an adult view of people and things.” He 
does not identify his realism with the 19th-century realism, nor does 

he reject, for that matter, modern artistic movements, because to him, 
all of them embody a desire to seek reality; further, he adds that he 
wants to be allured by facts not ‘gimmicks’ (Peroutka 46) Thus for this 
generation as well as for Viktor Fischl, literature became a means of 
representing the era.

Shaped in the troubled 1930s under the influence of Masarykian 
interwar discourse (see more in Jiroušek), Fischl’s poetics were tied 
to his committed life stance. Fischl followed this paradigm shaped by 
the time even in the years to come. In 1938–1939, the turning years of 
his career, Fischl confirmed his Czech identity, both in his literary 
creations and journalism. It became particularly apparent during the 
second world war when he worked in London and in his capacity as 
chief of the staff in the section of film and cultural propaganda at the 
Information Department of the Foreign Ministry in Exile, he signifi-
cantly influenced the positive ‘media’ image of Czechoslovakia, which 
was vital for Edvard Beneš’s concept of the constitutional continuity of 
the Czechoslovak Republic. Especialy if Beneš endeavoured to restore 
Czechoslovakia as it had existed prior to the Munich Pact. That is why

3 Edvard Beneš was the Czechoslovak president between 1935 
and 1948, during the German occupation he was in exile, and from 
1940 he was the internationally recognized president in exile.
he tried to make the British party deny the validity of the Munich Pact, which, though, did not materialise until August 1942.

To forge ahead with the plans of the Czechoslovak government in exile, Fischl presented to an English audience such works of art that could represent Czech culture and demonstrate the age-old struggle of Czech people for independence. Also, a number of his poems written in that period were a response to particular contemporary events, yet none, with the exception of Mrtvá ves [Dead Village], describing the razing of Lidice, can be deemed political in nature. Even Mrtvá ves became a political matter only because the tragic event itself little by little acquired a political meaning. Fischl’s reclaiming Czech cultural and national identity thus arises from contemporary events, as he also believed in the possibility of the restoration of peace in Europe and the restoration of pre-war Czechoslovakia. He thus followed the efforts of the Czech political representation in exile.

Viktor Fischl returned from London in 1947, but after the Communist coup d’etat of February 1948 he decided to left Czechoslovakia for Israel. He may have spent no more than 29 years of his life in Czechoslovakia, nevertheless, his mind was so moulded by interwar Czech culture and mentality that he remained faithful to the Czech language in the literary works he wrote in English exile after 1939 and after his emigration to Israel in 1949. Fischl thus leaned towards the culture and mentality of people who he did not live with for the next part of his life. The cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz states that culture is formed by collective thinking and collective memory which is based on ‘the stream of social thinking’ of the time. The power of collective thought is closely connected with a particular community tied to a particular space and time and it persists in the individual even after the community has gone out of existence (Hablwachs 63–64). A sufficient
condition is the existence of people to be interconnected within such space. Individuals then can realize their full potential within this frame, without taking active part in it (Halbwachs 188). Viktor Fischl’s diary after he left for Israel reveals that he once again made every effort to join the artistic activities and, above all, the Czech cultural structures in exile.⁴ He contributed to Czech exile periodicals and sent articles to foreign publishers and, in 1952, he succeeded in becoming a permanent staff member of Radio Free Europe. This enabled him to address Czech listeners not only with his literary texts but also with his memoirs, in which he often returned to his interwar spiritual guides, both in arts and ethics. In the 1980s, his works were already published in prestigious Czech publishing houses in exile, such as Konfrontace, Polygon, Sixty-Eight Publishers, Poezie mimo domov, Index, and then they were reviewed and commented on in Czechoslovak exile periodicals.

Although Viktor Fischl did not regard himself as an emigrant – having left for Israel legally – he was put in a position comparable with the condition of other exiled authors. Czech exiles in the 1950s expected that, by analogy to the war exiles, their situation was just a stopgap. Therefore artists, like in the war years, were again ‘in the employ of’ exiled politicians (Papoušek 83). Even if Viktor Fischl did not consider the possibility of his return to Czechoslovakia, in the early 1950s, he endeavoured to influence its political and social affairs in a similar way. This seemed to be only natural for him since he continued supporting the interwar concept of intellectuals as torchbeares of their nation (Fischl, “U vzdělaných lidí” 1). Ralf Dahrendorf in his book Versuchungen der Unfreiheit. Die Intellektuellen in Zeiten der Prüfung says that intellectuals become politically committed at the turning points of history, calling them ‘committed observers’ who try to help their nation through their engagement in public affairs. It was already in
the interwar period and during the war – when Fischl succeeded in providing some 200 English visas for Czech Jews – that he proved his public commitment more than enough.

The second world war, the shared holocaust experience and the Communist coup d’état of 1948 induced a change in Fischl’s literary creations. He gave up writing poetry, and he devoted more attention to fiction, which enabled him to explore the roots of barbarianism produced by modern society in the 20th century. In the narrative of a fictional world, the author can examine the qualities of individual characters and explain the motivation of their acts; in his case, it enabled him to reveal the causes of Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianisms. Not being a historian, he did not aim to carry out a theoretical analysis of totalitarianism. As a writer, he explored the real world through the fictional world. All of his novels, short stories or memoirs show that until the end he never abandoned integration between literature and reality though he knew very well that a literary story could not be a mimetic representation of reality. Consequently, Fischl’s literary texts can be viewed as a sign that, to paraphrase Ch. S. Peirce, can only represent the object and inform about it (Peirce 19). On that account, Fichl’s literary texts, charged with links to the real world in the form of concrete historic events and people, do not represent the past as such but the author’s thought about it. The purpose of the author’s reflection upon the world, according to his book *The Poet and the Cage* of 1951, is to impress the greatest number of people.

Viktor Fischl’s view on Communism as expounded in his book *The Poet and the Cage*, conveying the message that it was a totalitarian system that embraced principles similar to Nazism, resembles the attitudes of other great minds in the 1950s, such as Hannah Arendt, or Carl J. Friedrich, and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski (Brenner 27–39). Fischl is
fairly apprehensive about a substantial increase in ‘mechanical materialism’ professed by lost generations of people deprived of cultural, ethical and philosophical awareness as it was outlined for modern society in the 20th century by H. G. Adler. He stressed the necessity to foster the cultural and spiritual values in the rest of the world so that most people on the planet would put up stiff resistance to the expanding Communism. To achieve this aim, in Fischl’s opinion, it was necessary for democratic countries to create visions of cultural life and bring outstanding artistic achievements not only to a narrow circle of intellectual listeners, but also to let art and its humanising qualities produce a beneficial effect on as many people as possible.


Fischl’s authorial intent, which can only be ‘inferred’ by the interpreter from his textual corpus, undoubtedly arose from his determination to profit by the history of holocaust and prevent another potentiality of dehumanising experience of mankind. On account of holocaust, human history lost belief in progress and in the idea of humaneness grounded in the Enlightenment. The life philosophy of Fischl’s narrators (in Jeruzalémský triptych) “knowing neither the day nor the hour” reflects the fear of modern world being deprived of an integrating idea and stability, the fear of a ceaseless stream of changes,
a kaleidoscope of accidental events. The narrator describes the world around as chaotic because holocaust symbolises to him disruption of the man-God relationship. Nevertheless, he holds a teleological view, believing in the causality of all sudden changes that occur in the world symbolically represented by Mamila Street. Hence, while the implicit author is aware of the disharmonious condition of modern world and modern man, he at the same time resists such destruction of the world and metaphysical transcendency by erecting the world of integrity to defeat the world of chaos. Mainly it is implied in his texts dealing with family affairs or Judaism, or in texts inspired by antiquity. Though it may be traced in war stories as well.

Fischl’s optimism about mankind being able to learn from its history is nothing but identical with Masaryk’s creed expressed in Hovory s T. G. Masarykem [Talks with T. G. Masaryk]: “what has always mattered to me was what lesson can be drawn from history, our history or the world history, to apply to our politics. I do not claim to be a historian; but as a teleologist, I try to understand the purpose of history, the history of our nation and of the world” (Čapek, “Hovory s T. G. Masarykem” 310). The endeavour of Masarykian authors in the interwar discourse to learn from history and reflect upon contemporary events was prompted by responsibility for the nation – with Fischl, first in the 1930s, for Jew-ry, and during his London exile, also for Czechoslovak people. In his literary works of the 1970s and later in the 20th century, however, the scope of his thinking was probably cosmopolitan. As evidenced by other Czech artists and intellectuals in exile (most significantly by Ferdinand Peroutka), the contemporary Czech community in exile favoured and promoted transpersonal goals and ideas. It is obvious that Masarykian interwar discourse could be transferred by Czech intellectuals of the
1950s even to exile. They could identify with it because it was evoked by their memory as suggested by Halbwachs.

What was said above cannot deny the fact that Viktor Fischl was a Czech-Israeli or Czech-Jewish man of letters, for his literary texts include many direct and indirect references to Jewish belief and culture. For instance, he translated the *Song of Songs*; in his *Apocryfa* he dealt with the themes from the Old Testament; and his literary texts are permeated with themes related to Judaism or directly to Israel. Yet his thought was influenced by Masarykian interwar discourse.

— *From Czech translated by Jiřina Johanisová*
Literature


FISCHL, VIKTOR, 1938: Asyl a domovina. Židovské zprávy 21, no. 49. 1.

FISCHL, VIKTOR, 1938: U vzdělaných lidí. Židovské zprávy 21, no. 46. 1.
FISCHL, VIKTOR, 1930: Židovství a křesťanství. *Křesťanská revue* 4, no. 2. 57 and 61.


Souhrn článku

Studie je zaměřená na popis konstruktu národní a kulturní identity česko-židovského spisovatele Viktora Fischla (1912–2006), který po příchodu do Izraele v roce 1949 přijal hebrejské jméno Avigdor Dagan. Protože se nevěnoval pouze literární činnosti, byl i aktivním novinářem a diplomatem působícím jak ve službách českého, tak izraelského ministerstva zahraničí, je možné pracovat nejenom s jeho texty uměleckými, ale i texty neuměleckými a “čist” z nich jeho formování kulturní a národní identity, což napomáhá porozumět jeho utváření životního a filozofického postoje angažovaného intelektuála.

Viktor Fischl se narodil do bouřlivého 20. století, a tudíž jeho formování osobnosti bylo spjato se zlomovými dějinnými událostmi. Na počátku 30. let se začne profilovat jako židovský básník a sionistický žurnalista, ačkoli do těchto dnů byl Židem skularizovaným a ani v jeho tvorbě se židovská tematika nijak neobjevovala. V deníkových záznamech dokonce upřednostňoval křesťanství před židovstvím. Ve 30. letech se výrazně angažoval v otázkách židovských, respective sionistických. Zároveň ho ale lze vnímat, jak je v článku doloženo, jako prvorepublikového intelektuála spjatého s dobovou českou kulturou a myšlením, který velmi ctil osobnost T. G. Masaryka. Dalším zlomovým okamžikem se zdá být období Mnichovské dohody, kdy na stránkách sionistických Židovských novin, jejichž byl v té době šéfredaktorem, začal v roce 1938 ustupovat z vyhraněné sionistické pozice a spíše se identifikoval s hodnotami a ikonami Československé republiky.

V roce 1940 Fischl vstoupil do služeb československého exilového ministerstva zahraničí v Londýně. Stal se vedoucím filmové a kulturní propagandy, kde následoval cíle českého politického exilu. Prezentoval z české kultury ty osobnosti a ta díla, která mohla demonstrovat odvěký
boj Čechů proti Němcům. I v jeho poezii po roce 1938 se ztrácí židovská tematika, v emigraci se vedle tematiky válečného utrpení aktualizuje tematika domova a českého venkova.


Jak je patrné i z jeho tvorby umělecké, Fischl byl přesvědčen, že se lidstvo může ze svých dějin poučit. Shoduje se tak vlastně stále s postojem českých autorů prvorepublikového masarykovského diskurzu, kteří se cítili odpovědní za národ. Viktor Fischl tak byl, stejně jako další čeští exiloví intelektuálové (nejvýrazněji Ferdinand Peroutka), i po odchodu z Československa nadále formován prvorepublikovým diskurzem myšlení založeném na nadosobních cílech a hodnotách.
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