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# Ladislav Helge

Every year on 21st August, we commemorate the 1968 occupation putting an end to the idea of „socialism with a human face“ and the possibility of Czechoslovakia to take its own path, independent of the Soviet Union. At the same time however, it's the birthday of one of the most influential personalities on the domestic film scene of the 1950s and 1960s – Ladislav Helge. It has been ninety years since the birth of the author of *Škola otců* (School for Fathers, 1957), *První den mého syna* (Chance Meeting, 1964) and *Stud* (Shame, 1968).

Helge tends to be seen as part of the generation of Jiří Weiss, Otakar Vávra and Jiří Krejčík – of the Ur Wave, in whose films from the second half of the 1950s we can feel the influences leading to the onset of the New Wave energy.

In fact, though, Helge (born in 1927) is closer in terms of age to Jaroslav Papoušek (who is two years younger), Evald Schorm (four years younger) or Miloš Forman (five years younger) than to Weiss (year of birth 1913) or Vávra (year of birth 1911). He considered the 9-year-older Krejčík as his mentor. Therefore, being part of the New Wave cannot be mechanically connected with age or directing debuts in the 1960s: we rather tend to include in it Vojtěch Jasný or Ján Kadár, even though both of them are not only older than Helge, but similarly to him, they started directing independently already in the second half of the 1950s. What is decisive for the „New Wave feeling“ is mainly the aspect of style, considered by the classic narrator Helge as less important than the social topicality of the story.

„My great weakness indeed was the fact that these things were excessively important to me before I realized that I should also deal with how the things are expressed,“ explained Helge later in an interview with Štěpán Hulík.[1] „As this was not of primary interest to me, and you can see it in my films. For me, the opinion was more important than the form.“

That's why we see Ladislav Helge in one group with older, established filmmakers who in the 1960s had several things in common with younger authors and significantly contributed to the set of films shaping our today's notion of the Czechoslovak New Wave. In his case, it was *První den mého syna*, a sensitively portrayed story about the „hooligan“ problems of the young generation, and *Stud*, a psychological drama of a bigoted communist official.

Helge emerged in the 1960s in „Christ's age“ – at 33 – and repeatedly disappointed the critics with his films.

In the new times with less strict censorship, what was expected from *Jarní povětrí* (Spring Breeze, 1961), a probe into the family background of generational morality, *Bílá oblaka* (White Clouds, 1962), a Slovak National Uprising partisan drama, and *Bez svatozáře* (Without a Halo, 1963), a story of elderly factory workers, was at least the same critical courage Ladislav Helge showed in his debut *Škola otců*. A very critically depicted story of a teacher (Karel Höger) trying to put a provincial school in order to no avail, the film was saved from censorship by the State Awards; otherwise, it would have to be censored after a festival in Banská Bystrica, at which the party intervened against the liberalization of Czechoslovak cinematography.

However, as a result of this action, the director had to dramatically change the tone of his next film, *Velká samota* (Great Solitude, 1959). Helge had to add an optimistic ending to the original, morally dismal end, in which the main hero – the agile agricultural cooperative president Souček (Július Pántik) – rightly ends up as a lonely outcast from the centre of his community.[2]

In Czechoslovakia, this was an unprecedented misinterpretation of a finished work (commonly, censorship efficiently intervened already at the screenplay stage). Helge was also fatally devastated by the fact that he wasn't allowed to direct a story about the moral decay of provincial youth called *Věž* (The Tower) written in cooperation with his favourite colleague – the assistant director Čestmír Mlíkovský.

„The fact that I had let them cut me down like this was totally devastating for my further development. It was prostitution. Pure prostitution, something I had always condemned,“ said Helge who started making films to reflect the society around him and the time he lived in. Finding out that the socialist society can't stand any

criticism, he lost the meaning of life.

„Suddenly I didn't know what to do. I made a series of films – there might be something about each of them, but I am not really proud of them.“[3] In his own eyes, the director later couldn't find any excuse for *Jarní povětrí*, *Bílá oblaka* and *Bez svatozáře* („It might be a gesture, but it's not an act.“[4])

Nevertheless, Helge's films are considered to have significantly influenced the domestic filmmaking not only in the 1950s, but also in the 1960s, to which the moral consistency of his films and attitudes significantly contributed.

As a filmmaker, Helge was never an opportunist, even though he had understanding for those who were – such as for the natural opportunist Otakar Vávra (but for example not for Jaroslav Balík during the 1970s normalization). According to Štěpán Hulík, we see in many 1960s films that the filmmakers didn't agree with the ruling ideology; however, in Helge's films he saw a genuine belief that the idea is right, and we only need to approach it the right way and free it from any deformations.

Ladislav Helge never stopped believing in the idea of socialism, even though he considered unforgivable what happened to it after the 1948 coup d'état. Even as an old man, he supported social democrats, voting for them both in 1946 and after the Velvet Revolution of 1989 (looking with displeasure at the market, „capitalist“ practices treating film as a commercial product).

### **The journey of a pro-reform communist**

From idealistic motives, Ladislav Helge joined the Communist Party after his debut *Škola otců*. However, he was surprisingly apolitical for a long time (for example practically ignoring the show trials of the 1950s). His natural social conscience was a result of his origin: a son of a tailor and a seamstress, he saw himself as a typical child of the First Czechoslovak Republic capital (however, with the exception of *Jarní povětrí*, none of Helge's films takes place there, his films looking for „model societies“ in the countryside in accordance with the novels they are based on). It was his teachers who helped the talented boy overcome his social determination and in 1940, the 13-year-old boy became a member of the Dismantling of the Radio Children's Ensemble. During the War, he couldn't escape the forced labour program. When not

admitted to the newly founded Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU) (maybe only due to his illegible handwriting, which made it impossible for the jury to assess the work he had submitted), he was increasing his interest in film as an enthusiastic amateur. Recommended by Jiří Havelka, he was employed at the (also newly founded) Czechoslovak Film Archive, where Myrtil Frída was trying (not quite successfully) to contaminate him with his love for American films.

The humorous little film *Heduš nevěrnice* (Heduš the Adulteress) he attempted to shoot during a weekend on a desperately expired material together with Frída and other friends, was allegedly inspired by the humour of the Marx Brothers; however, Helge preferred the Italian neorealism and British civilism, to the spirit of which he then remained faithful.

Finally in 1947, he achieved his dream and got to the Barrandov Studio, where he worked as an assistant director and deputy production manager, mainly with the director Jiří Krejčík. The fact that he was selecting and working with child actors led to his cooperation on the screenplay for *Dobrodružství na Zlaté zátocce* (Adventure in the Golden Bay, 1955) and to his own debut from the school environment (thanks to the direction of *Škola otců*, he was recommended to Ivan Kříž (one of his later favourite co-workers) by the director Jiří Krejčík who Kříž had approached first).

An important political initiation for the apolitical film lover Helge was the shooting of Krejčík's ideological drama *Frona* (1954), during which from the side view of an assistant director, he could confront the false image of a cheerful collectivization with the reality of a Czech village. Since then, he was heading towards doubts and criticism, which not only manifested itself in his films, but also in his engagement in different functions within the industry – in the Association of Czechoslovak Film and Television Artists FITES, co-founded by him in 1965, and the Coordination Committee of Creators' Associations chaired by him in 1968–69.

The official Ladislav Helge was a moral authority: he was vehemently standing up for the „controversial“ New Wave works and their authors. So he was going together with Miloš Forman to discussions with firemen offended by the comedy *Hoří, má panenko* (The Firemen's Ball, 1967) and standing next to the screaming author of *Sedmikrásky*

(Daisies) and *Ovoce stromů rajských jíme* (Fruit of Paradise), Věra Chytilová, he was explaining the right to artistic freedom to the working people.

The statement „It was not the authority of the Association but of the people making up the Association,“ is symptomatic of Helge's modest, energetic and non-self-centred approach to his function.[5] At the beginning of the 1970s normalization period, it was not his aim to save himself, but to allow for as many colleagues as possible to continue working at the Barrandov Studio (even at the cost of political compromises). He handed over his function in the Coordination Committee to Elmar Klos at the moment when his name started automatically generate a „no“ by the incoming normalizers to any proposal to the benefit of the filmmaking community.

At the beginning of the normalization, his own fate was not yet sealed, as he was for example offered to direct the screenplay of *Silná ruka* (Strong Arm), an adaptation of a novel by the pro-regime author Jan Kozák intended as a deliberate polemic with Jasný's *Všichni dobří rodáci* (All My Good Countrymen, 1968). With his status of being „highly dangerous to society“, he became one of the most persecuted Czechoslovak filmmakers of the normalization period though.

„The essence of our job is optimism, which you mustn't lose. I didn't believe I would find employment during the socialist normalization period and I wasn't really expecting a political change, but I was still hoping,“ admitted Helge to Petr Bilík. „I couldn't imagine I wouldn't be allowed to return to filmmaking, even though this was exactly what happened. Had I admitted this to myself, I wouldn't have been able to live.“[6]

The dismissal from the Barrandov Studio was connected with an implicit ban of independent creative activities. For two years, Helge was allowed to work in dubbing (which he hated) and for the next five years, he was working at a Smíchov post office thanks to one of his contacts. Not even the job at Laterna Magika he got and maintained with great efforts brought him satisfaction: as an operations director, he only supervised the performances. He was exhausting himself coming up with unviable projects such as the adaptation of Dostoyevsky's *Demons* (intended to be based on Andrzej Wajda's play). After the fall of communism, he wasn't able to get back to directing films. In his interest to direct Škvorecký's *Příběh inženýra lidských duší* (The

Engineer of Human Souls) he was outpaced by Jiří Menzel, however, what also played a role here was Helge's awareness that he lacked practice due to his long inactivity as a director. Neither did he find meaning in teaching at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU) nor in any of the leading functions he was offered.

Ladislav Helge has remained a moral authority, mainly for some filmmakers of the older generation (such as Karel Vachek). The fact that he refused to sign Charter 77 (and never regretted not doing so) and, by contrast, signed the Anti-Charter doesn't change matters much. Helge saw the signing of the Anti-Charter as a „great shame of his life“, even though he could justify himself by having surrendered to long-time pressure: The State Security had him spied on and threatened him; he spent hundreds of hours being interrogated. However, signing the Anti-Charter and securing himself the job in *Laterna Magika* stigmatized Helge for good in the eyes of the dissidents (the writer Karel Pecka, based on whose novel Helge was supposed to direct a communist camp story *Horečka /Fever/* at the end of the 1960s never forgave him)...

Ladislav Helge can't be „in“ if we only read his films as criticizing the former communist regime in Czechoslovakia and don't see them in more general terms – as a timeless reflection of any arrogant, manipulative, self-centred power applicable to any big fish of modern times. (It should be noted in this context that when shown on TV in the 1990s, *Velká samota* created a wave of disagreement and was blamed for spreading communist ideas.)

Helge is half-forgotten and „not really in“ also as a result of the fact that he doesn't fit into the current discourse: he was a pro-reform communist, which is a negative status followed by the public (and the media) in connection with dissidents around Václav Havel. (Nevertheless, Helge saw the polemic with Havel as a long-time one, albeit slightly ironically.[7])

Helge was a inherent pro-reform communist: to a great extent, his life is a story of a person convinced that serving the system means criticizing it. However, the socialist system, about the healthy foundations of which he was convinced until his death in January 2016, resisted any more significant criticism – also inherently. We can follow this tragic fight between the system and an individual focusing either on Helge, the

filmmaker or on Helge, the homo politicus.[8] It is obvious though than one couldn't exist without the other – and that the deviations were not a testament to threatening the stability, but to a continuous search for an „impossible“, but necessary balance.

In the history of the Czechoslovak film, whose protagonists didn't really have a chance to be morally consistent personalities due to the twists of history, it is this that makes Ladislav Helge's story unique. In this context, the quote from the end of *Škola otců* suggests itself coming from the leaving (but not resigned) hero: „There don't need to be just winners and losers, there can also be the wounded.“

### Notes:

[1] Hulík, Štěpán, *Kinematografie zapomnění. Počátky normalizace ve Filmovém studiu Barrandov (1968–1973)*. Praha: Academia, 2012, p. 350.

[2] The intensity of Helge's reaction on the imposed change can be explained by his loathing the film's main hero: „I hated this type of communist apparatchiks, these local dictators being psychologically completely the same regardless of whether they held the highest government positions or a function in a village.“ Bilík, Petr, *Ladislav Helge. Cesta za občanským filmem*. Brno: Host, 2011, p. 150.

[3] Hulík, Štěpán, p. 337.

[4] Bilík, Petr, p. 191.

[5] Hulík, Štěpán, p. 340.

[6] Bilík, Petr, p. 190.

[7] „An 18-year-old boy, Václav Havel gave me a kick in the *Květen* magazine saying after *Škola otců* that I neglect the form. But he was right. At the time, something completely different was important to me.“ Hulík, Štěpán, p. 350.

[8] How hard it is can also be seen from the ambiguous assessment of the thesis written from this perspective by Jan Rousek in 2014 (*Ladislav Helge: mezi mocí a filmem*, Ústav českých dějin, FF UK, online:

<https://is.cuni.cz/webapps/zzp/detail/167611/>).