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Death Is Called Engelchen

At the beginning of the 1960s, Jan Kačer played in the Petr Bezruč Theatre in Ostrava and occasionally hosted TV shows. Around the same time, Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos were preparing to adapt the book *Smrt si říká Engelchen* (Death Is Called Engelchen) and were looking for an unknown face to play the lead role of a wounded partisan recounting the experiences of the last few months in flashbacks.

Coming to the theatre one day, Kačer was informed by the doorman that the Barrandov Studio had called and asked him to get in touch. Kadár and Klos were looking for him. They said they had seen him hosting a show about the town of Opava on TV and they very much wanted to work with him. Even though Kačer had practically no experience in acting for film and was not familiar with the work of the two creators, he came to Prague for the rehearsals and got the role. He regretted it many times during the 132 days of filming.

Kačer had a family and a permanent engagement in Ostrava – not far from the Beskydy Mountains where the film takes place. However, the filming itself took place in the Krkonoše Mountains, supposedly because the cameraman Rudolf Milič had a cottage there. That meant that Kačer spent a third of the year travelling between from one end of the country to the other and back. Early in the morning – to the set; in the evening – back to the theatre. Day after day. He hated both the film and filming itself.

Nevertheless, the introspective war drama was screened in dozens of countries around the world and made Kačer a star both in Czechoslovakia and abroad. *Engelchen* was no less important for Kadar and Klos, though.

The film marked their return to directing after a several-year-long ban from filming which followed their fairy-tale satire *Three Wishes* (Tři přání, 1958) pointing out the ills of socialist society with a wry eye. In the 1960s, a more critical view of some

controversial phenomena became acceptable again. This was true both in film and literature.

Death Is Called Engelchen, a reportage novel by Slovak writer Ladislav Mňačko, challenges certain myths about the partisans and uncovers the slaughter of the hilltop village of Ploštiny in East Moravia where partisans often hid from the Nazis. In writing the book, narrated in the first person, Mňačko drew partly on his own experiences, as he himself took an active part in World War II as a member of the partisan resistance.

Compared to the previous works on similar topics, Mňačko's partisans are not flawless heroes fighting against absolute German evil, but people hesitating, gripped by fear, and burdened by guilt and failure. Even the narrator Volodya comes to terms with his part in the burning of Ploština. Set in two time periods, the novel bluntly describes his stay in the hospital shortly after liberation while returning to the time before he was wounded to portray the harsh realities of partisan life.

Thanks to the attractiveness of the long-suppressed topic, a subject covered neither in specialist publications nor in fiction, the book was a great success immediately after the publication of the Slovak original in 1959. *Engelchen* was translated by Zuzana Bělinová into Czech a year later, was also received very positively by both Czech readers and critics, and saw several editions. The third one (the Máj edition) was published in an impressive print run of 86,000 copies.

At the same time, the first film adaptation was made in 1960 – for television by Ivan Balaďa. It was a very faithful adaptation, preserving the language of the text and most of the main motifs. The creators of the second and more famous version chose a looser approach.

However, Kadár and Klos were not the initiators of the project. They were working on the script for *The Shop on Main Street* (Obchod na korze) at the time, a film that would actually take them three years on and off. *Engelchen* was one of two films they managed to make in the interim (the other would be the 1964 courtroom drama *The Defendant* [Obžalovaný]).

The *Filmové informace* magazine wrote about the literary script of Mňačko's novel being prepared for the adaptation in February 1961. The script was written by Miloslav Fábera, Jiří Sequens was to direct. Later, Jindřich Polák was hired as director. Yet neither of them actually took the project to the next stage. In the third round, the material was offered to Kadár and Klos, who recognised their favourite theme of the clash between the individual and society during which the morality of man is formed. At the same time, like Mňacko, they belonged to a generation marked by the war and felt the need to express themselves using the film medium.

They did not use Fáber's script, though. With the help of writer (and former partisan) Milena Honzíková, they wrote their own, with many deviations from the original piece of work (further modifications, especially the softening of some of the dramatic scenes, were requested by the Main Administration of Press Supervision). Volodya became Pavel. His love affair with the nurse was deleted. So was the partisan trial and many other events.

Instead of the external drama, the film focuses on the protagonist's thought processes and self-questioning. Paul's greatest struggle is with his inner doubts about the rightness of his actions. The narrative of the film is not descriptive, but strongly subjective, based on associations connected with certain feelings, moods, ideas.

The flashbacks are toned according to how the protagonist remembers the incidents. To convey his psychology, motivations and feverish states, the usage of montage is crucial – the flashbacks from the present to the past, where Pavel tries to make sense of what he experienced in the border mountains and forests. Instead of enjoying the intoxicating feeling of freedom and victory, he is forced by his own conscience to relive the hardships of war and search for a path to redemption.

Because of the non-chronological, deliberately obscuring way of alternating time levels, many have considered *Engelchen* influenced by the poetics of French director Alain Resnais, especially his film *Hiroshima, mon amour*. However, in an interview with A. J. Liehm, Klos claimed that he saw *Hiroshima* only after he and Kadar had finished writing the script.

The authors did not go against conventions just when thinking through the modernist dramatic construction, which resembles a complex of many overlapping plots and ideas. The cinematographer Rudolf Milíč used complex camera rides, a transfocator, in-frame editing, great depth of field, and alternating objective bird's-eye views with subjective shots with a handheld camera. There are only a few scenes shot conventionally in the film, even when it comes to interior dialogues between two characters.

The tonally contrasting sequences are separated by a sharp, arrhythmic cut. The film moves from action to melancholic contemplation, from intimate conversation to a crowd scene with multi-headed extras. In terms of style, the emphasis is on expressiveness as well, drawing the audience into the story and conveying Pavel's emotions and thoughts.

The complicated shots were carefully prepared in advance and Kadár and Klos paid attention to every detail. They were famous for the one shot a day method. Sometimes they shot nothing all day. This was also the reason why the filming seemed endless to Kačer. Moreover, they filmed in difficult natural conditions, in mud, fog, rain. The whole production took 16 months. The first working copy was made in February 1963.

The critics perceived a significant formal shift from the previous, more formally conservative films by Kadár and Klos. They appreciated the non-schematic approach to war themes, without clearly positive or negative characters, and the fact that the directors did not choose the path of a realistic depiction of events, but a stylized subjective narrative.

"The overall impression that the film evokes is a sense of multiplicity of content and coherence of thought," Jaroslav Boček praised in *Kulturní tvorba*. Jan Žalman admired "the certainty with which Kadár and Klos managed to balance the action and reflection parts of the film". The critics also positively evaluated Milíč's cinematography, most of the actors' performances, and Zdeněk Liška's music which added both emphasis and pathos to the scenes.

The suggestive and innovative partisan drama was also recognized at the third Moscow International Film Festival where it won the Gold Medal in 1963. It was then that Jan Kačer realised that thanks to the film he hated he was famous not only in

Czechoslovakia but also abroad.

The actor's initial distaste gradually turned into fascination. Already while watching the daily chores, he began to admire the possibilities of the film medium, to wonder what a certain expression conveys. The great detail, the getting close to the audience, would later become the basis of his work as an actor and director at Činoherní klub (the Drama Club). And in the role of Pavel, he adopted another principle that he would stick to throughout his career – when you have something to say, which Kadár and Klos undoubtedly had in *Engelchen*, good acting does not require many words or strained emotions.

Death Is Called Engelchen (Smrt si říká Engelchen, Czechoslovakia 1963), director and script: Ján Kadár, Elmar Klos, cinematography: Rudolf Milič, music: Zdeněk Liška, cast: Jan Kačer, Eva Poláková, Martin Růžek, Blažena Holišová, Pavel Bártl, Ezard Haußmann, Otto Lackovič, Vlado Müller, Oľga Adamčíková, Miroslav Macháček, and others. Barrandov Film Studio, 129 min.

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