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Riders of the Sky

“Perhaps with *Riders of the Sky*, we will repay at least something to those who fought and died for us in England and who truly loved their nation,” director Jindřich Polák hoped in the press at the end of the 1960s.^[1] He referred to his film about Czechoslovak airmen in the service of the RAF as a “small memorial”, not a monument, due to the modest production costs. His *Riders of the Sky* (Nebeští jezdci) begins with the tombstones of fallen heroes in the military cemetery at Brockwood, England. In the audio flashbacks, we hear the voices of the men the film is about to tell the story of. It is precisely by giving the names on the graves specific voices and faces, bringing them back to life and saving them from the oblivion to which they were condemned during Communist totalitarianism, that Polák’s adaptation of the novel of the same name is particularly valuable.

Despite the “memorial” framing, however, *Riders of the Sky* is not a statuesque, pathetic work. They do not pay homage to the aviators by putting them on a pedestal, making them untouchable icons. Rather, they show them in their authentic, tragicomic dimensions as a bunch of sometimes foolish and irresponsible guys enjoying life. The scenes set in the cockpit of the Wellington bomber (a replica of which was made at Aero Vodochody by modifying a Soviet Lisunov Li-2), when the heroes return fire from German fighters, form a minor part of the film. Its centre of gravity is a look into the pilots’ private lives, revealing their emotional backgrounds and subjective experiences. The film takes place mostly on the ground, during pheasant hunting and resting at the air base, in the infirmary or in the pubs, where even during night raids, they drink beer, smoke, dance and flirt with the local girls.

Like other directors of the 1960s, Menzel, Kachyňa or Kadár and Klos, Polák captured the Second World War without glorifying myths and heroic clichés. And like his colleagues, he drew on the harshly realistic literary subject matter of an author who had direct experience of war. Former RAF 311 Squadron gunner Richard Husmann had

been on disability retirement since 1964 and made his living writing and translating. He published his debut novel, *Riders of the Sky*, as well as all his subsequent books, under the pseudonym Filip Jánský. In describing the fate of a young Czech airman in Great Britain, he was inspired not only by his own experiences but also by the story of Group Captain František Truhlář, a gunner in the 311th Bomber Squadron and the 312th Fighter Squadron of the RAF.

The real historical events are related by Husmann through the fictional crew of the 276th Bomber Squadron. It consists of a couple of Englishmen, a Canadian telegrapher, and three Czechoslovaks. The Slovak captain Pavel Kolář is played by Svatopluk Matyáš, while the Czech gunners, aptly nicknamed Študent (Student) and Prcek (Shorty), are played by Jan Bednář and Jiří Hrzán. The book portrays the friendship of the contrasting protagonists, the carefree Prcek and the conscientious Študent, as well as their flighty relationships with women – especially Študent's romance with Patricie from the Women's Auxiliary Corps of the Air Force. The narrative picks up in intensity during the raids on German territory. During one of them, Študent suffers spinal injuries and burns. After recovering, however, he is ready to rejoin the crew and once again deploy his life in combat against Luftwaffe fighters.

Husmann's novel was published in book form in 1964 and a year later in a sequel in the *Svobodné slovo* daily. The readership response was extraordinary. Apart from the distinctive characters and the vivid style with the immediate depiction of experiences, this can be attributed to the subject itself, which had not been (and could not have been) treated to such an extent until then, either professionally or in prose. One of the enthusiastic readers of *Riders of the Sky*, even back when it existed only in manuscript form, was Jindřich Polák, the hitmaker of Czech cinema. Apart from the long tabooed participation of Czechoslovak airmen in the RAF, he was also tempted by the opportunity to try out another spectator-attractive genre after western (*Death in the Saddle* [Smrt v sedle]), crime (*The Fifth Division* [Páté oddělení]) and science fiction (*Ikarie XB 1*) – a war film with battle scenes. Lots of movement, little lyricism, just as he liked it.

Despite Polák's belief that the material needed to be adapted for film, the film version of *Riders of the Sky* was not easy to make. The collaboration between Polák, Husmann and later screenwriter Zdeněk Mahler resulted in three versions of the script over the

course of three years. “We got permission several times, we got ban several times, and the bans always prevailed by one during those three years,” Polák explained the genesis in an interview with Galina Kopaněva.^[2] At one point, when the project had already been approved by Jiří Hendrych, the secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia’s Central Committee, it ran into the Main Political Administration of the Czechoslovak Army, which strictly scrutinised every film from the army environment.

When the film was finally approved for production, after many modifications and negotiations, Polák studied the relevant historical literature and met with many Western airmen. Thus, he did not rely solely on Husmann’s source material, although the film is not strikingly different from it in its construction. For the sake of narrative fluency, only some subplots were omitted, such as the Študent’s amorous adventure with the nurse. The focalization of the narrative is different. Husmann wrote in their form. The film is of a more objective nature since not all the events are treated from the Študent’s point of view. “This made its view broader and more general; instead of a personal account, which is close to a documentary, the film had to resort to an epic description. In other words, it made – theoretically speaking – whole parts of the book more fictional,” Gustav Franci wrote about this creative choice.^[3]

The shooting phase was equally challenging. Such a narrative spectacle, taking place entirely abroad and partly in the air, was unprecedented in Czechoslovakia.

Nevertheless, under the direction of the creative group Šebor–Bor, self-willed Polák embarked on the production journey without having secured any offer of a foreign co-production. However, no original English aircraft had survived on our territory. Thanks to the contacts of Jiří Šebor, a reserve military pilot, it was possible to arrange at least a loan of two aircraft from the Czechoslovak army which could be converted into Wellingtons. These were filmed at the airfields in Klecany and Vodochody. The country ball was filmed in the Ořechovka cinema, and the maternity hospital U Apolináře became a British military infirmary for the film purposes. The final scenes at sea were shot during May and June 1968 at Cape Arkona in Rügen, Germany.

Cinematographer Jan Němeček chose a classic black-and-white format for *Riders of the Sky* so that editor Josef Dobřichovský could seamlessly incorporate archival material into the footage. Thanks to Myrtil Frída from the Film Archive, these were

secured from both domestic and English film collections. According to Polák's recollections, it was a special type of barter. The Czechoslovak archive provided the English colleagues with a rare footage from the Protectorate in exchange for their footage of aerial duels. "I spent a week at the editing table in the London museum. I was looking at the authentic footage, but mainly I needed the air duels. I also made up the submarine at the end and I knew I would need shots with different directions so that it could be edited," Polák explained in an interview with Eva Strusková.^[4]

Thus, all scenes of air attacks were either filmed with model aircraft or were excerpts from British documentaries such as *Target for Tonight* (1941), on loan from London's Imperial War Museum. The filmmakers also "borrowed" actors for the English-speaking characters from Britain. Tommy, the radio operator, is played by Winston Chrislock, who was studying in Prague at the time. Other foreign actors were secured despite the limited budget thanks to the overseas contacts of Vojtěch Holý, who plays navigator George, and Sylva Langová, who married an Englishman in 1948. Langová also helped the filmmakers with dialogues and reconstructing the English facts as accurately as possible. Another expert advisor was Joyce Kadečková, who worked at the British Air, Navy and Land Forces Headquarters during the war.

Thanks to the talent and enthusiasm of the people involved, Polák actually managed to make a film about planes without planes, about England without England, in the 42 days of filming in spartan conditions. All that remained was to edit the footage and record the music. In composing it, the leading Czech composer Evžen Illín used, among other things, the country song motif of Stan Jones' *Ghost Riders in the Sky*, which was known in Czechoslovakia after the war as *Nebeští jezdci – Riders in the Sky*. However, the post-synchronization of music was completed on 21 August 1968. Soviet tanks invaded Czechoslovakia, Evžen Illín emigrated to Switzerland, and Polák had legitimate doubts whether his contribution to the rehabilitation of Czech and Slovak airmen in the service of the RAF would ever reach the cinemas.

The film, which generally avoids political innuendo and can be enjoyed as a genre spectacle, was not banned in the end. The première took place at the Jas cinema in Kolín on the national holiday of 28 October 1968. The fact that *Riders in the Sky* "repaid a debt" to those who had fought against fascism in the West was appreciated even by those critics who had various reservations about the film. These ranged from

the lack of evocative atmosphere, which the book was said to have excelled at, and the schematic and uneven pacing to the amateurish treatment of the soundscape at the film's opening. On the other hand, the civil handwriting was appreciated since the reviewers saw similarities with the British Free Cinema movement in it, and the choice and interplay of actors in major and minor roles was appraised as well.

Despite rumours to the contrary, *Riders in the Sky* did not end up in a vault even during the normalisation. Although they were not among the most popular works and were shown only sporadically in cinemas, they remained in the catalogue of the Central Film Rental Office even during the normalisation era. However, it was not until after November 1989 that Polák's cinematography reached its peak. In the eyes of many viewers, it was not overshadowed even by the thematically related *Dark Blue World* (Tmavomodrý svět), shot by Jan Svěrák in noticeably more generous conditions and co-produced by many European countries.

Riders of the Sky (Nebeští jezdci, Czechoslovakia 1968), director: Jindřich Polák, script: Filip Jánský, Zdeněk Mahler, Jindřich Polák, cinematography: Jan Němeček, music: Evžen Illín, cast: Jiří Bednář, Jiří Hrzán, Svatopluk Matyáš, Elsie Randolph, Joan Seton, Charles Cameron, Jana Nováková, Gunter Schoß, Winston Chrislock, Vojtěch Holý, and others. Barrandov Film Studio, 95 min.

Bibliography:

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Miloš Fiala, Nebeští jezdci aneb problém přepisu. *Rudé právo* 21/11/1968, p. 5.

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Ladislav Kapek, Třináct jarních známostí. *Kino* 23, 1968, no. 10 (16/05), 1968, p. 9.

Galina Kopaněva, Nezpronevřit se sám sobě. *Film a doba* 15, 1969, no. 10, p. 543–546.

Ladislav Tunys, Natáčí se film Nebeští jezdci. *Československý voják* (27/04) 1968, p. 48–51.

Notes:

[1] Ladislav Kapek, Třináct jarních známostí. *Kino* 23, 1968, no. 10, (16/05), p. 9.

[2] Galina Kopaněva, Nezpronevřit se sám sobě. *Film a doba* 15, 1969, no. 10, p. 543.

[3] Gustav Franci, Mezi nebem a zemí. *Film a doba* 15, 1969, no. 3, p. 149.

[4] Eva Strusková. Byl jsem maximalista. Rozhovor s Jindřichem Polákem o režii žánrových filmů. *Filmovyprehled.cz*. Available at:
<<https://www.filmovyprehled.cz/cs/revue/detail/byl-jsem-maximalista-rozhovor-s-jindrichem-polakem-o-rezii-zanrovych-filmu>> [cited on 22/04/2025]