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Philosophical Attitudes of Vladimír Mináč in the Context of the Philosophy of the History of the Slovak Nation

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ABSTRACT

Vladimír Mináč is one of the most important Slovak writers, essayists, participants of the antifascist Slovak National Uprising (arrested and taken to Mauthausen concentration camp and later to Dachau), and cultural figures of the 20th century. Despite the fact that he is a relatively well-known figure in Slovakia, and also thanks to the fact that he was the long-term chairman of Slovak Matica, the oldest cultural institution, since his works have not been translated, in the international context he is an unknown author. Mináč also became famous for his literary treatment of the Slovak National Uprising and his historical-philosophical treatment of this historical event. The most significant influence of his philosophy was gained by the essay collection *Dúchanie do pahrieb* (eng. *Blowing into the Embers*), which in the 1960s opened a discussion about the plebeian nature of Slovak history (especially for a review of the revolutionary events in 1848 and the role of the Štúr's group in Slovak history). The presented study analyses his philosophical concept for the first time in an international context. The aim of the study is to present to the world his basic philosophical ideas on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of his birth, for which several events have been organised in 2022. The text was created in collaboration between a philosopher and a historian.

Keywords: Vladimír Mináč; philosophy of history; Slovak literature; social and political philosophy; Slovak utopianism; Štúr's group; DAV

INTRODUCTION

Vladimír Mináč belongs to the remarkable personalities of the 20th century. Despite his large publishing activity, he is an unknown topic for interdisciplinary research in the international context, also because his works have not been translated. The ambition of the presented study is to present the foreign reader with at least the basic features of his philosophical attitudes.

Where is the border between philosophy and literature, philosophy and journalism, philosophy and politics, philosophy and personal life attitude? Is philosophy only an academic discipline or is philosophy all around us? And above all, when does a writer become a philosopher? Answering this question is not easy. The writer, as well as the philosopher, works with the word. Vladimír Mináč was one of those people who *thought about the world and he tried to understand it*, which clearly puts him in the realm of philosophy. Mináč said (during his speech in 1984) that *"the word must have the fairy-tale power of changeability and ubiquity; to be a dagger where a dagger is needed and must be a flower where a flower is needed..."* (Mináč 1984).

Although Vladimír Mináč did not leave behind a philosophical treatise like Ludwig Wittgenstein or Immanuel Kant, however, he left behind articles and books in which the philosophy can be reconstructed his original philosophical views. The authors of the *Encyclopedia of Slovak Writers* also remind us that Mináč created his own philosophy, *a philosophy of action that acts in the direction of historical and social progress, which only proves the validity of researching Mináč's work as a unique piece of literature with philosophical overlap* (Rosenbaum 1984).

The aim of the work will be the reconstruction of Vladimír Mináč's the reconstruction of the philosophical attitudes based on his prose/novels (Mináč 1947, Mináč 1961), essays or politically oriented texts (Mináč 1970, Mináč 1974, Mináč 1992, Mináč 1993), film scripts, literary criticism, interviews and other works. Vladimír Mináč's literary and philosophical reflection is only partial. They wrote about Mináč's work in the past Július Noge (before 1989) (See: Noge 1962) and Pavol Matejovič (after 1989) (See: Matejovič, 2014) and encyclopedias compilers Milan Pišút (Pišút 1984) and Karol Rosenbaum (Rosenbaum 1984).¹

LIFE OF VLADIMÍR MINÁČ

Vladimír Mináč was born on August 10, 1922 in Klenovec to a craftsman-farmer family in the Gemer-Malohont region². Mináč was strongly influenced by the environment from which he came, both by the personalities of the national-lutheran movement of the 19th century (Daxner, Francisci), and by nature, which determined his Rousseauian/pro-rural and environmental axiological attitudes. In the years 1940s he studied Slovak and German language at the Faculty of Arts of the Slovak University in Bratislava. At that time, he joined the Slovak National Uprising, which was the Slovak anti-fascist response to the oppression of Nazi Germany. However, on New Year's Eve, the village (where he fought) was surrounded by an SS regiment and Mináč was captured. He was subsequently interned in Mauthausen and Dachau concentration camps³.

A hundred thousand people were murdered in Mauthausen, but Mináč survived. After the war, he worked as an editor in the antifascist periodical *Bojovník* (eng. *Fighter*) later *Obrana ľudu* (eng. *Defense of the People*), then he was the secretary of the Slovak section of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers, at the same time he was the editor-in-chief

¹ In 2022, Slovak Matica and related institutions organized a conference where Mináč's work was analyzed by scientists and writers (P. Parenička, J. Lomenčík, Z. Pavelcová, M. Gešper, J. Leikert, E. Chmelár, P. Weiss, etc.). The conference resulted in a book, which is also the basis for this study (See more: Gešper, Perný 2023).

² In the region where they were born the Founding Fathers of Slovak political nation like Jánko Francisci-Rimavský (1822 – 1905), the first captain of Slovak volunteers in 1848/1849 and writer Štefan Marko Daxner (1822 – 1892), the initiator of the first Slovak political documents (like Memorandum of the Slovak nation) in the 19th century, but also the important diplomat and minister Vladimír Clementis (1902 – 1952).

³ According to the memorials, he never spoke about this part of his life, he expressed it himself: *"...I can't remember the concentration camps, simply, I didn't swallow it. I've always avoided thinking about it in order to preserve some human commodity, some human capability..."* (Slovak literature 2007: 243).

of *Kultúrny život* (eng. *Cultural life*), the head of the script department of Czechoslovak Film and for a short time also the editor-in-chief of *Slovak views*. In the 1950s, he was again threatened with persecution, as part of the Slovak left-wing intelligentsia was accused of „bourgeois nationalism“⁴ in fabricated trials for their pro-national attitudes (he avoided persecution only because he did not hold a significant political position). After he was removed from the position of the chairman of the Slovak Literary Fund, he had the opportunity to become the chairman of the oldest Slovak national-cultural institution Slovak Matica⁵. After taking office, Vladimír Mináč was primarily responsible for the completion of the third headquarters building in Hostihor (today the Slovak National Library⁶). Mináč (in Matica) also achieved that he employed politically-excluded personalities (dissidents, uncomfortable authors, censored authors). In 1988, he supported the ecological initiative "Bratislava Loud". After 1989, Mináč was persecuted again – he was fired from Matica, despite the fact that he contributed to the establishment of the independent Slovak Republic by supporting the Congress of Slovak Intelligence. In the years 1990–1992, he was a member of the Federal Assembly for the SDE. Even after 1989, he published books and commented on social events. He died on October 25, 1996 in Bratislava. In 1998, Vladimír Mináč was awarded Order of Ľudovít Štúr, but he is still waiting for real social rehabilitation (For full biography see more; Perný, Žgrada 2022).

MINÁČ'S WORK

After the war, when he worked in the editorial office of the *Obrana ľudu*, as he states in his memoirs, "he had a typewriter at hand", that's when they announced a competition for prose from the Uprising, he always sat down at the typewriter in the morning and wrote his three or four pages. That's how his famous literary work *Smrť chodí po horách* (eng. *Death Walks on the Mountains*) (Mináč 1950) was written. After finishing the novel, it had 300 pages, which seemed a lot to Mináč, and he submitted the second half to the competition. The work captures the feelings and experiences of a young intellectual who in the Uprising recognized the greatness and power of progressive thought, human cohesion, the reviving power of the active fight against fascism, against evil, and violence, and in the concentration camp saw the bottom of human existence.

The first philosophical positions showing the moral dimension of the Uprising can be found already in this novel. In his literary works, Mináč also criticized the post-war development in the context of schematism, bureaucratism and simplified building slogans, for which he got into trouble. *The Generácia* (eng. *The Generation*) (Mináč 1969) novel trilogy - about the last four months of the Slovak State, the Slovak National Uprising and the post-war period - is described by the authors of the *Encyclopedia of*

⁴ The trial of bourgeois nationalists, also trial of Gustáv Husák and Novomeský, Okáli, Clementis and others, was a show trial of high Slovak politicians). The conflict between the dogmatic functionaries of the Communist Party in Prague and the functionaries in Slovakia, who insisted on a certain autonomy, dates back to the 1920s. In 1924, some Slovak representatives of the cultural avantgarde, such as Vladimír Clementis, Daniel Okáli, Ladislav Novomeský, Andrej Sirácky, Ján Poničan and others, founded the DAV magazine and also formed the DAV group. The earlier disputes were later used to push back the "disruptive group of bourgeois nationalists" in Slovakia. Some of the criticism began before 1948, and in the early 1950s some members like Clementis were dismissed from their posts and later executed.

⁵ Matica slovenská (en. Slovak Matica; founded in 1863, prohibited 1875 and revived in 1919) is the oldest Slovak national, cultural and scientific organization. The headquarters of Slovak Matica is the town of Martin as the center of the national culture of Slovaks. Slovak Matica is a public institution that operates as a national scientific and cultural centre. Slovak Matica works to develop and protect the national rights, identity, and development of Slovak culture and the Slovak nation.

⁶ The institutional component of Slovak Matica fulfilled the function of the Slovak National Library, and at the same time methodically managed district libraries throughout Slovakia.

Slovak Writers (Rosenbaum 1984) as the culmination of Mináč's prose. The satire *Výrobca šastia* (eng. *Happiness-maker*), about František Ojbaba's three dreams, criticizes the petty bourgeoisie, bureaucracy and the desire to manipulate. Mináč notes that the petty bourgeoisie did not disappear with the new socialist society, but was transformed into a new form. Mináč worked as the head of the screenwriting department of the Czechoslovak State Film and wrote the script for one of the most famous Slovak wartime film for Pavol Bielik, *Captain Dabač* (1959). He gave up writing novels and continued to write essays in the 1960s, in which he develops his philosophical positions.

In his famous work *Dúchanie do pahrieb* (eng. *Blowing into the Embers*), he asks the fundamental question of what is history and what is a nation without history. According to Mináč, young nations were looking for the right to their authority, their meaning, and they were looking for it precisely in history. As the authors of the *Encyclopedia of Slovak Writers* (Rosenbaum, 1984) aptly write, Mináč tries to capture the essence, direction, problems and contradictions of Slovak life in the 19th century through the characters of Daxner, Francisci and Bakulíny (and their relations with Štúr and Hurban). The Slovak nation has the continuity of the plebeian nation in its ancestors and past: "*Historically we are plebeian – I don't know what modern nation is as pure plebeian as we are*" (Mináč 2013, p. 23). In *Collected disputes of Jozef Miloslav Hurban* (Mináč 1974), Mináč chooses the character of Hurban as a man of action, a politician who promoted progressive ideas throughout national and church life. The book is a continuation of the essays on the meaning of Slovak history, and its qualities are equal to *Blowing into the Embers*.

He approaches the philosophy of Karl Marx in the context of the philosophy of history in such a way that, although he adopted his Hegelian (dialectical) methodology in relation to history (history leads to social progress), he also points out that Marx could not understand the Slovak movement, as he looked at it from a distance. Mináč was not originally a Marxist, and he began to read Marxism itself only later in order to specifically transform it into his own thinking. According to Mináč, because of Marxism it was not attractive to talk about the nation, its destinies, history and culture, and even dangerous, for which the "*Feldvébels⁷ of Marxism*" were to blame, whose nostrils are accustomed and adapted to suspicion in the same way as a dog's snout is adapted to search for clues, which indirectly he pointed to dogmatic Marxists, mostly associated with the orthodox interpretation of Marxism, which manifested itself in both schematism. Mináč (by criticizing the orthodox interpretation of Marx) followed up on Ladislav Novomeský and his bold revision of Marx's attitudes towards the Slovak revolution, which he presented first in the essay *Marx and the Slovak Nation*, later in the journal DAV, then by re-interpreting Slavic mutuality to the post-war geopolitical situation and finally in the texts on the **U**prising of 1848-1849, where he reevaluates both the historical role of Kossuth and Marx's interpretation of the Slavic "reactionary" in 1848.

Mináč himself acknowledged Novomeský, in the book *Povstanie* (Mináč 1986) and in his book *Portraits* (Mináč 1986), he appreciates them and considers them the successors of the Štúr's group, and adds that their attitudes shaped our past as well as the present: "*...that was the best thing that arose on Slovakia since the Štúr's group generation. And it was and is "only" about continuing this tradition of the highest quality.*" (Mináč 1986: 12). After 1989, Mináč published the books *Návraty k prevratu* (*Returns to the Coup*; Mináč 1993), *Odkiaľ a kam Slováci* (*From where and where Slovaks*; Mináč 1993) and a series of interviews such as *Hovory M* (*Talks M*) (Mináč 1994) and *Paradiso* (Mináč 1998). In this books, Mináč analyzed the current political situation with a philosophical-essayist overlap (and comments on social events),

⁷ Mináč used the slang word *feldvéb* in a parodic context of guardians of ideological purity.

criticizes the development of culture after 1989, opposes consumerism. Mináč's brilliant essay writing is still waiting to be discovered and is waiting for a detailed analysis.

PHILOSOPHY OF SLOVAK HISTORY IN MINÁČ'S WORK

“Not the power that is fleeting, but the spirit that continuance: this is our path, our purpose, our destiny” – Vladimír Mináč

Mináč was especially famous for his work *Dúchanie do pahrieb* (Mináč 1970, Mináč 2014), but even before that he wrote the work *Paradoxy* (Mináč 1966) (the idea that relationships are the destiny of man dominates here, i.e., neither a person nor a nation can be interpreted outside of social and historical relations) and *Dúchanie* was followed up by *Collected disputes of Jozef Miloslav Hurban* (Mináč 1974). He asks the fundamental question of what is history and what is a nation without history. According to Mináč, *young nations were looking for the right to their authority, their meaning, and they were looking for it precisely in history* (Mináč 2014: 116). Mináč approaches history realistically and is aware of the limits that accompanied attempts at national and social emancipation. He approaches the personalities of history with understanding and often with an existentialist, psychological overlap between the subjective (personal life, love, solitude, feelings) and the objective (place of the personality in history). He reminds that Slovak politics has always not been independent: *“...it did not create changes, it reacted to them. Its concepts are defensive; its movement is a counter-movement: a small nation among the interests of large nations...”* (Mináč 2014, p. 16).

According to objective historical standards, it is meaningless, because objective historical standards are the exclusive property of great nations. According to Mináč, the history of the Slovak nation is connected with a plebeian essence. Everyday misery and the need to devote all one's strength to an almost hopeless cause is a certain moral greatness of the nation. He adds that our national intelligence was few and poor, oppositional, beaten and power, fame or wealth was nowhere in sight. However, despite every defeat, according to Mináč, we became stronger and this unstoppable rise is the iron logic of the development of modern nations. It is the movement that is in relation with other nations, with which it forms the work of civilization, that is the meaning of the nation.

According to Mináč, history can have meaning only if it has a *higher goal in humanism and social justice*, and *social justice* is the meaning of both national history and the history of humanity. Mináč philosophically followed the DAV generation (intellectuals and artists like Novomeský, Clementis, Husák, Okáli) (Perný, 2022). With his literary work, he opposed the schematism and dogmatism of the 1950s and supported Dubček's reform wing in the 1960s movements. In Mináč's essays, we find that the national must go hand in hand with the social, and cooperation between nations must presuppose their historical recognition. And above all is the supreme idea of social justice and brotherhood among nations. In a humanistic spirit, he measured the value of humanity according to the development of culture, the development of mutual human understanding. He built the Slovak philosophy of history on two uprisings of two centuries, while he considers the Slovak National Uprising – also under the influence of Novomeský's essays (Novomeský 1992) – to be the culmination of Slovak national self-awareness, which began with the revolution in 1848. The essay *Uprising* is the completion of the concepts he developed in two previous books and he wrote it for the 30th anniversary of the Slovak National Uprising. Mináč writes that it was with the nationwide uprising that *“the Slovak nation carried out its greatest, most significant historical act”*. (Mináč 1982, p. 242).

AXIOLOGICAL VIEWS AND THE AIM OF CULTURE IN MINÁČ'S WORK

Mináč's social sensibility comes from on the one hand, from the fact that he grew up in a poor family, which was affected by the consequences of the economic crisis and the national feeling is in turn connected with the love for his native region. Backwardness with nature, idealization of rural artisans and with the region, that is a remarkable phenomenon of Mináč's patriotism.

In the times when he was the chairman of Slovak Matica, Mináč defined the meaning of culture (its creation, moral message and its institutions) in existence/persistence over time. In the background of time, you can see an accelerated movement (and only persistence alone gives it meaning. According to Mináč, the Matica Slovak Institution is also an example of such persistence in time. What is real can be seen in its duration – a nationwide movement as a projection background (Mináč 1988).

Mináč's attitudes are predominantly ascetic (sometimes even Tolstoy or Fromm), anti-consumer, anti-capitalist. According to Mináč, *"the rule of (material) things has also reached us"*, and if *"things outgrow ideas, they threaten the free life of a person"* (Mináč 1971). The origin of evil, in Rousseau's spirit, reminds us that it comes from property. According to Mináč, society should be in solidarity with those who did not get rich. He emphasizes criticism and self-criticism: *"No one can climb the podium and talk about cleanliness if their feet are dirty... Only the clean can talk about the clean..."* (Mináč 1971). Mináč, however (unlike the radical Rousseauians), highlights the cultural advancement, education and upbringing of a person through quality literature.

Critically adds that television came to Slovak conditions before the nation learned to read. However, according to Mináč, happiness does not rest there in material surplus. He considers not accumulating property (not getting rich) as a virtue (even in Balzac he finds impoverishment as a punishment for getting rich). According to Mináč, consumerism leads the way to the moral degradation of man. In Hviezdoslav's⁸ works and other Slovak poets he finds that the poor people are right and adds that not all the richer have stolen *"from the common cash registers"* and some really *"made it with their own hands"*, so it cannot be fought against the enrichment of the nation, but against the ways in which individuals became rich. The society would it should have been in solidarity with those who did not get rich. Mináč's attitudes towards nature reveal his philosophical views when he says that he does *"not see the point in living, but in the fact that life has meaning if a person does something constantly he discovers"* what he compared to walks associated with *"picking mushrooms in the forest"* (Mináč 1971).

Mináč also commented on the issue of freedom in context democratic system. Individual freedom is subject to what is convenient for public and therefore must obey both written and unwritten laws and conventions, which are the limits that freedom runs into. According to Mináč, freedom is a space that is constantly lost she is fighting and it is important that her options are protected by the Constitution. Specifically „Slovak freedom“ is a fight for one's own responsibility and the idea of own future of the Slovakia, which is also associated with civic self-confidence and a higher degree of cultural realizations (Mináč, 2014)

We can find philosophy in essays, literary works, songs, poetry, folk literature, but also in the everyday life of a person. Even in literary works, axiological (ethical, aesthetic, economic...), gnoseological, semiotic, theological, anthropological or socio-philosophical aspects can be reconstructed, and finally, Vladimir Mináč can be understood as a

⁸ Slovak anti-war poet.

philosopher in the same way and same context (in Slovak culture) as writers such as Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Sartre or Camus.

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