

Anyone Can Be a Narrator: Possibilities of Hasidic Storytelling in the Work of Jiří Mordechaj Langer

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SYNOPSIS

This study aims to characterise the ways in which Hasidic storytelling is adapted in Jiří Langer's prose work *Devět bran* (Nine Gates). The main emphasis is on his manner of creating an illusion of 'skaz', which the author, in agreement with Hana Kosáková's and Boris Eikhnenbaum's work, understands as a narrative form, imitating spontaneous verbal utterance. The following interpretation shows two major principles of Jiří Langer's narrative strategy of anonymising the narrator, and of illusive speech: Firstly, the conscious usage of verbal material as if with artlessness and ease, using hidden rhythmisation, language deformation and playfulness. Secondly, he employs storytelling in everyday Hasidic life, convincing the reader of the narrator's own insignificance.

KEYWORDS

Jiří Mordechaj Langer; *Nine Gates to the Chasidic Mysteries* (*Devět bran. Chasidů tajemství*); Czech prose; Hassidic legends; storytelling; skaz.

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One of the disciples was reproached by the saint of Lublin with not pronouncing the prayers properly; the saint said he 'swallowed' them.

'I swallow them because they're sweeter than honey,' said the cunning fellow by way of excuse.

'Do you think I don't find the taste of the words just as sweet as you do? Yet I don't swallow them.'

Jiří Langer (1961, p. 185)

DOWN PATHS OF MISUNDERSTANDING

In the interpretative part of her book *Podoby skazu. K jedné linii moderní prozaické tvorby* (The Images of 'Skaz': One Approach to Modern Prosaic Writing), Hana Kosáková examines 'skaz' (narration imitating spontaneous verbal utterance), performativity, and scenic stylisation in a number of specific prose texts. She introduces the chapter



dedicated to Nikolai Leskov's *The Enchanted Wanderer* with a reflection upon the unfavourable reception given to Leskov's prose work *Levsha* (The Steel Flea) published in 1881: Because of the preface, in which Leskov set the story within an actual communicative/narrative situation, the book met with a wave of criticism, in which the author was accused of 'mere stenography', 're-translation' and even fraud. Leskov responded to this with the statement that the character of the original narrator of the *skaz* was in fact a work of fiction, just as was the narration itself. In subsequent editions he omitted the (fictional) preface about where, when and from whom he had heard the story (Kosáková 2019, pp. 114-115).

A similarly uncomprehending reception can be observed also in reviews dedicated to the remarkable work of literature *Devět bran. Chasidů tajemství* (Nine Gates to the Chassidic Mysteries, 1937), in which Jiří Mordechaj Langer, a Jewish writer, mystic and intellectual, depicts a Hasidic community via the means of narrated stories — Hasidic legends.

Although Benjamin Jedlička in the newspaper *Lidové noviny* accentuates the dramatic moment of the publication itself in the shadow of Hitler's anti-Semitism and the impending war, he assesses the book primarily as a religious rather than an artistic work:

There is no independent creative artistic, stylistic and novelistic aspiration here. Everything has its origin not in the author's imagination, but in the exuberant world of the legends and narration of the Jewish worlds of the last century. Jiří Langer merely expertly and enthusiastically interprets all of this, but does not remould them into independent works of art (Jedlička 1938, p. 5).

Jedlička then entirely unequivocally summarises his impressions in the statement that Jiří Langer 'is a broadcaster and servant, not a narrator or creator, he is like one of a large number' (ibid.).

In a similar spirit, Karel Sezima, in a review for *Lumír*, acknowledges that goal of the author of *Devět bran* was most probably not merely 'instructive', and that he instilled within his text a certain 'charming literary fashion', but nevertheless takes aim at the core of the work with the following questions: 'But will he never aspire to create an independent work of art from this rich and original resource of material? And to imprint upon it an impression of his own character in a more active and rounded form than mere passive reproduction, however virtuosos?' (Sezima 1937, p. 515).

The most perceptive review of Langer's book is provided by Irma Poláková in *Židovské zprávy*. Not only does she notice the stylisation of Langer's own preface into the form of a Hasidic narrative, but she also notes the accompanying motif of a journey through the individual gates, as well as the philosophical distinctiveness of the author's conception of Hasidism and the original form of the narrative delivery, including the poetic introductions before each chapter. She accentuates the quality of *Devět bran* in comparison with Martin Buber's *Chasidské povídky* (Tales of the Hasidim), a translation of which by O. F. Babler by coincidence was also published in 1937. However, Poláková regards the decisive advantage of Langer's book as consisting not in its linguistic or other aesthetic unorthodoxy or distinctiveness, but in the fact that 'Buber gathered together Hasidic legends and aphorisms, whereas Langer

listened to them in the environment in which they originated. Buber deserves credit for revealing the life of the Hasidim to us; Jiří Langer actually lived the life of the Hasidim' (Poláková 1937, p. 5).

After 1937 a tragic fate awaited both Jiří Langer and his book. Langer died in 1943 in the mandate territory of Palestine from severe illnesses caused by hardships on his journey from Europe. During the Nazi occupation, *Devět bran* was condemned as degenerate art, and during the course of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia was published only in 1965 (Pěkný 1990, p. 16). The life and work of Jiří Langer, as well as the broader contexts of the literary and social reception of the Hasidic movement from the time, are recorded in detail by Denisa G. Goldmannová in her study *Osamělé hlasy chasidismu a východního židovství v Praze* (The Solitary Voices of Hasidism and Eastern Jewry in Prague, Goldmannová 2016, pp. 199–232).

From the reception of the time there thus remained (with few exceptions) only confused statements regarding some kind of spiritual and mediating values of the work at the expense of notable aesthetic values. The publication and reception of the book between the years of 1990 and 2000 was suggestively commented upon by Michal Kosák in his study *Jiří Langer — outsiderova cesta za jinými světy* (Jiří Langer — an Outsider's Journey in Search of Other Worlds). Here he noted among other factors the inconsistent attention devoted to Langer's texts, or more precisely their persistently similarly oriented interpretations, which 'satisfied themselves with a sterile duplication of the opinions of Tomáš Pěkný and a repetition of the interpretation of the author's brother; a situation thus arose which did not concern an encounter with the work or the discovery of anything new in Langer's oeuvre' (Kosák 2000, p. 42).

It is not possible to experience any genuine 'encounter with the work' of Jiří Langer without posing the question of how in the text he succeeded in creating an impression of such vital authenticity that it was generally regarded as a 'mere passive reproduction, however virtuoso'. How does Langer's narrator induce a feeling that, in contrast with Martin Buber, he 'actually lived the life of the Hasidim,' although similarly to Buber he drew upon several written sources (Koschmal 2010, pp. 164–166), and despite the fact that the Hasidic environment with which he became acquainted during his life evidently had little in common with the one he depicts?

WORD, SOUND AND PLAYFULNESS...

'Do you know what a Yekke wears instead of our shelkes? — Hosenträger!'
Jiří Langer (1961, p. 78)

An important and pivotal approach in the case of *Devět bran* is confrontation with the methods of recognising skaz (or the illusion thereof). Hana Kosáková presents the given methods in her aforementioned publication. Upon reading Langer's book it is possible to start out from his conception of skaz as a manifestation of performativity, paying heed to both the presence of the storyteller and the aspect of temporality — the 'here and now' of the suggested discourse and the materialisation of the act of production and reception (see Kosáková 2019, pp. 88–97). Following on from Boris



Ejchenbaum's study, which Kosáková updates and in places also corrects, in the case of *Devět bran* it is possible to inquire into the 'organising principle, which more or less creates an illusion of skaz' (Ejchenbaum 2013, p. 32).¹

The author's preface in the form of the chapter 'A Youth from Prague among the Chassidim' already makes clear his deep interest not only in the presented substance itself (the introduction to Jewish philosophy and Hasidism, the presentation of the genre of the Hasidic legend...), but also in the material from which the narration is 'formed'. Instead of generally established forms of Jewish names, names of familiar settlements, places or objects, Langer here uses such a variant that (according to his narrator) is 'actually pronounced by the Hasidim', such as Shulem instead of Shalom, Avrum instead of Abraham, Yisrul instead of Israel, rebe or ruv instead of rabbi, Husid instead of Hasid, Kruke instead of Krakow etc. In addition, the storyteller — seemingly unwittingly — mentions the connection of certain 'diminutives endings in which the Yiddish language is very rich, for instance: -ele, -el, -nju, -tje, -ke' (Langer 1961, p. 28).

One of the fundamental pillars of the sonic diversity and allure of *Devět bran* is therefore its linguistic variation, mixing and deformation. Any part of the text — the narration of a Hasidic legend, an aphorism, description of a doctrine or of the everyday life of the Hasidim — may become the object of linguistic humour and a place of dissociation, playfulness, rhythmisation. Langer finds the main source for the disruption and transformation of the 'Czech' wording in Yiddish language:

Reb Sholem was a silken man. Silken? — Yes. In other words, he was an exceptionally learned man, perfect in godliness and richly endowed with all the virtues, a rare, exceedingly rare fellow, a silken fellow: A zadenr yingr machik — It really is impossible to express it in any other way (ibid., p. 33).²

For the narrator, Yiddish represents a means of expressing something which cannot be captured in Czech ('It really is impossible to express it in any other way'), and at the same time it enhances the distinctiveness of the text with a new rhythmic component.

With the aid of Yiddish expressions, Langer's storyteller frequently creates the impression that this is the language that comes to him first during the course of his narration: 'The Chassidim will catch hold of his *gartel*, his belt I mean' (ibid., p. 44);³ 'He took out his *pushke*, his tobacco case, I mean' (ibid., p. 106)⁴ etc. However, auto-correction here is not a rigorous process of amendment, which would be followed by a systematic terminological transition into Czech, but serves primarily as an explana-

1 We understand the concept of skaz, in accordance with Hana Kosáková's interpretation, as an illusion of an immediately perceived narration (Kosáková 2019, p. 32; see Ejchenbaum 2013, pp. 29–31).

2 'Reb Šulem byl *hedvábný* človíček. Hedvábný? — Ano. Totiž nadmíru učený, dokonale zbožný a všemi ctnostmi bohatě obdařený, inu, vzácný, tuze vzácný človíček, hedvábný človíček. A *zadenr jingr mančik* — jinak to věru říci nelze' (Langer 1990, p. 115).

3 'Chasidé se ho chytanou za *gartl*, chci říci za *opasek*' (Langer 1990, p. 125).

4 'Vyňal svou *piške*, chci říci *tabatěrku*' (Langer 1990, p. 198).



tion of the meaning with the aid of a Czech synonym. In the following description, the narrator without ceremony or comments chooses only the Yiddish variant: 'What did he do? — He went and tipped a good half of the tobacco from his own pushke into Jude Hersch's pushke' (ibid.).⁵ In other passages he relies upon the reader's ability to deduce the meaning from the context, or from the familiar lexical base and frequently used suffix.

However, in addition to Yiddish and Hebrew, several other world languages appear in Langer's cosmopolitan flow of speech: Polish ('Daj Boże Szczęście!' as our Polish brothers say'; ibid., p. 61), French ('That Mayer! was a proper enfant terrible'; ibid., p. 62), Ukrainian ('i do palaty i do chaty'; ibid., p. 210), and Latin ('Sed omnia praeclara tam difficilia, quam rara sunt'; ibid., p. 232). The narrator digresses into an inventive and amusing comparison of language in the chapter devoted to the Reb Naftali of Ropshitz. This variety of language is manifested here as one of the strongest points of support for Langer's distinctive humour and play:

And what about the few riches we do have? When the poor German gets up in the morning an asks his wife what they are going to have for dinner, he gets the same answer every day: 'Erdäpfel'. Very occasionally for a change he will be told: 'Kartoffeln'. What does he feel like, all day after that, poor man, when every morning he hears one and the same thing?!

How do we go about it? — Well, of course, we also eat potatoes and only potatoes the whole time, but at least we have something different every day: on Sunday, kartoflyes, on Monday, zemakes, on Tuesday, erdepl, on Wednesday, bulbes, on Thursday, barbuyes, on Friday, krumpirn perhaps, and on the holy Sabbath we make kigel-bramboratchek (ibid., p. 78).⁶

Besides playing with linguistic variations, Langer also makes skilful use of the possibilities of proper names, from which he consciously creates rhythmic and sonic units that support the auditory experience of the text. It is from here we have that the 'affectionate endings' or translated titles 'rebe' or 'reb'. Such playing with names is manifested significantly and 'noisily' for example in the following passage:

To be sure, there are not many such saints — only eight altogether. Foremost among them is the holy Rebe Reb Ber, or Preacher of Mezeritz, and then some of his pupils; the Moravian saint, Rebe Reb Shmelke of Mikulov and his brother, Rebe Reb Pinchas of Frankfort; the two brothers, Rebe Reb Melech, or more correctly Elimelech, of

5 'Co učinil Avrúm Simche? — šel a nasypal dobrou polovinu tabáku z piške do piške Jíde Heršovi' (Langer 1990, p. 198).

6 'A což teprve to naše bohatství! Když chudý Němec ráno vstává a ptá se ženy, co bude dnes k obědu, slyší každý den stejnou odpověď: *Erdepfl*. Jen tak někdy pro změnu má také *kartofln*. Jak mu je asi potom celý den, chudákovi, když každé ráno slyší totéž a jedno?! Kdežto my? — My také ovšem jíme jen brambory a zas jen brambory, ale přece máme každý den něco jiného: v neděli kartofljes, v pondělí zemakes, v úterý erdepl, ve středu bulbes, ve čtvrtek barbuljes, v pátek třebas krumpír a na svatý šábes si uděláme kíg-l-bramboráček' (Langer 1990, p. 165).



Lizensk, and Rebe Reb Sussya of Anipol. Then there are Rebe Reb Shimen of Jaroslav and Rebe Reb Borechl of Medziboz (ibid., p. 115).⁷

It is by no means a chance or isolated phenomenon that the storyteller presents several variants of a name, one after another. This in no way represents a correction, but rather an expansion of an intensively resounding chain of sound. The same function is then fulfilled by the epithets of each saint, which cannot be omitted.

Another document of Langer's feeling for the material of language and its rhythmic potency can be provided by his review of the E. F. Burian Voice-Band, published in *Tribuna* in 1928:

The point of departure are the merry children's rhymes which the Voice-Band includes in its varied programme. Indeed, the vocal diction of ordinary children's rhymes, whether directly adopted, either consciously or subconsciously, from children, or springing from the childlike complex in the soul of the composer, expressed with the most genteel technical refinement, appears to be the secret terrain out of which Burian's tonal absolute grows (Langer 1995, p. 138).

In addition to the application of rhythm by means of disrupting the structure of sentences, monosyllabic testimonies, exclamations or the deployment of other languages, Langer also incorporates musical elements into his text in the form of songs, poems or stylised, infantile rhymed contents of individual chapters.

Music and song are thematised most strikingly in the tales of the saints Naftali of Ropshitz and his pupil Dyvre Chayyim. It is precisely the music of the second of these that functions as a genuinely apposite metaphor for Langer's polyphone 'composition' of the text indicated above. Dyvre Chayyim leads a group of musicians and singers in the town of Sanz, and whenever his band strikes up, each musician plays differently:

The double bass would in all probability be playing something entirely different from the violins, and while the voices of the younger children were twittering like larks, the voices of the older lads would break in like thrushes or nightingales. In short it was some kind of polyphony, or whatever it's called. But it was all in perfect tune and very refined (Langer 1961, p. 191).⁸

Here Langer again focuses his attention on the sonic essence of what is perceived. The presented Hasidim have their hearing trained to perceive both the tone of the mu-

7 'Nemnoho je arci světců takových. Celkem toliko osm. Předně je to svatý rebe reb Bér neboli Kazatel z Meziriče a po něm někteří jeho žáci: moravský světec rebe reb Šmelke z Mikulova a jeho bratr rebe reb Pinches z Frankforta. Bratři rebe reb Mélech, správněji Eli-mélech z Liženska a rebe reb Žíše z Hanipoli. Dále pak rebe reb Šimen z Jaroslavi a rebe reb Búrechl z Meziboru' (Langer 1990, p. 207).

8 'Basa vám hrála třebas něco zcela jiného, než zpívaly housle. A mezitímco hlásky menších dětí švelely jako skřiváci, vpadaly jim do toho hlasy hochů starších jako drozdi nebo slavíci. Zkrátka byla to taková polyfonie nebo jak tomu říkáte. Ale bylo to všechno řádně zlaďeno a pěkně uhlazeno' (Langer 1990, p. 292).

sic and the tone of the narrative. Thus not only what is ‘made’, but also and above all how.

From all the examples it ensues that the language of the narrative chains constantly draws attention to itself, it is the centre of the plot, a space for playfulness, humour and irony. The better and more inventively Langer handles speech and makes it sing, the more it appears that he is engaging in the aforementioned ‘stenography’, or ‘virtuoso imitation’. However, a broader view of the narrator’s expressive, stylistic and scenic devices reveals how illusory this impression is.

AND THE NARRATION?

‘The storyteller has already become something remote from us and something that is getting even more distant.’

Walter Benjamin (2006, p. 362)

In addition to Ejchenbaum and Kosáková, the work of Nikolai Leskov is also commemorated by Walter Benjamin in his famous essay on the storyteller from 1936. Upon a background of a description of the radical transformation of the world, in which the art of storytelling has died out (Benjamin 1979, p. 215), he finds an exemplary form of the storyteller precisely in Leskov’s prose works. Here Benjamin goes on to characterise the fundamental archetypes of storyteller: the tiller of the soil, firmly rooted in his homeland, and the trading seafarer who returns from his travels and has stories to tell. In Leskov’s novel *The Enchanted Wanderer* (which is also analysed by Hana Kosáková in the interpretative section of her book), stories are narrated by ‘seafarers’, thus by those who have come from faraway lands. In addition to the main hero Ivan Severyanich, there also appears another striking storyteller-nomad character — a Jew who has arrived among the Tatars from ‘God knows where’, and who tells stories of rabbis: ‘The Asians immensely enjoyed the narration about the scholarly rabbi, and for a long time they listened to what the Jew recounted’ (Leskov 1950, p. 118; see Pavlík 2021, pp. 85–87).

One year after the writing of the essay *The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov*, three books were published in Czechoslovakia which distinctively adapted the genre of Hasidic legends and attempted to capture the elusive atmosphere of narration that always forms an element of social, communicative and temporal situations: Jiří Langer’s *Devět bran*, Ivan Olbracht’s *Golet v údolí* (Golet in the Valley) and Egon Hostovský’s *Dům bez pána* (House without a Master).

Before the publication of the above works, a series of remarkable interactions took place between their authors. Egon Hostovský recalled not only how he had traded Hasidic legends with Ivan Olbracht (‘He used some of them, while I used others’; Liehm 1990, p. 389), but also the purported journey he took with Jiří Mordechaj Langer to Galicia, spent among Hasidic Jews.⁹ After confrontation with Benjamin’s

9 The triple adaptation of Hasidic narratives is compared by the study *Poutníci a vyprávění: Adaptace chasidské legendy v díle Ivana Olbrachta, Jiřího Mordechaje Langera a Egona Hostovského* (Pilgrims and Narratives: Adaptation of a Hasidic Legend in the Works of Ivan Olbracht, Jiří Mordechaj Langer and Egon Hostovský; Pavlík 2021).



work, the conspicuously thematised searched for original, pure narration elsewhere than one's homeland, i.e. outside of Western civilisation, appears to be a symptomatic moment of all the above-mentioned texts.

Similarly to Nikolai Leskov, Jiří Langer also reinforces a feeling of authentic re-telling through the depiction of the circumstances in which he heard the legends. For this reason he devotes the introductory chapter in part to the above-recorded linguistic excursion, and in part to his journeys to the Hasidic world. From here there emerges a further illusory 'skaz' element of the work, thanks to which Langer's storyteller succeeds in losing himself in the crowd and disappearing: Narrating episodes in the Hasidic worlds is no mere banal distraction, but 'the most praiseworthy acts a Chassid can do' (Langer 1961, p. 22). It means something sacred and religiously charged, whilst simultaneously being something everyday, entertaining and pleasant: 'He will tell of them at every opportunity — during a meal, during his studies, on a train journey' (ibid.).

However, what is more important in Langer's modelled world is that narration does not represent any kind of privileged function. It does not require any talent or exceedingly broad range of vocabulary; on the contrary such gifts are considered entirely superfluous. It is here that the point of departure of the author's stylisation resides, aptly encapsulated in the assertion that 'anyone can be a narrator' (ibid.). The storyteller can be replaced by anyone, anyone can add to the narration and follow on from it. The process of storytelling is not subject to talent, but to a kind of community ownership. The shared expressive repertoire also includes non-verbal components of speech and its 'physicality'.

The storyteller does not speak with words alone. If his vocabulary proves inadequate, he can help himself along with gestures, miming or modulations of the voice. When relating something gloomy, he will lower his voice to a whisper. If he has a mystery to unfold he will content himself with hinting, breaking off in the middle of a sentence with a meaningful wink or squint. If he has to describe some supernatural beauty he will close his eyes and roll his head about in genuine ecstasy (ibid.).¹⁰

Using specific examples, the previous paragraphs document the complex strategy of narrative anonymisation. Within the collective framework of 'us Hasidim', Langer voluntarily forgoes his own individual voice and thereby creates an impression of shared Hasidic poetry. It is precisely thanks to this moment of egalitarian solidarity that he is able to illustrate the character of his own speech in the speech of any other member of the community (e.g. in the above-quoted passage he reveals the exuberance of the non-verbal components of narration in a kind of universal Hasidic storyteller). At the same time, through a rigorous gesture of fusion he reinforces the impression of the interconnectedness of the traditional Hasidic community.

¹⁰ 'Vypravěč nemluví toliko slovy. Kde se nedostává slovního bohatství, je přece možno vypo-moci si posunky, mimikou obličeje, modulací hlasu. Líčí-li vypravěč něco pochmurného, ztlumí hlas, šeptá. Jde-li o něco tajemného, pouze napoví, větu nedokončí, významně zamr-ká nebo zašilhá. Má-li znázornit nějakou nadpozemskou krásu, činí to takhle: Zamhouří oči a kroutí hlavou na všechny strany v opravdovém vytržení' (Langer 1990, p. 102).

BETWEEN VARIANTS OF HASIDIC LEGENDS

The specific character of Langer's storytelling also reveals confrontations with the genre of the Hasidic legend as presented by other authors. Jiří Trávníček focuses on three versions of the same Hasidic story in the second half of his book *Příběh je mrtev? Schizmata a dilemata moderní prózy* (The Story, Is It Dead? Schisms and Dilemmas of Modern Prose). Here he compares the well-known legend of the journey of a Krakow Jew to Prague in search of treasure in the work of Jiří Langer (*Devět bran*), Martin Buber (*Chasidská vyprávění*) and Elie Wiesel (*Svět chasidů*). However, the same story is also featured in Ivan Olbracht's *Golet v údolí*, a version which is more suitable for our comparison than Wiesel's (primarily due to the entirely different context of its origin).

The structure of the narrative and its point remains the same in Buber, Langer and Olbracht. However, their versions diverge seriously in small but important nuances, in the cadence of the plot, in the accenting of various of its aspects and in specific renderings.

Buber presents the legend in by far the most linear and least distinctive form: Rabbi Bunam tells his young pupils the tale of Rabbi Eisik, who was called upon in a dream to take a journey to Prague, where he would find a treasure. After the third repetition of the dream, Eisik took heed and set out to the faraway city. However, on the bridge in Prague he was stopped by a guard and taken to the regional governor, who after listening to the reasons for Eisik's journey laughed out loud and told the Jew about a similar dream he had had. According to this dream, a treasure hidden behind the stove was to be found in the house of some Jew from Krakow named Eisik. With that the governor released the visitor. The rabbi returned home, and had a tabernacle built from the proceeds of the treasure he found in his own house (Buber 1990, pp. 487–488).

In the case of *Golet v údolí*, the narration enters an expansive, global story. Unlike the other versions, the Hasidic legend here is placed within 'real' communicative practice: Here it is not a mere item in a set of legends, but becomes a part of the world, the events of which it can act upon and influence. The integration of the storytelling into a broader contextual framework enables an emphasising of the role of the listeners, whose presence, nature and attitude define and transform the form of the story. The saint and storyteller from Polana, Pinches Jakubovič, knows his listeners well, and is aware of their long-term lack of interest in the Hasidic tradition. Perhaps it is for precisely this reason that his version is the most dramatic of all. By truncating the descriptive passages he creates a space for a dynamic plot and its epic development. The guard (in this case unnamed) seizes the Jew, who is even threatened with execution. The dramatic culmination of the plot here is amplified by the anti-Semitic pronouncements of the soldiers: 'And suddenly he is grabbed from behind by two soldiers. 'Aha, a stinking Jew! Spying for the enemy, are you?! Just you wait!' (Olbracht 2001, p. 338).

It is as if Langer's storyteller seems to falter in his narration of the plot, and in characteristic style deliberately halts or slows himself. These digressive tendencies are most evident in descriptions of the surroundings (Prague, the Castle, the Vltava) and when relating the process of walking, movement — thus the journey as a kind





of metaphorical framework of the entire book. Whereas the storytellers of *Chasidské vyprávění* and *Golet v údolí* dispense with the journey in a single sentence, Langer's narrator provides a markedly more comprehensive account:

He [Eisik Yekels] therefore took his stick and set out on his journey. In those days the road from Cracow to Prague was a bad and dangerous one. But it was worse still if a man's conscience was burdened by the thought that he was leaving his dear ones in hunger and misery and going after a dream (Langer 1961, p. 247).¹¹

The image of the journey is supplemented with details, furnishing the main character with an essential pilgrim's attribute — a staff (and also homesickness).

In addition to the thematic accentuation of the fundamental, general motif, there is also a conspicuous (already described) emphasis on the phonetic aspect of the delivery, the setting of the scene, the performativity: Langer again modifies the form of otherwise familiar toponyms ('He felt that he had reached his goal, and that what he saw was Prague: *Prag hamaatyro, Ir ve-Em be-Ysroel*', 'And Eisik recognised that the river was the River Veltava'; *ibid.*, p. 247), and at the same time here he allows the characters to speak in a heavily rhythmised and even rhymed, theatrical diction. The words of the commander of the guards take on the most powerful scenic tenor. However, these specifics are evident above all from the original wording of the text (see footnote):

'I had a dream that there is some wonderful treasure there hidden near the fireplace in a room occupied by a Jew. The name of this Jew was declared to me in my dream. In fact I remember it very well! His name was... Eisik Yekels... Do you think I'd want to drag my weary body all the way to Cracow to go scratching for treasure near the fireplace of some confounded Jew?! Dreams are lies and deception. Only old women believe in them!' (*ibid.*, p. 248).¹²

Whereas Martin Buber presents the Hasidic legend to the Western reader as a kind of mediated spiritual inspiration, both Olbracht and Langer (each in their own way) render it a part of a distinctive work of literature (see Pavlík 2021), upon which Trávníček suggestively comments: 'It is as if what is of fundamental importance is not the content that is narrated, but the very need to tell stories and listen to what is told' (Trávníček 2003, p. 230).

11 'Vzal Ázik Jékls hůl a vydal se na cestu. Cesta z Krakova do Prahy byla za oněch časů zlá a nebezpečná. Horší však je, tíží-li nás svědomí, že zanecháváme své nejmilejší o hladu a bídě a jdeme za — snem. Avšak po putování svízelném a dlouhém stanul na jakémsi kopci [...]' (Langer 1990, p. 356).

12 'Zdálalo se mi tuhle, zdálo, že poklad nesmírný tam ukryt jest u krbu nějakého žida ve světnici. I jméno židovo mi ve snách oznámeno. Však si je předobře pamatuji! Je to prý nějaký — — Ázik Jekls... To by se mi však chtělo! Až do Krakova trmáčet tělo a hrabat se s pokladem u krbu leccakého proklatce židovského! Sny jsou klam a lež. Kdo jim věří, baba je!' (Langer 1990, p. 257).



IN CONCLUSION – TO BE ONE OF MANY

Above we have attempted to outline from various different perspectives the devices employed by Jiří Langer in order to accentuate the ‘phonetic’ aspect of his text, to create an ‘illusion of skaz’ and to ‘make present the events of the discourse’ (Kosáková 2019, p. 93). In creating such an illusion (and his own attendant anonymisation), the author of *Devět bran* places emphasis above all on two aspects:

- 1) A conscious treatment of the substance of the word: artlessness, effortlessness, deformation, playfulness, specific rhythmisation founded upon a disruption of the sentence structure by exclamations, interjections and insertions of foreign languages. All of this makes the text resound and renders it almost audible to the reader.
- 2) The incorporation of the telling of legends into the everyday world of the Hasidim, the convincing of the reader of the author’s own insignificance and the full adoption of Hasidic ‘poetics’.

The fact that Langer’s self-stylisation in the form of an anonymous Hasidic storyteller succeeded is attested to by all the documents of his lukewarm reception from the time.¹³

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