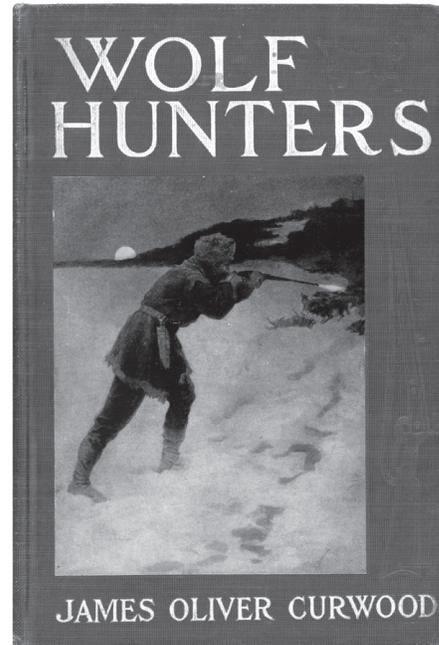
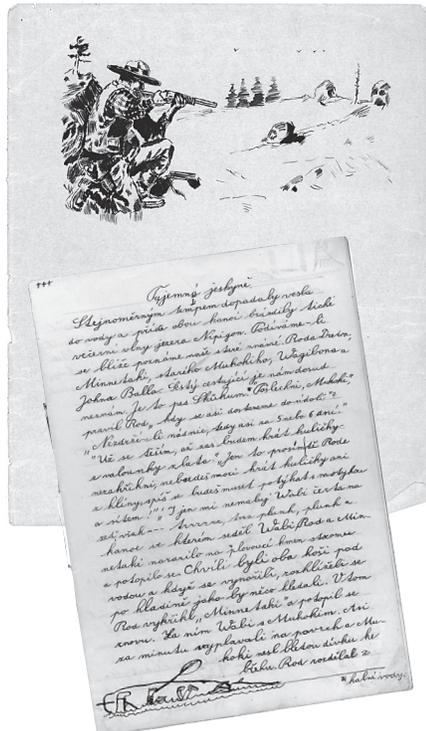




A “Prima” Week in a Small Czech Town

On September 29, 2004, Czech-Canadian author, Josef Škvorecký, celebrated his eightieth birthday. In honour of this event, the Literární akademie in Prague, in collaboration with the Institute for Czech Language of the Czech Academy of Science, the Czech centre of the International Pen Club and the Town Council of Náchod, organized an international symposium on the life and work of one of Náchod’s most famous sons. The Fisher Library was asked to participate, since it is the repository of the Škvorecký papers. I, as unofficial curator, by virtue of my native tongue and background, was asked to present a paper on the collection held by the Fisher Library and to prepare an exhibition that would illustrate some unknown aspects of Škvorecký’s life and work. Speaking about the collection was easy; I have been dealing with it since the late 1970s; but what secrets could I reveal about an author who has given so many interviews? Where would one start? I knew that when

he was deprived of his right to publish after the brief appearance of *Tankový prapor*, he used the name of a friend to publish some mystery stories and that that fact was not generally known. In one of them, an astute reader could put together the first letter of each chapter and come up with “Škvorecký et Zabrana fecerunt ioculum.” Did the public also know that this world-famous fiction writer had originally wanted to be a poet and it was only after he moved to Prague after World War II, that he branched out into fiction? Or the fact that Škvorecký wrote his first novel at the age of 10, inspired by the Canadian writer James Oliver Curwood, and that it was set in the Canadian West? Or that several books were banned because the censors found a reference to Škvorecký? This happened to a well known writer on parrots whose otherwise acceptable book was censored when, in a colour illustration a Senegal parrot was portrayed sitting on a pile of books, one of which was by the



Left: The first novel written by Josef Škvorecký (age 10) with an illustration by his father. Both were inspired by James Oliver Curwood’s *Wolf Hunters* (above).

banned Škvorecký. I gradually built up a respectable amount of material, but it was too late to mail it, even by courier, and I had to bring it with me.

On September 14, a very nervous librarian boarded the plane, clutching a very full briefcase to her chest. Here I was with a priceless collection of irreplaceable manuscripts. Did I dare sleep on the plane? Would I remember to take them from the overhead storage bin? I didn't sleep but I did remember to take all my belongings upon arrival in Prague. Almost home free. Two days after landing in Prague, I arrived in the small town of Náchod on the Czech/Polish border, where I met the curator of the regional museum and we discussed how best to display the material I had brought. It was quickly evident that he was a major fan and delighted to be able to work with original materials. Assured that the papers were in excellent hands, I set off to explore the town. I had seen pictures of Náchod before I arrived, having been given a picture book on it, with text by Škvorecký, so I was eager to see the place in real life. It is quite pretty, with the requisite castle on the hill, a baroque town hall, an impressive central square and intriguing little alleys and courtyards.

On Wednesday, September 22, the conference officially opened. The town was very busy that morning, as police and body guards were securing the area around the Josef Čížek theatre, location of the opening ceremonies, prior to the arrival of the President of the Czech Republic. Václav Klaus briefly addressed a packed house about Škvorecký's importance to the Republic. Other speakers offered their thoughts on Škvorecký as a Central European writer, Škvorecký within the context of Czech and world literature and the phenomenon of 68 Publishers. Michal Schonberg of the University of Toronto at Scarborough, speaking Czech to a live audience for the first time in twenty years, spoke of his attempts to produce a biography.

After lunch, the audience consisted of the actual conference attendees, and discussions were held in two smaller rooms. Speakers included old friends and classmates, translators of Škvorecký's books, jazz fans who had corresponded with Škvorecký for years, academics who had studied aspects of his works, people he had helped, and fans. The most interesting aspect for me was putting faces to names. Many were familiar, as they had written to Škvorecký and I had read their letters when I was listing them for appraisal. My hotel roommate was a scholar living in Sweden who had written a book on Škvorecký that I had catalogued. So many people had responded to the invitation to speak that parallel sessions had to be held. It was difficult to choose which session to attend; should I go to the session on Škvorecký and Náchod as a literary area or the one on the role of jazz in his works; a session where his translators discussed their adventures or a session on his short stories? Once I had no choice, being pulled out of a talk because Czech television was at the exhibition and wanted me to discuss some of the items I had brought. Paul Wilson, a long time Škvorecký translator, and I managed to act like professional presenters and pointed out various manuscripts and letters from fans as the television camera whirled. Vanna White had nothing on us!

On Thursday evening, there was a concert held in honor of Zdena and Josef Škvorecký with a surprise ending. We were asked to keep our seats for a brief interval while the stage was reset and suddenly the music of "Gaudeamus igitur" rang out and a procession of red and black robed personages filed down to the front of the hall. In a ceremony reminiscent of the Middle Ages, Škvorecký was given an honorary doctorate from the literary academy and after the various representatives of academe had bowed to him and congratulations were offered, he gave a very moving speech in which, among others,

he thanked the Fisher Library for preserving his work and for allowing it to come back to its native land for a period.

On Friday morning, the local archivist, another Škvorecký fan, took a small group to various locations around Náchod that appear in some form in his books. The Hotel Beránek (i.e., lamb) is called the Hotel Lion by Škvorecký, the Hotel Italia, the Hotel Espania, etc. She discussed his classmates who had their names altered also, a friend named Suchý (Dry) becomes Mokrý (Wet), etc. We saw the factory where Škvorecký did forced labour under the Germans; the villa where one of the girls lived (now the local police headquarters), the bridge on which he stood watching another girl studying in her room. It all made me want to reread some of the novels, now that I knew the town better. Then as a special treat, we were taken to a local pub, the Port Artur, where Škvorecký and friends had played jazz as teenagers and hung out. It was now only open on weekends, but the conference organizers had asked the owner to open for a couple of hours for this auspicious occasion. There we found Zdena and Josef Škvorecký, along with several of his classmates, listening to a jazz trio. We were invited to ask questions, and for about an hour

a lively and informal discussion ensued. It was the perfect ending to a great conference. Then it was time to remove the Fisher Library's materials, return to Prague and from there home. The nervousness returned. Would the Czech authorities allow the manuscripts to leave the country? Taking inspiration from my mother, who never declared anything and always got away with it, I said nothing and nothing happened. All the materials were returned safely to archival boxes on the shelves of the Fisher Library.

The conference was very well organized and the speakers informative. I learned a great deal about Josef Škvorecký, which will be very useful when I am asked about our holdings. It also gave me a sense of how complete our collection is and made me understand that we, as an institution, are fulfilling an important role in collecting and preserving this sort of material. Finally, it gave me the chance to confound Czech speakers with my old-fashioned Slovak. That was fun! My sincere thanks to Richard Landon, Director of the Fisher Library, for insisting that I go, and to the Chief Librarian, Carole Moore, for authorizing the funds to get me there.

Luba Frastacky

Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library