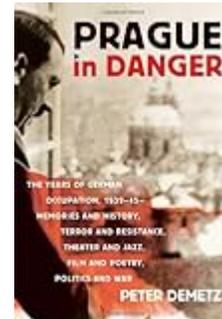


**Peter Demetz.** *Prague in Danger: The Years of German Occupation, 1939-1945: Memory and History, Terror and Resistance, Theater and Jazz, Film and Poetry, Politics and War.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008. xii + 288 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-28126-7.



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## A Personal History of Prague under Nazi Rule

Peter Demetz was a boy of sixteen when his native Czechoslovakia was occupied by Nazi Germany. *Prague in Danger* is both a history of the occupation and a memoir of Demetz's own experiences of living in the Protectorate (the administrative entity the Nazis created for the Czechoslovak provinces of Bohemia and Moravia). Demetz interweaves his own story with a more general history of Prague during the Second World War but also presents them as separate tales. His accounts of his personal experiences are sequestered from the rest of the text in special sections printed in italics.

Demetz is a captivating writer, and his history of the Protectorate is an excellent read. Aside from multiple sections on culture, the historical half of the book is a synthesis of recent Czech and older English and German-language historiography. These passages, which are dispersed throughout the book, come together into a standard narrative of the period, focusing on high politics and Czech resistance activities. In this story, the dramatic arc is created by the possibility of Czech resistance and the severity of Nazi oppression. While Demetz talks about the collaborationist Czech Protectorate government and

notes that many Czechs did not want to risk their safety to protest Nazi racial policies, accommodation to the Nazi regime is not his emphasis. Instead, he prefers to concentrate on events like the Czech student demonstrations from October through November 1939, the ill-planned 1942 assassination of Reich Protector Reinhard Heydrich by Czech agents sent from London, and the terror that followed. But while the political parts of his story are not new, Demetz presents them well and includes material that has seldom appeared in English, performing the essential service of bringing this history to a wider audience.

Demetz is particularly adept at using the life stories of leading political figures to add drama to his story. Early in the book, he emphasizes the tragic aspects of Czechoslovakia's fall through the story of Emil Hácha, the apolitical jurist who unluckily became president of Czechoslovakia shortly before the German occupation. In the fall of 1938, Hácha had been hoping to retire to "his studies, his art collection, and the memory of his beloved wife who had died in February" (p. 12). But when Czechoslovak president Edvard Beneš fled Prague

for Chicago in the aftermath of the Munich Conference, Hájcha was coerced into taking his place. A few months later, on March 14, 1939, Hájcha was placidly having lunch with a bishop when he was ordered to Berlin to meet with Adolf Hitler. Unbeknownst to Hájcha, the point of this meeting was to announce that German troops would enter Czechoslovakia the next day. Demetz renders the scene in splendid detail, noting that Hájcha and his party were kept waiting until Hitler had watched his nightly film, “not a B western, as was his habit, but a rather sophisticated German comedy entitled ‘A Hopeless Case’” (p. 7). When the meeting finally began, Hitler surprised the bewildered Hájcha with the news of the invasion and demanded that he order Czechoslovak troops to stand down. Caught between Hitler’s “shrieking” and Hermann Göring’s quiet threat that the Luftwaffe would destroy “that beautiful city” (Prague), Hájcha ultimately gave in, although not before he was forced by stress and exhaustion to accept a “fortifying glucose injection” (p. 8). Hitler also made Hájcha’s train wait for hours on the tracks in Berlin while he triumphantly proceeded to Prague castle and partook of a celebratory snack of Czech ham and beer, violating his usual habit of abstaining from both meat and alcohol. Hájcha, who would be arrested for collaboration in 1945, emerges from this vignette as a pitiable figure, more deserving of sympathy than scorn.

The real heart of the book is the material on cultural life during the Protectorate, from poetry and prose to jazz and film. Here, Demetz mixes his own readings and recollections with accounts of the lives of various artists, writers and musicians, bringing a vanished milieu to life. In the section on jazz, for example, we learn about people like Karel Vlach, “Prague’s answer to Benny Goodman” (p. 112). A poor kid from the working class quarter of Jiřkov, Vlach held a day job as a traveling salesman for a Jewish notions firm until the occupation made it untenable. During the war, Vlach played full time at the Café Lloyd with his swing orchestra and sheltered composers and players of Jewish origin as long as he could. The biggest problem for the music world, Demetz notes, was that young performers were always in danger of being shipped off to work in arms factories or even to the front, if they were of categorized as of German origin. Jazz purist Emil Ludvík was thus able to perform with his Hot Quintet for only a few years before its ranks were decimated, although some of his friends managed to keep “le jazz hot” flowing with new bands like the Harlem Jazz Group out in the Prague suburb of Spořilov.

Demetz also includes portraits of numerous writers,

most of whom met tragic ends, including Milena Jesenská and his own friend, Hans W. Kolben. The story of the young poet Jiř Orten is a particularly touching example. Orten, who was of Jewish heritage, decided not to emigrate when the opportunity was still available, romantically staying in Prague for a woman who soon left him. He began to live an isolated life, reading Rilke and writing poems in which he meditated on his solitude and isolation. The sense of suffering in his poetry, wrote the literary critic Václav Žemě “looks into its own eyes and explores the darkest corners of a bitter world” (p. 125). Tragically, or perhaps luckily, Orten was killed in an auto accident in August 1941, before the Protectorate’s Jews began to be deported to concentration camps.

Demetz’s own story, which threads through the book, is worthy of its own volume. The son of a German father and a Jewish mother, Demetz describes himself in 1939 as “inquisitive about politics, girls, movies and jazz (in that order approximately)” (p. 20). His recollections, like the book as a whole, coalesce around those topics, with the significant addition of literature. Demetz lives in the world of the young intelligentsia; he spends much of the Protectorate period working in a German-language bookstore in Prague. He takes part in a clandestine reading circle and edits an illicit pamphlet of poetry. Although the group was only literary in nature, it was responsible for getting Demetz pulled out of the Silesian work camp for half-Jews, where he had been sent in 1944, and hauled in front of the Gestapo. Luckily for Demetz, however, by the time he had been transported hundreds of miles for his interrogation, the investigating officer was no longer much interested in his testimony. Demetz was sent to another camp on the Bohemian-Saxon border, where he stayed until the end of the war.

Demetz writes particularly movingly of his mother and her siblings; this one family (the Brods) serves as a microcosm for the multilingual region of Bohemia during an era of increasing nationalization. Uncle Karel, a wealthy industrialist, becomes a “politically conscious Czech Jew” (p. 65), while Aunt Fritta, who “wore pants in the manner of Marlene Dietrich,” was an actress on the German stage, working in Berlin and Frankfurt (p. 66). Uncle Leo, a lawyer, and Aunt Irma, a fashionable seamstress, seem to float more easily between German and Czech (Uncle Leo went to both Czech and German schools), while Demetz’s mother married a German-speaker of Ladin peasant heritage who worked in the German-language theater. Nazi racial policies changed this family’s remarkable ability to move freely between national identities. For the Nazis, the Brods were sim-

ply Jews, subject to deportation and murder. As a half-Jew who spoke German and Czech (although he admits that in 1939 his Czech was far from perfect), Demetz, unlike his maternal relations, was able to continue to move in multiple worlds until the last year of the occupation, when he was deported. For the most part, Demetz wanted to be “Czechoslovak” (or “Czech” if necessary) rather than “German,” but his desire to reject Germanness as tainted by Nazism was tested when he met the beautiful Waltraut, a German girl from the Sudetenland. Demetz secretly had a relationship with W., as he calls her in the book, but was haunted by the feeling that it was wrong for him to do so. Demetz’s conviction that the war has firmly fixed previously permeable national boundaries and his own resistance to this new reality provides a nice example of the more general fate of the so-called amphibians (people who moved freely between German and Czech speaking worlds) described by historian Chad Bryant in his recent book *Prague in Black* (2007), which Demetz regrettably does not list in his bibliography.

While Demetz relates many fascinating and often touching incidents from his life in occupied Prague, this is not the kind of memoir where the author rigorously analyzes his past. A particularly striking example is his story of Eva L., a young woman of Jewish heritage

who had to the opportunity to escape with her father to England, but chose to stay in Prague with her Austrian boyfriend. When the two tried to flee together, the boyfriend was sent to Dachau and Eva received transport orders to the ghetto at TerezÅn. Demetz is invited to a farewell party for Eva. When he arrives, he finds a small group of young men. Eva is nowhere to be seen. The male host informs the guests that Eva wants to sleep with each of them before she leaves, and invites them to enter the bedroom one by one. Describing this incident, Demetz remarks merely, “It was not a gangbang ... but a strangely decorous affair” (p. 143) and then wonders whether or not he met Eva’s romantic expectations. Nowhere does he speculate on why, on the eve of her deportation to death, Eva would choose to have sex with four men in rapid succession, or why the men would so readily agree to her proposal, without even talking to her about it. The prose belies the extraordinary nature of the evening: each takes his turn, and then calmly retreats to the other room to sip white wine and wait for the others. But what had happened to them to make this seem so normal, or unworthy of particular comment? The lack of sustained reflection on such an incident is unfortunate, but perhaps the past was simply too painful to interrogate too deeply.

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