

JIŘÍ HAUSSMANN

-1

TRANSLATION AND INTRODUCTORY NOTE BY CARLETON BULKIN

Jiří Haussmann (1898-1923) was a Czech satirist and writer of early science fiction. He was born and raised in Prague during the final years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and performed his obligatory wartime military service entirely within Bohemia. After the Armistice, he began to work at a district court in the Czech capital, later completing his law degree. While his social and political views were left-leaning (and were not unusual for his age, place, and time), he was nevertheless a broadly equal-opportunity satirist. About nine weeks after his twenty-fourth birthday, he died of tuberculosis.¹ His father Ivan (1907-1944), a political independent, went on to serve as Czechoslovak minister of justice and then minister of employment during 1926.

Aside from some satirical songs, Jiří Haussmann's main fictional output consists of a one-act play, the collection *Divoké povídky* (Wild Stories, 1922) – feuilletons and short stories including “-1” – the lengthier

Velkovýroba ctnosti: nepravdělný román (The Mass Production of Virtue: An Irregular Novel, 1922),² and the posthumous poetry collection *Občanské války* (Civil Wars, 1923).

After publishing “-1” in a newspaper in 1921,³ Haussmann edited the story for *Divoké povídky* (published in May 1922), cutting some “political allusions” to the country's interwar communist party.⁴ The story is satirical, mock-stodgy, contemporary but not experimental in style, crisp with disdain for official hypocrisy and self-dealing. That same year, Haussmann completed his legal studies but then died of tuberculosis in January 1923.

The opportunism Haussmann witnessed after the 1918 collapse of the Habsburg empire surely sharpened his satire. He wrote “-1” in the wake of tremendous, historic upheaval in the Czech lands. Austria-Hungary had been dissolved and new states including Czechoslovakia created, a democratic constitution ratified, the franchise vastly

¹ Ivan Adamovič, *Slovník české literární fantastiky a science fiction*, Prague, R3, 1995, pp. 82-83.

² Czech science fiction's best satire, according to Ondřej Neff. It was adapted for television and radio in 1964.

³ Jiří Haussmann, “Minusová valuta,” in *Lidové noviny*, 29, no. 582 (1921), pp. 1-2. This translation is based on the later version edited by the author and included in *Divoké povídky*.

⁴ Pavel Pešta, “Tři haussmannovské problémy,” in *Česká literatura*, 22, no. 4 (1974), p. 293. Written during the “normalization” that followed the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, literary scholar Pešta's article problematizes Haussmann's left-wing credentials.

expanded and extended to women, a president elected in place of an emperor, and a government constituted of newly empowered mass political parties, including those representing local smallholder, parochial, and business interests.

On the economic front, the former Habsburg currency of the crown (German *Krone*, Czech/Slovak *koruna*) was adopted by the new state. While not a trained economist, Alois Rašín (1867-1923) became the country's first finance minister and the architect of its new *koruna*; the "cottager"-cum-minister in "-1" seems at least partly a parody of this brash, by-the-seat-of-the-pants policymaker in Czechoslovakia's tumultuous early days. In early 1919, the money supply was tightened

and remaining banknotes transformed into Czechoslovak currency with a stamped mark. The first *new* banknotes were then introduced only in mid-year – although at the time of "-1"'s publication, new coins had not yet been minted. It was a time of flux when anything must have seemed possible on the economic front.

Hausmann's satire may have overlooked some potential targets. The text's early reference to the "Czech" rather than "Czechoslovak" currency reflects Bohemian localism but also the dearth of viable ethnic Slovak candidates for national office in Prague, as well as the sheer novelty of Czechoslovakia for its Czech citizens at the time.

JIŘÍ HAUSSMANN

-1

At last the fateful day arrived. On Thursday, the Czech crown was trading at zero in Zurich, and on Friday it was at -1.

Unaccustomed to dealing with values “to the left of zero,” the human spirit could scarcely imagine the repercussions of so revolutionary an event. Yet even a cursory glance at the surviving records amply demonstrates their enormity and absurdity.

Indeed, the guiding principle of all morality to date, the accumulation of money for its own sake, *l'argent-pour-l'argentisme*, so to speak, has been turned on its head, and the banknote, till now the all-powerful source and symbol of every conceivable pleasure, both physical and intellectual, became such an intolerable burden that everyone tried as hard to get rid of it as he once did to get hold of it.

Naturally, the worst affected were the unfortunates who had, in commendable prudence, hoarded as much paper treasure as possible in their stockings and straw mattresses for precarious times to come. Thus did many well-to-do country folk become the most abject of wretches overnight. But not even those who had already deposited their cash in the banks got away scot-free. For though all the lending institutions deliberately flung open the doors of their impregnable safes and steel strongboxes on that fateful night, the next morning they were

horrified to find that not only had there been no robberies but that, on the contrary, deposits had risen tenfold. Indeed, some bold evildoers had taken advantage of the safes' accessibility to smuggle what they could of their wealth into them.

Commerce took unprecedented forms. For example, the customer who bought a roll would receive half a crown with it, and the patron who conceived a yen for a bottle of first-class French champagne would get a handsome purse full of legal tender into the bargain.

On their knees, creditors would implore debtors to continue taking out loans, henceforth interest-free, in unlimited amounts, while the latter arrived with grinning faces to pay down their long-delinquent liabilities. So it came to pass, out of the blue, that bohemian students and old-age pensioners suddenly displaced the former matadors of capital as objects of popular esteem and respect.

Factories were offering twentyfold increases in wages, workers stipulating uncompensated overtime in their collective-bargaining agreements, the unemployed refusing to accept the slightest support. Owing to wage levels, a lowly spot in the civil service became the object of private reveries for once-successful stock traders.

Publishers recognized that writers, as the principal originators of their works, were in fact entitled to a full one hundred percent of the net proceeds of their books. The pulps became extinct, as only truly worthwhile titles, both scholarly and literary, were published.

High-ranking dignitaries, particularly the party loyalists occupying leading positions in the national administration, unanimously declared their desire to continue performing their duties gratis, out of pure, disinterested love for the republic and the public good. Integrity and honesty blossomed broadly on an unprecedented scale. Any who attempted bribery were promptly and ruthlessly denounced, and no one even accepted tips, including hotel porters.

Theaters and moving-picture houses stood empty, for every patron found a bundle of thousand-crown notes on his seat. Professional athletes went down on their backs even before the start of their matches so as not to have to accept the prize money intended for the winners. Boxers insisted on covering the funeral expenses of their defeated opponents.

At a stroke, the state achieved a balanced budget. Taxes were paid in exemplary fashion, property levies remitted to the last farthing within three days, and fraudsters appeared before the authorities penitently and without grumbling, paying maximum fines for their false reporting. Loan sharks turned themselves in, beating their breasts and begging that their fines not be suspended. Out in the streets, people deliberately and understandably flouted traffic regulations, buying themselves a new tram ticket at every stop, and should a conductor approach them, declaring in a woebegone voice that they had none, just so they could pay the fine.

Pickpockets and thieves were rampant. An honest citizen, leaving home with an empty pocket, could not afford to eat unless he came back a millionaire many times over. In out-of-the-way spots, travelers would be waylaid and currency sewn into their clothes, and many a scoundrel would not scruple to sneak into a cemetery under cover of darkness and stuff bundles of securities into coffins with the dead bodies. The police department had to set up a special unit to register those honest citizens showing up every day with loads of discarded valuables and voluntarily waiving their right to a ten-percent reward.

Brides without dowries could not keep the marriage proposals at bay, while dollar-rich heiresses went languishing in spinsterhood.

The center-right parties abandoned the principle of the sanctity of private property, declaring themselves for the theory of class struggle and communal property. Big business petitioned the government for the imposition of a thousand-percent increase to the sales tax. The Christian Democrats⁵ took a mass vow of poverty and, eager to fulfill Scripture's precepts impeccably, promptly distributed all they owned among the poor devils still ignorant of the financial upheaval.

In this critical situation, the government proved utterly hapless. While it had indeed convened Parliament, the one measure that body's members could agree on was an immediate halt to the payment of their stipends, since they deemed the fulfillment of their duty and the thanks of a grateful nation reward enough for the sacrifices entailed by their office. A special subcommittee was appointed to deal with all other issues, but its work was endlessly delayed due to the prohibition on accepting any compensation for its work.

⁵ Formed primarily from Catholic political groupings, the Christian democratic People's Party was one of the five dominant parties in interwar Czechoslovakia. (*Translator's note.*)

At last the finance minister resigned and another was appointed in his place, a simple cottager by profession but a loyal party man and a creditable coordinator of farming cooperatives for the bulk purchase of artificial manure. Seeing that the matter was no closer to resolution despite never-ending meetings by the subcommittee in question, the new fellow remarked in an interview with some foreign journalist or other that he himself would have to “roll up his sleeves.” Having got hold of some relevant textbooks, he threw himself into mathematics and macroeconomics with uncommon moxie.

His efforts were slow to produce the desired results. He was about to give up completely and return to his humble cottage, like Cincinnatus – when one evening, absorbed in his algebra, he came upon the equation $-1 \times -1 = +1^2$.

The minister’s face suddenly brightened. Summoning the press corps by telephone, he pronounced deliverance at hand, and he swiftly presented them with his ingenious financial plan to shore up the debased currency and put the economy back on track. Withdrawing all banknotes from circulation, he simply had them stamped with an X, thus not only making their current value of -108.5 positive again but causing the crown to surge to unprecedented heights, rapidly overtaking both the Dutch gulden and the American dollar...

And the good old days came roaring back again. Country folk were squirreling their cash into their stockings and straw mattresses,

groceries were going up in price, civil servants were tightening their belts, party loyalists in ministerial positions proclaiming with one accord that while they were motivated solely by the interests of the republic and the public good, every workman was after all entitled to his wages, manufacturers were pointing out the necessity of “stabilizing production costs,” patrons who stiffed on tips were being ignored, boxers being forced to bury themselves at their own expense, the Education Ministry budget cut by ninety-nine percent, the payment of property levies postponed indefinitely, tram passengers asked by the conductor “does anyone need a ticket?” now remaining resolutely silent, thieves back to stealing in secret, speculators in the open, fifty lewd and sentimental novels were translated and published in eight editions of twenty thousand copies each within a week, while scientific works were sold to paper mills by the kilo. The center-right parties declared that, while they were not opposed to moderate, gradual social reforms, private property and individual initiative must be resolutely upheld, and by acclamation, Parliament passed a motion that their stipends should not only be restored, but that those previously withheld should be fully indemnified.

When shortly afterward, the newspapers printed the first reports of civil servants, artists, and old-age pensioners starving to death, it was seen as an undeniable sign that the crisis had finally passed, and the people’s indescribable jubilation knew no bounds.