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Erik Gilk
Palacký University Olomouc, Department of Czech Studies
erik.gilk@upol.cz
ORCID: 0000-0003-0208-6138

Olbracht's Literary Portrayal of Subcarpathian Ruthenia and Its Jewish Community

Abstract

This study examines the literary image of Subcarpathian Ruthenia, which was part of Czechoslovakia during the interwar period, and its representation in contemporary Czech prose. Following an introductory historical overview, the paper presents a selective survey of literary works that reference this region and explores the reasons behind its appeal, rooted in the profound cultural and social distinctiveness of its inhabitants. It highlights the significant role that writers played in shaping the media image of Subcarpathian Ruthenia through their reportage. The most influential figure in this regard was the Czech left-wing prose writer Ivan Olbracht (1882–1952), who repeatedly visited the easternmost part of Czechoslovakia in the 1930s. In addition to two influential reportage books, he authored two prose works: the balladic novel *Nikola Šuhaj loupežník* [Nikola Šuhaj the Bandit] (1933) and the short-story triptych *Golet v údolí* [Exile in the Valley] (1937). The analytical section of this study is devoted chiefly to *Golet v údolí* (along with its critical reception), as it – unlike the widely recognised and frequently analyzed *Nikola Šuhaj loupežník* [Nikola the Outlaw] – centers on the mentality of the Orthodox Jewish community and the challenges associated with it.

Keywords: Subcarpathian Ruthenia, Czechoslovakia, Colonialism, Jews, Orthodox Jews, Ivan Olbracht

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When Antonín Hartl published his article "Čeští spisovatelé a Podkarpatská Rus" ["Czech Writers and Subcarpathian Ruthenia"] in 1933 (Hartl 1933), he aptly referred to Subcarpathian Ruthenia as the "westernmost Orient" or the "Czechoslovak Far East." He used these terms to explain its appeal for interwar writers, who travelled there to explore the region and draw inspiration for their work. Writers played a crucial role in shaping the media and literary image of Subcarpathian Ruthenia through both reportage and fiction. Through their writings, the broader Czech public was not only informed about the

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region but also influenced in its ideological and value-based perceptions of it. Among these writers, one of the most significant contributors was Ivan Olbracht.

Czechoslovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia

Subcarpathian Ruthenia, also referred to as Transcarpathian Ukraine, Transcarpathia, or Subcarpathia, forms the southwestern tip of present-day Ukraine and is officially known as the Zakarpattia Oblast. Following the Paris Peace negotiations after World War I, the region was annexed to Czechoslovakia. Between 1919 and 1945, it was an official part of the Czechoslovak state, administered first by a governor and later by a regional president. The autonomy of Subcarpathian Ruthenia, long promised by the Prague government, was declared only in the politically turbulent autumn of 1938. A year later, the region was occupied by Hungary. During the Soviet advance through former Czechoslovak territory, Subcarpathian Ruthenia was annexed by Stalin, a step that was formalised a year later through a legal act transferring the land to the Soviet Union.

Subcarpathian Ruthenia was devastated by war and poverty in the aftermath of World War I, with four neighbouring nations – Hungarians, Romanians, Poles, and Russians – competing for control, despite the region's significant social, economic, and cultural underdevelopment. While the Czech lands were primarily industrial and Slovakia predominantly agricultural, Subcarpathian Ruthenia was characterised by pastoralism and seasonal wage labour, particularly in the logging industry. Transportation infrastructure that was considered standard elsewhere at the time was virtually non-existent here; a train journey from Prague to Uzhhorod took twenty-four hours. The later introduction of a regular air route between Prague and Uzhhorod provided a faster alternative but remained relatively expensive. With few exceptions, an intellectual class was almost entirely absent[1], which prompted the Prague government to dispatch large numbers of officials, police officers, teachers, and other state employees to establish the foundations of a functioning state administration. In the first year of the republic's existence, approximately twenty thousand Czechs arrived in the region – initially on their own, and later often with their families[2].

Czech Literature and Subcarpathian Ruthenia

Several writers were officially sent to Subcarpathian Ruthenia as state employees, serving in various capacities. For instance, Jaroslav Durych, author of the short story collection "Kouzelná lampa" [The Magic Lamp] (1926) and the travelogues *Toulky po domově* [Wanderings at Home] (1938)[3], worked as a military doctor in Uzhhorod from March 1921 to October 1922. Jaromír Tomeček spent nearly a decade in the region working as a notary in various locations. In addition to his prose works, he published dozens of feuilletons in the newspaper *Lidové noviny*, which were posthumously compiled in the volume *Na poloninách* [On the Mountain Pastures] (1998). The translator and folklorist Josef Spilka taught at a civic school in Uzhhorod from 1924 to 1929 and dedicated two of his many fairy tales collections to Subcarpathian Ruthenia: *Napucánek* (1936) and *Ivanko z Polonin* [Ivanko from the Mountain Pastures] (1939). The popular prose writer Jan Vrba worked in Transcarpathian Ukraine as a forester, and his novel *Duše na horách* [The Soul in the Mountains] (1932) is based on his first-hand experience. A contemporary of Jaroslav Hašek, Zdeněk Matěj Kuděj, lived in Subcarpathian Ruthenia as a freelance writer in the 1920s, drawing on these experiences in the novel *Horalská republika* [Hutsul Republic] (1932), which chronicles the anti-Hungarian uprising in the region and the establishment of the Hutsul Republic in Yasinia.

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[1] At the end of the 19th century, nearly 70% of individuals over the age of 15 in Subcarpathian Ruthenia were found to be illiterate (Rychlík, Rychlíková 2016: 153).

[2] It is precisely in this context that the reasons for the Prague government's postponement of the promised autonomy for Subcarpathian Ruthenia must be sought. The government argued that the region had not yet developed a sufficiently competent political representation and that the Rusyn people still needed time to grow and mature into such capacities.

[3] In 1993, a volume of Durych's articles on Subcarpathian Ruthenia was published under the title *Duše Podkarpatské Rusi* [*The Soul of Subcarpathian Ruthenia*], named after one of the articles.

Another sizable group consists of writers who spent shorter periods in Subcarpathian Ruthenia for various reasons and primarily documented their experiences through reportage. This group includes *Enciány z Popa Ivana* [Gentians from Mount Pop Ivan] (1932) by Stanislav Kostka Neumann, as well as *Zakarpatsko* [Transcarpathia], a similarly conceived work by Vašek Káňa, published in the same year. Anna Brtníková-Petříková compiled her sketches, diary entries, and feuilletons in the book *Mezi Huculy – zápisky z let 1929–1933* [Among the Hutsuls: Notes from 1929–1933] (1934). Julius Komárek's *Lovy v Karpatech* straddles the line between scientific treatise and adventurous travel diary [Hunts in the Carpathians] (1942).

Vladislav Vančura visited Subcarpathian Ruthenia twice, each time with a clear artistic purpose: first to gather material for his novel *Poslední soud* [The Last Judgment] (1929) and later to direct the film *Marijka nevěrnice* [Marijka the Unfaithful] (1934). A unique, though not entirely isolated, case is that of Karel Čapek, who visited Subcarpathian Ruthenia only as a tourist but nonetheless set the plot of one of his finest novels, *Hordubal* (1933), in the region. It appears that the ruralist writer Josef Knap never actually visited Transcarpathia, yet in his novel *Puszta* [The Puszta] (1937), he depicts the story of Czech settlers who purchased inexpensive land in the flatlands near the Hungarian border and struggled with the harsh natural conditions while establishing a new village. The same is true of Karel Nový, whose fairy-tale-like story *Potulný lovec* [The Wandering Hunter] (1941) opens in the easternmost part of the First Republic.

From this incomplete list of works set in Subcarpathian Ruthenia, it is evident that the region was an attractive setting and a significant source of inspiration for writers. As with other social phenomena, authors tended to engage with it collectively, regardless of their generational, programmatic, or ideological affiliations. While Slovakia was already familiar to Czech writers before the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy – having been "claimed" in literary terms as early as the 19th century through the works of Božena Němcová, Adolf Heyduk, Julius Zeyer, and Alois Jirásek – Subcarpathian Ruthenia played a similar role in the interwar period as an unexplored and previously uncharted literary territory.

Colonisation in Subcarpathian Ruthenia

Writers were evidently drawn to this region by its exoticism, which manifested in several key ways. One of the most striking was its distinct landscape – its rugged terrain of hills and mountains, with deep forests and high-altitude *polonyna*, evoking an environment seemingly untouched by human influence. This quality often conjured images of pre-Christian times, governed by natural and cyclical rhythms. For instance, in Durych's work, the search for the "soul" of Subcarpathian Ruthenia is marked by an atmosphere of mystery, an ancient, almost timeless quality, remote and incomprehensible to those bound by Western civilization. Vančura similarly reflects on the passage of time in this land in his novel: "The Carpathian forests are deep time, time with flowing manes from the era of raids" (Vančura [1929] 2000: 369).

A second aspect that captivated Czech artists was the region's entirely distinct culture, customs, and the mentality of its inhabitants. Closely related to this was its diverse ethnic composition: alongside the Rusyns lived sizable communities of Hungarians, Russians, Poles, Romanians, and, notably, Roma and Jews. The Orthodox Jewish community of Subcarpathian Ruthenia stood out in particular, as it differed markedly from the largely assimilated Jewish minority in the Czech lands. In terms of religious beliefs and practices, these Orthodox Jews closely resembled the Hasidic communities of neighbouring Galicia.

The inhabitants of Subcarpathian Ruthenia were accustomed to harsh living conditions, in part because they had always been under the rule of foreign powers. Czech communist journalists and writers, in particular, paid close attention to the stark social disparities, which they viewed as bordering on capitalist exploitation. While most Rusyns lived in extreme poverty, at the very edge of subsistence, a narrow class of merchants and labour brokers, predominantly of Jewish origin, was accused of exploiting them through arduous manual labour for inadequate pay.

For the average Czech citizen, Subcarpathian Ruthenia was a difficult-to-access region, and the public was initially introduced to it through reports and articles published in periodicals. Later, authors often gathered these pieces into book collections. These texts often sought to justify the annexation of the region to Czechoslovakia as a legitimate and rational decision, highlighting the progress already achieved in education, healthcare, culture, transportation, and the economy. The Rusyns were regarded as a similar Slavic people – "brothers," yet underdeveloped – who needed the guidance and assistance of the more advanced Czechs. This perspective is reflected in the metaphor of the region as "a foster child, not our own, but dear to us, which we have taken in to raise" (Drahný 1921: 25). The portrayal of Subcarpathian Ruthenia as an oriental or exotic land was meant to reinforce perceptions of its backwardness. As Stanislav Holubec suggests, it is possible that "by emphasising the existence of their own Orient, Czechs reinforced their self-image as Western Europeans, since having colonial possessions in the Orient was one of the defining characteristics of Western European nations" (Holubec 2016: 535).

Subcarpathian Ruthenia was most frequently compared to Bosnia, which had been under the protectorate of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy since 1878 and was widely regarded – not only in Czech political discourse – as a synonym for backwardness and political instability. However, colonialist[4] discourse did not confine itself to associating Subcarpathian Ruthenia with the Orient or Asia; parallels were drawn from even more distant geographical contexts. The region was described as "a piece of the darkest Africa," "Czechoslovakia's Tahiti" (Lev 1921: 16, 23), and even "Czechoslovakia's Canada" (Nauman 1929: 654), the latter alluding to its dense forests. This paternalistic Czech attitude toward Subcarpathian Ruthenia closely aligns with the concept of Orientalism as defined by Edward Said

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[4] This term is not a product of modern postcolonial discourse but was already in use at the time, including in Olbracht's writings. For example, in his 1932 reportage *Ti, o kterých tu dříve nebylo slýcháno* [*The Unheard Ones*], he stated: "Czech gentlemen are colonising Subcarpathia. They are Czechifying a region hundreds of kilometers away, separated from the crown lands by the entire expanse of Slovakia" (Olbracht 1935: 44).

([1978] 2008) and permeated both journalism and fiction. Although present in both spheres, in fiction it is naturally subordinated to artistic intent, making it less overt and more diffuse.

A telling example is Vrba's novel *Duše na horách*. On one hand, the novel legitimises Czechoslovak rule over Subcarpathian Ruthenia through statements that reflect the Rusyns' perspective:

> We used to serve the Hungarians, and now we serve the Czechs. The former whipped us and treated us like animals, while the latter get angry because we behave like animals. That's why they seem better to me. (Vrba 1931: 172)

On the other hand, the novel draws a parallel between Subcarpathian Ruthenia and Bosnia. When the protagonist, Jiří, a Czech forester with strong autobiographical traits, arrives in the region, he reflects:

> He was travelling to a strange land, about which everyone he spoke to had a different opinion. For us, it was most often what Bosnia and Herzegovina had been for Austria – a place where, as long as we held onto it, an endless stream of money would flow, but one that, once we made something of it, we would inevitably lose… Those who had seen the land spoke of its beauty and of the honourable work that awaited honest hands. (Vrba 1931: 56)

The literary portrayal of Subcarpathian Ruthenia, which was characterised by the poeticisation of archaic and mythical forms of folk life, began to collide with harsh social realities at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s. Perceptions of the region gradually evolved: the image of a unique, distant, mysterious, and beautiful yet impoverished and suffering land became increasingly grounded in concrete facts about its economic and social conditions. These realities, closely tied to the broader situation in other parts of the republic, ultimately presented an intensified version of the most severe consequences of the economic crisis. It was under these circumstances that Ivan Olbracht arrived in Subcarpathian Ruthenia.

Ivan Olbracht and Subcarpathian Ruthenia

Among all the writers and artists who turned to Subcarpathian Ruthenia in their works, Olbracht played a pivotal role. However, he was hardly the only leftist intellectual who directed his attention to the easternmost part of Czechoslovakia. In addition to S. K. Neumann, V. Vančura, K. Nový, and V. Káňa, we can also mention Laco Novomeský. The world of Subcarpathian Ruthenia completely drew Olbracht in; between 1931 and 1936, he spent every summer there and visited several times in winter as well. He travelled across the region from Uzhhorod to Yasinia, gaining an intimate knowledge of nearly all its ethnic communities – perhaps with the exception of the Romanian minority in the southeasternmost part. Without exaggeration, it can be said that in the highlands of Subcarpathian Ruthenia, Olbracht discovered a land that felt destined for him, just as this "nameless land" found in him its author – one who was the first to come close to capturing its essence and, in doing so, truly brought it into literature.

Miloš Hlávka, in his review of the reportage book *Hory a staletí* [Mountains and Centuries], even referred to Subcarpathian Ruthenia as "the land of I. Olbracht" (Hlávka 1934/1935), suggesting that it would secure a place in literary consciousness much like the regions associated with Bezruč, Jirásek, Pourrat, or Giono. Olbracht's first text on Transcarpathian Ukraine was an extensive reportage essay with the telling title "Boj o kulturu na Podkarpatské Rusi" [The Struggle for Culture in Subcarpathian Ruthenia]. He began writing it in Volové in August 1931, and it was serialised in the newspaper *Lidové* *noviny* in four instalments between September and November of the same year. The essay's depth of insight was remarkable, especially considering that Olbracht had spent less than two months in the region at the time[5]. Ludmila Lantová went so far as to suggest that, during his brief stay, Olbracht had "understood and conveyed a more multifaceted and profound picture of Subcarpathian Ruthenia than all previous accounts combined" (Lantová 1982: 249).

The reportage had a significant impact, and Olbracht quickly came to be regarded as an expert on Subcarpathian issues. He began delivering lectures on the topic and, during the harsh winter of 1931/1932, when the eastern part of the region faced famine, he helped establish the *Komitét dělnické pomoci pro záchranu hladovějících v Podkarpatské Rusi* [Workers' Aid Committee for the Rescue of the Starving in Subcarpathian Ruthenia]. The organization became highly politically active, and one of its public initiatives was the publication of the documentary pamphlet *Hlad v Podkarpatsku* [*Hunger in Subcarpathia*] (1932). That same year, Olbracht published his reportage book *Země bez jména* [Nameless Land], which expanded and reworked the successful essay mentioned above.

The relatively short book could be seen as a polemic against the distorted prejudices that had formed in the Czech public consciousness over the years, partly under the influence of official reports. The publication sparked a wave of interest in the social and political situation in Subcarpathian Ruthenia, even among Czech writers. František Xaver Šalda, upon his first reading, praised it as "a reportage of such high quality that it is equal to ten good novels" (Šalda 1931/1932: 317). Drawing on the facts compiled in the book, he went on to write an essay titled "Česká kolonizace na Podkarpatské Rusi" ["Czech Colonisation in Subcarpathian Ruthenia"], in which he expanded on Olbracht's observations regarding the nature of Czechoslovak administration in the region. Owing to the scholarly rigor and factual depth of Olbracht's reportage, anyone attempting to describe or analyse Subcarpathian society in the future had to contend with his findings. This is evidenced by the later official compendium *Podkarpatská Rus* [Subcarpathian Ruthenia] (1936), whose introduction implicitly positions itself as a counterpoint to Olbracht's pioneering but "biased" accounts.

However, the development of Olbracht's original periodical reportage did not end with this publication; it culminated in the final book version, *Hory a staletí* (1935), which underwent further revisions and was expanded with additional chapters. This expansion was more substantial than before, directly capturing the rapid transformations that had taken place in the region since the spring of 1932 while also providing a more detailed and multifaceted depiction of life in Subcarpathian Ruthenia. *Hory a staletí* thus became a comprehensive synthesis of Olbracht's knowledge and interpretations of Subcarpathian issues. Nonetheless, Olbracht's primary goal in travelling to Subcarpathian Ruthenia was not solely journalistic; he sought artistic inspiration for his fiction, as he later recalled (Olbracht 1938). Having first distilled his experience of the region into reportage, he began contemplating its potential for literary representation, which eventually resulted in a novel, a film script, and a short story triptych.

The plot of the balladic novel *Nikola Šuhaj loupežník* [Nikola Šuhaj the Bandit] (1933) was based on real events: the story of an outlaw who operated near the village of Koločava in the early postwar years. Critics particularly emphasised the novel's mythological and socio-ethical dimensions, praising the seamless and functional fusion of factual and artistic elements. Although Olbracht stressed that his goal was not to write a story grounded in absolute historical accuracy, he thoroughly researched all available materials before beginning the novel, including court records related to the case of the Šuhaj brothers.

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[5] We know that in June 1931, Olbracht first travelled to eastern Slovakia, where he stayed in a village near Medzilaborce. It was only in mid-July that he moved to Uzhhorod.

Immediately after the novel's publication, Olbracht faced criticism for distorting reality, particularly for his negative portrayal of state employees; namely, the gendarmes who unsuccessfully pursued Nikola Šuhaj and resorted to illegal methods. The attacks intensified after Olbracht received the State Prize for Literature. At the initiative of *Četnický obzor* [Gendarmerie Horizon], the most combative periodical on the issue, journalists Bohumil Mladý and R. Gordon were sent to Subcarpathian Ruthenia to study the same materials over a four-month period and "objectify" the Šuhaj legend. Their efforts culminated in the novel *Sami* [On Their Own] (1936), with a Remarque-inspired[6] subtitle, *Na východě republiky klid* [All Quiet in the East of the Republic]. The book completely inverted the evaluative perspective, as it sided with the enforcers of law and order[7].

Although Olbracht defended himself by appealing to artistic freedom and creative imagination – and *Nikola Šuhaj loupežník* had been reprinted nine times by the end of the 1930s – the novel was removed from school libraries, and its translation into Ukrainian even prompted a police intervention. This led to an absurd situation in which the same ministry that had initially recognised the novel's artistic merits with a state prize later effectively discredited it through its decisions (see Holub 1983). The same year the novel was published, Olbracht invited his friends Karel Nový and Vladislav Vančura to Subcarpathian Ruthenia to film *Marijka nevěrnice*. Exterior scenes were shot around Koločava based on Olbracht's concept. The film premiered on March 2, 1934, with a screenplay co-written by Olbracht and Nový, directed by Vančura, and featuring music composed by Bohuslav Martinů. The film's narrative was likely inspired by a motif from *Nikola Šuhaj loupežník* – the temporary separation of men from their wives due to seasonal forestry work. However, rather than constructing a tightly plotted narrative, the filmmakers prioritised psychological depth and sought to capture the uniqueness of the Transcarpathian landscape, further intensified by Martinů's music.

To achieve authenticity, they cast local non-actors from the highlands, who often re-enacted elements of their own lives on screen, and incorporated lyrical shots of the region's natural scenery. Olbracht himself played a minor role as a Prague tourist dissatisfied with the accommodations and dining services in Subcarpathian Ruthenia – if such things could even be spoken of at the time. The film was met with a lukewarm reception from both audiences and critics.[8] Their reserved response led to financial difficulties for the production company, ultimately forcing it to cease operations. In the summer of 1936, Olbracht made his final journey to the easternmost part of Czechoslovakia, spending most of his stay within the Jewish enclave. There, he met individuals who would become the models for the characters in his short story triptych *Golet v údolí* [Exile in the Valley] (1937)[9]. The author himself explained the meaning of the exotic-sounding title as follows:

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[6] The Czech translation of Remarque's famous novel *Na západní frontě klid* (*All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1928) was published a year after its original release, thanks to Bohumil Mathesius's translation.

[7] Later, Jaromír Tomeček adapted the Šuhaj theme in his youth novel *Mezi dvěma výstřely* [*Between Two Shots*] (1972).

[8] Conversely, the film Marijka nevěrnice was later highly praised by film historians, particularly Pavel Taussig, who appreciated its use of non-actors, its documentary-style cinematography, and its integration of both thematic and stylistic elements of the social ballad. He also highlighted its strong dramatic structure and Vladislav Vančura's extraordinary cinematic and artistic vision (see Taussig 1982).

> The Hebrew word gālūt means the land of expulsion, that is, the exile in which Jews live outside Palestine. In Subcarpathian Yiddish, it is pronounced "golet" (or at least that is how I hear it); among our Jews, it is pronounced "goles". The phrase *nicht länger soll Goles dauern* is used to refer to things that will soon come to pass. Among Hasidic Jews in the East, the word has a mystical connotation. A part of the *Shekhinah*, the divine presence (in dialects "šchine" or "šchune"), went into exile with the Jews and is scattered in the form of mystical sparks throughout all things and shapes. (Olbracht 1938: 4)

It is certainly no coincidence that amid profound political upheaval – including the rise of the global Zionist movement and the escalation of Nazi antisemitism – Olbracht, himself of Jewish descent through his mother[10], chose to depict the life of the Jewish community in a region he knew intimately. He was not the only one who, in the same year, artistically depicted the Jewish enclave in the eastern part of the republic or its vicinity. Jiří Langer, in his collection of Hasidic stories and legends *Devět bran* [Nine Gates] (1937), presented the vanishing world of Orthodox Galician Jews, a world that even then appeared exotic to Western European readers. With great sensitivity and literary ingenuity, Langer explains various aspects of everyday life and the religious culture of the Hasidim. The appeal of his stories is enhanced by the richness of their linguistic texture and the interweaving of diverse generic elements.

Langer addresses his readers with both solemn urgency and uninhibited humour, yet always with words that reveal a deep, sincere love for the community he portrays, a community to which he feels he belongs and in which he presents himself as an insider. Olbracht's approach shares Langer's empathy, kindness, and humour in depicting life in a Jewish village. However, a key difference lies in the sense of nostalgia that is absent from Langer's work, as well as in Olbracht's narrative distance from the stories that he relates. Unlike Langer, Olbracht does not identify with the Jewish community which he portrays.

The Jewish Community in Subcarpathian Ruthenia and Ivan Olbracht

The Jewish community in Subcarpathian Ruthenia was both numerically significant and politically and economically influential, especially in comparison to the Czech lands. According to the 1921 census, out of nearly 600,000 inhabitants, around 80,000 identified as Jewish by nationality. A decade later, this number exceeded 90,000[11]. As a result, Jews constituted one in eight residents in Subcarpathian Ruthenia, and the region was home to a quarter of all Jews in Czechoslovakia. However, the fundamental difference between the Jewish population in Subcarpathian Ruthenia and that in the western part of Czechoslovakia was not quantitative but qualitative – rooted in religious and cultural life. The vast majority of Subcarpathian Jews adhered to Orthodox[12] Eastern Judaism, strictly preserving its traditions. Their lives were governed by a set of firm religious regulations that structured daily existence into a rigid cycle of small rituals. These divine commandments, known as *mitzvot*[13], form the essence of the Torah, and their observance represents one of the pillars of Judaism.

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[9] For the sake of completeness, it should be noted that, according to Rudolf Havel, *Golet v údolí* was not intended to be Olbracht's final book on Subcarpathian Ruthenia. He had planned to compile two journalistic texts – *Jak jsme filmovali Marijku nevěrnici* [How We Filmed Marijka the Unfaithful] and *Jak mi Masarykovo jméno pomohlo napsati tři knihy* [How Masaryk's Name Helped Me Write Three Books] – together with two new humorous short stories set in the Jewish milieu. The newspaper *Rudé právo* announced the planned title of the volume, *Tajemství modré hvězdy* [The Secret of the Blue Star], on December 16, 1937, but neither the stories nor the book was ever completed (Hanuška 2001: 443).

[10] Under the racial Nuremberg Laws, enacted by the German Reichstag in 1935 and later applied in occupied Czechoslovakia, Olbracht would have been classified as Jewish and placed in direct life-threatening danger. However, his mother, Kamila Schönfeldová, who came from a wealthy Jewish family, had renounced Judaism before her marriage and converted to Catholicism. This fact played a crucial role in shaping Olbracht's fate during World War II, and it was only because of it that he was not directly affected by the Shoah.

The way of life of Subcarpathian Jews was one of the most distinctive elements of the region's cultural landscape, which both attracted and surprised Czech writers. In contrast, most Jewish families in the Czech lands were fully acculturated, blending into the national majority in appearance and habits, often not practicing religion, observing the Sabbath, or maintaining traditional customs. František Langer vividly illustrates this contrast in his memoir *Byli a bylo* [They Were, and It Was] (1963), recalling the external and internal transformation of his younger brother Jiří after his return from the Galician town of Belz. To describe his well-off, Vinohrady-based family's reaction to their newly Hasidic relative, Langer draws a parallel to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. He aptly remarks: "My brother did not escape from Belz back to civilization; my brother brought Belz with him" (Langer [1963] 2003: 179).

A similar sense of cultural shock must have awaited any Czech encountering the entirely different world and mentality of Subcarpathian Jews. It was precisely this environment – an autonomous Jewish enclave in the village of Polana – that Olbracht chose as the setting for the stories in *Golet v údolí*. The first two stories are anecdotal and arise from situations in which the protagonists' unwavering faith in God and the anticipated arrival of the Messiah lead to unexpected commercial gains (*Zázrak s Julčou* [The Miracle with Julča]), or in which the strict observance of *mitzvot* is carried to absurd extremes (*Událost v mikve* [Incident in the Mikveh]). The third and much longer story, *O smutných očích Hany Karadžičové* [The Sad Eyes of Hana Karadžičová], takes on a very different tone, highlighting the tragic consequences of insularity and rigid adherence to ancient traditions.

When Hanele, the daughter of a prominent Polana family, falls in love with Karadžič, an assimilated Jewish man from Ostrava, and brings him home to meet her parents, the couple encounters an insurmountable barrier. Although the suitor reassures himself that they will surely find a way to reconcile – after all, "this too is Europe" – the gulf between these two radically different and irreconcilable worlds proves impossible to bridge. Rationality cannot resolve what belongs to the spiritual and religious realm, enclosed within a world of mystery and myth[14]. The family disowns Hanele, the rabbi lights a black candle for her in the synagogue as if for the dead, and the young couple flees to Ostrava – back to the modern, civilised world, far removed from the patriarchal society of the East.

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[11] Nearly all of them were deported to concentration camps during World War II.

[12] Hasidism is considered an ultra-Orthodox branch of Judaism.

[13] In total, there are 613 mitzvot, divided into 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments.

[14] Olga Zitová aptly observes: "The unshakable constants in the malleable fabric of the world are faith, which goes hand in hand with an unwavering relationship with God, and above all, the definitiveness of Jewish identity. According to the people of Polana, one is born a Jew and dies a Jew. It is impossible to cease being Jewish or to renounce one's origins. This makes the encounter with Ivo Karadžič all the more terrifying for the Hasidim—he is a freethinker who has abandoned not only his faith but also emancipated himself from the traditions of his ancestors" (Zitová 2016: 285).

Olbracht had already pointed out the insurmountable sense of exclusivity among Hasidic Jews and their belief in their chosen status – as well as their disdain for anything deemed impure, meaning non-Jewish – in his reportage book *Země bez jména*. The chapter *Židé* [The Jews], originally published in 1932 as a standalone reportage, ends with an observation that closely parallels the resolution of the short story "O smutných očích Hany Karadžičové": "if a goy stands lower than a pig, then a faithless Western Jew stands even lower than a goy" (Olbracht 1935: 70). Yet the chapter is far from entirely negative. Olbracht also acknowledges the indispensable role of Jewish shopkeepers and merchants in the local economy. He sees Jewish economic dominance and moneylending as matters of the past and notes that, based on his observations and experience, he did not encounter antisemitism in Subcarpathian Ruthenia.

A starkly different picture, however, was painted by Czech journalists and correspondents, who often spoke of Subcarpathian Jews with contempt. This was partly due to their commercial ties with the much-despised Hungarians. Many observers even grouped Jews and Hungarians together as a subversive and destructive element, using the label "Hungarian-Jewish" – a deeply misleading designation given Hungary's strong anti-Jewish policies at the time (Holubec 2016: 544). An extreme example of this discourse was Miklós Bartha's book *V zemi Chazarů* [In the Land of the Khazars] (1927), whose cover featured the classic antisemitic motif of a grasping Jewish claw.

In *Golet v údolí*, Olbracht approaches Jewish society with empathy and understanding, fully aware of its gradual disappearance, while not overlooking the difficulties stemming from its rigid insularity. In *Nikola Šuhaj loupežník*, however, the depiction of Jews is markedly different, veering toward a negative – even hostile – portrayal. The Jewish community in Koločava has a strong vested interest in Šuhaj's capture, as his outlaw activities disrupt their trade routes and, given the widespread poverty in the region, his robberies primarily target wealthy Jews. It is the Jewish merchants who advise the Czech gendarmes to arrest Eržika, knowing that Šuhaj will try to rescue his beloved, and they are also the ones who offer a bounty for his capture – ten times higher than the amount set by the Czechoslovak government. The gendarmerie captain's mindset mirrors the antisemitic rhetoric found in contemporary journalism about Subcarpathian Jews: "A monstrous breed! Kill them, slaughter them, and wipe them out like Herod!" (Olbracht [1933] 2001: 144).

Contemporary Reactions

Critics reviewing *Golet v údolí* focused primarily on Olbracht's artistic portrayal of the Jewish community of Subcarpathian Ruthenia. Among the most notable responses were the contrasting views of Václav Černý and Bedřich Václavek. Černý discussed the book enthusiastically in *Literární noviny* in an article titled "Baladika židovského profétismu" [The Balladry of Jewish Prophetism], describing it as a profound exploration of the "racial" and "religious" psychology of the Jewish community. In his view, Olbracht, whom Černý compared to figures in French literature, with whom he was well acquainted, took a more effective approach by "leaving his protagonists within their religious and racial environments and capturing them poetically through their exclusive internal relationships. That is very perceptive and deeply insightful. It immediately opens up a broad and remarkably clear yet convincing view into the inner realms of Judaism" (Černý 1937: 5).

A similar perspective was expressed by František Křelina, who praised Olbracht's ability to penetrate beyond the surface "to the spiritual foundation of [Jewish] life, which lies in faith in the Talmud and the observance of religious forms" (Křelina 1938: 7). Alongside Černý, Antonín Matěj Píša (Píša 1937) and Josef Strnadel (Strnadel 1937) also viewed the Jewish community's religious bonds, their faith and sense of responsibility toward God, as a source of unwavering strength that enabled them to endure extreme poverty in *Golet v údolí*. Václavek, however, offered a sharply contrasting view. He argued that the insularity of the world that Olbracht depicted weakened the author's mythopoetic power. A Marxist-oriented critic, Václavek reproached Olbracht for his lack of ideological engagement. He maintained that mere understanding and depiction were insufficient – Olbracht should have confronted this world "with our reality, the reality of the twentieth century, a century in which even much younger structures are already in decline, a century of struggle for a new present and a distant future" (Václavek 1937: 54)[15].

Virtually all critics acknowledged the book's mimetic achievement and the depth of Olbracht's observations about Subcarpathian Ruthenia. For instance, František Götz wrote that the author "discovered the miracle of folk solidarity through the spirit of the ancient Jewish myth" (Götz 1936/1937: 2). Likewise, there was broad consensus on the high artistic quality of Olbracht's work. Pavel Eisner, writing in *Prager Presse*, did not hesitate to call the triptych "another Czech book of global significance" (Eisner 1937: 8). According to critics, the aesthetic value of *Golet v údolí* lay primarily in its vibrant and distinctive fusion of factual accuracy with mythical elements, of reality with hallucination. Olbracht's exploration of the mystery, enigma, and even the strangeness of Orthodox Jewish faith was also widely praised. In another review, Götz noted that the novelist, "precisely because he immersed himself so reverently in the twilight soul of the people and in the communal life of the Jewish village, also uncovered the sources of folk demonology" (Götz 1937: 11).

Conclusion

Through his journalistic and literary work, Olbracht significantly shaped public perception of the easternmost region of the First Republic. With his keen, immersive observation of local social conditions – some of which he actively influenced – he played a crucial role in modifying and correcting the prevailing[16], often critical and disdainful attitudes toward Subcarpathian Ruthenia. His portrayal of the lives of members of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community – so distant from modern, "civilised" Europe, including the Czech lands – offered a balanced artistic depiction of otherness and exoticism. Much like Jiří Langer, he thus unintentionally (or perhaps deliberately?) preserved a record of a world that would soon be annihilated during World War II and is now entirely unimaginable.

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[15] It should be noted that Olbracht subjected the Jewish enclave to precisely such a confrontation in the final short story, *O smutných očích Hany Karadžičové*.

[16] Or at the very least, he was perceived by the local inhabitants as someone possessing such influence. As Olbracht himself remarked: "For five years, I travelled to this region. My reputation has settled somewhere in the middle, as it should be – neither excessively good nor bad. I have grown accustomed to people constantly asking things of me because they believe I am 'more powerful than the district chief himself' and that I am always sending messages to the president" (Olbracht 1938: 4).

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