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## A small provincial town family as a social and literary phenomenon at the end of 19th century

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*Kateřina Homolová*

A SMALL PROVINCIAL TOWN FAMILY AS A SOCIAL AND LITERARY  
PHENOMENON AT THE END OF 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Small town as a social fact of 19<sup>th</sup> century

In the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century advances on the significant qualitative change of the society from traditional to modern. Caused by the influence of urbanism and industrialism the new specific and not only territorial community is emerging – a small provincial town.

We are witnesses of haywired and wrecked relational ideal too. The family as a relational mesh is endangered by dynamics of the social development. Traditional family is going to collapse, at once time strong home fellowship starts to lose its functions. These factors dictate the specific way of living being neither the old villager nor the new citizen – the individual assuming of city life arrangement with no ingrained cultural pattern. "Small town" could be seen as a term for life style that is filled up with futile enjoyment, adherence to the things that are already part of past time, the things that do not exist in reality anymore. It is a synonym for foolishness and hypocrisy promoted to the virtues.

Small town did not want to become a city. It is naturally very comfortable just to pretend to be a city, just to be similar (and in this imitation of a city it goes futhermore), to use the same so called "great" privileges but the duties or better the rules make to "small" to its own image.

Provincial town family – the principal theme of critical realism

The realism, usually called critical, dominates also the czech literature in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century. This term comes out from main realistic prose inclination to changed society. The bourgeois family with emasculated father-figure and with temporary and non-consonant children's living with parents together gives more space for detailed analysis of these thorny problems. The fundamental conflict is based on superordination of money and social grades (which are accompanied by ruthless self-interest) over honesty and morality. Deformed ideas of "national revival" are caricatured as well.

The authors adopt distinctive attitude to individual residents of the small provincial towns. The characters become figures with a ridiculous tincture (caused by their blames and faults). That's why the authorial approach oscillates among fellow feeling, mercifulness, warm tenderness, bitter irony, understanding humour even sharp squib. In the centre of the authorial intention stands the animadversion of the townee. The main writers' instrument is detailed portray and in-depth depiction of their shortcomings such as small-minded and trivial interests, empty talks and gossips, superstitions, narrow-mindedness and empty pomp.

The most marked manifestation of national and personal emancipative tendency is the clash between old and new world in form of literary characters. Especially the critical conditions inside the family circle.

We have chosen one of the best czech critical realists (besides the others) František Herites<sup>1</sup>.

In his work the perfect intimate knowledge of small town is reflected. Herites's genre miniature is fully convenient to the need to express all the typical features of chosen world of small town in details. He shows life of common people and their heavily hidden poverty, describes decline and breakup of old weathy families, points out the low manners and inconsolableness of family and society conditions – in small town even emphasized by egoism, acquisitiveness, prejudices, narrow-mindedness, hypocrisy and last but not the least national lukewarmness.

Although it was reprehended to Herites that his works lack of art general conclusion, the ability to express features that are peculiarly original and disproportionate prolixity of action, he has remarkably developed sense for ordinary detail. The life stories of his heroes are sentimental stories more than human tragedies because of author's sober criticism. As the most valuable at Herites work is considered to be his ability to describe his characters from their psychological side – characterization.

#### The secret of uncle Josef

The story that František Herites himself evaluated as a one of his best literary deeds was devoted to *Lumir* and finished on 6<sup>th</sup> May in 1882. We can talk about the author's autobiography and at the same time about his "secret" (according to the young age in which he was able to create such a high-quality masterpiece). *The secret of uncle Josef* is truly the chef d'oeuvre at the beginning of author's long literary production.

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<sup>1</sup> František Herites (1851–1929) novelist of lumir generation, author of fine genre spectacles from small town environment and feuilletons. As a writer he was very popular and he was also translated a lot especially to Serbo-Croat, Polish, Russian. Together with Otakar Mokří and Julius Zeyer created so called Vodňany trio. The other masterpieces from small town environment: *Dvě povídky z maloměstského* (1894), *Maloměstské humoresky* (1895–1896), *Maloměstské obrázky* (1959).

### Storyline

*The secret of uncle Josef* is mostly an idyll from an old small town when ado, tea or coffee parties have taken turns and the excitement changed for the contentment and the piece of heart and home. The text is a picture and at the same time the reflection of young dreams and resolutions but it does not cover their conflict with the background of small town.

Towards the fundamental line of action – a young pharmacist Josef Perner sacrificed his scientific ambitions for the rescue of family estate that is in danger and finally he died tragically of cholera – the shorter stories are attached and relate to the main or secondary characters (grandfather, rococo lady, clergyman Tomáš). Several independent episodes are also attached (about Josef's childhood and youth, about the history of Perner pharmacy trade) and they put the finishing touches to the story as a whole.

The main characters were chosen by an author from three different figures. Old Krón with his wig and plait, an enemy of anything new and a rococo lady that symbolizes distant past. The grandfather with his wife, grandmother are the holders of renescent burgess-ship – thinker grandpa, always polite and loving and a grandma as a ideal wife of all the times are both the typical representatives of Biedermeier style. Uncle Josef and Ema Krón are the new generation of 19<sup>th</sup> century – Josef with his scientific interests that go beyond the town borders and even beyond the borders of the country and with his aversion to becoming involved to small town intrigues and Ema as a woman that decides about her destiny by herself.

### Herites's small town family

František Herites in *The secret of uncle Josef* wanted to cover the mentality, opinions and life style of three generation in Czech small town from the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century.

It is a generation of playful and gallant rococo, a generation of sober and towards town oriented Biedermeier style and finally the young generation of the same young 19<sup>th</sup> century. Each of them perceive the space of small town in a different way, each of them can see different values there. And the common for all of them is just the same (more or less intensive) perception of small town environment. The best way how to point this fact out is to analyse the behaviour and attitudes of the main characters in the story.

### Grandpa – gallant adventurer

He tried to mine gold, he wanted to use pearl river and realized "construction of monumental building in the precise ancient style". His renescently poetic plans (huge traps for quails, the try of turning over the natural riverbed of a river to different direction, try to acclimatize a tea plant in Bohemia or to set out a ship on the journey to India) seems to be charmingly foolish to a reader. With the eagerness of a hawker and with unfailing enthusiasm he starts greater and even greater businesses, more and more opaque but even also more tempting actions.

All of them lasts in a crash. But nothing can discouraged grandpa. He is volatile in his desires to do something great. He, a thinker does not have time to take care about the

things that exalt spirit too less like the simple questions of housekeeping. He reads Voltair, and always behaves as a real specialist. Inspired by ancient poets, he lives from one day to another and enjoys all his days, in this process he strictly keeps *Carpe diem!* Small town life style only makes him sure in his thoughts of his own exceptionality. He gives his time and space to the foolishness and from the reality removed life.

### Mrs. Grandma

She is an ideal woman of all the times, she is obedient to a man and proud of herself at the same time, educated and pragmatic, without any stronger emotions like experience of sadness or joy, she always takes a perfect control of herself, she is an old vital lady.

But she also cannot conceal "her" time. She wears exclusively "chapeau à la Walter Scott". We can see her as an erudite woman who knows the latest news, who lives in the latest trends. She takes pleasure in unsettled destinies of the heroines of Samuel Richardson's books. She loves weepy stories, she reads revues about all the experiments and inventions of her time and she likes to arrange talks about current topics with anyone.

Her life is also run by stereotypes, even if her activities are seemingly very innocent like talks above newspapers or playing the piano. Another significant feature of small town mentality at grandma is the character of her relationship towards Czech language: Mrs. Grandma spoke Czech but she read in German, she thought in German; her education was German.

### Václav Krón

Eighty-years old man but a man that is full of life in both physical and mental strength. He was an old soldier who fought under Laudon in time of the highest fame of Austrian arms. What was in his youth good manners, he took as a highest point of all goodness. The end of the century brought so many surprises to Europe and so many unexpected changes that the beginning of the new century became a horror for him.

Small town is not a half city for him, it is just a half perversion, shamefulness and chaos of empty godlessness and at the same time personal faintheartedness and cowardice. Small town allows him to live "in the old times" at least a bit. He is a laughing stock for other people, even his own relatives for his character and probably the last honest nature.

Meanwhile grandpa takes a small town as a first degree of the great changes, Václav Krón takes him (or better he would like to take it) in the other way – as a place that keeps off the eccentric society novelties of great settlements.

### Lady Laura Krocín from Drahobejle – a rococo lady

This woman represents a small town life style in a best way. Although even she like her son-in-law Václav Krón, stagnated in the time of her youth, she adapted perfectly to the new claims of the society at small town. Her indispensable personal things are a face powder, fard, fly for upper lip in the shape of heart and a mirror. She still wore a rococo fashion.

Even if she still lived in past and was flirtatious and wicked, she soon learnt "modern" deceptions and intrigues and unfortunately even not a typically small town family pride missed her.

She lived in small town from coercion because she married "common, but wealthy bourgeois". Lady Laura, humiliated by the situation that she was made living outside Viennese court, when she was once introduced, found herself finally in a small town society. Here she could finally seem even to herself as a noblewoman. In the same way as the others from the higher society she also paid a great attention to the superficial tinsels of worldly life inwrought into the foolish dreams.

Herites ironizes the character of rococo lady in his mention of the origin of her name. Her name was originally Šafránková but it was always a symbol of everything worldly, simply civil sludge so the family accepted the name Krocín (lat. crocus – šafrán) from Drahohejle.

### Josef Perner and Ema Krón

Josef accepts small town in a realistic way: he is here because of the family claims and so separated from his scientific research in Sweden. Small town relatives even more raised his feeling of a deportee, it is a weight for him. He escapes from the small town every day life and he is devoted to his work – to his secret. Finally even he accepts something from the small town life style – its monotony and stereotype. But in his case it is only the defence against the anxiety from the broken dreams.

František Herites made a small town family as an environment of the basic conflict of the story – the fight between giving up and enjoying life, between duty and desire. Author's approach can get no fewer than fatalistic dimension: in this small town (and particularly in family) he lastly finds his death.

Ema Krón as a sixteen years old girl is bringing up in this small town. Here we can see her transformation into a woman, in this atmosphere she realizes her own feelings for the first time. And as it would be possible for her to get to the conflict with the environment of small town, author shows here slow coming of emancipation (bovarism) to the mentality of Czech young women.

### Conclusion

Czech literary realism had found one of its main themes in the provincial town family. The "family problems" are basically oriented on social changes reflected in human characters. This paper was geared to show how the traditional cohesive and well integrated family became modern fellowship of individualities with only formal connections. The main intention was to make an observation about perpetual conflict between young and old, between stereotype and genuine characters.

The paper focuses on a new life style of family at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century – life in a small town. This specific area bears not only the new way of living but also the new way of thinking. As a social phenomenon the small town intensifies a failure, degeneration and disruption of old respectable family values. It brings, or more precisely it makes

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stronger breezy new ideas at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As a literary phenomenon the small town gives the authors a chance to fight against human egoism, prejudice and mental insularity of those "new bourgeois".

This paper is particularly oriented on František Herites's novel *Tajemství strýce Josefa* (*The secret of uncle Josef*). The author tries to show how the small town area works on human (literary) characters, how the "family pride of the olds" stands against "family (mental) emancipation".