



Josef Skvorecky's life was divided almost evenly between Czechoslovakia and Canada. He lived in the former from 1924 to 1968, and for the next 44 years here, until his death Tuesday in Toronto at age 87. Though he and his wife Zdena visited Prague often after 1989, and though his books are Czech bestsellers, and though there is a university named after him, he told me that there was never any question in their minds that Canada was now home. He once joked that his destiny was to be a Czech-Canadian writer, a term that implied either that he was in two places at once (an Aristotelian impossibility) or, more likely, that he was nowhere. When Skvorecky was awarded the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 1980, two letters of congratulation were read at the awards ceremony. One was from Graham Greene and praised two of his novellas as "in the same rank as James Joyce's *The Dead* and the very best of Henry James's shorter novels." The other was from Czeslaw Milosz, who was awarded the Nobel Prize that same year. The Polish writer, living in exile in the United States, reminded the audience of Skvorecky's Czech roots and addressed him as a representative of "our part of Europe." Read side by side, the two letters reminded the audience that Skvorecky was, in his own words, a writer "between two worlds."

He said that he learned English during the 1930s and 1940s in order to write infatuated fan letters to Judy Garland (she didn't answer). But a more important result of his infatuation was his early access to English and American fiction. As early as the 1950s, one can hear the influence of Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner in *The Cowards* and *The Bass Saxophone* respectively. The subject matter and the language are Czech, but the buzz of Modernism can be felt.

During his Prague years, Skvorecky moved in the avant-garde. He was a poet, a scriptwriter, an actor, a translator, a critic, a novelist, and an editor. An expert on literature in English, he was a bridge to the West for Czech readers. The 1958 publication of *The Cowards*, an autobiographical and anti-heroic novel about the last days of the war, made him famous overnight, and almost brought his career to an end when the government decided to make an example of the book and the apolitical author by banning both.

Josef and Zdena Skvorecky left Czechoslovakia for North America soon after the 1968 Warsaw

Written by - sam solecki -

Thursday, 05 January 2012 20:07 - Last Updated Thursday, 05 January 2012 23:11

---

Pact invasion. The University of Toronto offered him a position with the English department and he taught fiction, creative writing, and film until he retired in 1990, a much admired and much loved figure. Ironically, the first twenty years in exile were also his most productive. The Skvoreckys founded Sixty-Eight Publishers, and over the next two decades the company brought out more than 200 Czech titles, the majority banned at home. Their most profitable author was Skvorecky, who produced a stream of journalism, memoirs, short stories, mysteries and novels. Among the best known are *Miss Silver's Past*, *The Miracle Game*, *The Engineer of Human Souls* (a Governor-General's Award winner), *Dvorak in Love*, *Headed for the Blues* and *Two Murders in My Double Life*. Though often dealing with tragic events from the Second World War or the Stalinist Fifties or exile, the fiction interweaves tragedy and comedy, always returning to the latter. When I once mentioned to him that much of the humour in his fiction was tinged with sadness, almost melancholy, he answered: "There was much to be sad about in those days."

His most ambitious project is the series of seven semi-autobiographical novels about the life of Daniel Smiricky. They offer a portrait of a generation and a history of Czechoslovakia from the 1930s almost to the present. *Ordinary Lives*, the last in the series, shows the aged Smiricky returning from Canada in 1993 for a class reunion. I have always thought of these novels as offering an unofficial history – what Solzhenitsyn called "a second government" – to counter the distortions and propaganda of Czechoslovakia's communist government. Following Truffaut's suggestion that the Second World War was really between Chaplin and Hitler, I've sometimes thought that Czechoslovak history in our time was a turf war between Skvorecky and Gustav Husak.



Against communism Skvorecky's writing offers a skepticism about ideologues and ideologies, an insistence on liberal freedoms, an aversion to revolutions, and a "suspicion that capitalism is probably good, liberalism may be right, and democracy is the closest approximation" that we have to an ideal government. Though Skvorecky's writing is permeated by politics, he often joked that he belonged to the non-political "Party of Moderate Progress within the Bounds of the Law." He borrowed the concept from the great Czech humorist, Jaroslav Hasek, the author of *The Good Soldier Svejk*.

He is one of those rare figures whose body of work exists within two literary traditions. In his first 40 years he introduced Czechs to Western literature; in his last four decades he brought Czech writing West. Once, when we were discussing how North American culture had been enriched by the presence of exiles like Milosz, Brodsky and himself, he laughed and said that "We owe it

Written by - sam solecki -

Thursday, 05 January 2012 20:07 - Last Updated Thursday, 05 January 2012 23:11

---

all to Hitler and Stalin.”

Sam Solecki lives in Toronto and is the author of Prague Blues: The Fiction of Josef Skvorecky

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/arts/books/josef-skvorecky-a-writer-between-two-worlds/article2291370/>