

The Last Thing

Leopold Lahola



Translated by Julia
and Peter Sherwood

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Translated from the Slovak by Julia and Peter Sherwood

Afterword by Peter Darovec

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leopold Lahola (1918–1968) was a Slovak Jewish fiction writer, playwright and film director. He escaped deportation to a concentration camp, writing under a pseudonym and later joined the resistance. In 1949 Lahola emigrated to Israel, where he worked in film before moving to West Germany to work in film and TV. During the Prague Spring his plays were staged again in Czechoslovakia to critical acclaim and in 1967–8 Lahola became a frequent visitor, enjoying renewed interest in his work as playwright and film director until his premature death of a heart attack in 1968.

The short story collection *Posledná vec* (*The Last Thing*) appeared in Slovakia in 1968 and was republished in 1994. The stories, written between 1949 and the 1950s, are set in Slovakia during World War II and focus on individuals (Jews, partisans or ordinary people in internment camps) caught up in extreme moments of persecution and hardship or faced with impossible decisions.

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Old Levinský ran all the way home and after arriving huffing and puffing, he collapsed onto the unmade bed and as his family gathered around the table in respectful trepidation, he told them why he decided to close the shop at this unusual hour, in the middle of the afternoon. No one knew better than he that Friday was a blessed day for business. On Fridays his small shop was always packed to the rafters and old Levinský would come alive like a helmsman on a stormy sea, relishing the inexpressible joy of serving four or even five customers at the same time, all of them shouting, all of them in a hurry and each contributing to the babel of voices. Levinský adored this chaos, indeed he revelled in it, and he was keen to ensure that it rose and fell as he savoured the feeling God himself must have experienced in the beginning, in the very beginning, when he set about creating the world and forging order out of chaos and confusion. This Friday was different, however. There had been something hanging in the air since the morning. Something was brewing. No one in the alley knew what was about to happen, yet everyone without exception started shutting their dingy, fusty little stores and hastily boarding up their shabby shop windows whose glass was their most valuable asset. When they finished, they exhorted one another to go home. They were mostly junk dealers, cobblers who did nothing but repair old shoes, or tailors who would turn old clothes into new, while others sold milk, sweets or second-hand prayer books repaired with glue. There was also a fishmonger that opened only on Friday mornings, as well as a few shops boasting nothing apart from their four damp walls, while still somehow providing their owners with a living.

The more affluent plied their trade in shops scattered around the better-lit streets of the pretty little town. Some

were able to afford accommodation in close proximity to buildings adorned with flags fluttering from their windows sporting the Arrow Cross emblem of the neighbouring country, or the double cross of the local Guards. Their sky-blue veneer lent these buildings a much more pleasing appearance, but to Levinský they represented a far-off world, where all kinds of things went on that the inhabitants of his shabby little alley might not even comprehend.

"What's going to happen?" his wife asked, interrupting his reverie. She had been weeping all day and her face looked tormented. Having failed to procure any meat, she had not dared set foot in the market hall in her coat marked with a big star of David. While taking a shortcut through a small park on her way home, she was assaulted by some street urchins who had subjected her to a vicious beating, drawing blood. She didn't say a word about it to her husband, feeling she had only herself to blame, as she had ignored the sign stating that Jews and dogs were forbidden from entering the park as well as sitting on the benches, but she was nevertheless upset that her husband failed to notice anything.

"So what's going to happen?" she asked again, daring to raise her voice at her husband.

"I don't know," he said, trying to stem the tide of the approaching evil by raising his hand. "I have no idea but everyone started shutting their shops so I thought I'd better do the same."

Just at that moment Marmor burst into the room. He was the kind of man who always knew about everything and who found it easier to come to terms with any and every horror provided he could talk about it. Standing in the middle of the room he looked around to check if he had a big enough audience for his news.

"Well, if you haven't heard yet, you must be living on the moon," said Marmor, relishing his privileged position.

"No, we haven't, Marmor," said Levinský's wife, trembling as she strained to straighten her battered back. Even now it did not occur to a single member of her family to enquire why mother had a painful back. She was no longer all that young and suffered from the odd ache or pain now and then. Levinský told her to shoo the children out the room so they would not hear the news that made Marmor come all the way to their house. His wife left the room. She always did what he told her to.

"Well then?" asked Levinský, facing his neighbour impatiently, his tiny eyes blinking behind his steamed-up glasses.

"What do you think?" asked Marmor, holding back on purpose. "What was bound to come is about to come: reprisals."

"I see, Marmor, reprisals, but what reprisals, what kind of reprisals? Was there something in the papers?"

Marmor guessed that Levinský did not understand what reprisals meant and enjoyed teasing him.

"Reprisals are coming, whether there's anything about them in the papers or not. I know what I'm talking about. You can trust me one hundred per cent, and you might as well prepare for it."

"Prepare for what?"

"For the reprisals, Levinský. It will be quite something."

"I can't believe they would come all the way here. Why on earth would they come here?" said Levinský, refusing to accept the prospect.

Marmor walked up to the mirror and replied drily, as if reading an official notice from the newspaper.

"A member of the German mission to Switzerland has been shot dead. The perpetrator was caught and turned out to be a Jewish youth. The German government demanded that the culprit be handed over immediately. But the Swiss government has refused to do so."

“And what happened next?”

“Nothing. That’s it, Levinský. And that’s why now the reprisals are bound to come. The day before yesterday it happened in Germany, yesterday in Vienna, and today it’s going to reach us here in Slovakia. The streets are swarming with Guardists.”

“The streets,” countered Levinský trying to blunt the edge of the impending horror, “are always swarming with Guardists. It happens every time they’re issued with new uniforms. Would you be sitting at home on your backside, Marmor?”

“What do you mean, would I be sitting at home on my backside?”

“If you had a new uniform, you couldn’t wait to go out and show it off, could you?”

Marmor had had enough. He couldn’t see the point of wasting his time if he wasn’t taken seriously. As he was leaving, he stopped in the doorway and played his final trump card.

“Just so that you know, this morning Dr Steiner was killed in the street and a woman was so viciously beaten with wooden truncheons that she was left lying in the park until the police arrived. They fined her for breaking the ban on entering the park.”

Levinský was not too shocked to hear that someone had received a beating, not even so badly that it made them faint, and he was sure Marmor had made up the bit about wooden truncheons, though he wasn’t sure that fists would have been any more humane than truncheons. However, what he could not believe was that someone had been killed and actually died. Observing from the doorway the effect of the news, Marmor smiled like someone who knew much more but did not think it appropriate to go into more detail there and then.

"Hold on, Marmor," Levinský called out to delay his departure, "has someone really been killed in the street?"

"Yes, Dr Jozef Steiner, when he went out for a walk for the first time after recovering from a long and serious illness. The funeral is on Monday."

"How was he killed?" Levinský could not stop prying.

"A whack on the head and that was it. What do you mean how was he killed?"

"I mean, by what means?"

"By means of his own walking stick. They need their ammunition for more serious purposes. Don't worry, Levinský, you won't be shot dead. The worst that could happen to you is to be impaled on a sharp stick."

Levinský was devastated. His teeth began to chatter as if he were having a fit of the shivers.

"Has someone been impaled on a stick?" he mouthed almost inaudibly.

"Not yet. But that doesn't mean that one of us won't be."

"Do you know which Steiner it was, the one who was killed?"

"I don't know. Some Steiner or other. What does it matter which one? He wasn't killed because he was a Jozef but because he was a Steiner."

"What are we going to do?" sobbed Levinský, grabbing the back of the chair, "what are we going to do, what on earth are we going to do?"

There was no one to answer, as by now Marmor had gone. And whatever response Levinský might have elicited, it wouldn't have answered his question about what was to be done, which was the only thing that interested everyone in the entire alley, from the lower end where the devout Mencer lived, whose every word, even when spoken normally, came in a quiet singsong as if he were praying, right up to the upper end where until recently one could regularly see, sitting on the steps in front of a

deserted dairy, a man with an enormous, bearlike body. He was known by everyone as Dufi, not just in the alley but throughout the country, and indeed half the world. The newspapers had written about him as far away as in Johannesburg. Dufi was a wrestler. He captivated audiences with his wrestling holds and his astonishing speed belied his hundred-and-twenty-kilogram bulk. Normally you would find him outside the dairy which had barely any customers and rarely any milk, selling only tired, sticky, discoloured sweets or, occasionally, an umbrella.

Despite being as shortsighted as a rat, Dufi refused to wear glasses and his chubby face with its treble chin had retained its childlike look. Young boys would loiter around him and test his strength by hanging from his outstretched arm to see if they could bend it, or from his bent arm, trying to straighten it. Exploding with delight, Dufi could lift a couple of youngsters up into the air with one arm, like a crane.

"Dufi, you're solid flesh, how can you be a wrestler?" they would ask him.

"Any slave who's been doing the same thing all his life has muscles," Dufi would reply in his high-pitched voice, "muscles have nothing to do with strength. What do I need muscles for?"

They wouldn't leave his side as he sat outside the dairy: hey, Dufi, give us another double Nelson, and Dufi would show them a double Nelson, Dufi, tell us the story about the Turk, and Dufi would give them a detailed account of his encounter with the Turk who had bitten his wrist in his fury - the scar was still visible and they were all allowed to touch and feel it, and then they would start again: hey, Dufi, take us to the pictures and Dufi would take six snott-nosed kids to the morning show at the cinema and enjoy it no less than they did.

Over the past few months, however, no one had seen the bear with a human heart outside the dairy. He stayed

at home as if under house arrest, having removed from the walls and cupboards all the trophies and medals that reminded him of having once been the middleweight champion of Central Europe. Dufi was the last person Marmor visited with the news of the assassination of a member of the German mission to Switzerland.

Candles in the room had been lit in honour of the sabbath. The men of the family had left for the temple while Dufi sat on a low three-legged stool looking miserable and not knowing what to do with his hands.

"Dufi," the surprised Marmor asked, "where is everybody?"

"They must have gone to the temple. What about you? Don't tell me you no longer pray."

"I certainly do," replied Marmor meaningfully, "I've been praying more than ever. We should all pray during days like this. Including you, Dufi."

Dufi did not give a damn about this sort of talk. He had no stomach for verbal skirmishes with Marmor and instead let his mind wander towards loftier thoughts that would transport him instantly from this damp room to wherever he wished to be. He gazed at Marmor without seeing him, listened to him without understanding his words, and praised heaven for being able to do so.

"What did you say?" he asked suddenly, jumping up as Marmor seemed to keep talking about cowardice and about cowards hiding themselves away in holes.

"I said it's cowardly to sit around at home just because we've been made to wear the star of David. You're a Jew and Jews must wear the yellow star, so you should wear it like I do and like I would even if it were not a star but a yellow cow's tail. If God had not wanted us to wear yellow stars, he could have chosen not to create the colour yellow, but seeing as has, don't imagine you can pin Him to the ground, Dufi."

"Leave me alone," Dufi said, breathing heavily as if to summon up the strength to control himself. "Leave me alone and go home. Goodbye!" Dufi lowered himself back onto the three-legged stool into what seemed like a squatting position and Marmor started defending his honour.

"God has endowed you with twice the strength of the average man but no wisdom. Who do you think you are to tell me to get lost, Dufi? You think I've come here to be told to get lost? I'm trying to help you and you're kicking me out."

"I'm not kicking you out," said Dufi, repentant. "Sit down if you feel like sitting, but if you can't keep quiet, go home."

"I just wanted to tell you," Marmor said, lowering his voice, "that I didn't go to the temple and that I'm not going home either. Something is about to happen here in this street. I think you should clear off tonight, get out of this neighbourhood, preferably to the residential area where all your rich acquaintances live, so many of them that I can't help envying you, may God forgive me for this small sin."

Dufi did not stir. After listening to a few more descriptions of atrocities that this evening was bound to be saturated with, since reprisals were reprisals and the events in Germany and Austria provided a graphic illustration of just how it would happen, he stood up and went out, leaving Marmor on his own in mid-sentence.

The street was deserted.

Dufi climbed the wide steps to the prayer house, barging into the room at the least appropriate moment, as the men inside happened to be in the middle of the Amidah, the Standing Prayer. Facing east, their feet pressed together, their hands covering their eyes and sunken into themselves during this prayer, they were forbidden from moving from the spot, or from being interrupted or speaking. In the complete silence Dufi's heavy breathing sounded like an insolent interruption. He didn't care and proceeded to

count those present and to divide them into groups in his head. Since the men were taking too long to take the three steps back to conclude the prayer, he shouted into the silence.

“We’ve got to do something!”

The entire prayer room froze. But no heads turned towards him, everyone remained standing still and waited for a bolt of lightning to strike the sinner who dared to shatter the Amidah. Dufi hesitated for a moment but his self-assurance flooded back when he saw that he had in fact attracted the attention of all these people who stood there with their backs to him.

“Don’t you know what’s brewing?” Dufi’s high-pitched voice rang out in the prayer house. “Very well then, I’ll tell you, even if you’ve stopped up your ears.”

A babel of voices rippled through the room, but Dufi cut across them in one fell swoop.

“There’s going to be a pogrom.”

Many, if not all, of those present knew that something horrific was about to happen and that it would come to a head in this very street. But there was nothing that could be done about this evil. They had to suffer a pogrom, in the same way that those in Ukraine, Galicia, Bessarabia and elsewhere had done before them. The windows had been shuttered, the doors locked, the women and children were cowering in corners and the men were praying, not out of devotion but out of an immense fear.

“What do you want to do?” came a voice from the huddle around Dufi.

“I don’t know yet. We need to discuss it. But we’ve got to come up with something.”

The devout Mencer, now feeling even more lost, immersed himself in prayer, standing forlornly on the same spot. No news or event may interrupt a Jew during the Amidah, except death itself. Dávid Mencer, too, was aware that

something was brewing. He believed that he was already fighting against it by grinding every word of the prayer between his teeth so firmly that it rang out loud.

Soon, two camps formed. One gathered around Dufi, while the other went back to their places, calling for silence and returning to their prayers. Their beseeching voices sounded as humble as if they hoped that God himself would come down to this alley and shield it with His presence.

On the steps outside the prayer house Dufi surveyed the fifteen men who had plucked up the courage to come out and follow him, the broad-backed wrestler.

"Do you have somewhere to hide?" asked Lederer, sounding alarmed.

Dufi fixed his eyes on the pale, emaciated youth.

"I don't," Dufi said.

"But surely," Lederer stuttered, "we have to hide somewhere if it's true what they say is brewing."

Lazár Veselý fixed him with a diamond-hard gaze.

"Who asked you? No one's interested in what you have to say. Let the one who has something to say speak. Let Dufi speak."

"Well," Dufi began hesitantly, as if not quite sure what he had in mind. "Well, what should I say? I'm a wrestler. In a fight you can't run away and hide from your sparring partner."

"But that's nonsense, Dufi," said Lederer, not letting himself be brushed off so easily, "the people who are coming for us are far stronger."

"As a wrestler I'm telling you that the adversary gets stronger the minute you start being afraid of him."

"But this is not going to be any wrestling match, as you seem to want us to believe. Dufi, you said yourself a moment ago what this is going to be."

"What did I say?" Dufi defended himself awkwardly, for he didn't know how to pin someone to the ground using words. "I didn't say anything. I said something's got to be done. That's all I said."

"But you did, you did," another voice chipped in. "You said there's a pogrom coming. That's what you said."

"I said they're getting ready for a pogrom. That's the gospel truth. And what I'm telling you now is this: tell all the men to come out of their houses, drag them out of the temple and let's turn this pogrom into a fight."

"Tremendous," cheered Lazár Veselý, "tremendous! You heard what Dufi said. Go on, Dufi, keep talking. Quick. Go on. Say we're going to turn the pogrom into a fight, Dufi."

But Lederer, representing the disheartened majority, sneered.

"You are a wrestler, Dufi, but I'm not. I sell old junk. I don't have any muscles."

In fact, no one apart from Lazár Veselý was fully behind Dufi at that moment, so he had nothing to lose.

"Never mind that you have no muscles," he said, trying another tack, "Who needs muscles? Do you have a brain?"

"Fantastic," Lazár Veselý rejoiced, repeating Dufi's question.

"Do you have a brain? You don't. Do you have human dignity? You don't. So let them thrash you. Let them skin you alive. It's not worth anything anyway if you're not prepared to defend it."

A group of figures with Dávid Mencer at their head emerged from the prayer house where the service in celebration of Princess (or maybe even Queen) Sabbath had come to a premature end.

"Nobody should flatter himself," he said, immediately taking Dufi to task in his singsong voice, "and imagine he will be able to prevent what God Almighty has not deemed right to prevent."

“What’s God got to do with it?” Dufi asked helplessly, realising it would be difficult to persuade anyone, now that Dávid Mencer had declared Him his ally.

“God,” said Mencer, waving his arms, “God does exist. Or does He not?” This was a triumphant question, followed by further, even more triumphant mountains of questions that came tumbling down, mountains in motion that threatened to bury Dufi if he didn’t move away in time.

“Has God not created everything and everyone? And is He not the one who provides us with guidance from birth to the grave? The one who rewards us when He so wishes and likewise punishes us when He will? Would it even be conceivable for misfortune to befall us if it weren’t God’s will? Are we not obliged to accept everything from His hands, including any blows, as those are the the same hands from which we accept the gifts of life? Are we to defy His punishment which He has chosen to visit upon us? Surely not a hair on our head could be harmed against His will, may His name be praised! Whatever happens, it will be His will. Praised be His name!”

Having concluded his stirring speech that drained all the blood from his face, Dávid Mencer stood there pale and trembling, moved by his own words more than anyone else.

Dufi was caught off guard. He didn’t know any wrestling hold that might pin down Dávid Mencer and his arguments. Neither Greco-Roman nor freestyle wrestling knew any such hold.

“Oh no, my friend”, said Mencer, guessing what Dufi was thinking. “You can’t pin God down on His back. Not even your double or treble or thousandfold Nelson is up to it. You’re too weak for that. All of us here are too weak for that. Forget these ideas, Dufi. It’s a sin.”

He started walking off to indicate there was no point discussing this matter any further and that everyone should go on their way. To his dismay, no one moved.

“Who knows, perhaps God, may His name be praised,” said Lazár Veselý daring to raise his voice, “has decided to put our courage to the test. Perhaps all he wants is to see whether we are cowards, or worthy of his help.”

Looking around in search of support, Lazár moved closer to Dufi, who felt relieved by the lack of response. Whenever he lost a fight he would be overcome by this kind of relief, as if he had shed a burden.

“Go home,” he said softly, “What are you standing around for? Dávid Mencer has explained why all your windows will be shattered and your heads smashed. Everything is clear now. Go home and prepare a few candles so that you won’t have to go looking for your knocked-out teeth in the dark.”

“Why are you laughing?” Lederer barked at Lazár Veselý.

“I just love Dufi, he makes my heart leap for joy. I can’t help it.”

Just as a few figures started peeling away from the group, a small man with a prayer book crossed their path.

It was Levinský, screaming as if he was out of his mind.

“There’s a fire! I’ve been to the temple and saw it all. Everything is on fire, oh my God, you should see it! Everything is on fire!”

“Where’s the fire?” the others asked Levinský who was sobbing and raising his arms to heaven.

“I’m telling you, I’ve been to the big temple, I saw it all with my own eyes, right from the start,” he said, panting.

“Where’s the fire, damn it?” Dufi asked, laying a heavy hand on Levinský’s shoulder and making him come to his senses straight away.

“Our temple is on fire. As I said, first they shouted something, then they stormed in, poured petrol over the pews and before you knew it, everything went up in flames.”

Unable to utter another word, he stood there shaking dreadfully and weeping like a small child. More and more people gathered in the street. Those who had escaped

from the big temple were bumping into curious onlookers tempted out of their homes and onto the streets by a sky that was glowing red. The baleful screaming and chanting of a distant mob rang out like thunder. It was a storm without any lightning.

"The temple is on fire!" yelled Marmor, careening down the street and deliberately sowing alarm. Dufi blocked his path and grabbed him by the collar.

"What are you screaming for?"

"The big temple is on fire! I told you there would be reprisals, and now here are the reprisals. They've come. Even the blind can see it now. The temple is on fire."

"We know it's on fire. But why are you screaming?" asked Dufi, not easing his grip.

"To let everyone know," stuttered Marmor, gasping for breath.

"And once everyone knows," Dufi said, lifting him off the ground as if he were a feather, "should they also run around in panic screaming that the temple is on fire?"

"Let him have it, Dufi," called Lazár Veselý, becoming animated.

This Lazár Veselý, thought Dufi, letting Marmor go, this devout youth who sits around day and night poring over massive tomes in an airless room, a youth so light you could blow him away with a single breath, so frail and almost certainly afflicted by lung disease like most of his fellow students, this creature who consists of nothing except his gleaming eyes, as if all that was alive in him were concentrated in this pair of eyes that now radiated justice enough to save the world. This Lazár Veselý had demonstrated that someone may believe in God's commands and step over an earthworm so as not to hurt it, and yet be brave or have pride, or something else for which Dufi lacked a name but which he could clearly feel leaping over to him from Lazár Veselý like a spark, setting him alight like the big temple

under the castle and making him realise, all of a sudden, that he no longer had two options left from which to choose.

"Those who are afraid should go home," he announced, turning to the crowd.

"I'm here," Lazár Veselý piped up, as if worried that Dufi was not counting him in.

"Go after the man who's running down the street and bring him back," Dufi said resolutely.

Levinský was brought back, resisting tooth and nail.

"We'll let you go in a moment, Levinský," said Dufi reassuringly, "I just wanted to tell you not to lock your gate. Make sure that all the gates at the lower end stay open.

"You want me to get killed?" shrieked Levinský.

"They would kill you anyway, but we're not going to let them."

Then he turned to face the street and said aloud, so that everyone would hear, that a band of hooligans was marching towards them, that they were minded to assault innocent people just like any mindless herd, and that was exactly why they had to be split into smaller groups, something that could easily be done, provided several gates were left open. They couldn't all squeeze through a single gate.

"Let's say there are three hundred of them." Dufi explained, "If no more than ten barge into each gate, only a small group will be left out in the street and those we can handle."

The mob rumbled ominously as it approached. It turned out that the fear spread by the enemy did less to sap morale in this alley than the fear spread by their own people. They were rushing down from the blazing prayer house, looking as if they had turned to ashes along with the temple. A single breath would blow them away, leaving not a trace behind. Dufi grabbed one of the men by his shirt as he bounded down the street in tears.

"Were you there?" he asked him.