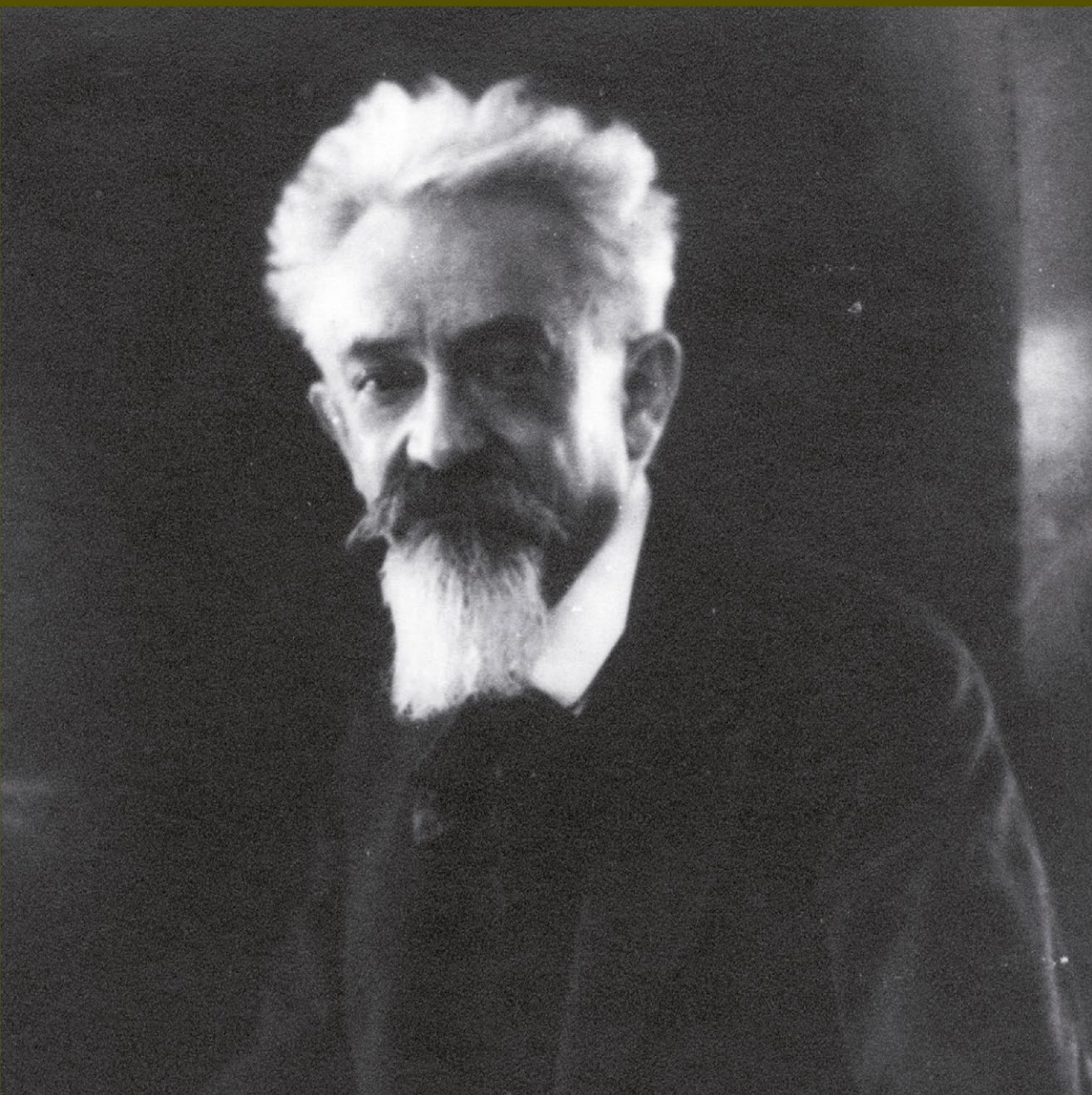
PETER
BUTLER

BEYOND DECADENCE: EXPOSING THE NARRATIVE IRONY IN JAN OPOLSKÝ'S PROSE

KAROLINUM



Beyond Decadence:
Exposing the Narrative Irony in Jan Opolský's Prose

Peter Butler

———

Reviewed by:
Luboš Merhaut (Charles University Prague)
Robert B. Pynsent (University College London, SSEES)

Published by Charles University in Prague,
Karolinum Press
Edited by Martin Janeček
Cover and layout by Jan Šerých
Typeset by Karolinum Press
First edition

ISBN 978-80-246-2571-3
ISBN 978-80-246-2711-3 (online : pdf)

Charles University in Prague
Karolinum Press 2015

www.karolinum.cz
ebooks@karolinum.cz

In memory of

Karel Brušák
(1913–2004)

and

Helen Kay
(1951–2012)

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe my greatest debt of gratitude to the late Karel Brušák, the former doyen of Czech and Slovak Studies in the United Kingdom, who encouraged and supported me throughout the larger part of a task that proved to be vastly more challenging than either of us ever imagined. Sadly he did not live to see this book completed. I can only hope that he would have approved of the way it has turned out.

My search for, and quest for access to, Opolský's papers was aided by the Hřbitovní správa in Nová Paka, who kindly supplied me with the address of Opolský's daughter, Marta Kubenková, and by the staff of the Akviziční oddělení of the Památník národního písemnictví in Prague, who willingly agreed to purchase Opolský's papers from her, and went well beyond the call of duty in granting me early access to them.

I am obliged to the former director of the Podkrkonošské muzeum in Nová Paka for letting me have supernumerary copies of photographs of Jan Opolský and contemporary Nová Paka and for acquainting me with invaluable snippets of local gossip surviving from Opolský's time.

I am also grateful to the late Ivan Slavík, the late Bedřich Slavík and the late Zdeněk Kalista for receiving me so warmly and for readily sharing their knowledge of Opolský's life and work with me.

Finally, I am indebted to the British Department of Education and Science for providing two years of research funding, and to the British Council for providing two exchange scholarships to the Charles University in Prague, each for one academic year.

Drafts of this book were read by Andreas Guski (Basel), Luboš Merhaut (Prague), Robert Pynsent (London) and Ulrich Schmid (St. Gallen). Their comments have been invaluable and the manuscript is much improved as a result. However, responsibility for any errors and infelicities that remain is solely my own.

This book is dedicated to Karel Brušák and to my lifelong friend Helen Kay (born Vladimíra Plecháčová), who died at her home in Tokyo while this book was in the final stages of completion. Helen was the first person I ever heard speak Czech and it was my early exposure to this language that prompted me to learn it. This book would not have been written without either of them.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

INTRODUCTION

In 1968, the poet, translator and literary historian Ivan Slavík published an anthology of prose and verse by Jan Opolský (1875–1942), a writer then known largely only to a select circle of scholars of Czech literature and second-hand booksellers. The anthology, which borrowed its title *Představení v soumraku* from one of the prose pieces in the collection, appeared in the popular paperback *Světová četba* series of major publisher Odeon. It was a courageous and prescient attempt to rehabilitate a writer who had seldom been thought of as anything more than an epigon of the Czech Decadence.

Slavík, whose faible for *poetae minores* and especially for neglected and forgotten authors of Romantism, Decadence and Catholic Moderna, later led him to popularize writers like Vítězslav Hálek, Irma Geisslová, Hermor Lilia and Bohuslav Reynek,[1] was especially attracted to Opolský's prose, which he admired for its carefully crafted language and its ability to create atmospherically dense and sensually evocative images. He likened Opolský to a medieval illuminator of manuscripts ('dávný iluminatoř', 'malíř iniciál') and to a grinder of precious stones ('brusič drahokamů').[2] Believing that Opolský's later poetry had deteriorated into pedestrian dullness, Slavík saw his prose as the natural continuation of those early collections of verse – *Svět smutných* (1899), *Klékání* (1900), *Jedy a léky* (1901) – that had made such a favourable impression on major Decadent writer Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic and leading turn-of-the-century literary critic F. X. Šalda.[3]

Like Slavík, I too was drawn to Opolský's prose, in much the same way as I had, years earlier, been drawn to the prose of the nineteenth-century Austrian writer Adalbert Stifter. As with Stifter, there was strangely captivating elegance to his narrative, a rhythmic beauty even, but with apparent

1 See Vítěslav Hálek, *Srdce písněmi dotýkané* (Prague, 1974); Irma Geisslová, *Zraněný pták* (Prague, 1978); Hermor Lilia [František Bíbl], *Verše tajného básníka* (Prague, 1982); Bohuslav Reynek, *Rybí šupiny. Rty a zuby. Had na sněhu* (Prague, 1990) – all edited with an afterword by Ivan Slavík.

2 See Ivan Slavík, 'Básník miniatur a devadesátá léta', in Jan Opolský, *Představení v soumraku* (Prague, 1968), pp. 7–23; reprinted in Ivan Slavík, *Viděno jinak* (Prague, 1995), pp. 112–126. Neither image was original. Both had become part of the standard critical jargon on Opolský by the mid-1940s (see Chapter 3).

3 See Jiří Karásek, *Impresionisté a ironikové* (Prague, 1926), pp. 101–2; F. X. Šalda, 'Jan Opolský: Svět smutných', *Lumír* 27 (1899), pp. 299–300; reprinted in *Kritické projevy* 4, (Prague, 1951), pp. 256–258.

lapses into clumsiness and verbosity. A quick off-the-cuff calculation with Lubomír Doležel's kinetic coefficient of style produced a value so low that in terms of linguistic dynamism this prose seemed remarkably close to some sort of 'degré zéro de l'écriture', to misuse Roland Barthes's phrase.[4] The value was significantly lower than those I obtained for other Czech Decadent writers. This lack of dynamism may have been what Otakar Theer had in mind when he claimed that Opolský's style produced a narrative surface from which the spark of life had been extinguished ('povrch, z kterého vyprchla jiskra života')[5]. As I continued my reading of Opolský's prose *in extenso*, I began to notice that the heavily descriptive language was sometimes characterized by an ethereal lightness and sometimes by a dense weightiness that seemed to correlate with some sort of spiritual and physical states. Karel Sezima seems to have noticed something of the kind when he wrote: 'Opolský dovede [...] vyjadřovat představy matožné a lehce smyté [...] a hned opět jediným úderem štětce vzbudit dojem zcela syrové konkretnosti'.[6] Initially, I thought that these states might symbolize something like a basic opposition of principles. If this were true, I thought, it might be a sign of unexpected originality in a writer considered a mere epigon.

However, it was only when I began to concentrate on individual texts, examining their narrative perspective and paying attention to their precise wording that it gradually became clear to me that the texts could not be other than ironic. What is more, they seemed to be ironic through and through, as if the irony were not just one element in the narrative but its principal *raison d'être*. What I found myself confronting was a consistently sustained but subtle conventional narrative irony deploying an exceptional range of sophisticated linguistic and conceptual devices with resourcefulness and ingenuity. Within the framework of this irony, the narrator was gradually revealed as a morbid individual divorced from reality and alienated from healthy vitality. The measurable lack of linguistic dynamism in the texts and the impressions of rarefied lightness alternating with dead-weight heaviness were then easily explained as corollaries of this ironic stylization of the narrator.

This book tries to describe Opolský's irony in all its facets but it deliberately makes no attempt to retrace the tortuous process which led to its recognition. Every reader approaches irony differently and in ways that are impossible to predict. My exposition will be strictly linear and take the form of close readings of five selected texts. This mode of exposition present challenges of its own, as I shall explain.

---

4 The kinetic coefficient of style is obtained by dividing the verb-adjective ratio by the word-sentence ratio; see Lubomír Doležel and Richard Bailey (eds), *Statistics of style* (New York, 1969).

5 Otakar Theer, (Review of *Kresby uhlem*) *Lumír* 35 (1906–7), Nos 10–11, p. 451.

6 Karel Sezima, (Review of *Demaskování) Podobizny a reliefy* (Prague, 1919), pp. 131–138 (p. 132).

Quotations from Czech are given in the original and are not translated. The textual interpretations at the core of this book are so sensitive to the exact wording of the narrative that they can only be carried out on the original texts. To supply a continuous translation as an aid to comprehension would be constantly to beg the question of how the texts are meant to be understood, which is precisely what needs to be established. What is more, the resulting necessity for continual reference to an inevitably inadequate translation would greatly confuse the already complex issue of interpretation. A reading knowledge of Czech must therefore be assumed, and this will, by and large, limit the readership of this book to Slavists. However, it is hoped that with the detailed explanations and frequent glosses provided, even a Slavist who does not have Czech as a main language should be able to manage reasonably well. Quotations from French, German and Russian have also been left untranslated because a working knowledge of these languages is normally part of a Slavist's linguistic repertoire. For the time being, at least, the non-Slavist is largely excluded, which I regret but do not apologize for. I think it does no harm for us to be reminded occasionally that in the study of literature a knowledge of languages is not an optional extra.

I believe that once Opolský's irony is recognized, it will no longer possible to regard him as a Decadent epigon nor even as a minor writer. His consummate mastery of the genre sets him aside, not only from the many writers in Czech literature who have used irony at some point in their work, but also from many other writers in world literature. I venture to suggest that Opolský at his best will prove to be one finest practitioners of conventional narrative irony that literature has to offer, though the language in which he wrote and the challenge his texts present to translation may mean that his literary merit will never be broadly recognized.

1. BIOGRAPHY

Jan Opolský was born on 15 July 1875, in the small north-eastern Bohemian town of Nová Paka, as the son of Josef Opolský, a solicitor's clerk, and his wife Kateřina née Menčíková. Both parents came from working-class families. Josef Opolský was the son of a saddler from the nearby town of Nový Bydžov, and Kateřina was the daughter of a local confectioner and gingerbread-maker. The couple had three sons, of whom Jan was the second-born.

The family seems to have been harmonious, at least initially. Kateřina was an attentive mother who took the upbringing and education of her children seriously. It is to her credit that they were all taught to read and write before going to school. As a result of this early learning Jan was able to skip the first year at primary school after only three weeks. The rest of his school career, as far as it went, was remarkably successful and his standard of achievement consistently high.[7] After completing the basic nine-year course, he was ready to leave school on his thirteenth birthday. By this time he had developed a strong interest in art and handicraft and decided to become an engraver. He applied for an apprenticeship but was rejected because he was too young. Granted permission to stay on at school for another year, he hoped to succeed in his application second time round. But this was not to be. A year later, Opolský's father was already considerably less sympathetic to the idea of an apprenticeship, especially in a field in which there was no family tradition, and decided that it was time for his son to start earning a living. It is quite possible that his attitude was influenced by the critical situation which had developed at home. When Jan was ten years old, Kateřina died in her late thirties, leaving her husband to rear three children single-handed. This was in addition to the problems he already had trying to salvage the business of his negligent boss.

The search for employment led Jan Opolský to the commercial art studio of Václav Kretschmer, where he found a job that did not require formal training but nonetheless allowed him to use his natural artistic skills. It is hardly likely that Opolský found this work profoundly satisfying, even though he was to remain with Václav Kretschmer for a full twenty-five years. Kretschmer's

7 This is borne out by his school reports which from part of his papers held by the Památník národního písemnictví in Prague.

Plate 1: Nová Paka. Postcard. Main square with plague column and church of St. Nicholas (mentioned in 'Poledne').

studio was run on a strictly mercantile basis, churning out standard items of religious art, such as icons and gilded statuettes, but also, mainly to order, secular works such as landscapes, portraits, still-lifes and genre paintings. Many years later, Opolský reminisces sardonically:

Všech dílen, co jich na světě je, ta dílna byla vzorem,
neb co se dalo malovat, to mastili jsme skorem.
My robili jsme landšafty a portréty,
jež měly to vlastnost, že jsme obětí svých nikdy neviděli.
My malovali ikony, i žánry, jež jsou k tomu,
by krášlily svým humorem zdi měšťanského domu.
My tenkrát všecko uměli a mám na to dost svědků,
že překrásná už madona tak stála u nás pětku.
My malovali amóry. A zátiší. A báby,
a fortel měli na plátně tak jako na hedvábí.
No universum hotové, se dalo prostě říci,
a dřeli jsme to od kusu tak jako soustružníci.[8]

The eight employees were paid by the piece and worked from eight to twelve and from one to six every day.[9] There was no room for creative inspiration; all that was required was routine, technically proficient craftsmanship. As the literary historian Bedřich Slavík, later a close friend of Opolský's, comments euphemistically:

8 Jan Opolský, 'Sám o sobě', *Lumír*, 60 (1934), pp. 217–19, (p. 218).
9 See Arne Novák, 'Malířské počátky Jana Opolského', *Lidové noviny*, 20 December 1935, p. 2.

Plate 2: Jan Opolský's birthplace in Nová Paka

> Při malbě nešlo o individuální vlohy a umělecký vývoj, ale časem se u malířů vyvinula zručnost mnohem podobná dovednosti středověkých řemeslníků.[10]

The painters worked in a team, each one specializing in certain aspects of the task: one would mix the paint, another would draw the outlines, another would paint hands and faces, another clothing, another background and so on, according to a system originally evolved by early Flemish painters. However, for all its dull routine, the workshop produced several artists of note, such as Bohumír Číla and Karel Havlata.[11]

At the age of nineteen, after five years with Václav Kretschmer, Opolský lost his father, who died suddenly in his late forties. Now orphaned, he not only was left to his own resources but also carried the responsibility of looking after his younger brother. There followed a period of hardship and loneliness. However, Opolský soon succeeded in overcoming this isolation and forming a circle of friends. Many of them were older than Opolský, and were

10 Bedřich Slavík, *U Suchardů* (Hradec Králové, 1973), p. 46.

11 Both painted mainly landscapes, still lifes and portraits. Bohumír Číla (1885–1957) is best known for creating a new copy of Josef Mánes's calendar plate on the famous astronomical clock that adorns Prague Town Hall. Karel Havlata (1885–1957) is best known for the frescos he painted in Suchardův dům in Nová Paka and for his landscape painting 'Permská krajina' (1935). Havlata was also an avid collector of fossils and precious stones. See Prokop Toman, *Nový slovník československých výtvarných umělců* (Ostrava, 1993).

probably as much fatherly mentors as friends. Among them were several of Opolský's former teachers: Vilém Polák, for example, headmaster of the local primary school and a musician of sorts; and Josef Nováček, languages and history master at the secondary school, whose English wife lent the studious youngster books from her private library and acquainted him with the works of Dickens and Meredith, as well as other works of English and European literature. Then there was Břetislav Jampílek, also a schoolmaster, something of a philosopher, but with theosophist leanings. Last but not least, there was Opolský's former classmate, the ironmonger Josef Anton, who had the largest library in the district and who ran a family table-top puppet theatre ('stolní rodinné divadlo'). Later on, Opolský was to make friends with two well-known writers resident locally, Karel Sezima and Josef Karel Šlejhar. He also became acquainted with the painter Josef Tulka and the sculptor Stanislav Sucharda.[12]

It was largely through the influence of these friends that Opolský began to evolve an extensive audodidactic activity. He eagerly consumed large quantities of literature both domestic and foreign. He regularly read the literary periodicals *Rozhledy*, *Lumír* and *Moderní revue*, to which he also began to contribute poetry, and acquainted himself with the work of Jiří Karásek, Karel Hlaváček, Antonín Sova, Otokar Březina and Julius Zeyer. His favourite writers, however, were Garborg, Hamsun, Flaubert, Rilke and Dehmel, especially Gautier, Dostoevsky and Gogol. In addition, he read numerous works on art history, above all on Renaissance and Baroque art and developed an interest in the Dutch, German and Italian masters.[13]

Opolský became something of a local character. Sezima has given us a charming vignette of Opolský, habitually clad in a long sleeveless hooded coat and a wide-brimmed hat, striding along the arcade around the main square of Nová Paka on his daily walk to his favourite watering-place, the 'Snake's Grotto', where he enjoyed the regard of local malcontents:

> Básník denně, za každého počasí prošel ve svém věčném haveloku a karbonářském širáku podloubím, po jedné straně vroubícím náměstí mířil do své demokratické hospůdky, obecně nazývané 'Hadí Slují'. Bylo tam dostaveníčko mistrů ševců novopackých a vůbec doupě místních nespokojených živlů, Opolský požíval mezi nimi značné autority.[14]

12 See Karel Sezima, *Z mého života*, 4 vols (Prague, 1946–9), I, pp. 160–72. On Josef Tulka, see Marie Freimannová, *Josef Tulka, malíř generace Národního divadla* (Prague, 1965) and the entry on Josef Tulka in Emanuel Poche et al. (ed.), *Encyklopedie českého výtvarného umění* (Prague, 1975). On Stanislav Sucharda, see Jiří Kotalík, Česká secese (Prague, 1966).

13 Bedřich Slavík, *Počátky básnické činnosti Jana Opolského* (Prague, 1935), p. 2.

14 Karel Sezima, *Paměti*, 4 vols, Prague, 1945, vol. 2, p. 160; quoted in Jan Stejskal, *Novopacko: portét paměti a srdce* (Nová Paka and Harrachov, 2009).

The Snake's Grotto was so named after a room at the rear that was hewn into the local sandstone like a cave. One wonders how many readers of his poem 'Hadí král' in *Svět smutných* saw the joke when he wrote:

> Zde bylo k smrti úzko za noci!
> Ta černá sluj, v níž kapraď vyhnívala,
> kam vlét-li pták, už zhynul bez moci,
> kde voda zelená se zabublati bála!

Opolský's daily quota of beer in the 'Snake's Grotto' was a pleasure he could hardly afford on his meagre wages, which meant he had to save on clothes and shoes. As his niece Jiřina Brabcová recalls:

> […] měl zlatku denně. To bylo málo, byl pivapitel, tedy vypil řadu pullitrů, a i když stál půllitr piva šest krejcarů, bylo to denně dost a nezbylo často ani na opravu bot, tím méně na doplnění prádla[15]

adding that her grandmother often had to go to the pub and pay for the drinks Opolský had put on tick.

Besides material hardship, the young Opolský was also afflicted by recurrent ill health. The basic complaint seems to have been a weak heart, although there may have been other contributory factors. He spent frequent periods in hospital in Jičín, the provincial capital, between the spring of 1895 and the summer of 1897. Often he was bed-ridden for several months at a time. However, by physical exercise and particularly by participating in the activities of the nationalist gymnastic association Sokol, he improved his state of health to such an extent that, in early 1899, he was found fit for military service.

At the beginning of April 1899 he was called up to serve with the 74th infantery regiment at Jičín. The experience of army life seems to have had a disconcerting effect on the young recruit. In a letter to his girlfriend, Františka Endová, he describes his impression of his first weeks' military service:

> Minulé dny ztratily se pro mne jako plachý dým, a není ničeho než hrubého a bezduchého dření.[16]

15 Testimony of Jiřina Brabcová from the 1920s. Quoted from the menu of 'Novopacké sklepy' (as the 'Hadí sluj' is now known) in *Staré lesy* (Prague, 2010), edited by Václav Cílek and Pavel Kostiuk, pp. 121–122.

16 Letter from Jan Opolský to Františka Endová (16 April 1899), Prague, Památník národního písemnictví (PNP), Literární archiv (LA), Pozůstalost Jana Opolského (PJO).

Plate 3: Self-portrait with spouse by Jan Opolský. Photograph of painting (oil on canvas). Impishly, Opolský made himself look half a head taller than his wife although, in reality, it was the other way round.

But it was less the stultifying grind of army routine or the physical strain of military drill that distressed Opolský than the coarse atmosphere:

> Jsem otráven více surovým ovzduším, nežli velikým tělesným dřením.[17]

In June 1901, Opolský was transferred from Jičín to Liberec, but the regiment and barracks in Liberec were, if anything, worse than those at Jičín.

Throughout his military service Opolský maintained a regular correspondence with Františka Endová, whom he had met originally at a dancing lesson in Nová Paka, and to whom he later became engaged. His relationship with Františka, the daughter of a well-to-do clothier, was the source of much hostility and resentment locally. Malicious gossipmongers had soon spread the conjecture that the indigent young suitor was only after his fiancée's money and social position. Opolský took these accusations very much to heart, and, at one point, even considered leaving Nová Paka for good, hoping that this

17 Letter from Jan Opolský to Františka Endová (undated), Prague, PNP, LA, PJO.

sacrifice would bring people to reason. Nonetheless, the courtship was successful and the couple were married in late 1902. A year later, a daughter, Marta, was born, their only child.

In 1914, with the outbreak of the First World War, Václav Kretschmer was forced to close his painters' workshop, having lost vital export markets in Germany, Serbia and Russia. Opolský subsequently transferred to the textile company of his local namesake Otto Kretschmer, where he was given a clerical position.[18] In 1921, Otto Kretschmer, a barytone of European standing, moved his entire business to Prague in order to accommodate his frequent concert commitments. Otto Kretschmer went on to become a highly successful entrepreneur and patron of the arts, living in a palace in Malá Strana and befrieding members of the cultural elite, such as the painter lithographer Max Švabinský, and the composers Leo Janáček and Josef Suk.[19] Opolský, who followed Otto Kretschmer to Prague, was given a managerial position in Kretschmer's new textile factory in Nusle.

Opolský's life in Prague is less well documented than his life in the provincial obscurity of Nová Paka. Nonetheless, we do know that he and his wife first lived on Vratislavova Street in the district of Vyšehrad, later moving to Boleslavova Street in adjacent Nusle, presumably in order to be closer to his workplace in Kretschmer's factory on Vlastislavova, now only a stone's throw away. Of the flat at the second of these addresses we have a rudimentary description.[20] It consisted of a small double-bedroom and a kitchen that also served as living-room. In the kitchen there was a large table on which Opolský was able to write after meals, and a sofa. The walls were decorated with a number of paintings, most of which were the work of Opolský himself, and there were a few bookshelves with volumes mainly on art history. The couple's circumstances, evidently, remained modest, even though Opolský eventually reached managerial level in Kretschmer's textile firm, and in spite of income from his publications, especially in periodicals and newspapers.

If moving to Prague did not bring about much of a material upswing, there can scarcely be any doubt that it did provide Opolský with more intellectual and cultural stimulation. It was in Prague that he first became acquainted with poet and novelist Viktor Dyk, who was later to be a very close friend, with the Decadent writers Jiří Karásek and Arnošt Procházka, with the graphic artist and painter František Kobliha and the sculptor Bohumil Kafka . His circle of friends was soon to include the doctor and minor novelist František Skácelík,

18 It is often claimed that Otto Kretschmer was Václav Kretschmer's nephew. Bedřich Slavík always insisted to me that they were unrelated. His assertion is borne out by Yvona Benčová, *Osobnosti Novopacka* (Nová Paka, 2011), which provides detailed genealogies of the two Kretschmer families.

19 See Yvona Benčová, *Osobnosti Novopacka*, p. 148.

20 See František Hampl, 'Básník života a smrti', *Nový večerník*, 13 March 1937, p. 3.