

## Přemysl Pitter – A Complicated Czech and European

Born in 1895, he was one of the last generation to reach adulthood before World War I – just in time to wake up into full, overwhelming and unenviable experience of maturity on the battlefronts of WWI.

Like many of his contemporaries young Přemysl Pitter found the prospect of war exciting. Many men of his generation felt dissatisfied with the petrified framework of the civic world of their fathers where everything – family businesses and establishments, partnerships or views on art – seemed to be preordained forever. The idea of living in such a world sent shivers down their spines. Anything seemed better than carrying on this predestined order which was suffocating for those just setting forward on their journeys and were unsure of what to do with themselves. The war promised many things: escape, adventure, perhaps even a chance to become a hero.

It was all one great blunder and Pitter was convinced of this in the most drastic way: in January 1915 during his first turn of duty on the Galicia battlefield. Like so many other young men on all battlefronts of the world, he was driven into killing sooner than he, in his youth, could understand the reality of the situation he was caught up in. In one of the first nights on the frontline the enemy attacked and for several hours all the men of his unit, including Pitter himself, put their best efforts into firing into the dark although they could see nothing but flashes – it was just a panic-filled dread that if they did not fight off the attack a hand-to-hand struggle in the trenches would follow. At dawn the open country before them was full of scattered corpses. Pitter never found out if he had been one of the night killers. However, from that moment his life story began to develop along a different path to his comrades-in-arms.

Many of them subsequently became "good soldiers": they killed on orders from their officers and so they absolved of the responsibility for somebody else's death. It seemed to have another, higher meaning ordained from elsewhere and it freed such soldiers from doubts about the rightness of

their behaviour. Pitter was unusual in that he took pains not to impose this "deeper" political spirit of war on himself. He always saw himself as responsible for everything he did. He could not resolve the death of another human with his conscience and so began the long road of Přemysl Pitter from a visceral to a more and more conscious and thoughtful pacifism.

The horrors of war that surrounded him for years may have made him unbalanced for a while, but it was no wonder. However, among all the dying he was one of the lucky ones: while other soldiers at his side were dying he himself was left "ill-deservedly" alive. This trauma transformed one day into a religious experience, perhaps the strongest of his entire future life. He later described on many occasions that moment when he heard a voice from above and was liberated from the tribulations of the battlefield with the following words: *Your life does not belong to you any more but to me – and to the service of people, the salvation of those who are drowning.*

Přemysl Pitter did not learn his faith at home, nor did he work through gradual cognition of the world. His faith struck and overcame him out of the blue in a similar way to that described in the biographies of some saints. And at the same time he was "lucky" that in the course of his occasional leaves from the front he met in Prague, his hometown, members of an unorthodox religious circle based around Anna Pohlová. They read the Bible together, favouring extracts from the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus presents to the disciples his concept of revealed faith: those who accept it do so not on the basis of critical examination of the various pros and cons but because they identify with Jesus in the innermost selves, in their own urgency. After the founding of the republic when hundreds of people not only left the Catholic and various other churches, but also grew apart from religion altogether, Pitter and his friends on the contrary came to the belief that in times of religious crisis there is a need to seek new ways to allow Jesus' word to work among people and to change their lives for the better.

In 1920 the religious community of New Jerusalem was born. It owed



name to Jan Milič of Kroměříž, who had been one of the first Czech religious reformers to oppose the corruption of the Church in the fourteenth century. He had built a sanctuary for the poor in the Prague of Charles IV, which he called New Jerusalem and which was to become a model of a better future world. Like Milič, Pitter believed that a Christian had to undergo an inner moral transformation and purge of the heart (conversion) in order for his/her faith to be personal and true; Pitter also believed that the current church could be renewed only on the basis of the spirit of primal church communities – and that the touchstone of how effective this transformation was would be “fieldwork” among the most needy – particularly among the poor and the young.

The movement had a solid Christian base but it was also inspired by the Buddhist doctrine of karma and elements of various other spiritual teachings – even such positively spectacular or time-conditioned ones as occultism or spiritualism. Pitter was not a Christian eclectic or experimenter; he considered himself a man who followed the Apostle Paul's statement: “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.” Pitter rejected anything that did not correspond to the Christian base. However, he did not conceal that in formulating his pacifistic ideas he was inspired not only by the Bible but also by the methods of the International Red Cross, the writings of the Czech theosophist Pavla Moudrá and the philosophy of “non-resistance against evil with force” by the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy.

After 1918 everybody thought that the world which emerged from the slaughter of WWI had to vary although the recipes were different: Gandhi or Masaryk, Lenin or Hitler. Pitter and his friends aimed their work particularly at the birth of a new, morally regenerated man. Perhaps no other Czech travelled to so many pacifist congresses between the wars and hardly anybody put in so much work within the peace movement as he did. However, the main focus of his activities was in social charity. Pitter identified himself with the movement of Religious Communism whose main representative was the Swiss theologian Leonhard Ragaz and he proved with his activities that the word “communism” could have a completely different meaning than that suggested by the catastrophic deeds of part of the international radical left.

Pitter longed to change the world and above all the people in it, and he chose methods that would have an impact on public opinion. However, these were different methods to those used for example by politicians. Pitter did not seek collaboration on the basis of rational pragmatism, he wished for more: through the power of his personal example he wanted to (and he did) lead helpers to believe as unconditionally as he did. Among these helpers the one who was closest to him for half a century was a Swiss woman Olga Fierz (1900–1990) who, together with Pitter, formed a collaborative tandem that survived all the transformations and critical stages of the movement. Fierz also took great and determined care to preserve Pitter's memory after his death.

Together they were the main force behind publishing the periodical *Sbratření* (Becoming Friends; 1924–1942). It helped to bind the movement together and acquired supporters both in Czechoslovakia and abroad. From the mid 1920s they also started working with young people, particularly those from poor Prague working-class neighbourhoods like Žižkov. In 1933 the famous Miličův dům (Milič House) opened as a sanctuary for children and young people where Pitter introduced educational methods he learnt about during his travels around Europe (he was especially inspired by Quaker schools he had studied in England). Together with Olga Fierz, Ferdinand Krch and other tutors the Miličův dům offered a non-authoritarian style of education based on personal example and offering a wide range not only of “subjects” but also games and practical occupations. The religious ethos of this education stayed hidden; there was no conversion to Pitter's faith but the fact that the “Uncle” (as the children called him) was driven primarily by this lifelong faith was patently clear. It was from the work at the Miličův dům, that the “Action Castles” (1945–1947) gradually arose. This project was possibly the most significant contribution that Přemysl Pitter and his collaborators made to the history of the twentieth century.

It began with the Munich Agreement and the establishment of the Protectorate when the situation of the Jewish children Pitter had in his care in the Miličův dům worsened due to the gradual imposition of the Nuremberg Laws. He continued to support their families and risked his own life to vi-



them even when it was strictly forbidden and transports to concentration camps were in full swing. Pitter had no idea during the war about the extent of the "Final Solution" and so immediately following the liberation of Terezin in May he decided to go there to look for "his" children and bring them back. He did not find them there because they were no longer alive; however, he brought back tens of others in a pitiful state, and with his team he started to take care of them in the way he used to. He arranged health care for them in several buildings in central Bohemia: the former castles of Olešovice, Štířín, Kamenice and Lojovice, largely confiscated from expelled German owners. And together with these Jewish children he placed into the castles children from other families affected by the war, both Czech and German. There were 810 children altogether, half of whom were German.

The exceptional nature of Pitter's "action" becomes clearer when contrasted with the general Czech context at that time. The expulsion of almost three million Germans after the war was in full progress and particularly in the early weeks and months it often took a wild (violent) form on the part of the Czechs. At the same time that Czech politicians, regardless of their political affiliation, proclaimed a final break with the Germans, Pitter applied his idea of Christian mercy – and he used it not in theory or rhetoric but in practice. The coexistence of children from slaughtered Jewish families with German children who had been, for example, in the Hitlerjugend was extremely difficult so soon after the war, but this was what Pitter attempted to achieve (almost without publicity at the time). The "Action Castles" lasted two years and over that time Pitter traced family members for his wards in the world fragmented by the war or found other people willing to take care of them. And meanwhile he "educated" his children. Meetings of former "Pitter's children" – which still take place today – are perhaps the best testament to the importance of this coexistence. It is clear from the speeches of participants that even in 1945 it was possible to behave in Czech-German relationships in a different manner than the traumas of the recent war seemed to dictate. (In 1964 Pitter was awarded the honorary title of Righteous among the Nations in the State of Israel in recognition of his work.)

Other stories from Pitter's post-war life also show that the core of his faith lay in relief work for the poor and needy. After the communist takeover in 1948 his pedagogical model, based on Christian foundations and thus in opposition to Nejedlý's or Makarenko's ideas, became undesirable. This prevented Pitter from working at the Miličův dům or elsewhere and he came under surveillance by the secret police. He resisted for a long time but in 1951 when his life was at risk he chose exile. The following year (1952–1962) he spent, together with Olga Fierz, as a social worker and a lay preacher in the Valka German refugee camp near Nuremberg and as a collaborator in the Czechoslovak broadcasting service of Radio Free Europe in Munich. All this time he was also one of the most dedicated proponents of Czech-German forgiveness and reconciliation among Czechoslovak exiles, even then the number of such Czechs could be counted on fingers of one hand.

Přemysl Pitter lived out the last fourteen years of his life with Olga Fierz in "retirement" at a new address near Zurich in Switzerland. It was one of the most powerful periods. From 1962 they published the periodical *Hovoření s pisateli* (Conversations with Writers) – a follow-up to the former *Sbratnění* – and sent it out to Czechoslovak exiles all over the world. At the same time Pitter expanded his publishing activities and collaborated with many Czechoslovak exile and German organisations to support the development of mutual contacts (for example Ackermann Gemeinde). When he died in 1976 both Czech exiles and the nation at home lost their most distinctive and lifelong representative of the belief that if there are fewer ideological terms that are given, the moral values and practical effects of reconciliation between both individuals and nations are all the greater.

Though his name is not unknown in the Czech Republic today the significance of his legacy is still not fully appreciated, limited to a smallish circle of eyewitnesses and those interested in the history of religion, including outside the church. Přemysl Pitter was a humanist of similar impact to Nicholas Winton or Oskar Schindler but his name is known in a far smaller sphere. Was he perhaps too demanding in his life, his concept of faith and in the complexity of his demands of believers? Could a man be condemned to the margins of interest in the largely atheistic Czech society just



because he was confident he had experienced in his youth the miracle of God's grace and he never gave up hoping to experience it again together with others? Přemysl Pitter is still awaiting full recognition in his homeland.

Pavel Kosatik

Translated by Ladislav Šenkyřík and April Retter



S Olgou (1943)



Mýto – čeští uprchlíci (1938)



Mýto (1941)