



German Ghosts Haunting Slovak Theater: The Role of Drama in the Slovak Culture of Remembrance

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11649/sn.3363>

Michał Korhel

Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8319-4557>

e-mail: michal.korhel@ispan.edu.pl

Abstract

With the independence of Slovakia in 1993, a culture of memory of the problematic aspects of the history of Slovak Germans – such as anti-German violence, post-World War II internment camps, or forced displacement from (Czecho)Slovakia during and after the war – began to develop gradually. Currently there are more than twenty sites of memory in the form of monuments or memorial plaques commemorating those aspects of the common Slovak-German history. However, there are still voices in Slovak society pointing out the lack of public knowledge about the historical issues involved. In 2022 and 2023, the plays *Domov!* [Home!] and *Hauerland* appeared on the stages of Slovak theaters. Focusing on the period of World War II and first postwar years, they both show it for the first time from the perspective of Slovak Germans. Based on a comparison of these two plays and the existing sites of memory, this article considers how Slovak Germans are remembered in Slovakia today. Applying the analytical framework of hauntology, it further

Funded by the European Union (ERC, Spectral Recycling, 101041946). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them. No competing interests have been declared.

Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits redistribution, commercial and non-commercial, provided that the article is properly cited. © The Author(s) 2024.

explores the role of drama in the Slovak culture of remembrance. The study argues that traditional sites of memory in the regions formerly inhabited by Slovak Germans, such as monuments or memorial plaques, are a response of the local population to the German ghosts of the past – various material traces of German culture. In turn, the actors playing the Slovak Germans in the theatrical productions under discussion are considered to be possessed by their characters, who bring the repressed past back to light. As the actors are not limited by local concerns, they can reach a wider audience. They bring new perspectives on a history that is already known, and thus they play an important role in the process whereby individual and/or social memories become part of collective memory on the national level.

Keywords: theater; German minority; culture of remembrance; sites of memory; forced migration; history of Slovakia; hauntology

In 2022, the play *Domov!* [Home!], performed by the exTEATRO theater from Ľubica in northern Slovakia, appeared on stage in the neighboring town of Kežmarok (Ger. Kesmark). To be more precise, it was not a stage as such, but rather the various rooms of Kežmarok Castle, where the play had its premiere. However, it was not the site where it was performed that caught the attention of Slovak theater critics. They praised *Domov!* for “the remarkable authenticity of the text, the real fates of individuals and whole families who had to leave their entire lives behind and go into the unknown” (21. ročník súťaže DRÁMA, n.d.), and that earned the play a place among the winners of the competition called “Drama” – the only Slovak competition for original dramatic texts. The author and director of this historical drama set in the period of the forced displacement of Slovak Germans,¹ Marcel Hanáček, drew his inspiration from authentic memories of those who were made to leave. As such, *Domov!* is the first theater play in Slovakia on the subject of the events of World War II and the postwar period from their perspective. When asked about his intentions for the play, Hanáček said that his aim was not to enlighten the public or assign blame to one or the other side. At the same time, however, he admitted he probably had wanted to “build a tiny, inconspicuous monument to those that no one knows anything about” (M. Hanáček, interview, March 19, 2024).

With the fall of state socialism in Czechoslovakia in 1989 and the democratization of Czechoslovak society, new aspects of the country’s recent past became part of academic and public discourses. One of them was the postwar fate of the German-speaking population, which was a taboo in socialist Czechoslovakia (Kraft, 2005, p. 336). Also, with the independence of Slovakia in 1993, a culture of memory regarding the problematic

1 The often-used term “Carpathian Germans” originally referred to the Germans living not only on the territory of present-day Slovakia. In Czechoslovakia, it became popular as a name of a political movement in the 1920s and 1930s. However, there was no Carpathian German group consciousness among Germans in Slovakia. Therefore, the historian Martin Zückert suggests using the terms “Slovak Germans” or “Germans in Slovakia” (Zückert, 2016, pp. 25–26).

aspects of the history of Slovak Germans began to develop gradually, including issues such as anti-German violence, post-World War II internment camps, forced displacement, or merely the presence of Slovak Germans in Slovakia before the war. Currently there are more than twenty sites of memory in the form of monuments or memorial plaques commemorating those aspects of the common Slovak-German history (Pöss, 2021).² Still, as can be seen from the quotation presented above, Hanáček finds the current state of the Slovak culture of remembrance regarding Slovak Germans somehow insufficient. Even though there are various sites of memory commemorating the German-speaking population in Slovakia, he refers to Slovak Germans as “those that no one knows anything about”. Therefore, one should ask: How are Slovak Germans remembered in Slovakia today? And also: How is a monument in the form of a theater play different from traditional monuments and memorial plaques? Answers to these questions will make it possible to assess the role of drama in the Slovak culture of remembrance of Slovak Germans.

In order to address the above questions, this study compares the existing sites of memory and the drama dealing with the problematic aspects of Slovak-German history. Based on the relevant examples of such sites, the events or people they commemorate and their perception in Slovak society, the article will first consider Slovak Germans in the context of Slovak collective memory. In the next step, the study will focus on two plays: the play *Domov!* mentioned above and Peter Palik’s play *Hauerland*;³ the latter appeared in 2023 on the stage of J. G. Tajovský Theater in Zvolen in central Slovakia; Palik is the author and at the same time also director of *Hauerland*. The play deals with the relations between individual national groups and their development during the 1930s and 1940s in a fictional village in the Hauerland region. In this regard, the present study will also critically analyze the scripts of both plays as well as interviews with Hanáček and Palik conducted by the author, with a particular focus on the portrayal of the problematic aspects of Slovak-German history (M. Hanáček, interview, March 19, 2024; P. Palik, interview, August 4, 2023). Additional comments on the perception of German heritage in Slovak society are based on the author’s fieldwork in Handlová and surrounding villages as well as in Kežmarok – areas that until the end of World War II were inhabited mostly by the German-speaking population. The fieldwork included oral history and ethnographic interviews with settlers who had come to those regions after the war, members of the German minority who were allowed to stay there, and interlocutors actively interested in local history.⁴

² There are also permanent or special exhibitions on this topic. However, an additional comparison would exceed the extent of the present study (e.g. Juhászová, 2018).

³ The play’s title refers to a specific region in central Slovakia which was inhabited predominantly by Slovak Germans until World War II.

⁴ All interviews used in this study were conducted by its author in a semi-structured method. Aside from the interviews with the two authors of the theater plays under discussion, all other interviews have been anonymized due to ethical reasons. Fieldwork in Handlová and the surrounding area was conducted in 2022–2024, and in Kežmarok – in 2024.

Although there are no doubts about the importance of performativity and its effects on the audience in the context of a theater play as a mnemonic device (Logge et al., 2020, pp. 14–16), this aspect is not analyzed in the present study, as the author saw only the play *Hauerland* and read the scripts of both plays under discussion. Furthermore, he did not talk with members of the audience about their impressions after seeing the plays.

Theater, Memorials and Ghosts

Both plays, *Domov!* and *Hauerland*, originated in the areas of Slovakia that were inhabited predominantly by German-speaking population until World War II: the regions of Spiš (Ger. Zips) in the east, and Hauerland – in the central part of the country. Although it is still possible to find traces of German heritage in these regions, they have a ghost-like character – they are visible and invisible, they exist and do not exist at the same time. As such, they can be understood as ghosts haunting the local population (e.g. Ćwiek-Rogalska, 2020).

In order to describe and explore these hauntings and their mnemonic structures, the present article applies the analytical framework of hauntology. Developed by Jacques Derrida and other scholars (del Pilar Blanco & Peeren, 2013; Derrida, 2012), the concept of hauntology presents an alternative to ontology by “replacing the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive” (Davis, 2005, p. 373). As known from stories and legends, what ghosts do is they haunt. In the case of German material heritage, haunting can be, for example, a repetitive activity by which the ghost directs attention to something specific that is not normally visible (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi). However, at the same time, haunting can also occur “when a particular place becomes the site for an encounter with broken time” (M. Fisher, 2012, p. 19).

That particular place can be the theater, where the audience, through the play, encounters a time that does not correspond with the reality they know. Consequently, the audience’s reality gets disrupted by the play (R. Fisher & Wandt, 2023, p. 23). As Luckhurst and Morin claim, “theater is an art that enacts the paradox of physical embodiment” (Luckhurst & Morin, 2014, p. 3). In the context of the plays analyzed in this study, ghosts are not the material remains of German culture – both plays are based on memories of Slovak or Czech Germans. While in the case of *Domov!* their testimonies were transferred into dialogues and monologues, the author of *Hauerland* used them as inspiration for a fictional story (M. Hanáček, interview, March 19, 2024; P. Palik, interview, August 4, 2023). Actors impersonating a character experience an internal and consequently also external transformation – they enter a particular state of being possessed by the characters they impersonate (Kolankiewicz, 1999, p. 46). Moreover, following Mary Luckhurst (2014), an actor’s body can be understood as “a haunted house inhabited by others” (p. 163).

Therefore, in the present study the actors of both plays are considered to be possessed by the ghosts of Slovak Germans.

Domov! and *Hauerland* present not only the individual memory of Slovak Germans, but also the experience of a national group in a particular time period – its social memory.⁵ More precisely, as the testimonies and their parts were selected by the plays' authors, it is their interpretation of the individual and social memories of Slovak Germans. Bringing the past into the present, a theater play – most of all ones based on testimonies of contemporary witnesses – not only fulfills a socio-political function, but at the same time has an important role in a culture of remembrance (Rokem, 2000, p. 3; Steffen, 2020, p. 162). There is a variety of research focusing also on the role of a theater play as a mnemonic device in the context of East-Central Europe after 1989, especially regarding individuals and communities who have been denied the possibility to be remembered for political reasons (e.g. Burzyńska, 2015; Lease, 2016; Niziołek, 2021; Turzíkova, 2019).

Like a historical play, a site of memory brings the past into the present (Assmann, 2018, p. 217). In this way, it also creates an interpretation, a construct of particular historical events relevant for the collective or cultural memory (Assmann, 2018, p. 217; Hroch, 2014, p. 36). In comparison to theater plays, which can be performed in various theaters or other places, traditional monuments are established firmly in the cultural landscape. This means they are meant to stay there for a longer period of time, whereas a theater play, performed for a limited amount of time, is rather impermanent. Moreover, the location of monuments and memorial plaques has an impact on who can see them. Even though one can find them in public places such as churches, cemeteries or locations closely connected to the historical events they commemorate, these places are often not visited by a wider public. Some memorials are located in places that are hard to reach or meant only for a particular group of people.⁶ Therefore, only people actively interested in the topic will look for them. In this regard, there is a similarity with theater plays, where the audience's interest in the topic can be assumed, as a play can be seen after intentionally buying a ticket.

Considering that the memorials and memorial plaques discussed in this study – and compared with the theater plays mentioned above – were not created by the previous German-speaking inhabitants, from the hauntological perspective they cannot be understood as German ghosts. The sites of memory in question were established in the post-displacement period by the new local population. In some cases, there was cooperation between the previous and new inhabitants of a particular region. Therefore, these sites represent a form of practice – how the local population tried to make peace with the ghosts haunting their present (Sterling, 2017).

5 For more on social memory see e.g. Assmann (2018, pp. 26–28).

6 One such example is the site of memory at the camp Nováky-Laskár, used for the internment of Slovak Germans after the war. The monument is located on the mass grave of the Germans who died in the camp near the village of Koš – today in the fields ("Neues Denkmal für die Opfer des Lagers Nováky", 2018; Pöss, 2021, p. 269).

Slovak Germans in National and Local Collective Memory

Until the end of World War II, the German-speaking population lived on the territory of present-day Slovakia predominantly in particular regions – in the west it was the country's capital Bratislava (Ger. Pressburg) and its surroundings, and in the central and eastern parts – the regions of Hauerland and Spiš mentioned above (Gabzdilová-Olejníková & Olejník, 2004, p. 9). In the course of forced migration at the war's end and in its aftermath, the population of those regions almost completely changed. New, mostly Slovak settlers from neighboring regions and other countries arrived in place of the forcibly displaced Germans (Gabzdilová-Olejníková & Olejník, 2004; Korhel, 2024). Therefore, the regions in question can be classified as post-displacement regions. As indicated above, in these regions the settlers encountered traces of previous cultures – in the hauntological analytical framework: the German ghosts that haunted them. There are various ways how the settlers dealt with German ghosts. Some tried exorcism to eliminate the existing German traces completely. Others recycled the German objects they found, giving them a new meaning and/or purpose. In some cases, members of the local population tried to make peace with the ghosts by establishing or helping to establish sites of memory commemorating the previous German-speaking population (author's fieldwork in Handlová and its surroundings, 2022–2024). In what follows in this section, two examples of such sites will be briefly presented in order to consider the memory of Slovak Germans in the Slovak collective memory.

One of the central events, if not the central event of the Slovak history in the twentieth century is the Slovak National Uprising (Hudek, 2016, pp. 121–122), which represents the peak of the resistance against the authoritarian regime of the Slovak Republic in the years 1939 to 1945. The uprising started in late summer of 1944. After its suppression in October 1944 by the German army, some of the insurgents continued fighting as partisans (Hudek, 2016, pp. 121–122). Aside from its moral and political importance (Hudek, 2016, pp. 162, 169), the uprising also had its negative aspects. One of them was the violence against the German-speaking population that took place on the territories controlled by the insurgents. The largest mass execution took place on September 21, 1944 in a forest near the village of Sklené (Ger. Glaserhau) in the Hauerland region: partisans shot 187 men between the ages of 16 and 60 (Schvarc, 2007).

In socialist Czechoslovakia, the public commemoration of victims of violence against German civilians during the Slovak National Uprising was a taboo. On the local level, in Sklené, new inhabitants who came there after the war knew about a “German cemetery” not far from the village (interviews, July–August, 2023). However, they did not know about the exact circumstances that led to the death of the Germans buried there. Like a ghost,

the “cemetery” haunted new inhabitants of Sklené, raising questions about the past. Even though there were some Germans who stayed in the village and gave them more information on this matter, the details about the mass execution of German-speaking civilians became available to the wider public only after the fall of state socialism in Czechoslovakia. In 1994, as a result of cooperation between the forcibly displaced Germans and locals from Sklené and its surroundings, a monument was established on the mass grave – the “cemetery”. The inscription on the monument in Slovak and German reads: “In memory of 187 victims from Sklené, 21.9.1944”. Every year, on the anniversary of the tragic event, local authorities together with some of the inhabitants of Sklené commemorate the victims by laying flowers at the monument. By establishing the monument its creators addressed the haunting. They tried to give answers to the questions the German ghosts were raising about the past of the village, but also the whole country.

On the national level, the main public narrative about the Slovak National Uprising is determined by the exhibitions at the museum of this event in Banská Bystrica in central Slovakia, which cultivates its memory. What dominates here is the Slovak perspective – the perspective of Slovak insurgents, partisans and civilian population. Although the memory of the mass execution in Sklené is not completely missing, it is somehow hidden in the main exhibition. The information about the massacre can be found on one of the media stations. While the museum regularly holds anniversary events in the memory of Slovaks killed in the uprising or villages destroyed during its suppression by the German military, it does not do the same in the case of the mass execution in Sklené. Also, the local mass grave cannot be found on the list of mass graves presented in the exhibition. Therefore, in comparison to the local commemoration of the mass execution in Sklené, the memory of violence against German civilians during the uprising is marginalized in official collective memory.

About twenty kilometers south of Sklené lies Nová Lehota (Ger. Neuhaus), today a district of Handlová (Ger. Krickerhaus). Before World War II, it used to be a village inhabited almost exclusively by Germans, with a population of about 1,500 in 1945 (Lasslob, 1980). Nearly all of them were forced to leave at the end of the war, and new Slovak population was resettled in empty houses built of stone, with unplastered walls typical of the region (Lasslob, 1980; interview, November 27, 2022). Even today, their particular form, and in some cases also unplastered stone walls that still can be seen, remind their new owners of the original German inhabitants of Nová Lehota – they haunt them (author’s fieldwork in Handlová and its surroundings, 2022–2024). When talking about ghosts, a cemetery is often the place that can be identified as haunted. In the cemetery in Nová Lehota, one can find several pre-World War II tombstones or at least their remnants. Some of them still have legible inscriptions in German, and a few of them – even fading pictures of people who used to live there before the forced displacement of the German-speaking population from Czechoslovakia. These tombstones – German ghosts – compelled new inhabitants of Nová Lehota to ask, or at least think about, their local predecessors (author’s fieldwork in Handlová and its surroundings, 2022–2024).

In one corner of the cemetery there is a stone morgue. In 2015, it was reconstructed by a group of local activists (interview, November 27, 2022). During the reconstruction, looking at the surrounding old tombstones that were gradually disappearing, they decided to put up memorial plaques with the names of the German families who lived in the village in January 1945. The plaques are accompanied by an inscription in Slovak: "In memory of the inhabitants of Nová Lehota – Neuhaus who had to leave in 1945". The aim of the activists was to make up for what they saw as undignified behavior of the new inhabitants of Nová Lehota, and to preserve the memory of German culture (interview, November 27, 2022). However, there is a lock on the door of the morgue, and thus the site of memory is available to the public only through a person who has the key (author's fieldwork in Handlová and its surroundings, 2022–2024). There is no annual event commemorating the victims of forced displacement in Nová Lehota, unlike in the case of the monument in Sklené. Other plaques commemorating forcibly displaced Slovak Germans are found mostly in churches or on the walls of local centers of the Carpathian-German Association in Slovakia (Pöss, 2021). Therefore, it can be assumed that the memory of the forced displacement is meant for a certain group of people. The morgue in Nová Lehota might serve as a metaphor of the place of the forced displacement of the German-speaking population from Czechoslovakia in Slovak collective memory – even though it is there, at the same time it is locked somewhere in the corner.

The two examples discussed above represent a sample of the culture of remembrance of problematic aspects in Slovak-German history. Although these aspects are part of the Slovak collective memory, they are limited to its local level. In the post-displacement regions, new inhabitants tried to make peace with the hauntings by addressing the forgotten or unspoken past. As ghosts are usually tied to the places they haunt, the problematic aspects of common history of Slovaks and Germans are rather marginalized on the level of national collective memory. But what if the German ghosts cross the borders of the places they haunt?

Exporting the German Ghosts Through Theater

The plays *Domov!* and *Hauerland* were created in different places and under different circumstances. Nevertheless, they both have been able to reach an audience beyond the post-displacement regions they are set in. It is theater that allows ghosts to move beyond the spaces they normally haunt. As presented at the beginning of this article, actors impersonating a character can be considered to be possessed by a ghost. What is more, they can not only reappear on one stage performing the same play more times – they can also (re)appear on a different stage and perform for an audience with no previous experience with ghosts, including German ghosts in any form.

The characters impersonated by actors in the plays *Domov!* and *Hauerland* can be collectively described as Slovak Germans. As mentioned above, the lines of the individual characters in *Domov!* are based on the real memories of Slovak and Czech Germans.

One character in the play carries the stories of multiple authentic narrators. The main characters, with whom the audience moves through the story, are Germans living in the Spiš region – two men, two women and a child coming from the small town of Kežmarok and surrounding villages. The author portrays them as common people. Before the war they did not care about their nationality, but this changed during the war as result of political agitation. After the war, they shared the fate of the German-speaking population in Czechoslovakia and had to leave their homes (Hanáček, 2022). The main characters are complemented by secondary ones of Slovak, Czech, Russian and American nationalities, as well as characters of real historical figures connected with the mass execution of mostly German-speaking civilians on the Švédské šance hill near the Moravian town of Přerov (Ger. Prerau) (Staněk, 2005, pp. 274–279). The story of *Domov!* focuses on the various forms of forced displacement of Slovak Germans and how these affected the life of the main characters (Hanáček, 2022).

By contrast, an important part of the plot of *Hauerland* are the relations between individual national groups and their development at the time of the emerging ideology of National Socialism in the 1930s, and in the following period of extremes of World War II and the postwar years (P. Palik, interview, August 4, 2023). Correspondingly, there is a variety of characters. The fictional village is dominated by Germans, but Slovaks, Jews and the Roma are also present; some of the characters do not always fit into national categories. At the beginning, the play depicts the inhabitants of the village as one community with minimal mutual conflicts.⁷ However, this changes with the increasing influence of historical events. Gradually, it is possible to observe their effects on the personality of the individual characters. They are slowly affected by the rise of antisemitism and the Holocaust, the outbreak of the war and the Slovak National Uprising, the advances of the Soviet army and the forced displacement of the German-speaking population (P. Palik, interview, August 4, 2023; Palik, 2023).

The play *Domov!* was first shown in the series *Krvavé dejiny* [Bloody History], in which the exTeatro theater in cooperation with the Kežmarok Museum prepares a theatrical performance thematically focused on the history of the town and the region every year. It was presented partly during the European Folk Craft Festival, attended by almost 50,000 people (*Festival ľudového remesla*, 2022). It was also performed once in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia. The author, Marcel Hanáček, commented on the differences in how the audience perceived his play in those different environments. In Kežmarok, the audience knew that Germans once lived there but did not know about the circumstances of their “departure”. For the audience in Bratislava, the entire performance allegedly presented something almost completely new (M. Hanáček, interview, March 19, 2024).

⁷ This is an idealized image of the Slovak-German relations before World War II. In testimonies, the social conflicts that existed before the war are often relativized or even overshadowed by the violence associated with the war.

Hauerland was shown in Zvolen, a town in central Slovakia, which is not located in the Hauerland region itself and was not dominated by German-speaking population in the past. The author, Peter Palik, said he did not encounter negative reactions to his play. On the contrary, the topic of Slovak Germans resonated with many of those who had seen it, and, as he heard, they had spent several days thinking about it (P. Palik, interview, August 4, 2023). The play ends with a screening of interviews with the actors and other members of the team uncovering their German ancestors.

While Palik described the audience's reaction to his play as "surprise" (P. Palik, interview, August 4, 2023), Hanáček used the word "dismay" in this context (M. Hanáček, interview, March 19, 2024). In both cases, one can recognize a reaction to seeing a ghost. Surprise is a rather neutral reaction, but dismay already points to a negative one. Through their theater plays, both authors managed to confront the German ghosts not only with people from post-displacement regions, but also with an audience that was not aware of their existence. Consequently, the ghosts can haunt a wider population, making it think about the past they bring back to light.

Ghosts of German Victims of World War II

In the popular literature in socialist Czechoslovakia, with some exceptions, the Germans were presented predominantly as the collective enemy who executed partisans and Slovak civilian population and burned down villages during the war (Kolcún, 2011, pp. 35, 37). After 1989, the topic of Slovak Germans rarely appeared in Slovak popular literature or cinema.⁸ Therefore, one could argue that the picture of the German as a perpetrator dominates the Slovak collective memory of World War II.⁹ In the interviews conducted with the authors of the plays, they both said they had used the original testimonies without additional evaluation and portrayed the characters in a balanced way (M. Hanáček, interview, March 19, 2024; P. Palik, interview, August 4, 2023). Still, by choosing the characters and their portrayal, the authors of *Domov!* and *Hauerland* offer their own interpretation of the depicted events. They decided to present the perspective of Slovak Germans not as a perspective of perpetrators, but rather victims – people severely affected by the particular circumstances of the time period they lived in.¹⁰

On stage, in both plays, actors possessed by German ghosts bring the past back to light. In doing so, they address the problematic aspects of Slovak-German history that are

8 An exception here is the movie *Tlmočník (The Interpreter)*. Due to the specificity of the region and the attendant national issues, Slovak authors focused primarily on the issue of the Hungarian minority (Stowikowska, 2018, p. 70).

9 By contrast, Slovak (and German) historiography includes works presenting new perspectives on World War II and the postwar years, including a multi-faceted portrayal of Slovak Germans. See e.g. works of Dušan Kováč, Tereza Juhászová, Soňa Gabzdilová-Olejníková, Milan Olejník, Michal Schvarc, Jozef Tancer, Martin Zückert.

10 On the commemoration of Germans as victims after World War II see Kossert (2008, pp. 345–354) and Moeller (2005).

commemorated by the sites of memory mentioned above. A few days after the massacre in Sklené, another mass execution of Slovak Germans took place about fifty kilometers south, in Banská Štiavnica (Ger. Schemnitz), where 83 people were killed (Pöss, 2024). This tragic event appears in *Hauerland*. In the course of the plot, three characters are successively arrested by partisans or soldiers: a local priest, who does not agree with the justification of the Holocaust in Slovakia by Christian elites; a Slovak man working as a liaison for the partisans who lost his documents; and a German who married a Slovak woman, seized the business of his Jewish neighbors at their request in order to protect it, and helped the partisans. All three characters subsequently meet in one scene when they are crowded together with others in a so-called cattle wagon. The priest calls for joint prayer. While the others pray silently, he recites the authentic testimony of a real priest who survived the massacre in Banská Štiavnica (P. Palik, interview, August 4, 2023; Palik, 2023). The scene ends with the train stopping. In the silence that follows, information appears that these three characters will not be seen in the story anymore (Palik, 2023, p. 40).

Domov! also makes the executions of Slovak Germans a subject of discussion. Since the play focuses on the Spiš region, the author chose probably the most famous tragic event associated with the German-speaking population living in this area – the massacre on the Švédské šance hill near the town of Přerov. Unlike the mass executions during the Slovak National Uprising, this execution took place after the war, on the night of June 18/19, 1945, and it was not carried out on the territory of Slovakia. The victims were people returning to Slovakia from the Czech borderlands, where they had been evacuated during the war. At the station in Přerov, they were escorted off the train by soldiers of the Czechoslovak army, whose train stopped there as well on its way to Slovakia. A total of 265 men, women and children were falsely accused of being members of German political organizations and the SS and subsequently shot on the nearby Švédské šance hill (Staněk, 2005, pp. 274–279).

In *Domov!*, the female characters in one of the scenes realize that their train stopped at the station in Přerov. Seeing soldiers outside, the main protagonists decide to escape from the train and thus save their lives (Hanáček, 2022, pp. 21–23). Next, together with a light effect, a sound of shooting can be heard. The scene changes and the characters of real historical figures arrive: Karol Pazúr, who was identified as the commander responsible for the massacre on the Švédské šance hill, and the investigator of the crime. Pazúr explains to the audience what happened on the night of June 18/19, 1945. His explanations correspond to those from his real investigation in the postwar period (Hanáček, 2022, pp. 23–24; Staněk, 2005, pp. 275–278).

Aside from the fact that Palik and Hanáček incorporate scenes that resemble specific historical events – mass executions of the German-speaking population – they also depict the context of those events. They point out that the victims were civilians, they were not armed, and they were not only people of German nationality. In the case of the massacre on the Švédské šance hill, its cruelty is emphasized by providing specific information – there were 120 women

and 74 children among the victims (Hanáček, 2022, p. 23). When mentioning men of German nationality as victims of mass executions – based on how the plot unfolds and the characters develop – it is emphasized that they did not necessarily share the ideology of National Socialism or support the policy of the Slovak Republic in the years 1939 to 1945. On the contrary, as a result of the arbitrariness of partisans or insurgent soldiers, people who did not agree with the new regime also became victims of anti-German violence (Palik, 2023).

What makes a separate chapter of how *Domov!* and *Hauerland* present the perspective of Slovak Germans is the depiction of their forced migration during and after World War II. In both productions, the audience is gradually confronted with their experience. First, the evacuation of mainly women and children from Slovakia because of the danger of partisans and the approaching Soviet army in late 1944 and early 1945 – they went to the Czech borderlands, which at that time belonged to the German Reich. Second, their return to Slovakia. Third, the forced displacement of Slovak Germans to the American and Soviet occupation zones of postwar Germany. *Domov!* adds the part of the forced migration experience of Slovak Germans which is probably the least known: the deportation of some of them to labor camps in the Soviet Union (Hanáček, 2022). In this context, it is not just about informing the audience that something like this happened in the past, but above all – about showing the impact it had on the individual characters, and thus also on particular Slovak Germans whose memories are represented in the dialogues (Hanáček, 2022).

Aside from the topics of losing one's home and questioning the concept of collective guilt for the war and related atrocities discussed in both plays (Hanáček, 2022), *Domov!* also points out negative aspects of their forced migration, such as poor living conditions to which they were exposed in different contexts. In the internment camp, they are confronted with insufficient hygiene and exposed to physical and psychological violence by the guards (Hanáček, 2022, pp. 6–7). In a labor camp in the Soviet Union, the characters mention – in addition to the hard work – the unbearable weather conditions and low food rations that force people to steal (Hanáček, 2022, pp. 16–18). In order to survive, the evacuated women and children have to do the same: the children steal the leftovers that the villagers left at the front door for the animals (Hanáček, 2022, p. 17). In several scenes, the play emphasizes that the Slovak Germans realize they are not treated like human beings, and sometimes – even worse than animals: “They can at least eat the cattle, but what do they get from you? Shit. And that’s how they treat you” (Hanáček, 2022, p. 14). Aside from fear and anger, it is mainly the feelings of uncertainty and despair that accompany individual characters during their involuntary journeys. They do not know where they are being taken, and they do not know if they will arrive anywhere at all. Despair leads the characters of *Domov!* to think about whether death would be an easier fate: “I should’ve stayed at home, let them shoot me, if I’m a Nazi as they say” (Hanáček, 2022, p. 26).

Such portrayals of Slovak Germans, at the end of their tether, thinking of death as an easier fate – which are based on their individual and social memories – disrupt the dominant picture of Germans as perpetrators in Slovak national memory. In both plays, the ghosts of

Slovak Germans offer a new perspective on the common Slovak-German history of World War II and the postwar years. In the case of *Domov!*, it is almost entirely the perspective of Germans as victims, as the audience does not get much additional information about the life of particular characters during the war. The viewer does not know whether they in any way profited from being German, and the play does not put German atrocities up for discussion (Hanáček, 2022). Consequently, the perspective of Germans as victims may be perceived as one-sided. On the other hand, the perspective offered by *Hauerland's* ghosts is rather multi-faceted. In this case, Slovak Germans are not only victims but also perpetrators, and some of them are both (Moeller, 2005, p. 182; Palik, 2023).

Universalizing Negative Experiences of Slovak Germans

As discussed above, the past that the German ghosts bring back to light through both plays includes various problematic aspects of Slovak-German history. But we could go even further. What the German ghosts remind Slovak society of as well, is a multinational society and local communities that used to be typical of the territory of present-day Slovakia. This began to change radically during the war as a result of the Holocaust of Jews and Roma, and, later on, with the postwar policy of national homogeneity – an attempt to re-establish Czechoslovakia as a state of Czechs and Slovaks (*Košický vládný program*, 1978).

However, due to particular features of both plays, the ghosts leave their national context and become universal. Going beyond the topic of Slovak Germans was important for both Hanáček and Palik. The subject of *Hauerland* is general in its own way – it is about the development of interpersonal relationships in a community under the influence of an external ideology. As Palik noted, “it is set in one place, but theoretically it could take place in Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, or anywhere, one just has to change the badges and uniforms” (P. Palik, interview, August 4, 2023).

Domov! was prepared and staged during the war in Ukraine, when refugees were coming to Slovakia. As Hanáček stated, the circumstances of the war added a new dimension to his play. It was no longer only about the audience’s imagination of what it could have been like when Slovak Germans had to leave their home, and what it was like when they arrived in the occupation zones in Germany. With the war going on, a number of people from the audience could have had direct experience with refugees from Ukraine (M. Hanáček, interview, March 19, 2024). What is more, before the show, a small exhibition was created from photos with the same motifs from different migration waves in the second half of the twentieth century. Temporary tents, sleeping bags, leftover food and garbage were installed under the photos. In the words of Hanáček, it was there “so that the viewer knows that he is going to watch a docudrama, that he is going to watch something that is not fictional, but [something] that happened [...] and that something really stinks; it was even accompanied by cry and death of people” (M. Hanáček, interview, March 19, 2024).

By pointing to the possibility of recurrence of the experiences of Slovak Germans in other temporal and geographical contexts, Hanáček and Palik additionally stress the significance of the statements made by the German ghosts in their plays. In the end, the actors are not only the German ghosts, but also ghosts of victims of mass violence, ghosts of people fighting for freedom and democracy against public expectations, or ghosts of people affected by forced displacement.

The Role of Drama in the Slovak Culture of Remembrance

The examples of the sites of memory in Sklené and Nová Lehota, commemorating a mass execution of the German-speaking population and, respectively, its forced displacement from Czechoslovakia, indicate that these aspects of Slovak-German history are part of the Slovak collective memory. At the same time, however, they are limited to post-displacement regions, and they are marginalized on the national level. An artistic confrontation with Slovak-German history such as a theater play might help make them visible for a wider audience. In this regard, hauntology proved to be helpful in the analysis of this process. The actors who are considered to be possessed by the ghosts of Slovak Germans bring the invisible or repressed past back to light. Performing a play on various stages, they can bring particular aspects of the past beyond the limited community that is usually confronted with it. What is more, they can offer new perspectives on the topic. Also, the performative aspect of theater, briefly mentioned in the introduction above, may strongly affect the audience. Finally, with help of comparisons with contexts more familiar to the audience, the ghosts and their haunting acquire a more universal nature.

Coming back to Hanáček's statement from the introduction about his intention to build a "monument to those that no one knows anything about" with his play *Domov!* From a hauntological perspective – with his play, he might have built a monument as a way of coming to terms with the ghosts of Slovak Germans that haunted him personally. At the same time, however, by writing the script of a play that was consequently performed on various stages, he also summoned the ghosts of Slovak Germans that started to haunt the play's audience. Consequently, Hanáček's *Domov!*, as well as Palik's *Hauerland*, can be helpful in the process whereby individual and/or social memories become part of collective memory on the national level.

References

21. ročník súťaže DRÁMA pozná víťazov! (n.d.). Divadelný ústav Bratislava. <https://www.theatre.sk/projekty/sutaze-dramatickych-textov/sutaz-drama>
- Assmann, A. (2018). *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (3rd ed.). C. H. Beck.

- Burzyńska, A. R. (2015). Transfer: O niemieckim i polskim teatrze politycznym na początku XXI wieku. *Polish Theatre Journal*, 2015(1), 1–13.
- Ćwiek-Rogalska, K. (2020). "It's scary here": Haunted landscape as a research tool to look into post-expulsion landscapes. *Polish Journal of Landscape Studies*, 3(6), 27–47. <https://doi.org/10.14746/pls.2020.6.2>
- Davis, C. (2005). Hauntology, spectres and phantoms. *French Studies*, 59(3), 373–379. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/kni143>
- del Pilar Blanco, M., & Peeren, E. (Eds.). (2013). *The spectralities reader: Ghosts and haunting in contemporary cultural theory*. Bloomsbury.
- Derrida, J. (2012). *Specters of Marx: The state of the debt, the work of mourning and the New International* (P. Kamuf, Trans.). Taylor and Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203821619>
- Festival ľudového remesla prilákal do Kežmarku takmer 50.000 ľudí. (2022, July 10). [teraz.sk. https://www.teraz.sk/priame-prenosy-a-videa-tasr-tv/festival-ludoveho-remesla-prilakal-do/646640-clanok.html](https://www.teraz.sk/priame-prenosy-a-videa-tasr-tv/festival-ludoveho-remesla-prilakal-do/646640-clanok.html)
- Fisher, M. (2012). What is hauntology? *Film Quarterly*, 66(1), 16–24. <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2012.66.1.16>
- Fisher, R., & Wandt, I. (2023, May). Verdichtung statt Verdrängung. *Theater der Zeit*, 2023(5), 22–26.
- Gabzdilová-Olejníková, S., & Olejník, M. (2004). *Karpatskí Nemci na Slovensku od druhej svetovej vojny do roku 1953*. Spoločenskovedný Ústav SAV; Múzeum Kultúry Karpatských Nemcov.
- Gordon, A. F. (2008). *Ghostly matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Hanáček, M. (2022). *Domov!* [Unpublished script provided by the author].
- Hroch, M. (2014). Paměť a historické vědomí v kontextu národní pospolitosti. In R. Šustrová & L. Hédlová (Eds.), *Česká paměť: Národ, dějiny a místa paměti* (pp. 21–55). Academia.
- Hudek, A. (2016). Der Slowakische Nationalaufstand – Geschichte und Wahrnehmung. In P. Behrens (Ed.), *"Es lebe unsere gerechte Sache!": Der Slowakische Nationalaufstand, 29. August bis 27. Oktober 1944: Eine Ausstellung der Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand in Kooperation mit dem Historischen Institut der Slowakischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (pp. 120–170). Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand.
- Juhászová, T. (2018). The troubled pasts of Hungarian and German minorities in Slovakia and their representation in museums. *Journal of Nationalism, Memory & Language Politics*, 12(1), 52–71. <https://doi.org/10.2478/jnmlp-2018-0002>
- Kolankiewicz, L. (1999). *Dziady: Teatr święta zmarłych*. Wydawnictwo słowo/obraz terytoria.
- Kolcún, D. (2011). *Obráz SNP v slovenskej beletrii po roku 1945* [Bachelor's thesis, Masaryk University, Brno]. Informační systém Masarykovy univerzity. <https://is.muni.cz/th/zz8e9>
- Korhel, M. (2024). Povojnová migrácia na Slovensku: Perspektíva osídlencov a ich detí v Handlovej. *Historický časopis*, 72(4), 741–770. <https://doi.org/10.31577/histcaso.2024.72.4.6>
- Košický vládný program. (1978). Pravda.
- Kossert, A. (2008). *Kalte Heimat: Die Geschichte der deutschen Vertriebenen nach 1945*. Siedler.

- Kraft, C. (2005). Der Platz der Vertreibung der Deutschen im historischen Gedächtnis Polens und der Tschechoslowakei/Tschechiens. In C. Cornelißen, R. Holec, & J. Pešek (Eds.), *Diktatur – Krieg – Vertreibung: Erinnerungskulturen in Tschechien, der Slowakei und Deutschland seit 1945* (pp. 329–353). Klartext Verlag.
- Lasslob, J. (1980). *Neuhau: Eine ehemals deutsche Gemeinde in der Mittelslowakei*. Ortsgemeinschaft Neuhau der Karpatendeutschen Landsmannschaft Slowakei.
- Lease, B. (2016). *After '89: Polish theatre and the political*. Manchester University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7228/manchester/9781784992958.001.0001>
- Logge, T., Schöck-Quinteros, E., & Steffen, N. (2020). Geschichte und dokumentarisches Theater: Einleitende Bemerkungen zur Inszenierung von Zeitzeugnissen. In T. Logge, E. Schöck-Quinteros, & N. Steffen (Eds.), *Geschichte im Rampenlicht: Inszenierungen historischer Quellen im Theater* (pp. 3–23). De Gruyter Oldenbourg. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110661866-001>
- Luckhurst, M. (2014). Giving up the ghost: The actor's body as haunted house. In M. Luckhurst & E. Morin (Eds.), *Theatre and ghosts: Materiality, performance and modernity* (pp. 163–177). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137345073_10
- Luckhurst, M., & Morin, E. (2014). Introduction: Theatre and spectrality. In M. Luckhurst & E. Morin (Eds.), *Theatre and ghosts: Materiality, performance and modernity* (pp. 1–23). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137345073_1
- Moeller, R. G. (2005). Germans as victims? Thoughts on a post-Cold War history of World War II's legacies. *History and Memory*, 17(1–2), 145–194. <https://doi.org/10.2979/his.2005.17.1-2.145>
- Neues Denkmal für die Opfer des Lagers Nováky. (2018, August 28). *Karpatenblatt*. <https://karpatenblatt.sk/neues-denkmal-fuer-die-opfer-des-lagers-novaky-aufrichtige-freundschaft-ist-wichtiger-als-rache/>
- Niziołek, K. (2021). 'I remember little. Almost nothing': Participatory theatre as a means to access subjugated memories. *Memory Studies*, 15(2), 41–63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698020982047>
- Palik, P. (2023). *Hauerland* [Unpublished script provided by the author].
- Pöss, O. (2021). *Dokumentácia pomníkov a pamätných tabúl karpatských Nemcov*. Karpat-skonemecké kultúrne združenie.
- Pöss, O. (2024, August 26). 80. Jahrestag des Slowakischen Nationalaufstandes. *Karpatenblatt*. <https://karpatenblatt.sk/80-jahrestag-des-slowakischen-nationalaufstandes>
- Rokem, F. (2000). *Performing history: Theatrical representations of the past in contemporary theatre*. University of Iowa Press.
- Schvarc, M. (2007). Masová exekúcia v Sklenom 21. septembra 1944 v širšom dejinnom kontexte. *Pamäť národa*, 3(3), 4–13.
- Słowikowska, A. (2018). Na pograniczu pamięci współczesnych – (nie)pamięć o przeszłości słowackich Węgrów w słowackiej literaturze XXI wieku. *Acta Baltico-Slavica*, 42, 66–80. <https://doi.org/10.11649/abs.2018.007>
- Staněk, T. (2005). *Poválečné "excesy" v českých zemích v roce 1945 a jejich vyšetřování. Ústav pro Soudobé Dějiny Akademie věd České Republiky*.

Steffen, N. (2020). "Ich wusste nicht, dass es so war!": Authentizität im Zeitzeugnistheater. In T. Logge, E. Schöck-Quinteros, & N. Steffen (Eds.), *Geschichte im Rampenlicht: Inszenierungen historischer Quellen im Theater* (pp. 145–163). De Gruyter Oldenbourg. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110661866-008>

Sterling, C. (2017, November 6). *On heritage and hauntology*. Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage. <https://www.carmah.berlin/reflections/on-heritage-and-hauntology/>

Turzíková, T. (2019). Remembering guilt: Central European collective memory in theatrical reflection. In *European Association for the Study of Theatre and Performance Conference: Shared Memory(ies): Creation, Research and Politics in the European Contemporary Stage*. <https://eastapconferencelisbon2019.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/bios-resumos-bilingue.pdf>

Zückert, M. (2016). Jenseits der Nation: Überlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Deutschen in der Slowakei. In M. Zückert, M. Schvarc, & J. Meier (Eds.), *Migration – Zentrum und Peripherie – Kulturelle Vielfalt: Neue Zugänge zur Geschichte der Deutschen in der Slowakei* (pp. 13–36). BiblionMedia. <https://doi.org/10.3726/b11854>

Niemieckie duchy nawiedzają słowacki teatr: rola dramatu w słowackiej kulturze pamięci

Abstrakt

Wraz z uzyskaniem niepodległości przez Słowację w 1993 roku zaczęła się stopniowo rozwijać kultura pamięci związana z problematycznymi aspektami historii słowackich Niemców, takimi jak przemoc antyniemiecka, obozy internowania po II wojnie światowej czy przymusowe wysiedlenia słowackich Niemców z (Czecho)Słowacji w trakcie i po II wojnie światowej. Dzisiaj na Słowacji istnieje ponad dwadzieścia różnych miejsc pamięci w formie pomników lub tablic pamiątkowych zwracających uwagę na te elementy wspólnej słowacko-niemieckiej historii. Jednak w społeczeństwie słowackim nadal słychać głosy wskazujące na brak powszechnej wiedzy o niedawnej historii słowacko-niemieckiej. W latach 2022 i 2023 na scenach słowackich teatrów wystawiono dwa spektakle teatralne *Domov!* i *Hauerland*. Oba skupiają się na okresie II wojny światowej i pierwszych latach powojennych, pokazując ten czas po raz pierwszy z perspektywy słowackich Niemców. Na podstawie porównania wspomnianych sztuk i istniejących miejsc pamięci autor pyta, w jaki sposób pamięta się o słowackich Niemcach we współczesnej Słowacji. Z pomocą widmontologii jako ramy analitycznej bada rolę dramatu w słowackiej kulturze pamięci. Stwierdza, że tradycyjne miejsca pamięci, takie jak pomniki lub tablice pamiątkowe, znajdujące się w regionach zamieszkiwanych dawniej przez słowackich Niemców są odpowiedzią miejscowej ludności na niemieckie widma – różne materialne ślady ówczesnej niemieckiej kultury. Jednocześnie postrzega się aktorów grających słowackich Niemców w omawianych sztukach jako opętanych przez swoich bohaterów, przywracających wypartą przeszłość do teraźniejszości. Ponieważ aktorzy nie mają żadnych lokalnych powiązań, mogą dotrzeć

do szerszej publiczności. Wnosząc nowe perspektywy do już znanej historii, odgrywają ważną rolę w procesie, w którym indywidualne i/lub społeczne wspomnienia stają się częścią pamięci zbiorowej na poziomie narodowym.

Słowa kluczowe: teatr; mniejszość niemiecka; kultura pamięci; miejsca pamięci; przymusowa migracja; historia Słowacji; hauntologia

Citation

Korhel, M. (2024). German ghosts haunting Slovak theater: The role of drama in the Slovak culture of remembrance. *Sprawy Narodowościowe: Seria nowa*, 2024(56), Article 3363. <https://doi.org/10.11649/sn.3363>