

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 12. 8. 2022

A Higher Principle

One of the most highly rated Czech films of the 1960s is Jiří Krejčík's *A Higher Principle* (*Vyšší princip*). Even though the protectorate drama might not be as rich in motifs and as formally inventive as some New Wave films, it has appealed to generations of viewers with its sensitively portrayed characters and excellently built story with an exceptionally strong humanistic message.

Krejčík, along with Otakar Vávra or Jan Kadár and Elmar Klos, is among the authors who made some of their most valuable works during the New Wave, but whose careers had already taken off after the war. Also encountering them as lecturers at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU), members of the next generation saw them as the old guard. At the same time, they respected them for their craftsmanship.

At first, Krejčík made commissioned ads and documentaries and, after the war, made socialism-building films about miners. He also cooperated with Jiří Trnka and Jiří Brdečka on the animated *Present* (*Dárek*, 1946). Before *A Higher Principle*, he had made several psychological dramas from the present as well, also having as a theme the conflict an individual whose values are in conflict with a social or political system.

Krejčík often found the subject matter for his films in literary works. As for *A Higher Principle*, it was a five-page short story of the same name by Jan Drda, published as early as in the autumn 1945 in the *Work* (*Práce*) Daily. A year later, he included it in the anthology *The Silent Barricade* (*Němá barikáda*) together with ten other short stories – many later being filmed – celebrating the heroism of Czechs facing the occupiers.

Drda was inspired by an actual event at the Příbram grammar school after the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich. In June 1942, the 16-year-old student Antonín Stočes was arrested by the Gestapo and executed for his expression of revulsion

towards the occupiers. Leafing through the magazine *Source of Fun and Information* (Zdroj zábavy a poučení) and searching for input for his paper on painting, he allegedly came across Adolf Hitler's picture and, saying, "this doesn't belong here," threw it into the bin.

His schoolmate Červenka, a repeater student, told his friend Kepka about this, who as a member of the Czech National Socialist Camp – The Flag zealously defended the interests of the Third Reich. Information about the little act of defiance reached the competent German authorities who were on high alert after the assassination of Heydrich, the acting governor of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Denounced by his peer, the sixth-year student became one of the victims of the vengeful Nazi rampage.

Stočas's father Vojtěch was arrested together with his teenage son – Drda knew both of them personally as he was giving private lessons at their place – and the grammar school principal, Josef Lukeš. The Greek and Latin teacher was allegedly guilty of approving of Heydrich's assassination and showing disrespect for the criminal regime. Specifically, he purportedly said: "The murder of a tyrant is not a crime", a sentence Drda used in the short story as well (however, in his statement from 1940, Lukeš was not referring to Heydrich but to Nazi terror as such).

Gestapo officers arrested Lukeš during the final exams. On June 15, all three men were transferred to the Tábor prison for interrogation. Lukeš was executed six days later, and the Stočases on June 29. The grammar school commemorates the shot student with an annual athletic memorial.

Krejčík noticed Drda's short story in the *Work* daily and wanted to film it as early as in the late 1940s. However, Drda only finished the final version of the screenplay ten years later, having added other characters and storylines. In the meantime, Krejčík considered a short film to be presented as part of a short story triptych from the occupation period. Krejčík contemplated casting Jindřich Plachta as the professor; Plachta already having played a similar role in the comedy *Journey into the Depth of the Student's Soul* (Cesta do hlubin studákovy duše, 1939).

However, Plachta died in 1951 and did not live to see the start of the production, and Krejčík cast František Smolík instead. The film was shot in Prague and Hradec Králové,

and for instance the Jan Neruda Grammar School in Malá Strana, Prague appeared in the film. The execution was shot in a barracks courtyard not far from the Prague Municipal House.

The time frame of the story remained the same. Martial law is declared after Heydrich's assassination and the search for the offenders starts. The main hero is the experienced professor of the Kostelec grammar school, Málek, who seemingly doesn't take in the reality due to his interest in ancient philosophers. However, it is he who decides to stand up for three eighth-year students whose lives are in danger because of a harmless prank – modifying Heydrich's photo in the *National Politics* (Národní politika) daily.

Unforgettable is the teacher's final speech to the class, in which he expresses his civic position despite the principal's recommendation to avoid provoking speeches: "From the standpoint of higher moral principles, the murder of a tyrant is not a crime. I protest like every honest person must protest. I protest against the murder of your friends; let their innocent blood fall on the heads of their murderers."

Even though the students mock Málek and call him "Higher Principle" because of his moralizing, for many of them, he is a greater model, source of support, and moral authority than their own parents. The film ending shows that he has the courage to back his lofty pronouncements with decisive action. Saying the condemning sentences in front of the students, including the informer, he risks suffering the same fate as the three students.

A Higher Principle (Vyšší princip, 1960) is not just considered the peak of Krejčík's filmography, but also of František Smolík's, who in the role of Málek represents the solid moral centre of the story. Always having a great sense of casting and leading actors, Krejčík also cast many talented members of the middle and young generations, such as Jana Brejchová, Petr Kostka, Ivan Mistrík, Bohuš Záhorský or Jiří Kodet.

The modest, non-schematic drama about courage and moral integrity is not only remarkable for the emotive acting jobs, but also for the meticulously drawn relationships in a small town in the atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion. There are obvious parallels with communism, with the state again applying pressure to depoliticize society and eliminate any harmful and unwanted opinions that could

destabilize the prevailing order.

The anti-fascist drama, portraying the period of absence of freedom in a way we want to remember it as a nation – as a fight of heroic and honest Czechs against totalitarianism – received a great audience response already after the première, seen by over two million people. In 1960, the film also applied to the competition section of the Venice Film Festival (together with Jiří Weiss's thematically related *Romeo, Juliet, and Darkness* [Romeo, Julie a tma, 1959]).

However, the festival managers rejected the film, accepting František Vlácil's *The White Dove* (Holubice, 1960) as a "substitute". Nevertheless, *A Higher Principle* was shown in the non-competition section, and František Smolík was awarded the festival President's Medal Award for his performance. The film also won the International Film Press Federation Award at the Locarno Film Festival. At the same festival, Jana Brejchová got the Silver Sail Award in the Best Actress category.

A Higher Principle (Vyšší princip, Czechoslovakia 1960), director: Jiří Krejčík, screenplay: Jan Drda, Jiří Krejčík, director of photography: Jaroslav Tuzar, music: Zdeněk Liška, cast: František Smolík, Jana Brejchová, Ivan Mistrík, Jan Šmíd, Alexandr Postler Sr., Petr Kostka, Radovan Lukavský, Václav Lohniský et al. Filmové studio Barrandov, 102 min.