

Moral Quandaries in Extremis: The Last Thing by Leopold Lahola

Leopold Lahola, *The Last Thing*. Translated by Julia and Peter Sherwood. Prague, Karolinum Press, 2025. 217 pages, paperback, ISBN 978-80-246-6041.7

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In his 1982 book *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit*, historian Lawrence Langer devised the term “choiceless choices” to describe the no-win dilemmas people faced during the Holocaust. The choiceless choices presented in Leopold Lahola’s *The Last Thing* are a potent reminder about how human agency is impeded or distorted in extremis. The book consists of nine short stories in chronological sequence that transport the reader into the psyches of individuals caught up in circumstances that were larger and more powerful than they were, where there were no good choices, and where uplifting outcomes were unlikely.

With the exception of the final chapter, the stories take place in wartime Slovakia in the early stages of the Holocaust, starting with the onset of antisemitic persecution. The final chapter of the book brings the reader to New York City, three years after the end of World War II. When reading the various predicaments of the protagonists, one wonders whether the only real choice a person had was whether or not to descend into madness given the cruelty and violence of the era, as some people did. The situations presented in this collection are powerful reminders about the vulnerability and fragility of the human psyche. Lahola’s stories collide with the notion of “just world theory.”

Just world theory implies that people need to believe that the world is a safe, fair, and predictable place where they are in control of their lives. Lahola’s stories remind us that just world theory is an illusion. He skillfully and evocatively displays how the pressures of war and persecution skew human interaction with his theatrical style and peculiar personalities. He shows that moral choices are not black and white. He does not sugar coat. There are no heroes to be found here.

The stories are drawn from Lahola’s personal experiences. Though they are fictional, many of the episodes draw on incidents that are known to have occurred. The first choiceless choice that the reader encounters is in Chapter I (God’s Alley), where Jews are trying to decide whether to resist an oncoming pogrom. In Chapter II (Birdsong), a Jewish man is attempting to cope with being humiliated in the street. These early aggressions were certainly the topic of anguished conversations among Jews at the time. There is ample photographic evidence of Nazis or Hlinka

Guard members cutting off Jewish beards in the street and laughing about it. The humiliation of the victim is visible. Lahola wants us to envision the scenes in our minds and contemplate how the protagonists were *feeling*. He guides the reader into that psychological space to examine the human tragedy on the soulful level. These terrible moments stay with the reader. Having Jews compile lists of other Jews for transport (Chapter III -Twenty-Five Blows) also happened. Infanticide, the topic of chapter IV (Salvo) took place when many lives were at stake and children whimpered or cried, something which could mean the death of the entire group. Postwar suicide and issues of survivor guilt are another (Chapter IX – The Funeral of David Krakower) psychological realm.

What is less contemplated is how people struggled with these terrible predicaments in the secret chamber of their minds, and this is Lahola's gift to the reader. Lahola reminds us that people are not just swept up in the winds of history, like the nameless, faceless victims described in the statistics and the history books. Choices are made, sometimes lethal choices, which involve soul searching, sometimes with little time. The pogrom is coming—there is not a lot of time to think about what to do. In some cases, madness has set in. This was not necessarily a conscious choice, but rather a coping mechanism--or being unable to cope--with the unfathomable. Surely, many did lose a grip on their bearings, a recurring theme in the book. Are carving up Big Joco (Chapter V - The Last Thing) and murdering a fellow partisan not the actions of a madman? The absurdity, that Melius did to his friend the very thing that he did not want the Nazis to do, is inescapable.

Chapter VI (A Conversation with the Enemy) displays a philosophical conversation between a partisan and a German and the choiceless choices that occur when there is a change in their power dynamic. In Chapter VII (Like a Dog), the reader witnesses the abuse of a dog based on specious identities assigned to it that are beyond its control. Is Lahola telling us that the innocent were given arbitrary attributes that could affect their life or death (German dog vs. Jewish dog)? Or did the main character merely need a way to vent his emotions after learning that his family had disappeared? What is going on in that man's mind when he carries out the senseless killing? Is not the senselessness of the killing Lahola's point? Chapter VIII (In the First Person) brings the reader to themes of denial, the fruitless attempts to reconstitute what remained of the Jewish family, trying to understand the last moments of loved ones, and the psychological aspects of rebuilding in the wake of the Holocaust. Lahola is part philosopher, part psychologist. He knows of what he speaks as a Jewish man who survived the Holocaust himself.

Lahola was born Arje Friedmann in 1918, and was conscripted into the Slovak Army in

1940. He deserted and joined his mother and younger brother in a labor camp. He was not deported thanks to a friend in the camp administration who struck his name off the transport list. He was a partisan in the Slovak National Uprising and after the war, he worked as a playwright in Czechoslovakia. However, in 1949, after the postwar Communist takeover, he emigrated to Israel and then to Germany to work on television and film productions. In the Prague Spring, Lahola was able to get his career back on track as a successful playwright and film director. Thanks to the temporarily liberalized conditions, the collection of stories, "The Last Thing," was published in Czechoslovakia in 1968. He died three months before the book came out at the age of 50. After the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, his work remained unpublished due to communist censorship and would not reappear until 1994. Due to the timing of his work and his early death, *The Last Thing* regrettably fell into obscurity. This book brings Lahola and his timeless themes about our fragile humanity back to the reading public and English-speaking audiences. Though the writer and the settings are Slovak, the messages and moral quandaries contained in this book transcend international borders. It is a riveting read, superbly translated into English by Julia and Peter Sherwood.