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ENGLISH JOURNAL FOR YOU



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EDITORIAL



Dear Readers,

As another inspiring summer semester comes to a close, we are delighted to present a new issue of our departmental journal, celebrating the achievements, experiences, and creativity of our students and staff at the Department of English Language and Culture, Faculty of Education, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra.

This semester once again demonstrated that our department is a vibrant community where learning extends beyond the classroom. We were proud to host the annual Diversity in Education Conference, bringing together scholars, teachers, and students to discuss contemporary educational issues and professional development. Our international engagement continued through participation in the Erasmus+ mobilities. Closer to home, the Sustainability Islands project engaged secondary school students in creative activities that combined language learning, environmental awareness, and sustainability.

As always, our journal provides a platform for student voices. You will meet promising young researchers presenting their academic interests, read personal reflections on unforgettable Erasmus+ mobility experiences, and enjoy the first instalment of a short story by one of our external students.

In addition, this issue includes thought-provoking essays from abroad, offering fresh perspectives and reminding us that language and culture connect people across borders.

We hope these pages capture the energy, curiosity, and dedication that have characterised this semester.

We wish all our readers a relaxing and well-deserved summer. May it be filled with new experiences, meaningful encounters, and, of course, plenty of good books. We look forward to welcoming you back for another exciting academic year.

Lenka Michelčíková
Editor-in-Chief

SUMMER TERM IN PICTURES



Diversity in Education conference
an annual conference
on teachers' and students' professional
and personal development

**Erasmus+ BIP Project: Local to
Global Citizenship: Education for
a Connected World in Porto,
Portugal**



**Sustainability Islands: educational
and creative activities for secondary
school visitors**



IN THE HOT SEAT

More Than Just a Lecturer: An Exclusive Interview with Gregory Shaughnessy, Our Experienced Native Speaker (Part 2)

BY RENÁTA KUNOVÁ & MIROSLAV KOLAR

There is also an interesting fact about you: you have been described as having a voice that can easily be mistaken for Elvis Presley's. When did you first realize you had that talent?

I think I was a little odd as a teenager (laughs) because I really liked music from the '50s and '60s. While all of my friends were listening to popular music at the time, I was listening to the music my parents grew up with. If you came into my car, I would always have the oldies radio station on—I just loved that music, and so naturally, Elvis was a big influence. I bought his records and would just sing his songs.

At school, I had a couple of friends who I would just fool around and sing with. I had some other friends who were just starting a band, and they asked me if I wanted to join. However, I was really shy in high school—I hated speaking in front of people. Still, I joined the band, and then one thing kind of led to another.

Do you think it affected your teaching skills? Since you said that you were so shy.

When I think back, teaching was probably the last thing I could imagine myself doing—having to stand up in front of people and talk. Also, in the early stages with the band, I was okay with singing. As long as the song was playing, I felt fine, but once it stopped, I didn't know what to do. I honestly couldn't wait for the next song to start. So I put myself into these situations that were uncomfortable, and I forced myself to somehow do it.



Apart from teaching at Peace Corps and being in a band, you also have a sport background. You played quarterback for the Nitra Knights in Slovakia! How did that happen? Did you always play football back in the U.S., or was this a new adventure?

I started playing football competitively at nine while living in Puerto Rico, where my father was my coach. We played with full equipment, and I continued for 12 years before taking a long break. Still, it remained my favorite sport—every year, when autumn came, I could feel football season in the air.

Years later, I saw a recruitment poster for the Nitra Knights and thought I could help as a coach. But when I arrived, they asked if I wanted to play. At first, I hesitated—I had no equipment, and logically, it didn't seem like a good idea. But my heart said yes, and they convinced me. There was a big age gap between me and the other players, and while they were faster, I understood the tactical side of the game. That's how I became a quarterback—I figured it would help me avoid too much physical contact (laugh). Interestingly, in the US, I had always played receiver or tight end, never quarterback.

At first, it was a small league with teams from Trnava, Nitra, Zvolen, Žilina, and Smolenice, so we often played 7-on-7 instead of the usual 11-a-side. It was fun for a few years, but then, during a practice, I tore my knee ligament on an option play. I had injured my other knee 15 years earlier playing basketball, so I knew right away what had happened. My knee was swollen, and I needed surgery, but it was scheduled six months later.

In the meantime, my teammates called me before a game against Zvolen, saying, "We need you—we have no one to play!" I told them I wasn't very mobile, but they reassured me, "We'll protect you, you just have to hand off the ball." My knee was already damaged, so I thought, "What worse can happen?" and played despite the injury. Even after the operation, I still played occasionally, though not regularly. Eventually, I transitioned into coaching, and now the team competes at a completely different level.

One could say that the Nitra Knights' success is partly thanks to you. They won the league two years ago, right?

Ha-ha, well, I wouldn't say that, but yes, they did win the league. I remember when we used to play on a simple grass field in Fatranská against Trnava. Back then, we didn't have enough equipment, so I had to share mine with a teammate who played defense. Now, seeing them play in big football stadiums, with huge monitors and even being on TV, is just amazing. Last year, I went to almost all their games. The atmosphere was incredible—it's always a great experience. I even take videos to show my students, who sometimes don't believe me when I tell them about it. What I love is how family-friendly it is. Whole families come to watch, and everyone has a good time. It's very different from some small-town football games in the U.S., where people argue and swear. Here, after the game, both teams get applause. I really appreciate that sportsmanship.

I still know a lot of the players since I used to play with them. Every autumn, they organize a community day, which originally started as a memorial for one of our teammates. He was a police officer in a special unit who was killed about 12 years ago. He was one of the pioneers of the team back in the '90s. The event started as a fundraiser in his honor, but over time, it evolved into a full community day.

It takes place on a field outside the football stadium and is open to everyone. People bring food, there are kegs, Kofola, grilled sausages, goulash, cookies, cakes—you name it. There are also fun activities for kids, like a mechanical bull and a jumping castle. Everything is sponsored by the team and its sponsors, so it's all free. We encourage people to bring their friends, enjoy the day, and help spread the word about the sport. Plus, we usually play there with our band.



Speaking of the community day, you mentioned the mechanical bull and the bouncing house—things that feel quite American. Over time, have you noticed more Western influence in Slovakia?

Absolutely. As an outsider, I've observed Slovakia's transformation over the last 35–40 years. When I first arrived, I started noticing things that didn't originally have roots here, like Halloween and Valentine's Day. Back home, these were traditions we grew up with, but here, they were new. I understand why, though—it's all commercial, driven by marketing.

But the one that really gets me is Black Friday. It started as a single day, then stretched into a whole "Black Friday Month," and now it seems to last forever. And you know why it drives me crazy? Because Black Friday only makes sense if you have Thanksgiving.

In the U.S., Thanksgiving is a four-day weekend. People finish work on Wednesday, celebrate Thanksgiving on Thursday, and then Friday, everyone has the day off but nothing to do. So businesses decided to open early and offer big sales, and that's how Black Friday became the official start of the Christmas shopping season.

Okay, thank you Gregory for this interview, now I would like to end this interview by asking you to give advice, either to your younger self, or to our students reading this.

Well, let's see, to my younger self? The advice I would give; you know... No spoilers. Just enjoy the journey, enjoy the process, enjoy the mystery that is ahead of you, enjoy experiencing new things, discovering new things, make the most of it. I don't want to tell you what you should worry about or think about, just be open to what's ahead of you and try to make the most of it and enjoy it.

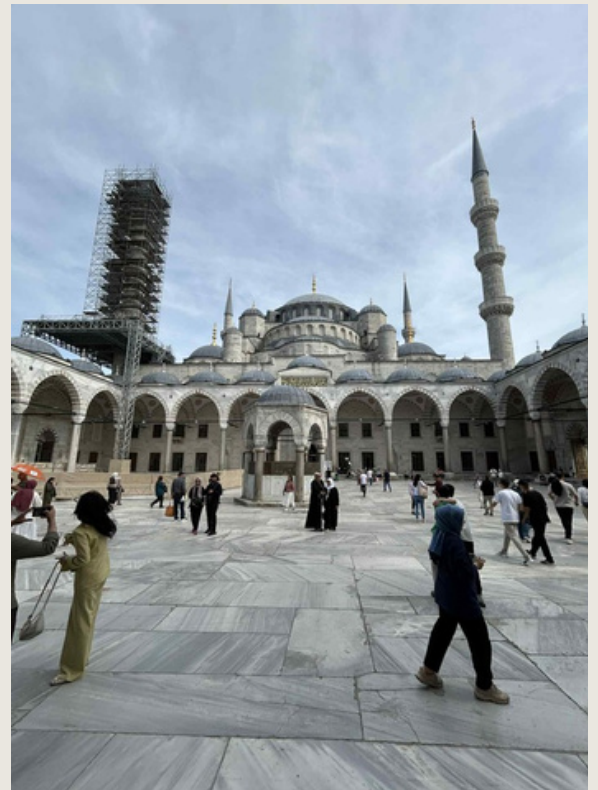
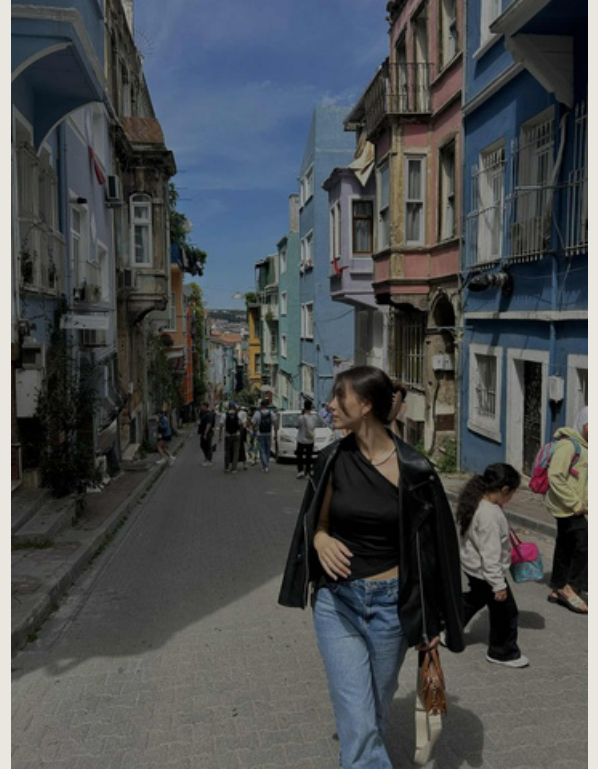
ERASMUS DIARIES

MY ERASMUS JOURNEY IN ISTANBUL

By Ema Goralová

My Erasmus stay in Istanbul was one of the most beautiful experiences of my life. I had already been very fond of Turkey for a long time—I had read a lot about it, watched travel videos, and Istanbul felt like a small travel dream of mine. That is why I fully enjoyed this mobility with great enthusiasm.

Istanbul was even more beautiful than I had imagined—stunning, vibrant, and breathtaking. Each day brought something new, interesting, and inspiring. I was fascinated by the atmosphere of a metropolis connecting two cultures and two continents, the historical landmarks at every step, and the friendliness of the local people.



ERASMUS DIARIES

I also had a very positive experience with the university we visited. The teacher and the students we worked with were kind, helpful, and welcoming. We quickly connected and created a pleasant working as well as personal environment, which made me feel truly comfortable there.

Erasmus in Istanbul is something I will remember for the rest of my life. Although this is only my subjective perspective, I would recommend every student to take part in a mobility program if they have the opportunity. It is an experience that opens your eyes, broadens your horizons, and leaves you with many beautiful memories.

And if anyone asks me about my Erasmus experience, I will always speak about it with enthusiasm.



ERASMUS DIARIES

CROSSING BORDERS: AN UZBEK GIRL IN SLOVAKIA

By Dilafruz Mukhamatjonova

An Exchange student from Uzbekistan, Fergana State University, Faculty of Foreign Languages

Coming to Europe for the first time has been one of the most unforgettable chapters of my life. I have never been abroad before - in fact, I was not even allowed to study in my own country's capital city. I completed my bachelor's studies in my home region, far from the big cities. But dreams always find their way. Through the National Scholarship Program (NSP), I was given the incredible opportunity to study at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia.

A New World, A New Life

When I arrived in Slovakia, everything felt different - the weather, people, food, culture, and even the air. Of course, there was an adaptation period, but it was not as hard as I had imagined. Before coming here, I have read a lot about the country and learned from Uzbek students who had already studied in Slovakia. Thanks to that, I was mentally ready for the change.

The first few weeks were filled with organizational work - registration, class enrollment, and meeting professors. That was when I noticed the first big difference between Slovak and Uzbek education systems. Here, students can choose their subjects and even professors based on their interests. In Uzbekistan, especially in public universities, the curriculum is mostly fixed by the institution. The idea of freedom in education was new and fascinating for me.

From Theory to Practice

Slovak higher education strongly emphasizes independent thinking and practical skills. Classes are discussion-based and interactive. Students are encouraged to express their opinions, even if they disagree with the teachers -something that would be considered unusual in Uzbekistan.



In my country, education and upbringing go hand in hand. Respect for elders and discipline are deeply rooted in our culture. Slovak students, however, are raised to be more independent from an early age. Here, education and personal development are seen as separate aspects, while in Uzbekistan, they are closely intertwined.

Classes in Slovakia are mostly student-centered, meaning that the student, not the teacher, becomes the main focus. Professors guide and motivate rather than dictate. Most of them hold PhD degrees and have international experience, which makes their teaching open-minded and globally oriented. It inspired me to think more critically and confidently. Another thing that impressed me was the concept of single and double majors.

I have never heard of it before coming here. This system allows students to study two fields at once, broadening their knowledge and career opportunities. It's something I wish could be introduced more widely in Uzbek universities too.

Learning Beyond Classrooms

Student life in Slovakia is very active. There are numerous clubs, events, and conferences almost every week. I joined a few cultural exchange events where I met people from various countries. It was amazing to see how open and curious everyone was about different cultures. In Uzbekistan, there are also many events, but students often hesitate to participate - sometimes because of time, sometimes because of shyness. In Slovakia, being active is a natural part of student life. Here, everyone seems to understand that education goes far beyond the classroom walls.

Culture Shock and Lifestyle Differences

Cultural differences are visible everywhere - from food and clothing to communication style. In Uzbekistan, students usually wear uniforms to promote equality and discipline. In Slovakia, it's completely different - everyone wears whatever they like, as long as it's comfortable. At first, this seemed a bit strange to me, but later I realized it reflects freedom, individuality, and self-confidence. Another big difference is the rhythm of life. Slovak people are calm and patient. They don't rush, but they value time and efficiency. I've learned to appreciate this balance - to live calmly but productively.



Finding Myself in a New World

Studying abroad has changed me in many ways. I've learned to be independent, to manage my time, to express myself freely, and most importantly, to respect different perspectives. Meeting people from various countries has taught me that diversity is not something that separates us - it connects us. Sometimes I think, if I had stayed in Uzbekistan, I might not have discovered this new version of myself. Slovakia taught me that stepping out of your comfort zone is the best way to grow.

Every morning when I walk to university, I remind myself: "I didn't come here just to study - I came to grow, to learn, and to turn my dreams into reality."

YOUNG RESEARCHERS

This new journal column is dedicated to introducing emerging scholars - PhD students who are contributing to the development of their respective fields.

We also hope this platform encourages collaboration across disciplines. If you find shared interests or potential connections within these profiles, you are warmly encouraged to reach out and engage.

VIKTORIE VRŠANSKÁ



My name is Viktorie Vršanská, and I am pleased to introduce myself as a first-year PhD student in the field of Didactics of English Language and Literature at the Department of English Language and Culture at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra.

ACADEMIC BACKGROUND

I come from the Czech Republic, where I spent the last five years studying at J. E. Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem. During my studies, I completed both my Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Teaching English Language and Literature and Social Sciences for Secondary Schools. Although this programme helped me develop a strong foundation in language and pedagogy, I wish to grow as a teacher as much as possible. Therefore, I have also completed the Cambridge Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT), which provided me with deeper insights into teaching methodology and classroom management.

CURRENT RESEARCH

When studying the social sciences, psychology has always been my favourite field, especially the study of motivation. I have long been fascinated by what drives individuals to learn, persevere, and achieve their goals, and by how these psychological aspects can be applied to education. My research interests also include pronunciation development and the long-standing debate concerned with native-like pronunciation and intelligibility. This personal and academic interest continues to guide my research today, as I strive to combine insights from psychology with English language didactics. I am particularly interested in how motivational factors influence language learning outcomes.

Affiliation:

Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Education, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra

Specialization:

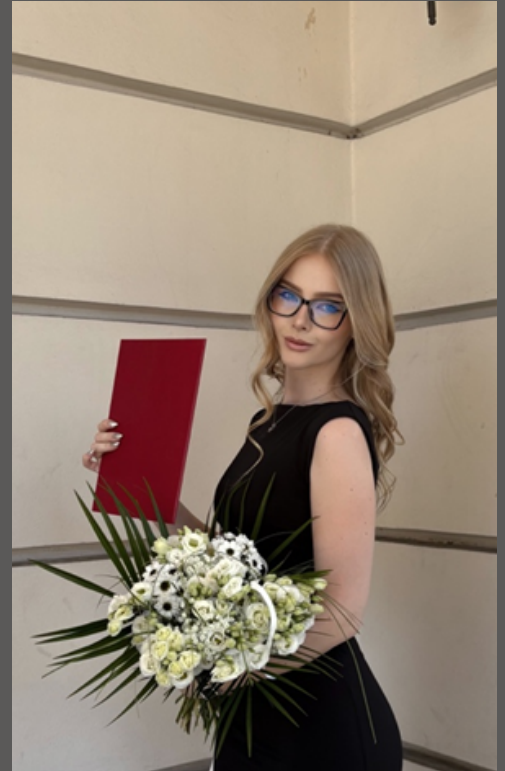
ELT: English Language Teaching

 viktorie.vrsanska@ukf.sk

YOUNG RESEARCHERS

ACHIEVEMENTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

- ▶ Graduated with honours (Mgr.) in 2025 in the study programme Teaching of English Language and Literature and Social Sciences for Secondary Schools.
- ▶ Holder of the Cambridge Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT) Certificate, Modules 1–3 (2021).
- ▶ Presented at the international conference CHALLENGES XI – The Changing Landscape of ELT (2025).
- ▶ Presented at the International Academic Conference – Global Education, Teaching and Learning (2025).
- ▶ Presented at the EDUCA XXI Conference (2026).
- ▶ Completed an Erasmus+ mobility placement at the University of Barcelona, Spain (2026).
- ▶ Present with colleagues at the 18th Annual International Conference on Education and New Learning Technologies (EDULEARN) in Mallorca, Spain.



BEYOND RESEARCH

Outside my academic life, I like engaging in creative activities that help me relax and stay inspired. I enjoy reading, colouring, creating small DIY projects, going to the gym, and watching TV series. I also value spending time with my loved ones.

I am genuinely looking forward to the opportunities that studying in Nitra will bring, including collaborating with my colleagues and contributing to the academic and social life of our department.

MAREK ŠIMČEK



Marek Šimček is a PhD student at the Department of History, Faculty of Arts, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra. His research delves into an intriguing and little-explored aspect of Slovak and Central European history—the patterns and motives of criminal behaviour during the interwar period in Czechoslovakia, with a specific focus on the city of Nitra.

Affiliation:

Department of History, Faculty of Arts,
Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra

Specialization:

History of interwar Czechoslovakia



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ACADEMIC BACKGROUND

Marek has been closely connected to the university since his undergraduate years. He completed both his bachelor's and master's studies in history at the same department. His bachelor's thesis examined coats of arms during the reign of Maria Theresa in the Habsburg Empire, while his master's thesis focused on the recovery of the educational system after the Second World War in the Lower Liptov region.

Building on these foundations, his doctoral research represents a shift from institutional and cultural history toward social history, exploring how crime reveals the daily lives, fears, and values of ordinary people.

CURRENT RESEARCH

Dissertation thesis title:

Crime in Interwar Nitra (1918–1939)

In his doctoral thesis, Marek seeks to understand:

- To what extent did nationwide and global events influence crime rates in Nitra?

YOUNG RESEARCHERS

- Was there a dominant type of crime committed during the interwar period?
- Did the motives behind crimes change over time—for instance, did social motives give way to racial ones?

He explains his motivation:

“When we look at crime and crime rates, we can see history and the lives of ordinary people from a completely different perspective. My aim is to show how criminality shaped not only society’s rules and fears but also its sense of normal life.”

Through this work, Marek also contributes to regional history and urban studies, two areas often overlooked in mainstream historical research.

RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE AND INNOVATION

While the history of criminality is a recognized field, much of the scholarship concentrates on earlier centuries—the Middle Ages or early modern period. Marek’s work stands out by bringing this discussion into the 20th century, situating criminality within the modern context of interwar Czechoslovakia.

A distinctive aspect of his approach is his attempt to define and apply the concept of “motives of crime” as a historical category—examining how these motives can illuminate broader social, political, and cultural transformations. This innovative perspective links historical methodology with criminological theory and social psychology.

By reconstructing the patterns and psychology of crime in interwar Nitra, Marek Šimček aims not only to broaden our understanding of 20th-century social history but also to remind us that behind every historical record lies a human story—of choice, consequence, and community.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Marek has already made notable strides in his academic career:

- ▶ 2024: Awarded third place in the national student competition “In the Footsteps of Ján Trnovský” (V šľapajách Jána Trnovského).
- ▶ 2024: Co-authored a peer-reviewed study, “An Insight into the Institutionalized Care of Visually Impaired Youth in Slovakia in the Interwar Period with Emphasis on the Institution in Levoča,” published in *Studia Historica Nitriensia*.
- ▶ 2025: Served as an organizer and moderator for “Memento Bellum: Eighty Years After” (Memento Bellum: Osemdesiat rokov po), a series of student-led historical lectures bringing together multiple historians to reflect on wartime legacies.

BEYOND RESEARCH

Outside academia, Marek enjoys both fiction and non-fiction reading and also writes creatively. He notes that the process of writing fiction complements his academic work by helping him think about human motives and emotions—the same elements that lie at the heart of his historical research.

MY CHŮIČE

BY ADRIANA KARVAIOVÁ

Chapter 1: A WELL-DESERVED REST

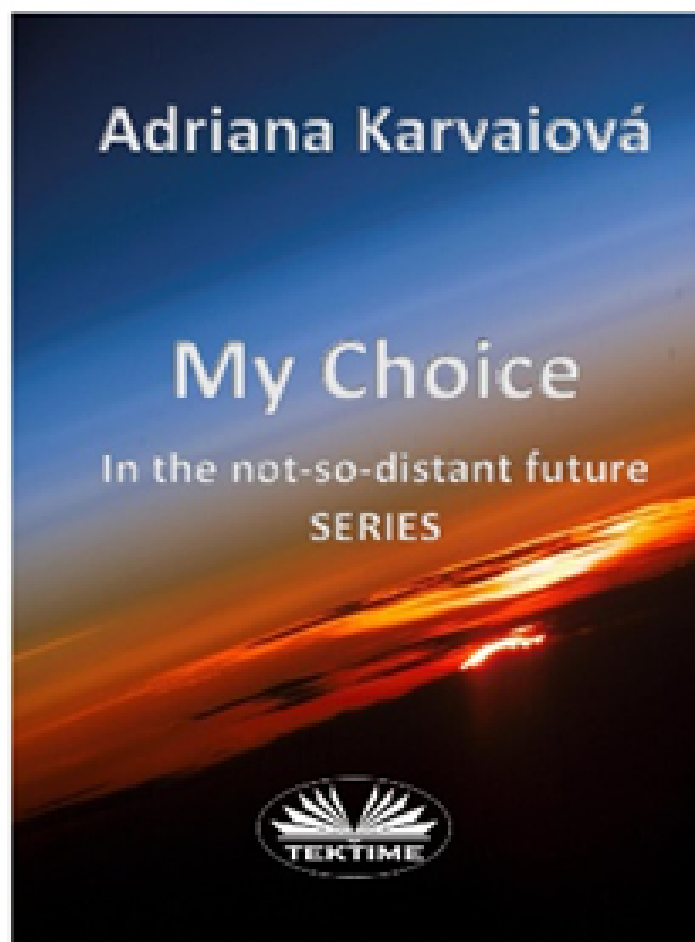
The sound of the harp reminded the pensive Leo where he was and what he was waiting for. A single-seater drone, popularly known as a taxi, signalled its arrival this way, in addition to subtle flashes of pastel colours. As Leo moved a little closer to the door, it disappeared for a moment, only to reappear as soon as he got in, solid and unconquerable.

"Home," he instructed the machine, and while the route was being set automatically, he took a short breath of relief. That does it for today. Two difficult exams successfully passed. Time to chill.

Wasn't it? Who'll be home at this time and in what mood? Will they question him how well he did today? Will he be able to resist the temptation to open the textbooks once more? He hesitated and glanced at the watch on the dashboard. In his mind, he praised the developers for having enabled to automatically adjust the commonly chosen routes as well as also the interior design according to the passenger's taste. Moreover, he was pleased not only with the design, but also with the time it read. It's not very late yet.

"Change, a new destination: Club..." He paused, clearing his throat a bit, trying to remember the name as he had recently heard it from his classmates." Club The Possibilities? Alternatives? My option? I'm not sure of the name."

When Leo started school, he found he wasn't fond of speaking taxis, so he preset silent communication. Various options were thus now projected onto the windshield, where he easily found the right one. "Club My Choice."



It wasn't long before the imaginary fingers strummed the invisible strings of the harp again, so that even the dozing passenger would find that he had reached his destination. The discreet entrance to the entertainment establishment greeted Leo warmly and then absorbed him to scan his face and, after checking his age, eligibility and financial situation, asked the dear visitor about his preferences.

"Random," he said, as he was in no mood to select, although he knew that he was sort of risking experiences he might never want. The My Choice Club had only recently opened, but already gained a decent reputation for offering a wide range of leisure options matching parameters specified by the visitor, but the guest also did not have to make this decision himself. But Leo, having left the content and form of his relax to chance, took a step back and pronounced clearly:

"Including people," which meant that he was to be accompanied by other guests with identical program choices, or professional entertainers. He knew from his own experience, as well as from the stories heard, that the random selection could offer absolutely anything, from a twenties-style disco, through a course in artistic craft called cooking, or a very realistic ascent of the former highest mountain in the world, Mount Everest, on which there didn't use to be heated conveniences and one had to make do with a collapsible thermotent, to a main character in a thermonuclear war. Leo was just hoping that the AI would be smart enough to correctly judge that he needed something more soothing today. And preferably something without augmented reality, without taste or smell receptor irritants, without electronic skin stimulation. Today he was merely longing for simple things and, ideally, real things.

Chapter 2: THE COMPANION

"Hello," a drab-looking young lady greeted him in the box where the purchased ticket escorted him with luminous signals and let him in.

Uninteresting haircut, lifeless work uniform, dull tone of voice. Perfect choice!

"Hi," Leo replied. "How's it going?"

"Will be cool. That's what I'm here for. So are you, sure thing. What shall we start with? Music?

Drink?" When Leo remained silent for a long time, she chose. "Drink. Two cocktails number four, please."

He had barely shrugged and slid into the sofa facing her wide armchair when the wall opened and two glasses filled with some rainbow-colored liquid glistened in the alcove. A mixture of six drinks.

"Wow, so fast," Leo said, just to break the awkward silence that was beginning to settle.

"Latest invention. I think it's called the paternoster. Imagine this physically travelling from the kitchen all the way here, no teleport." He couldn't think of any appropriate response, and since the girl was a complete stranger whom he had no intention of getting to know, he didn't bother at all and remained silent. He reached out for his drink and a finger of his other hand stroked the touch screen that was part of the wall. Instrumental music started playing at a medium tempo, with moderate volume.

"Really?" the girl asked, playfully looking in his eyes and knocking at a nearby wall. Slow rock took over, the singer's husky voice began to get under the skin, and Leo realized he was tapping his foot to the beat.

"What's that you ordered? Will I be okay tomorrow? Gotta go to school, although it's Thursday."

"What, working on a Thursday? No, no need to worry about this. It only contains a drop of alcohol, not even too much, and nothing else. But if you were interested..."

"Then what?"

"Nothing."

"Well, cool. Will it be just the two of us, or is anyone else coming? Seems like it's time to go."

"Well, if you fancied it, there's a new thing. A few hours in paradise. Absolutely harmless and one hundred percent effective."

"I say I have to be fit tomorrow. Moreover, I have an exam to take. Humanology. "

"I do have ears. You will. You don't drink it, don't inhale it, it's not absorbed through the skin, and please don't you even ask me about pricking the skin or similar sick methods. Non-contact direct brain stimulation. Once the program has ended, you'll be yourself again and no test will reveal it. You take a bigger risk when you have one beer. And it's not illegal, it's a beta test, pretty soon it's gonna be on the market."

Leo took a sip of the top colour from the glass, while the other shades did not blend. The offer sounded quite tempting, but he wasn't having such a bad day that he'd fall into the trap of the ubiquitous agents. But if he leaves immediately, it will be obvious that the beans have been spilled, and thus one of her colleagues may seek him in the future. Scrutinizing moral decisions and exposing wrongdoing has become quite a thing lately, he's heard.

"You do what you want to, I'm staying here," he answered her and stretched his arm towards the wall again in order to start the program. "Are you staying or leaving, then?"

"I don't feel like getting high on my lonesome. Try playing it, we'll see if someone else joins, or if the two of us will do. But if I get too bored, I'll leave you in trouble, you should know."

He didn't react; he just started a random entertainment program by touching the proper place. The wall began to disappear to gradually transform into a green forest, the floor became an uneven stony surface, and something on the ceiling started to glow and blaze intensely.

Chapter 3: BOATING

"Hello," on one of the walls of the box that had now been transformed into a 3D cinema screen, a strange-looking middle-aged man approached. Pebbles creaking under his feet, here and there the weight of a heavy boot even broke a twig with a crack. "That is the sun. The sun as it was before the Great Bang. It won't hurt you. You will feel warmth, but it will pass. Welcome to a river rafting adventure."

Leo and the girl didn't know where to look first. Tall woody plants seemed to be covered by knee-length undergrowth. Something was buzzing and rustling over there. Not too far away, something was burbling in a strange manner. Where had the song gone that he thought he could still hear somewhere in the background, just more quietly?

"I'm Max. These are trees and bushes, they take a long time to grow, but then insects live in them, as well as voles, birds and you'll see what else. There's a river over there. A river is a vast, endless stream of water."

"I know what a river is," Leo was still acting dismissive, though it was getting hard to disguise his growing interest.

"Great. This is called radio. I'm going to turn it off now, look, I have to press this button to silence it. But you need to stan dup now, forester Ema. You can't be rafting sitting on a stump, you have to get in the boat. Leo is there already."

And indeed, the sofa he'd been sitting on was now gone, its colour and shape now closely resembling the bench of a small boat. The glasses stood on a folding table in front of the bench, and the chair from which the girl had just got up a little confused as she didn't understand many of Max's words was just a stump on the bank. Both the walls and the furniture had become a lifelike part of the projection.

Ema took a few steps towards Leo in the boat, but Max halted her with a raised hand.

"Watch out, you can't just step anywhere. You are on the shore, the boat in the water. The water is deep, if you fall into it, you will suffer hypothermia and drown. In other words, not only will the program end for you, but the cold will be quite unpleasant, trust me. And most importantly, so many beautiful things are ahead of us. Look, there are stones you can step on. But mind, there are poisonous ants, some rocks are slippery, some are too far apart. In other words, this is your first task." Ema accepted the challenge, a little laboriously, but with great determination she set out to conquer the three or four steps. Leo decided to have fun at her expense, sipping the next colour of his drink, which he found really tasty, but as he reached for his glass, his elbow bumped into something long, hard, smooth to the touch and warm, an object the end of which passed from sight in the water.

"You will be rowing," Max told him. "I'll tell you how, don't worry. But you have to sit still now so that the boat doesn't sway, otherwise Ema won't be able to get in."

And so began the adventure down the river and down the stream of time. With the help of their virtual guide, the two visitors tried their hand at the technique of paddling, besides calm water they also experienced a strong current of the stream, they were even annoyed by robotic mosquitoes. Leo had to bring the boat right to the pier, and Ema learned how to tie a knot in the rope to secure the boat. Throughout the journey, Max kept talking to them and pointing out the different living things around, he told them that some of them were plants, some animals, and explained that in the past there used to be so many different forms of life living in symbiosis even though there was continuous competition and a never-ending battle for survival between them, until the time when man intervened.

As ordinary young people, Leo and Ema were never very interested in history, but Max's story caught their attention. Moreover, they could see, hear, feel so much all around that they did not have time to notice every single detail. Before they knew it, it was time to sail back to the port, where a chair and a familiar sofa could be seen in the distance. Leo deftly brought the boat up to the pier and Ema stood up to put a foot on the bank so she could tie it.

"Don't step there, there is a flower. It's alive," for the first time Leo called out to Ema only to warn her not to set foot on the miniature daisy peeking timidly out from under the lawn.

"This is a 3D game, it's not alive," she snarled at him, but stepped a little further onto the bare stone.

"That's not what I meant. If you trample on it, as long as we're here, we'll have to be looking at a dead and suffering life form. Shall we try a higher level?" he suggested. "I like this stuff here."

"Agreed. Do we have a choice, or is there only one option to move on to?"

Max advised them to spend the evening by a campfire and the next morning to switch the rather comfortable boat for a kayak, which more sensitively reflected every movement of the water, through its walls they could even feel the impact of the waves. They were made to put on and carefully fasten tasteless and enormous vests which, as Max explained, would save them if they fell into the water. For the first time in their lives, they saw funny little sticks with sulphur tips, which, if the wood was properly placed, could start a fire, and they even learned that it is not a good idea to be sitting at the campfire facing the wind, because the flames smell disgusting. Leo, curious, tried to feel the flickering glow with his fingers, but Ema held him back, tugging at his sleeve.

"Don't do that, it's like going outside not wearing a bionic suit."

Leo was startled by how pleasant and warm her touch felt through the thin layer of clothing. She noticed it, felt a bit uncomfortable for an instant and moved backwards, but then she changed her mind and tapped his fingers with a laugh:

"If you get hurt, I'll have to row tomorrow, won't I, Max?"

"Actually, yes and no. You are right that fire can cause burns, skin injury. However, an injury does not mean the end of the program, merely the activation of skin receptors and you'd feel pain. Depending on the extent of the burn, these might be turned off only after the program has ended. So, it's up to you if you want to experience that, as well. But I suggest you explore the more pleasant things, there are plenty of them."

to be continued...

INTERNATIONAL CORNER

Our International Corner celebrates the diverse voices of our international contributors. In this section, readers will find essays, reflections, and creative writing that offer unique perspectives, foster intercultural dialogue, and remind us that language and literature connect people across cultures and borders.

The Zone of Interest: Understanding the Sonderkommando through Szmul's Narrative

By Daniel Silva Moreira Fernandes

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Abstract: This essay explores the profound moral and psychological wounds inflicted by the Nazi regime upon the members of the Sonderkommando, as depicted through the harrowing narrative of the character Szmul in Martin Amis' novel, *The Zone of Interest*. It is through a close reading of Szmul's fragmented narrative, and by establishing an intertextual connection with Primo Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved* that this essay is able to explore themes like complicity, moral ambiguity and the "grey zone". This analysis also aims to explain how the Sonderkommando's actions can be seen as an act of internal resistance as the character struggles to maintain his dignity while facing extreme dehumanization.

To this day, it is still incomprehensible how something as atrocious as the Holocaust could have happened. How could the genocide of millions of Jews happen? How could anyone possibly survive such an infernal situation and become able to live again, after witnessing what is considered to be one of mankind's greatest sins? Among the most burdened survivors were the Sonderkommando, a unit mostly made up of Jewish prisoners who were forced to help in the destruction of their own people, by working in the gas chambers and crematoria.

In Martin Amis' novel, *The Zone of Interest*, the narrative uses a polyphonic approach, meaning it is told by multiple voices, namely through Angelus 'Golo' Thomsen, a Nazi officer who works at a concentration camp in Auschwitz; Paul Doll, the camp's commandant, and Szmul, the camp's longest serving Sonderkommando member. Through Szmul's narrative, Amis offers a better understanding of the Sonderkommando and their condition while exploring the profound existential and psychological scars left on them by the Nazi regime.

To understand Szmul's fragmented narrative and psychological state throughout the novel, we must first explore who the Sonderkommando were and what role they played in the concentration camps during the Holocaust. As mentioned before, the Sonderkommando (from German, meaning 'Special Squad'), were a team made up largely of Jewish male prisoners who were forced to work for the Nazi regime, mostly in the gas chambers and crematoriums. When selecting members of the Special Squad, Nazi officers would choose those who seemed more physically fit, and also those who seemed more desperate and disoriented upon arrival (Levi, 1989). They would be provided with better conditions when in comparison to other prisoners: they would be given decent food,

they would sleep on straw mattresses, and they wouldn't be killed immediately.

Sonderkommando were divided into several groups, each with a specialized function (Díaz Bild, 2018). Some members were in charge of leading the camp's new arrivals to the gas chambers, assuring them that after a quick shower, they would be given a meal before being assigned to work teams. While the SS officers poured the deadly Zyklon-B crystals into ventilated shafts (Weed, 2012), other members of the Special Squad would then be tasked with collecting the belongings left by the victims in the undressing hall. After the SS confirmed the victim's deaths, another group of members would then enter the gas chambers and proceed to shave the hair of the females, remove any gold or false teeth as well as examine body orifices for any hidden valuables (Weed, 2012). They would also transport the bodies to the crematoria and oversee the operation of the ovens, to extract and eliminate the ashes (Levi, 1989). Often enough, larger bones like the pelvis would need to be ground to dust by the Sonderkommando and mixed with the rest of the ashes.



Cremation of corpses at Auschwitz-Birkenau. This photograph was taken clandestinely by prisoners in the Sonderkommando, Poland, summer 1944.
© National Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

It is important to note that the Nazis wholeheartedly believed in the righteousness of their actions. This is evident in Adolf Eichmann's defense during his trial, where he testified behind a glass booth, and claimed that he was "merely a cog in the machinery" of destruction. In the last day of Eichmann's testimony, he admitted that while he was guilty of arranging the transport of millions of Jews to their deaths, he did not feel guilty of the consequences". (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.)

Despite this, the Nazis still did not want the world to learn about their horrendous secrets, and for this reason, the Sonderkommando members were also called 'Geheimnisträger', secret keepers (van Kesteren, 2016). Because of this, the members were killed on a regular basis, and very few were able to survive, which explains the lack of testimonies we have as of today. However, Martin Amis' extensive research on the Holocaust allowed him to create a great fictional reconstruction of these men, giving us the chance to peek into their minds so we can gain a better understanding of their psychological torment and moral conflicts.

While it is difficult to form an image of how these men lived, we can somewhat start to comprehend the pain they must have felt, as well as a profound, inexplicable sadness. In the initial chapter of *The Zone of Interest*, one of the first things Sonderkommando Szmul says is exactly this: "We are of the Sonderkommando, the SK, the Special Squad, and we are the saddest men in the Lager. We are in fact the saddest men in the history of the world." (Amis, 2014, Chapter 1).

“In 1986, Italian Holocaust survivor Primo Levi completed his last book *The Drowned and the Saved*, which is a compilation of essays about life and death in the Nazi concentration camps, based on his own survival experience. In the second and longest essay in the book, “The Gray Zone”, the author shows us a dialogue between two Sonderkommando members, where one of them pleads: “You mustn't think that we are monsters; we are the same as you, only much more unhappy.” (Levi, 1989, p. 53)

Throughout Amis' novel, we can hear Primo Levi's voice, and we can even go as far as saying that Szmul mirrors what Levi wrote, especially about the Special Squad. The Sonder continues by adding: “And of all these very sad men I am the saddest”. (Amis, 2014, Chapter 1). It is also at this point that we learn more about the character: he is oldest member of the Sonderkommando, which explains why he sees himself as the ‘saddest’ among the rest of the members – Szmul has seen and done more than any of them, and he carries an immense burden within him. This self-identification also marks the moment when we understand how the character views himself: not wholly victim, not wholly perpetrator.

Szmul also adds that not only are they the saddest, they are also ‘disgusting’. Yet he states that their situation is paradoxical: “It is difficult to see how we can be as disgusting as we unquestionably are when we do no harm.” (Amis, 2014, Chapter 1). Did the Sonderkommando truly do no harm? It is a fact that they led newcomers to the gas chambers, lied to them, and disposed of them, but in no way did they kill them, and it is important to keep in mind they only did such things because they were forced to by the Nazis. However, it is understandable for one to be unable to label them as a “victim” or “perpetrator” as there is no clear boundary – their “exceedingly ambiguous position [made] them neither fully innocent nor fully guilty” (Weed, 2012).

To comprehend Szmul's words, it is essential to explore Levi's concept of the “grey zone”. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, the author explains that humans have a natural desire for simplification, that is to say we have a tendency to believe there's always ‘evil’ or ‘good’ and ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, and nothing in between. Levi defends that life inside the camps was not that simple, “it could not be reduced to the two blocs of victims and persecutors” (Levi, 1989, p. 37), and that the indistinct area in the middle is “grey”.

Between trying to understand what is wrong or right, and also what cannot be understood, it is inevitable that the topic of guilt and innocence comes up. When Szmul recalls a late friend of his saying they don't even have the comfort of innocence – the Sonder doesn't agree and says he still wouldn't plead guilty. In contrast, Levi agrees with Szmul's friend: “This institution represented an attempt to shift onto others— specifically, the victims—the burden of guilt, so that they were deprived of even the solace of innocence.” (Levi, 1989, p. 53)

We can now understand Szmul's moral complexity, and it deepens as his narrative continues. The man states that there are three reasons (or “excuses”) to keep on going: first, “to bear witness”, second, “to exact mortal vengeance” and third, (and “most crucially”) to save (or “prolong”) a life – in this essay, we will only explore the first and third reason. Although they were forced to be part of the Special Squad and forced to carry out terrifying tasks, they still felt they should – that it was their duty and responsibility – to one day testify to what they saw and lived through. And if they believed they could testify in any way, then this indicates that, despite everything, they still held onto a glimmer of hope. When confronted by the camp's ruthless commandant, Paul Doll, about why the Sonderkommando didn't rise, Szmul simply replied that the men still hoped, and that it was human to do so.

While Szmul's reply is extremely simple, it is equally profound. When facing death on a daily basis, while knowing his is unavoidable, this clinging to hope becomes an act of internal resistance and an attempt at maintaining dignity. We must not think of the character's answer as naive optimism, but as a defiant assertion of their identity as a human being, after being stripped of everything that made them human – after everything the Nazi regime did in order to dehumanize the Sonderkommando so they could become mere numbers, nothing but "crematorium ravens" as Levi referred to them.

In this context, hope is a psychological survival mechanism, and not necessarily tied to escape from the camp or rescue, as that would be unimaginable at the time, but to their dignity, and to the possibility to bear witness. For the reasons already mentioned in this essay, very few members of the Special Squad survived, but some of them were able to live on through the testimonies they carefully hid: "(...) diary pages written feverishly for future memory and buried with extreme care near the crematoria in Auschwitz by some of the squads' members." (Levi, 1989, p. 51)

In the sixth and final chapter of the novel, Szmul's narrative is brief – occupying only a single page – yet it stands as one of the novel's most morally significant moments. At this point, Szmul knows that he will die soon, as he is the oldest member of the Special Squad and therefore cannot be allowed to live for much longer. He also knows of Paul Doll's twisted plan to murder his wife, which we will discuss further into this essay. In this chapter, Szmul tells us that although he lives in the present, he remembers everything that has happened to him since he came to the camp, and that he cannot forget. He continues by adding:

And now at the last all these memories will have to be dispersed. There is only one possible outcome, and it is the outcome I want. With this I prove that my life is mine, and mine alone.

On my way over there I will inhume everything I've written, in the Thermos flask beneath the gooseberry bush.

And, by reason of that, not all of me will die.

(Amis, 2014, Chapter 6)

In this final passage, Szmul reflects on his inevitable death and the significance of leaving something behind. He knows he will die soon, but he takes control of that outcome by choosing to bury his writings. This act is deeply meaningful because, in a place built to break the human spirit, Szmul is able to claim ownership over his life and his story, by allowing it to be known in the future. When he says, "With this I prove that my life is mine, and mine alone", he is resisting the Nazis' attempt to reduce him to a voiceless victim. This is his own way of saying he existed, he remembered, and he chose to leave behind a trace of him. This is why he continues by saying, "not all of me will die" – it is through his writing and his memory that the truth can prevail and that he can live on. We can also interpret "me" as referring not just to his personal identity, but to the collective voice of those who suffered and perished – it is through his voice and testimony that we are able to hear the voice of the broken Sonderkommando and the voice of the millions of Jews that were ruthlessly hunted down and destroyed by the Nazis.

At the end of the novel, Paul Doll gives Szmul the order to kill his wife Hannah on Walpurgisnacht, which also happens to be her birthday. The commandant forces him to do so by threatening to kill the prisoner's wife: "Sonder, the only way you can keep your wife alive is by killing mine." (Amis, 2014, Chapter 5). However, a few days before he is forced to do so, Szmul finds an old neighbor in the concentration camp, Witold, who also happens to be one of his son's childhood friends and who tells him that his wife, Shulamith, is safe and managed to leave the ghetto. Once he learns that she is out of the Nazi's reach, Szmul makes his final decision: within a system that was designed to break people, Szmul is able to break free from the chains that tormented him during his imprisonment.

We learn about the Sonderkommando's brave decision in the novel's aftermath, when Thomsen is finally able to meet Hannah again, and she tells him what happened: "Looking glazed, the prisoner drew from his sleeve a long tool or weapon, a kind of spike with a narrow crosspiece. (...) He parted his shirt and put the point to his chest. (...) And Szmul looked her in the eye and said to her, *Eigentlich wolte er dass ich Ihnen das antun.*" (Amis, 2014, Aftermath)

At the end, before attempting to commit suicide, Szmul warns Hannah of her husband's true intentions by telling her: "Really he wanted me to do this to you." Before he goes through with it, Paul brutally murders Szmul by shooting him in the face and the back of the neck. Despite not being able to fulfill his last wish, by trying to take his own life, the Sonder shows a powerful sense of self-determination. Although he knows that death is inevitable in the camp, he refuses to let the circumstances control the way he dies. In a place as wicked as the concentration camps, Szmul's decision to end his life on his own terms allows him to regain some control over his existence – over his own fate. It is his final act of defiance against a system that stripped him of everything that made him human, and a powerful statement – even in the face of extreme dehumanization, Szmul still had the power to make a choice.

In conclusion, it is through Szmul's narrative in *The Zone of Interest* that we can explore the moral complexities of the Sonderkommando and the Holocaust itself. His actions – preserving his testimony through writing, choosing his own death – represent internal acts of defiance against a world where, as Filip Müller described, "the values and laws which formed the basis of civilization were obsolete." Faced with the brutal and dehumanizing conditions of Auschwitz, as well as the complex reality of his survival as a Sonderkommando, Szmul stands as the book's "moral compass" (van Kesteren, 2016), as he refuses to let go of his humanity even when all the odds are against him. Through extensive research, Amis presents an accurate description of the Sonderkommando, and it is through Szmul that we understand that not all acts of resistance look like a rebellion – they can also take form through bearing witness, not losing hope and reclaiming one's voice.

Szmul's character also illustrates what Primo Levi called the "grey zone" – a space where the distinction between victim and perpetrator is not clear, and where the Sonderkommando fit perfectly. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi warns: "I believe that no one is authorized to judge them, not those who lived through the experience of the Lager, and even less those who did not." This reminder urges us to approach testimonies of victims like the Sonderkommando with humility, empathy and a refusal to simplify what is evil and what is not. There had never been anything like the Holocaust, or the Special Squads, whose creation Levi considered to be "National Socialism's most demonic crime" and it is crucial that we don't forget what happened, and that we keep remembering – much like Szmul – because preserving these memories is essential to ensure that such atrocities are never repeated.

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COMMON MISTAKES IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN/SECOND LANGUAGE

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to explore the most common mistakes made by EFL/ESL learners, including grammar and pronunciation errors, misuse of vocabulary, and communication challenges, and some suggestions to solve these issues are generally mentioned with examples.

Keywords: EFL/ESL learners, grammar mistakes, pronunciation errors, vocabulary misuse, cultural communication, language interference, language learning strategies.

English has already become a global necessity as the majority of people are learning it. The major reason people are choosing this language is that it offers several opportunities, such as travelling, finding well-paid jobs, or accessing international education. However, there are some mistakes that slow down the progress. These common mistakes are a natural part of learning, but it would be better if they were understood and corrected properly, helping teachers guide students and conduct more effective lessons.

Grammar and pronunciation mistakes

One of the most common problems studied is that most English learners use grammatical terms incorrectly and mispronounce some typical English phrases or words. Since their native language may not include similar rules, they mostly use the wrong verb tenses or articles. Uzbek students are a good case for the topic, because many of them say “He go to school every day” instead of “He goes.” According to Harmer (2015, p. 42), interference from the learner’s native language is a common reason for such grammar mistakes. Similarly, Swan (2005, p. 9) emphasizes that a lot of English learners try to make some grammatical structures easier, leading to errors. Pronunciation is another issue; English spelling and sounds do not always match, resulting in students’ mispronunciation. To solve this, teachers should provide more authentic listening practice materials and phonetic training courses.

Vocabulary and translation problems

Another common error is using vocabulary incorrectly and translating certain texts directly from the native language. When translating or communicating, students sometimes misuse some vocabulary; they know because these words sound similar, but are not aware of the different meanings in English. According to Richards and Schmidt (2010, p. 98), reduced communication accuracy and confusion come after such “false friends.” For instance, many confuse using “I am bored” and “I am boring.” To use the right words and understand subtle differences in meaning, learners are required to expand their vocabulary through reading and contextual learning.

Communication and cultural challenges

Beyond grammar and words, communication style and culture can challenge students. The primary reason for this is that many idioms, polite forms, and indirect expressions in English may not exist in other languages, making it harder for new beginners to learn and remember. As Brown (2007, p. 67) claims, communication breakdowns come from misunderstanding these elements. For example, when learners speak in their mother tongue too directly, this may sound rude in English contexts. This can be tackled by cultural explanations and real-life dialogues by teachers, helping learners speak naturally and appropriately. In addition, Kramsch (1998, p. 10) admits that language and culture cannot be separated, so understanding cultural norms and social meanings is important in learning English effectively.

It is normal to have many challenges while learning English as a second or foreign language; these are important in the learning journey. Teachers can conduct better and more interactive lessons by identifying problems – grammar, vocabulary, and cultural misunderstandings – improving learners’ ability. As Kapusta (2002, p. 15) says, to be a master, you should be aware of mistakes and consequences. Hence, teachers and learners should work cooperatively in viewing such errors not as failures, but as opportunities to grow and learn more.

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PROJECT HAIL MARY (2026) – SCIENCE CAN WEAR A SMILE

Samuel Král', Trnava University
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There are basically two types of space movies: the ones where astronauts are effortlessly smart, and those where they're quietly (or loudly) freaking out the whole time. Project Hail Mary happily falls into the second group, and that's a big part of its charm. Based on Andy Weir's 2021 novel, the film leans into the same idea that made The Martian work so well: science can be fun, even when it's complicated, as long as you don't take yourself too seriously. The vibe here is similar – problem-solving, lots of explaining, a bit chaotic, but with more nerves and a little more existential dread.

We follow Ryland Grace (Ryan Gosling), a middle-school science teacher who wakes up alone on a spaceship with no memory of who he is or how he got there. Not exactly an ideal situation. As things slowly come back to him, he realizes Earth is in trouble.

The sun is dimming, and somehow he's the only guy who can fix it. A lot of the movie is built around solving problems, running experiments, testing ideas, messing up and trying again, but it never feels dry.

Grace approaches everything the way most of us would: a mix of determination, confusion, and mild panic. Think less "brilliant scientist in control" and more "I'm pretty sure I'm doing this wrong, but let's see what happens." The humor really carries it. It's not just a few jokes here and there. It's baked into the way the story unfolds. Every success feels hard-earned, and every failure feels... very human. You're constantly aware that things could fall apart at any moment, and sometimes they do.

Without giving too much away, Grace isn't alone for long. The movie introduces a non-human companion, and honestly, their dynamic ends up being one of the best parts. What starts as confusion turns into a genuinely touching friendship. It's one of those rare sci-fi relationships that actually lands emotionally without feeling forced. The performance at the center of it all works because Grace doesn't feel like a typical hero. He's anxious, sarcastic, and more than a little overwhelmed. He reacts the way a normal person probably would – badly at first, then slightly better, and eventually, kind of bravely. Not because he wants to be heroic, but because he has no choice.

Visually, the movie strikes a fine balance. The ship feels practical and lived-in, not flashy, and space itself is treated as both beautiful and dangerous. The big, impressive moments matter more because you're seeing them from the viewpoint of someone who's just trying to stay alive long enough to understand them all.

Overall, Project Hail Mary manages to be insightful, humorous, and surprisingly emotional all at once. It's about survival, curiosity, and pushing through even when everything feels impossible. And at its core, it's really about connection, because even in the middle of nowhere, having someone with you makes everything seem less terrifying. If you like sci-fi that mixes real science with humor and a bit of heart, it's definitely worth your time.

ISSN: 1339-7370

PUBLISHED ONLINE:

Once a semester, twice a year

PUBLISHED BY:

Department of English Language and Culture,
Faculty of Education,
Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra

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