

the menace from prague

by Jeff Swanson

Žižkov has been transmitting some very strange programming.

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The Žižkov Television Tower stands on the location of an old city graveyard. It is in this graveyard where legend says the Golem of Prague was interred.

At the end of the 16th century, Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, the Maharal of Prague, after having vanquished the rampaging monster, ensconced the Golem in the attic genizah of the old synagogue. Orthodox Jews are forbidden from throwing away anything with the name of God on it, so they store these things in the synagogue genizah until such time as it can be buried. Synagogues in Jerusalem, it is said, would bury their writings every seventh year -- or in time of drought, believing they would bring rain.

There is some truth to this tradition. And in a way this ties in with the story of the Žižkov tower.

In the hill where the tower now stands, the city's citizens were buried for hundreds of years. Gentile and Jew alike. But many of those old writings were also buried here. And the Golem himself lies here, with the Žižkov Television Tower as his tombstone.

It was probably inevitable that all this contained energy would siphon up the tower, as sap rises in a tree, and generate its own very strange programming.

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The graveyards of Europe are receptacles of historical disease.

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There are several species of plague here -- one careless apple away from infecting a new generation. Typhoid, cholera, consumption, St. Vitus' Dance, Bronze John, all those antique diseases slumber here, in the arms of their victims. Their victims die clutching these microbes like bouquets of funerary poppies. The microbes encyst themselves and lie dormant, waiting for the proper conditions for reanimation.

The huddled dead of Europe and her multitudinous wars, major and minor, litter the substrate of every corner of the land. In a very few cases the graveyards remain marked, and have become famous. Villages continue to mix their latter-day dead in with the old heroes and victims. As the land generally rises over the years, with new depositions, the old bodies have gone deeper, tunneling like moles -- the new bodies are simply overlaid atop them, forming an underground apartment building of disintegrating corpses. It's a cool image, anyway.

Very few of these bodies were encased in coffins. Some were dumped hurriedly, by veiled burghers or scowling invaders, sometimes bagged, sometimes sprinkled with lime. Sometimes limes grew over them, as bird-borne seeds germinated, as the gravestones crumbled and were lost to history. Trees of all kinds have crept back into old cemeteries, not to mention all the grasses and shrubs. Cows crop this grass, humans eat the cows, humans eat the fruit of the trees, and drink the groundwater (a veritable tea of human remains). The people of Europe are infused with the dead, and have been for much of their history, solely on account of those now-unmarked graveyards with their countless generations of ancestors who have finally returned, as the preachers promised, to dust.

Just as their old memories, lost dreams and unspoken desires have leached into the soil, groundwater, and produce of their districts -- the dead have also communicated into the high tech microwave

towers of modern Prague. And their messages now may mount to the stars, confusing millions.

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Perhaps an exaggeration; programming is not affected on a grand scale. But you're a young boy sitting in Vilnius on a rainy night, watching a rerun of a Soviet-era melodrama, and suddenly an old man is staring at you from the television, threadbare sweater, elbows on knees, face shadowed in a light coming from some unknown source, saying to you, "Keturiasdešimt žingsnių nuo seno medžio. Aš paslėpiau jį pykčio priepuolio. Prašom, rasti žiedą ir gražinti jį į mano brangus, Rūta."

Well, that is, he should be, but he's really saying, "Štyridsať krokov od starého stromu. Aj pochovali ho v záchvate hnevu. Prosím, prosím, nájsť prsteň a vráti ho do svojej drahej Ruta."

Which is to say, "Forty paces from the old tree. I buried it in a fit of anger. Please, please find the ring and return it to my darling Ruta." But since he's speaking old Czech and the boy with the cocked head staring at the screen in Vilnius knows only modern Lithuanian, the forlorn man's dear Ruta will have to wait a little longer.

All sorts of transmissions leach into the programming that goes out from this tower over modern Europe. All sorts of mysterious, proscribed, forbidden transmissions emanate from this space age tower on a hill overlooking the old city. The unsanctioned programming goes out, to trouble old Russian conspiracy theorists, Swedish HAM enthusiasts, and others in all countries, near and far, within and over the horizon, who listen to these pulses, these reflections off the ionosphere, during the long, cold, bright shining nights.

The transmissions are not all mysterious, ineluctable or troubling,

however. One transmission made its way into the consciousness of a young, sensitive man who later honored the tower, unconsciously, with the sculptures that made it famous.

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There are those artists who spend their nights watching for messages in television snow. Watching the snow for inspiration. This is a more popular activity in Europe, especially late 20th century Europe, than you might think. There are only so many drugs one can do, and if one is a pre-teen, in a garret room, within whiffing distance of the paper mill on one side, and the effluvia-stinking river on the other, there's little more you can do but watch the snow and ponder.

Imagination is, after all, free. Which is why the most imaginative artists were poor kids, stuck indoors, given lots of time alone, to formulate, and contemplate, and slowly develop their own inimitable aesthetic. Long nights full of stars, where the only soundtrack is state-run television off the air, and the gentle growling of a stomach that can never be filled -- these are the ingredients that build the best artists, those who crawl the margin of the inner & the outer, all four limbs touching at all times.

And this is perhaps what inspired David Černý to create his sculptures and mount them on the Žižkov Television Tower high above Prague. Each is about 12 feet long, and they are positioned at random intervals up the tower's 700-foot-high flanks. The sculptures are of enormous crawling babies.

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There are two questions we must now ask ourselves. One: does the tower have ceramic insulators within it? Two: are the babies themselves of a ceramic material?

These odd-seeming questions assume their proper importance when one considers the remains of the old Golem lying beneath the earth at the base of the tower. The Golem was made of clay; what conditions will cause his mineral spirit to resurrect and migrate into that tower? Into the babies? Into the whole damnable assembly?

It's one thing to have a television tower suddenly uproot itself, split parts of its shaft into members, and begin rampaging the countryside. That's bad enough. All it would take is the proper ritual, and a scroll of a Hebrew spell placed into a receptacle high up the tower where a mouth might be. The public is allowed to sight-see freely inside the tower; any mischievous rabbi could easily gain access and perform the ritual.

Let us suppose for the sake of argument that some rainy night in the dark of the moon the tower does come to life. What may also come to life are these babies! Mischievous sculptor Černý's tower babies...their long withheld purpose revealed at last!

Do we really want this golem tower hurling its offspring far and wide, with vast sweeps of its giant "arms"?

Centrally located, Prague is roughly equidistant from all major cities in Europe: Paris, London, Oslo, Stockholm, Helsinki, Riga, Moscow, Bucharest, Athens, Rome, Madrid...if the golem-tower can throw its babies a thousand miles, and the poor things do not shatter on impact (presumably they'll be moistened and flexible by the time they are thrown), then we could have a real problem on our hands.

Perhaps this is the Mayan apocalypse that was predicted. This would explain some of the confusing translations that have puzzled Mayan scholars for decades. "Baby-tower-clay-thing-ravages-planet" is a devil to parse even for the smartest Mesoamerican scholar. The scholar would have a hard time not being laughed out of the

discipline altogether.

We may never know the answers to these questions, and it's probably best that we do not. Rabbi Judah was a wise man, wise enough to bring clay to life... and wiser still to learn from his mistake and banish the monstrosity. We would be wise to follow his example...and yet, if the unthinkable happens, we will be ready.

