

San Francisco Chronicle Aug. 28, 1994

THE REPUBLIC OF WHORES

A Fragment from the Time of the Cults

By Josef Skvorecky

Trans. from the Czech by Paul Wilson

Ecco Press; 256 pp.

You can bet on this: the day after Homer chanted his *Iliad* and packed up his lyre, some Ionian former corporal plopped onto the blind poet's still-warm seat and sang a rowdy satire of the Trojan campaign to twice the audience. From that day until contemporary master military parodists like Louis de Bernières and the underheralded David Eyre, no institution's pomp and autocracy has inspired more universal lampooning than the army's. Since man first lifted a hostile club, humor has provided military life its emotional buffer zone between terror and despair.

Throw in the clueless draftees of a Czech tank battalion in 1952 scurrying to convince their new Soviet overlords they've absorbed a politically correct indoctrination and can repel the inevitable American invasion, while their minds are more immediately absorbed with plans to sleep with their officers' wives, and you have Josef Skvorecky's riotous farce, *The Republic of Whores*.

Written in 1971, two decades after Skvorecky's own three-year stint in the Czech army, and newly translated into a spicy English that rolls glibly along the crease between bawdy and vulgar, the patchwork plot follows Tank Commander Danny Smiricky, a frequent Skvorecky persona, who has a Ph.D. in philosophy and is nearing the end of his hitch.

Smiricky believes that "wherever there's ointment, there's a fly," and his battalion swarms with them. While musing wistfully on the pretty girls he'd taught at Hronov and the parting gifts they'd exchanged (they'd given him French cognac; he'd responded with high grades), he watches tank maneuvers that appear executed by the Keystone Cops. When his battalion finally gets the chance to perform before a Soviet inspection, they scrub "politically inappropriate graffiti" such as "Screw orders! Give us women!" off the walls, read love poems to their tanks and stand glassy-eyed when grilled on basic tactical questions. No matter, filled with vodka and speaking no Czech, the Soviet general has slept through the inspection.

As the battalion's cultural officer, Smiricky spoonfeeds answers to dimwitted soldiers vying for the Fucik Merit Badge. As guardhouse prisoner escort, a busy job as he must walk detainees to the toilets located injudiciously outside their locked cells, he keeps vigil while the officer of the guards entangles himself in the carnal embraces of buxom prisoner Sgt. Mitzi Babincakova.

Meanwhile, philosopher Danny faces a recurring conundrum over what to do with his leisure time. Should he sneak into Prague to see the coy Lizetka, with whom Danny's most concerted advance "had got him a two-week stay in the eye department of the army hospital," or should he sneak into the quarters of Janinka Pinkas, with haunting black eyes and a workaholic lieutenant husband.

And what's to be done about the battalion's diminutive but fiercely overbearing commander, Maj. Borovicka, a.k.a. The Pygmy Devil, who issues punishment and abuse, happy in the knowledge that his men hate him while feeling "secure inside the armor of discipline and rank." Can they liberate themselves from his tyranny? Count on it.

Laced lightly through the unrelenting mayhem, however, are more serious undercurrents of political concern, even national tragedy. As Smiriky waits in Prague for Lizetka, her parents listen to Radio Free Europe, cursing at the Soviets who have crushed their land. "Is this what we spent twenty years building a country for?" shouts Lizetka's father. But Danny only nods and thinks of the man's voluptuous daughter, for some problems are too overwhelming to solve, leaving solace only where we can find laughter.

In this book, we can find it cover to cover.