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BECKETT'S WAITING FOR GODOT: A HISTORICAL PLAY WITH TWO JEWS AS MAIN CHARACTERS

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Abstract

In a new interpretation of *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, Valentin and Pierre Temkine came to the conclusion that it is not a piece of absurd theatre, but a play with a concrete historical background. Based on geographical locations and specific terms used in the original French version, they locate the play in German-occupied France during the Second World War. This article shows that Beckett assimilated his wartime experiences in the play and showed sympathy for the Jews who were hunted by the Germans and their collaborators. Vladimir and Estragon can be regarded as two Jews waiting for someone who will bring them deeper into either the Italian-occupied zone or Switzerland. Godot is therefore an alias for a smuggler taking precautions against arrest. Concrete references in the play are discussed against the historical background to support the thesis of a historical foundation. Several other authors have also stated that the play makes references to the Holocaust.

Key words

Waiting for Godot; Beckett; Second World War; Résistance; Vichy; France; occupation

1. Introduction

Christopher Morrison presented the thesis that the myth of the Wandering Jew is present in Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot* (Morrison 2012). On the day of crucifixion, Jesus carried the cross on the road to Golgatha. He stopped at the house of the Jewish shoemaker Cartaphilus asking him for water and a possibility to rest. Cartaphilus denied the request and Jesus said that he himself was going to die but Cartaphilus was not going to die until he returns. The shoemaker then left his home to wander the earth for ever. The play contains several references to the crucifixion and to Christ which are taken – among other text passages – as a support for this general assumption (Morrison 2012: 399, 403–404). This is indeed an interesting interpretation but in my theoretical review I will present support for the thesis that Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* should be regarded as a historical play about the Second World War with two Jews as the main protagonists.

Valentin and Pierre Temkine first published this radical interpretation in 2009 (Temkine, Thouard and Trzaskalik 2009). Valentin Temkine says that he first discovered the historical impact in 2001 while watching a staging of *Waiting for Godot* in Paris. One of the main protagonists, Vladimir, regrets not having been able to jump off the Eiffel tower because he was not permitted to enter. Temkine then realized that the play must take place in occupied France, when Jews were not

allowed to enter public places like the Eiffel tower (Temkine 2009c: 14–15). A decree issued on July 8th, 1942 by the German occupiers forbade the Jews to enter public places in France. Furthermore, the play is full of geographic references like the Paris quarter of La Roquette, Roussillon, the Durance, and the Vaucluse, but only in the original French version. Temkine hypothesizes that it takes place on a plateau on the foothills of the Alps in the spring of 1943 (Temkine 2009a: 36). This could be the Plateau de Valensole in southern France (Temkine 2009c: 22) from which Godot might have acted as a smuggler¹ taking Vladimir and Estragon deeper into the Italian-occupied zone, or perhaps to Switzerland. Godot is a human trafficker (Temkine 2009c: 20). He has to be very careful, uses Godot as an alias, and children as messengers.

There have been several attempts to interpret the play within a concrete historical context. In 1967, Eric Bentley stated the play may reflect the waiting of the prisoners, either those in Auschwitz and Buchenwald, or prisoners in totalitarian societies in general (Perloff 2005: 80). Hugh Kenner wondered in 1973 how readers and audiences did not see the obvious similarity between the play and German-occupied France during the Second World War. People in the Résistance were accustomed to being very careful in making and keeping appointments, meaning that waiting was a constant reality. Kenner argues that Pozzo may be a Gestapo official, and that the play closely corresponds to the situation in France during 1940-1944 (Perloff 2005: 84–85). This interpretation was ignored at that time.

Not directly naming Vladimir and Estragon as Jews can be seen as an act of respect towards the Jews in order not to stigmatize them (Temkine 2009b: 99–100). In this way, Beckett expressed his subtle empathy with the hunted. He bore witness for the Jews by writing this piece of theater, but nobody was willing (or able?) to see this message (Temkine 2009e: 112). The question remains as to why these hints were not recognized by the public, or why the public was not willing to recognize them. Beckett may have met individuals like Vladimir and Estragon while working for the winegrower Bonnelly, but as Jews they would have had to leave Roussillon for the safer areas of the Italian-occupied zone, like Savoyen and Nizza in 1943 (Grillère 2010); Jews were hunted by the Pétain regime after the Germans invaded the former free zone on November 11th, 1942.

Waiting for Godot also features a connection between the fragmented identity of the characters and their fragmented sense of the places among which they move, like in other works by Samuel Beckett (Addyman 2010: 120). Gibson calls this phenomenon ‘topophobia’ (Gibson 2010: 83), which might be true for Beckett’s other works, but not *Waiting for Godot*, which I will explicate further when I refer to other concrete references in the play.

2. The meaning of the translations

Ruby Cohn states that the self-translations Samuel Beckett performed are unique in the history of literature (Cohn 1961). In *Waiting for Godot*, he changed the names of several geographical locations between the original French version and the English translation, and also in the German translation together with Elmar

Tophoven. According to Cohn, minor changes in Lucky's tirade can be associated with the changed nationality of the audience, but she finds it curious that the clear references to the Vaucluse in the French version are changed to the Burgundian Macon country in the English translation. In the German translation, the Vaucluse was changed to the Breisgau, a region in southern Germany, and the Durance to the Rhine (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 137, 154). The association of the two protagonists with France still remains. Vladimir and Estragon still regret not having jumped from the Eiffel tower and still want to see l'Ariège (the Pyrenees in the English version) while in the German version it is translated to Emsland, a region in northern Germany (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 201). In the English translation hiding the historical background might have been imperfectly done, perhaps by purpose. Samuel Beckett and his later wife Suzanne Dechevaux-Dumesnil crossed the demarcation line to the unoccupied zone at Châlon-sur-Saône and headed further south. About 60km south of Châlon-sur-Saône there is the town of Mâcon belonging to the Burgundian region. Therefore, changing the Vaucluse to Macon country in the English translation does not seem to be that curious if one considers this autobiographical background information. In my opinion, changing geographic locations between the translations serves to hide the historical background of the play from a wider audience. Therefore, I disagree with the view that changing geographic locations is simply to pay respect to the different nationalities of the audiences (Scheiner 2013: 375) or that they were politically too specific at that time to be translated into other languages (Morin 2017: 144).

Beckett often spoke of "writing the voices he heard in his head" (Overbeck 2013: 431), Roger Blin also mentioned that Beckett heard the voices of his characters (Benson 1987: 26). From a psychological point of view, this can be regarded as an uncensored capturing of conscious and subconscious thoughts and motives. Beckett experienced difficult and traumatic times in the Vaucluse during the Second World War; these he directly transferred into the French language. Psychological censorship might have then urged him to reduce the concreteness he has given to the French version in his later translations (Freud 1900: 517). He has always denied that his writings have an autobiographical meaning. Therefore, this process of covering the tracks can be regarded as a self-protective measure. The interpretation of the play should include the original French version. Future stagings in other languages should incorporate the concrete geographical locations mentioned in this version as they fundamentally affect the interpretation of the play.

3. Samuel Beckett's biographical connection to *Waiting for Godot*

Beckett began writing *Waiting for Godot* on 9 October 1948; the date on the last page of the manuscript is 29 January 1949 (Duckworth 1987: 81). Vladimir was the first character to receive his name. His companion was called 'Lévy' until the end of Act 1. From then on he was renamed to Estragon (Duckworth 1987: 84; Nixon and van Hulle 2018: 173). It seems unusual that Beckett changed the more

Jewish-sounding name 'Lévy' when one considers the historical background of the play. A possible explanation, in my opinion, is that he tried to cover these historical tracks to prevent autobiographical details from becoming too obvious in his work; this was his strategy throughout his career (Knowlson 1996: 20–21). Another offered explanation was that this process of undoing was not done to obscure autobiographical details but to deemphasize them (Gontarski 1983: 8). Gontarski argues that removing such autobiographical details, Beckett managed to transfer his texts more toward the abstract, toward an universal meaning (Gontarski 1983: 9). After recording the initial stream of unconscious material, Beckett's strategy was to delete details, reject extrinsic systems of chronology and causality and create alternative patterns of internal relationship. The goal was to devalue content for the benefit of form and this also originated from a suspicion of unconscious processes in general. This can further be understood on the basis of Beckett's fundamental insight that an artist should not explain anything, especially not the outside world (Gontarski 1983: 20–23). Other references also emphasize that for Beckett it is the shape that matters (Pountney 1988: 11). This concept is implemented in *Waiting for Godot* by a cyclical inaction, repetitious events, and the two acts which are symmetric. A shape is also achieved by repetition of themes like Estragon being asleep several times, and by phases of silence (Pountney 1988: 49–50). Beckett's reworking of even small texts was immense. The withholding of information from the final version of the text in *Waiting for Godot*, for example the suppression of a written message from Godot, is interpreted to increase ambiguity. Replacing coherent expressions by repeated, deformed, and nonsensical words is regarded as a process of mystification (Pountney 1988: 71–72). Pountney states that the reason for Beckett to suppress specific details from later versions of his texts is to free his plays from limitations arising from identifications. Audiences are then forced to work and cannot sit back and just await entertainment (Pountney 1988: 102). This strategy of "vaguening" is applied in several of his plays to serve the mentioned purposes (Pountney 1988: 133–155). Beckett himself said that he tried to take away as much of the detail as possible (Pountney 1988: 156). It is further suggested that he removed any opportunity for Jewish stereotyping by changing the name 'Lévy' (Nixon and van Hulle 2018: 222).

Beckett's work as a writer should be analyzed in relation to the historical situation of Nazi occupied France 1940-1944 (Gibson 2010: 99). After the German invasion in 1940, he and his future wife, Suzanne Dechevaux-Dumesnil, left Paris, where he had been working, and travelled through France passing through Vichy, Toulouse, Cahors, and Arachon before returning to Paris. Beckett became a member of the Résistance network 'Gloria SMH', part of the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) in September 1941, but the group was betrayed one year later (Beckett, Craig, and Hirte 2014: 15). Twelve members of Gloria SMH were shot and 90 were deported to German concentration camps (Morin 2017: 147).

At this point, it was uncommon to be a member of the Résistance. Even when the Germans were facing defeat in 1944, only about 2% of the French population belonged to the Résistance. So in 1941, only a small fraction of that 2% were already members of the Résistance (Will 2014: 114). It showed, therefore, great courage and conviction to become a member at this early stage. Beckett joined

the Résistance partly because of his solidarity with the Jews (Gibson 2010: 101).

He and Suzanne barely escaped the Gestapo, and later crossed the demarcation line at Châlon-sur-Saône with the help of a smuggler¹ (Perloff 2005: 81). They arrived in Roussillon in Vaucluse in November 1942 and stayed there until early 1945 (Knowlson 1996: 309). Beckett wrote that he was interrogated by local *gendarmes* who initially believed that he was a Jew because of his first name, Samuel (Beckett, Craig, and Hirte 2014: 16). In spite of this incident, denunciation was not a problem within the village (Knowlson 1996: 291). They were confronted with the food shortages of that time and had to organize clothing, especially footwear (Gibson 2010: 102). He was questioned several times at the prefecture of the Vaucluse to clear his residence permit during his first year in the region (Beckett, Craig, and Hirte 2014: 17–18). Beckett worked for local farmers, including the winegrower, Bonnelly, mentioned in *Waiting for Godot* (Knowlson 1996: 294).

Roussillon plays a central part in *Waiting for Godot* as Beckett refers to the ochre mines close to the village. The village was mainly ignored by the Germans, although Gordes, only 12km away, was a Maquis² headquarter for the Résistance (Knowlson 1996: 304). Sociologist Laurence Wylie, who spent one year in Roussillon after the war in 1950–51 and wrote a well-known book about his stay, said that the village was largely untouched by the Germans except for a few patrols. There were no fights or bombings (Gordon 1996: 173; Wylie 1975). Anne O'Meara de Vic Beamish, known as Miss Beamish, was a writer who also stayed in Roussillon and claimed that she invited Beckett to come to the village, although other sources say that Beckett was invited by the musician Roger Deleutre (Knowlson 1996: 292). Beamish has also claimed that Beckett began planning *Waiting for Godot* while living in the village (Gordon 1996: 180).

Other impressions in this region seem to have influenced Beckett in his later works as well. Farmers in this region cultivated garance, a root that produced red color to dye clothes. In German it is called “Krapprot”. One of Beckett’s later plays was called “Krapp’s last tape”. This is most likely another clear reference to his experiences in the area around Roussillon as he was involved in farm work and in regular contact with farm workers.

People in Roussillon were adapted to an attitude called *Système D*, meaning that they were determined to do what was necessary to live through the German occupation, but some of them were also actively involved in Résistance work (Gordon 2013: 118). This work had to be executed with great caution and long stages of planning and waiting preceded action.

Working for the Résistance, Beckett was familiar with aliases. He collected information, translated it, and was therefore familiar with coded messages (Gordon 2013: 114). He was also involved in sabotage actions and kept explosives for the Résistance (Gordon 2013: 114). Sabotage activities were organized in Gordes and consisted, among others, of burning German vehicles, cutting telecommunications wires (Gordon 1996: 150), and attacking railroad lines (Gordon 1996: 169). It is therefore likely that he, as a member of the Résistance, was involved in such sabotage activities and had access to firsthand information on the situation in southern France. It is said that the Maquis in this area arranged drop-off and pick-up areas for explosives and supplies, and some members were involved

in arranging escape routes for prisoners out of Poland, Hungary, and Romania (Gordon 1996: 170).

Beckett told Alan Simpson that he was fighting against the Germans who were making life hell for his friends, and not for the French nation (Gordon 1996: 140). What exactly Beckett encountered during his time in the Résistance remains a mystery, as his nephew, Edward Beckett, states that he always spoke of the war in very general terms (Gordon 1996: 144). Nevertheless, he was awarded with the Croix de Guerre and the Médaille de la Résistance, both indicating special acts of bravery (Gordon 1996: 145).

Andrew Gibson says that Beckett's life in Vichy France has to be connected to some of his works (Gibson 2010: 17). Readers and audiences cannot fully grasp his message without considering his life in occupied France from 1940–44 and what he likely knew about French collaboration. The truth was that Vichy France offered more assistance to the Germans than was actually demanded, something surely known by members of the Résistance (Gibson 2010: 99), particularly those living so close to Maquis headquarters, like Beckett. Morin states that Beckett's references to French political history should be analyzed in connection to the Holocaust and French collaboration with Nazism (Morin 2017: 13).

4. The historical situation behind *Waiting for Godot*

As of the summer of 1942, Jews were no longer allowed to enter public buildings anywhere in France, and about 26000 Jews were interned in concentration camps in the unoccupied zone. There were public executions held for Résistance fighters caught in sabotage actions, and reports of German massacres like in Oradour-sur-Glane in 1944. Beckett was directly confronted with these atrocities (Gordon 2013: 115, 119).

Generally, the Alps were a region in which shelter and safety for Jewish refugees was still possible (Cavaglioni 2005). There were still hiding places around Ventimiglia in the south, at the Côte d'Azur, or north at the feet of Mont Blanc in the Aosta valley. Refugees would cross the border to Italy over mountain passes on their own, or with the help of smugglers, often by boat or by railway (Cavaglioni 2005: 431).

The prosecution of the Jews in Italy was also brutal but was different compared to treatment in Germany or under German occupation. Mussolini was not as interested in anti-Semitism (Schlemmer and Woller 2005: 176), but Hitler pressured Italy into imposing laws against Jews. These laws damaged the Jews both financially and psychologically, but the Jews did not fear for their lives in Italy (Sarfatti 1998: 318). Sometimes these laws were not thoroughly implemented because of compassion or corruption (Schlemmer and Woller 2005: 183).

From the summer of 1942 onwards, German authorities demanded the extradition of Jews from the Italian-occupied zone, in which between 20,000 and 40,000 Jews, half of them French and half of them foreign refugees, were living. In March 1943, a Royal inspectorate of racial police was installed to stop the illegal entry of Jews trying to escape from the German controlled territory (Sarfatti

1998: 320). Italian diplomats, military, and government employees showed active and passive resistance, combined with corruption, to work against the demand to hand over the Jews to the Germans (Schlemmer and Woller 2005: 190). Nevertheless, in July 1943 Italy gave the order to handover the German Jews in the Italian-occupied zone in south-east France, which was initially nullified after the fall of Mussolini on July 25th, 1943. This order was analyzed as progressive Fascist anti-Semitism (Sarfatti 1998: 318). The role of the Italian authorities during the occupation is still controversial and historians are still divided when drawing conclusions about this time (Cavaglioni 2005: 439). The deportations and killings of Jews in Northern Italy began immediately after the invasion of German troops in September 1943 following the Italian capitulation. Many were able to reach the already freed southern part of Italy, or were able to cross the border into a Switzerland that had become more generous as it became clear that the Nazis would lose the war, giving shelter to 21,000 Jewish refugees (Kreis 1997: 573). Others joined the partisans and engaged in active fighting against the German occupiers. Most of the Jews were forced to go into hiding and were dependent on the courage and mercy of common Italian citizens. The Catholic church also saved a number of Jews. In Rome more than 4,000 Jews were said to have survived in hiding, some even in the Vatican (Schlemmer and Woller 2005: 195).

Beckett might also have heard of the village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, where, under the leadership of the local priest André Trocmé and his wife, about 3,000 to 5,000 people hunted by the Nazis – amongst them many Jews – were saved, and some of them were brought to Switzerland (Gordon 1996: 184–185). This might have inspired Beckett to choose two Jews as main characters and have them wait for their smuggler, who will perhaps bring them to Switzerland.

Switzerland's attitude towards Jewish refugees became more and more restrictive after the beginning of the war. In 1939, Swiss Jewish citizens had their documents stamped with a 'J', and in 1942 the Swiss borders were closed, especially to Jews, but also to other politically-hunted individuals applying for a required visa; applications to enter Switzerland were denied, which essentially then sentenced them to death (Spuhler and Boillat 1999: 107). The only possibility was to enter Switzerland illegally and hope that a local official would legalize the residence in the country.

Illegal entry was possible with the help of smugglers. Refugees were, for example, transported by railway close to the western border at Pontarlier, where a smuggler¹ would then lead them on a dangerous 4–6 hour walk across the border. It is difficult to discriminate whether smugglers acted for financial reasons or personal convictions. What is certain, is that it was dangerous for the smugglers¹ and some were even shot by Swiss border officials (Spuhler and Boillat 1999: 117–120, 123). Many refugees were sent back to France, which in most cases meant deportation and death (Kreis 1997).

The number of deported Jews from France was about 80,000, which represented approximately 23% of the total Jewish population in France. This was lower than in other European countries during the Second World War, and after the war the Vichy regime tried to state that they had been actively resisting the demands of the German occupiers. In reality, they handed over far more for-

eign Jews, and a combination of geographical, chronological, social, and political reasons (the high proportion of French Jews) prevented higher numbers of deportations (Rouso and Grässlin 2009: 103–104). The Germans had to rely on French collaborators as the French Jews were more difficult to identify than in other European countries. These factors make it difficult to conclude whether the higher survival rate was indeed based on a different attitude held by the French towards the Jews (Levendel 1999: 246–247). Nevertheless, as a Jewish individual, one always feared arrest and would likely make every effort to escape to safer areas, like the protagonists in *Waiting for Godot*.

Waiting was a common experience in Vichy France. One was either waiting for ration cards³ or parachute drops (Gibson 2010: 103). There was also an attitude called *attentisme* present at that time, which meant that collaboration with the Pétain regime was tolerated because people saw no opportunity to actively fight German occupation. Beckett's membership in the Résistance resulted in boredom at daylight which was often associated with waiting and danger at night. This change from boredom to anxiety was later processed in *Waiting for Godot* (Gordon 1996: 171–172).

5. Concrete references in the play

5.1. Location references

The stage directions to describe the scenery are minimal: “A country road. A tree. Evening.” (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 26). Nevertheless, they match the landscape of Vaucluse, which is a rural area; the Plateau de Valensole, where Valentin Temkine claims the play is set, is characterized by country roads and almond trees.

A remarkable reference to the Eiffel Tower is made by Vladimir, the line that first made Valentin Temkine aware of the historical impact of the play. “Hand in hand from the top of the Eiffel Tower, among the first.” (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 28). In the play it is now too late to commit suicide this way as Jews were no longer allowed to enter public places.

A hint where Vladimir and Estragon come from appears in the French version of the play. When Vladimir asks if Estragon has read the Bible, there are cuts made in the English version. In the French version they talk about where Estragon might have looked inside the Bible, and Vladimir says that he must be confusing it with la Roquette: “*Tu dois confondre avec la Roquette.*” (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 34). In the original manuscript “maison de correction” (borstal) was replaced by la Roquette with a different handwriting, not Beckett's (Nixon and van Hulle 2018: 178–179). La Roquette is the 11th arrondissement of Paris containing a high number of Jews at that time, mainly coming from eastern and central Europe. Before the war, more than two thirds of the Jewish population in Paris lived there. Vladimir and Estragon are supposed to be Jews from the 11th *arrondissement* (Temkine 2009a: 35). There was a large roundup in la Roquette on August 20th, 1941 in which more than 4000 men were arrested and taken to Drancy (Drake 2015: 191–221) and one may speculate that Vladimir protected

Estragon from being arrested in such a roundup, after which both were able to escape to the former French Free Zone, which was later also invaded by the Germans on November 11th, 1942. Vladimir was able to organize the escape and save Estragon (Temkine 2009d: 152).

When they are talking about carrots and turnips it seems obvious that they are talking about the food shortages in France the population had to face. Vladimir: "Make it last. That's the end of them." (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 54). People were divided into six categories by a food card rationing system depending on age and physical labor. Jews faced even more food restrictions (Granier 2014: 15–19). Individual reports clearly show that the amount of food provided was far from sufficient, and that children especially suffered from malnutrition (Levendel 1999: 65–69).

An indication where the play may take place can be found in the French version. There, Pozzo says that he might sell Lucky "*au marché de Saint-Sauveur*" (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 84). In the English version it simply says that he would bring him to the fair, almost immediately adding "The best thing would be to kill him.", which is another reference to the aforementioned torturer-prisoner relationship in occupied France. Saint-Sauveur is a small village at an altitude of 1200 meters, with about 300 inhabitants at the time of the Second World War in the Hautes-Alpes, in the region Provence-Alpes-Cote d'Azur. It is situated close to the Italian border, about 55km from Briancon, 85km from Sestriere in Italy, and about 150km from the Plateau de Valensole where the Temkines located the play. It is further situated on the railroad line to Briancon. Taken together, these details support the hypothesis that Vladimir and Estragon are waiting to be transferred to Italy, where people were more reluctant to persecute Jews at that time.

That the play is definitely situated in France can be derived from the fact that Estragon demands ten francs from Pozzo in the English version and "*un louis*" which is an equivalent of twenty francs (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 100), but Vladimir intervenes that they are not beggars. In the French version, Estragon adds a few lines later: "*Même cent sous.*" (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 102), where he mentions another French currency. This is repeated later in the play when Pozzo offers them money; here he also speaks of „francs" in the French and English versions (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 198).

In the French version of Lucky's monologue, there are again several references that the play might be located in France. Lucky mentions the region of Normandie several times, the river Seine, the department Seine-et-Oise situated around Paris, and the department Seine-et-Marne, which is situated east of Paris. These could be biographical fragments as Beckett lived in Paris and helped to rebuild a hospital at Saint-Lô in the Normandie after the war (Knowlson 1996: 313–317).

Estragon mentions another geographical location when he talks of jumping into the river Durance in the French version, which is translated to the Rhône in the English, and the Rhine in the German versions (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 136–137). He did this while they were grape harvesting. The Durance is a river in the region Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur and has its source close to the Italian border. Before building the Lac de Serre-Ponçon in 1961, the Durance caused several

devastating floods. It passes the cities of Briançon, Sisteron, Manosque, Pertuis, and Cavaillon before it flows into the Rhône near Avignon. This is a region Beckett knew well from his stay in the Vaucluse during the Second World War.

Another clear hint about the geographical location is given in the French version. Vladimir and Estragon argue about whether they have been in Vaucluse, the French department to which Roussillon belongs. Estragon says that he does not remember having been there, but Vladimir replies that they have been picking grapes for a man named Bonnelly in Roussillon, and that everything there is red. In the English and German versions these geographical locations are not used, rather Maçon country or Breisgau. Also missing is the name of the winegrower whose family is still running this business in Roussillon, and that a female relative of his is the actual mayor of the village (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 152–155).

“But down there everything is red!” is a clear reference to the ochre cliffs in Roussillon and the red soil in the area. Beckett often went out for long walks around the village. Therefore, he was very familiar with the local landscape and its more unusual characteristics.

In the French and German versions, Vladimir and Estragon are described as being easily visible up on a plateau, and Estragon fears that they will be surrounded and attacked (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 180–183). Valentin and Pierre Temkine interpret this to be a reference to the Plateau de Valensole. This 800 km² large area at the foot of the Alps is a sunny region known for the many almond trees that grew there during the years when Beckett lived in the area. It is an ideal starting point for travelling north to Digne-les-Bains and Briançon, where one could use the railway to reach the Italian border. The other route might have led to Sisteron, Gap, Grenoble, Annecy, and Annemasse, from which one could reach the Swiss border.

Being surrounded by possible enemies, either Germans or members of the French Milice, evokes associations with battles on the Plateau des Glières, about 50km south of Geneva and 130km northwest of Aosta in Italy, where, in March 1944, 121 members of the Résistance were killed; Beckett was likely informed about this tragic incident.

Further evidence for the French geography of the play is found in the French and English versions when Estragon says that they will go to the region of Ariège (Pyrenees in the English version), which borders on Spain, and that he always wanted to wander there (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 200). Boyle stresses the striking parallel between the clandestine crossing of the Pyrenees into Spain to escape the Nazi occupation (Boyle 1987: 180), and the reference in the play where Estragon says: “We’ll go to the Pyrenees. ... I’ve always wanted to wander in the Pyrenees.” (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 200). This reference is even clearer in the French version. There, Estragon says: “*Nous irons dans l’Ariège. ...J’ai toujours voulu me balader dans l’Ariège.*” (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 200). In this translation he directly references the department Ariège, which is situated right at the border to Spain where smugglers would bring people from Vichy France to Spain. “*Le chemin de la liberté*” was one of the main escape routes from France to Spain; here one could more easily avoid official checkpoints and contact with German patrols (Perloff 2005: 77).

Ironically, this was not really a place to wander in. A famous testimony about helping individuals escape to Spain was given by Lisa Fittko (Fittko 2000). Via the 'F route' from Banyuls-sur-Mer via Cerbère to Portbou in Spain, Lisa Fittko and her husband, Hans, helped many people reach Spain during 1940 and 1941 before they themselves escaped to Cuba. Therefore, mentioning the department of Ariège and the Pyrenees appears to be a reference to the possible escape routes from occupied France rather than a simple location.

Another possible interpretation could be that the internment camp Le Vernet d'Ariège was a center of resistance as many intellectuals, politicians, and cultural workers from around Europe were arrested here; some survivors became important executives in their countries (Bökel 2017: 67–77).

5.2. Socio-political references

The protagonists must meet in the evening to profit from the approaching darkness and avoid arrest by the Germans or by French collaborators. Vladimir tells Estragon that he thought that he would be gone forever. He must have feared that he would be arrested and sent to one of the internment camps from which deportations took place to Drancy and from there to Auschwitz.

They had to sleep outside as they are fleeing, and Estragon reports that he was obviously beaten just because he was recognized as a Jew (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 28). Due to a shortage of staff, the German occupiers had to rely on French collaborators to arrest Jews and political opponents. They were often criminals who harassed and blackmailed their victims. With this strategy they would collect pay from their German employers as well as from victims they then promised not to arrest (Levendel and Weisz 2012).

Estragon might have been attacked by such violent subjects. Vladimir says: "You'd be nothing more than a little heap of bones at the present minute, no doubt about it." (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 28). He seemed to have helped Estragon escape from the Nazis, otherwise he would already have been killed by them.

The protagonists wait for someone called Godot. The identity of Godot has inspired wide speculation since the play was first made public; the name itself may inspire associations to God. But the answer might be quite simple. Godot could be their smuggler contact. They are waiting for their smuggler from the Résistance, someone who will bring them to Switzerland, Italy or closer to the Italian border where it would be safer to have not been fully persecuted, when the play is supposed to occur. Godot can be regarded as an alias; members of the Résistance did not want to be identified. They had to verify several times whether meeting places were safe or if they had been betrayed to the Germans or collaborators. This is why Godot's arrival is uncertain, and why later in the play he sends a boy to Vladimir and Estragon to establish secure communication.

On the other hand, this interpretation is not without problems. The Résistance was a heterogeneous movement, and at least some of the involved groups, including one lead by de Gaulle, had an ambivalent attitude to the oppressive anti-Semitic policy of the Vichy regime (Joffrin and Raffy 1994).

The protagonists talk about committing suicide by hanging themselves (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 46, 48). It was not uncommon that Jews preferred committing suicide instead of being arrested by the Nazis or by French collaborators.

They reflect on having lost their rights. Vladimir: "We got rid of them." (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 52). This is a clear reference to the fact that Jews have lost their rights as citizens.

The character of Pozzo unites traits of a SS officer and a member of the French militia. Boyle compares Pozzo's behavior with the behavior of a commander of an extermination camp (Boyle 1987: 180). He behaves aggressively towards Lucky, his slave, and ignorant towards Vladimir and Estragon. Lucky can be regarded as a concentration camp inmate who is tortured by his guard, Pozzo. Estragon asks why Lucky does not put down the bags (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 68, 78, 80, 82). Pozzo replies that Lucky wants to impress him so that he will keep him, seeing that he is not short of slaves. A clear reference to the Nazi concentration camps is given in the German translation by Pozzo's statement "*Jedem das Seine*" (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 83) ("To each one his due" in the English version), which was displayed over the entrance to the Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany. The primary means of survival in a concentration camp was for inmates to show that they were able to work. Therefore, Lucky remains carrying the bags in order to show Pozzo that he is able to work. Vladimir calls the treatment of Lucky a "scandal" (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 74), but this is just a verbal opposition. Pozzo realizes that Vladimir's and Estragon's future depends on Godot's appearance (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 76) and this heightens the drama of the situation.

Pozzo's role as an SS officer or French collaborator is manifested in the French and German versions, but only somewhat in the English version. Without Lucky, his thoughts and feelings would have been of common things, "*que des choses basses, ayant trait à mon métier de – peu importe.*" (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 86). He talks of mean tasks he has to busy himself with regarding occupational matters.

When Pozzo asks Estragon about his name, he replies in the French and German version that his name is Catull, a Roman poet who lived in the first century BC; in the English version he says his name is Adam. He uses an alias to conceal his real identity as it was dangerous during the occupation to reveal one's real name.

According to the Vichy regime, France had to face a moral renewal. Their new slogan became "*Travail, Famille, Patrie*", which implied a conservative and reactionary way to interpret society. Jews, Freemasons, gypsies, communists, homosexuals, and foreigners were declared to be impure and were interned before being deported. Lucky's monologue can be regarded as a fundamental criticism of Vichy ideology, and not merely absurd and comical nonsense (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 111–117). It resembles the medieval *fatras* of the 14th century that contained illogical, impossible, obscene, and scatological elements. He talks of several pseudoscientific improvements and of sports, which was also central to Vichy ideology, and by doing so reveals the absurdity of this reactionary approach (Gibson 2010: 105). Individualism was rejected by the Vichy regime. From July 1940, boys between 15 and 19 years of age had to spend eight months in a camp

and were indoctrinated with a fascist ideology. A similar program was established for girls (Gordon 1996: 149).

Historian Robert Owen Paxton argues that the Vichy government engaged in enthusiastic cooperation with Nazi Germany. The Nazis could not have reached their objectives without the Vichy regime pursuing an aggressive anti-Semitic policy on their own (Gordon 1996: 147). The French were responsible for the deportation of thousands of Jews without having definite external pressure imposed on them by the Germans (Gordon 1996: 149). Vichy imposed massive pressure on Jews. They had to declare themselves, identity cards were stamped with '*Juif*', businesses were marked as 'Jewish Enterprise', Jews were excluded from civil and military services, and Jewish property was confiscated (Gordon 1996: 152). As of the summer of 1942 Jews were forbidden to enter public buildings; those who protested or did not comply with this order were executed. Vichy deported 30000 Jews in July and August 1942 to Drancy and then to Auschwitz (Gordon 1996: 153).

A boy appears, having observed the interaction with Pozzo and Lucky, and can be viewed as a secret messenger from the smuggler Godot (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 127–35). Beckett himself faced betrayal within his Résistance group and was thereby aware of the dangers associated with helping those hunted by the Germans. High rewards were promised to those who revealed individuals assisting Jews and Résistance fighters.

At the beginning of Act Two, Estragon reports that he was again beaten up; this time there were ten people.

Estragon: "I wasn't doing anything."

Vladimir: "Then why did they beat you."

Estragon: "I don't know." (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 148).

He appears to have been beaten by Vichy henchmen because he looked different and did not fit the restrictive ideology of the Vichy regime.

Following this episode is a central scene which evokes associations of the Holocaust.

Estragon: "The best thing would be to kill me, like the other."

Vladimir: "What other? *Pause*. What other?"

Estragon: "Like billions of others."

Vladimir: (*sententious*) "To every man his little cross." *He sighs*. "Till he dies." *Afterthought*. "And is forgotten."

(...)

Estragon: "All the dead voices."

(...)

Vladimir: "To be dead is not enough for them."

Estragon: "It is not sufficient."

Silence.

Vladimir: "They make a noise like feathers."

Estragon: "Like leaves."

Vladimir: "Like ashes."

(Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 154, 156)

If one considers the aforementioned new historical interpretation of the play, one might conclude that they are talking about the Holocaust.

Not long thereafter Vladimir again seems to have a vision or a traumatic flashback which has strong associations with the Holocaust.

Vladimir: "Where are all these corpses from?"

Estragon: "These skeletons."

(...)

Vladimir: "A charnel-house! A charnel-house!"

(Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 160)

In the French version Vladimir says "*Un charnier, un charnier.*", which means 'mass grave', likely leaving no doubt that they are talking about the Holocaust.

Beckett was also likely influenced by the social life surrounding him while planning and conceptualizing *Waiting for Godot*. In Roussillon, children were allowed to verbally insult each other as much as they liked, but they were not allowed to physically attack each other. Consequently, they were not punished by their parents for verbally aggressive behavior (Wylie 1975: 50). Children who misbehaved were shamed and treated as if they were much younger, which intimidated them. They could not expect any support if their punishment seemed justified in even the slightest way (Wylie 1975: 87). This reminds us of the verbal abuse Pozzo used against Lucky, and the insults Vladimir and Estragon trade with each other (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 186).

At the end of the play there are again several statements that can be interpreted in the context of the Holocaust. When Pozzo says, "They give birth astride of a grave" (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 220), one is reminded how pregnant women in concentration camps gave birth only to have their newborns immediately taken away and killed. Vladimir later repeats, "Astride of a grave and a difficult birth.", and continues "The air is full of our cries." (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 224). This brings to mind the death struggle of the Jews in concentration camp gas chambers.

These dramatic references are intertwined with experiences Beckett had during his stay in Roussillon. Village life in Roussillon was characterized by routines and traditions. Family life was of high importance. For people in the village, privacy was their priority rather than being suspicious of strangers (Wylie 1975: 137 ff.). For this reason, Beckett was not really labeled a fugitive and could live there relatively safely, yet also lacking intellectual stimulation (Gordon 1996: 178). With this in mind we can understand Vladimir saying "But habit is a great deadener" (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 224).

When the boy calls Vladimir 'Mr. Albert', Vladimir does not object (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 224). Aliases were important during the occupation to conceal true identity. As mentioned earlier, Godot is most likely an alias, and the apparent nicknames of Didi and Gogo that Estragon and Vladimir give each other should also be seen in this context. People working for Résistance groups used code names and sometimes multiple pseudonyms when they were working for several organizations (Gordon 1996: 159). Consequently, Godot can be

regarded as an alias for a Résistance member, and the boy acts as his messenger to add protective measures against the danger of arrest. Furthermore, there was a constant danger of infiltration by Gestapo 'V-men' (*Vertrauensmann*, an elite Gestapo spy) (Gordon 1996: 159). On the other hand, Morrison gives a different interpretation of the nickname Gogo when he states that several historical sources quote the Jewish shoemaker when addressing Jesus with a statement beginning "Go, go thou ..." from which the name "Gogo" should be derived (Morrison 2012, 403).

Even the last scene of the play might illustrate historical context. Estragon's trousers fell down after he and Vladimir inspected the cord that held them up while they again planned to hang themselves. Vladimir tells him to pull up his trousers (Beckett and Tophoven 1971: 232). Male Jews could be identified as Jewish by their circumcision. This was not an uncommon practice, for example, for the Germans and the Milice in Lyon (Rastier 2009: 55–56). Consequently, Estragon should pull up his trousers so as not to be easily identified as a Jew.

These examples from *Waiting for Godot* and from Beckett's other work immediately after World War II could be characterized as being concerned with anti-semitism under the Vichy regime and the general situation of occupied France (Morin 2017: 131).

6. The title of the play

Both the meaning of Godot and the title of the play have long been debated in the literature. I therefore refer to just a few not so frequently mentioned ideas that have been put forward. Roger Blin, who first directed *Waiting for Godot* in Paris, said that Beckett told him that Godot came from *godillot*, which are hob-nailed boots, because boots play an important role in the play (Benson 1987: 27).

The name of the play might also be influenced by the short story '*En attendant*' by Marcel Aymé, published in April 1943 (Aymé 1959). It is about 14 people waiting in a queue before a grocery shop in the Rue Caulaincourt in Paris; they become friends and decide to stay in contact. The setting is timed during the war, between 1939 and 1972 which is a remarkably long period. The characters are critical about the living conditions in Paris at that time, complaining, for example, that they have only 200g of bread to eat per day, that their children suffer from constant malnutrition and have thus died, that a husband is forced to work for the Germans in Silesia, that the government does not care about ordinary citizens, that the rich have even more to eat than before the war, and that there will be revenge when the Germans have withdrawn. The story also contains one sentence where a person simply says that he is a Jew, which is unusual as Jews had to face even more restrictions regarding food supply and were only allowed to enter shops during restricted opening times. The 14th person, a young woman with her husband imprisoned by the Germans, died while waiting, but at first there was no coffin to bury her. All of them met again in a café, waiting for further misfortune. This is an unusually critical text about the situation in France during the Second World War.

It remains unknown as to whether or not Beckett knew about this piece, but the apocalyptic mood and the motif of waiting resemble the elements present in *Waiting for Godot*. It is further surprising that Marcel Aymé even wrote such a text as there is still debate about his collaborationist attitude during the occupation.

Another possible source of inspiration for Beckett's *Godot* might be the play of Honoré de Balzac called *Mercadet ou le Faiseur*, in which an indebted Mercadet tries to gamble with borrowed money and he can only be saved by Monsieur Godeau who is a myth. Beckett explicitly denied having read Balzac's *Mercadet* (Balzac 2017: 118).

7. Conclusion

The different language versions of *Waiting for Godot* affect understanding and interpretation of the play. The original French version contains numerous quotes which clearly locate the play during the German occupation of France in World War II and should therefore be considered in a general interpretation of the play. These quotes are expressions of the historical and biographical context *Waiting for Godot* is based on. Consequently, *Waiting for Godot* should no longer be regarded as an absurd play but as a play with a concrete background.

I agree with Morrison that Beckett was a philo-semitic (Morrison 2012: 413). Travelling to Nazi Germany in 1936–1937, Beckett was confronted with the serious maltreatment of the Jews. He was disgusted by the behavior of the Nazis and developed a sense of solidarity with the Jews (Gibson 2010, 89). It is reported that there are many indications that he based his political identity on the ideals of the French Résistance (Morin 2017: 139). In his works after World War II he used the special language of the French Résistance which amongst others corresponds to the use of code names in *Waiting for Godot* (Morin 2017: 142).

Furthermore, I agree with Gibson that Beckett assimilated his wartime experience by writing the play *Waiting for Godot* which he first wrote in French in late 1948 and early 1949. Gordon also regards the play as a product of the war, which contains the element of helping and protecting strangers (Gordon 2013: 110). Gontarski considers the play an autobiographical account of Beckett's and Suzanne Dechevaux-Dumesnil's flight from Paris to the Vaucluse, where they often walked by night and faced food shortages. In his opinion, the play is doubtlessly based on incidents during the war (Gontarski 1987: 175). Boyle also connects the play to Beckett's experiences during World War II and his work in the French Résistance. Beckett said that he couldn't stand there with his arms folded (Boyle 1987: 179).

There are numerous quotes in the play that show the historical foundation of the plot and may lead to the conclusion that Beckett might have been haunted by traumatic experiences which he tried to assimilate by writing the play (Morin 2017: 154). However, the absurdist and existentialist interpretations of the play have prevented a historical reading of the content (Rastier 2009: 49). This is especially true regarding postwar France, where it was common to deny the widespread collaboration with the Germans while simultaneously constructing the

legend of large support for the Résistance among the French population. This environment made it convenient to interpret Beckett's play in terms of existentialist alienation instead of seeing the historical connections (Perloff 2005: 78).

Even a few decades ago, one-sided theological interpretations of the play were published that still disregarded key scenes referring to the Holocaust (Terrien 1989: 152). There are, of course, several references to the Bible in *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett was known to struggle with religion and distanced himself from Christianity. These references are then further autobiographical elements hidden in the play.

There are also other authors who interpret *Waiting for Godot* in the context of the Holocaust. Drake also regards the play as a symbolic Holocaust drama (Drake 2012: 6). She acknowledges the historical background in which the play was written but does not recognize the concrete hints of time and location as she does not integrate the French version into her interpretation. She argues that Beckett dissociates the play with a specific place or time so that it would seem timeless. This would enable the audience to see Vladimir and Estragon as symbolic Jewish characters hunted by the Nazis (Drake 2012: 11). She gives several examples showing that Vladimir and Estragon once belonged to the Jewish middle class, suffer from malnutrition, and are emotionally traumatized by their situation (Drake 2012: 13–19). Nevertheless, her argumentation remains on the surface and she does not fully embrace the role of Godot as a potential savior. Surprisingly, she reaches the conclusion that the play cannot be strictly classified as a Holocaust drama (Drake 2012: 26), but does state that it may serve to honor Holocaust heroes and their stories (Drake 2012: 53). Compared to the presented analyses, this approach lacks consistency in interpreting the play in its full historical context by taking all versions of the text into account. With a comprehensive analysis of the French text the interpretation as a Holocaust drama can be much more intensified.

Gibson clearly states that, in his opinion, Beckett has distilled his wartime experience in his play *Waiting for Godot* (Gibson 2010: 103). Beckett's strategy in the translations was to remove or obscure links that would enable the reader to link his works to real contexts (Nixon and van Hulle 2018: 281, 296). This gives them the possibility to be connected to any location, any person, any time (Uhlmann 2013: 3). Beckett did not want to link the play to a specific event in order to give it a universal meaning, as events like the German occupation of France will be absorbed by history (Kenner 1987: 59–60). Interestingly, in the original French version of *Waiting for Godot* he diverted from this strategy, giving his audience enough opportunities to localize the play although he has always denied that his writings have an autobiographical meaning (Knowlson 1996: 20–21). In an interview in 1956 he said that there is nothing but dust at the end of his work (Pountney 1988: 39).

Valentin Temkine hoped that one day a director would lead the play back to the place and time in which Beckett returned to in his thoughts when he wrote it. A whole cohort of refugees would then be revitalized (Temkine 2009e: 122). To my knowledge, two stagings of the play according to the new interpretation of Valentin Temkine were performed in Germany: 2009 in Stendal and 2012 in Sindelfingen, but both productions seemed to have been relatively cautious in

implementing the historical background. According to the presented arguments, there is a need for a contextualized performance of the play. For this reason, the present author, together with his wife, are currently working on a new staging of *Waiting for Godot* which will clearly feature the historical dimension of the play.

Notes

- ¹ Smugglers, traffickers. French: passeurs.
- ² Corsican expression, meaning 'the bush', guerilla fighters against German occupation of France during World War II
- ³ Ration cards. The French population suffered from massive food shortages during the occupation as food and other goods from France were confiscated and brought to Germany; rationing was essential. France even had to pay for the occupation of Germany: 400 million francs per day until May 1941, 300 million francs until November 1942, and 500 million francs afterwards. The exchange rate was 20 francs per Reichsmark instead of 12 francs (Rouso and Grässlin 2009: 39).
- ⁴ Meaning 'work, family, fatherland'. A contrast to their previous motto, '*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*', meaning 'liberty, equality, fraternity'.

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