

The Flow  
of History  
DANUBE

# BRIDGES OF REMEMBRANCE



Editors: **Uwe Rada / Andrej Ivanji**



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# **Bridges of Remembrance**



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## River of war, river of peace

Rivers do not know about nations. They do not have colours fit to go on national flags. Nationality which makes the themes of songs and monuments on river banks is a heritage of the 19th and 20th centuries. Rivers do not like this. They do not care about boundaries. This is why they are the best ambassadors of Europe, becoming an antidote against a growing trend towards re-nationalized recollection.



This is the optimistic outlook that the big streams of central and Eastern Europe make possible again. The Oder, a symbol of the German-Polish border for decades, is no longer *a river on the edge of the map* as Karl Schloegel, a historian of Eastern Europe put it once. It is actually a German-Polish river and a narrative sphere where people from both banks of the river engage in exchanging history and stories. The example of the Oder shows that, rather than being a divide, history can also be a tie that binds. Provided both sides are aware of each other's history so that perspectives can be swapped. This is the invitation that rivers, having witnessed so many new boundaries being drawn, may send.

Does this apply to the Danube?

György Konrád, the famous Hungarian writer, once admitted that his favourite view of Budapest was the Danube. Wanderlust was part of it to some extent, he added. *Sea nations are usually open-minded, but we*

*Bavarians, Austrians, Hungarians and Serbs do not have a sea*, he said regretfully. He was born in Debrecen in 1933 and only narrowly escaped from the Nazis. *To us the Danube is the promise of the sea. It will take us to remote lands; it crosses our heart and dissolves our feeling of seclusion.*

The rivers appear as a window to a distant place. This is the view that Konrád dares to take. Another more pessimistic view was a reality not so long ago. *The first casualties in wars are bridges*, as he puts it. The latest war in Europe did not end until 1999 on the Danube. It is over by now, and the Danube is facing the challenges of the future. This probably most European river of all the continent's streams is no longer a divide but will become part of new European co-operation projects.

GIZ, the German Agency for International Co-operation is aware of the hope 'resource' that the Danube carries from the Black Forest to the Black Sea. This is why it is publishing this volume in co-operation with the German Federal Agency for Political Education. The texts it contains are drawn from the agency's online pool entitled *Geschichte im Fluss* (History flows). The present contributions are now available in Serbian and English for the first time.

Karl-Markus Gauß, Ivan Ivanji, Andrej Ivanji, Momir Turudić, Muharem Bazdulji, Dragan Velkić and Miljenko Jergović take a look at the history of the Danube, at their own involvement in its history and their hopes for its future without covering up the difficult issues. But this is part of the shift in perspective which is newly being practiced as seen in Vukovar. Only if one national narrative is complemented by another can the former be questioned. Only then can facts be divided from war propaganda and the politics of history which is not concerned with reconciliation but with perpetuating





hostile stereotypes. Dragan Velikić and Miljenko Jergović set out to undergo this experiment.

A different type of dialogue is embraced by Ivan Ivanji, Andrej's father, and Andrej Ivanji, his son. At the end of his text *My Danube* the father tells us how his son seems to be taking just superficial notice of his history. But in his own story the son demonstrates that he has picked up the thread and carries it forward. A thread spanning the everyday experience of a boy from the Batschka, the massacre among the Jews of Novi Sad, Auschwitz and the most recent bombings of Novi Sad and Belgrade in 1999. With the Danube flowing and continuing to flow in the middle of it all.

Karl-Markus Gauß, Muharem Bazdulji and Momir Turudić relate to the Danube in an entirely different manner. Gauss gives an account of the history of the Danubian Swabians and their establishment of new settlements in the former Austrian borderlands with the Ottoman empire. The narratives carried forward by the descendants of the Danubian Swabians can today be heard in both Austria and New York. Muharem Bazdulji gives us a geographical and cultural survey of Bosnia-Herzegovina, reporting that Bosnia sees itself, considering the links the Sava and the Danube provide, as part of central Europe whereas Herzegovina, following the course of the Neretva, leans towards the Mediterranean. Momir Turudić tells us about a lost civilization, i.e. the ethnically and culturally mixed everyday life on Ada Kaleh island, which may become a model for the future again.

Gyorgy Konrád sees this as a task comprising the stream as its heart. *Who respects the river will respect their neighbor*, he is convinced.

**Uwe Rada** and **Andrej Ivanji**, May 2013

Translated into English: **Bernd Kleinheyer**





## An island of the soul

Through window ornaments which spell out the words *Ada Kaleh* shine the rays of the November sun and light up the large room where the Orient can be felt in every detail - in carved chairs, low tables, floor tiles with arabesques, chandeliers. The air is somewhat heavy and musty; one can feel that the room has not been opened up for quite some time. Emil Popescu brings in the coffee and pours it into small cups called *fildzans*. A familiar scent spreads around the room, the scent of coffee prepared from grains that someone had roasted and freshly ground in a handheld mill. I haven't smelled it for a long time, but my nose remembers it from forty years ago. I was seven years old; my aunt took me to the market in Višegrad and to visit some Muslim friends. To visit the Turks, as they were called at that time, without any malice in Serbian villages on the other bank of the Drina River. That was the first time that I felt the sting of the Orient which forever remained in my blood, forcing me thereafter to seek it in every corner of the world.

Emil Popescu also speaks about scents: "When I heard that the island was going to be submerged during the construction of the dam, I wanted to preserve at least something that bound all of us from Turnu Severin to this place. I didn't live on the island, but as a child, and later as a young man I frequently visited it. As if it were yesterday, it was a basket of flowers on the Danube, roses, figs, grapes, olives, people... I had many friends there, and I wanted to help them as well, so that when



they were relocated, they would have a place where they could do everything they used to do on the island. At the time they prepared Turkish delight, rose jam, and *the* coffee. The last time I went there, I took my son who was four years old, and he says that he still remembers everything.”

He opened the tavern in 1968 and called it *Ada Kaleh*. “It wasn’t located here at that time. The old one was somehow prettier, but that building and some others were demolished when they built a fountain in the center of town, the big metal one, you saw it. After that I moved to this location, and it took me four years to finish it, every detail.” While speaking, Emil lights up a cigarette and taps off the ash into a big, rusty coffee pot called a *dzezva*. “I don’t use it anymore, but at that time it was used to brew up to ten cups of coffee at the same time. Various guests used to come, to get coffee, sweets and everything else. Buses full of workers from the factory used to come, but wealthier people as well, two Romanian presidents stopped by when they were visiting Turnu Severin. My friends from the island used to work here in Turkish national costumes, with small red caps on their heads called *fez*. Then gradually business began to decline, and finally in 2009, three years ago, I was forced to close down... I don’t think that I will reopen; also there are new laws now. To make cakes in your own home you need product authorization, numerous permits. Many Turks have left, a few live in the town, they are old and ill, just like me. Young people today ask for different drinks, Nescafe, espresso, no one wants Turkish coffee.”

### **History and legend**

Ada Kaleh finally disappeared in 1970. That year the river’s waves covered the island which was 1750



meters long and barely half a kilometre wide, where so many legends and histories had accumulated that they were sufficient for several worlds. Legend said that the Argonauts had paused at this piece of land in the middle of the Danube which had a climate similar to that of their homeland far away in the south, and it was here that they saw an olive tree for the first time and took it with them to the ancient world.

An abundance of history is a logical result of the location of the island. Anyone who ruled the island was also the ruler of the lower course of the Danube; the Ada was the gateway for navigation through the Iron Gate. Ancient tales say that at the beginning of the war against the Dacians this was the spot where Roman emperor Trajan transferred his legions across the river, by tying his ships together thus creating a bridge and using the island as its centre. This is where the Mongolians crossed the frozen Danube in their terrible campaign to the West; and over the centuries many others also passed by it, the Visigoths, Huns, Slovenes, Hungarians, Austrians, Serbs, Turks, Romanians .....

The rulers of the island changed with time, and the longest battles for control over Ada Kaleh which lasted more than five hundred years were fought between Turkey and Austria. The name of the island changed as well. For a long time it was called Sa'an, and the origin of that name has been lost somewhere in the dark corridors of history. Later on it was named Caroline, after a fortress in Austria; New Orsova, after the town of Orsova on the Danube bank in Romania; Ada-i-Kebir (Big Island) in a mixture of Arabic, Persian and Turkish. The name Ada Kaleh (Turkish term for Island-fortress) was given after the construction of a large fortress, and it was the name the island had when it sank into the Danube.



Forts were built on the island even before, since Roman times, but the last and largest one was built by the Austrians; its construction began in 1689, and it was completed in 1717. Felix Kanitz recorded that the island had a “military barracks, a hospital, a church and a tunnel passing beneath the Danube toward the Serbian bank, which led to a fortress named *Fort Elisabeth* after the Austrian empress.”

Fierce battles were fought for control of the island, the Austrians and Turks repeatedly seized it from each other. The first thing every conqueror did was to mark the territory by constructing a place of worship. When the Turks conquered Ada Kaleh in 1738, they turned the building of the Austrian military command into a mosque. The Austrians regained control of Ada in the spring of 1790 and converted the mosque into a Franciscan monastery, but after just one year and according to a peace treaty Ada Kaleh was returned to the Turks, who routinely transformed the monastery into a mosque. However, attempts of both sides to leave their own individual mark on the island were in vain.

From the very beginning the brew of nations and religions boiling around the Danube was too dense to enable any of them to draw a clear demarcation line. A strange poetry of names, which also indicate nationality, religion, occupation, character, aches of the soul, echoes from the Turkish register of “taxpayers from the town of Ada Orsava” dated 1714: Prvul Bugarče, Stančul Gazibara, Nedeljko Mrzak, Ferenc Fujko, Jovan Boginja, Petre Dugi, Džora Bosiok, Stojko Milko, Petre Ližibure, Jakob Gintuša, Ilija Janoš, Čorka the carpenter, Sava the priest, Dimitrije the melon grower, Simo the tailor, Gina the carpenter, Stojan the feeble-minded, Prvul the feeble-minded...



## Historical sidetracks

Strange tales were woven on and around the island about seemingly impossible alliances and betrayals, friendships and love affairs between “age-old enemies”, who obviously knew each other far better, socialized and mingled much more than could be concluded based on the dull list of wars and battles.

Serbian records originating from June 1813 state that the soldiers of Aga Redžep, the Turkish commander in Ada Kaleh “plundered four villages and enslaved the inhabitants on Ada Kaleh”. One of Aga Redžep’s hired hands was a certain Haiduk Gica, who together with his band plundered and killed in Serbian territories. It could be said that Redžep and Gica were cousins since Gica’s sister was in Redžep’s harem. Gica was married to Jelenka, a Christianized Turk who had previously been in the harem (!) of Serbian Duke Milenko Stojković. When in 1813 Gica chose a new master and began fighting on the side of the Serbs against the Turks, Jelenka caught the eye of Prince Miloš. It is said that Jelenka was extremely beautiful, and Miloš was very sensitive to the beauty of the female gender. Since she spoke Turkish, Serbian and Vlach, Jelenka was an interpreter when in 1822 Miloš’s wife Ljubica visited the Belgrade Vizier Abdurahman. Three years later Jelenka was officially presented as Miloš’s second wife and she gave birth to his son Gavriilo.

Serbian history does not record the aforementioned Aga Redžep as only an enemy and malefactor, on the contrary. When in 1804 four Dahias, Kučugalija, Mula Jusuf, Aganlija and Fočoglija, whose terror incited the beginning of the First Serbian Uprising, fled from Belgrade, Aga Redžep immediately informed Karađorđe. It seems that Redžep was also very displeased with the Dahias, since he decided that they should be killed and to that end proposed to Karađorđe a joint attack by Serbian



and Turkish forces. In a detailed account of this event, given by protopresbyter Mihailo Pejić, it is stated that 50 Turks and 27 soldiers of Milenko Stojković attacked and killed the Dahias and their men, and that the battle lasted eight hours. Pejić also writes that the heads of the Dahias, skinned and stuffed with wool, were handed over by Milenko to Aga Redžep, and that they both took them to the Vizier in Belgrade, who “draped Aga Redžep and his seven chosen men with fur coats and gave them money, but nothing was given to the Serbians as gratitude for their courage”.

Ada was still under Turkish rule in 1849, when it was visited by the Hungarian revolutionary Lajos Kosuth who arrived there on his way to Turkey, where he had been banished by Austria after the failure of the revolution. On the island he was received with honours, and according to legend he carried with him the Hungarian crown which had been hidden, buried, on Ada Kaleh for four years.

Turkish rule in the Balkans was coming to an end. When in 1867 six remaining Turkish forts were peacefully handed over to the Serbs, Fort Elisabeth on the Serbian bank of the Danube, once an inseparable part of the Ada Kaleh fortress, was demolished. After many tempestuous centuries Ada Kaleh was no longer significant for the great powers, and it was barely mentioned during the Congress of Berlin in 1878. The administration of the island was assumed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but its inhabitants officially remained citizens of the Ottoman Empire and were exempted from paying taxes, customs and military service.

### **The new age**

It seems that the island was not able to completely flourish until it threw off the heavy burden of being



war booty to the great empires. After World War I the inhabitants decided to unite with Romania. The golden age of Ada Kaleh began in peacetime.

The island was like a forgotten part of Turkey in Europe, but it was not inhabited only by Turks. In a documentary directed by Ismet Arasan, entitled *Tales from Ada Kaleh*, the surviving inhabitants of the island, scattered throughout Turkey, remember that there were people coming from all over the world, some as exiles, fugitives, adventurers, of different religions and nations. They say that all of them lived together, mixing with each other, and that it was not unusual for a Jewish woman to be buried by an Imam, and a Muslim man by an Orthodox priest. Everyone celebrated Hidirellez (Đurđevdan) and lived as one family; they respected each other, and wore the same clothes, mainly traditional Turkish clothing. People drank every evening, usually homemade mulberry brandy, went to bed without locking their doors, and no one remembers that there were any thefts or quarrels.

The Romanian king Carol II visited the island in 1931. He drank coffee from a cup used also by his father, and listened with a smile to a legend which said that a long time ago someone from Ada Kaleh had predicted that a ruler would come to the island during that very same year who would restore all privileges to the islanders and exempt them from paying import customs for tobacco and four wagons of sugar, as well as taxes on souvenirs. There was a cigarette factory on the island which manufactured cigars said to be as good as Cuban cigars; they were even smoked by some members of the British royal family and the Romanian king himself.

Every year tens of thousands of tourists visited the narrow, cobbled alleys, enjoyed Turkish delight with hazelnuts, fig and rose jam, halva and hookahs. A black



and white photograph shows a football team, probably from the 1950s based on their jerseys. The Danube can be seen behind the football field, and it is said that the greatest problem was the fact that the ball frequently ended up in the river and the audience and players had to swim and retrieve it.

During a gathering in the mosque in 1963, Imam Redžep read the first announcement stating that Romania and Yugoslavia would build a large dam called the Iron Gates, and that the island would be submerged. The plan was to relocate the people, the fortress and most of the buildings to the Simian Island (former Ada Gubavac). Simian is located 18km downstream, in the vicinity of Turnu Severin and was the location where a brilliant builder Apolodor from Damascus built a bridge over the Danube River for Roman emperor Trajan nearly two millennia ago.

A Romanian documentary from 1968 entitled *The last spring on Ada Kaleh* shows how parts of the fortress were marked and removed, one stone at a time, and transferred to Simian. Most of the fortress was actually rebuilt on Simian, but the people never relocated. Maybe because Romania concluded that the entire undertaking would be too expensive; maybe because Turkish Prime Minister Suleiman Demirel told the inhabitants during his visit to Romania in 1967 that the doors of Turkey were always open to them; and maybe because it was simply unthinkable for them to replace their beloved island with another one.

The people of Ada Kaleh were offered resettlement in Romania, Turkey and Yugoslavia. Some 600 people, 70 families emigrated to Turkey, several chose Yugoslavia. "One family moved here, to Kladovo, but later on even they went somewhere else" says Brankica Joković while sitting on the Serbian bank of the Danube. "Not

much of Ada is left here; almost all of those who remember have died. My grandfather used to tell me that he and his friends would frequently go to the island, both before and after the Second War. They would go during the night by boat and in secret. That was the border; on the island Romanian guards were posted at all four gates of the fortress, but the guards knew them, so they would let them pass. They traded, exchanged candles, Turkish delight, cakes from the island which our people did not know how to prepare, for wheat and maize. People had to trade; here at the border smuggling was a tradition.”

Most of the islanders who chose Romania went to Constanta, Turnu Severin, Orsava. The carpet from the Ada Kaleh mosque fifteen meters long and nine meters wide, which was a gift from Sultan Abdulhamid II, was transferred to the mosque in Constanta. Some families even split up, and their members went in different directions. Wherever they went, they took with them tales of a vanished heaven and sorrow for the lost homeland.



### **Traces and memories**

While a wedding party passes by under the sun of a melancholic autumn, Emil Popescu and his peer Viktor Rusu talk about the island which impacted their lives. Somewhat reserved at first, they now interrupt and remind each other of past events with ever growing excitement. “There was a song about the love of a young Turkish girl and a Romanian sailor, Aisha and Dragomir, it was sung in the 50s. It had two endings; according to one they both jumped into the Danube because their families didn’t approve their love, and according to the other they remained together. Whenever Romanian ships passed by the island, they would always play this song as loudly as possible.” “When they were relocated to apartment buildings, they continued doing the things

they knew. The residential blocks smelled of rose jam and halva. Durgut used to make sweets at my place, but later on they began leaving. Ilmas Ombasi, a friend, left for Istanbul as far back as '69".

"Before the submerging of the island, animals were also relocated, there were sheep and goats. After that everything was levelled to the ground by dynamite, probably so it wouldn't protrude and endanger shipping. We watched from the banks as the cypress trees and houses disappeared. According to legend, the minaret remained standing, and could be seen at low tide, but this is not true, I saw it go down. The last thing I remember is that when the water started covering the tree tops thousands of bird nests began floating on the surface. The river slowly carried them away, and above them flew flocks of distraught birds..."

The island of the soul, a smugglers' lair, an oasis of freedom, a paradise lost where cultures, nations, religions lived together in peace, sunk into the waters of the Danube forever.

Legend has it that the inhabitants of Ada Kaleh had an oath that, no matter where they might die they would be buried on the island. Those of them who remained in Turnu Severin are buried at the Skela cemetery. To reach Skela one must pass through the suburbs of Turnu Severin, where rows of rundown houses from the socialist era have terraces decorated with drying clothes and satellite dishes, and then follow the road up the hill. There is a lot of garbage around the fence enclosing the cemetery, but from it the view of the Danube is wonderful.

A part of the Christian, Orthodox cemetery is reserved for countrymen of other religions. There is no fence between them; crosses, crescent moons and stars stand side by side. On some Turkish graves there are



pictures of the deceased, which is not a usual practice in the Islamic world, but on Ada Kaleh meaningless borders between worlds barely existed. An olive branch is engraved on many monuments, probably the branch of the Argonauts, as well as the following inscription: *Ruhuna el fatiha* – Our hands pray for the soul of Ahmet Ali Fuat, 1914—87; Husref Usref, 1932-2006; Omer Muzafer, 1929-91...

The graves from Ada were transferred to Simian. Among them, the grave of Misčin Baba and it is very difficult to say whether his life was real or a myth, which could also be said for many things connected to the Island. Legend has it that Baba was a prince in the distant Bukhara, who abandoned the throne in 1786 when he was told in his sleep to go to an island on the holy river. Much later the prince came to Ada Kaleh, where he remained until he died. The islanders remember him as a modest man, and according to legend he performed miraculous healings and could change water into wine. He died at the age of 95, and his grave became a place of pilgrimage for many Muslims and Christians.

For many years the inhabitants of Ada Kaleh were not able to visit their dead on the island of Simian. Until the Romanian revolution in 1989, the island was accessible only to the military. Even in this new age the Danube was a border between worlds; the Iron Gate separating Romania from the West, which at the time began in Yugoslavia, ran along the Danube. Countless unnamed graves on the Yugoslavian side of the river tell the dark tales of the Danube, graves of those who attempted but did not succeed in reaching the other world by swimming through the cold waters. Some of them drowned, others were shot before they reached the middle of the river which was the imaginary boundary. The legend of the “Romanian torpedo” also originates from that time,



a bottle of compressed air with two welded handles, which, when punctured at one end, propelled fugitives to the other side of the river. The first people who visited Simijan after the Romanian revolution found the fortress overgrown with shrubs and weeds, and many tombstones damaged by bullets fired by border guards probably during their leisure time.

Everyone who has lost his/her country or birthplace for ever has something in common. It's not only a longing for childhood and golden youth, when the grass was greener and everything was more innocent and more beautiful. More than that, it's a certain disability of the soul, a feeling that its missing parts hurt as if they still existed, even though they either no longer exist or have changed irreversibly. "It seems as if the Danube has washed away both the country and the Belgrade that I once knew", writes a friend from a place far, far away who left a long time ago.

In *The tales from Ada Kaleh* this pain can be felt in every word. "The island had a specific aroma; it was different on each side. From the river came a scent of sea water; a scent of fruit or marmalade being prepared spread around the houses; in the centre of the town one came upon the scent of tobacco. In springtime the entire island would turn green, and in the evenings, starting as the sun went down, the croaking of an entire orchestra of frogs could be heard... Everyone has a fatherland, everyone can visit their homeland, and everyone has a place to return to. I cannot show my husband and children the place where I grew up."

"It was heaven on earth especially for children. There we learned how to share with others. Holidays were always something special; we do not experience this atmosphere and festivity in Turkey. We had a beach but we could not swim far from the river bank because

of the eddies and whirlpools. People lived long lives, ate what they grew themselves, the air was clean, there were no cars, and no stress. I thank God for living my childhood and youth in that heavenly corner of the world. If such a place existed anywhere else, I would leave everything and live there.”

“I kissed the four corners of the house, left the door open and departed with tears in my eyes. When it was submerged, for a long time people could see birds flying over the Danube at the location where Ada Kaleh used to be.”

Translated into English:  
**Mirjana Ivanji and Dragana Rajić**

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## A Word Eludes Me

My birthplace is located on a waterway altered so many times by human hands that it is no longer deemed a river, but rather a canal. It's called Begej and it pours out into the Tisza River, which comes from Hungary and then flows into the Danube. This is why I consider myself an inhabitant of the Danubian shoreline.



The image I have of my homeland is based, even today, on the first map I was given in school for earth science classes, as we called geography at that time, on which two thin blue lines marked the twin Begej canal. They stretched from the top – from the northeast – obliquely downward and to the left – to the southwest. There they joined a somewhat thicker blue line, the river Tisza, which descends almost vertically from the top of the map straight downward. The Danube could be perceived much better, even though it was sometimes narrower, sometimes wider, and sometimes it appeared as if it was crouching. It began in the north and moved south, then it changed direction and continued to the east, then downward again, then once more to the right and after having made several complicated snakelike turns, it continued all the way to the big blue surface of the Black Sea. Somewhere in the middle of the flow of this large river lies the town of Novi Sad, called Neusatz in German, Ujvidék in Hungarian.

I can draw this map with all its rivers quite accurately at any moment. As a ten-year-old boy I used to copy it on transparent paper. The blue lines of river



flows resemble veins and arteries in anatomy atlases. The Danube as the main bloodline?

### **The beach on the Danube in Novi Sad**

My most important recollections of this actual Danube begin in the summer of 1941. At that time my parents, who were inept enough to be born Jews, had already been arrested, but my aunt who had the good sense to be born a German, even though she then married my uncle, my father's elder brother, had taken me to Novi Sad. Novi Sad is the capital of Bačka which was under the occupation Horthy's fascist Hungary.

The beach on the Danube in Novi Sad, called the Štrand, is the most beautiful river beach in the world. I thought so then, and I still do. It is many kilometres long and has peculiar, but architecturally well designed, wooden huts with changing rooms, some with unnecessary spires on the top; there are several taverns and restaurants; along the entire length of the beach the sand is fine, light brown, not powdery but roughly granulated, suitable for building fairly solid small castles.

In the building for storing vessels my uncle had rented a space for his boat, and he and his family, which now included me, could use the big changing room. Sometimes I would be allowed to row the boat along the river, because in my hometown on the Begej I had had a similar boat.

In spite of everything, all alone on that wide Danube, I felt free.

The currents of the Danube at Novi Sad are so strong that it is almost impossible to swim upstream; but what you can do is stroll up the river, then get into the water and let it carry you back downstream. Or you can play in the sand. If you're still a child. I was twelve years old at that time. Grownups drank beer and played cards.



My uncle had given me a pocket calendar from the previous year with traffic signs printed in colour. I glued them to a cardboard, carefully cut them out and attached them to matchsticks. Then I built sand hills and valleys, and made roads through that landscape where I would place my caution signs and other instructions to the drivers. I would plant small branches as trees. Sometimes my roads would go through tunnels, which I was able to build from wet sand. Now the playground for toy-cars would be safe for driving. I really hoped every night that in the morning I would find my masterpiece as it was when I left it, but instead of fulfilled hopes I would experience disappointment; my world of sand would be trampled upon by unheeding human feet time and time again. Naturally I was careful enough to pick up all my traffic signs and take them home with me. I could always rebuild my sand world, but if I were to lose the traffic signs, I could never find a way to replace them.



### **Where are my parents?**

I can't remember who told me that my parents were in a concentration camp, or what the term "concentration camp" really meant to me at that time. Some days I would pick wildflowers on the Danube bank and take them to the port where I would wait for ships from Belgrade. Maybe they would arrive and I would greet them. They would be very surprised. Ships would dock; people would disembark and pass by, not even noticing me. Between the deck and the quay the Danube lapped against the bank. In the late afternoon, when it was evident that no more ships would come, I would throw the flowers away. I could have taken them home to my aunt, that would have made her happy, but I just couldn't, they weren't intended for her.

But let's return to the Štrand; officially it was a beach as far back as 1911 – in Austro-Hungary and afterward in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Now it was occupied by the Hungarians. It seemed that all of this was of no importance to the Danube.

Sometimes I would simply lie on the hot sand and watch the sky with dancing clouds. Even today rows of tall, wonderful poplars guard the beach in Novi Sad. During the war, thank God, in spite of the cold and death, they were not cut down. I have never counted them. There must be hundreds of them forming an aisle of poplar trees several kilometres long.



### **Impossible to describe**

Later on in my life I read an essay by the German author Kurt Tucholsky entitled “A word eludes me”. That same word eludes me now. At the time, naturally, I knew nothing about this author; that he would kill himself because of those people with swastikas on their sleeves, although he was already safely in Sweden. That summer of 1941 I didn't even know where my parents were, whether they were maybe being humiliated, tortured or murdered, while I was.... While I was gazing idly and without a thought in my head at the grey Danube, as grey as the schist and the poplar trees. The same Tucholsky actually wrote about birch trees, but is there really a difference?

“I will go to my grave,” he says, “without knowing what it is that leaves do. I know what it is, but I can't find the right word to express it. The wind blows through the young branches; each leaf so quickly vibrates to-and-fro, as if it... as if it what? One might say that the leaves shimmer... but that's not it. It's some kind of nervous movement, but what exactly? That which cannot be said remains unredeemed says Goethe. Maybe the flowing of

leaves? I can't be bothered to get up; those volumes of books are so far away, four meters and a hundred years..." writes Tucholsky. Mine is the same situation, my bookshelves are at the very same distance from my desk. "I will die" continues Tucholsky "and will not have said it..." I also will not be able to say what I would like to say at this very moment.

It is equally difficult, equally impossible to describe the summer of 1941 seen through my twelve-year-old eyes, as it is to describe the moving of birch or poplar leaves. The mighty Danube rolls on. Its waves are unlike the waves of the sea, but they are equally powerful. There are many shades of grey. Did I say grey as schist? Maybe it's more accurate to say dove-grey? Grey as a mouse, absolutely not. Depending on the position and angle of the sun, something greenish begins to glitter, maybe even bluish. It sparks. Or vibrates, shines, glows.... When the evening sun lights its tired rays on to the Danube, the river immediately blazes red but only for a brief moment.

White seagulls fly in circles above the wide river. Where did they come from? Where will they fly off to?

### **The Novi Sad massacre**

All this was happening during the summer. When autumn came I went to school, a Hungarian Gymnasium, and I no longer spent much time on the Danube. However, we lived near the bridge that was destroyed during the war and sometimes I would go a watch that pile of metal which broke apart and fell into the river. Somehow it attracted me.... It seemed that all this didn't bother the Danube. As I said it was September 1941. October, November.... Who could have known at that time that this same bridge, rebuilt after the war, would once again be destroyed by bombs in the spring of 1999 and

that it would once again collapse into the Danube. This time, they were not fascist bombs, but rather... NATO bombs, which blow peaceful bridges into pieces, are also part of the history of the Danube, as it flows through the Serbian land, but not the topic of my present account.

Then winter came, an exceptionally cold winter. The Danube carried off many blocks of ice, and froze along its banks. December. Christmas. New Year's. Doughnuts. My aunt put a golden coin into one of the doughnuts, and by chance I was the one to find it. It's strange sometimes how things can happen accidentally. Soon it would be by chance that I stayed alive.

On January twenty first 1942, I started off to school like I had been doing every week-day at precisely a quarter to eight, with my two cousins, the sons of my Jewish uncle and German aunt; the elder we called Eći, and the other one was Saša. Or maybe I should say, we were planning to go to school. As always, we wanted to pass through the snowy park. Crows. Snow along cleared paths. It was very cold. A notice: A raid! No one is allowed to leave their apartments. Thus: no school. Hurrah! Return home. At home we played a game called "Do not Get Angry". Or maybe checkers. Chess or some other game. The police came twice. "Who lives here? Papers please!" they were satisfied with our school ID's. They routinely opened some cabinets and drawers, and politely said goodbye.

I can't remember how my uncle behaved on that occasion, if he already knew something about the massacre, about the murder of several hundred, several thousand people in the neighbourhood. Did he already know when the police rang the doorbell? How did he find out? We, the children, did not know that a hundred meters from us Jews, Serbs and Gypsies were chased out of their homes and killed in the street or taken to our beloved Štrand.



In front of the modern governmental building on the boulevard that stretched all the way to the Danube, military buglers sounded lights-out every evening. I really liked the sound of those bugles and would stand in front of the military musicians with all the other children, in spite of the fact that this was a ceremony of the hated occupational forces. We listened to the bugles both before and after the massacre. Almost every evening.

It was only after the war that I learned that the commander of the massacre had a really nice Hungarian name: Major-General Ferenc Feketehalmy-Czeydner. During the war he was promoted to Lieutenant-General. He was captured by the Americans, but was extradited to Hungary, and Hungary transferred him to Yugoslavia. He justified his actions as acts of retaliation. I was present at the court proceedings held against him and his pals. As a former concentration camp detainee I could have been present also at the execution of the death penalty, but I didn't attend. He was hanged on November 5, 1946 in the village of Žabalj where the raid had begun. Žabalj is located at a distance of thirty kilometers from the Danube.

The names of more than 1,300 residents of Novi Sad who were killed at that time are known; however, immediately after the war there was mention of as many as 4,500 victims. The names of many, numerous, executed people remain unknown, either because no one from their families and among their friends was left alive to bear witness, or because, being Jewish, they had escaped from other parts of the country in an attempt to hide in a larger town and, thus no one knew them. I can personally testify only that I survived and that the raid ended on my thirteenth birthday, on January 24. In the Jewish tradition, a thirteenth birthday is celebrated as the coming of age day, the Bar Mitzvah. However, at the time, no one remembered this.

### **It could have been me**

I cannot remember when and how I learned the details of the massacre. I think that it happened gradually. I found out more about it after the war when I returned from the concentration camp.

What actually happened? Freedom fighters appeared in the vicinity of Novi Sad. The Hungarian security forces were not really keen to search for possible accomplices of the insurgents, maybe they were afraid. Instead, they began killing Jews, Serbs and Gypsies. Some streets were chosen at random, while other areas were spared. My uncle lived in a good part of the town and not many evil things happened in our neighbourhood. But not far from us Hungarian gendarmes with cock feathers in their black hats and bayonets on their rifles were throwing their victims out of their homes into the freezing cold of the winter.

“Don’t take anything with you! Come on! Quickly!”

Terrified people were taken to the same beaches on the Danube where many of them had joyfully swum and sun bathed several months earlier. They were forced to stand in line on the banks of the frozen Danube; the men were ordered to break the ice with axes. Few were those who had the strength to cry out or pray to God for mercy. Crows were perched on the bare poplar tree branches, there were no seagulls flying in circles above the river as during the summer. It was no longer the beautiful blue Danube, but rather an ugly, dark, filthy grey shroud on the Danube.

I knew a woman, a doctor, a physician in Novi Sad, who reminded me of my mother. She could have been my mother, and I her son. She was never a really gentle woman, or at least she didn’t know how to express her love with gestures, but at that moment she hugged her children so hard that her daughter Laura shrieked in pain.



Her son Leo had heard what was being said in Hungarian. The men who were talking did not sound excited, or agitated at all, the conversation was almost business like, somewhat monotonous, and seemingly soothing, even though the boy understood the meaning.

“Must we really do it to the children as well?”

“Of course! What would we do with them otherwise? If they were to grow up they would become avengers....”

“Close your eyes!” said the lady doctor. Laura did as she was told, but not Leo, he watched as in front of him people were murdered with rifle butts and axes, and their bodies thrown into the Danube through the broken ice. Bullets had to be spared, while the burial of so many corpses would require too much work. Leo was not frightened. Then it was his turn, and his sister’s and his mother’s.

Had my mother come to Novi Sad we wouldn’t have been living with my uncle. We would have had our own apartment. I would have suffered the same fate as Leo, and today someone else would be writing about the raid in Novi Sad.

The story about the lady doctor and her children is fictional, but there were hundreds or thousands of identical or similar incidents. On the sandy bank of the Danube. The only thing I can accurately say is that in the summer of 1942 I and my cousins, as well as many other honest residents, swam once again on the very same Štrand where several months earlier so many people had been killed.

The swift waves of the Danube quickly carry downstream from Schwarzwald – the Black Forest – to the Black Sea everything that becomes its prey. All our garbage. All our corpses as well.

Even great rivers like the Danube are not truly eternal. On the location where today, and also thousands of



years ago, the Danube flows through Hungary and Serbia and where crows and seagulls fly, an immeasurably long time ago for us, but just a blink of an eye ago for the history of planet Earth, which we were allowed to inhabit, inquisitive fish and even sabre-tooth sharks used to swim in the Pannonian Sea. Now an old man, I remind myself over and over again that we are merely a speck of dust on the cheeks of history; that the existence of mankind is nothing compared to the existence of the Danube, and that this river is nothing with regard to the continued existence of our planet. In that context, the three days from January 21 to 24, 1942 on the Novi Sad beach are nothing when compared to the flow of the Danube from the black forests of Schwarzwald to the Black Sea. All this is equally indescribable as is the movement of poplar leaves, as are people who kill other people.



Unfortunately during the summers of forty four and forty five I was unable to come to the Štrand in Novi Sad. Not because I was disturbed by the mass murder. I was prevented by other reasons. During the year of forty four I was in Auschwitz and Buchenwald. In the summer of forty five I was waiting to return home on the banks of another river, named Elba, which flowed in the opposite direction, namely from the south to the north, in search of the estuary of another sea. The Russians and Americans had met at that river, and I had to wait patiently until they came to an agreement about which side would be responsible for my transport to my homeland. I waited until the autumn.

After returning from the concentration camp, I enrolled in a technical secondary school, and in the summer of forty six once again I swam in the Danube in Novi Sad, walked upstream along the sandy beach, and then let the water carry me back; I was carefree. The glittering of sunrays on the back of the grey Danube, sluggish

during the summer, was the same as it always was. The same as always. I no longer built sand castles and I didn't think about the massacre, not even about my dead parents. I was preparing myself for more joyful tales. Young girls in minuscule bathing suits were sunbathing on the sand. Girls who looked like that had surely lain on the sands of previous summers as well, but I never used to notice them before. Now, they were resting in front of me, motionless but very alive.

A monument was erected on the bank of the Danube made by the sculptor Jovan Soldatović. It represents three bronze emaciated figures holding hands – a man, a woman and a child. Plaques in Serbian and Hebrew. Every year commemorations are organized on that very spot, but people cannot come to an agreement regarding a joint ceremony. The Serbian Orthodox Church insists on its own religious service; descendants of the communists want to give their speeches, and not listen to priests. The Jews, who mourn their dead, participate in both commemorations. At the end of the ceremonies wreaths and flowers are thrown into the river. The Danube stoically endures all this.

During the past half-century I have crossed the Danube bridges in Novi Sad dozens of times by car or train, not always thinking about the raid in 1942. Not always, but sometimes I did.

Once I went to Novi Sad with my son and told him everything that had happened and showed him where it had happened, and he simply said: "Aha!" Should he have said anything more?

As said by Tucholsky: "A word eludes me."

Translated into English:

**Mirjana Ivanji** and **Dragana Rajić**

## Fleeting Happiness of the Swabians from the Danube Region

My grandfather Michael Herdt was born in 1880 in Futog, a municipality which has long been a part of Novi Sad, the capital of the Province, which was then called Neusatz, and he attended school for only six years but nevertheless, spoke five languages. He was poor by birth, but as a skilled hatter he became the owner of the largest department store in south Bačka, and he invested his fortune, as was the tradition of his farmer ancestors, in land and vineyards. He was a loyal subject of the Hapsburg Empire, and when the royal-imperial monarchy collapsed in 1918, he became a loyal subject of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes.

His first earnings were in Austrian koruna and heller, but the currency of his business success was the Yugoslavian dinar. When in 1944 he fled, along with hundreds of thousands of Danube Swabians, from the advancing partisan units, he took with him a suitcase filled with money, Hungarian pengo. When German forces, the Wehrmacht, attacked Yugoslavia, Bačka was given to Hungarian allies of the Third Reich, and their occupation also included the monetary policy.

He still had his suitcase when he finally arrived, after wandering for a long time, in a Bavarian village called Garching on the Alz River. Several thousand refugees, Danube Swabians, transformed the village into



a small town developing it according to the urban development plans of their abandoned Pannonian settlements: dusty streets straight as an arrow laid out as on a chess-board; all the houses so exactly alike that they could easily be confused one with another, and each with a living room where furniture was protected by covers and which were never actually used but rather served for display; gardens between the houses where every piece of land was extensively used to grow beans, tomatoes and lettuce.

I grew up in Salzburg some fifty kilometres away, and when, as a child, I and my brothers had to visit our grandparents in Garching, to me the village seemed boring as a desert, which always made me feel sad. At that time all Swabian women from the Danube region and in Germany dressed alike; they wore those black, wide skirts, and not one of them was ever tempted to accept anything modern or go out into the street without a scarf on her head. The only thing in that inconsolable small village that remained exiting was my grandfather's suitcase, when he would allow us to take it out from under the bed, open it and rummage through its contents: we would throw around bunches of those pengo bills which testified to the insignificance of every human aspiration. My grandfather had left all his wealth in Bačka, while everything that he had taken with him during his escape, the suitcase with the money, no longer had any value whatsoever. Father, as we called our grandfather in Hungarian, would just sit by the window, inconsolably staring off into the distance, and during the remaining twenty years of his life, he remained persistently silent.

## **Straight to the distant “Hungarian land”**

There are many unconfirmed theories about the identity of the Swabians, how they came to the Balkans and why their history was irreversibly abolished after 200 years. The first theory is expressed in the name itself. Swabians from the Danube region are not actually Swabians at all, or to be more precise: Swabians were only a minor part of a group that was given the common name Danube Swabians just prior to its historical demise in the 20th century. They were Franks, Pfalzens, Hessians, Argovians, Alsatians, Lorrainians, Luxembourgers, Thuringians and immigrants from many Austrian provinces, who in the late 17th century came to Southeast Europe in several large waves, which were later termed the “Invasions of the Swabians”. They arrived in regions abandoned to rotting corpses, the bodies of those who had been killed, of generations murdered in the seemingly endless series of battles fought between the Ottoman and Hapsburg empires. After the imperial army under the command of Prince Eugene of Savoy victoriously succeeded in expelling the Ottomans from central Europe, the Hapsburg administration began colonizing the land that had been abandoned with great bureaucratic agility; land which, according to present day state categories belonged to southern Hungary, eastern Croatia and vast parts of Serbia and Romania, but which was at that time part of the Danubian Monarchy.

For such extensive colonization people were needed, large numbers of people who were willing to leave their homeland. Later on the German national mythology presented them as heroic knights on the East, who wanted to bring German culture and morals to the soil of Southeast Europe, as armed farmers-frontiersmen, as a German barricade that defended



the West from the eternal Islamic threat. But who were they actually, these people who embarked on a difficult journey to the Pannonian Basin, a journey that would bring death to many of them, either when the overloaded vessels, the so-called Ulm boxes, capsized in the rapids of the Danube, or when they ran out of food during the first cold winter, or when they died from diseases?

Only those who could find no other way to escape from poverty and oppression in their native countries undertook this journey. Those who in massive processions embarked on the journey to distant “Hungarian lands” had suffered under the highhandedness of the feudal lords, under the dukes, who would not grant them freedom of religion and political codetermination; many of them were people who were forced to stray from their path, craftsmen who had to work as hired hands, farmers’ sons who had inherited nothing.... They did not leave their towns and villages because of ideological blindness or a yearning for adventure, not for these reasons; they left because they hoped to find the prosperity and freedom which they did not have in their old homeland, in a land where they would be strangers at first, but would in time and with hard work become entitled to call their fatherland.

### **Imported nationalism**

In around 1900, when the different emigrant groups found their common identity as “Danube Swabians” and were considered the “youngest German tribe”, there were about 1.5 million of them. Until 1918 they were all citizens and subjects of the Danubian Monarchy, whose structure in general was supranational regardless of its imperfection and regardless of numerous conflicts. Some of the Swabians in the




Danube region lived right on the banks of the Danube, while others at a certain distance from the river, but always side by side with other nations, Hungarians, Croats, Serbs, Romanians, Jews, Roma and with half a dozen smaller nationalities. It is not our intention to portray the cohabitation of so many nationalities as a peaceful idyll of different peoples, but until the 20th century there was no mention of national conflicts in any historical records; they probably lived next to each other, not together, but the welfare of all was inextricably linked with the wellbeing of each individual among them.

The historical milieu was marked by the coexistence of different peoples and a carefully calibrated equilibrium in all aspects even in everyday life, within small and big businesses, in the villages, in the towns, between farmers and merchants; it was important not to disturb this equilibrium, because to do so would endanger the safety of every individual. In fact the daily encounters of nationalities gradually created some sort of common “identity” and all inhabitants of Slavonia, Srem, Bačka and Banat – to mention only these territories with Danube Swabians – contributed to this process. As often happens in history, these common characteristics were discovered and celebrated only when their foundations ceased to exist. Only after these multinational neighborhoods had been brutally wiped out did Serbs, Hungarians, Romanians and Danube Swabians begin idealizing their “Pannonian heritage” which had transcended the borders of nationalities, through literature and the recollections of the people.

Nationalism had to be imported, because there are very few regions in Europe where it was as utterly inappropriate as in this one, the riches of which were based exactly on cultural diversity. The first step came



after 1866, when the structure of the state changed based on the “Austro-Hungarian settlement”, by which the eastern part of the Danubian Monarchy was given to Hungary – or more precisely to Hungarian tycoons. National pressure, now exerted by the leading nation, was just as great as the temptation to adapt to that lifestyle as early as the 19th century, countless educated, higher class Danube Swabians adopted Hungarian culture and language – they simply became Hungarians, which was manifested also in the Hungarization of surnames.



The changing of national identity is a “natural” occurrence (if one may even use that term for historical events) which has been repeated a million-times-over during every epoch. However, pressure from a leading nation, which is necessary for it to feel that it is right, necessarily provokes counter-pressure from other nations; thus, following the Hungarian example, other Pannonians gradually discovered their affiliation to specific nations. After 1918 their region was divided by the borders of three states, and in each of them, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Romania, there were many former citizens of a supranational empire, who now became members of national minorities. A tenacious conflict of nationalities quickly ensued regarding every single school; it continued even when it became “a battle for the nation” with a fascist connotation.

### **Collective suspicion**

Why did my grandfather, who had achieved something in his life because as a true child of the Danube, that supranational river, he could conduct his business in five languages; why did my grandfather, who had been equally respected by Serbs, Hungarians, Romanians, flee from the country in his old age?



Couldn't he have stayed since he was not a Nazi and personally had done nothing wrong?

After the attack of the German army, after the bombardment of Belgrade, Nazi special units left behind a terrible bloody trail in the Balkans. Genocide against the Jews was organized with deadly efficiency. Serbs were collectively suspected of being communists and supporting the partisans, and the greater the military achievements of the partisans, the greater the random retaliation of the SS against the civilian population. There were collaborators with the occupying forces among the Danube Swabians; however, documents which were accepted as genuine by Serbian historians a few years ago, show that this was more a matter of the Nazi alignment of the political elite, than the adoption of fascist ideology by the national group.



Regardless, when it became evident that the Third Reich was going to be defeated, a verdict was rendered regarding the Danube Swabians. They were characterized as a criminal minority that had lost its right to remain in the socialist, federative Yugoslavia. Consequently the Danube Swabians took flight when the partisans began advancing toward the villages and towns of Bačka and Banat. Their panic was justified, because those that remained faced a life of hardship because no distinction was made between criminals, collaborators, those who quietly resisted or those who were members of the resistance. All of them including children and the elderly were sent to camps, where many thousands died of hunger and exhaustion, and those who survived, were subsequently expelled from the country without any of their belongings.

In Romania, which at the beginning of the war sided with Germany, things were different; there was no ethnic cleansing, as in Yugoslavia, however, the life

of Swabians from Banat was also quite tough. During the Stalinist trials thousands of them were sentenced to detrimental forced labour, while others, as representatives of the urban intelligentsia, faced long prison sentences. As soon as they got the chance, hundreds of thousands left the country in the late 60s. In Hungary anyone who wanted to remain in the country could do so under the condition that they were prepared to change their national affiliation and gratefully enjoy the quiet happiness of an obedient proletarian among other obedient proletarians.



### **Global Village**

They arrived from different parts of the world and by working hard contributed to the transformation of an abandoned area into one of the richer regions of Europe. After more than 200 years they were scattered in all directions. As always, when a multiethnic region is nationally cleansed, this inflicts harm also on those who probably consider themselves victorious and beneficial. Already in Tito's time, the area that was now called Voivodina and was granted special autonomy and the former granary of the Balkans, was forced to import wheat. The once thriving villages of the Danube Swabians were populated by Montenegrins and Macedonians who, as highlanders, did not know how to use the agrarian culture of the Swabians thus allowing these riches to perish.

Nowadays descendants of Swabians from the Danube region can be found in almost all corners of the world, in Chicago and Toronto, in Australia, Brazil, Argentina, France and, naturally, in Germany and Austria. Hard working, as they always were, they mainly succeeded in adapting to the conditions that existed wherever they had been exiled to. Here and there they still fostered their traditions in various associations

and remembered their homeland; the homeland from which they were unjustifiably driven away. Social life is especially well organized in the USA, and there are numerous *Communities* on the Internet where descendants of Danube Swabians communicate in English and exchange information about the countries from which their ancestors came to Banat, and to which countries they fled in 1945. Entire villages with all their streets, cemeteries and cadastral data have been rebuilt as a virtual homeland thanks to genealogical research; however their concrete language, that regional dialect with all its specific facets, the dark tone, which as a child I could still hear in the speech of many Danube Swabians, has begun to disappear forever.



Translated into English:

**Mirjana Ivanji** and **Dragana Rajić**

## From the Miljacka to the Danube

In one of the most famous – and the best – books about the Danube, Claudio Magris refers to Bosnia (and Sarajevo) in two places (at least). Talking about photographs of the Sarajevo assassination, Magris states that it was very similar to the one in Dallas (the assassination of Kennedy) and adds the following: “in those moments, between the first and second photograph, the bullets of Europe’s suicide were shot – and maybe, for the meandering paths of the ingenuity of reason, these bullets which inflicted mortal wounds, also indicated the beginning of the liberation of Asian and African countries, which might otherwise still be ruled and exploited by old European powers, had they remained united”. Further on, having followed the Danube to Bratislava, Magris remembers the Slovak poet Novomesky and one of his verses about a graveyard. Magris writes (about Slovak graveyards): “In many villages, among the mountains, graveyards have no fences, or have fences which are unnoticeable, which are open and extend into grassy meadows, and follow the roads, like in Matiasovce, towards the border with Poland; or they are located at the entrance of the village, like gardens in front of houses. This epic familiarity with death – which can also be found in Muslim graves in Bosnia, where they are peacefully located in the backyards of family houses, but which our world strives neurotically to repel – carries within itself

a certain justice, represents a sense of relationship between individuals and generations, the land, nature, the elements that compose it, and the laws which govern their combining and decomposition.”

Through most of the twentieth century Bosnia and Herzegovina was part of Yugoslavia, first the Kingdom, and then the Socialist Federation. One of the identity markers of Yugoslavia was its triple affiliation with large civilization complexes: the Balkans, the Mediterranean and Central Europe. The Balkan complex is the most dominant, but also the only one on a global scale to represent a negative stereotype. However, from a wider point of view, the only affiliation which remains for Bosnia and Herzegovina after the disintegration of Yugoslavia is the affiliation with the Balkans, while its ties with the Mediterranean and Central Europe are less known.

Symbolically the strongest link Yugoslavia had with the Mediterranean was the Adriatic Sea, and with Central Europe – the Danube. Even though Bosnia and Herzegovina has a coastline on the Adriatic Sea slightly over twenty kilometres long at the town of Neum, its affiliation to the Mediterranean from a global perception is much less recognizable than in the case of Montenegro, Slovenia, and especially Croatia. Furthermore, the Danube flows through Croatia and Serbia, thus the link these two countries have with Central Europe is obvious, while this is not the case with Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, in addition to being part of the Balkans and the Mediterranean, Bosnia and Herzegovina is also affiliated to Central Europe and is strongly linked with the Danube.

The two quoted paragraphs from Magris’ book *The Danube* are multi-symbolical in this respect. In the historical and cultural sense, the strongest link Bosnia and Herzegovina has with Central Europe is the forty-year period in its history during which it was part of



the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1878-1918), except that during the first three of those four decades it was under occupation, and only in the last decade Bosnia and Herzegovina annexed was by Austro-Hungary, and thus became part of the empire not only *de facto*, but *de iure* as well. The assassination in Sarajevo marked the beginning of the end not only of Bosnia and Herzegovina's affiliation with Austro-Hungary, but also of the Austro-Hungarian Empire as such.

Magris also refers to Bosnian Muslim graveyards. Two to three centuries before Austro-Hungary occupied Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bosnian Muslims were fighting on the side of the Ottoman Empire, which conducted numerous campaigns toward Central Europe, toward the Danube, and even besieged Vienna on several occasions. In this sense, the vicinity of the Danube exists in the collective memory, in folk songs, oral narrations and so on.

### **Where does it flow?**

My first personal, completely private and slightly sentimental idea regarding the link between Bosnia and the Danube, originates as far back as my early childhood. The river Lašva flows through Travnik, my hometown. Somewhere towards the middle of the way between Travnik and Sarajevo, the Lašva flows into the river Bosna. As a boy I frequently travelled to Sarajevo with my parents. The confluence of the Lašva and the Bosna is immediately next to the road and it can be seen quite well through a car window. I think I was about four or five years old, I still didn't go to school, when I began asking my parents: if the Lašva flows into the Bosna, what happens with the Bosna, where does it flow? The answer was: into the Sava River. And what happens to the Sava River? It flows into the river Danube. And what happens to the Danube? Well, it flows into the Black Sea.

At that time, naturally, I didn't know the fine distinction that exists in the French language, which differentiates a river that flows into another river and a river that flows into a sea, the first one being a *riviere*, and the latter a *fleuve*, however it was clear to me that the Danube is somehow *older* and *more important* than the other rivers, since it flows into the sea; the Danube, by flowing into the sea, carries into it also the waters of Lašva, and the waters of Bosna, and the waters of the Sava and other mighty rivers. For example, the river Miljacka flows through Sarajevo and when it was explained to me while I was a boy that it also flows into the Bosna, it was immediately clear to me that the Miljacka also ends up in the Danube.



We went to Sarajevo several times each year and to the seaside only once, during the summer. The seaside, during my Yugoslavian childhood, meant the Adriatic Sea, and the road would take us through the small towns of Donji Vakuf and Bugojno through which flowed the river Vrbas. To my question where does the Vrbas flow, the answer was: the Sava River, and I knew – it also ended up in the Danube.

On the maps of Bosnia and Herzegovina, four somewhat meandering blue *verticals* end up in one also fairly meandering blue *horizontal*. The four *verticals* (going from west to east) are the rivers Una, Vrbas, Bosna and Drina, while the *horizontal* is the Sava River. The writer Branko Ćopić, born somewhere between the rivers Una and Vrbas, wrote a wonderful poem entitled *Bosnian racers*:

*Every day, whether clear or murky,  
through my Bosnia a race is run.  
Four meandering tracks,  
a racer on each one. Who will finish first?*

*On the first track is a girl called Una,  
forever young, renowned from the uprisings,  
an adorned lass from Martin-Brod,  
her shining jewels, the green water.*

*She took a running start from the Lika cliffs,  
from the steep rocks of the Štrbac rapids.*

*Along the other track runs stridently  
a joyful lad, fiercely and loudly,  
the proud Vrbas, with his easy stride,  
mountain river Vrbas, freezing water,  
under its force the ravine cracks,  
golden grains on his bed glitter.*

*On the third track blazes under the sun  
the gurgling Bosna from Sarajevo,  
her eyes flashing, morning dew,  
the foam of forest green her hair.*

*She meanders, dances, rushes down the slopes,  
restless, clear and proud.*

*On the last track crumbling all barriers  
a dark highland girl,  
from a rocky landscape, murky distances,  
with eternal sadness, freezing cold Drina.*

*Descending with a roar, not singing at all,  
frantically rushing through fields.*

*At the final destination, in the blue mornings,  
sleepy Sava greets the racers.*

In a poetic way, in a poem which is usually considered a children's poem, the poet uses four strings to connect Bosnia (the country) with Sava (the river), and thus with the Danube. Those four Bosnian rivers are elegantly



and nicely *anthropomorphized* by Branko Ćopić. In our language, Una, Bosna and Drina are of the female gender, which is why they are *lasses* in Ćopić's poem, while Vrbas is a male, and is therefore a *lad*. And not only that; some of their geographical features Ćopić wittily transforms into character traits. From the far west to the far east of Bosnia and Herzegovina, from the river Una, whose flow partly represents the border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, to the river Drina, which separates Bosnia and Herzegovina from Serbia, all these *waters* end up in the Danube (via the Sava River).



### **The perspective of geography**

From a childhood perspective, from the perspective of first impressions and the discovery of the world, this link is symbolic and metaphysical at the same time. Later on some new connections are discovered, but again, in some way or another, they all *derive* from the first one.

From the perspective of geography and the unusual *two-part* name of the country, the easiest way for us to recognize the difference between Bosnia and Herzegovina, and find out where Bosnia finishes and Herzegovina begins, is with the aid of the Danube. Because, in addition to the four blue *verticals* which end up in the Sava River, there is also another blue *vertical* which doesn't flow from the south to the north, but rather from the north to the south, and which doesn't end up in the Sava (or the Danube) but rather in the Adriatic Sea, and which, therefore, is not a *riviere*, but a *fleuve*, the only (Bosnian) Herzegovinian *fleuve* – the Neretva. The River Neretva is not mentioned in Ćopić's *Bosnian racers* because it is a *Herzegovinian racer*. Bosnian rivers (via the Sava and the Danube) belong to the Black Sea basin, and the Herzegovinian ones to the Adriatic basin. The difference is indicative, because, even though both Bosnia and

Herzegovina are equally Balkan, Bosnia is more Central European, while Herzegovina is more Mediterranean.

Historically speaking, the original name of the entire area known today as Bosnia and Herzegovina was Bosnia. Byzantine emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus mentioned it for the first time in his book *De administrando imperio*. In it he called Bosnia *the inner country*, in a technical sense, naturally, and from the perspective of his own empire, where at that time it was not a *peripheral* province, but rather an *inner* one. (The southern part of Bosnia, closer to the Mediterranean Sea, was not given the name Herzegovina until the fifteenth century when its ruler Stjepan Vukčić Kosača proclaimed himself *Herceg* (Herzog, Duke), and named his country *Herceg's land* (Duke's land) – Herzegovina; the name of the title itself – *Herceg* – originated, naturally, somewhere in the Danube valley.)

By some historical coincidence – or irony – during its existence Bosnia was alternately an *inner* and a *peripheral* country. At the time of the rise of the Ottoman Empire, while the Turks besieged Vienna on several occasions, and while they ruled over numerous towns on the Danube from Budapest and Belgrade and further on to the east, Bosnia was an *inner* country. After the signing of the peace treaty in Sremski Karlovci – again on the Danube! – Bosnia became a *peripheral* country. This peripheral status of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the western outskirts of the Ottoman Empire lasted for nearly two hundred years, until 1878 when this status changed, but remained *peripheral*. Namely, Bosnia and Herzegovina became a *peripheral country* of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, on its eastern fringes, and remained as such until the end of World War I and the downfall of Austro-Hungary. Within the borders of Yugoslavia – both the Kingdom and the Socialist Federation – Bosnia



once again became a traditional *inner* country. This can best be illustrated if one compares it with the other five republics of the Yugoslavian Socialist Federation. Slovenia bordered with Austria, Italy and Hungary; Croatia with Hungary; Serbia with Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Albania; Montenegro with Albania; Macedonia with Albania, Bulgaria and Greece; Bosnia and Herzegovina was the only one of the Yugoslavian republics with no external borders; Bosnia and Herzegovina was the only *inner* Yugoslavian country.

With the disintegration of Yugoslavia, former administrative borders became state borders, thus nowadays Bosnia and Herzegovina borders with three independent states: Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro. However, in psychological terms, a sensation of innerness, enclosure and claustrophobia still exists. As a result of their shared history, these three countries are not considered as foreign by common people in their everyday lives; thus the small part of the Adriatic coast at the town of Neum and a port on the Sava River – at the town of Brčko – are often regarded as the only Bosnian-Herzegovinian links with the distant world.



### **The disintegration of Yugoslavia**

Certainly, the disintegration of Yugoslavia was not peaceful, it was accompanied by a bloody civil war, and its undoubtedly bloodiest episode took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina. All three neighboring states participated in that war (truth be told, during the war Serbia and Montenegro were parts of the same state). Between 1992 and 1995, during the war, the issue of accessing the Adriatic Sea and the port in Brčko, was one of the key topics of all peace initiatives and negotiations. This is especially true for Brčko, a port on the Sava River, the most direct Bosnian link with the Danube. When after numerous

failed peace conferences, a round of peace talks finally began in Dayton in the American federal state of Ohio, all disputable issues were resolved with relative ease, except the issue of Brčko. Because of Brčko, *the most Danubian* Bosnian town, the entire process nearly failed. Finally, *pax americana* was applied in the case of Brčko. Namely, according to the Dayton agreement Bosnia and Herzegovina was formally-administratively divided into two parts: the Federation and the Republica Srpska. The town of Brčko was not vested with either side, but rather was proclaimed a district (DC), probably modelled after Washington.

These days, Brčko, *the most Danubian* Bosnian town, is the only town that primarily belongs to Bosnia and Herzegovina, without being part of either of the ethnically defined entities. This is no accident and it has everything to do with the Danube. Namely, Brčko is one of the gates of Bosnia and Herzegovina, one of the spots where innerness, enclosure and claustrophobia disappear. The great water makes this possible. Brčko is the westernmost Bosnian-Herzegovinian town on the Sava River, the largest Yugoslavian tributary of the Danube, our largest *Danubian* town, and it is therefore logical for it to be exactly a town as it is, a town devoid of provincial restraints. Nowadays books are being written about Brčko, where it is defined as a *free town in the Balkans*, similar somewhat to Trieste or Gdansk during certain periods of their history. (To underline the coincidence: Claudio Magris, the author of the quoted book about the Danube, is a resident of Trieste.)

### **The past and the future**

At the same time, Brčko symbolizes both the past and the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It symbolizes the war and its termination, but also a projection of

a country with closer links to the world than the Bosnia and Herzegovina of today. Those links go in various directions, but one of the most important is the European and Danubian. Danube is a European river somewhat paradigmatically, and it can be said that the location of Bosnia and Herzegovina vis-à-vis this river confirms the verse in a poem by Hamza Humo, a poet from Mostar, which says that Bosnia is “a country alongside Europe”

But let's return to the beginning. Today, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, exactly one hundred years since the eve of the Sarajevo assassination and World War I, what is it that connects Bosnia to the Danube? Bosnia and Herzegovina is no longer part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, as it was for forty years, it is not part of Yugoslavia as it was for seventy years, more-or-less; it (still) isn't part of the European Union; and the Danube is a significant landmark in all three of these *unions*. However, administration and bureaucracy often go in one direction while life goes in the other. Many things connect Bosnia and Herzegovina with towns on the Danube, towns whose names (just like the name of Brčko) begin with a *B*: Bratislava, Budapest, Belgrade. Bosnian tourists and students go to these towns; people from these towns come to Bosnia. There are also similarities in urban landscapes: the same street signs, the same bank names, clothing stores, *brands*, as they are called. When travellers who are familiar with Central Europe come to Sarajevo, they often feel like they are in a Danubian town.

In one of his most famous sayings – in addition to the saying in which *war is father to everything, king to everything* – Heraclitus states that it is not possible to step twice into the same river. I can no longer look at the Bosnian rivers which I most frequently watch, the Miljacka and Lašva, in the same way as I looked at



them when I was a child, when I thought that their every drop ends up in the Danube, imagining that maybe the paper boat I was going to make and lower into the Lašva and Miljacka, would finally sail into the Danube. I can no longer do that, but maybe some other children, some new kids, can. They gaze at the rivers for the first time, diving into the river of the world for the first time. Times are different and the world is different than it was thirty years ago when I asked myself the first childish metaphysic questions. A lot has changed: governmental systems and states, on one side, while on the other side the world has become digitalized as never before. Then again, the geography has remained the same, rivers flow into the same rivers. And children are also the same in the tender earliest years of their life, prone to asking questions, first and last.

When I see small boys or girls walking by the river with their parents, I know that, sooner or later, they will ask what happens to the river, where does it flow to. And this is how the Danube will enter into those children's lives, in their early childhood, first as a word, powerful, dense and violent. When those children desire to see what that Danube looks like, they will probably not see it for the first time on a photograph or on the pages of a book, but on a computer monitor or a mobile phone display. And presumably, before long, the road will take them to some Danubian town where they will actually see the Danube which until then they knew only by its name, only by its reputation.

It's a strange fact; I know from personal experience that it is easier to remember your childhood outside your homeland, outside the place or town where you grew up. Nowadays I remember my childhood more often when I look at the Danube, than when I look at the Lašva or Miljacka. I remember how I used to gaze at the

waves, vortexes and rapids, into the river bed and cascades, into the swift, loud water which splashes as it hits the rocks, and how I used to ask what happens to that vast water, with those numerous drops. When you're a child you think that every question has an answer and you are happy when you find one. And the answer to this question is – the Danube, all that vast water and all those numerous drops end up in the Danube.

I think about that, and remember it today as I look at the Danube. I think of the children in Bosnia who play, walk and sit along the rivers Lašva, Miljack, Una, Sana, Pliva, Vrbanja, Vrbas, Bosna, Drina and Sava, and who wonder what happens to all that abundant water, where it ends up. And the answer is the same as it always was and always will be: in the Danube.

Everything begins from that Bosnian link with the Danube. Politics, economics, art – all that comes later.


Translated into English:

**Mirjana Ivanji** and **Dragana Rajić**



## Vukovar and the Serbs

### 1.



My deepest recollections, images that exist for themselves, are connected to the water. They float in my memory, without context, plucked out from some ancient, forgotten daily lives. I am four years old. I'm standing on a ship deck in the port of Belgrade. My father, an officer of the Yugoslavian navy, is beside me. The last time I saw that vessel, the *Sava* monitor, which was part of the war indemnity received by Yugoslavia after World War II, was at the beginning of the 90s at a ship graveyard on a bayou of the Danube on the New Belgrade bank.

I was walking with my son who was six years old at the time, along our usual route, from the Museum of Modern Arts to Zemun. When we stepped down from the path to walk around a wire fence in a wide circle, we met a guard who allowed us to continue our journey along the bank, through the military zone and past anchored ships. We read their names out loud. Suddenly, in this mass of rusty metal, I saw the name: *Sava* written on one of the bows. For a moment I could see a river monitor gliding down the Danube. I evoked the names of all the ports visited by my father during his long absences in the 50s of the previous century: Kladovo, Smederevo, Pančevo, Novi Sad, Apatin, and Vukovar.

The last town from this list no longer exists. The pictures of Vukovar in ruins from newspapers and the



TV screen are still fresh in my memory, the horror on the frozen faces of those who survived the three-month siege by the Yugoslav army and Serbian paramilitary units. For me, the verb to *liberate* and the adjective *liberated* were two of the least convincing, and two of the most absurd words in texts which after the fall of Vukovar were used to maintain the tone of Serbian war propaganda.

What was liberated? Who was it liberated from? Who were the liberators? Who were the liberated?

I speak from the point of view of someone who was born and who grew up in Yugoslavia. Someone who was never a member of the Communist Party. In fact, my entire engagement, the “oppositionism” of my youth, was limited to ironic comments regarding Tito’s regime and the socialist block. Nonetheless, with a Yugoslavian passport one could travel without visas both to the West and to the East. To some extent we experienced both sides of the medal.

In the late 50s of the past century my father substituted the Danube with for the Adriatic Sea. Our family moved from Belgrade to Pula. When as child I began talking I spoke Serbian, and in school I studied in Croatian. In fact, it was one language, Serbo-Croatian or Croato-Serbian.

For me, the disintegration of Yugoslavia meant much more the demarcation of territory. People, at least most of them, are not cattle which can be forced into corals according to someone’s will. Existence is much more than nations, anthems, flags and passports. From the perspective of those who perished in Vukovar, it would be distasteful for me to speak about all the breakdowns I went through at that time. There were three sides during all those years: two which were at war, and one, allegedly,



neutral –the International Community. I chose no man's land. And this is my viewpoint in this text as well.

## 2.

Today, based on the experience I gathered over time, I know how madness begins. How the media precursor functions as it prepares the chaos that will ensue. How the dogs of war prepare the terrain for future conflicts, and how only a trail of money remains after all the big words uttered by populist leaders, after the myths of the glorious past and nationalist ideologies. It was always like this, at all times and in all wars. It is always said that one side is fighting, while the other is killing.

Vukovar was the crime which determined the ill fate of Serbian politics during the war in Croatia. The catastrophically low response of draftees to the call for military service in the Yugoslavian National Army (JNA) speaks volumes in favour of the opinion that the siege of Vukovar did not induce patriotic feelings among a large percentage of Serbian citizens. On the contrary, in some Belgrade municipalities the response barely reached twenty percent. However, there were enough volunteers deployed in paramilitary units. Various *eagles*, *tigers*, *panthers* and other beasts, many of which had been released from prison, prowled the Vukovar battlefield. And these were not self-organized bands of renegades; they represented part of the strategy of Serbian war politics. (Naturally, all warring parties during the wars in Croatia and Bosnia engaged the “services” of their alleged paramilitary units.)

What does Vukovar represent today on the Serbian side?

For a small part of the population it is a place of shame. For another, also minor part, it is a place where the Serbian army, at that time still called Yugoslavian,

was victorious. For most, it is a sensation they flee from. Even after two decades this issue hasn't been properly dealt with, thus there is no catharsis.

The only crime that remains unpunished is the one committed under a flag.

Europe and the UN clearly showed the true face of their "neutrality". Srebrenica is the peak of the International Community's hypocrisy and neutrality.

The case of Mile Dedaković the Hawk, a hero from Vukovar who is now very ill and forgotten, is currently in the spotlight in Croatia. He was among the people who defended Vukovar until he realized that the Croatian military leadership had decided to sacrifice the town. The defenders of Vukovar were lied to until the very end. Mile Dedaković the Hawk was much respected among the true defenders who believed to the last moment that the Croatian military leadership would send help. But they ended up either as a pile of meat, or if they did survive, with serious psychological problems. After several public appearances, when he raised the touchy issue of the Vukovar sacrifice, he was allegedly "brought to his senses" by beatings and ended up in hospital after which he fell silent for quite a long time. He was granted a large pension and was awarded a National hero medal. Today he is an ill and disappointed man, once again in the spotlight of Croatian media.

Vukovar is a blind spot, just like Srebrenica, a place of shame for mankind. In the name of what freedom are such crimes committed? The question is rhetorical, worn from use. The responses are as well.

The thing I would like to know is what an individual can do when madness begins?

I remember an acquaintance, an urban guy, a twenty-year-old musician, from Belgrade who, at the time of the Vukovar siege, was taken from his apartment



during the night and sent to the battlefield the very next day. When I met him in the street about a year later, I didn't recognize him immediately. At first I thought he was seriously ill. He just uttered through his teeth something like: *I was there*. It took me several minutes to understand what *there* meant.

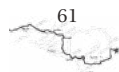
For Croatia *there* is a symbol of suffering during the Homeland War. It also represents one of the most important sanctities of modern Croatian history. The meaning of Vukovar for Serbia, and whether it will mean anything in the near future to generations which hadn't even been born at that time, can best be seen in the way Vukovar – the siege or liberation, whichever - is presented in history school books. A short glance at the history curriculum reveals that ten years ago there was no mention of Vukovar. Three years later history textbooks for the eighth grade contain the following text: "Even the JNA, as the federal army, contributed to the destruction of many towns and the suffering of numerous civilians, mainly during the liberation of its own military barracks and soldiers. The consequences of these battles were catastrophic for the entire population, regardless of nationality and religion. The pogrom of civilians, Serbs, Croats and Muslims, left many mass graves behind". Two years ago Vukovar was finally mentioned in history textbooks for the eighth grade: "The new phase of the war was marked by mass attacks against the JNA by Croatian paramilitary units, the siege of military barracks and the call issued to Croatian officers and soldiers to place themselves at the disposal of Croatia. Fierce battles were fought in Vukovar. After the international recognition of Croatia, headed by the Vatican and Germany, at the beginning of 1992 the JNA withdrew from Croatian territory"



Nothing else. There is not a single photograph, nor has anything been mentioned about what really happened in Vukovar. All textbooks contain Milošević's interpretation of the causes and events during the war.

And what does Vukovar represent in Europe nowadays after more than two decades? A subway station in Paris? Even that station no longer exists; at least I couldn't find it on Wikipedia. I remember well when, during the siege of Vukovar, the French public changed the name of a Parisian subway station to Vukovar.

Vukovar remains in the shadows of history. Not much is said about it even in Croatia, in spite of the fact that it represents the strongest symbol of suffering during the Homeland War. During three months of battles in the autumn of 1991, thousands of innocent people died in Vukovar (the Croatian side mentions 4000 civilians killed). The exact number of killed soldiers on both sides has never been determined.



### 3.

Water remembers. The endless archive of water is indestructible. The superiority of structure. The human body is an aquarium. Everything that has ever existed anywhere remains recorded forever. Water absorbs information. It has a memory and remembers everything that surrounds it: concrete residential complexes, forests, fields, motorways, caves, noisy stadiums, the shouting of merchants in the markets, street musicians, and the freezing calmness of glaciers.

The quiet and passive power of water is maybe the greatest power we know, because it can soften the strongest rock, it always finds a way towards its estuary. When forced to go subterranean, as is the case in karst soil, it becomes an underground river. But it still remembers.

This is the moral of Mother Nature. Vukovar is a symbol of the senselessness of human suffering. The Danube – a river that doesn't flow in a straight line through a plane but rather meanders and spills over into bayous, could be called an intelligent river of pluralism – a word which is accepted on both banks with disapproval.

From the moment Croatia became an independent state, a problem regarding the determination of the border arose. For 20 years the governments of Serbia and Croatia have not managed to come to an agreement about the location of the boundary between the two countries. While Serbia argues that the border should pass along the middle of the Danube, as stipulated by International Law, Croatia refers to the cadastral map from 1878.

The Danube meanders. This is contrary to the current wishes of map-makers on both sides. Serbian and Croatian commissions are now tasked with finding a solution to the problem of the meandering of the Danube, because suddenly territories began blending. Peasant farms suddenly appeared in the neighbouring country. In addition, an entire street along the quay in the town of Apatin could appear overnight in Croatia. The border would curve between weekend cottages. An Orthodox temple would “float” onto Croatian territory. A hospital that treats children with special needs is a specific case, because it would have to be divided into two parts.

Nonetheless, a border must be determined. On land, in the air, in the water. In the people.

The Danube meanders. So does life.

A meander, the favourite decorative motif in Greek art, is actually a symbolized labyrinth. Anyone who finds an exit from a labyrinth uncovers their own



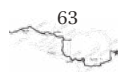
essence. This was allegedly written at the entrance to the Delphi temple where Pythia sat and predicted destinies.

#### 4.

The recent verdicts of the Hague Tribunal, which exonerated Croatian generals Gotovina and Markač, as well as the leader of the KLA Haradinaj, for crimes committed during the *Storm* military operation of the Croatian army, and in Kosovo after the NATO intervention in 1999, have halted for now the process of reconciliation among the nations of former Yugoslavia. At the same time, the results of such verdicts represent a strong boost to all forms of radicalism, especially in Serbia. The score still hasn't been settled; instead an awful perpetuity in the Balkans is being indefinitely prolonged. The exit from the labyrinth is still out of sight.

For the past quarter of a century, the International Community has made too many wrong moves for them to be catalogued as accidental mistakes. Instead, one could say that maybe it was part of a strategy? Maybe a controlled dump on its fringes, where accounts could be settled, suits Europe's needs.

Translated into English:  
**Mirjana Ivanji** and **Dragana Rajić**



## Vukovar, Croatian Kosovo

Today, twenty one years after the destruction of the town and the banishment of its heterodox inhabitants, Vukovar is *the most expensive Croatian word*. And, in fact, it serves no other purpose then to be a word, a letter containing the concept itself, because, outside of the word, it, essentially, does not exist. Vukovar of 2013 is Croatia's Kosovo, its myth is still being written and re-written, epic poetry decasyllables are being composed, Vukovar's martyrdom and heroism are being repeated over and over, and, as early as tomorrow, this will be the basis for the reconstitution of the Croatian nation, which shall then, like a tumor, embrace the myth it was created from, and eventually, as is the nature of tumors, destroy itself and Vukovar. This is how it must be, everything leads in this direction, and we can only observe in petrified horror.

Shortly before the beginning of 2013, the Bureau of Statistics finally published the first results of the Census conducted as far back as the spring of 2011. The processing of data took a very long time, much longer that before the introduction of computers, longer than in the former Yugoslavia, and when it was done, it was published with anxiety and trepidation that according to the Census results, more than 35% of the population of Vukovar are Serbs. In line with the Law on National Minorities, which had to be incorporated into the Croatian Constitution in order for the country to become a candidate for European Union membership, this 35% Serbian





minority has the right to use their own language and alphabet. This means that Vukovar once more, as was the case prior to 1991, becomes a town symbolically claimed also by Vukovar Serbs. All public signs should be written in both alphabets, Latin and Cyrillic, and as far as the language is concerned, in the linguistic sense it is the same, thus the Law, basically, changes nothing. Of course, Vukovar, or at least what's left of it, is and shall remain part of Croatia; this town can go nowhere else, nor can it by magic – as presented in the movies of Emir Kusturica and novels of Gabriel Garcia Marquez - suddenly and fraudulently, with the help of the Cyrillic alphabet, jump over the Danube and relocate to its eastern, Serbian bank.



### **Unbelievable outbursts of rage**

The possibility that this Law could be implemented, and that the Serbs in Vukovar could exercise the rights promised by Franjo Tuđman at the time, provoked unbelievable outbursts of rage not only among the nationalist, rightist and radically Catholic members of the society, and the political opposition, but also among the governing political and cultural elite, frightened by the aggressive right-wingers, but even more by the idea that anyone else other than Croats could exist in Croatia, in every sense of the word. The editor of the cultural program of the Croatian National TV Station, Branka Kamenski, stated in her show that the Croats should be cautious regarding the Cyrillic alphabet in the same way as the Israelis are cautious regarding Richard Wagner. This is a mannerism, so common among rightist radicals in neglected, transitory democracies throughout Europe: every form of imperative humiliation and disenfranchisement of minority neighbours, as well as every form of strategic national chauvinism against neighbouring

countries and nations, is explained and justified by referring to the policy of the state of Israel. At the same time, of course, behind every Moldovan, Hungarian or Croatian advocate of the Jewish state and its policy towards the Arabs lies a small, concealed anti-Semite. Attempt, for example, to ask one of them what happened, where did all the Jews from their countries and towns disappear to, what was it really like in 1941? The answer will be harsh and clear. Such questions disturb the national pride of the poor Eastern European nations, especially Croats, Hungarians, Romanians; and furthermore we all know the following: if there was a Holocaust, the only ones to blame for the Holocaust are Hitler and his Germans.

However, Branka Kamenski is not some obscure Moldovan right-winger; she is the minion of the current social-democratic, left-liberal government, which boasts of its cosmopolitanism in Brussels. However, when those same representatives return from Brussels, they are also annoyed by the Vukovar Cyrillic; they regard Croatian Serbs in the same way as the Israelis regard Richard Wagner. (Even this comparison is not completely accurate: Daniel Barenboim, the cultural icon of Israel and the Middle East, in addition to advocating reconciliation with the Palestinians, is the greatest Israeli Wagnerian and is meritorious for reintroducing this musical genius of the nineteenth century – personally an anti-Semite – to the Holy land...)

### **“Peaceful integration”**

After the first protests against the Cyrillic alphabet organized in Vukovar in January with the vocal support of Croatian national television and radio and attended by people from all over Croatia whose transfer to Vukovar by buses was well organized, statements were

published – on the pages of *Večernji list*, the daily newspaper with the largest circulation in the country – that it is unfortunate for Croatia that the war in Vukovar ended in so-called “peaceful integration”, under the supervision of the United Nations, for which this was the only real peacemaking success during the Yugoslavian wars, but that rather the war should have been terminated with another Storm operation. Even though rightist commentators, as well as the entire political establishment in the country, do not admit that the aim of the Storm operation was the expulsion of Serbs from parts of Croatia, these statements indicate precisely the following: Serbs should have been deported from Vukovar.



After the first protests against the Cyrillic alphabet, the mayor of Vukovar, a social-democrat, leftist Željko Sabo also made a statement. He admitted that he is not only against the Cyrillic alphabet, but also that several years ago he personally went around the town under the cover of night and took down signs written in Cyrillic. There were no negative reactions to this statement; no one posed a question regarding the nature and character of his social-democracy.

The government in Zagreb, however, does not know what to do. They are openly instructed from Brussels that the Constitutional Law on National Minorities must be implemented, and that failing to do so would mean that Croatia commenced negotiations on EU accession on false pretences, and that the political and cultural elite in the country are attempting by all means not to implement this Law in Vukovar.

War veterans are threatening to forcibly overthrow the government in Zagreb should the government insist on erecting Cyrillic signs, and in primetime news on Croatian national television they state that during 1991 they, “went to war against the Cyrillic alphabet” and

that they will not allow that war to be lost after two decades without a fight. In spite of the fact that the Croatian national television is under supervision of the government which is being threatened by arms, that same government will not attempt to prevent such spreading of hatred and fear in the country. These threats suit the government, even when aimed against it, because officials are well aware that in such circumstances the accumulated anger of the masses, fuelled by the economic crises and formidable unemployment, will not be directed at the southern hillsides of Zagreb, from where they rule the country, but rather at those who are closer and more accessible to the mob, such as writers and journalists who have attempted rationally to defend the reasons for the introduction of the Cyrillic alphabet in Vukovar, or aimed directly at the Serbs in Vukovar.

The only thing that worries the government is the fact that, at the time of the outbreak of protests against the Cyrillic alphabet, there remained a full six months until the anticipated EU accession of the country. This is a long period for the government. Had Croatia already become a member of this selective democratic society, the government would have known quite well what to do regarding the Cyrillic alphabet and the rights of national minorities. Their role model would no longer have been Israel and its policy regarding the Palestinians, but rather Victor Orban's Hungary.

### **Black banners**

Along with the creation of the Vukovar myth, neglect of this living town and its inhabitants continues even after twenty-two years. Although the buildings have mostly been reconstructed, the town is essentially dead. Sometimes it appears, when observed from Zagreb, that only the cemeteries and the locations of mass

graves are alive in Vukovar. Those are the only locations where something is happening: commemorations are held; specific war dates are observed; war veterans visit these sites carrying national flags and war banners which are, for some reason, always black; mothers of fallen martyrs light candles; mothers of warriors whose bodies have never been found cry out for the graves of their sons; political delegations in luster suits and cheap muddy shoes lay wreaths with the national Croatian emblem made of red and white carnations; children and grandchildren cry over the graves of their fathers; bishops and lower ranking clergymen in rich robes publicly pray to God, waving their thuribles from which the fragrance of incense spreads through small glass openings, and then preach their sermons, and these sermons soon turn into political speeches, and in these political speeches, held over the tombs of Vukovar, they always recall Croatian victims from World War II, those who were killed in a vengeful rage by the Yugoslav Partisans and Antifascists in 1945. Here in Vukovar no one ever remembers the Partisans and their casualties in World War II, or the holocaust and genocide performed during the war against the Serbs, and not a word is ever uttered about Partisan antifascism and antifascism in general. If you insist, if from Zagreb you ask why the Partisans are never mentioned in Vukovar, even though members of the Ustaša movement killed in 1945 by the Partisans are mentioned, you will get the angry reply that those same Partisans from 1945 killed Croats in 1991? How? It is unclear, and it is not important how, such questions are simply not asked when dealing with a myth.

A monument dedicated to the defenders of the town has been erected on the banks of the Vuka, a small river which flows into the Danube near Vukovar. Taking the form of a massive cross whose sides are engraved



with the Croatian national wattle (a decorative pattern found in medieval Croatian art), this monument has become one of the symbols of the new town. Not only would it be dangerous for someone to attempt, but it would also be impossible to explain to anyone in Croatia today why it is inappropriate for the memorial to be in the shape of a cross. It's as if every one of those people was killed during the Crusades in the Middle Ages, fighting against the Saracens and unbelievers, and that in 1991 Roman Pope John Paul II sent them to war after having granted them absolution. This monument and the entire Croatian Vukovar myth represent a strong and unbreakable link between earthly and heavenly Croatia, in the unity of a collective idea of the State and the collective idea of God. Is it at all possible to stand in front of that monument and not cross yourself and not utter a prayer to God, according to the Catholic procedure? If you omit to do so, will you not be suspected of being an enemy or an enemy spy? I asked myself these questions one late autumn evening several years ago while I was standing in front of this cross. I did not pray, nor did I cross myself, even though I had a feeling that some was watching me nearby. Instead of being places of remembrance, monuments here serve as a means of repression.

There is one more reason why the cross is inappropriate: the war in Yugoslavia began rapidly and without much introduction. Several months earlier, in the spring of 1991, life was still normal, people went to work, Saturday afternoons were spent playing football with colleagues, people lived their everyday lives in mature Yugoslavian socialism. Most of those young men, born during the 60s, were not baptized, they didn't go to church nor did they know the words of even one prayer. Not even half a year later, in late autumn of 1991, these young people were already young heroes, killed while

defending the town or executed above mass graves after the fall of the town. Were they able during those several months to learn the Our Father and the Hail Mary, did they experience a conversion during the war, or, and this is more probable, did they die defending their homes and their town from the attack of the Yugoslavian National Army, not having time even to think about God and the Church?

At the same time, what does a cross on the small Vuka river, which can also be seen from some locations in Serbia, really mean when somewhere on the other side, on the east banks of the Danube there surely exists, a somewhat differently styled, stone cross, visible from Croatia, erected for those who attacked Vukovar, or who were somewhere near the town defending Serbian villages from the Croats? What can actually be achieved by confronting a Catholic cross and an Orthodox cross, and vice versa?



### **A battle of cross against cross**

The use of a Croatian cross against a Serbian cross in wartime – in the Serbian and Croatian language different terms are used for the word cross, but let's skip these small linguistic differences and say – a battle of cross against cross is pointless only at first glance. Namely, it will not serve in the Croatian war against Serbs, and on the other hand, it will not serve in the Serbian war against the Croats. Monuments in the shape of crosses, and the foundation of national and nationalist motives for war on crusading and religious reasons, serve as instruments in the internal battle and transformation of a community from a secular society, like those existing all over Europe, to a religious and theocratic state, a kind of European Iran, in which bishops and archbishops appear as religious heads of state, whose opinion becomes

decisive in all matters important for the community: from premarital sex, abortions and nudity on the beach, to foreign policy, macroeconomics and economic development. In the winter and spring of 2013, Croatia was well underway to becoming a clandestine theocracy, to a much larger degree than Serbia, because in Croatia bishops actually do express their binding opinions regarding all social issues, and when anyone from the government stands up to them, as did the Minister of Education, Željko Jovanović, when he rejected the opinions of the Church regarding medical education in schools, then the bishops call the people to revolt, they talk of “the purification” of Croatia and “some new Storm”, and the suffragan bishop in Zagreb, Valentin Pozaić, publicly posed the question in this sermon published in the electronic media “does Minister Jovanović have a vagina”?

And what does all this have to do with Vukovar and the Croatian Vukovar myth?

In the shadows of this myth, meekness prompted by sermons regarding hundreds and thousands of murdered people ensures a suitable environment for preaching about the deleterious effects of premarital sex, the villainous nature of the Serbian people, the Independent State of Croatia as the fulfilment of centennial Croatian dreams, members of the Ustaša movement as the liberators and the righteous, the devilish character of preservatives, Jews who rule the global banking community and who destroy honest Catholics and Christians with their usurious rates of interest, and everything else advocated today by Croatian nationalist right-wingers, guided by militant Catholic clergy and the majority of Croatian bishops. We are all forced to remain quiet, to meditate and pray to God in the face of the “Vukovar victim”, at the foot of the stone cross adorned with Croatian folklore ornaments, while nationalists and bishops



very stridently preach, roar and issue commands regarding topics which have something to do with Vukovar, the war and suffering, but also regarding topics that have nothing to do with the war.

This is the purpose of a myth: to deny the community and individuals every right to make decisions regarding anything that has already been decided at the altar or at the meeting of local associations of Croatian war veterans. The Cyrillic alphabet was the latest issue on the agenda. It is portrayed as a criminal alphabet; Cyrillic letters were used to slaughter Croatian children, civilians and prisoners of war. Because of Cyrillic thousands of innocent people perished in the last war, and in all previous wars Cyrillic was used for slaughtering, Cyrillic shrapnel, those fragments of Cyrillic letters, were used to kill and cripple millions of Croats, or tens of millions of Croats... If the Serbs hadn't committed a mass murder of Croats using Cyrillic, today there would be at least a hundred million Croats, more than the French, British and Germans. Because of Cyrillic an entire Croatian world is today buried underground, skeletons, skulls, decomposing corpses. Only "the remains of a slaughtered nation" have survived, and in an inverse perspective, the same could be written and narrated by a Serbian poet regarding the Serbs.




### **The border**

The border between Serbia and Croatia is relatively new, unlike most internal Balkan borders, and in its present form it was established for the first time after World War II. Along most of its length this border is determined by the Danube River. For the most part, Croatia is on the right bank and Serbia is on the left.

The wide, navigable and deep Danube flows like a lush motorway and separates two poor, spiritually and

financially devastated countries. It separates two cultures and two national myths, which are mainly based on mutual antagonisms. This is especially true for Croatian culture, since it originates from a smaller, more inferior nation. Everything that is not Serbian culture is considered to be Croatian culture. The Croatian language is a language that is not Serbian. If there were no Serbs and no Serbia, it would be difficult to define Croatian culture, and to distinguish the Croatian language a propos the Chinese language, for example.



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However, the Danube is neither predetermined to be a border, nor to be a line of separation. So large, calm and powerful the river connects different, frequently very distant cultures, identities and languages; the Danube is a natural road, probably also the most secure passage in Central and Eastern Europe; the Danube is wide and beautiful, it has always connected, not separated the banks between which it flows; the Danube cannot be a border between worlds, even when it is a border between states. For the Danube to separate Serbs and Croats, as desired by Croatian and Serbian nationalists, it would have to transform and become a narrow and shallow polluted little river into which Croatian sewage would flow on the right side, and Serbian sewage on the left side, and in it, for the sake of mutual hatred, Serbian and Croatian shit would intermix. And this would be the only connection between the nations.

But all is in vain, because in spite of all troubles and Serbian and Croatian efforts, the Danube cannot be transformed into a filthy stream and become a line of separation. This river shall always connect its banks, no matter who lives on one side or the other. Towns can be destroyed and humiliated, but never this great river.

Whenever I come to Vukovar, and I have been there three or four times during the last decade, the

feeling of sorrow, uneasiness and nausea that I sense at the site of a destroyed town, disappears as soon as I see this huge river. The Danube represents hope for Vukovar, the promise of a future, for salvation and life. On the Danube Vukovar is not *the most expensive Croatian word*, it is not a sinister myth and a detonator of national self-destruction; on its banks Vukovar is alive, with a view to the other side, which is, suddenly, also alive.

Translated into English:

**Mirjana Ivanji** and **Dragana Rajić**



## Bridges of remembrance

I am trying to look into the future. Down the waters of the Danube. Its purposeful expanse. I am trying to picture a different Europe. A European nation. People carrying a different load of thoughts, memories and experience than my father did. People that see the Danube as the ties that bind. Not the boundaries, the Iron Curtain, the dead bodies bloated with water, the crippled bridges. The wounds. The marks of destruction. The split.

I am trying to think of my daughters. They may only see the beauty of the Danube. They may see hope in those grey-brown waters, community and diversity. They may feel that this continent is home. Listening to stories of merciless times on the Danube, they will identify with their Jewish grandfather and his experience of the horrors of World War II. Hearing how he waited for his dead parents on the banks of the Danube. When they grow up I will also tell them how NATO bombed Danube bridges in Serbia. When American British and French fighter jets were flying across Belgrade. German Tornados. That I was standing on one of those bridges, listening to the roar of the bombing and admiring the anti-aircraft fire in the dark. They will ask me 'Why' but I will not have a real answer. Just my own truth.

When speaking about the Danube in Brussels people tend to forget that the history of wars in Europe did not end in April 1945 but in June 1999. Temporarily. Or forever. At long last. Germans from the Black Forest and Serbs from Belgrade or Novi Sad were opposing



parties in a war just fourteen years ago. Yet again, people from Danube countries.

*Auschwitz – never again* said German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, implying that ‘the Serbs’ were treating Albanians in Kosovo just like the Nazis had treated the Jews. Serbian forces, police and paramilitaries did commit atrocities when socialist Yugoslavia disintegrated. In Croatia, in Bosnia, in Kosovo. But was this Auschwitz? To most Germans, there was sufficient reason to bomb and destroy Danube bridges in Serbia. To bomb Serbia for almost three months. Serbs did and still do disagree.

I am trying to imagine Europe learning from and not just living its history. Building bridges between moments of recollection. I am inclined to hope that my daughter will be part of this new start. It will take generations that were not affected by the war after all. On Europe’s stream. On the Danube.



### **Good old times**


As any Belgrade kid, I used to take the rivers for granted. The Danube and the Sava had always been around, as long as I could remember. They were home to us. There was nothing more exciting than the view from high up in the Montenegro mountains onto the strange blue sea lit by dazzling sunshine. That other big water. Endlessly wide.

One day, as kids, we climbed with our parents, up to the medieval fortress of Kalemegdan, built by the Turks, to look at the Sava flowing into the Danube. This view wrote itself into our memory. Even before taking Geography classes. Before getting those many answers to questions on the Danube that we had to memorize in school. Cycling. Ballgames. Pancakes, looking on

the Danube. The rivers were part of childhood. Sandy beaches, boats, buoys.

And bridges. If you want to get to New Belgrade or Zemun you need to cross the Sava. To get to Vojvodina, Budapest and further to Vienna or Germany you need to cross the Danube. The rivers were a natural barrier. People had to build bridges to be able to visit each other.

Or to conquer each other's territories as we learned from a certain age on. As an old royal-imperial army tune says



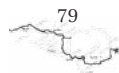
*Prince Eugene the noble knight  
Was to conquer for his master  
Belgrade's fortress and its city  
Building bridges crossing rivers  
For his army to move further  
Thus to conquer Belgrade city.  
When the bridges were erected  
So that cart and canon were directed  
Freely 'cross the Danube river  
Zemun being camp to forces  
Setting out to beat the Turks  
To be left to Serbs' derision.*

The Sava is simply called the Danube river here. The 1717 battlefield was below Kalemegdan. The noble knight from Savoy had a floating bridge built, attacking from the waterfront rather than from the landside as was to be expected; and he defeated the Turks.

My mother's family saga had it that my great-granduncle Velja, born in Kosovo, met my great-grandmother Leopoldine in Vienna and took her to Belgrade against her family's will. Her parents with their Wienerwald background were not willing to let their daughter escape to wild Serbia. To an unknown country down the

Danube. To those Ottomans. They may not have understood Karl Krauss' ironic verse, *the Serbs must be curbed*. They may have thought of Prince Eugene's battle underneath Belgrade's city walls. Serbia was a hostile target in Vienna. Eventually Leopoldine and Velja, after a long journey, had to cross the Sava from Zemun on a ferry. The bridges below Kalemegdan were not built until much later.

The Danube runs through Serbia for 588 km. It is crossed by thirteen bridges seven of which link Serbia to its neighbouring countries. The Roman Emperor Trajan (53 to 117) had a gigantic bridge built across the Danube which is only commemorated now by the Trajan plaque. He needed the bridge for his military campaigns.



In Tito's socialist Yugoslavia the bridge near Beška in Vojvodina was built as a link with the West in 1975. It was the time of brotherhood and unity among the nations of Yugoslavia. Openness to the world. I was then living temporarily, with my family, on another river. The Rhine. In Bonn. We went to Belgrade at least once a year. To me, home did not start in Subotica nor Novi Sad but at this Danube bridge and the country beyond. It stood for good-byes whenever we returned to the Rhine valley. Jumping into this water, so I thought, would get me quickly back home. To Belgrade.

When I was ten I became aware of the Danube for the first time. And of the Sava. Moving away meant not taking its views for granted any more. It was the first major change in my life. I became aware that not everything would remain as it was. And that change might not be for the worse. I got to know Lorelei after playing on those rusty canons on Kalemegdan. As Heine had written in his poem. Other rivers bring other tales and other myths.

Whatever the river, the Danube, the Rhine, the Elbe – people living on rivers share one thing. They need to cross the familiar water to move on. They need to build bridges. Approaching each other.

Much later Oto Bilji-Merin, a pilot, POW, communist, Spanish Civil War volunteer, writer and art historian who grew up in Zemun with the Danube at his fingertips, spoke to me about bridges. People build bridges of understanding, of language, art, legend and knowledge. To encounter other humans, gods and themselves. Building bridges crossing rivers, canyons and estuaries was just a little part of the human endeavour to meet challenges.

Bihalji published the book *Bridges of the World*. *Mankind is building bridges to the moon and unexplored space*, he wrote. *But above all, bridges overcoming difference, hatred and preconceptions among nations, races and religions; bridges of equality and peace.*

A decade after this conversation with this diehard philanthropist I was standing at the Old Bridge in Novi Sad that had just been bombed. It was picked as a strategic target by NATO.

### **Sing a Song of Joy**

By mere accident the Danube was to remind me all my life of a strange war. NATO's war against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Against Serbia. The first war waged against a sovereign European state. Without the consent of the UN Security Council.

On the evening of 24 March 1999 I was sitting in a bar in Zemun, overlooking the restful river. I was a journalist. Times were turbulent. Far from the city centre, I was looking for a little rest. I had sent my coverage to the Vienna Standard and the Berlin Tageszeitung. *Serbia is awaiting the bombs*, I wrote. Negotiations on a peaceful retreat of the Serbian forces from Kosovo and a subsequent

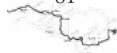


entry of NATO troops had definitely failed the day before. The West, led by the US, was determined to put an end to the rage the Serbian *soldatesca* was displaying. The Serbian regime believed that NATO would not dare to bomb a European country. At least not for long.

The first time I heard them was when a nice waitress was getting me my second beer. The warning sirens. The air raid alerts. *So this is where it's actually starting*, I thought. NATO's operation *Noble Anvil* had started. The waitress stared at the sunny evening sky in terror. She expected to see fighter jets like we knew them from war movies. We never actually got to see the fighter jets. They were flying too high. Sometimes a deep buzzing could be heard in the sky. Then the hiss of the cruise missiles. Followed by the blast. This was to become a high-tech war. Pressing buttons and joysticks. It was to last 78 days and nights. NATO was to fly 38,000 attacks.

*NATO aggression has come flying over Belgrade*, the radio announced. Enter the shelters. Avoid being near military facilities, refineries or petrol stations. And bridges. *How is this supposed to work?* I wondered. Half of my family and friends were living on the other side of the Sava. Coming from Zemun I had to cross the Sava to get to my office. It all seemed unreal.

On 1st April NATO bombed the Petrovaradin bridge in Novi Sad. A 29-year-old man lost his life. Oleg Nasov. He was on the bridge at the wrong time. He may have assumed this shaky Old Bridge was not part of NATO's military targets. It was not even fit for heavier trucks to cross. It was destroyed. By any standard this bridge is a civilian object. *This is a breach of the Geneva Convention*, the then mayor of Novi Sad complained. On 3rd April the Freedom Bridge was also destroyed by bombs. Several people lost their lives. On 26th April the last Danube bridge in Novi Sad went under, the Žeželj bridge.



I just had to watch this with my own eyes. I was curious. I was a reporter. This was war. I was one of the few journalists working for foreign media that had stayed in the country and obtained a travel permit from the Belgrade authorities with great difficulties. I drove to Novi Sad. Empty streets. There it was in front of me. The wreck of the Petrovaradin bridge, dipped into the Danube. The setting of war. *What has this old bridge to do with Kosovo?* I was wondering. *Are these guys going crazy?* No explanations given later as to what destroying these three bridges 500 km north of Kosovo had to do with the *military solution to the humanitarian disaster in Kosovo*. I recalled walking across the bridge at dawn with friends one morning after a party.

This 341 m long bridge was built in 1928 by German companies from Dortmund and Szsceczin and baptized *Prince Tomislav Bridge*. At the beginning of World War II in 1941 it was blown up by the Yugoslav army. In 1945 German POWs patched it back together again. In 2000 it was eventually replaced by the new Rainbow Bridge that is now called Petrovaradin Bridge again. It links Novi Sad city centre with Petrovaradin on the other bank of the Danube. This is where the Austrian-Hungarian fortress from the 17th century is located. The largest one of its time in Europe. For years it has hosted one of the biggest international music festivals, Exit. Tens of thousands of mainly young people from all over the world come here every summer. They cannot even imagine the scenes of war on the Danube that were around not so long ago. Debris has been cleared from the Danube. The bridges are up again. Exit has become one of the trademarks of Serbia.



## Once upon a time there was a war.

The birth of suspicion from the spirit of air raids.

On 3rd April 1999 I wrote

For days, Belgrade nights have been starting with the howl of sirens. Followed by deadly silence. As darkness settles and the familiar buzz of the big city dies down. It is relayed by the low hiss of fighter jets high above the clouds. Not a soul in the streets. Hardly anyone dares cross the bridges. Traffic stops at 8 p.m. Some intriguing uncertainty is tearing people apart. Where will NATO be striking today? A missile exploded in the city centre only a few meters from a maternity ward. Are they really sure about being on target? In central Belgrade a lot of windows are bonded together with wide tape. The impact of explosions can turn broken glass into fatal weapons.

### 4TH APRIL

*Night is falling. The sirens will start howling soon. People in Belgrade are rushing back home. The main challenge is to make it across the bridges on time. For days there has been talk they were going to be NATO's next target, those four bridges crossing the Sava and linking the city centre with the apartment blocks of New Belgrade. And the Danube bridge linking Belgrade and Pančevo.*

### 6TH APRIL

*Spent my day on the Sava. It is highly unlikely that the bridge I am standing on is to be hit by a missile. I am spending the night at my girlfriend's in New Belgrade. At 4.30 a.m. I start hearing the hissing sound of remote-controlled cruise missiles. Followed by explosions. One, two, three. Like an earthquake. Through the windows I can see a flame rising as high as a building. Ashes are flying through the air. A huge black cloud of smoke is obscuring a fading moon. Fire reflections can be seen from miles away. Minor explosions follow. This time NATO hit an oil*



reservoir. Amazing to realize how these scenes enter your everyday life. Coffee on the Sava around lunch. The river-side footpath is covered with ashes.

14TH APRIL

As usual the sirens start howling briefly after 8 p.m. Belgraders are cursing the beautiful spring weather. It's ideal for air raids. I am standing on the rooftop of a high-rise in Zemun enjoying a marvelous view of the Danube. This is where mainly young people gather every night. They do not give a damn about stuffy shelters any more. They have barbecues, drink beer and watch the war, live. Their own war. The familiar humming of the fighter planes kicks in next. Followed by thuds. The Yugoslav flak is crackling nervously from all sides. Artillery thunder can be heard from heavier weapons. This is the most robust response by Yugoslav anti-aircraft since the outbreak of the war. An air battle above Belgrade. A one-sided battle. Garnished with the hiss of cruise missiles. Flying just 50 to 100 meters above ground level at times. Football derby atmosphere with the rooftop crowd. Screw these bastards!, the youngsters cheer whenever the Yugoslav flak revs up. This looks like fireworks. I am thinking of Europe

28TH APRIL

Here we go again. Belgrade is rocked by incredible detonations. Like earthquakes. Again and again. Windowpanes clanging. The ground is trembling. Coloured balls fired by the Yugoslav flak tear up the pitch black sky. Firey tongues hit the ground now and then, followed, seconds later, by some incredibly noisy drone, unheard so far in Belgrade. Explosions are reported from all parts of Belgrade, Batajnica, Rakovica, the residential area of Dedinje housing lots of embassies. NATO's heaviest attack on Belgrade since the outbreak of the war lasts for hours. Chancellor Schroeder says in a televised speech We are not waging a war but we are called upon to enforce a

peaceful solution in Kosovo including military action. *What is Schroeder, the social democrat, talking about? Not waging a war?! Does anyone in Germany believe this? Dissidents, opposition, pro-European parties, staunch Europeans alike: as long as NATO drops its bombs the public mood in Serbia will be anti-Western. I am wondering how children sitting in air raid shelters today will feel about Europe when they grow up.*

It must have been in May. I was in Pančevo on the outskirts of Belgrade, on the other side of the Danube. Night was falling when I left to get back home. It was one of those nights, alerts, the flak emitting flickering fire in the sky, some fire on the Belgrade river bank. I was alone in the dark. No car, not a soul. Well, I thought, it'll just be 1.5 km. I accelerated. Halfway onto the bridge I just did not feel like speeding up any more. I stopped. Got out of the car. Silly, pure spite. The Danube below, the air battle above me. Is all this real? I looked upstream. Towards Novi Sad, Budapest, Vienna, the Black Forest.

I looked into the Danube. Each wave taking a breath of history. Dead bodies had always been found in the Danube. Just a few weeks ago a fisherman near Tekija discovered a refrigerator truck in the Danube. It contained more than 80 dead bodies. Bodies of Albanian civilians killed in Kosovo. They were secretly buried in Batajnica on the outskirts of Belgrade. The Serbian police wanted to cover up a massacre. All this I learned later.

Pančevo bridge links Belgrade to the region of Banat. It was built with damages paid by the Germans after World War I. This combined road and rail bridge was opened to traffic in 1935 and named *King Peter II Bridge*. On 6th April 1941 the German air force bombed Belgrade. The royal Yugoslav army blew up the Pančevo bridge on the night of 11th April. German engineers as



part of the occupant forces pieced this bridge of strategic importance back up. The allied forces' air raids destroyed it again on 3rd Sept 1944 and German forces gave it its coup de grace on their retreat. It was opened to traffic again as early as November 1946 but was not properly repaired till 1965.

NATO's air raids spared Belgrade's bridges. Rumour has it that the Pentagon was going to destroy them just like the ones in Novi Sad, but the French government is said to have prevented this by threatening to withdraw their troops from operation Noble Anvil. As discontent in Europe was growing the NATO leadership was focused on keeping all 19 member states in the operation.



### **Back into the future**

I am thinking of my daughters. I tend to believe they will have an EU passport. I tend to believe that the Danube basin between Croatia and Romania will not remain a black hole, that bridges of recollection will emerge. Leading into the future.

Any bridge is built for eternity. This certainly includes the glorious Sava bridge across the Ada Ciganlija island in Belgrade. It has become an icon of the city with its 996 meters in length and 45 in width, six lanes and two rail tracks. Its 200 meter high pylon illuminates the night. It symbolizes a modern city. Turning towards the future. The Ada bridge was solemnly inaugurated on New Year's Eve 2012. Including real fireworks.

Translated into English:

**Bernd Kleinheyer**

# Authors

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**IVAN IVANJI**, born 1929 in Veliki Bečkerek (present day Zrenjanin) in Voivodina, Yugoslavia as the son of Jewish medical family, author, translator and journalist. Well known in Germany for his numerous novels; recently published works *Shadow skipping*, 2009; *Ghosts from a small town*, 2010; *Cast iron letters*, 2011, and the book *Tito's translator*, 2007, about his experiences as a translator for Josip Broz Tito. His works have been translated into several languages. Ivanji lives in Belgrade and Vienna.



**KARL-MARKUS GAUSS** born 1954, lives and works in Salzburg as an author, essayist and literary critic. His recently published works include *Down the Danube*, 2009; *In the forest of cities*, 2012; *The glory of the afternoon*, 2012. The original version of his literary contribution in this book was published in 2006 in the Swiss magazine "DU". We would like to thank the editors for their kind permission to reprint.

**MUHAREM BAZDULJ**, born 1977 in Travnik, is one of the leading voices of the younger literary generation in Bosnia. He is the author of more than ten books, including *The second book*, *Enchantment*, *Sowing salt*. He writes for the daily newspaper *Oslobođenje* from Sarajevo and the Belgrade weekly news magazine *Vreme*. He lives in Belgrade and Sarajevo.

**DRAGAN VELIKIĆ**, born 1953 in Belgrade, author, essayist and translator. His books have been translated into ten languages. He publishes in many European magazines. In 1999 he lived in exile (Germany, Austria, Hungary). From 2005 to 2010 he was ambassador of Serbia in Austria. He is best-known for his novels *The Bremen case*, 2002; *The Domaszewsky dossier*, *Lights of the touch*, *The Russian window*, Munich 2008. He lives in Belgrade.

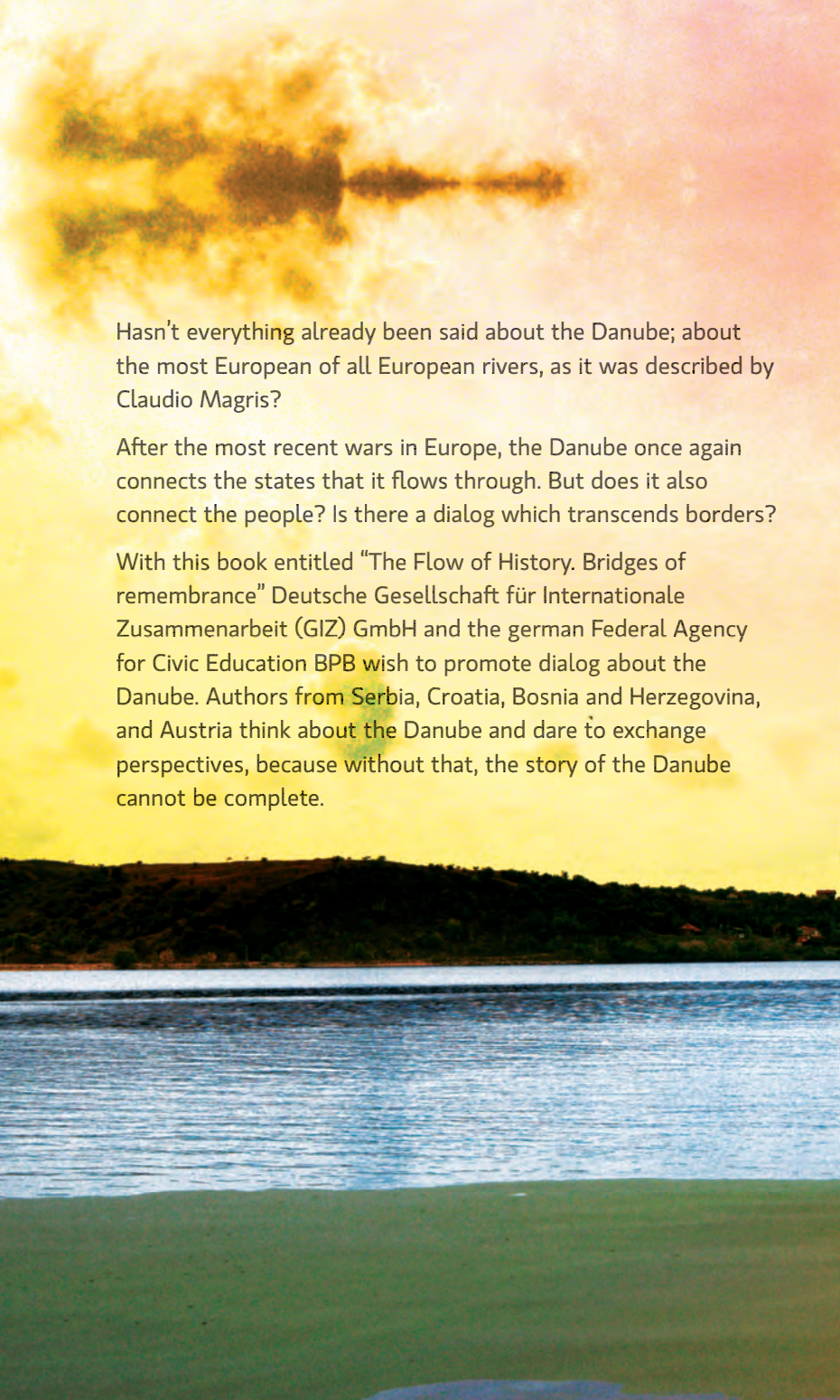
**MILJENKO JERGOVIĆ**, born 1966 in Sarajevo, is one of the best-known authors of former Yugoslavia. Since 1993 he lives in Croatia. His following works have been published in German: *The Mansion in Walnut*, 2008; *Sarajevo Marlboro*, 2010; *The Freelanders*, 2010; *Volga, Volga* (Frankfurt, 2011).

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Hasn't everything already been said about the Danube; about the most European of all European rivers, as it was described by Claudio Magris?

After the most recent wars in Europe, the Danube once again connects the states that it flows through. But does it also connect the people? Is there a dialog which transcends borders?

With this book entitled "The Flow of History. Bridges of remembrance" Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH and the German Federal Agency for Civic Education BPB wish to promote dialog about the Danube. Authors from Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Austria think about the Danube and dare to exchange perspectives, because without that, the story of the Danube cannot be complete.