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Isak Samokovlija

Meša Selimović

After the Second World War, Samokovlija dedicated one of his stories to his mother, Sara, with these words: "I'm happy that she died before the war and did not experience the horrors to which we have been witnesses." I cite this dedication, the bitterest of all dedications I know, with an uncertain memory, for nowhere in his collected or selected works have I been able to find it. I do not have time to search for it in libraries, but I'm sure that the sense of it is perfectly correct. I don't know why this unusual authorial statement has been left out. Perhaps because it is too bitter. A scream is disturbing, and optimism is dearer to us. By this state of affairs an author is handicapped and truth damaged. And we are harmed, too, by every bloody act of bearing witness. And that dedication, in addition to everything I know about him, confirms the extent to which Isak was a sensitive, kind-hearted, good man; associating with him was a rare pleasure. One never felt menaced by anything, and there emanated continuously from him something distinctive, something beautiful and noble. He knew how to crack a joke, and engage in stinging repartee, but there was little malice in it: just enough to keep things from getting boring.

"I was born in Goražde (he writes in the autobiographical piece 'Sun over the Drina,' dating from 1947), in that small town in eastern Bosnia through which the magnificent and hot-tempered Drina flows. I spent almost my entire childhood on that river. The Drina is one of my most profound experiences. It enthralled me like some god-like, living creature. Its clear, magical, green coloration, full of sunshine, which poured into my soul every summer without fail in those years, filled me with a lifetime of serenity, purity, and wondrous power...I fell in love with the Drina. It was that same well-nigh incomprehensible love with which Klindžo, the hero of my story 'Drina,' loved it."

His Drina "fell sick" because of crimes on the river, spoiling all of his childhood memories and poisoning his life. As soon as the Ustaše came, they put Samokovlija in prison and then transferred him to a refugee camp that was located in Alipašić Most, near Sarajevo. He worked there as a doctor, torn away from his children. And, as a Jew, he lived in constant fear of the Ustaše. He described this in his story "The Necklace":

"The doctor was sitting in front of the shack. He was seated on a small wooden chair with no back rest.

It was probably midnight already. Over all the fields around Sarajevo hung an anxious stillness. Everything was quiet but filled with dread...

...The night was clear, and the stars lustrous. Muffled shouting could be heard from time to time in

the distance, underneath the slopes of Jahorina, down below in Crveni dol, behind Simo's Barrens. Sometimes a machine gun would hiss or a shell would explode with great force. Is that a skirmish—a night engagement between our fighters and the occupiers—or is the Ustaše mauling the population, ravaging villages?...

...The doctor's children were far away, but they were within reach of the Ustaša's claws. And those claws could lurch into motion at any moment, clenching and sinking into flesh..."

There we have his great torment: two daughters and a son (they survived, fortunately) and the intense and heavy worry, every day, every hour, for the duration of the war. And there is the grief at the tragedy of the Jewish people, and the sorrow arising from such a great number of criminals and victims in one era—in our era, unfortunately. He was so horrified by everything he had experienced that, for a time after the war, he lost his own splendid serenity. He devoted nearly his entire postwar literary production to the condemnation of war and to his disgust at atrocities. This was not the tender, generous prose of his prewar stories, although one sees flashes of it and it can always be recognized in his humanity and nobility of heart. But now, more powerful than anything else in him, were his stupefaction, and his desire to tell the world, to bear witness against evil, to compose a requiem to the victims.

It was as if Samokovlija, who wrote without haste, was, in these tales of his, rushing to get everything on paper, to toss out ever more sketches and toss in more and more raw facts, and then later on would develop and refine it all as he had done earlier, leaving us with delightful stories, testimony to his talent and his goodness. He thought he would have time to reflect upon all that he'd mapped out. But death was faster. He died at the beginning of 1955 in the fifty-sixth year of his life.

I cannot forget his final hours. I observed them, unfortunately, even though I neither wanted to nor suspected that I might happen upon his agony. I had gone to visit him in the Koševo Hospital and I knew he was suffering from uremia, but I had no idea his condition was grave. I knew the number of the room in which he was lying, and in I went, as I had done earlier. No one stopped me, and no one warned me, for there was nobody else in the room. He didn't receive me with a smile or a kind word: he was in a coma, eyes half open, mouth agape, head rolled back, and he was wheezing, struggling to take in the air that was in ever shorter supply. —Isak!— I said instinctively, although he couldn't hear anybody any more. There I stood, as if paralyzed, rendered speechless by the imminent death of a dear friend, horrified at the sight of an exquisite life in disintegration, stupefied by the painful end of a man who so loved life. No, this should not have happened to him. To any one of us, but not to him. He deserved a more peaceful and dignified death. I am glad that none of his family members saw him in that condition. They had been there just before the death agony set in; they chatted and laughed; they parted ways as if everything were perfectly in order. They remembered him as he had always looked, insouciant and smiling. And I wish I had never seen him any other way.

His body was taken to the Cultural Center for viewing. Many of his friends and admirers came to pay their respects. As protocol demands, a committee was formed to oversee the funeral and a program was drawn up. There was a schedule for all the events and an itinerary for the funeral procession. It was determined who would speak where, who would carry his medals and decorations on a plush cushion behind the coffin. And everything would have been fine, except that they found out there were no medals, not one single decoration. The finest Bosnian writer since Ko'i? (save Andri?) did not even hold so much as an Order of St. Sava, not even one of the

Fifth Degree, nor any other decoration whatsoever, even though half of the country of Yugoslavia had one.

He never sought them. Nor did he need them at his funeral. But this is indeed a characteristic of good people such as he. Later his admirers suggested that the clinic on Vrazova Street in Sarajevo bear his name, since there were so many schools, public institutions, and centers of various types already named after less deserving people; it truly was necessary to branch out and in doing so give credit to a person who was so distinguished in the cultural life of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Yugoslavia. Someone tabled this proposal, though, and today there is still not a single establishment named for Samokovlija. Nor does his bust stand in park among other literary figures, and his portrait is not to be found in the museum. But that says more about us than about him. He did what he knew how to do, and he did great deal; he left us wonderful stories that we will always rank with those of Ko?i? and Andri?, if we want to be honest about it, but the fact that we've forgotten him in every other way is perhaps an illustration of our factionalism. His camp is the smallest, and it is unimportant in the landscape of strategic positions with which we are preoccupied.

I made Isak's acquaintance in 1947, at the office of Marko Markovi?, the managing director of Svjetlost, above what is now the Nama department store. We quickly became friends, all three of us. Marko was an old-fashioned man, very proper, full of respect for others and also insistent upon that consideration in others; he was thoughtful to a fault, sensitive towards everybody and to everything, attentive to everyone. Isak was merry, ready with a joke at his own expense or at someone else's, and could easily fit right in with any crowd. We often had coffee together, talking and joking around. At that point, Isak was not yet editor of Svjetlost; that came later. (The editors at the time were Mihailo Delibaši?, Emil Petrovi?, and Marko himself.) Isak was the chief editor of the journal Život, which the state publishing house Svjetlost founded in 1948. The following year the editorial staff was expanded to include Mladen ?aldarevi?, Ilija Kecmanovi?, Nika Mili?evi?, and Meša Selimovi?, in addition to Isak. But Isak continued to do the most important work there. I remember that time as one of the brightest and most pleasant periods of my life. Because of the good man that Isak Samokovlija was.

Translated by John K. Cox – © 2007 John K. Cox

Meša Selimovi?, Sje?anja: Memoarska proza. Beograd: Book-Marso, 2002, pp. 201-4

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