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Voices of Remembrance: Borislav Pekić's Correspondence with Danilo Kiš

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In the early spring of 1970, Borislav Pekić decided to take a temporary refuge in London. This move was planned over a longer period of time as Pekić had to address his immediate obligations and secure the necessary travel documents. However, on the eve of his departure to England, he was asked to turn over his passport to the police. The officials at the Department of Internal Affairs justified their decision by citing “reasons of national security.” Pekić was advised to remain in Belgrade, while his wife was allowed to leave the country.

The news about this unfortunate incident eventually reached Pekić's close friend and fellow writer Danilo Kiš who was living in France at the time. In a letter to Pekić from Gentilly, dated June 15, 1970, Kiš deplored his fellow writer's misfortune at the moment when Pekić was looking forward to a moving abroad which was favorable for both his family and him. Pekić's wife Ljiljana, a distinguished architect, was offered a position at the Architecture Department of the Greater London Council.¹

The exchange of letters between Pekić and Kiš in the early summer of 1970 may well illustrate lawful practice during the communist rule in Yugoslavia. Although special entitlements were granted to the writers, their published works as well as their general comportment were carefully monitored.

In the afore-mentioned letter Kiš inquired whether anybody had tried to help Pekić, and thought that the Association of Writers should have explained that Pekić was a first class writer and not a scribe who occupied himself with the trivialities of everyday life. Pekić's writing should not have been a reason for such a harsh government decision. Kiš thought that the reason might have been due to Pekić's habit of speaking openly, expressing his views and concerns that were not appreciated by those in power. Kiš thought that Pekić's outspoken attitude should not have provided an excuse for such a blatant dis-

¹Jelena Milojković-Djurić, “Borislav Pekić's Literary Oeuvre: A Legacy Upheld,” *Serbian Studies* 15/1 (2001): 3–7.

regard of personal liberties. The freedom of speech should not be considered as the privilege of some people that others were deprived of. Kiš advised Pekić to continue writing and finish his book or books currently in progress. He was obviously aware that Pekić usually worked on several novels at the same time. Furthermore, Kiš thought that Ljiljana should travel alone. He thought he could offer his friend some good advice and support, although he knew that this was hard to accomplish from afar.

Pekić answered expressing his thanks for Kiš's encouragement and confessing that in his situation the support of his friends was important to him. Compassion was not a widespread virtue among the Serbs.² He mentioned that another fellow writer, Dragoslav Mihailović, had also offered him his support. Nevertheless, it was difficult to understand why he was declared to be "an enemy of his people." Perhaps some individuals wanted to hurt him. He confessed that he did find a sense of solace in his work. He knew from experience gained in his youth, during the five bleak days of his imprisonment, that in a similar situation one had to keep a cool head and try to work incessantly. Such an attitude would help to keep an active mind and suppress the feeling of self-pity.

Furthermore, Pekić disclosed that his efforts to join his wife in London were not successful and that his appeal regarding the return of his passport was turned down. Moreover, the Secretary of the Department of the Interior Affairs responded negatively to the letter of the Writers' Association supporting Pekić's request for the return of his confiscated travel document. Pekić was content that the Association acted decisively upholding the dignity and professional standing of its membership for the first time.

Pekić expressed his pleasure that Kiš had managed to write a great deal more, advancing his work on a new novel. Yet Pekić also criticized Kiš for lack of confidence in his own writing, resulting in many completely new versions of the work in progress. That attitude he considered counter-productive, causing a waste of precious energy and time; rewriting the whole manuscript was redundant and unnecessary. Kiš should entertain the idea that the process of writing occasionally included shifting of the text, cuts, pasting, erasing, a pair of scissors and glue. Pekić allowed that perhaps Kiš was not only improving the already existing manuscript as much as changing the original concept and casting new light on the already created narrative.

Pekić admitted that he was fully aware that he himself could not sleep at night when working on a new text if a word or an idea did not please him,

² Pekić's letter to Kiš was dated July 30, 1970. Ljiljana Pekić has compiled a book comprising Pekić's correspondence entitled *Korespondencija kao život, Prepiska sa prijateljima 1965–1986*, Novi Sad: Solaris, 2002.

despite the fact that he was aware that he could change the existing dilemma the next day. Presently, he worked “as a horse,” as he put it, and did not frequent the Writer’s Club or go to downtown cafes, as if he lived far away from Belgrade. He also knew that an evening in the Writer’s Club could provoke confrontations and cause him great stress during the heated polemics.³

At the end of this lengthy letter to Kiš, Pekić mentioned that he had written some twenty-four letters to his wife in London, although she left in June, slightly more than a month before. He considered his letters a form of a diary chronicling his work in progress during the lonely days after their separation.

While still living alone in Belgrade, in February 1971 Pekić received the coveted NIN Literary Award for his book *Hodočašće Arsenija Njegovana* (The Houses of Belgrade).⁴ According to his wife Ljiljana, Pekić obtained his passport the day after this award was handed to him. He was eventually allowed to travel and joined his family in London in April 1971. Soon upon his arrival in England, Pekić proceeded with his literary work with renewed vigor. His life centered on his writing of fiction as well as researching new literary and/or historical sources. He was subscribed to a great number of periodicals as well as newly published books from Belgrade. While his wife was at work and his daughter at school, he spent the whole day writing, planning and drafting. This secluded life without distraction helped to stabilize his health and the years spent in London turned out to be the most fruitful years of his writing career. Gradually he acquired an interest in gardening, and devoted much time to the cultivation of roses and various flowers. He even built a much coveted green house. Pekić said that he slept not more than five hours during the night in order to have more time for his work.

During his sojourn in London, that eventually stretched over some twenty years, the correspondence with his close friends and fellow writers gained additional importance: it provided a much needed link with literary happenings in faraway Belgrade. Just like Kiš, Pekić continued writing in Serbian. Their novels, written in France and England respectively, were meant to be published and read in Belgrade and hopefully throughout Yugoslavia. They shared the hope that future translations of some of these works would reach new readers in other countries around the world.

In a letter of June 13, 1972, Pekić reported to Kiš that he continued to work on the completion of three of his novels. They were soon ready to be submitted for publication

³ Pekić’s letter to Kiš, July 30, 1970.

⁴ The book was translated by Bernard Johnson, and published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York-London, 1978.

The first novel titled, *Uspenje i sunovrat Ikara Gubelkijana* (The Ascendance and Fall of Ikar Gubelkijan), was dedicated to the fellow writer and a long-time friend Filip David. Pekić mentioned that the first novel should be familiar to Kiš since David had already read the first pages of this novel when they had all gotten together in Belgrade two years earlier. The novel was some one hundred pages long. Pekić announced that he was expecting David for a visit in August.

The second novel, *Odbrana i poslednji dani Andrije Gavrilovića* (The Defense and the last Days of Andrija Gavrilović) was about the same length. It was dedicated to Dragoslav Mihailović.

Pekić stated that the third novel, *Smrt i preobražaj Adama Trpkovića* (Death and Transfiguration of Adam Trpković) was dedicated “to one Danilo Kiš.” He was searching for the best description of a literary genre that would aptly characterize these novels, and decided that the term *romanesque* would be appropriate.

Pekić explained that the novel dedicated to Kiš was a typical intellectual novel, perhaps too intellectual for his own taste. Anyhow, Pekić was not sure whether the novel was truly intellectual, although he was sure that it was free-spirited with a dose of idiosyncrasies. He was obviously aware of the intellectual curiosity and multifaceted talents of his friend. He went on to describe why he decided to dedicate it novel to Kiš:

The novel developed directly from the walking stick of your father, the honorable gentleman Eduard Sam, who has the leading role. In addition, there are several hard core Gestapo men in it with an imagination of Marquis de Sade. There is a county deputy of the lowest class, a professor of medieval history and a former Gestapo officer, and another professor of contemporary history who does not appear in the story, although the main character of the novel is repeatedly addressing him, since the whole story is written in an epistolary form. There is a monument from aluminum ten meter long, and one supernatural umbrella for men, that is in reality a descendant of your Mr. Sam. It is not strange at all that a man of his intelligence, imagination, and predisposition for adventure has turned up in his wanderings somewhere in the East. That is how it happened that the love union between Sam's walking stick and Aladdin's magical carpet was realized. That is how this monster umbrella was born bearing attributes of a Devil's ally. In an otherwise realistic story in which the discussion centers around history and historiography, the creation and destruction of contemporary myths and communism alike, this umbrella does

consistently its supernatural work directly inspired by the forces of hell. The umbrella is a pure incarnation of Lucifer. To tell the truth, I myself have had it enough with the devil up till now and such apparitions as Andjame in Ćosić's work, the Great Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's novel, or Mephisto in Goethe's Faust. Mann also had a Devil. All these devils had a human likeness. Only Goethe allowed that his Mefisto temporarily assumed the form of a black dog.

Why not to explore all of this a little bit further? The devil could appear in a form resembling an umbrella in an act of mimicry. Such umbrellas are still carried by Montenegrin men riding on horseback, while their wives loaded with wood struggle walking up the hill several paces behind them. I do not see any hindrance to this proposition. That this stick did not have an out-of-wedlock progeny, the blame should be shared by the general spirit of our literature that did not tolerate good heroes, as well as good umbrellas. Thus, something happened precisely in the cellars of Gestapo after many intricacies and encounters in other places. This umbrella paradoxically was poised to carry its owner up in the sky right after the hanging. In front of all the people and the Germans alike the umbrella acted as a parachute that proceeded in the opposite direction. It would indeed carry him away to the great delight of Boža Vukadinović, the last Serbian lunatic, if we do not count Mirko Kovač, who is after all a Catholic. By the way, I do not know whether you are aware that the parachute originated from an umbrella. Well, indeed, gentlemen, . . . as the honorable Mr. Sam would say.

On this playful note Pekić concluded that Kiš had to reciprocate regarding this grand dedication of the manuscript. It could be at least in the form of a letter that Pekić really longed for. He promised Kiš that on another occasion he would "have more time to write [Kiš] a normal letter."

Kiš did answer to Pekić in a letter dated June 26, 1972, complaining facetiously that Pekić's request for an answer did cause him great pain by forcing him to write again. He was sick of writing due to the fact that he was seated in front of his typewriter from seven o'clock in the morning until seven thirty in the evening.

He admitted that he loved receiving letters more than anybody else, but was equally reluctant to write them himself. If he were an American, he would surely consult a psychiatrist, to examine the reasons for this condition. Most of all, Kiš wrote that a letter from Pekić presented always a delightful occasion particularly when Pekić chastised him for his laziness.

Kiš disclosed that he was writing some “little stories” for television that he considered his “deadly sins” and a commercial commodity. He usually had to wait for the proverbial inspiration to write about topics that truly interested him. He explained that he defined the so-called inspiration as the growing trust in the written word during the arduous process of deliberating about a new subject. He would start writing at the moment when the reluctance to write and the mistrust toward the written word would cease and the wish to finish the torturous process became acute.

Beside the completion of a television play, Kiš wanted to finish some translations of poetry out of pure pleasure. He liked poetry and at first envisioned himself a poet, but eventually realized that poetry was not his preferred mode of expression.

He had additional plans to write for television, translate Petöfi and Kenois, and then to start learning English. He felt that he was on the verge of speaking English, and that after some additional studies, he would be ready to appear in London in a year or two. He further disclosed that his book *Bašta, pepeo* (Garden, Ashes) was scheduled to be published in 1973 by BIGZ in a pocketbook edition. He also hoped that his erotic poetry would provide some extra income. Thus, in addition to writing books for which he cared deeply and spending days in rewriting and editing, Kiš had to spend time and energy in writing television plays, that he labeled as trivial and sinful as well as erotic poetry. He was hoping for a financial success he had promised to his wife Mirjana. Yet, he feared that few of these plans would come through.

With obvious pleasure but in very few words, Kiš stated that the new novel *Peščanik* (Hourglass) was accepted by the publishing house Prosveta. He said that it encompassed some three hundred pages, and thus represented his longest work. He disclosed that he undertook numerous rewritings of the text, and that in the process of rewriting he used some eight kilograms of paper. He assured Pekić that this large volume of discarded paper did not contain any valuable material, although some of his friends believed that was the case. He just wanted to preserve this worthless heap of paper to prove that he was indeed working during the last three or four years.

Kiš's method of writing encompassed a thorough revision of the written text which amounted to rewriting two or three times the already organized and researched narrative. Pekić knew about Kiš's elaborate revisions and admonished Kiš to change this difficult procedure. He suggested that the process of writing of a new book should include rearranging the chronology of researched material, pasting and erasing, as well as cutting and gluing of some paragraphs. The rewriting of the already finished book was not necessary or advisable. Pekić thought that he would not be able himself to finish writing

any of his novels if he had engaged in such a strenuous process of self-censorship and complete rewriting.

Pekić admitted that he was prone to correcting endless editing, and working very slowly, but complete rewriting would be impossible for him to accomplish. *Graditelji* (The Builders) had more than one thousand pages, and he would rather drink poison than start writing anew. So much pain, sweat, passion, and beating the head against the wall, including future crises, would make it impossible to discard any of the written text. Pekić described in another context the process of writing

as an internal civil war that every writer conducts within himself confronting the rational and irrational, learned and experienced, appropriated and imputed, falsehood and truthfulness, personal and literary consciousness, civic and artistic morale, inspiration and planning, a war between the reality that is fluid and real within that which is static, and above all the imagined omnipotence and veritable helplessness to express oneself.⁵

While acknowledging the intense struggle in shaping a narrative, Pekić did not preclude the possibility that “a good book is the gift of an accident.”⁶

Kiš was equally aware that Pekić’s style of writing was different from his own. In a letter he mentioned that he saw the collection of Pekić’s “short stories” in Nolit’s editorial office. He complained jokingly that now he had to read some five hundred pages, adding that, after all, that was better than reading seven hundred pages. Kiš was alluding to Pekić’s usually very long books.⁷

This was a correct observation. Pekić’s major novel *Zlatno runo* (Golden Fleece) includes seven lengthy volumes.⁸ It records the multifaceted epic adventures of the main hero, Simeon Njegovan, as well as those of his numerous relatives and ancestors. Moreover, Pekić sought to offer a reconstruction of the history of humankind as encapsulated in Greek mythology. His narrative is also entwined with the history of the Serbian people, blurring mythical with

⁵ J. Milojković-Djurić,” In Search of the Golden Fleece,” Borislav Pekić, *Balkanistica* 12 (1999): 127–31.

⁶ B. Pekić, “Zamka ideologije,” *Novija srpska književnost i kritika ideologije*, P. Palavestra, ed. (Belgrade-Niš: SANU, Naučni skupovi XLVI, 1989), 61.

⁷ Kiš’s letter was dated 26 June 1972

⁸ Pekić defined *Zlatno runo* as a “phantasmagory in seven volumes.” Pekić started working on it in 1978 and finished it in 1986. This book received the Njegoš Literary Award, “as one of the ten best books written in between 1982 and 1992.”

historic references as if affirming that human condition is in essence universal: each generation is following in the footsteps of its predecessors trying but not always succeeding in setting a new and higher benchmark for their life's journey.⁹

After having read Kiš's collection of stories *Grobnica za Borisa Davidovica* (A Tomb for Boris Davidovich), Pekić penned an exceptional letter to his friend expressing his delight.¹⁰ Although many agreed that the story bearing the same name was the most remarkable in this collection, Pekić's personal choice was the story "Mechanical Lions." Pekić admired Kiš's masterful presentation of the Soviet duplicity in disguising the realities of everyday life in the Soviet Union to Western intellectuals, the sympathizers of the Soviet regime.

Moreover, Kiš used historical figures in his narrative, embroiled in imaginary yet possible confrontations and dubious encounters. The case in point was the official visit to Russia of Emile Henriot, a prominent figure of French public life. Kiš gave him an alias, naming his hero Eduard Herriot. Henriot was a writer, publicist, musicologist and political figure wielding considerable influence in his native France as well as in the international milieu. The Soviet officials took his visit seriously knowing well that Henriot would eventually publish his Soviet travelogue. While visiting Kiev, Henriot expressed the wish to visit the St. Sophia Cathedral, one of the oldest churches in Russia built in 1037 by Prince Iaroslav Vladimirovich Mudry. The Cathedral was famed for its architectural beauty and exceptional frescoes adorning the nave of the church. Most significantly, the St. Sophia was the seat of the famed Theological Seminary that had educated generations of young theologians from Russia proper, as well as those from other Slavic countries that observed the religious canons of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

According to Kiš, the Communist officials used the St. Sophia Cathedral and its cellars as a brewery. The ancient façade of the church was draped with a banner proclaiming that the religion is the opiate of the masses. Prior to Henriot's visit this banner was removed.

The cover-up was further enhanced by an improvised liturgical service officiated by a communist bureaucrat with a sonorous voice. The wives and office workers of the Party apparatchiks took part of the regular parishioners attending the liturgical service. The draped burlap inside the church concealed barrels of beer stacked on top of each other. Thus, the desecration of religious edifices as well as spiritual values and religious practices were symbolically

⁹ J. Milojković-Djurić, "In Search of the Golden Fleece," 127–28.

¹⁰ Letter to Kiš, dated October 10, 1976.

recreated in this story. Many Western dignitaries were duped in a similar manner believing in the truthfulness of similarly staged tours.

It should not be forgotten that the false presentation of the realities of life in Russia were in historical terms not a new invention. It suffices to recall the Potemkin's villages that were in truth painted panels positioned from a far to represent prosperous settlements, erected during the reign of Catherine the Great, and her efforts to create a proverbial Garden of Eden, in ancient Tauris on the shores of the Black Sea.¹¹

In the same letter, Pekić acknowledged the favorable critiques as well as opposing views and negative evaluations regarding Kiš's book. Pekić thought that Kiš was in a better position to receive the Andrić Literary Award since the October Award entailed certain ideological qualification that neither Kiš nor Pekić possessed.

Pekić disclosed that he had heard about some unfortunate incidents that were apparently staged in order to disqualify Kiš for the prestigious award. These old tricks were commonly practiced in some intellectual and artistic circles, particularly where everything was decided behind the scenes. Pekić ventured to offer advice since he understood the situation well, having personally experienced a similar confrontation:

I beseech you to guard your nerves, and not allow yourself to be provoked, since such acts, intrigues and slandering have no other goal than to compromise honorable people and lower them to the level of provincial literary politics. You should to disregard them like the proverbial traveling caravan disregarded the barking of dogs and continued with its journey. Very likely you can't escape being bitten, but the wound will eventually heal. However, a person can't be cured from the devastation of rabies that you may get if you aren't immunized. I also know that it's easy to speak from the perspective of my London isolation. I did loose many years immersed in this miserable society, where monkeys are models of intellectual superiority and citizenship. That's why I allow myself to voice all these remarks. Therefore, courage and above all hauteur.¹²

¹¹ Jelena Milojković-Djurić, "Therese Albertine von Jakob: Regarding the Lives of the Other," *The South Slav Journal*, 26 (2005). Moreover, the Russian writer Michael Gogol revealed in his novel the *Dead Soul* a similar misrepresentation when presenting the reality of social and public demeanor in Russia.

¹² Pekić's letter addressed to Kiš, London, Oct 10, 1976.

Concluding his letter, Pekić wrote that he was planning to come to Belgrade in November for the Book Fair. He decided not to drink any alcohol for the whole month prior to his travel, and he hoped that Kiš would be equally at ease and meet him with some new literary plans, instead of a sketch for an accomplished crime. On a personal note, Pekić stated that he had received the English translation of his book *Vreme čuda* (Time of Miracles), and that he considered the translation to be better than his Serbian original. The reviews of the translation were also good. He hoped that he would find the Club of the Writers Union and the usual literary entourage at their usual places as before.

The correspondence of the two great Serbian writers of Serbian reveals a number of interesting insights regarding the way they perceived the literary and political environment in which they lived.