

DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ

Old Men and Their Grandchildren

Translated from Croatian by Celia Hawkesworth

ONE HUNDRED AND ONE OLD MEN

OVER THE WEEKEND of July 19th and 20th, 2008, the town of Key West in Florida played host to 141 Ernest Hemingways. Hemingways from all over America gathered in Key West in a competition for the greatest degree of physical resemblance to the famous writer. This year the winner was Tom Grizzard, in what is said to have been a very stiff competition. The photograph that went round the world shows a collection of merry granddads, looking like Father Christmases who have escaped from their winter duties—in other words, like Ernest Hemingway. The old men, who meet every year in Key West on Hemingway's birthday, also took part in fishing and short story writing competitions.

ANOTHER OLD MAN . . .

The following day, newspapers in Croatia carried a photograph of an old man who has no connection at all with the 141 old men from the previous article. In Croatia on July 21st, 2008, Dinko Šakić died, at the age of eighty-six. Who was Dinko Šakić? Šakić was the commandant of the Ustasha concentration camp of Jasenovac, where Jews, Serbs, Gypsies, and communist-oriented Croats were efficiently executed. After the war he managed to escape to Argentina, and it was not until 1999 that the Argentinian authorities handed him over to Croatia, where he was sentenced to twenty years in prison. At that “historic” moment, many Croats saw the sentence of Dinko Šakić as an injustice—for them, that same Independent State of Croatia (in which Dinko Šakić had killed Jews, Gypsies, Serbs, and unsuitable Croats) was “the foundation of our present Croatian homeland,” as the local priest, Vjekoslav Lasić, put it on the occasion of Šakić's death. The priest was in fact merely expounding a

thesis put forward by Franjo Tuđman, the first president of Croatia (since Ante Tuđman), and the “father of the Croatian nation.” “That is why every decent Croat is proud of the name of Dinko Šakić,” announced the priest Vjekoslav Lasić, adding that he was “proud that he had seen Šakić on his bier dressed in an Ustasha uniform.” The funeral of old Dinko Šakić at Mirogoj cemetery in Zagreb on July 24th, 2008, was attended by some three hundred people. Even aged criminals have friends. Three hundred people is not a bad number.

AND YET ANOTHER OLD MAN . . .

ON THE DAY of Dinko Šakić’s funeral, another old man rose from the grave in Croatia. Zvonko Bušić Tajko — *the Croatian Mandela*, or *the most renowned Croatian émigré* (as some Croatian newspaper headlines put it) — landed at Zagreb airport on July 24th, to an enthusiastic reception by a crowd of some five hundred people. Bušić was returning to Croatia metaphorically from the grave, but in fact out of American prisons where he had spent thirty-two years. Way back in the 1970s, with his American wife, Julienne Eden BušTuđman, and a few friends, he had hijacked an American airplane on its way to New York, because “he wanted to draw the attention of the world to the unjust position of Croatia in the former Yugoslavia.” This gesture of “political activism” (as the Croatian papers defined Bušić’s terrorist act) ended ingloriously — Bušić’s explosive device led to one American policeman being killed and another losing an eye, and Bušić and his wife ended up in prison. Julienne was released on the eve of Croatian independence; she got a job in the Croatian Embassy in Washington, and later in Croatia, in Franjo Tuđman’s personal security service. The Croatian army built a villa on the Adriatic coast, so that she would be able to dedicate herself fully to writing her autobiographical novel *Lovers & Madmen* and to her political activities, lobbying for her husband’s release from prison. Among those gathered at Zagreb airport were Croatian politicians, patriots, pop singers (Marko Perković Thompson, for example), priests, children sitting on their fathers’ shoulders and holding their welcome banners up to the cameras, young people shouting Ustasha slogans (“*For the homeland ever ready!*”) and singing Ustasha songs. “The Croatian Mandela” made a patriotic speech and quoted a verse from Gundulić’s poem *Osman*, which every Croatian primary school pupil knows by heart:

*The wheel of fate spins about
Round and about ceaselessly:
He who was high is cast down
And who was below is now on high.*

Zvonko Bušić added that, thanks to the good Lord and free Croatia (“*At last I am in my free homeland!*”), he had climbed *high*, while, according to the logic of the wheel of fortune, his enemies had fallen. The only person to comment briefly the following day on Bušić’s resurrection was the Croatian president Stipe Mesic (*his motive could have been patriotic, but the method he applied was the method of terrorism*). Zvonko and Julienne Bušić told the newspapers that they wanted a little peace, although Bušić’s lively speech, his evident excitement at finally finding himself “among his own people,” and the five-hundred-strong crowd seem to indicate the opposite.

DOCTOR VELBING AND MR. HIDE

ON JULY 21st, 2008, the day Dinko Šakić died, all the world’s newspapers carried a photograph of an old man with a long white beard and white hair, coquettishly gathered on the crown of his head like a kind of diminutive Samurai pigtail. This old man had no connection whatever with the Hemingways of Key West, nor with the late Dinko Šakić, nor with Zvonko Bušić, who was to land at Zagreb airport three days later. This old man looked as though he had fallen out of the file of some Hollywood agent: like a third-rate actor who specialized in playing Merlin and Gandalf in film fairy tales. The old man was arrested in Belgrade by the Serbian police just as he was getting into a number 73 bus. It turned out that the old man was called Dragan Dabić, or rather Dragan David Dabić (3D), or rather—Radovan Karadžić. From the moment of the arrest of Radovan Karadžić, the Balkan *butcher* and European *Osama bin Laden*, the media were flooded with numerous farcical details: Karadžić’s unsuccessful attempts to get involved in football and his derisive nickname “Phantom”; his statement that *Yasser Arafat was first an international terrorist, then twenty years later he was awarded the Nobel Prize* (an echo of Tuđman’s claim that someone who knew about the Nobel Prize had once flattered him: “*If you were not a Croat, General, you would certainly have received the Nobel Prize*”); Karadžić’s frenetic 1968 student speech from the roof of the university; his activities as a police informer; his financial fraud and embezzlement; his collection of children’s verse, *There Are Miracles, There Are No Miracles*; his alleged mistress, who also has two names; his online shop where you can

buy a little “*velbing*” (from *well-being*) or a “cross-shaped composition of the smallest *velbing* for your personal protection to be worn on the chest” or a large “*velbing* or spacious cross-shaped composition which harmonizes a whole space”; the decoration on his website, a Jewish three-branched (!) menorah, which is in fact the Orthodox three-fingered blessing in disguise; his cheap aphorisms, which seem to have been copied from Paulo Coelho (“*Man is the most perfect instrument!*”). Commentaries circulated on the Internet and in private e-mails. They included mention of the film *The Hunting Party*, set in the forests of Bosnia, through which Richard Gere hunts the notorious Bogdanovich, played in the film by the Croatian actor Ljubomir Kerekeš . . . And then a friend of the author of these lines dug up a YouTube video clip from *Barbarella* in which Dr. Durand Durand (3D!) sets his *Excessive machine* in motion and performs his *Sonata for the Executioner of Various Women*. What possible connection can there be between *Barbarella* and Karadžić? None whatsoever. Apart from the fact that the Irish actor Milo O’Shea, who plays Dr. Durand Durand, is extraordinarily like Ljubomir Kerekeš, that is to say Dr. Bogdanovich, from the film *The Hunting Party*, in other words like Karadžić before his complete *makeover*.

Despite everything, this heap of trivial rubbish circulating in the media served Karadžić himself well, it transformed him from a notorious murderer into a clown and placated a potentially hostile crowd. Intrigued by the farce of his disguise, many people forgot that this same Karadžić-Bogdanovich-Dabić is sitting on a pile of anonymous human corpses, and that there is a large, silent, nameless heap of witnesses, including the women of Srebrenica, for whom this whole media circus that surrounds Karadžić is like salt on an open wound.

THE TRUTH WILL OUT . . .

PAWEL PAWLIKOWSKI’S *Serbian Epics*—the best and fullest portrait of Karadžić to date—was made as long ago as 1992. Everything in the film is so clear and explicit that this documentary on its own could serve as an indictment against Radovan Karadžić.

In the intervening years, Karadžić’s criminal file has become notoriously public, and the new details which have flooded the media since his arrest have merely confirmed what we all knew: that Karadžić is a murderer, sitting calmly on a pile of the corpses of people whom he himself killed, and the only thought buzzing in his head is—how to survive. An enormous human mechanism has been keeping Karadžić alive, the same mechanism

that preserved Milošević for years: servants, like-thinkers, admirers, assistants, petty and large-scale criminals, the police, the state apparatus, politicians, murderers, fighters, patients, women, friends, priests, the church, believers, dealers, people—both sick and quite ordinary.

At this moment, many Serbs are lighting candles and praying for their man in prison in The Hague. Ordinary citizens, aging rockers (Bora Đorđević), members of the ultra-right group “Honor” (Obraz), Serbian radicals, supporters of Šešelj, Nikolić, Karadžić, with children at their head—a boy and a girl—they are all marching at this moment through Belgrade, shouting slogans of support for Karadžić, threatening the Serbian government, The Hague Tribunal, the world. Many Serbs—who otherwise have no idea what to do in the face of a sudden “blow” in their household, when, for example, there’s a faulty tap in the bathroom, or if their wife ends up in hospital—suddenly display supreme organizational skills and political agility:

Karadžić has been arrested—a heavy “blow” has been struck against their “Serbdom.” Every *blow against Serbdom* has the effect of an adrenaline injection.

Following the false news of Karadžić’s arrest in 2001, “defensive” meetings were instantly organized in Karadžić’s native village and some other places in Montenegro.

Supporters from Montenegro and Serbia gathered, Chetnik songs rang out, priests waved censers around. Karadžić was proclaimed a *haiduk*, “poet,” “fighter,” “saint,” and “symbol of Serbdom.” People fell into poetic raptures (“*We will not hand Karadžić over!*” “*Wake up Serbian fire! Radovan is a spark in the rock. Whoever betrays the spark be damned!*” “*And may all belonging to the traitor be damned a thousand times!*”). Those present were given masks of Karadžić’s face. The Montenegrin backwoods sent a message to the world: “*We are all Radovan Karadžić!*”; in other words the people behind the masks brazenly admitted their complicity in genocide, both real and mental. The main slogan of the Chetnik organization “Honor” is: “*Every Serb is Radovan!*”—and it could be seen in recent days again in the streets of Belgrade. Is Karadžić, Radovan, really an exclusively Serbian monster? Let us not forget the fact that Karadžić easily crossed the borders between such “irreconcilably different” peoples as the Croats, Serbs, Bosnians, and Montenegrins; he spent his summer holidays in Croatia (making only a single linguistic error, the experts maintain). In the end, if for no other reason than because of Karadžić’s longevity and his ability to rise up again like a phoenix, one might ask: How many citizens of the former Yugoslavia were Radovan Karadžić?

CHILDREN, GRANDCHILDREN, MUTANTS

THE LACK OF A SYMBOLIC lynching of Karadžić—now that it is possible—demonstrates that the problem is deeper and harder, and that it is not after all confined to “Karadžićes”: swindlers; prophets and profiteers; doctors of the human soul; grudge-bearers who drag their personal affronts out of dusty chests and transform them into ideologies; necrophiliacs; bone-diggers; bullies; exterminators; murderers; drummers-up of collective hysteria; local “butchers” and “vampires” for whom many citizens of the former Yugoslavia have been obediently stretching out their necks for two decades now. The problem is that all these servants of fascism—like Karadžić—do not excel in the quantity of evil they produce, but in an invisible form, in the seed they leave behind them, in their children, and their grandchildren.

And those children, grandchildren, mutants, have sprung up, healthy and handsome, in the course of these last twenty years. These are the children with Chetnik caps on their heads, who demonstrate throughout Serbia against Karadžić’s arrest. Or Marija Šefarović, whose three-fingered sign of the cross spread throughout Europe, although she was unable to explain its purpose (“In the name of mother, father, and you know . . .” she tried irritably to explain to a Dutch woman journalist), and who, when she won the Eurovision Song Contest, did so as she put it herself, “for Serbia.” These are the enthusiastic supporters of the “granddads,” of the Serbian radical Tomislav Nikolić (the author of the statement “God created the world in six days, and it took me two to send it reeling”); these are the bullies who beat up Gypsies and homosexuals in the streets of Belgrade; the drunken, ecstatic crowd at concerts by Ceca Ražnjatović-Arkan. These young mutants are from Bosnia; they go on the rampage during football championships and wrap themselves in Croatian, Serbian, and Turkish flags as if in a protective placenta. They are secondary-school children from Makarska who recently had themselves photographed for their school almanac with a swastika in the background, “for fun” (“It’s not a swastika but an Indian symbol of love and peace,” a pupil explained meekly) and strutted about wearing T-shirts bearing the slogan “Über alles” (“We meant that we had matriculated, it was over, we were above all others,” explained another even more meekly). These are the children who appear at concerts by Marko Perković Thompson in Ustasha uniforms and raise their right hands to the level of their noses, while their granddads—Croatian academicians, writers, journalists, doctors, generals,

philosophers, and publicists—write open letters of support for Thompson, the illiterate, third-rate turbo-folk singer, defending his right to the expression of uncensored Ustasha ideas in our free Croatian homeland. They are the young members of obscure pro-fascist parties in Serbia; children with tattoos, whose bodies display Pavelić's face; customers in shops freely selling fascist souvenirs; the "brave" attackers of tourists, foreigners, homosexuals, and Gypsies. These are children who wear crosses round their necks, who regularly attend Catholic and Orthodox churches and Muslim mosques, who hate each other, or some third party, and all join in hating Gypsies, Jews, blacks, and homosexuals. These are young contributors to chat-sites who, I presume, know of their brothers: the young Hungarian fascists (*Magyar garda*), who rose up to defend "Magyar values and culture"; the young Bulgarian fascists of Bogdan Rassata, who "defend Bulgarian values and culture" and for ideological reasons beat up Turks and Gypsies; the brutal Russian children, who beat to death anyone whose skin is darker than Putin's; the eco-fascists of the German radical right . . . They are members of "Honor" and similar ultra-right-wing groups who lure children with the cheap glue of love of God and the homeland, Serbian Serbia, gallant armed forces, the crucified fatherland, and the suffering nation (We need new heroes, Obilićs, and new Maids of Kosovo!). These children are young Croats, Serbs, Montenegrins, and Bosnians who use both open and closed web forums to sow and graft their hatred and proclaim that the war is not yet over . . . And they are not alone (there are their grandparents, their parents, their families, Serbdom, Croatdom), nor are they original: fascism thrives among servants and in serving. The local press, local authorities, and local politicians do not pay attention to the "children," "cases," "hooligans," "troublemakers," "unpleasant, but understandable incidents" in what is otherwise the successful daily life of transition.

Meanwhile Radovan Karadžić can stroll peacefully in his Hugo Boss suits into the Hague courtroom. His work is done.

A PROCESSION OF COLLECTIVE SHAME

THE JOB OF THE Hague judges is to prove individual guilt in the war crimes committed on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, and they, the judges, will be the first, I presume, not to agree with the emotional and hazy thesis of collective guilt. It seems, however, that the mere trial of war criminals does not have the power to bring about a real catharsis or to set

in motion real social changes. For without the admission of collective responsibility there can be no successful de-Nazification. For many citizens of the former Yugoslavia, regardless of the actual scale of their responsibility and guilt in the recent war—which, we emphasize, is not equal or the same—those who are to blame for everything are always the others: for the Croats it is the Serbs, for the Serbs the Muslims, the Kosovo Albanians, the Croats, *the whole world* . . . All of them blame the communists, Tito, and the Partisans for everything. And then the “Americans,” the “Russians,” “Jews,” “Europe,” “the world,” unfavorable stars, destiny. All, without distinction, insist on interpreting the events—which they themselves initiated, which they failed to prevent, or in which they themselves took part—as natural catastrophes in which they are exclusively the victims. In that sense Karadžić’s schizophrenic fragmentation—into a *gusle*-player, a psychiatrist, would-be footballer, ecologist, police informer, Chetnik, murderer, politician, would-be Nobel Prize-winner, thief, poet, tutti-frutti guru, Orthodox mystic, into Radovan Karadžić and Dragan David Dabić—is a typical local sickness, the result of a general social lie, a profound moral and mental disturbance, a madness which their milieu continues persistently to treat as though it were normal.

There is a hope that, with the arrest of Karadžić, by contrast with the messages of the young mutants, the war will finally end. There is a childish hope that we will one day come across the following little newspaper announcement:

ON THE 21ST OF JULY 2018—the day of the arrest of the criminal Radovan Karadžić, sentenced to a hundred years in prison for genocide in Bosnia, in the Montenegrin town of Meljina, which is known for its traditional festival of *gusle*-playing—there took place a “procession of collective shame,” consisting of 141 old men. The old men had false beards and false white hair gathered on the crowns of their heads in pigtailed, and they exposed themselves voluntarily to being spat at by the crowd, which this year had gathered in large numbers in order to participate in the ritual of repentance. In this ritual “the old men” (every year there are new volunteers—everyone has the right to participate in the ritual only once, so that all interested volunteers can have their turn) express their awareness of the crimes committed, of the fact that these crimes were committed in their name, with their full knowledge or even their participation, they confess their responsibility for their crimes and apologize wholeheartedly to their victims.

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