

MILJENKO JERGOVIĆ

Kakania

Translated from Bosnian by Russell Scott Valentino

MY GRANDFATHER Franjo Rejc lived his life in Bosnia. As a high-ranking railroad official, he moved from station to station until, several months before the outbreak of World War II, he arrived in Sarajevo to work at the main headquarters with the title of chief railway inspector. When I first wrote about my grandfather's working as a chief inspector, the critics interpreted it as a postmodern inscription for Danilo Kiš, whose novelistic and actual father had the same job. This, however, was not something I was thinking about at the time. I did not compare the life of my grandfather with that of heroes in books. But I was still pleased by the critical observation. Anytime anyone would later ask me whether the figure of my grandfather as a chief inspector was an homage to Danilo Kiš, I would lie and say yes. In the end, perhaps it really is. Perhaps the actual life of my deceased grandfather Franjo Rejc was a palimpsest of some written or unwritten Kiš novel. And perhaps the rest of us are living the lives of some future or past literary characters.

But there is something real that connects Kiš's father and my grandfather—the long-lived emperor and king Franz Joseph I. It was under his good leadership that the tracks were constructed where the two of them performed their highly responsible work. The job of a chief inspector is to somehow arrange the movement of trains such that two trains are never found on the same stretch of open track, hurtling toward each other. His job is to foresee and avoid all possible accidents and collisions.

From the spring when he arrived in Sarajevo as an experienced railway man to design timetables, until his final days, my grandfather lived in fear of accidents across the territory for which the headquarters in Bosnia and Herzegovina had responsibility. It didn't matter where the fault lay—with a drunk engineer, a broken signal light, tracks in disrepair, or inclement weather, a storm, an earthquake, a fire—he believed deep inside that if only one thing were different, if

the arrivals and departures of the locals, the regionals, the internationals with people and freight had been planned better, casualties could have been averted or, in the very least, lessened. The network of narrow- and standard-gauge lines mapped as if onto the network of his nervous system. But as the lines for which he had responsibility were part of a wider structure, the largest piece of which had been planned and built during Austro-Hungarian times, he did the calculations for his timetable and put it in accord with all the others, from the Baltic and mythic Galicia, from the Kingdom of Krakow, from Ukraine and Romania, across Hungary and Vojvodina, all the way to Austria and the capital of the dual monarchy in Vienna. Every accident that took place in this territory was part of his responsibility. Even though the Habsburg monarchy and the Kakania of Robert Musil had been dead for decades, my grandfather Franjo Rejc's native country to the end of his working days, and then to the end of his life, spread out across the entire landmass of what had once been Austro-Hungary. It might seem a nice metaphor to some, but his country was, before all else, the space of his personal responsibility.

All the timetables were kept in our home, from the first in 1923 to the one for the year of his death in 1972. Even after he retired at the beginning of the seventies, he continued to worry about accidents and schedules, though he no longer worked out the calculations for them. He obviously knew the names of all the hubs from Gdansk to Doboj and Vinkovci. In truth he knew the names of all the stations from the northern to the southern seas. In his world, the great luxurious stations like the one in Pest, which was the pride of the monarchy at the time of its demise, or in Warsaw, that ugly and incomplete work of socialist architecture, were less important because it was often the small, provincial, nameless stations that posed the greatest risk of serious disaster. A switchman's wife had died or a station chief had got drunk at his son's wedding and thought the train from Kiev was behind schedule, and there it would happen—a horrid accident somewhere in the depths of Ukraine in which hundreds of people perished and which was felt from Riga to Kovno in the north all the way to Zelenik, the tiny station in Montenegro's far south, at the end of the narrow-gauge that completed Franz Joseph's tracks down on the shores of the warm sea. Its finale was like something in a dream—until that bit of track was definitively closed in 1968, the train crossed the boardwalk, passing along the coast before arriving at the final station, right beside the beach where tourists

sunbathed, while children with inflatable tubes around their waists hopped back from the locomotive's puffs of steam before saving themselves by leaping into the sea at the last second. From 1904 or 1907, when that part of the track was opened, until 1968, no one was ever killed by the train in Zelenik, though the people sunbathing on the beach would be sprinkled with coal dust from the locomotive's engine. Today this would be considered neither healthy nor ecologically sound.

My grandfather Franjo Rejc's native land extended from Kovno to Zelenik. While the Austro-Hungarian state no longer existed and the governmental, administrative, and cultural institutions that would have borne its name were no more, and although all of Europe looked on it with disdain and condescension after the fall of Kakania, the most important thing that defined my grandfather's emotional and cultural identity did exist—the network of complementing logically linked railway lines of the Habsburg monarchy, as well as his feeling of responsibility and strong emotional attachment to the people who maintained that network. I know of no more precise definition of the concepts of homeland and patriotism than how my grandfather, the chief inspector in Sarajevo's head office, lived his life. I somehow imagine that the other chief inspectors must have resembled him.

My grandfather Franjo Rejc knew the following languages besides his native Slovenian and Serbo-Croatian: German, which he spoke without an accent; Italian, which he learned in an Italian detention camp during World War I—he would remember it for the rest of his life; French, because it would be a pity not to study French if you already knew Italian; Hungarian, which he studied and learned well during the last gasps of the monarchy in which all the better educated Southern Slavs knew Hungarian, too; Romanian—I have no idea why he studied that language; and as a seventy-year-old, having concluded that English was the language of the future, he took up a grammar book and a dictionary, and began to study them. I had already been born by this time. He would walk around the house, refusing to communicate in any language but English. Everyone found this funny. Go ahead and laugh, he would say, but this was the only way to learn a language. (As I write this, it grieves me no end that I did not inherit his gift for languages and even more his courage to attempt to speak in a language he barely knew. . . .)

All this was somehow natural and normal. In the world into which my grandfather was born, it was not strange to know a handful of

languages—particularly for people from the border. My grandfather was born in 1896 when his father, a Slovene by nationality, was a guest worker in Bosnia. It was a time for big construction projects, and he came from Tolmin, an area of extreme poverty along the coast of what is today right on the frontier between Slovenia and Italy. It was he who did the metalwork for Sarajevo Cathedral, which was then under construction. The door handles and locks in today's church were forged and installed by my Slovene great-grandfather. Besides being a good smith, he had six children and was an alcoholic his entire life, a difficult man, and abusive to his family.

Having run away from such a father, my grandpa Franjo connected with his numerous relatives who were still living in Tolmin. He studied at the famous Jesuit gymnasium in Travnik and spent his vacations with them in Slovenia. Even though he was a Bosnian from the standpoint of his native land and his true homeland was Austro-Hungary, my grandpa Franjo was a Slovene in terms of nationality. He wasn't happy when, after the fall of the Habsburg monarchy, the border between the Kingdom of Italy and the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes cut right through the homeland of his relatives, slicing it into two pieces, the larger part falling to Italy.

And of course, as it was the European custom of the time to give one's life for one's language, homeland, and culture, my grandpa's kinsmen turned toward clandestine organizations. At first they sought their right to be what they were, Slovenes, but as that didn't go over well and the Italians were unwilling to allow them to open schools that taught in Slovene, the demands for cultural and educational autonomy expanded into militant political and irredentist strategies. Thus did my Slovene ancestors, the close kinsmen of my grandfather, turn toward the battle for something that small, European nations would fight for throughout the twentieth century, in different ways and with differing emotional commitments and existential roles, people whose villages and homelands were divided and plowed through by the borders of newly formed states. The methods were of course always the same: assassinations, terrorism, sabotage, concealed explosives.

The largest Slovenian revolutionary organization, which was created by my grandfather's relations and compatriots, was called TIGR (or Trieste, Istria, Gorizia, and Rijeka). As with all true revolutionaries, they chose a quite sentimental name for themselves. The abbreviation spelled out the Slovenian word for tiger. I don't bring it up in order to

express pride about my grandfather and his relations, but they were in fact the first secret anti-Fascist organization in Europe, for they were formed immediately on Mussolini's rise to power and their program was consistent in its anti-Fascism and irredentism. They printed leaflets, issued proclamations, and shot and threw bombs until the beginning of the thirties, when they were annihilated, driven underground, into the woods, or forced to emigrate to Yugoslavia under the pressure of Mussolini's own state terrorism. Then as now, state terrorism was stronger and more successful than revolutionary, individual, or conspiratorial terrorism. In Italy, several TIGR members, including one of my grandfather's closest relatives, were sentenced to death and were killed.

My grandfather Franjo Rejc had nothing against Italians. One could even say he loved both them and their language. He looked at the years he spent as an Austro-Hungarian soldier in an Italian detention camp (from 1915 to 1919) as the most beautiful years of his youth. He made friends among the Italian guards with whom he would correspond to the very end as one by one they passed on to the next world. I suppose he didn't discuss his relatives with them, or the idea that Istria along with Trieste, the Karst Plateau, and the coast to the south, might be split off from the Kingdom of Italy and attached to the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, which since 1929 had been named the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. His Italian friends were, I believe, also anti-Fascists, for why would Italian fascists correspond with a Slovene from Bosnia, but, even so, they would not likely have supported the idea of snipping off pieces of Italy, especially since some of them were from Trieste and Istria. How did my grandfather reconcile his devotion to his Italian friends with his loyalty to his Slovene relatives? How did he reconcile his belief that the portions of Italy populated by a majority of Slovenes should be part of Yugoslavia with his coolly acknowledged belief that the Italians were nobler, more cultured, and better educated than us, their southern Slav neighbors? How did he reconcile terrorism as a method of struggle for Slovenian freedom with the freedom and right to life of his Italian comrades? I know nothing of all this, having been just six years old when he died and having never had the chance to ask him.

The relation of the Yugoslav authorities to the members of TIGR was strategic. When relations with Mussolini's Italy were bad, they let those people loose and even encouraged them to commit acts of ter-

ror. But when at the end of the thirties Milan Stojadinović, who had found in Mussolini his political ideal, became premier in Belgrade, however, the Tigers found themselves under the full force of law. It was even worse at the beginning of World War II. The Quisling authorities of the Independent State of Croatia, as well as the occupying German forces in Slovenia, persecuted and killed them, nor did Tito's Partisans have much faith in them. One of my grandfather's relatives, an important leader in TIGR, was even shot by the Partisans. In the battle for the proletarian international, the Communists were happy to use terrorist methods, but what they hated more than anything was when someone else was fighting for the same cause they were.

During the war, besides creating railroad timetables and worrying about possible train accidents, my grandfather hid TIGR members who made it to Sarajevo as they fled persecution. He also kept an important part of TIGR's secret documents. Fearing a search, he buried the documents in a field, which was later paved over, so it's not known whether the papers were destroyed or whether they still lie somewhere underground, wrapped in a rubberized tarp or tucked away in metal boxes. They await some future archaeologist to discover them by chance and bring them to light. This is how the story of our family's terrorism comes to an end. After the fall of Communism and the creation of an independent state, several books about TIGR were published in Slovenia. One was by the widow of my grandfather's closest relative, whom everyone called Uncle Berti.

My grandfather Franjo Rejc would often come to mind when the story of a unified Europe still held a romantic attraction for those of us just coming out of the bloody wars that had begun in 1991 and only ended in 1999 when NATO completed its bombing of Serbia. Though he's been dead for forty years, this sort of united Europe was his true homeland. It won't change anything in my life, nor will it become my native country—in contrast to my grandfather, I am a Balkan native, a person closed in on himself, someone who doesn't like to travel and looks at everything from a distance, askance, through books, films, and newspapers. He knew many of its languages and would have learned all the rest if he'd had time. He was a true European, for he created Europe and simultaneously destroyed it. First he worked for keeping the harmony of his tracks, then he helped his relatives in their revolutionary aspirations. Thus did his life unfold in a completely European rhythm of building up and tearing down. Of

all this I have only his memory. I have the stories he told me, or the stories about him that others told me, or that I learned from the letters he received from friends, preserved in the back of a Sarajevo closet. His Europe was the “native realm” of Czesław Miłosz, while mine is just the recollection of that other Europe that was his, and probably for me it can be nothing more than that.

My grandfather Franjo Rejc was a more completed European than I am. Although I am seventy years his junior, was born in a time of televised, quickly transmitted information, and was formed through and through by the époque of a computerized, virtual, and altogether globalized world, in a figurative sense I am centuries older than he was, less prepared to adapt, more distant from the ideal of a unified world that would stretch from the northern seas to the southern. But I recognize both his railroads and his sympathy for the terrorism of our Slovene relatives. I have a recollection of Europe, but only a recollection.

My grandpa has called to my mind a unified Europe, that is, the European Union, whenever its conception has awakened for me those early romantic and idealistic notions characteristic of people from Eastern Europe and the former Yugoslavia when they were still certain that a unified Europe would be a community of cultures in which the rights of individuals, their basic human rights, would be the basic reason for its existence. Never was Europe so beautiful and exalted as to the wretches of Eastern Europe, to the Yugoslav peoples and nations ravaged by their brotherly, civil, and nationalistic wars. They honestly believed Europe would return to them their human dignity, that it would heal them of their nationalism, and that by some marvelous enchantment it would make them better and happier. The energy of their disillusionment would be the same as that of their hope. The positive force of Eastern Europe has not been used up, but the effects of the force of disillusionment will continue to be felt for some time to come.

With time I, like others, have come to understand that the European Union is above all an economic, financial, corporate entity, a sort of Deutsche Telekom, British Petroleum, or, more precisely, a network of global banks with credit lines, interest on arrears, and marketing-oriented packages of financial services for governments and citizens, and that it is a community of cultures only to the extent that this improves the business of banks, the prosperity of telecommunications companies, the survival of European oil companies in the brutal world

market. Just as every large bank publicly boasts of its humanitarian funding and expenditures on culture and ecology, so can the European Union boast of its status as a community of cultures. But the worst and most painful thing is that the basic human rights of a citizen of the European Union depend on having been born in Germany, the Netherlands, France, or, perhaps, Greece, Hungary, or Italy. This means that, from the standpoint of human rights, this territory without customs and border crossings, with a unified currency and proclaimed shared ideals, is the same as it would be if the customs and border crossings still existed.

No, I am not complaining about it, nor am I even disappointed—but I did think it would be different. In this I am neither a Yugoslav nor an East European. I am not so easily disappointed, but I was led to my personal error in the vision of a united Europe by reflecting on it and how it arose. How could I have come to see my grandfather as an ideal European? Was it just that he knew so many European languages? Well, today on our computers we have Google Translate, which knows all the languages of the world, in a superficial way. Or was it the Austro-Hungarian railroads and the worry of a chief inspector in the face of possible accidents? Well, why couldn't a global tracking system be built by a European today when aircraft have long since been networked across the skies and not even the detainees in secret American prisons, those concentration camps of our time, are put into cattle cars but are plopped from one place to another by enormous military cargo jets? Actually, for this Europe of banks I am incomparably better prepared than my grandfather—he lived and died for Europe as a community of cultures, for a Europe of human rights.

My mistake lay in imagining a unified Europe as a completed and modernized Austro-Hungary, the land in which our kind old king and emperor deemed on principle that he should know all the languages of his monarchy. His son, Franz Ferdinand—whom we would kill in Sarajevo on St. Vitus Day, 28 June 1914—even stated that before ascending to the throne he would speak our own Serbo-Croatian fluently. However much we might ridicule it, Kakanian was a community of cultures. And it fell because it could no longer function as such a community. If it had been formed as a capitalist corporation, perhaps it would have lasted until our own day, for in that case it would not have even entered the minds of its small nations to struggle for and win their small national rights to culture, language, and identity. The

established illusion of Austro-Hungary as a community of cultures passed through the years and generations of the nineteenth century. When at last everyone believed in it, they took to destroying it. And this was how the shots fired by Gavrilo Princip marked the start of World War I. Afterward, some Slovene kinsman of mine began shooting at the customs guards and carabinieri in Trieste, for he was fueled by the belief—acquired before the collapse of the great multinational monarchy—that he had the right to his own language, homeland, and culture. In the end, that he had the right to his own country.