

Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

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Excerpts from the Novel “Spies”

Derviš Suši?

I arrived on the agreed day. I spent two nights at the local inn, met several respected gentlemen, and, in fact, they deigned ask me for my name, origin, and reason for coming. I persuaded them to believe in the veracity of the prepared information.

At first sight, everything here seems peaceful, or perhaps, I still haven't managed to sharpen my senses for this environment.

The gentleman who you mentioned can be relied upon during the times of the utmost need died last Friday; supposedly, his rifle malfunctioned. People from the administration are so domestically inclined that I most probably will be unable to cooperate with any of them. But, I have to – from the beginning.

The bearer of this letter knows not who sends it, nor does he know to whom it is addressed. Reward him, but trust him not.

The center or *aršija* of a Bosnian town, such as this one, is a mystery to every foreigner, and a closed gate to every inexperienced newcomer. To its own people, it is a nest, a brood in which everyone knows when and how someone may talk, and when it is the time to be silent. They share every secret amongst themselves. If someone is being silent about something, that is just an order, a threat, or a plea to others to meddle not in that matter.

The people here tend to become subjugated by and socialized into the praxis of others until they find their own place in this world, acquiring routines for themselves, and – to a degree – an autonomous personality: this way, they protect themselves from the unforeseen, while complying with the established customs. This rigid, slow, and cautious behavior is an unwritten contract with the other for support and cultural persistence.

Hardly anyone is happy here, if we agree that happiness is the joy springing from life. On the other hand, misfortune is endured in silence, as if it is an ugly, cloudy sky, or an ulcer behind one's neck. It is the worst for foreigners: they go berserk, or run away from their refined, polite suspicion. Even the expert spy is instantly recognized here, then excommunicated, exiled, or found in a ditch with a slit throat.

You should not worry for my safety. They trust me.

Some of our assumptions about Bosnia, the town of Grada?ac, and Husein were not correct. The reason for this is the laziness of our administration to penetrate into real life, as well as the lack of courage among officials to openly present the truth to their superiors.

Considering Bosnian conditions, Grada?ac is a rich place. Allah forbid if you live in such abundance. The people here have been destitute for such a long time that the only things left to them are indignation, hatred, and hope. It is only now that I have come to understand the intensity

of their misunderstanding with our administration.

Their lives become less burdensome through discrete acts of mercy. Husein rewards people most frequently, and in the greatest abundance.

Last Friday, the old imam placed me in front of him to pray Jum'ah. After I finished with prayers, I started walking towards the door, holding the imam by his arm. Once I reached the door among the last ones, a young and haughty gallant started praising my work. The imam told me that was Husein.

I ask from you to consider the following about him:

He is my age, somewhat shorter than me, but quite strong and fast. On his way out, he reprimanded me in an impertinent manner, because a young and learned hafiz, such as I, roams around the Empire, instead of settling down in one place. And to all of that, I humbly justified myself by saying that I would be happy if I could find a permanent job somewhere, but the happiest if I could settle down in a town or *šeher* so beautiful as Grada?ac.

To my offer, he said nothing. He just went up the street, unarmed, straight-postured, and absorbed in his thoughts. Following him were three of his attendants, each determined to kill in an instant anyone who would address a foul word to Husein-bey.

For the time being, there is no possibility of poisoning or killing him.

The weather here is frantic. The more sensitive scoundrels from warmer lands should be exiled into this place. All of this humidity and nauseating boredom would make them slit their throats.

I found a room in the house of a widow whose husband died in the battle of Ivankovac. She is timid and pious. In addition, she is poor, but everything in her place is as clean as the interior of a mosque. The old imam recommended her to me. I think I will be able to use her for some small errands, which only women can take care of.

Since the month of Ramadan has started, I am assigned more work as a skilled hafiz. I recite the Holy Qur'an and lead Tarawih prayers. I know that Husein spends every night with the most respected gentlemen, but I still have not managed to entice anyone to enter into that company. I must not risk so much, and expose myself so directly. Bosnian people possess such a refined sense for measure in relations that it is too dangerous to rush something or to be late.

Even though I constantly encountered Husein, and was close enough to stab him, yet not flee, he looked at me not a single time. And yet, I have a feeling that he sees me, assesses me, and inspects me.

The Bosniak is modest by his nature. Husein, nonetheless, is preparing for a coronation. Be careful – if unified, the Bosniak stubbornness, and the valley hatred inherited from his mother, will make him into a huge opponent to our aims in Bosnia. Our delays play into his hands.

The affairs of the imperial administration in Grada?ac are not even moderately functioning, let alone in a tolerable manner. If a rebellion were to start anywhere in Bosnia, it would start here. For the time being, I am not aware of any details regarding the preparation for such an undertaking. I do not even think they could hide the very idea of rebellion from me.

The widow is offering me, indirectly, her niece, forty dunums¹ of plowed field, eighteen dunums of orchard land, and two fine oxen and a cow. I am mentioning this as an example of how much she came to fancy me. It is from her that I discovered much about the members of Husein's household, although a more destitute people here nurture God-fearing silence about the captain's house and his affairs, as if they are holy secrets.

If you wish to know about his fortune, I cannot grasp it fully. One talkative man told me that Husein could support 15.000 soldiers for an entire year, even in the time of war. There are signs that he is supported by Austria in two ways: one is through loans without a fixed date of payment, the other through very favorable prices for his grains, cattle, trees, fruit, wool, wax, and hay. His

mother proudly claims that he is the only Gradaš?evi?, or a person from Grada?ac, who knows the location of every single coin he owns. Therefore, he knows a lot.

I request that money be sent to me at the first opportunity. It is high time I start weaving the web we planned.

Husein is not a Turkish captain, but a captain of his own kind. There is no possibility of carrying out a direct assassination. Not a single fanatic exists who would support our idea of raising a hand to this haughty outlaw, for they are aware they would immediately be torn into pieces. What is more, you cannot find anyone in this place who hates the captain so much that they would die simply to satisfy their hatred.

Husein is not a half-literate landowner feeding the whole gang of outlaws for the purpose of fighting neighbors of the same kind. He is a European who prays, and a Bosniak who hates Turks. Husein is not a stupid rich person, obsessed with the passions common among the Bosniak provincial lords, such as conspicuous possession and superiority of title. His possessions, titles, and personal prestige are merely means to an end. The goal is to rule Bosnia. I propose we invite him to Travnik. I would agree to prepare a non-commissioned officer whose rifle would fire accidentally.

Husein is not a despot. Each time he passes through the town center, or *?aršija*, on foot, he kindly greets every elderly person. When he rides with an escort, people move away into the corner, smiling and admiring both his horses and horsemen. His power lays in the hope fostered by the backward peasantry and artisans who believe that they could break out of poverty under his rule. Surprisingly, no one envies him for his wealth, nor is anyone particularly affected by a lack of trust in him due to their immense disparity in wealth. He managed to convince his people that he will never fail them.

In a possible rebellion, we will have to deal not only with the stupid vanity of the gentry, but with a fanatic and beligerent peasantry, unable to organize themselves, but able to fight. I ask from you to hurry with your measures of separating the other beys from Husein.

Husein, among other things, has one shelf full of Austrian collections of laws and commentaries. He reads more than people assume. Our advantage is the fact that his fellow countrymen do not do the same.

I do not understand why you refuse to give answers to my heralds. I shall not be left in the position of an ordinary observer and reporter. I am not even aware of the evaluations of my own reports. Therefore, I seek permission to come to the center for negotiations.

Why do the sources interest you? That is unusual. Nevertheless, I will mention three of them. One of my sources is a scribe who smokes hashish in seclusion, yet has no money for drugs; the next is a woman building a house simply to lure some widower, who hates two of her cousins residing near Gradaš?evi?'s kitchen. The final source is a farm boy working as a fortress guardian who, by his clothes and profligacy, is trying his best to portray himself as a hero and a person of good stock; and yet, he is short of *nafaka*². None of them have noticed my curiosity, but only my desire to chit-chat, and my willingness to help them.

I received the money. I would like to thank you for your understanding expressed in the amount of money, which is greater than what I demanded in the first place. This shall help me even more to fortify myself in the center or *?aršija* of this town.

One should always strive to know the essence of things in our profession, but I wish for you to

never have to enter into the essence of Bosnia, for in that case, your lovely golden eyes would become drained through depression and silence in a one or two-year period. Your healthy and mature laughter would turn into incurable states of mute lamentation and agony.

Pardon me, but it seems that someone unknown is walking outside the doors. Oh, but he has passed!

Thank God! Just in case, take off your shoes, put on my slippers, place a cigarette between your fingers, cross your legs, but act more free, so that we appear as lovers, in case someone...

accidentally opens the door,

that way, exactly,

thank you!

And now, you may drink half a cup of brandy, and unbutton another button on your chest,

that way,

yes, that way!

And now – may God grant me the ability to utter something smart, for you are so wonderful...

I apologize, yet despite my reality and self-discipline, I am a human being as well, perhaps even more sensible and more amorous than the average European. That's how it is, unfortunately!

But, I started talking about the essence of Bosnia! You see, that essence exists somewhere, and yet, no one has managed to penetrate its depths through logic. Each and every country can easily be defined from a national, geo-political, ethnic, or any other perspective. But not Bosnia! And yet, it still possesses all the continuities and continual prerogatives of a country that used to lavish in years of splendor, and years of slavery; possessing both the grandeur of the European kingdoms, and the squalor of a divided Ottoman province.

You see, our Europe – where creative curiosity is reduced to the tourist mentality, and abstract thought to the daily feuilletonism³ – suffers from a great deal of misconceptions about Bosnia. The first of those misconceptions is that Bosnia is an Orient in the West. Though, its essence I do not know. In general, it is hard to define, and one can use only partial analytics.

In the ethnic and religious senses, Bosnia is more diverse than the Levant. Things here possess the Albanian stubbornness, and due to bloody experiences, they pamper, and touch themselves softly, and with caution. Then, from time to time, they wreak havoc upon themselves in the most dreadful ways, through bloodshed, so emotional and severe that every intervention by a cultured Europe would appear to be a Heaven-sent mercy.

It is probably because of this that the profile of a man from this area appears as a great mystery before simplified European criteria, even considering that we know everything about the European and Oriental psychologies, as well as everything about the multitude of intersecting variants.

No, Bosnia is something entirely different; something tragic, humble, dignified, serene, and compassionate – and yet, it is unfaltering.

Look at the people here! A constant tense, but silent anger over something, perhaps over everything. One soundless indictment of God, and heaven, and earth, for their own fate; a sorrowful and morbid lack of self-criticism, which brings forth evil victims. And thus, they move as in a tragic opera, in which everyone plays the leading role. Nay, it is too difficult for me, someone using the English language, to have proficiency in the softness of expression, clarity, and all of the partial shades of meaning so common in the local mentality. Our neurotic European flexibility will become insane before this primitive, and yet so persistently played stone-cold tranquility of the Bosnians. And I swear, the tranquility they possess is a masquerade. It is simply a fortress guarding their overt sensitivity, one perhaps even deeper and sicker than our own. What resides in the fortress, I do not know. Perhaps nothing but the hope of the patient ones? Or the hatred of the oppressed? Or perhaps the vanity of the perpetual provincials? I want none of our

friends to be obliged to penetrate the walls of this fortress, through this jungle of silence and boundless suspicion.

Even the stone is talkative compared to this land, for even if you receive an elaborate welcome, a long woven story, or persuasion to talk you out of something, no matter what you do, in the end you are nothing but a strange newcomer for them, escorted by a thinly veiled taunt and refined contempt.

I managed to convince them that I am a harmless – somewhat odd – friend, and I have learned enough to discern the true intent in the flood of skilled speech and courteous listening. The archive of the headquarters is a witness to how much I achieved, but only God and I know under what circumstances.

Margaret,

I have been living with these people, and all of a sudden, after eleven years of sadness and darkness, at the moment when my belief, ambition, and sense of duty are almost about to die due to despair and fatigue, you appear – so beautiful, radiant, and joyous – to make my life better, and this voluntary slavery bearable... in four days only... in four days only.

Eleven years!

Can you even imagine what it means to me to have a whole night with you, after eleven years of constant tension, the iron regime over myself, and all the bitterness within and around me...

I am sorry,

it seems to me that someone uninvited is tramping around the door again. Nay, it is fine! Still, I will sit down next to you, on the back of a sofa, and kiss you... let me kiss your lips! Mmm!

Thank you Margaret!

Thank you, and let me kiss your hand as well.

My Morlak is long gone, and I still spend afternoons and evenings next to the slightly opened window, crying and waiting for him – but waiting is in vain. Turpija, my dear friend, what should I do, where should I go, for God's sake?! I am sitting here with dead arms in my lap, getting old and becoming uglier too quickly; and so my long periods of silence and my cries have not reached anyone. The people simmer and swarm, carried away by their whirling, and I – like a corpse outside of its coffin – am floating without goal and meaning.

Nay, I am not crying for Morlak the husband, or Morlak the protector. Nor am I crying for a body I cannot renounce. I am lamenting my own existence. Through the memory of Morlak, I lead a fulfilled life. He took away the one thing that kept me on my feet, fed my hope, and gave me a reason to exist.

Life itself was scattering dreams, spoiling plans, and destroying faith. The more flexible ones assimilated themselves easily enough, but Morlak did not belong to them. The smarter ones obeyed – Morlak did not belong to them either. You were not beside any dangerous ford to lead Morlak across. Nobody can obligate you to do miracles, from whatever standpoint. I, especially, cannot blame you for anything, because I see – I apologize for this rudeness, but I can feel that your renowned strength, that tranquility, that radiant, yet ever watchful reason, is nothing but a tense coil hardly keeping your dirty laundry and moments of crisis from surfacing – all of that is only a school of time, not the real state of things.

All sorts of misfortunes, and the books I read in my times of crisis have taught me to make conclusions, even though they destroyed every need for action.

This is how I live – in silent mourning!

I am alone. In my room, crushed by fear and fatigue, I sit, hands in lap, and cry. The night covering me with its veil is thick from ripe vegetation, and is suffocatingly stuffy from the intense scents. I would like to think about everything in peace, and come to a reasonable decision, but my thoughts

are just a pitiful candle in this darkness. When the window is slightly opened, I look over the rooftops to see hills, or hear the melancholic tolling of bronze placed on a bellwether; however, the town's rooftops are like dead men's coffins. The sky is desolate, and the high winds are not coming down here, entangling my locks. The unknown others crawl down below, obsessed with selfish unrest, and bound by the anxiety within and around themselves.

And my Morlak is gone.

Damned spies!

For even from the imaginary ones, we reap only agony and a wasteland.

My Morlak is gone: it seems I am gone as well.

I could easily manage myself, if it was about me alone, and if I became accustomed to thinking of myself without care for the others. Nonetheless, the roots of my misfortune are far deeper than the reasons for my personal sadness. I see around me, innumerable victims, such as myself, my Morlak, and you Turpija, my friend, as well as all of us who remember the war atrocities, be it in our body or through our eyes. And since I cannot murder a murderer, or burn an arsonist, or stone a beast – for I am helpless – I simply wish I could disentangle my hair, deform my face and chest, and curse:

Damn you!

You... who in your lust for money slurp human blood, and devour human flesh;

You who issue orders for butchering and torching, and you who butcher and torch things to the ground;

You who keep us awake, for fear that you may take away our children, or place us in chains while we're dozing off;

You who hire spies, and you who spy on us.

Damn you, damn all of you!

I wish all those victims, both dead and alive, would appear to you in both dream and reality, so as to interrogate you...

Yes, they would interrogate you, and you would be struck by fear and shame, unable to provide answers! Forever!

We gratefully thank the family of Derviš Sušić for permission to publish this excerpt from their father's work.

Translated by Maja Pašović

Notes

1. Dunum is a land measure, and it equals around 900 square meters. ?
2. In the Bosnian tradition, the word nafaka refers to good luck, good omen. ?
3. Feuilleton is a diminutive of the French word feuilleton, which was originally a kind of supplement attached to the political portion of French newspapers, devoted chiefly to light fiction, reviews, and articles of general entertainment. ?

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