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## Dušan Karpatský

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In the rich history of Czech-Yugoslav cultural relations, few individuals have left as profound a mark as Dušan Karpatský, who passed away seven years ago.

In stark contrast to the controversial reactions in the South Slavic region to his death, his associates, admirers and friends - particularly Andreja Stojković - organized, in that same space, several exhibitions and published a book dedicated to his work. Karpatský was an exceptional Croaticist, translator and author of numerous popular and useful books ranging from academic texts on literary history to bibliographies and his renowned cookbooks.

Andreja Stojković, who after Karpatský's passing in February 2017 dedicated himself to preserving his legacy, organized a traveling exhibition showcasing Karpatský's work (with stops in Prague and Pula in 2019, Rijeka, Zagreb and Bjelovar in 2020, Daruvar and Sarajevo in 2021, and Novi Sad, Subotica and Beograd in 2022.) This exhibition presented his work exactly as it deserves to be seen: across the entire former Serbo-Croatian region. Once a unified literary market, it has been divided into five smaller ones after the breakup of Yugoslavia, where, as if shut into five closed Olympic rings, books circulate with difficulty, yet business, even unsavory, flows with ease, reminiscent of wartime dealings.

The culmination of Stojković's efforts, along with those of his collaborators (Marijan Lipovac, Jaroslav Pecnik and Mia Stojković) was the bilingual publication of **Dušan Karpatský (1935-2017): Život i djelo/Život a dílo (Life and Works)** in 2023. So far this book has been presented in Beograd, Zagreb, and Sarajevo, as well as in Prague at the end of November 2023. It was a collaborative effort involving cultural institutions and individuals from both the Croatian-Serbian speaking area and the Czech Republic. Financial support was provided by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Croatia, Croatian media, and Lastavica, the Prague association of citizens originally from former Yugoslavia. The book was published by the publishing house For Prague.

Summarizing the rich and diverse body of work left behind by Dušan Karpatský is no small task. His bibliography boasts 570 items including 17 translations of works from Czech to Croatian and 126 books by South Slavic authors into Czech. For those

interested in Karpatský's work, I highly recommend this comprehensive yet simply conceived and intelligible book.

Let's not be misled by Stojković's success: it's a testament more to his craftsmanship and immense effort than to any improvements in the situation. Tensions in the Croatian-Serbian speaking region are undeniably higher today than they were at the time of Karpatský's passing. Influenced by both global and regional events, saber-rattling and hollow nationalistic rhetoric are once again on the rise. That's why I believe it would be timely to republish my piece *An Ethnically Cleansed In Memoriam*, originally featured in the magazine *Diwan* (2017) and now included in this remarkable book dedicated to a truly exceptional man. The text is also available at <https://samizdat.nu>.

## AN ETHNICALLY CLEANSED IN MEMORIAM

**Dušan Karpatský (February 28, 1935 – January 31, 2017)**

Gone is a man who has left Yugoslav literatures in his debt like few before him. While writing the epilogue for a book and trying to condense his life's work into a single sentence, I said this about him: "Were it not for his work on Czech and South Slavic cross-cultural relations, a black hole, impossible to fill, would gape there today".

The sadness of his departure is compounded by the nauseating media responses from the South Slavic peoples, to whose literatures he devoted his life's work. These reactions range from failure to acknowledge his contributions to outright dismissal, or, at best, to ostentatious and loud recognition of only parts of it. Dušan Karpatský abhorred the appropriation or rejection of writers like Ivo Andrić and Meša Selimović, yet he now faces the same fate.

In the Croatian media his passing has been acknowledged "in a worthy manner". One such (brief) article (Novilist.hr) mentions the words *Croatian* and *Croatia* a total of 25 times (almost suggesting that it's the state, not he, that has ceased to exist), while overlooking almost half of his literary oeuvre. It's a masterful manipulation! Every sentence is technically accurate, yet the whole portrayal is distorted. Everything is filtered through a nationalistic lens. While he is portrayed as the "tireless translator of Croatian literature" in the Croatian media, among his Serbian colleagues his passing has been met with silence. Not only are they silent, but the prevailing notion from the 1990s still persists: that Dušan Karpatský is a Croatian nationalist.

For those truly interested in understanding Karpatský, I urge them to check his bibliography of translations (the Czech Translators Association website, for instance), paying heed to the authors and years of publication.

Another beacon to guide an uninformed reader away from the shallow nationalistic waters is Karpatský's book *Epistolar*, a compilation of letters chronicling his interactions with literary figures across the former Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. The collection includes letters he received in "the last fifty or so years, while immersed in the literatures of the former Yugoslavia - primarily Croatian, and former Czechoslovakia - primarily Czech".<sup>1</sup> *Epistolar* serves not only as a vital document for

literary scholars but also as a treasure trove of insights for historians. For example, it features a snippet of conversation between Miroslav Krleža and Vojo Kuzmanović on February 22, 1966, witnessed by Karpatský at Kuzmanović's residence. In this exchange, the host mildly prodded Krleža by asking him if socialism was the right solution for Yugoslavia, to which Krleža responded: "You know, Kuzmanović, I probably grasp the faults of this country better than you, but remember, compared to what may come, it is still milk and honey."

As I flip through *Epistolar* for the umpteenth time, I find it difficult to comprehend that as recently as January 14, 2017 I received an email from the author of this very book, from a person who once strolled the streets of Prague with Ranko Marinković (in 1958) or Vasko Popa (in 1960). Popa reached out to thank him for the visit with this simple message:

*"Belgrade, October 16, 1960*

*Dear Dušan,*

*I am writing to express how much I enjoyed our time together in your golden Prague, to send greetings from Belgrade, and to promise that you will not be forgotten.*

*Vasko*

*P.S.*

*Be good with your children. Do not torture them with knowledge. They'll get it once they grow up.*

*V."*

Those who label Karpatský a "tireless translator of Croatian literature" upon his passing, while disregarding his many translations of Bosnian and Herzegovinian, Serbian, Montenegrin, even Macedonian and Slovenian authors (let's not use the expression "from Vardar to Triglav" here), exhibit a profound disrespect for his legacy, ignoring nearly half of his work. It appears that even *in memoriam* tributes are not exempt from ethnic cleaning.

Those saying an anti-Serb translator or a Croat nationalist passed away, should know that Dušan Karpatský:

- was a disciple of Krleža.
- was one of the founders of the Czech Friends of Indivisible Bosnia and Herzegovina Association.
- translated the famous essay *About Nationalism* by Danilo Kiš in 1992, which describes nationalism as both a collective and individual form of paranoia.
- refused to translate an anthology of Croatian war poetry by Sanader and Stamać, *At This Terrible Moment* in 1995.

- refused to translate Franjo Tuđman's *Destiny of the People* or *Wastelands of Historical Reality (Horrors of War)* in 1996.
- was, until his death, a member of *Lastavica* (Swallow), a Prague association of citizens from former Yugoslavia, and that his most recent translations were published in cooperation with this group.

Refusing Ivo Sanader or ambassador Zlatko Stahuljak (who personally pressured him to translate Franjo Tuđman's "valuable" work) meant facing many closed doors and forfeiting numerous opportunities... In an April 30, 1996 letter, Ambassador Stahuljak asserted: "You recall I never pushed you, let alone coerced you, to translate Sanader and Stamać's poetry anthology, *At This Terrible Moment* ... (...) The circumstances have changed now. Franjo Tuđman's *Destiny of the People*, as you yourself acknowledge, stands as his finest work to date, objectively portraying Croatia and Croats in a positive light... And it is a different situation for me, as well, as it places me in a difficult position personally if I refrain from action, given the significant value of this book. You are the best one, the only one who can interpret and capture the book's essence, translating it into Czech with clarity, ensuring the book's impactful publication here and its future positive effect for Croatia (...)"

Despite numerous attempts (let's be honest, under tremendous pressure, accompanied by extraordinary financial incentives, and even an additional bonus in the form of an opportunity to meet the President and visit the Brioni Islands), Dušan Karpatský remained steadfast in his decision not to translate the book, fully aware that someone else most certainly would undertake this task. Describing his relationship with Ambassador Stahuljak, the "tireless translator of Croatian literature" remarked: "Unfortunately, our cooperation, was less than ideal: I refused to translate what the Ambassador requested, while he, on the other hand, showed little interest in my own translations that I was able to publish without the assistance of the state he represented".

And what was the tireless translator translating at the time? He was translating works by Miroslav Krleža, Dubravka Ugrešić, Predrag Matvejević, but also Danilo Kiš, Raymond Rehnicer...

He did love Croatia, but which one?

Although it is evident that Karpatský, as a Krležian, and therefore an internationalist, transcended the pitiful confines of nationalism, both Croatian and Serbian nationalists continue to attempt to push him there even after his passing. These nationalists, in their efforts, are actually indifferent to whether he translated Croatian or Serbian authors; their sole concern is perpetuating their black-and-white, nationalistic world view.

The final farewell and cremation of Dušan Karpatský took place at the Olšanské cemetery in Prague on February 9, 2017. This cemetery is also the resting place of the commander-in-chief of the Austro-Hungarian occupying force, bearing the typical Austrian name of *Filipović*. This fact brought to mind an episode from that era: during the Austro-Hungarian military's 'liberation' of Mostar in 1878, led by a general

bearing another typical Austrian name, *Jovanović*, confusion reigned among the city's inhabitants regarding how to welcome the 'liberators' - with signs in Cyrillic or Latin. They ultimately settled on using Latin signage to be mixed with Serbian flags. Furthermore, a Turkish-style triumphal arch, adorned with expensive cloth and velvet, featuring Turkish script, was erected. Notably, all four Sephardic Jewish families, totaling 19 souls altogether, also prepared a warm reception...

In Czech tradition, it is customary to play three songs during funeral or cremation services. Three years ago, as we bade farewell to Mrs. Ema Karpatský, Dušan's wife and companion of half a century, the final song played was *Goodbye* by Arsen Dedić. With that song we bade farewell to our Dušan. As the final curtain fell, Arsen's familiar voice echoed:

*"You'll go by train,*

*I by ship,*

*Goodbye"*

And so Dušan Karpatský departed to join his Ema, his Krleža, all while listening to Arsen's verses - the singer with whom he shared an extraordinary and respectful friendship. Just two days after Dušan's passing, his friend, Predrag Matvejević, who used to greet Dušan with "Sincere (Krležian) greetings", joined him.

Dear Dušan,

I, too, extend my sincere Krležian greetings to you, with the hope that in the happy hunting grounds you're headed towards, there are no authors whose works you would refuse to translate.

**Adin Ljuca**, February 10, 2017

Translated by **Esma Hadžiselimović**

## Notes

1. All quotations are from: Karpatský, Dušan: *Epistolar. Češki i slovački pisana pisma prevela i pjesme prepjevala Dubravka Dorotić Sesar*. Zagreb, Pula, Sarajevo, 2010. [←](#)

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