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Mak Dizdar: The Poet

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Mehmed Alija Dizdar, the most famous Bosnian poet of this age, was born in 1917 in Stolac, a town in the heart of Hum, the southern province of Bosnia.

Few of Dizdar's readers know him by the name bestowed on him by his father Muharem and his mother Nezira, née Babović. Rather, they known him by his pseudonym of Mak – the code name he used as a member of the anti-fascist movement during World War II. (Mak's mother and sister Refika were killed in 1945 in the Jasenovac concentration camp, the Nazis' way of taking their revenge on the elusive Mak.)

Although he wrote and published poems from his early youth to his death in 1971, Mak Dizdar is best known for his volume of poems entitled Kameni spavač, Stone Sleeper, a milestone in twentieth century Bosnian and southern Slav poetry.

The first edition of Kameni spavač appeared in 1966. Shortly before his death, the poet submitted to the Mostar-based publishing house known as the First Literary Commune a version of the book that still more explicitly reflects the mystery of Bosnia's destiny. This edition of Kameni spavač was published in 1973, two years after the poet's death.

Dizdar's Sleeper poses the perennial questions of the origin, way and purpose of our existence in this world, doing so through the krstjani, the followers of the distinctive mediaeval Bosnian Church, who lie beneath the great tombstones known as stećci (sing. stećak), awaiting the Day of Judgment. In lonely isolation or grouped in cemeteries, to this day the stećci still define the spatial, cultural and religious image of Bosnia, and remain central to the discords and debates that arise over the origins and future of Bosnian plurality.

Kameni spavač was originally received as an integral poetic discourse. It was welcomed with delight and amazement, as its readers found in it a lost treasure that had belonged to them. Most of them were unable to recognize this discourse in the light of the perennial wisdom, for in the modern age, traditional intellectuality and every aspect of culture associated with it were harshly rejected. On its first publication, the Sleeper's discourse was sensed rather than understood. Under communism, people were expected to renounce everything unquantifiable and to pay homage to the promises of the "end of history" that were within the grasp of the

revolutionary elite. Indeed, they were expected not merely to pay homage, but to sacrifice themselves and others for that earthly goal.

Communist rule was established in Bosnia in 1945, and the country became part of the Yugoslav communist federation. The ruling elite imposed its own image of the world to be the absolute truth. Everything contrary to this ideology was regarded as an imperfection, to be either altered or eliminated. The future was presented as the earthly paradise, and everything that lies beyond the attainable boundaries of space and time was declared to be non-existent.

Seen from the outside, Mehmed Alija Dizdar was a complete insider in that account of man, society and the world. He grew up at a time of harsh denial of his entire collective heritage, and of almost indescribable misery and poverty, along with communist assurances that the country would emerge out of its difficulties into a happy future. Other ideologies were disseminated alongside communism – those of nationalism and liberalism, of Nazism and fascism, which were based on the premise that people can achieve self-realization in society as centre-stage, not in themselves and their central position in the totality of the visible and invisible world.

Almost every account of Mehmed Alija Dizdar's life presents him, along with most of his comrades, as engaged in the social restructuring which, the "avant-garde workers' class" proclaimed, would necessarily lead via revolutionary changes to the "classless society" and the "earthly paradise." There was no apparent trace of the traditional heritage in either his private or his public life. He did not follow the precepts dictating what may and may not be eaten and drunk, nor did he advocate restraint in the face of temptation. But his Kameni spavač is perhaps the most resolute of discourses, thinking and poetry set in opposition to the modern world view. There is probably no other discourse of his day in which the truth was so convincingly revealed as in the Sleeper's poetic utterances. Everything in them is contrary to the ideological image: the one and only road leading to the "end of history" is countered by many roads, and the word on the world is spoken through the testimony that man, heaven and earth are indivisible.

Dizdar was both a witness to and actor in the denial and ravages of Bosnia's traditional heritage. At the very moment mhen he transcended the bounds of his forcibly closed self, there occurred a reversal from ideological constructs towards the self as the ocean over which the Spirit hovers. In this, the individual will, subordinate to instrumental rational intelligence, revealed itself as utterly powerless. It is perhaps this reversal by the Poet that the Sleeper speaks of:

> (Lord
> Forgive me
> That I only arrived
> Back where I'd started so hopeful-hearted)
> ("bbbb 14")

These poetic pronouncements of Dizdar's are testimony that no self can of its own free

will choose the truth and subjugate it to itself. The truth chooses its own speakers, for it is invariably above the self, regardless of how far that self has plumbed the depths or scaled the heights. Not one human measure or quantifier can be imposed on the truth, which is in every language and every age, but always accessible according to the state of the self, which is in a constant state of change.

The poems of Kameni spavač attest to the voice that is from the innermost human centre, the voice of the uncreated, indestructible Spirit within us; the voice that has been muffled in post-Renaissance centuries by the hubbub of the marketplace and the campaigns waged against the strongholds of the old world. It is the voice of man as such, the sum of all creation, which takes on its own form at all times and in all languages, but which was made manifest anew through the Stone Sleeper as Bosnian, in the language and the parts of the world where it was received. It was made known in the world after having been concealed behind the signs carved onto the stećci and inscribed in the charters and books that have survived, dispersed though they be by all the attempts to destroy them. These books, or parts of books, are but the traces of a discourse that will not die out as long as there are people who remain attached to them.

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