Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne
An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal
Međunarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezični, online časopis

Excerpts from the Novel “Spies”

Derviš Sušić

My lord,
the land named Bosnia is an unfortunate land, not worth conquering, even less worth keeping, but still tolerable as a friendly land. In this way, it would pose no nuisance to us, and we could at least use it as a safe stop en route to other lands. It is not a kingdom in the way we understand it; the king being an object of ridicule among the half-wild barony. The fine gentry are in fear of one another. The commoners loathe both the king and barons. Contenders for power well known to you plot, provoke, attack and loot from all the four sides. This is a land of tears, carnage, and horror. However, the faces of the people here are serene; they conduct conversations slowly, and reflect on the past with a sense of pride, on the future with a sense of hope.
How peculiar!
The men are a kind of mixture of Slavs, Illyrians, Celts, and Romans. At home, they do not put their swords down for a watering place, a pasture, a loathsome look, or a foul word. Their health and strength, their elegance and war skills impress everyone at European tournaments. In their own houses, they impress with negligence and indolence, vanity and filth.
They are mainly Patarines. The ordained live in abstinence, and atone for those enjoying pagan comforts.
Their women are tall and timid, incorrigible and deprived of charm. And yet, I have to admit there is still something alluring in their sombre, stone-cold dignity.
They do well both as queens and servants. If they come to Court, they bring riches and peace – but no joy. For your nephew, Prince Edward, I would kindly recommend Kotromanić’s youngest daughter. Only her Bosnian composure could tame his lust for profligacy and orgies.
May the Lord have mercy upon this land. Until it has found itself, we have nothing to look for, except for the hospitality we may encounter on our travels to the East.

…*horribile visu*… because that land *Bossina* – that confluence of the most abominable heretics – deserves to be punished… From time to time, they meet in the woods, allegedly to pray, while in fact they’re bringing sacrifices to Satan, and thus, possessed by him, they revel in madness and all kinds of lewd and heinous acts.
…as it shows, our monasteries are… a flood of hatred and satanic darkness surround them… and slaughter, disease, and all kinds of afflictions make our decimated

brothers stick together like decisive ‘breth…’. Their knowledge has been rendered useless due to the ceaseless struggle with ‘the Slanderer’, but their belief is praiseworthy. Being well versed in dreadful circumstances, they are of the opinion, which I indeed confirm, that the following needs to be done as soon as possible, for *periculum in mora*:
plow this land with weapons, *ence recidentum est, ne pars sincera trakatur*;
punish their current prince (*ban*) – a fickle and deceitful man – with the ultimate punishment, and teach fine landlords that God’s punishment commences on earth;
burn at the stake the sons of Satan, wrapped in plain cloth capes, who entice the masses into the endless path of hell, so that the misguided and the wicked be shown… *ecclesiasticum* adequately, and do so *brevi manu*… *Cloacas Augiae purgare, debellare superbos*… thus, in *saecula saeculorum*, make this land loyal to the Holy See, and the results shall justify the harshness.
…charge a crusade from north and west, provided that no surrender is accepted. Issue an order to Buda [1] as soon as possible, and afterwards… *in maiorem Dei gloriam*…

Fourteen years, and nothing… nothing… nothing… even when they believe, they don’t believe; even when they defy, they laugh. With our own prayer they speak to their god. I cannot… I’m fading… even though my faith awakens my intentions with the same passion of belief – and I’m not giving up. I’m falling… the word of God cannot touch the souls of this satanic herd.

I beg of you, recall me, send me to a place where I can burn alive for the gentle word of Jesus. Take me away from here my kind brothers, since the darkness around me obscures my mind, and this damned Satan taunts me and ensnares me into his misty caverns. Help me while I still can utter God’s name with these dying lips!

May Allah spread the glory of Ishak-bey! I am in the land of Paul, which they still call Bosna. I saw, I heard, I checked, I acknowledged. I dare suggest a few truths necessary for our purposes.
When unified, they can hardly be defeated. We can defeat them only if we rouse them against each other. It is urgent to approach their eastern border, and from there select and change allies and adversaries as necessary.
The serf and the petty nobleman in that land cannot access the gates of abundance and safety. But these gates need to become accessible. With us by their side, thousands of deserters shall discern the advantage of serving the invincible Empire and Islamic army; may Allah multiply its victories. With this new army, the way to the north and west shall be exposed to us.
The land of Paul, or Bosnia, can thus be destroyed with money and proof of safety for person and property, or any other type of safety under our legal auspices. And then, we shall construct promptly a new country using its sources of wealth and timber, for this is a very rich land, on which I shall present a separate report. That way, we would do a deed profitable to us, and pleasing to God.

…may the sword judge briefly, but briskly and thoroughly, and then a law – clear and reliable – with a firm hand. The loyal shall become the gentry, awarded by the generous hand of the one who places the final stamp.
And now, allow me to present facts on roads, settlements and distances, and on everything else confirmed at the beginning of the presented truth, which one needs to bear in mind when, if God wills, the time comes for this land, and… and the banners of the invincible Empire flutter in the sky…

…and who cast a slander upon me when I am not guilty? Who saw me doing what I am not doing? My reports have always been accurate, and each one of my acts and steps in accordance with the laws of religion, and the needs of the Empire. Why did you send Rubejid, the son of Balaban, to come after my innocent neck with the black noose? I tied Rubejid, the son of Balaban, and locked him in a shack. I am waiting for your answer. Assure me that this was just a mistake! Or else, I will tie this black noose of yours round the neck of Rubejid, the son of Balaban.
For so many years, I have been languishing among these people without faith – except for a wooden symbol; without law – except for the sword and customs; without joy – except for a doubtful smile. And to all my reports, you respond with silence; to all my estimates, with scorn; to all my suggestions, with nothing but petty money without additional support.
The only thing that remains is a blind belief in the usefulness of the exalted command that brought me here in the first place. My common sense, disturbed by fatigue, and my soul, gravely ill from doubt and silence, will feed upon it.
May Allah protect you from my hatred. Should you become an excessively zealous executioner, I will send you some of the local air, in the skull of your mercenary. It kills faster than the white powder in that ring of yours. There is no salvation from it, except for the locals, and those who are not foreign to them…

Appalled heralds have rushed from Kosovo to deliver news of the defeat and carnage.

And following them, taking a road through Hotča and Borač [2], came a group of the fastest deserters. Two days later, a silent army, cut in half, arrived under the discipline of the stern commander, Vlatko Vuković. Following them, the wounded and weary are rushing to catch up with the army.
The number of weary reduced.
The road turned desolate.
At the end of September, you could see neither rags nor rubble of the withdrawn army. Not even corpses of the dead warriors could be seen. Because, even man – the biggest glutton – is someone else's juicy morsel.
The passengers now traveled in both directions, just like before the Kosovo battle.
One day, in the middle of October, an unusual passenger stopped on the Drina ferryboat at Hotča. Though a well-armed and a lavishly clothed nobleman, he was riding alone, and was keeping his pack horse on a halter, alone. He showed his

medallion to the curious sentinels, then immediately placed it close to his bosom. The javelineers bowed, for the man who presents that royal emblem must not be asked for name, let alone for anything else. The passenger of this kind usually has no time or will to converse on the way to his destination.
And so they met and parted in silence.
Dabiživ Vojsalić was rushing towards the Bosnian capitol to present the King with a detailed and skillfully crafted report on the Turks, whom he learned much of during his two-year life among them.
October, dry and sunny, was rather the dawn of a beautiful summer than the beginning of a ripe autumn. Someone else, who is acquainted with the nature and length of the Bosnian winter, would stop beside the road to take a deep breath, and a good look at this beauty once again. The King's spy was nervously spurring the horse under himself, and with a few swear words, was pulling the pack horse by its bridle. He was in a hurry. He hated the desolate woods and bad roads, both in summer and winter.
He felt at peace only on the coast, abounding in clear space and light. Or in royal and princely suites, where, swarming with a plenty of distinguished names, female beauty, music, and splendor, his curiosity and coastal vanity were satisfied.
On a desolate road in Bosnia, his living thoughts festering, he felt his marrow becoming cold from an inconceivable apprehension. However, at the gate of the King's palace, before the dear smile of Queen Doroteja, the apprehension would fade away. And again, Dabiživ would turn into a merry, elegant adventurer, and a smooth-spoken servant and suitor.
His father was a petty, but jolly Bosnian nobleman who escaped the Hungarians a long time ago, fled to Dubrovnik, and fell in love with wine and the sun. This highlander, drunkard, braggart, and skilled fencing instructor in a wealthy town, quickly found himself a woman – a talkative, industrious, yet destitute woman from Dubrovnik, who gave him a son. He died in her arms, in a drunken state, joyfully astonished due to a sudden weakness in his body.
Their son grew up in Dubrovnik as a poor friend of rich children, having to use his strong hand and more articulate language to earn their favor. The nobles of Dubrovnik educated him as a spy, and sent him to the Court of the conceited Duke Hrvoje, to work as a literate courtier. The Bosnian Queen Doroteja came to realize what a handsome servant that powerful boor had, then bought him for the Bosnian Court, partially with money, partially with persuasion. The distance from a high-ranked King's spy to the Queen's bed was rather small.
He was a loyal servant to King Tvrtko, and was regularly informing Dubrovnik about everything that was happening at the Court.
Anyone who saw him, or met him, would trust him. There was so much sun and clear sky in those big, lively eyes, that you could not doubt them. A cultivated charm and shrewd word completed his impression as a dear and beautiful creature.
But in Bosnia, there always are enough eyes that can see.

Late in the afternoon, the guest invited two of his companions. They entered, one with a noose in hand, the other clutching a knife. After a few moments of silence, they came out pale, and disappeared among the small tents.

A young man delivered Trailo's message to the court service about the sudden death of Ismail, the merchant, and about Trailo's responsibility to escort all of the servants and property to Skopje. The permission to depart came from the Court.
That same afternoon, the campers folded the tents, loaded the horses, and set off.
They carried Ismail's dead body on a stretcher.
Riding behind the stretcher, a dark-skinned guest was whispering the prayers for the peace of Mehmed Kotoranin's soul – an upright officer and believer, recorded in the registry under the name of Ismail Jabandži.
Ten years later, at the head of the advance guard of the Turkish army, rode Ismail-aga Dinjičić. When he reached the desolate bazaar before Bobovac, he summoned the camp imam, and ordered him to stand on a place which once was a spy's tent, and to recite the Fatihah aloud.
Since they set off, he commanded the two town criers to warn all the petty officers that in case they apprehend some man from Dubrovnik, they shall bring him. Alive.

Listen, do not be offended if I am chattering this much! It's been a long time since I've had any company. I started speaking to horses, and objects. And sometimes, crazy thoughts come to my mind from all this thinking. Say, what if the human race is nothing but leaves, mentally limited leaves, which Someone of an appearance and form unfathomable to our meagre conceptual reservoirs uses to breathe on? Or are we simply the soybeans that Someone feeds upon, during our lives, or when we start to decompose!

I sometimes feel beings a few million light years away thinking of me. Then, I start summoning them, and talking with them. Whenever there is a companion of mine beside me, still, I stand firm on the ground. As soon as the solitude comes, I… leave…
Have you ever peeked into this burial chamber? Do you know who lies here?
His name is Mustafa Brainović: a drunkard, a blasphemer, and a squanderer from Vlasenica. And still, people come here to burn candles and recite prayers, and I, I maintain this burial chamber, secretly pour rakia on his grave, and leave mouthfulls of mezze. If the peasants knew of this, they would butcher me. They think that someone named Hajji Zulfikar lies here.

And the story goes:
once upon a time, there was a learned and a pious Bosniak named Zulfikar. Good deeds he did, and wiped the tears of the poor. When the enemy attacked the imperial town Zvornik, Zulfikar was among the first heroes who set off to defend it. On the tenth day, using his saber, Zulfikar broke through the battle lines, and reaching the biggest cannon of the enemy, he embraced the hot barrel, and together with it, plunged down the cliff into the cold Drina river. Once the enemy realized what sort of heroes they attacked, they lifted their siege, and after burrying their dead and taking care of the wounded, they withdrew behind the border.
Zulfikar was proclaimed a hero and a martyr, so that the people remember him for the

good.
Lo…, this is not so! The people are fabricating various stories, for the naked reality would make them lose their senses, or without a hero, they would turn mute from shame.
The human being is not ready to acknowledge extraordinariness in an extraordinary brother, unless they have to invent a hero, powerful and strong, for their own purposes, so they can place their weakness in the other. The less they know themselves within themselves, the more they pull into someone else. And the further that someone else is, the closer.

For twenty years, Zulfikar served as a border spy. He saw much blood spilled, and licked his own blood so much that his departure from the service was, in fact, an escape, though with the Tsar's permission.
As he was waiting for a few days in Kostajnica to get his lagging compensation, he was thinking where to settle and build hearth and home. He did not want to go to Istanbul. Even an honorable Bosniak becomes a Turk there – but then, he is neither honorable, nor a Bosniak; however, neither does he entirely become a Turk. He did not dare go to Sarajevo. He was afraid: some Sarajevo Janissaries, whom he guided shortly before a battle on the western border, may recognize him, and may even think he settled down in Sarajevo to inform the authorities about them. After all, it was quite possible that any given morning he may be found, with his skull cracked, laying in a ditch. He did not want to go to the countryside. He hated the wide fields, and felt his fear of wide open spaces poisoning him. For, the spy who deserts cannot find salvation in the plains, when hunted by pursuers. He inquired about it… and the passengers praised one provincial town in Eastern Bosnia. That's our small town, which even I escaped from. It is situated on cultivated land, beside cold water, with clear air and mild sun. They say, the people there are diligent, pious, and hospitable.

Zulfikar received the remainder of his compensation, placed the gold he earned at the border round his waist, and mounted a horse to seek that beautiful and merry place.
He was rushing to burst into the town centre as soon as possible, to spread his hands, and say:
"Good people, here I am!"
and those good people are placing him among themselves, drinking coffee with him, and having a cordial chitchat about his journey and travels, weather and the harvest. And not a single person directs a doubtful look at someone, a look which may uncover a foreign spy in his accent and movement, causing a sword fight or pursuit.
Ha, as if that's possible!
There is no such town.

There are innumerable types of spies, and the most common are those unfortunate to such an extent to see spying as the only compensation for their unnatural curiosity. Then, come those who, with no respect for themselves, spy on others for money,

prestige, fame, or safety. And finally, we have those who spy due to their sense of duty. Among them are imposters thinking they really are such spies; but they are not! The only spies worthy of any respect, whatsoever, are those spying to defend the goals and motives stemming from their desire to contribute to the easing of this period of existence called life.

I was the scribe of Husein-kapetan. I beg you not to form judgments, you who know little about Husein. After all, oblivion is more righteous than exaggerated praise; especially more rigtheous than reproach supported by superficial evidence. I am telling you, I was his scribe. However, because Husein-kapetan was poisoned and buried, his army defeated, our hopes of freedom, long delayed, I am – partially – liberated from my oath of silence. So long as I can make his deeds defy oblivion, our candle of hope shall not be extinguished. I am afraid that my love for Husein, and the boundless sorrow I feel for him may harm the truth about him. That is why I prefer to present words of one of the enemies, unusual for his clear-sightedness and strange act in the end.

Since all sorts of people, from all over the world, were being sent for Husein, the vice vizier and I were obliged to form around him an invisible wall that would provide protection from crooked people. A troublesome work that was, a work that would usually end in blood and silence. Only in the case of a single spy, I did not end up dirtying or washing my hands. The documents he was sending to his superiors may testify to that. With God as my witness, I proclaim that I have invested my whole conscience and knowledge in the accurate translation of every single word from Turkish, and in giving meaning to every profundity, which each word, in its profound heaviness, carries with it. Here I provide you with a report purged from a large quantity of numbers, names, estimates, and incoherencies, which is a nuisance to foreigners when they form judgments about Bosnia.

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. The Buda referred to is a part of present-day Budapest. ↩
2. Hotča is a medieval name for Foča, a town in Eastern Bosnia; Borač was a town in medieval Bosnia, and its remains can be found a few kilometers away from today's Rogatica. ↩

The preceding text is copyright of the author and/or translator and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.