

A Dream Napkin White as Snow on the Basket of Slovenian Literature

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Shortly before the painter Zoran Mušič died there was an exhibition in the ancient Auersperg Palace in Italian Gorizia to which, as usual, neither the Slovenes nor their cultural minister officially paid homage.

I was deeply moved by this exhibition, and by one painting in particular. From the ground floor of the old palace, a staircase led to the first floor. At the far right end of the corridor there it was – I believe it had to be gigantic in size – a painting whose title I don't recall – perhaps I never even knew it. It could have been of an Artist, a Philosopher, or maybe it was Zoran Mušič, or somebody else. The painting was alive, and the man it depicted was watching me as I approached along the corridor. And I was watching him. He was alone at the far end of the corridor just as I myself was alone. He stood there upright – nothing could possibly bend him. I realized it instantly: this was Wealth from my book *Zlate dépuške pripovedke* (Golden Tales from Depala Vas). I found him, he lives. This Jew from Varaždin that I invented for my book is actually alive. He had to live in Varaždin because the text I gave him was in Croatian, as the only version I had of the Talmud was in Croatian. This is what we writers do; we displace our heroes, change their outer appearance, but not the inner. And at the beginning of World War II this hero of mine, Wealth, used the words from the Talmud, a book so strange to me, twice in the same day: first he spoke to a tired soldier, returning from the war, and later to Slovenian Jews, trembling with fear from the Nazi boots. This old man drove on back roads to Ljubljana in a luxurious Lamborghini with his own chauffeur and a basket full of fragrant chicken pies. He had to get to his people in Slovenia. This mighty old Jewish merchant had to be there when a discussion about the gold, mistakenly brought to Trieste instead of to England, was taking place, gold that could easily be used as ransom for the Jews. And when Wealth came and his chauffeur laid the basket full of succulent chicken pies with flaky golden-yellow crusts on the table in the midst of the eager merchants that invited him, the snow-

white napkin that covered the basket was embroidered with an inscription: “The cook a chicken roasts, from the chicken juices flow – how the juices wouldn’t flow, when well to roast she didn’t know!” At this moment Wealth boldly stated in a calm, clear voice, “Be aware of where you came from and where you’re headed and to whom you will have to render accounts in the future; where you came from is a stinking gobbet, and where you are going is to the city of dust, worms, and insects, and to whom you will render accounts is to the King of Kings, the Holy. May He be blessed.”

I scoured over half of Croatia to find dozens and dozens of old napkins embroidered long ago with proverbs by simple, almost illiterate housewives from Zagreb and Karlovac. I did this to find the right one to cover Wealth’s basket. Likewise, what effort it took me to collect the words, engraved on gold bars – they had to be from the proper period, from about the end of the 19th century and from gold minted in Melbourne, to make my writing sound credible. How much I studied the makes and models of cars I knew nothing about just to set my Wealth into one of them! Not to mention the lace from the Island of Pag that I had described so poetically before realizing just in time that what I was praising was not Pag lace at all.

The tall man on the wall at the end of the corridor was, like my Wealth, narrating his story and preparing me for what I would see in the hall. The eyes that were tracing me knew more about me than did I. Trembling, I passed by him and in the next room I then saw those dreadful, smirking skulls among the stack of people that were once human beings – as seen and felt by an artist that had to show it to those few of us that understood.

The eighties brought me the first trial because of the books on Stob that I was publishing under the pseudonym of *Gospa* (Lady). I was sentenced to three months (this was a suspended sentence for a period of two years) for the crime of being a Slovenian artisan. The next prosecution was an eight-year trial, closed to the public, provoked by my prose work *Ko se tam gori olistajo breže* (When the Birches Bud Up Yonder). The punishment for my writing was multilayered and diverse:

1. I had to pay over €8,300 (penalty + costs) to five very old women I didn’t know from Slovenia and the US who claimed that I was writing about their parents in my book.

2. I had to stop printing and selling the book – forever. I had to remove all existing books from the market.

3. The punishment had a certain moral dimension as well: I had to use specifically preselected words to apologize publicly in several newspapers; I was not allowed to digress or explain anything, and had to just stick to the prescribed text. If I hadn't done so, I would have had to immediately pay €4,160; and, if I still refused, a higher penalty would have been levied – ad infinitum (actually, for as long as there was any property left).

4. Another penalty was that I was responsible for every single copy of the book that might appear anywhere on the market after the ban; each copy would cost me €208 for each day – until I paid the fine. One book was actually “found” – by a prosecutor's employee; until the day that the constitutional court abolished all previous sentences, I would have to pay about €167,000; this is a sum I never could pay – even if one included the value of all my property.

5. As a result of all this, all four of the accusers were written into the land register as part owners of my property and of the company that I run. From my pension every month I received only the minimum amount guaranteed by law. The rest was taken away. And so it was until the middle of 2007.

Over the course of these eight years I did more than fight through the court system. During this long period of prosecution I also published books that are “locked”, written in ciphers, encoded; books with blanks, mockingly stammering; and, because they were not allowed to “live”, I publicly burnt one of them. In 2005, I presented 100 copies of the forbidden book in English as a special souvenir, locked as well and self-published. I also published an audio book version on compact disc, which I recorded myself. – According to the Slovenian constitution there was nothing wrong with that. I published and paid for all of these books on my own.

On 13 April 2007, after eight years of closed prosecution, the Constitutional Court of Slovenia finally acquitted me. For me, tomorrow is therefore a day of hope.

Translated by Marijan Dović