CROATIAN LITERATURE

Daša Drndić

"A work of European high culture... Even at their most lurid, Drndic's sentences remain coldly dignified."
- The New York Times Book Review on *Trieste*

"A palimpsest of personal quest and the historical atrocities of war... Undeniably raw and mythical..."
- Alan Cheuse, NPR on *Trieste*

" Trieste is an exceptional reading experience and an early contender for book of the year."
- Minneapolis Star Tribune on *Trieste*

The novelist Daša Drndić was born in Zagreb in 1946. She studied English language and literature at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade. As a Fulbright scholar, she studied at the Southern Illinois University, and also afterwards at Case Western Reserve University. She worked as an editor for the publishing house "Vuk Karadžić", at Radio-television Belgrade and as an English language teacher at the Public University "Đuro Salaj". She spent some years teaching in Canada. She was an associate professor in the English Department at the University of Rijeka where she taught modern British literature and English language.

Daša Drndić publishes prose, literary criticism, analytical texts, translations and plays. Her published works include: *Put do subote* (*Way to Saturday*), 1982; *Kamen s neba* (*Stone from heaven*), 1984; *Marija Częstohowska još uvijek roni suze ili Umiranje u Torontu* (*Maria Częstohowska still shedding tears or Dying in Toronto*), 1997; *Canzone di guerra*, 1998; *Totenwande*, 2000; *Doppelgänger*, 2002; *Leica format*, 2003; *Sonnenschein*, 2007; *April u Berlinu* (*April in Berlin*), 2009; *Belladonna*, 2012.

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"An extraordinarily rewarding novel... Rich."
-Pittsburgh Post-Gazette on *Trieste*

"A darkly hypnotic kaleidoscope of a book... Drndic has in her own way composed an astonishment that extracts light from darkness."
- The Jewish Daily Forward on *Trieste*

"Although this is fiction, it is also a deeply researched historical documentary. Haya's life story is woven artfully into a broader tale of the twentieth century's atrocities."
- A. N. Wilson, Financial Times on *Trieste*

"Trieste achieves a factographical poetry, superbly rendered by Ellen Elias-Bursac, implying that no one in Axis-occupied Europe stood more than two degrees from atrocity."
- Times Literary Supplement on *Trieste*

"Trieste is a massive undertaking. It swings from stomach-churning but compelling testimonials from former concentration camp workers to fluid fictional prose."
- Irish Independent on Sunday on *Trieste*

MAIN WORKS:

Way to Saturday (*Put do subote*), novel

Stone from heaven (*Kamen s neba*), novel

Maria Częstohowska still shedding tears or Dying in Toronto (*Marija Częstohowska još uvijek roni suze ili Umiranje u Torontu*), novel

Canzone di guerra, novel

Totenwande, novel

Doppelgänger, novel

Leica format, novel;

Trieste (*Sonnenschein*), novel - **Independent Foreign Fiction READERS Prize 2013, Kiklop Prize for the best literary work of the year 2007, Fran Galović Prize for the best novel 2007**

April in Berlin (*April u Berlinu*), novel

Belladonna, novel - **Kiklop Prize for the best literary work of the year 2013**

TRANSLATIONS:

Trieste (Sonnenschein): Macedonia (Ikona), Italy (Bompiani), Finland (Mansarda) US (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), France (Gallimard), UK (MacLehose Press), Slovak Republic (Kalligram), Hungary (Kalligram), Poland (Czarne), Netherlands (De Geus), Slovenia (Modrijan)

Belladonna: rights sold to Macedonia (Ikona)

Daša Drndić
TRIESTE

(*Sonnenschein;* **excerpt from a novel**)

For sixty-two years she has been waiting.

She sits and rocks by a tall window in a room on the third floor of an Austro-Hungarian building in the old part of Old Gorizia. The rocking chair is old and, as she rocks, it whimpers.

Is that the chair whimpering or is it me? she asks the deep emptiness, which, like every emptiness, spreads its putrid cloak in all directions to draw her in, her, the woman rocking, to swallow her, blanket her, swamp her, envelop her, ready her for the rubbish heap where the emptiness, her emptiness, is piling the corpses, already stiffened, of the past. She sits in front of her old-fashioned darkened window, her breathing shallow, halting (as if she were sobbing, but she isn't) and at first she tries to get rid of the stench of stale air around her, waving her hand as if shooing away flies, then to her face, as if splashing it or brushing cobwebs from her lashes. Foul breath (whose? whose?) fills the room, rising to a raging torrent and she knows she must arrange the pebbles around her gravestone, now, just in case, in case he doesn't come, in case he does, after she has been expecting him for sixty-two years.

He will come.

I will come.

She hears voices where there are none. Her voices are dead. All the same, she converses with the voices of the dead, she quibbles with them, sometimes she slumps limply into their arms and they whisper to her and guide her through landscapes she has forgotten. There are times when events boil over in her mind and then her thoughts become an avenue of statues, granite, marble, stone statues, plaster figures that do nothing but move their lips and tremble. This must be borne. Without the voices she is alone, trapped in her own skull that grows softer and more vulnerable by the day, like the skull of a newborn, in which her brain, already somewhat mummified, pulses wearily in the murky liquid, slowly, like her heart; after all, everything is diminishing. Her eyes are small and fill readily with tears. She summons non-existent voices, the voices that have left her, summons them to replenish her abandonment.

By her feet there is a big red basket, reaching to her knees. From the basket she takes out her life and hangs it on the imaginary clothes line of reality. She takes out letters, some of them more than a hundred years old, photographs, postcards, newspaper clippings, magazines, and leafs through them, she thumbs through the pile of lifeless paper and then sorts it yet again, this time on the floor, or on the desk by the window. She arranges her existence. She is the embodiment of her ancestors, her kin, her faith, the cities and towns where she has lived, her time, fat sweeping time like one of those gigantic cakes which master chefs of the little towns of *Mitteleuropa* bake for popular festivities on squares, and then she takes it and she swallows it and hoards it, walls herself in, and all of that now rots and decomposes inside her.

She is wildly calm. She listens to a sermon for dirty ears and drapes herself in the histories of others, here in the spacious room in the old building at Via Aprica 47, in Gorica, known as Gorizia in Italian, Gorz in German, and Gurize in the Friulian dialect, in a miniature cosmos at the foot of the Alps, where the River Isonzo, or Soča, joins the River Vipava, at the borders of fallen empires.

Her story is a small one, one of innumerable stories about encounters, about the traces preserved of human contact. She knows this, just as she knows that Earth can slumber until all these stories of the world are arranged in a vast cosmic patchwork which will wrap around it. And until then history, reality's phantom, will continue to unravel, chop, take to pieces, snatch patches of the universe and sew them into its own death shroud. She knows that without her story the job will be incomplete, just as she knows that there is no end, that the end reaches on to eternity, beyond existence. She knows that the end is madness, as Umberto Saba once told her while he was in hospital here, in Gorizia, in Dr Basaglia's ward perhaps, or maybe it was in Trieste with Dr Weiss. She knows that the end is a dream from which there is no waking. And the shortcuts she takes, the quickest ways to get from one place to the next, are often nearly impassable, truly goats' paths. These shortcuts may stir her nostalgia for those long, straight, rectilinear, provincial roads, also something Umberto Saba told her then, so she sweeps away the underbrush of her memory now, memories for which she cannot say whether they even sank to the threshold of memory, or are still in the present, set aside, stored, tucked away. It is along these overgrown shortcuts that she

walks. She knows there is no such thing as coincidence; there is no such thing as the famous brick which falls on a person's head; there are links – and resolve – of which we seem to be unaware, for which we search.

She sits and rocks, her silence is unbearable.

It is Monday, 3 July, 2006.

HURRY UP PLEASE IT 'S TIME

Her name is Haya Tedeschi. She was born on 9 February, 1923, in Gorizia. Her documents state that she was baptized on 8 April of that same year, in 1923, by Father Aldo Boschin who, of course, she does not remember, just as she has no memory of her godmother, Margherita Collenz. There is also a baptism celebrated by Don Carlo Baubela. Baubela is a German name. She meets Don Carlo Baubela in the autumn of 1944 when he is already old and hunched over and, spreading the fragrance of incense and tobacco with his half-frozen, trembling hands, he gives his blessing. Gorizia is a charming little town. There have been interesting histories in Gorizia, little family histories, like this one of hers. She never met many of the members of her family. She has never even heard of quite a few of them. Her mother's and her father's families are large. There are, there were, families in Gorizia with tangled stories, but their stories do not matter, despite the way history has been trailing them along with it for centuries, just as rapids sweep along broken branches wrenched free of the shore, and the carcasses of livestock, their bellies bloated, cows, their eyes glassy, tailless rats, corpses with their throats slit, and suicides. There were no suicides in her family. Or if there were, no-one ever spoke of them to her.

There were several well-known people who lived in Gorizia and committed suicide. Many people passed through Gorizia on the run. Some stayed, some were taken away. Of these some were Jews, some were Gentiles. Of these, some were poets, philosophers and painters. Women and men. The most famous person to commit suicide in Gorizia was Carlo Michelstaedter.

Her mother's name was Ada Baar . . .

It took her years to assemble the information from which she tailored her mangled family tree and learned who was what to whom. For a long time now she has had no-one to ask. Those who remain are few, and their memories are blotted, full of gaps, covered with the black stamps of oblivion or contention and like little islands engulfed in towering flames – they shimmer, elusive. The dead voices of her ancestors shudder, whimper, well up from the corners of the room, from the floor, the ceiling, they creep in through the Venetian blinds and hum history just beyond her reach.

She has no idea what her ancestors looked like. There is no proof. Nothing remains.

Her family rattle on the bottom of the trough (of her memory). Today the limbs, her family's branches, are so jumbled, so dislocated, it is impossible to settle on their whereabouts. The organs of her family are strewn all over. The lives of her ancestors matter less and less for her story, however, for her wait.

Her grandfather was born in Görz. Her mother was born in Görz. She was born in Gorizia/Gorica. When the Great War broke out, they began moving, living in many places. She doesn't know what Görz was, nor does she know what Gorizia is now though she has been here nearly sixty years. She takes walks along Gorizia's streets, but hers are brief forays, quick walks, walks with a purpose, jaunts. Even when she takes longer strolls, when her strolls are more leisurely (when the days are mild and her room feels stale, a humid inertia), Haya doesn't notice the big changes in her surroundings. She feels as if she has been sitting for sixty years in a shrinking room, a room whose walls are moving slowly inward to meet at a miniature surface, a line, at the apex of which she sits, crushed. She cannot see, nor is she watching. She has wax plugs in her ears. She does not hear. Görz, Gorizia, are memories. She isn't certain whose memories they are. Hers or her family's. Maybe they are fresh memories. When she goes out she squints at the sun, picks daisies, sits at the Joy Café and smokes. She has not let herself go. She does not wear black. She is not forever rocking back and forth. All is as it should be. She has a television. She has little memories, darting memories, fragmented. She sways on the threads of the past. On the threads of history. She swings on a spider's web. She is very light. Around her, in her, now is quiet. Gorizia has a history, she has a history. The days are so old.

Sometimes she dreams

she is dragging her mother in a plastic sack. she is dragging her by the legs. she wants to hide her. one of her mother's legs snaps off. Her mother is dead, but she says, hide that leg, bury it near the stationery shop at the intersection of seminario and ascoli; take the rest to rose valley, that is what she says

Her grandfather, grandmother and mother are born as subjects of the Habsburg Monarchy to which their ancestors came long before, from Spain, she thinks. She is born in Italy. They speak German, Italian and Slovenian,

mostly Italian. Grandmother Marisa was a Slovene, as was her great-grandmother, Marija. Both died young. Her family did not mix much with others in terms of race and nationality, yet they became mixed. Today all her ancestors are jumbled, impossible to disentangle.

An oft-thumbed family booklet, a guidebook of sorts from 1780 that Haya Tedeschi keeps on the desk by the window with a dozen old volumes and several pamphlets, says that Görz or Goritz is an ancient city on the banks of the River Lizono, situated in Gorizia, in a small province by the name of Friuli, a possession of the House of Austria. Sovereignty over the Gorizia Habsburgs is lost between 1508 and 1509 when the Venetians rule the town, building it into a fortification, only to lose it during the Napoleonic Wars, when it becomes part of the Illyrian provinces. The castle (1780) still dominates Gorizia. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the guidebook says, a synagogue was built there, suggesting the influx of a colourful community. Gorizia lies about thirty kilometres to the north of Aquileia and, according to the guidebook, some seventy kilometres north of Venice. The town of Gorizia is in a wooded area, not far from a road that ran, in Roman times, from Aquileia to Emona. The name of the town appears first in a document dated 28 April, 1001 ("*quae sclavonica lingua vocatur Goritia*"), with which Emperor Otto III makes a gift of the fort and settlement to Patriarch Giovanni II and Verihen Eppenstein, the Count of Friuli. Today, the guidebook says, Gorizia is an archbishopric with jurisdiction over the bishoprics of Trieste, Trento, Como and Pedena.

Her grandfather Bruno Baar fights in the Austrian Army during World War One. His half-brother Roberto Golombek, a student in Vienna at the time, opens a dentistry office there at Weinberggasse 16 in 1924. Roberto moves to Great Britain in 1939 and gets a job at a sardine factory, so that between 1943 and 1945 the Baar family, while still living at Via Favetti 13 in Gorizia, is supplied, who knows how, with vast quantities of salted sardines, thanks to which they survive the bleakest years of World War Two.

As of May 1915, Italy is no longer neutral. It has not been granted Trentino, the Southern Tyrol and Istria by Austria-Hungary, which it had demanded in return for staying on the sidelines. Rarely does war leave anyone on the sidelines. Hence, affronted, Italy conducts secret talks with the Triple Entente, after which it crosses over and joins them. Invariably there are conflicting sides in any war. The Great War was a conflict between two sides led by the selfsame purpose. To conquer the world. For themselves. For one side. When it enters the war on the side of the Triple Entente, Italy asks again for: Trentino, Trieste, the Slovenian coastline, Istria, a part of Dalmatia and Albania, as well as the right to the Turkish provinces of Adalia and Smyrna, expansion of the colonies in Africa, and so forth. Italy asks for a great deal. What is not granted after World War One, Italy strives to make up for in the next war. Wars are games on a grand scale. Self-indulgent young men move little lead soldiers around on manycoloured maps. They draw in the gains. Then they go to bed. The maps hover in the sky like paper aeroplanes, then settle over cities, fields, mountains and rivers. They cover people, figurines, which the great strategians then shift elsewhere, move here, there, along with their houses and their stupid dreams. The maps of the unbridled military leaders cover what was there, bury the past. When the game is done, the warriors rest. Then historians step up to fashion falsehoods out of the heartless games of those who are never satiated. A new past is written which the new military leaders then draw on to new maps so the game will never end. Italy joins the Triple Entente. A new front is created – the Italian front. Major battles are fought along the Soča. The Soča flows through Gorica, Gorizia, Görz, Goritz. The Soča, the Isonzo, is a river of a vivid turquoise hue. In its river bed it holds a history which eludes historians. The Soča is a river much like a person. Quiet one moment, raging the next. When it rages, it is mighty. When it is quiet, it sings. The Italians wage four terrible battles in 1915 along the Soča. In the Sixth Battle of the Soča (there are eleven or twelve all told), in 1916, the Italians finally capture Gorizia. They shout Viva! Evviva Italia! The Soča is red. Blinded. The rains tell it, we will heal your wounds. The rains push fiercely into the Soča, like lovers gone wild. The Soča is silent. The muddy and bloodstained waters rise, but the rains do not rinse them clean. On the river bottom roll bones which, like a huge baby's rattle, disturb its dreams. To this day.

Translated from Croatian by Ellen Elias-Bursać