Miljenko Jergović

Hercules

(Herkul)

Novel

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We depart from Vienna around one. Borka couldn't leave the office before. First two meetings with investors, then out of the blue our wretched Kasim appears unheralded, he'd like to build a house and she had promised him a design. And so he sits down to talk about the house. The house kind of seems to have grown smaller in his plans, because he no longer has a son, he's alone with his wife, his daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren are in Canada, and he is in fact not looking for a blueprint; he'd much rather have Borka talk about his house, give it a sense, a meaning, tell him what it's supposed to contain, what he really wants is for her to design the rest of his life. And that's not how it works.

It took her an hour to get rid of Kasim so that we can hit the road. And yet, it turned out that we were talking about him for most of the journey.

Kasim was an ensign first in Peć and Strumica, then in Knin, and finally in Sarajevo. He accompanied Borka's father since he was a lieutenant colonel, until he became a general. First he accompanied him, then Starović decommissioned him along, one redraft after another. The general was tall and slender and Kasim was small, round, they looked like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. But what does the military know who Don Quixote is – they used to call them Zagor and Chico. When Starović retired in '85 – just in time, one might say – it somehow turned out that Kasim is also eligible for early retirement. They lived door to door in those military buildings in Dolac Malta, visiting and taking care of each other. They were interesting to watch: Kasim was Starović's former fellow from work, no bigger or smaller than him, but to Kasim Starović has always remain a general. And as soon as they had a few with barbecue at the country house, he'd call him – comrade general! He was somehow proud of Starović's rank, as though he himself had credit in his generalship.

As soon as the war broke out, in April '92 Kasim immediately picked up his wife and children and fled to Vienna. He had ample reasons: that wretched Goran of his was already in high school struggling with depression, toured different

doctors in psychiatry, but no one knew how to help him; there's no help with depression, apart from learning to live with the pain, as long as they can. I don't know how, but they went to Vienna straight away. Maybe Kasim knew someone there. If that was so, the person was not all too helpful, because they wound up in a refugee detention centre and remained there the next half a year or so. And it was in these half a year that Kasim's great transformation occurred. Perhaps it was not a transformation after all, some people simply have to retire and be exiled to discover their true calling. It was not for Kasim to be a barely trainer junior officer in a communist army, a KOS man and an intelligence mole, a spy who spent half of his career stalking or making up irredentists and other enemies of the state across the Yugoslav National Army garrisons, it was his fate to become a famous Austrian chef.

This is how it all began: as soon as they came to the collective housing, which was, as bad luck would have it, a former military barracks, Kasim set out to tour the city on foot. By pure chance he stumbled upon the Dubrovnik restaurant and, drawn by nostalgia, he entered to have a cup of tea – by that point he was no longer a coffee drinker – and word by word with the boss – who introduced himself immediately as an Ustasha from Tomislavgrad, just to make things clear – he learned that the boss had just lost his grill chef.

However, none of the people who know Kasim were sure what tipped the scale, the fact that he was not used to dawdling and wanted to do something, the fact that barbecuing was his eternal passion, or the fact that he felt like he was hunting enemies the state again and needed to infiltrate, or perhaps a little bit of everything, but Kasim offered himself to handle the barbecue.

The boss disliked the fact that he was a refugee and he was no less thrilled with the fact that he was a Muslim, but Kasim tricked him into believing that he was an Ustasha himself, that his entire family were slaughtered in that other war in east Bosnia and that he can't stand the sight of a Serb, so he agreed to take him for a test period.

Half a year later, Kasim was the head chef at the Dubrovnik restaurant, with a work permit and all the residence papers. Starting over yet again. From noon to midnight he worked, the rest of the time rummaging around cookbooks, handbooks and gastronomy encyclopaedias, experimenting in the kitchen of the flat they moved in. His Bosa, a very fine woman generally speaking, up until the war a teacher at the Silvije Strahimir Krranjčević Elementary School, up on Mejtaš, couldn't believe her eyes, because the old Kasim had absolutely no interest whatsoever in kitchen and cooking. He went as far as to the barbecue at the country house and a big bowl of salad to go with, and that was it. The only other thing he could make was a Dalmatian fish, squid or prawn brodetto, but only

when they went to the coast, because in Sarajevo there was never good sea fish to buy. And now, in his golden years, he went bananas for cooking.

Before the war in Bosnia ended, he was already a head chef in one fine Viennese restaurant, owned by a Jew from New York, continuing the traditions of the Viennese bourgeois cooking and the Habsburg court. *Der Standard* wrote about him on several occasions, first time as a hard-working and diligent Bosnian refugee, the next time as an acclaimed Bosnian chef, the next time as a sensation on the Austrian gastronomic scene. That time no one mentioned Kasim's origin.

Starović received the first envelope with a letter and five hundred marks, in fifty, twenty and ten mark bills, if Borka remembers correctly, before the summer of 1992. It seemed to me it was already autumn. The post came with a German reporter, I think he wrote for the Berlin *Tageszeitung*. His last name was Rathfelder, I think. From then on, every few months, in different ways, envelopes with marks came, keeping the in-laws and the two of us quite well and safe. Soon the envelopes started to include newspaper clippings about Kasim's sudden fame. When circumstances improved, packages began to arrive as well. Bosa and Kasim's packages moved Starović even more than all that money. Money is cold, it doesn't shake a man to the core.

And so, in a blink of an eye, the bombs still echoed and the general's ensign became rich and famous, and no one even remembered who this man was and what he was doing the first fifty odd years of his life. And Starović, whom he looked up to, lived like an average Sarajevo pensioner during the war, perhaps even worse, like an average Sarajevo Serb who still hadn't fled the city. Forty pounds lighter, with half less teeth, grey haired and humble, the way an enemy army general should be.

He never complained to Kasim, nor could Kasim see him the way Starović really was. To the ensign time stopped in '85, when he retired after his general and when he saw him as a model of intelligence, decency and courage, a military superman and a Yugoslav. And although he never complained, Kasim invited him and his wife to join him in Vienna. He would take care of the papers and accommodation, just let him leave Sarajevo behind and never look back, nothing good can ever come of it. The general, naturally, turned him down. Out of self-respect and out of fear – or self-respect and fear are one and the same – he wouldn't dream of leaving Sarajevo. His flat was searched three times during the war, looking in vain for weapons, made the old man dig trenches, called him names, but the worse the fate, the more adamant he was in his decision to go nowhere and stay put until death comes. I believe in his mind it looked like this: if all this evil happens to me at home, imagine what Vienna would bring!

Late in 19996 Kasim paid a visit to Sarajevo. The Austrian Embassy organised

the Vienna Days in Sarajevo, at that time all the foreign embassies threw events with famous musicians, artists and writers, to show that they care about Bosnia and Sarajevo, and on the occasion of the Vienna Days they hosted a fancy Christmas lunch at the Holiday Inn for five hundred guests. Just for the occasion, they announced a famous chef from Vienna, our Sarajevo native. Truth be told, no one remembered Kasim before the war, because no one knew him. Who would know a military pensioner from Dolac Malta, a KOS ensign, a spy and a security officer, by nature the most invisible and the least liked in any garrison? But now they're throwing themselves all over him, they want to interview him, to film and photograph him, to display him and portray him as one of us who made it abroad, a refugee who taught Vienna how the people of Sarajevo eat and live. He was both embarrassed and pleased. His Viennese fame was nothing compared to this sad and dreary fame of Baščaršija and Marijin Dvor.

He could have as many seats as he wanted among those five hundred guests, they told him. Two will suffice, said he. For the general and the missus. And so we sent off the in-laws to a Catholic Christmas lunch at the Holiday Inn. Poor man, so underwhelmed and dismal over the fact that he had to go, but he went, no one asked for his opinion. No one asks for his opinion for quite a while, so he goes, as if by military command ordered, him the general, by his ensign. The world is upside down as it is.

The lunch became dinner. How it went, they didn't say, but two or three days later Kasim called me from Vienna. My father-in-law gave him my number at work. He says he spoke with the general that day, tried to persuade him time and again to move to Vienna, but he said no. Instead, there is only one thing left that mattered to him, for his daughter and son-in-law to leave Sarajevo. It's late for him, he says, in every aspect. Not only because he is old, a man is never old enough to run for the hills, but because he swore to the one who is gone and acted as a general to one which no longer exists. He says it is upon him, just the Egyptian pharaohs' servants, to lie in the same grave with the two. Kasim doesn't ask which two, he knows what the general is talking about, and now he is calling me to tell me that Borka and I have to leave Sarajevo.

Fear sent shivers down my spine. Throughout the entire war it never occurred to us to leave. Not even when it was the worst, when the father-in-law's flat was searched, when they took him to dig trenches, not even when she and I realised it was no longer the same whether your name was Ahmo or Zoran, Borka or Fata, let alone now when we were both on a good streak, I have two jobs, both for the foreigners, both well paid, Borka is opening an architectural design office with a fellow from the university, there is a lot to be built now, it's important to be among the first. And then again, when someone offers you to move to Vienna,

they will take care of the papers and accommodation, a shadow of doubt looms. I mean, if everything goes fine, like it seemed in 1996 that it would go fine and even finer, they I will never remember Kasim's offer. But if it doesn't go fine, like it hasn't been in years and if, God forbid, another war breaks out, I'll never forget myself for not accepting it. Maybe it's better that I don't tell Borka a thing, not to disturb her, or to tell her something nevertheless but to make it all fun and games, and then to tell her that the general is out of his wits and is trying to dislocate us through Kasim now when we finally got things going. She'll accept the joke, even up the ante with a story how we couldn't leave the general and madam general alone in the first place, they're not getting any younger, we need to keep handy. And so the story will be put to rest and will be forgotten.

But what if the story is not to be forgotten, what if this is our last chance to go, after so many have gone before us? Today I don't even remember what tipped the scale, what I was thinking, but I know that after work I ran home to Borka, soulless, to tell her everything. I'm not sure if I suggested we should go, because all of a sudden it went without saying, we're going, nothing else makes sense than to leave it all behind and go. The father-in-law is happy, the mother-in-law is in tears of joy, Borka is already making plans how to tell her friend that the office is not going to happen, and whether it's more affordable to go to Zagreb by car, or to do the paperwork here in Sarajevo and fly directly to Vienna... No one to suspect, no one to tell us that maybe we shouldn't go, now that the war is over and life is slowly coming back to Sarajevo. Not then, not over the next month, how long it took us to sort out and cancel things, to practically terminate our lives here in this city, not a word of suspicion or doubt was heard. What I know now didn't even cross my mind – Vienna is not the end of the world and, if things don't go well, we can always come back. We were going forever, suddenly enthusiastic about leaving. Someone should explain this, a psychiatrist, an anthropologist, a writer, how it is possible that we didn't feel like leaving before and that we were walking around with a noose around our neck for three and a half years, and now out of nowhere we're leaving without looking back.

Later it all took an almost predictable course. Naturally, today it all seems predictable, now it's behind us and two of us are standing on an elevated position, on top of the hill from which we see it all clearly. We see them clearly, like the back of our hands, all the years between 1996 and today, August 20..., and it all seems somehow logical, life without big surprises, upheavals and wars.

While the two of us were starting a new life in Vienna, a life we didn't even need to adapt to, a life that seemed naturally ours from the beginning, the general and madam general seem to have been designing their departure. She fell sick in the spring of 1997 – which they hid from us not to disturb us or make us come

over – and as soon as early in autumn, on 25 September, she parted with the world. She underwent three surgeries, chemotherapy and radiotherapy, but to no avail. And all this time she was on the phone with Borka every bloody day. They talked about the things they have talked about all their lives, girly stuff, neighbourhood, family trees, cities and apartments they lived in, moving and things lost in the process, and madam general never gave herself away. Her voice was equally adamant and firm, regardless of the fact that she had just woken up from anaesthesia or is receiving chemo, engulfing all the poisons of this world killing her instead of killing her cancer, this voice was adamant and firm even on the days when she was clearly dying and Borka didn't have a clue, but instead kept babbling about a Sandžak woman from Novi Pazar who moved with her husband and five kids to the first floor and the flat where colonel Zorc used to live in with his family. A fine woman, with fine kids, they say hello unlike those from Sarajevo, her husband opened a *bureh* shop in Dolac Malta, so every other day they bring fresh pies and meat pies, she says it's nothing, dear neighbour, I'm just bringing them for you to try them out... And so madam general talks and talks for hours on end, dying at the same time, and you realise only afterwards that this *bureh* shop owner from Novi Pazar brought pies to his sick neighbour and her husband because that's the right thing to do and that's how things are done in his world. He brought them pies thinking these people didn't have anyone to call close. In a way he was right, they didn't. All her chitchats with Borka finally acquire another meaning in death, they complement as though they were only half told.

We returned to Sarajevo for the first time for her funeral. The second time would be three month later when the general died. And he died when a lorry carrying sand ran him over in Stup, at the traffic light by the Catholic cemetery, crossing the street with the red light on. It was late December, the impervious December in Sarajevo, fog and dark, New Year's Eve, a funeral at Bare. An atheist lot, right above the chapel and the mortuary, black and white marble, five-pointed stars, occasionally an engraved partisan plaque. The general is buried in the same grave where madam general lies, under the wooden pyramid intended for non-believers. Around twenty people came to the funeral, mostly neighbours and perhaps two or three of his garrison fellows, today pensioners. Kasim is not here, I figured he wouldn't be, like he didn't come for her funeral, but rather sent a wreath, a green one, made of that fake laurel, and in the middle a five-pointed star made of carnations. This is, it seems, a sign, the only sign the general will be buried under.

Borka is upright and silent, wouldn't even shudder, let alone shed a tear. She didn't cry the last time, but it was different then, we were shocked, less by the death and more by everything madam general managed to hide from us; this

lack of tears is caused by some misery, by the soot of Sarajevo and the smell of coal smoke coming all the way from Šip, as heavy and heady as death.

When a believer dies, a hundred and thousand-year-old play is being performed over his grave, if they are Catholic, a Catholic play, if they are Muslim, a Muslim play, if they are Orthodox, an Orthodox play, and then people do their standing around the stage, shed a tear if a word was exceptionally spoken or a movement performed differently, but when a faithless man dies in Sarajevo in 1997, not only that there is not show, but the gravediggers somehow seem to try to stretch the funeral, not to go home and they only just got here. Not to throw the deceased in the ground like a dog. And as they were stretching, all of a sudden, Kasim appeared. In his best Sunday suit and theatre shoes, he is treading the heavy and sticky silt mud. He flew over from Vienna just in time to give sense to the stretched gravedigging.

Tomorrow we all returned to Vienna together. An early morning taxi to the airport, then the plane, where we were welcomed by Austrian flight attendants in red attire. We were overjoyed to see them as if they were family, although we were living in Vienna for less than a year and spoke German no better than Bosnian maids and bricklayers. It is not that it was so good in Vienna, and it was, but rather, this wasn't us anymore. Everything around us seemed to scream: it was never you in the first place!

On the plane, Borka became anxiety-ridden. I ask her, are you scared of flying, love? It's not that, she says. And what is it then? Everything, she says. And starts to cry. But not the little tears, like women's tears of dismay, but crying like children cry. From the top of her lungs, out loud. And as she stops, she bursts into tears again. People look around, trying to figure out what is going on, some American reporters, in fact a reporter and a photographer, he's practically a step away from taking our his camera, it's the war, they think, the consequences of the war, and I still don't know what to do, how to stop her, I'm overcome by fear, I think: this will go on forever. The cabin voice announces landing, fasten your seatbelts, fold up the tray tables, the flight attendant is coming, worried, offers help, I just tell her to go, just go. We landed, Borka is crying, I'm thinking, how are we going to get on that bus with her crying like that. Here we are later in the passport queue, they single us out and take us to a room. What's wrong, I ask, and the police officer who pulled us out says that what's wrong is that the lady doesn't look like her non-crying photo while she is crying. By these words of his I seem to have remembered everything else.

I don't know what happened on the plane. I thought I did something wrong. You didn't, she says. Well, what's the matter then? I don't know, she says, for months. I really don't know, it's not like I don't want to tell you. I suggest we

should, maybe, visit a psychiatrist. He could tell us what the matter was. She laughs, what do you know, a psychiatrist!, she says, what could a psychiatrist know about it. All of a sudden a letter came from Sarajevo, an invitation to the inheritance procedure. I say, we must go, to empty out the flat, we need to give it back to the state. Kill me but I can't, she says. What do you mean, you can't? The way I said it, I can't go to Sarajevo.

And so we never went for the inheritance procedure, never emptied the flat. Truth be told, there wasn't much to empty. I asked some guy named Haris I worked with at UNPROFOR to try to get there and take photo albums, personal documents and that little bit of personal effects, but he wasn't allowed. They say the flat is sealed, the inheritance procedure must be conducted, nothing should be touched. I later called the municipality, then the city housing secretariat, then the ministry, I sent POAs certified by a notary in Vienna and the Bosnian and Herzegovinian Embassy, but in vain.

Later I never tried to persuade her to suck it up and go to Sarajevo again anymore. It stuck with her, like a thorn in her heel, stinging whenever she thought of it. And no one can just make a decision and never again think of it. Another general from another military moved to the general's flat, a former Yugoslav National Army junior officer from Konjic. I gave him a call to ask about the things, a female voice answered, I said who I was and why I was calling, and at that moment the line was cut. I tried again, a man answered and before I could breathe a word he blew me off and said we could go look for our stuff at the landfill.

But this was never an issue, never has been, nor it ever came to Borka even mentioning that she lost all of her childhood photos. Even when a conversation naturally brought to so many Bosnian people who lost their family albums in the war, and at that time this was one of the things mentioned so often that it seemed that the hardest outcome of the war, after so many deaths, losing home and property, was that people no longer had their photos and couldn't check what they looked like in the past, Borka pretended this didn't apply to her. She spent the war in Sarajevo, no one drove her out of the flat she grew up in, or her room, which at one point became our room, so she didn't suffer a loss. In a way that is true: photo albums, father's diplomas and medals, mother's diaries and notebooks with recipes for cakes and winter provisions were taken away from her after the war was already over. This was a loss that had nothing whatsoever to do with the war.

These years shrapnel oozed out of living bodies. For some time it stayed below, and then it pierced through the skin and came out. Like children dropping their baby teeth. Luckily, the two of us had no shrapnel inside us. But over time the reasons why Borka couldn't step foot in Sarajevo came out. At first she wasn't

even aware of them, and then, when they began to unravel, she couldn't talk to me about them. Why, shouldn't we talk about everything? Because I didn't know how to tell you something that sound incredible and impossible even to me. And finally, what seemed incredible and impossible turns out to have happened and even later, when one realises what happened, it will remain equally incredible and impossible.

This is what a complex of incredible and impossible would look like. The general and madam general wanted us never to step foot in Sarajevo again. Why? We will be searching for an answer the next thirty years to come. And just when we think we have found it, it will elude us. When madam general fell sick, they made an agreement not to tell us anything. She and Borka talked every day on the phone, but it was always the mother making the call to the daughter, never the other way around. If the mother didn't call at the expected time, the father did, saying that madam general was somewhere around the neighbourhood. Except that she wasn't, she was in hospital. However, she did call later. How could she call from the hospital before they had mobile phones and the rooms had no phones? That we don't know and we have no one to ask.

When mother died, we flew in to Sarajevo first thing the next morning. First we heard, quite by accident, from the neighbours, that she had cancer. Borka was beside herself. Later her father explained her that this was her wish, they didn't want to upset us, to disturb the life we were only establishing in Vienna, and everything was clear right from the start. Her illness was equally untreatable in Houston, Vienna, Paris or Sarajevo. This way she at least died like she had always said she would, in her house and in her bed. The general, as persuasive as God dealt him to be, managed somehow to convince Borka, but a silent shadow of doubt lingered on, the unanswered question that would only grow with time: why did they both care so much that we don't come? Just not to see her dying? If there were other reasons, and both Borka and myself feel like there were, we will never find out, we will only keep telling ourselves that such reasons never existed for as long as we live.

After madam general's death, she spoke with the general every two to three days. She asked if he needed anything. He didn't. If he'd like to come to Vienna for a while, to get some rest and compose himself. No, he is rested and composed. If he wanted us to come. No way, why should we come, there's nothing here to see, same old Sarajevo, we've already seen enough of it. It's not about Sarajevo, she said, it's about you. Oh come on, just let me be, you'd only be disturbing my routine.

And so that was how the lot of them talked. In short and brusque, as by a rule always the same phrases. He always sounded equally zestful, but we weren't too

convinced in his zest, trained in military schools and academies, border posts, barracks and garrisons across Yugoslavia, among the army and officers, dim-wits, smartasses, swindlers, liars, psychopaths, suicidal types, closeted gays, maniacs and reticents. This zest, however, was big enough to take the general the next two or three days off our backs and conscience, to make us not think about him, but of ourselves and our lives. But whilst thinking of others can be of some use, though not as a rule, thinking of oneself one never comes up with anything sensible.

And then one day news came that the general was run over by a sand-carrying lorry at Stup. According to the police report, published in all the newspapers, the lorry was moving at a speed of no more than thirty kilometres per hour. Senior citizen B. S. (71) was crossing the street with the red light on. The driver was trying to warn him by honking the horn – which is extremely loud with this type of vehicle – once, twice, even three times – the number of warnings differs from one witness to the other – and then desperately honked his horn and pushed the brakes and with a piercing noise – the sound of the trumpets of Jericho, as I say – killed him on the spot. The driver, born in Zenica and residing in Banja Luka, had a nervous breakdown and was hospitalised at the psychiatric clinic of the Koševo hospital. For several long seconds he was looking at the man crossing the road unspeakably slowly, knowing he would run him over, just like the man, now I'm certain, knew he would be run over. The former couldn't, the latter wouldn't do anything about it.

That was what we found out as soon as we landed in Sarajevo. That was what the newspapers wrote, that was what the neighbours who came to express their condolences said, as if they themselves were all present at the scene and can now describe everything into the tiniest colourful detail. And no one to raise eyebrows at the fact that the neighbour didn't hear the lorry honking which can wake the dead and sounds like a transatlantic ship horn sailing out of the harbour never to return, although he previously had the hearing of a trained hound, jumping at every noise, the other day, when I was picking up the phone from Borka to say hello to him, he heard me puffing out smoke and asked me disapprovingly – well then, son-in-law, you're smoking again, right? – and I said to him – no, I was just sighing! – and he said – well, that's not how you sigh! – and this man now supposedly didn't hear a lorry honking its horn behind his back?

It was long dining tables where they preferred to sit at, madam general and the general liked big dining tables, everything else in their lives was modest and small, only the tables were big, and they talked of this and that, neighbours took it in turns to express condolences, quiet and humble former officers and junior officers came, civilian serving the Yugoslav National Army, those who still

remember him as helpful, everyone pretty much know everything, only one thing is never mentioned: how did he lose hearing so suddenly that he slowly and without looking back cross the street with the red light on at the place with the densest traffic in Sarajevo?

We didn't mention it that day, nor the next day or the next months, in fact Borka and I never again discussed the general and his death, but somehow we both knew that we both thought, to ourselves, and knew that the general killed himself. But made it look like an accident so that we wouldn't be burdened by his suicide. But he miscalculated it all; it burdened us even more than it would if he had fired a bullet in his temple. (Although I don't know what with, since our territorial army early on in the war 'expropriated' his gun, calling it 'defence needs'.)

The twins were born exactly one year after the general died. If I had read this somewhere, in a Bosnian or Yugoslavian writer's novel – they are the only ones writing about the war and post-war tragedies, which is why I never read them – I'd say, no, no way, this can't be true, but it was, Borka indeed gave birth on the anniversary of his death, the same day, perhaps even the same hour. The general was run over by the lorry early in the afternoon, and she gave birth a few minutes past two. We named the boy Adrian, after Adrian Leverkühn, and debated a lot about the girl's name. Finally we named her Nora. One thing mattered only: their names mustn't be local and in any way related to the country they came from. Although we still spoke poor German, we agreed to speak only German in front of them and from the moment Borka came home from the hospital, to September 2018 when Adrian went to Prague to study film directing and Nora went to Berlin two week later to study international relations, they never once heard us utter a word in Serbo-Croatian. Instead of children learning their mother tongue with us, we learned German with them.

Do I feel sorry our kids are real Austrians? No. If I had been asked the question a year, two or ten years ago, I'd be answering it much more harshly. And now, there you see, after so many years, I still go there. True, not to Sarajevo and not to Bosnia, but to the seaside, but this is irrelevant for the story. Maybe we even pop over to Sarajevo on our way back. I'd love to, Borka is reluctant, but she seems to be playing with the idea. Something has definitely changed. As we get older, things hidden at the bottom start to emerge, the primordial stuff from the most profound depths of the self. As though one starts to get senile and forgetful, so something that preceded everything becomes important. At least important enough to pay a visit to it again and see what all these years you were trying not to see. But regardless, if someone asked me now if I felt sorry about hiding our language from our kids, I'd say no, not the least bit. This question to me sounded

the same as if I was asked why I would hide a gun from my kids if I had one. This language, in which I still dream and think if something is hard and serious, and then I translate my thoughts into German, this language in which almost nothing hurts, this language is a loaded gun pressed against my temple all the time. If I can't hide this barrel from my head and Borka's, may it be as far from our children as it can possibly be.

The pair of them saved us. They were intolerable. They took it in turns at howling. When Nora was asleep, Adrian cried, and when he fell asleep, she woke up and started to cry. That was how it was the first year. Later I found it hard to get used to the silence that ensued after they stopped crying. Although it wasn't much of a silence. He was a little devil, the real textbook hyperactive child, it's just that we didn't know much about hyperactivity nor were we interested to find out. Life had to go on, there was no time for modern pedagogy. Nora was quieter, but more problematic. She was scared of everything: if we turned off the light, Nora was afraid of the dark, if we left it on, Nora was afraid of what she could see in the light. She couldn't be left alone for a single minute. Someone had to be there for her all the time to keep her and her fears safe. If there had been time and patience, or literary talent – and the gene pool made us both literature dimwits – Nora's childhood fears could have been spun into a great story, a real novel. I guess that whatever scared Borka's and my ancestors three hundred years back to this day, and whatever will yet scare us and our successors until who knows when, seemed to have been speaking from her. Such were Nora's fears and, interestingly, it never occurred to us, or simply it never occurred to me, that there might be something wrong with the child or that these fears could, God forbid, evolve into something when she grows up. You could tell that this was simply a child's head populated with fears of many generations behind, which would one day clear out. Sometimes I wished I knew what this darkness was about. Because they must have been about something. Every child is a prophet, only they don't possess a language the express their prophecies. There, I'm on a roll...

Besides, we both had to work. It was not easy being foreign in Vienna those days, let alone being an architect or a designer. Especially since we didn't feel like working with strangers in big offices, we wanted something of our own, something we couldn't have in Sarajevo. It's incredible how clients start to back off when they hear you don't speak the language, your wrong grammar, your heavy Balkan bricklayer accent. They think the house you're about to design will be the same, that it will look like it was designed by the construction worker carrying around buckets with plaster. So they will much rather give alms to the poor or try to create an illusion that you're doing something useful for them

rather than give you a chance to do real work. That was how it was back then, perhaps it's still the same. I wouldn't know, for I'm not the man I was then. Maybe I've become that Austrian fearing a bricklayer might design his house or on a computer screen arrange typography in the words of a language he doesn't understand.

But this was all welcome to forget the things we didn't want to think about. The sleepless nights with the two of them caterwauling, and the taxing days with untrusting Viennese gentlemen, only to stop us thinking about the general's death and what preceded it. Thinking about how and why the two of them tried so desperately to chase us out of Sarajevo and never return at any cost. What we could discover by thinking about it was abysmal. Or not, what we could discover would only take us back to that previous life, once begun and then put to a stop by the war, which the general and madam general wanted to avoid. It was their war, their national liberation fight, begun after all the wars in Bosnia ended: the two of us had to leave and forget we ever had a life in Sarajevo.

Everything was much easier when the twins started school. By that time they were our children, with all our flaws and craziness, but with a hundred times more energy than we ever had, and then all of a sudden, in just a few days at school, they became something else. The mixture of our flesh and blood was gone forever and two little, very responsible and quite cold Austrians were born. When they started school, an immense, insurmountable gap suddenly opened up between us. We became two helpless, uncultured and maladapted old people, hillbillies who descended to Vienna from some Himalayas of their own and not only that they don't know and don't understand anything, but their imagination hinders them from living here and understanding this life. Not only was their German better than our German, but their math was also better than our math. Simpler in calculation. They solved problems in just a few steps; what took us years in Sarajevo, Nora and Adrian would crack in a day.

Borka had big issues accepting this change. To her the children seemed to distance themselves from her permanently, running away, like someone was abducting them and she can't do a thing to bring them back. That was when she first went to a psychotherapist, a Lebanese – another one recommended by Kasim or, more accurately, we were recommended to his care – he really helped her, he somehow convinced her that she should be happy that the children are so different from us. It's like this today, he said, one day it will be different, they will seek what they're running away from now. For a long time I thought: may this day never come.

With them in school, the two of us, little by little, started to travel. First there was a two-day trip to Prague, we left them with the parents of their classmate,

later Nora's best friend Lisa, Italians, doctors, who came as medical residents and remained in Vienna. The next year we went to Spain for ten days while the two of them, together with Lisa, went camping with some catholic scout organisation. It became a habit that once a year the parents and the children go their own separate ways. At first the travels took a week or two. And as they grew older, towards the end of the elementary school, it extended to a month, even two. That way, separation brought us closer to our children. (Was this also a suggestion made by Jean-Patrick, our Lebanese therapist, I'm not certain anymore. Borka smiles and says it wasn't.) The two of them talked to us about their adventures, we talked to them about ours. We confided in each other about small trespasses, unpaid subway tickets, getting into museums and galleries without buying a ticket, and that way we built trust incomparable among parents and children. Especially if they are, like us, separated by a difference in culture, language, identity. The two of them are Austrians, and we are what we are not.

By their 18th birthday we travelled the world. We toured Europe, we went to New York, rented a car to drive across America all the way to the East Coast and San Francisco, we paid a visit to our folks in Australia and New Zealand, arrived across Bulgaria, Turkey, Syria and Iraq to Tehran, visited India twice... We went wherever we felt like, preyed on peace in between wars, faked press passes, went where tourists never go and never, not once, did we feel fear. But we never went to Yugoslavia. We knew Borka couldn't go to Sarajevo, so I steered clear as well. Then all of a sudden Dalmatia couldn't be reached although half the Vienna holidayed there, then Belgrade was unattainable, where people kept inviting us and where most our relatives lived, both Borka's and mine. We stopped answering them, we ended all communication so we wouldn't have to explain what is in fact inexplicable: why we couldn't go to Belgrade. Then Borka's uncle, the general's older brother, the geologist, died and we didn't come to the funeral. After that, my uncle and aunt died, people who were closer to me as I was growing up than my parents, and I couldn't go. Finally, through their deaths we died to each other.

It is hard to say what our problem with Yugoslavia was. And why was this territory stretching from Zagreb, to Sarajevo, to Belgrade something we kept calling Yugoslavia although the country was long gone and not that it was long gone, but we also spent the entire three and a half years of the siege in Sarajevo and experienced viscerally its bloodthirsty demise, we lived in Bosnia, already a separate country bordering with Croatia and Serbia, two other separate countries? How did Yugoslavia appear when it was already gone before and nothing changed in the meantime? Or maybe it just seemed to us that noting changed, while in fact everything changed?

This Yugoslavia, of which we didn't talk much – because I was scared Borka

might think I was crazy, just like she was scared I might think she was crazy – was a coherent union, composed of several fears, or perhaps just one fear that would beset a man in Yugoslavia from different sides and manifest itself in different ways. If I tried to picture it from Sarajevo, this fear had the voice of the adhan, the orange colour of the overalls the Islamists dressed their victims in across the deserts of North Africa, it caused a feeling of utter impotence, moral disqualification, impossibility to say something in their defence, to scream and shout. In front of thus pictured Sarajevo in thus pictured Yugoslavia the two of us were Serbs, responsible with our names and surnames for everything the Serbs in this war did to the Muslims, in Srebrenica, Prijedor, Sarajevo. And the fact that we lived through this war in some, mostly highly overrated, reality in Sarajevo, showered by Serbian bullets, mines and grenades, playing unconsciously and unknowingly the roles of Muslims, I'm guessing those who escaped even before the first bullet was fired, this very fact under the threat of this phantom fear meant nothing. It only highlighted our guilt. Not only were we as Serbs guilty of all the perished Muslims, those killed in Srebrenica, Prijedor and Sarajevo, those who survived Srebrenica, Prijedor and Sarajevo, as well as those watching from Munich, Ankara or Riyadh what went on in Srebrenica, Prijedor and Sarajevo, reliving the sufferings of their people and faith from their distant Americas, Australias and Arabias, but we were also guilty of the sufferings of those two Muslims we turned into and whose roles we played living in the besieged city. Every Muslim in this new Yugoslavian Sarajevo, no matter if he was a Bosnian or Turkish or Arabian or Malaysian Muslim, no matter if he spoke Bosnian or Arabic, if he drank beer or chopped beer drinkers' heads off, had the vantage point of the Muslim suffering in the previous besieged Sarajevo and could use it against us.

How should we defend ourselves from that fear? Only by accepting the role we were given, by accepting that we are the Serbs our fear sees us. We could defend only by accepting the guilt for every bullet, mine and grenade fired over Sarajevo, to accept their arguments, condone the crime and find the cause of all evil in Muslims. I met here in Vienna people who did the exact same thing, our fellows from Sarajevo, Serbs, he was even a Bosnian war veteran, she spent three and a half years during the war working as a doctor in traumatology, in Sarajevo's wartime hospital; today they claim light-heartedly that Karadžić and Mladić were right and pray for the health of those who shot at them. I met them, I'm telling you, and ran for the hills. But what if this is the only way to step out of the role assigned to you and go on living your life? There, the siege was only a dream, everything you thought was real was only a dream. And the reality is that you are a Serb chased out of Sarajevo by Muslims, like all the other Serbs,

when the war was over because they no longer needed you to confirm their natural born *merhamet* and tolerance before the eyes of the world.

A fear of Yugoslavia is a fear of Croats. In the previous life we didn't have unsettled scores, open wounds, anything evil. Starović was the first post-war class in military schools, a Yugoslavian as Tito would have him, not only did he never succumb to Serbian nationalism, but he also hated the specifically Serbian hillbilly habits – after half a litre of plum brandy they're all Chetniks!, he said – and my mother went through all the youth labour actions building the motorway across Yugoslavia, while my father spent his working life as an agent for a Croatian company. Truth be told, in peaceful periods, Borka's family and mine were closer to Croats than to Serbs. My family, luckily, didn't live to see the war and the general lived to see it by sending off Karadžić's emissaries three times. They first offered in the summer of 1990 to come sit in the initiative board of the Serbian Democratic Party. He told them they made a mistake, he was a Serb, but not a democrat; he was a communist, so if they ever found the Serbian Communist Party, they should contact him. The second time he sent them off was in November the same year when they invited him to sign some kind of petition on behalf of endangered Serbs. He told them that he felt for the Serbs, but didn't believe in petitions. The third time, in February 1992, they called him to join the Serbian army in the making and to relocate his family first to Pale, then to Belgrade. He told them that an army was not a band to be founded by any idiot. His family was having it just fine in Sarajevo and didn't feel like moving to Pale. General, you'll be sorry!, responded brusquely Karadžić's party commissioner, a former up-and-coming writer and founder of the post-modernist narrative in Bosnian and Herzegovinian literature. Of course I'll be sorry!, the general laughed. But it's human to be sorry. You're not a man if you're not sorry.

And nothing much happened between us and the Croats. And then all of a sudden everything changed. Only to me? To Borka? To general and madam general while they were still alive? Or perhaps it has changed to everyone, those few who remained in Sarajevo, those who moved to Belgrade and became one with the city, those who parted with the world? I don't know, for I never had a person to talk to about it. I won't even try, for I don't know what to say and how to say it. So it's best that I keep my mouth shut. Best not even to think. For as soon as I start to think, my thoughts go where they're not supposed to go. All of a sudden I see myself in their eyes as a Serb. And to protect myself from this image and everything it could possibly mean, they become Croats to me. The World War II Croats, the ones who tortured and killed people in Jasenovac, those who demolished the church and the monastery in Žitomislići in this war, and suddenly I am the one whose church is demolished although I don't even know how to

make the sign of the cross and I don't believe on a church God, I am the one whose house was burned by Ustashe in 1941 in Kulen Vakuf, in Bihać, in Prijedor, in 1992 in Čapljina, Stolac and Mostar, and our destiny has been locked for all times.

It's not like this just in stories and in theory. A woman came to my studio, in her forties, as beautiful as they make them, you can tell immediately she's not Austrian. She introduces herself by her last name and her last name is, naturally, her husband's, she owns a travel agency and needs a total graphic redesign. I'm all ears trying to detect an accent, but her German is much better than mine and she speaks Hochdeutsch, so you can't tell where she's from. The conversation revolves strictly around business and it makes it even harder to find out anything. Before leaving, she gives me her business card and I finally see the name: Danica. I look up, but she already turned to leave. I say automatically: Well then, give me a call!, and as these words fly out of my mouth, I become aware I missed the language. And she, as though she didn't hear me or as though I said nothing, approaches the elevator and once again, in her flawless, freezing cold, German, repeats the words of goodbye. Of course she never called back – and she was supposed to next week, she forwarded the job to another agency, but I knew it was because of those three or four words spoken in our language. Arriving here she probably didn't know my name because my name was not in the name of the studio – I hate this custom among our people to highlight their nation or home somewhere in the company name, but she nevertheless continued to negotiate, trusting I wouldn't cross the line and that I would talk to her as an Austrian to an Austrian. Which is would have done, if it hadn't slipped.

By name she could be a Serb. And perhaps there are Danicas in other Slavic countries. She could be German too, named by her parents Dania for whatever reason. But I knew she was Croatian. I knew is right from the start, that was why I listened to the accent hoping I was wrong. When she ignored those impure words and escaped them in the elevator, I was one hundred per cent sure she was a Croat. And that everything that refers to Croats, from Jasenovac 1941 do Žitomislići 1992, referred to her as well. As soon as I think about it rationally, I know it's not true, she is she not like them, but them too, Croats, are not what crept in my mind, infected it, poisoned it and obsessed it with what couldn't be but still is. And then I try to return to that blessed pre-war state, when everyone was good enough, or the wartime state when I found Croats to be better that Serbs. But it doesn't work. And just like it doesn't work for me, apparently it doesn't work for Danica.

But more than anything else, the fear of Yugoslavia is a fear of Serbs. Of what I feel inside when I stumble across our people in Vienna and wonder who they are, Bosnians, Croats or indeed Serbs, and then something about the way they

look at me as soon as they hear my name makes me feel like I gorged on rotten, uncooked meat from a Sarajevo fridge that melted down in the summer of 1992, after we lost electricity for good. The nausea and the metallic taste somewhere behind my tongue, in my throat, which cannot be washed away or deterred by honey, another thought, alcohol, marijuana, chocolate, chilli pepper, fear of death, crossing the street with the red light on, nothing. This metallic taste I try to touch with the tip of my tongue but it keeps escaping me down my throat, in my oesophagus, inside, it is a Serb in Vienna recognising a Serb in me. He expects something, hopes for something, his voice heightens, he becomes cockier in front of another Serb. I wish I could tell him that he made a mistake, tell him to move away from me because I'm not that, I'm something else, and I've spent over a half of my life in an attempt at becoming an Austrian who won't be recognised as anything but an Austrian. And when I look at my children, I'm equally proud that they are Austrians and no one sees any other origin in them, nothing gives them away, they belong to no one. They can be whatever they whatever they want in life, to me it's only important that they're Austrians. This is the best the two of us could have done for them.

For years we, out of fear of Yugoslavia, travelled the world carefully avoiding anything south and east of Villach and Klagenfurt. Fear shaped the image of the world we avoided. The Sarajevo we never visited for long now hasn't been the Sarajevo we once departed from and visited twice to bury the general and madam general, it was rather a city of imagination and fear which, little by little, took shape and grew as the two of us forgot about it, as we forgot about ourselves from the time we lived in Sarajevo. What I didn't know and what would cause trouble later, though more in my sleep than in reality, was that this new, fantasised and dreamed about Sarajevo, built of fear and caution, could occupy in our souls and minds a space as big as the one belonging to the real, experienced, remembered and forgotten Sarajevo.

And then one day you get tired of living like a shipwrecked man. In fact, it doesn't happen on that one day, it's rather that over time something changes in you and, little by little, you go with the flow. At first you pretend you don't care and then you really start not to care. You no longer try to keep your head above the water all the time. You learn to breathe under water and realise your fears could have engulfed your whole life without you breathing like man, like a fish in fact, but instead that you keep stretching your head up, fighting for breath, although it makes no sense anymore. You no longer need it. It's not you anymore.

We both have our companies, we work for ourselves, we can't get fired. If we wished to stop working tomorrow and never ever return to work, we have made enough money to keep us going for the rest of a very comfortable and very, very

long life. The children are grown up and don't need us anymore. There is nothing unspoken between us, no dark secrets or betrayals to swallow. There was nothing to forgive. Even if there was, the other side was unaware of it. All things considered, we could call ourselves happy. Apart from the fact that, like in any life, we seem to have collected too much past. The past we remember and the past we're trying not to remember.

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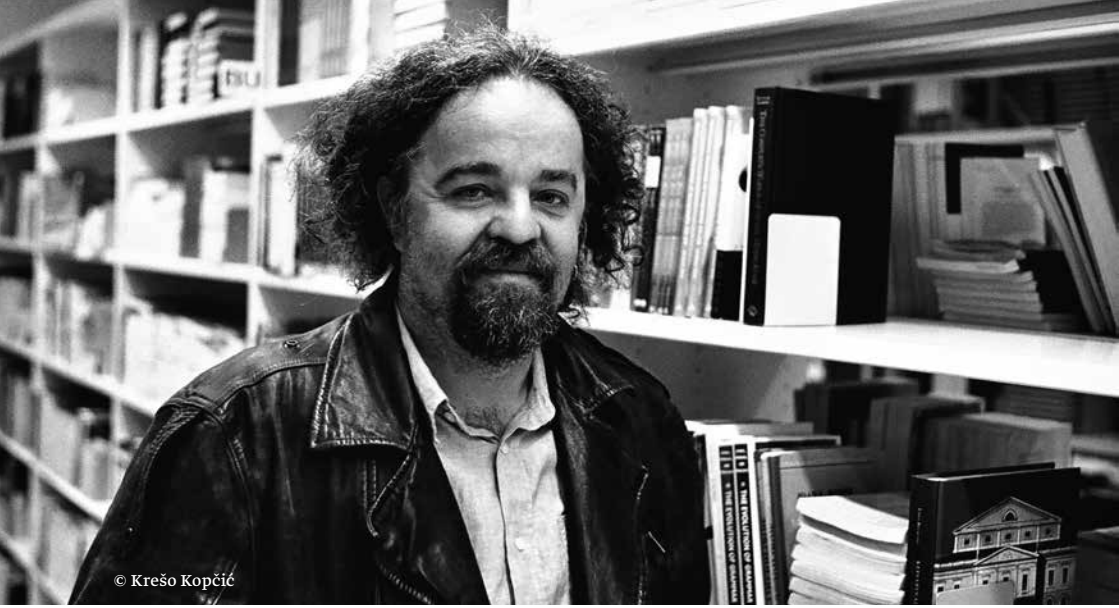

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MILJENKO JERGOVIĆ (Sarajevo, 1966.), writer and journalist, lives in the country near Zagreb. He published his first article in 1983, and his first book of poetry, *Opservatorija Varšava* (*Opservatory Warsaw*, 1988). He wrote several collections of short-stories, *Sarajevski Marlboro* (*Sarajevo Marlboro*), *Mama Leone*, *Inšallah Madona, Inšallah* (*Inch'Allah, Madonna, Inch'Allah*) and a dozen novels, *Dvori od oraha* (*Walnut Mansion*) and *Ruta Tannenbaum* among them. Polish translation of his novel *Srda pjeva, u sumrak, na Duhove* (*Srda Sings, at Dusk, on Pentecost*) won Angelus literary award for the best Central European book in 2012. His works have been translated into more than twenty languages.