

In Memoriam, Ethnically Cleansed

Dušan Karpatský (February 28, 1935—January 31, 2017)

Gone is a man who has indebted Yugoslav literature like few before him. While writing the epilogue for a book and compressing his life's work into a single sentence, this is what I said about him: "Were it not for his work on the Czech and South Slavic cross-cultural relations, a black hole, impossible to fill, would gape there right now". Sadness caused by his passing is accompanied by the nauseating media reactions coming from the South Slavic regions, to whose literatures he devoted his entire life. These reactions range from a failure to acknowledge his work, to ignoring it completely, to ostentatiously and loudly recognizing only portions of it. Dušan Karpatský used to hate it when writers like Ivo Andrić and Meša Selimović were either claimed or rejected, and now he himself is being both claimed and disowned.

His departure has been recognized in the Croatian media "in a worthy manner". One such (brief) article (Novilist.hr) uses the word *Croatian* and *Croatia* 25 times (as if the state passed away, not he), while overlooking almost half of his literary opus. Pure mastery! Not a single sentence about him is a lie, but the whole picture is distorted. Everything has been sifted through a nationalistic sieve.

While praised in the Croatian media as the "tireless translator of Croatian writers", in Serbia, his passing has been met by silence. Not only are they silent, but it has become obvious that a widely accepted notion from the 1990s that Dušan Karpatský is a Croatian nationalist, still prevails.

Everyone interested in knowing what kind of a man he really was should check the bibliography of his translations (the Czech Translators Association website, for instance) while paying attention to the authors and the years of publication.

Another beacon that might be helpful to an uninformed reader in evading the shallow nationalistic waters is *Epistolar* – a book by Dušan Karpatský, a collection of letters he received in "the last fifty years, while engaged with the literatures in the former Yugoslavia, especially Croatian, and former Czechoslovakia, especially Czech".

Epistolar is not only an important document for literary historians, but a rich source of information for general historians as well. The book, for example, includes a fragment of a conversation, in which the author also participated, that took place on January 22, 1966 at the home of Vojo Kuzmanović. The host mildly provoked Krleža by asking him if socialism was the right solution for Yugoslavia. Krleža's answer was: "You know, Kuzmanović, I probably understand better than you all the things that are wrong in this country, but remember, it is still all milk and honey now compared to what might happen".

As I leaf through *Epistolar* for the umpteenth time, it is hard for me to grasp that as recently as January 14, 2017, I received an e-mail from its very author, Dušan Karpatský, the same person who used to hang out with Ranko Marinković in Prague in 1958, or Vasko Popa in 1960. The latter thanked him with this simple note:

“Belgrade, October 16, 1960

Dear Dušan,

I write to say how much I enjoyed your company in your golden Prague, to send greetings from Belgrade, and promise not to forget you.

Vasko

P.S. Be good with your children. Do not torture them with knowledge. They'll get it once they grow up.

V.”

Those who only say that a “tireless translator of Croatian literature” passed away, without mentioning his translations of the authors from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, even Macedonia and Slovenia (pretty much from Vardar to Triglav), do not show one morsel of respect for this man because they neglect almost half of his work. It seems that even an *in memoriam* has to be ethnically cleansed.

Those who claim that it is either an anti-Serb translator or a Croat nationalist who passed away, should know that Dušan Karpatský:

- was a Krležian.
- was one of the founders of the Czech Friends for Indivisible Bosnia and Herzegovina Society.
- translated in 1992 the famous Danilo Kiš essay *About Nationalism*, which describes nationalism as both a collective and individual form of paranoia.
- refused in 1995 to translate an anthology of Croatian war poetry by Sanader and Stamać titled, *At This Terrible Moment*.
- refused in 1996 to translate Franjo Tuđman's *Destiny of the People or Horrors of War*).
- was, until his death, a member of *Lastavica (Swallow)*, a Prague society of citizens from former Yugoslavia, and that his most recent books of translations were published in cooperation with this society.

To say 'no' to Ivo Sanader or to ambassador Zlatko Stahuljak, who personally pressured him to translate the “valuable” work of Franjo Tuđman, meant closing many doors and being denied many opportunities...

Ambassador Stahuljak wrote in his April 30, 1996 letter: “You remember that I never urged you, let alone forced you to translate the book of poetry by Sanader and Stamać, *At This Terrible Moment* ... (...) The situation is different now. Franjo Tuđman's *Destiny of the People*, as

you say yourself, is the best he has written so far, an objectively worthy book that depicts Croatia and Croats in a positive light... And it is a different situation for me, as well, as I personally will put myself to a test if I don't do anything, because this book is really one of a great value. You are the best one, the only one who can translate it into correct and highly understandable Czech, so we can publish the book here and ensure its future positive impact for Croatia (...)"

Despite numerous attempts (let's admit it, a tremendous pressure, out of the ordinary monetary compensation, and an extra bonus in the form of an opportunity to meet the President and visit Brioni), Dušan Karpatský still did not translate the book, knowing very well that someone else certainly will. The "tireless translator of Croatian literature" described his relationship with Ambassador Stahuljak as follows: "Our cooperation, unfortunately, was not a very good one: I did not want to translate what the Ambassador asked me to, and he, on the other hand, did not show any interest in what I was translating and was able to publish without the help of the state he was representing".

And what was the tireless translator translating at the time? He was translating works by Miroslav Krleža , Dubravka Ugrešić, Predrag Matvejević, but also Danilo Kiš, Raymond Rehnicer... He did love Croatia, but which one?

It is obvious that Karpatský, as a Krležian, and consequently an internationalist, has risen above the pitiful nationalist standards, towards which both the Croatian and Serbian nationalists kept pushing him. The nationalists, by doing so, do not actually care whether he is a translator of Croatian or Serbian authors, they only care that their black-and-white, nationalistic world view persists.

The last farewell and cremation of Dušan Karpatský took place at the Olšanské cemetery in Prague on February 9, 2017. It is the same cemetery where the commander-in-chief of the Austro-Hungarian occupying force, with the typical Austrian name of *Filipović*, was buried. This reminded me of an episode from that period: when the Austro-Hungarian military was in the process of 'liberating' Mostar in 1878, an operation led by a general with another typical Austrian name, *Jovanović*, a huge confusion broke out among the population of Mostar as they could not agree on whether to greet the 'liberators' with signs in cyrillic or latin. They finally agreed on the latin signage to be mixed with Serbian flags. In addition, a Turkish-looking triumphal arch was erected, made from very expensive cloth and velvet, with a Turkish sign on it. And all four Jewish families, numbering 19 souls altogether, prepared a warm reception as well...

It is customary among Czech people to play three songs during funeral or cremation services. Three years ago, when we said our goodbyes to Mrs. Ema Karpatský, the wife of Dušan, a woman with whom he spent half of a century, the last song played was *Goodbye* by Arsen Dedić. With that song we said farewell to our Dušan. As the final curtain fell, the familiar voice of Arsen echoed:

“You'll go by train,
I by ship,
Goodbye”

And so Dušan Karpatský left us to be with his Ema, his Krleža, all while listening to Arsen's verses, the singer with whom he shared an extraordinary and respectful friendship. Just two days after Dušan's passing, his friend, Predrag Matvejević, who used to greet Dušan with “Sincere (Krležian) greetings”, joined him.

Dear Dušan, I, too, send my sincere Krležian greetings to you, with the hope that in the happy hunting grounds up there where you are headed, no such people exist whose works you would refuse to translate.

Adin Ljuca, February 10, 2017