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## An Epitaph

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# AN EPITAPH

*Aleksandar Bogdanic*

The stories about the *former* Yugoslavia are ubiquitous in the media. Everybody, everywhere seems to be re-telling bits and pieces of the horrors happening in this splintered country. And, as with a shattered mirror, every shard of the Yugoslav agony reflects a uniquely ghastly image—blurred and voiceless, yet haunting.

It seems to me, however, that despite all the expert analyses and reflective commentaries, nobody really knows what happened *to* Yugoslavia. And, moreover, nobody really cares. Many, still, are quite confident about what should be done to some of its pieces, fully relying on and susceptible to the fragmented, media-sponsored impressions. Such superficial political analyses and quasi-moralist lamentations, occasionally reeking of unethical public relations, help neither those who might like to learn the story about the mirror nor those being haunted. And they—who are puzzled by all the electronic imagery and whose hearts are pierced by the fragments of glass in which they used to identify themselves—would need an apolitical tale. This tale would be about people and their feelings, not about governments and their agendas.

I remember those old shepherds' stories told by the fire I used to hear as a child, usually during corn-husking nights when visiting my grandparents in a Bosnian mountain village. The young people would climb up the huge piles of unhusked corn, of sharp, pleasant odor and yet sharper and somewhat unpleasant touch, and occupy the darkest and farthest parts of the barn and, while husking, enchant one another with their tales. We children, however, stayed close to the fire and listened to the old men with zealous awe. And the story-tellers looked so serious about their business that it seemed the stories were as important to the well-being of the little village as the corn was.

The stories were simple. They had a "this-was-when" beginning, and always a moral ending applicable to the present, always humanity as an underlying theme. Their stories were organic, un-fragmented, and detailed. The characters were not stylized, yet they were people one was able to recognize: they were whole people, not eyes or limbs, heads or noses, graphic and contextless. I had the feeling that the characters themselves were sitting there by the fire. The lives of these people in their small, self-contained village, embedded in the lasting stillness of the surrounding mountains, had something to do with the stories, or vice versa. They both had something universal and eternal about them, and, at the same time, they seemed so small, unimportant, ephemeral.

An often-told story was about two Bohemians who came to steal the hidden treasure from the mount *Tajan*.<sup>1</sup>"This happened when the two Bohemians came to

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<sup>1</sup>Covert

*Marica* and tried to throw the seed of hatred between our village and *Marica*," Luka would begin, an old man in his early nineties. He was short, thin, with hands too small for a grown-up. If it was not for his dusty hat, hardly covering the few remaining gray hairs, and his big gray mustache, there in half-darkness, he could pass for one of the children.

"Well, the Turks, we all knew who they were, says my grandfather, but the Bohemians? And they were said to have come directly from the court of Maria Theresa!"

"You old man, "my grandmother interrupts, "you just keep talking nonsense! What would the two noblemen do in our God-forsaken village? Maria Theresa? May God help you, Luka, in your foolishness. The older you get, the worse you become! I don't think the Bohemians ever came anywhere."

"Come, they did, come they did, and they are still here and you know it and you have seen them and stood on them! They first went to see *Beg*<sup>2</sup> Suljo in *Marica*; they said they were looking for the *treasure* and they needed his help," Luka continued, now, after offering the "proof," less interrupted.

"Suljo was to force Lazar, who was said to be the only living human soul who knew where the *treasure* was hidden, to take the Bohemians there. Everyone, of course, knew that the *treasure* was not to be touched. The three *Vilas*<sup>3</sup> guarded it. Suljo knew it too. And, although he was a *beg*, and Lazar was a simple peasant, he also knew that he would have to fight Lazar and that the two villages would fight, God forbid. But he could not convince the two Bohemian devils. Besides, some say, they threatened to kill him; others say they offered him a third of the treasure and forced him to say he took some gold in advance. In any case, off they went to look for Lazar. But, when they came to the *Dolica Hill*, out of nowhere a big storm came and you could not see a thing! Then, in a lightning, came the *Vila Mila*. *She turned the two Bohemians into two stones and Suljo into a pine tree to guard the stones!* She stood on the stones for seven days and seven nights and kept telling people in the villages below (who dared not look up at her) how sacred the *treasure* was and how they all would become stone if any strangers stole it! After she took off, two big feet remained impressed on the stones, and, as you all know, they are still there."

As the country was done away with, so were these people, their villages and their stories. But **yes, oh yes**, there were Yugoslavs in Yugoslavia; not the Serbs, Croats, Muslims, Albanians, Macedonians, Slovenes, Gypsies, Dalmatians, Istrians and other parts of the whole, but people who had shared the same stories for a thousand years.

These people were South Slavs long before they became the citizens of Southslavia ( i.e., Yugoslavia). Of Yugoslavia, wars would put it together, wars would break it apart. But those who were born and brought up in Yugoslavia as Yugoslavs, who embodied the whole more than their individual parts, genetically or emotionally,

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<sup>2</sup>Count

<sup>3</sup>fairies

are now being cut and hurt most by the shattered pieces. They cannot identify themselves with the surrogates offered: the idea of a multi-ethnic Bosnia sounds beautiful, but it also seems blighted and abused, since the same people purporting to support it assassinated the idea of a multi-ethnic Yugoslavia. Similarly, the "new" Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia & Montenegro) buries the *true* Yugoslav feeling ever deeper into oblivion.

The Yugoslavs were not offered a referendum, nor were they later given a place at the negotiating panels. The world **de-recognized** their existence, their lives, their values and hopes. The Yugoslavs are dead, obliterated, written off as a people by the United Nations. Yet, it was the Yugoslavs who genuinely shared the cosmopolitan values some of their neighbors are still striving for. It was the Yugoslavs who were gregariously and truly pro-Muslim, pro-Serb, pro-Croat, pro-Slovene and pro-European. And they lost everything. Although the little South-Slavic tribes proudly cling to their newly decorated bathrooms, closets, kitchens and sitting rooms, carefully rubbing off all the traces of the idea of a comfortable house they once shared, the blood-stained pieces of the broken mirror reflect their retarded ideas.

The stories being told about the individual pieces are partial, of course. Nevertheless, the media seem to love them. "Which hand," a Yugoslav may wonder, "which eye has more right to tell you how you feel or what you see?" When one's arms and eyes begin sending different messages to the brain and start fighting one another, the brain splits eventually. And what madness it is: neighbor fighting neighbor, claiming the road they had built and used together never existed!

Now Yugoslavs or the parts they were coerced to become are scattered all over: dead, crippled, mutilated, both physically and mentally. Eyes and legs, arms and brains, lying on the asphalt that used to connect them. Those who managed to flee the horror are not much better off: the broken images are behind them, telling them how wrong or right some of their body parts are. Many have already become permanently impaired, bereft of any ability to put themselves together: they walk and tell their stories of abomination, secretly longing for the missing parts they hate. But their leaders and the world stubbornly keep convincing them that it's okay to be crippled: "You were an artificial creation; a mistake to begin with. We'll give you sovereignty and recognition. The civilized world supports you."

But what kind of stories can these invalids tell their children? Only bigotry and hate come to my mind. Unless, of course, they wake up one day and in their memories lay a flower on the shrine.