



To The Far Shore
Négoan Rajic

Translated by Nora Alleyn

“Rajic’s stories show the dehumanizing aspects of society while ironically rising above them with imagination and a perverse sense of humour.”

— Geoff Hancock, *The Toronto Star*

*To The
Far Shore*

A NOVEL

Nēgovan Rajic



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*To Milenko and all the other
freedom-loving pilgrims*

*Who will revive the past? Who will defend its martyrs,
felled by bullets? Is this not why we are here?*

—VLADIMIR JANKÉLÉVITCH

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A Summer With No Clouds or A Farewell to Arms

*Time, beyond recall, has fled.
The hour is drawing to a close.*

— PAUL-JEAN TOULET

A garrison is a dull place in peacetime.

— CARSON McCULLERS

MY LAST MONTHS in Niš — I was still in the army — were the worst since I had joined up in October 1944. That autumn, through a string of extraordinary circumstances, I joined the Partisans under the command of Captain Boško. We were stationed near Užice, a town in the mountains of Western Serbia, and the birthplace of my father.

The army was hardly a summer camp, but as long as we were ready to die without a whimper, discipline in the garrison was minimal. Both the officers and non-commissioned officers turned a blind eye to our peccadilloes. The rough lodgings and plain food forced us to improvise to make the overcrowded conditions more tolerable. For us, the 1945 Armistice marked the end of an adventurous, almost bohemian existence. Garrison life, by contrast, turned out to be excruciatingly boring. The army became a machine for churning out mindless regulations and endless drills. I can still hear the drill-sergeant barking out his commands: *right, left ... right, left ... right, left ...* Worse yet, life was returning to normal and we were being left out of it.

Shreds of memory survive from that time, but the chronology of events grows foggier and foggier, in the same way that faces fade in old photos. Still, certain images persist and remain amazingly sharp.

The summer of 1945 remained cloudless for days on end. Then a sudden downpour would freshen the air temporarily. For an hour or two, the barracks courtyard turned to mud and the Nišava River swirled by, silt-laden. When the sun broke through again, the paved streets of Niš dried out in patches. Two days later, the clay along the riverbanks would crack into spidery patterns.

The hours limped along, filled with rounds of fatigue duties and dull ideological indoctrination sessions held in a classroom with desperately blank walls. Our minds and our bodies would succumb to the sweltering heat. The blank-faced commissar would drone on, reading aloud the latest speech by the Grand Master of the Keys, known to a small group of insiders as Tito — a troublemaker and an unprincipled nabob who had emerged as the strongman from the murky events of the Second World War.

The speeches, meant to be edifying, invariably started with: *Comrades, I think ...* Was he about to say: *therefore I am?* No. This boor had never even heard of Descartes. So what was he going on about? Mostly he expatiated on the past and the future, rarely on the present: On how, before the war, our country was so poor, and then the Germans invaded and destroyed what little we had. As for the future, he said it beckoned like an enchanted land. Tomorrow, the Tower of Babel, built by our worthy people, would reach into the heavens. The only snag: the enemies of the people. They had to be flushed out and crushed like vermin.

We were often subjected to theories hatched more than a century before by a pedantic German philosopher living in exile in London. Our poor commissar. He had to wrestle with these badly digested concepts, which made him look like the demon thrashing around in holy water. History was reduced to its simplest terms: after primitive communism, slavery, feudalism and capitalism, humanity was edging towards the magic Land of Plenty, towards an era of geometric Justice. And that was how History would end.

During these lectures the soldiers — poor devils, yanked out of their fields by the war — would yawn till their jaws nearly came unhinged. Had the commissar announced the Apocalypse for tomorrow, they would have continued to stare at him vacant-eyed.

One day, a large irreverent housefly disrupted the scene. Buzzing and circling around our instructor, the fly afforded a welcome distraction. I couldn't help smiling — and was severely reprimanded. Slowly but surely the army was turning us into morons.



I had lived through so much since that dark, moonless night of October 2, 1944 when I crawled along a muddy riverbank to escape from the besieged city of Užice. During that fateful year, when the destiny of so many European countries was sucked into the maelstrom of History, the war was drawing to a close. The Third Reich was in its death throes, but the Great Paranoiac, hiding in his wolf's lair, his *Wolfsschanze* in Eastern Prussia, was high on Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*. He kept hoping that his secret weapons would save him, just as Empress

Elisabeth Petrovna's death saved Frederic the Great from the Russian invasion of 1762.

It was game over in the Balkans by autumn 1944. The last German divisions were pulling out of Greece. In Serbia, the Allies followed some obscure geo-political strategy: they abandoned the Nationalist Resistance forces to support the Grand Master of the Keys and his Partisans. Night after night, airplanes would parachute arms and munitions to his troops, enabling him eventually to seize power.

In the end, everyone pursued their own agenda. Some were running after glory while others believed in the justice of their cause. As for myself, I can't explain why I joined the Grand Master's Partisans who were fighting around Užice. I knew I wanted to be a part of the history that was unfolding around me. Was it vanity on my part? Or a spirit of adventure? Death-wish, or a desire to feel truly alive? To see clearly into one's soul is not easy.

An old slight also pushed me to join the Partisans. An elderly woman had once remarked to me: "Your grandmother Jelena was lucky. Her three sons wore glasses. They all came back from the war while my only son was killed during the battle of Cer." Her words rankled for a long time. So I belonged to a family that refused to spill its blood? Was I being overly sensitive? The only way I could rid myself of guilt was by enlisting.

We all had to choose sides in this triangular war between the guerilla troops of the Nationalist Resistance led by General Mihajlović, the Partisans led by the Grand Master of the Keys, and the German army. Each side wanted to see the other two bleed to death. The Nationalist Resistance Movement, with its slogan "For King and country," had a theatrical ring to it whereas the Partisans were convinced they possessed the truth.

In these troubled times, the future was very unpredictable. If I hesitated, I would miss the war.

So I made the leap and found myself in a detachment of Partisans commanded by Captain Boško. However, in my heart of hearts, I swore I would never fire on General Mihajlović's troops even if it meant being killed. The only time my company engaged in a skirmish with them, I slipped away, claiming I had a slight wound to my left leg.

In several clashes with the German occupying forces, I managed to cheat death. I was convinced that some unknown force was protecting me. Whenever we attacked an enemy position, I would run, not from the Germans but from my own cowardice. Sometimes the coward rises up against his own cowardice. My superiors saw this as devotion to the Master Design. They suggested I join the Party. An inner voice whispered to me to avoid those in power, so I refused.

My brief war experience ended the night of December 18, 1944. That day, the Second Company of the Second Battalion entered the liberated town of Užice. One week earlier, the Allies had rained bombs down on the city. Charred beams like broad strokes of charcoal lay amidst the snowy ruins of the town.

We marched into a sleepy neighbourhood in single file. With our mismatched uniforms, we looked more like an army in flight than the victors. People opened their windows and doors to greet us and ask about their loved ones. Ten minutes later, I found myself standing in front of my family's house. I was stunned. A bomb had blown away the facade, and you could see the furniture in the room. The building looked like a doll house with its Lilliputian furniture.

I climbed to the first floor and found my Aunt Elisabeth and the faithful Klara safe and sound. The apartment no longer had a living room. When I opened the door, I found myself staring

into space. The wall on the street side no longer existed. Nor did the floor. Snow was falling softly onto the debris of beams and parquet. Luckily, the other rooms were habitable. The bathroom was also intact. When I entered its steamy atmosphere, I appreciated the cult of the *hammam*, the Turkish steam bath. Divesting myself of my flea-infested clothes, I plunged into my first bath after three months of exhausting marches and sleeping on straw pallets. My stomach and legs were covered with tiny red bites. I wanted to spend the rest of my life luxuriating in the tub. Such bliss to slip into clean sheets and pyjamas. It was a strange night. Beech logs crackled in the great tile stove and a soft warmth permeated the room. Nothing seemed to have changed, yet all I had to do was open the living-room door to feel December's bite and see the snow falling on Ljubica Street.

In the hallway stood the old cupboard with the curious painted face. During my childhood this piece of furniture had been in our country house, and it used to keep me awake at night. Glimpsed in the faint light of the bedroom, the bearded face would make me feel anxious — and compassionate. My imagination identified the face as that of Judas, condemned to expiate his betrayal of Christ until Judgment Day. In the morning, when the light returned, I would pluck up my courage and peek into the cupboard. Inside, there was only my grandmother Jelena's Sunday outfit. She had died just a few weeks before I was born.

Before falling asleep, I let my thoughts wander. The next day was the Orthodox feast day of St. Nicholas, my family's guardian since time immemorial. Centuries ago, one of my ancestors converted to Christianity and adopted St. Nicholas as his patron saint. Before the war, when my mother was still alive, we would celebrate his feast day with friends.

My thoughts strayed to my father. I had had little news of him except that the Gestapo had released him, in poor health, just before the German army's retreat from Belgium. He probably knew nothing about what was going on in my life.



During this winter of war, a brief love affair left me with a bittersweet aftertaste.

At the beginning of December, I took advantage of a short leave from the Second Division, temporarily stationed in the village of Varda. The gently rolling countryside slept under its blanket of snow. It was almost midnight. With my rifle slung over my shoulder and my kit on my back, I set out under a full moon, and walked along a little path that followed the meandering of a frozen river. On either side, trees stretched out their gaunt branches. The cold was starting to penetrate my bones. The long trek from Varda was almost over.

A warm fire, a roof, and maybe a dish of polenta were awaiting me in a large villa that rose up like a Scottish castle on its promontory, with the little river at its feet. Before the war, this luxurious dwelling had belonged to a wealthy lawyer. Looted and plundered by successive waves of transients, it now sheltered a merry band of young artists. They performed in a nearby market town. They sang, danced and put on plays for the soldiers, who, on returning from the front, were anxious to rid themselves of fleas and grab a few days' respite. At one time I also had been a member of the troupe, but had left in a fit of temper.

Suddenly, I became aware of strange noises coming from a small hill above the road. Bang! ... Bang! ... Bang! ... Someone was hammering on an empty barrel. At least that was what it sounded like, but why at this hour of the night? Without

knowing why, I started to climb the path running up the hillside and found fresh tracks left by mysterious night visitors. Gradually, the mystery was revealed. At the top of the rise was a small abandoned-looking cemetery with dilapidated fences and leaning headstones. A scattering of pines stood guard. Four men, their faces lit by a storm lantern, were standing near a pile of freshly turned earth. Bang! ... Bang! ... Bang! ... A fifth man, down on one knee, was hammering nails into a coffin. After he finished, the men lowered it into the grave. You could hear the rope rubbing against the wooden sides, followed by the dull thud of clumps of frozen earth. I quickly retraced my steps, having no wish to meet these nocturnal gravediggers. Nevertheless, I was intrigued by the death of this unknown person. Was it an enemy of the people, a deserter, or one of our soldiers killed at the front? And if it was a soldier, why had they not fired a salute?

These questions continued to haunt me as I crossed the threshold of the villa, the solitary structure in the landscape. The warm air inside filled me with an animal happiness. In the empty rooms stripped of furniture, the boys and girls of the troupe were fast asleep on straw pallets. In the great hall, a young teacher, a recent graduate, was waiting for me by the fireplace where a good fire was burning. The firelight played on her pure fresh face framed by ash-blonde hair. Moved by this dreamlike vision, I launched into a lengthy and lyrical flight of fancy, expounding on love and the brevity of human existence. She and I were soon re-inventing the world.

A mere two hours by foot from this solitary villa, in No Man's Land, shivering sentries busily scanned the wintry horizon. At times, a rocket would shoot up and slowly descend, shedding a sinister green light over the snow. The staccato bark of a machinegun would disrupt the silence, and then all would be

still again. Thanatos, disguised as a hoary old man, was lurking nearby, invisible, and hard at work.

Is that why we felt so transported by Eros during this night stolen from war and death? I tried, with the magic of words, to create the sense that we were sailing towards some imaginary Cythera, far from the villa and the mysterious gravesite on the hillside. The embers were dying when our brief idyll was sealed by a kiss. It left me with the bittersweet taste of an unfinished dream.

Early the next morning, I set off for Varda to rejoin the Second Company of the Second Battalion. The intense cold and bruising shoulder straps soon snapped me out of my lovesickness. As I passed the hill with the abandoned cemetery, I thought about the strange night-time burial and the five mysterious grave-diggers. Who were they and how many more anonymous graves were salted away in our countryside?



The two months following my return to Užice passed in a surreal atmosphere. Neither soldier nor civilian, I slept at the house and went skiing on my Aunt Elisabeth's property with a rifle on my shoulder. This left me plenty of time to go courting. Inevitably, the memory of that romantic night by the fireside slowly faded. In any case, the young teacher had set her heart on a tall blond fellow, a hero of the Resistance. At a dinner dance one evening, she reproached me for inviting her to spin to a waltz because I was keeping her from the arms of her great blond lover. Ah, Love was not the cosmic adventure I had thought it was.

I was making rapid progress in my understanding of life. Or was this simply the delusion of a philosopher — or that of

a prig? I didn't doubt that the future was about to project me into new adventures of mind and body.

I continued to stride down the streets of Užice with my Browning Automatic in its black holster. Some people must have thought I was still in the army. In the general confusion, nobody knew whether I still belonged to the Second Company or if Captain Boško had given me leave. My situation began to feel somewhat precarious. The fighting continued to rage on the Syrmian Plain and in Bosnia. It no longer felt right to be having a good time when young people were coming back crippled or not at all.

In February 1945, Providence sent me my distant cousin, Efrem Popovič. He was now a lieutenant colonel and political commissar of the 47th Division stationed not far from the little town of Čuprija. He suggested to my cousin Dimitri and me that we enlist in his division, a ragtag band of soldiers as we soon discovered. From February to April 1945, we lived in Čuprija and Jagodina, two small towns in Serbia. When his division was disbanded, we were sent to the front.

Life and death were strictly a matter of chance. By a stroke of luck, my cousin and I were able to ride out the war. Many students from Belgrade were not so fortunate. In October 1944, when the fate of our country was hanging by a thread, they were dispatched to a bloodbath on the Syrmian front two hundred kilometres west of Belgrade. Many were mowed down by German machineguns. The Third Reich was nearing defeat but a mortally wounded beast can still attack.

Had the Party deliberately used the children of the bourgeoisie as cannon fodder, as some claimed? We will probably never know, but true or not, the officers sent to the Pannonian Plain had been trained as guerillas in the mountains and lacked any experience of trench warfare.

In the spring of 1945, when we received the order to join

the 21st Serbian shock troops, the end of the conflict was only weeks, or days, away. The front was moving like wildfire towards Zagreb, capital of the short-lived independent Croatian state. For us, these famous shock troops were like a figment of someone's imagination. We tried in vain to catch up with them. By the time we arrived by train from Jagodina to Vinkovci, they were already moving across Slavonia; by the time we finally found ourselves marching under the blazing sun on the dusty roads of this picturesque province, they were already near the Austrian border in trucks captured from the *Wehrmacht*.

On the evening of May 8, 1945, we stopped trying to catch up with them. The Second World War was over. It had begun to the sound of band music on September 1, 1939 with a *sondermeldung*, a special message announcing Hitler's attack on Poland. In Belgrade, we had paid scant attention, as if this attack were happening on another planet. Race cars were backfiring around the old fortress of Kalemegdan. Our jubilant capital was proud to be holding its first car race. To commemorate the event, the Yugoslav post office had printed a series of stamps. Two thousand and seventy-five days later, the Third Reich, supposed to last a thousand years, was no more. This is a fitting subject for meditation on the impermanence of empires and the vanity of their founders.

The news of the Armistice caught up with us in a little Slavonian town, after having completed a full day's march. We were exhausted. The railway network had been destroyed. As they retreated, the German army had hitched a huge ploughshare to a locomotive and dragged it over the railway tracks, splintering the ties like matchsticks. Their destructive genius was commensurate with their creative genius.

On May 8, 1945, the head of our column entered Djhakovica, a small medieval town. The dark mass of its cathedral towered

above the peaked roofs of the houses, a startling sight in this market town. Its soaring steeple mirrored in stone the crazy dream of a nineteenth-century Croatian bishop who had wanted to unite all the Slavs of the south into a single state. The scene resembled an antique etching of the sun setting fire to the Western sky.

Suddenly, we heard shots coming from town. Was it an ambush? Soldiers were running up to meet us, gesticulating and shouting: "The war is over ... the war is over!" Overcome with emotion, we too started shooting into the air, hooting and shouting and hugging one another. All over Europe the same gesture was repeated.

Behind us, on the Syrmian Plain, bodies were piled into the common graves of Kragujevaùc, Bajica, Krčagovo. Men, women, the elderly and children had had their throats slit in the Orthodox church of Glina. Many who survived the war would die soon after, their bodies mangled, their lips chapped with thirst.

Those of us who had survived rejoiced because we still had our legs, our arms, our eyes. We could walk and shake hands. We could see the streets and the forests. For us, tomorrow had meaning again. In a few weeks or months, we would shuck off our rags and guns and sleep in clean beds. Once again I would go dancing in Zlatibor. The waltzes and tangos would ring out in the streets of Užice to the annoyance of our neighbours. What did we care? We would take back the night. I would twirl with a beautiful girl in my arms under the soft light of the lanterns. The next morning, she and I would walk among the trees of the Great Park and we would embrace to our hearts' content.

One day in July, I boarded an old train that rattled its way out of the town of Niš. The hot air came rushing in through the windows and the filthy curtains fluttered in the breeze. By two in the afternoon, the heat was as oppressive on the plain we were jolting across as it had been on the city pavement. The sun had scorched the orchards and the stubbled fields. In the distance, grapes were ripening in the vineyards. At times we would pass a house with its shutters closed. The residents were probably having a siesta. Lucky people. I unbuttoned the collar of my woolen tunic — regulations be damned — and watched the landscape go by. Despite the heat, I was content to escape the dreariness of the barracks.

I had been granted special leave to visit the infamous Tower of Skulls. From the time we were in grade school, teachers had been dinning stories into our heads about this monument. In 1804, a ragged army of Serbian peasants and beggars had rebelled against the Turkish sultan's troops over the humiliations inflicted on them. After an initial success, the uprising ground to a halt in the spring of 1809. A detachment of this motley crew had besieged the Turkish garrison in Niš but had overestimated their strength. On the last day of May, the Ottoman troops streamed out of the fortress and hacked their attackers to pieces. Stevan Sindjelić, commander of the Serbian army, seeing that the battle was lost, allowed the enemy soldiers to approach the powder magazine which he then ignited. The explosion and fire had killed defenders and besiegers alike.

The Turks erected a macabre tower made of the severed heads of the rebels on the side of the road to Istanbul. The tower was intended to serve as a warning to the *roumis* (Christians) should they be tempted to rise up again against the Sublime Porte, the government of the Ottoman Empire. But the Serbs, thirsting for freedom, had not yet learned their lesson, and six years later, the

raia, or guerilla troops, rebelled anew. Fighting with rusty old guns and cannons made from the trunks of cherry trees, they succeeded in wresting some measure of independence from the Turks.

Getting off the train, I saw a monument topped by a chapel-like structure but without a cross. The interior was in ruins. A deathlike silence reigned. The bones and plaster gave off an acrid odour. What many of us had imagined as a powerful dungeon turned out to be a small square tower barely four metres high. Originally, there had been 952 scalped heads, but some of the cavities were now empty. Women would come, from far and near, to scrape the plaster and the skulls in order to concoct a fertility potion, in the belief that the bones of their dead heroes could engender new life.

I was the only visitor. I walked around the strange ruin and discovered a black stone commemorating the visit of Alphonse de Lamartine. The inscription, in French and Serbian, read thus:

“... may this monument endure! It will teach children the value of independence by showing them the awful price paid by their forefathers.”

– LAMARTINE, JULY 1833

Standing there, I tried to picture the poet’s stagecoach coming to a standstill in a cloud of dust in front of the Tower of Skulls and the traveller from France alighting to examine the tragic structure. In his *Voyage en Orient*, he referred to it as the “cornerstone of Serbian independence.”

What curious people these Serbs are. Instead of destroying this sinister tower, it was preserved so they could mortify themselves in perpetuity. The French would never consider inscribing

the names of Bérézina or Waterloo inside their Arc de Triomphe.

Why had the people of Serbia chosen to commemorate their dead so conspicuously and morbidly? A Wuthering Heights of history. At least they could have moved the tower to a more isolated spot. Frederic Barbarossa's crusades had passed by here on their way to the Holy Land, and the Ottomans used the route on their way north to lay siege to Vienna.

I might have stayed longer, reflecting on our people's destiny in front of these skulls with their empty eye sockets, but I had to be back at the barracks, located inside the very fortress that the Serbs had attacked so many years ago, before five o'clock.

The train rattled its way back to Niš. Alphonse de Lamartine had awakened memories of my stay in Paris during the 1937 World's Fair. On July 1 of that year, I had disembarked from the train at Lyon Station where I was met by Madame Laval and her daughter Madeleine, a lovely blonde who had just passed her exam to become a German teacher. We descended into the bowels of the subway: long tiled corridors, trains thundering in and out of the tunnels, and crowds hurrying towards unknown destinations — I was stunned by all of the bustle. The city was an immense hive of activity. In comparison, Belgrade seemed like a small provincial town.

My father had sent me to France to learn the language. He secretly hoped that I would choose a diplomatic career. In any case, French would always be useful. While boarding at Madame Levi's on Rue Monbel, I enjoyed walking around the pavilions of the World's Fair and visiting the museums. A veritable passion to explore every corner of the capital took hold of me: I would leave the house after breakfast and only come home for supper. A fascinating world had opened up around me. Along the grand boulevards, the street vendors with their sales pitches for ties and cheap fountain pens intrigued me.

The French spoke with incredible eloquence. Two or three times they cheated me, but eventually I discovered their secret by watching the shills who pretended to buy a necktie or a pen in order to encourage the onlookers to do the same. In a cutlery shop on the Boulevard des Italiens, opposite the Gaumont Theatre, the world's greatest movie house, a man pretending to be a robot mesmerized me. At the end of two months, I returned to Belgrade, convinced that one day I would go back to Paris to continue my education.

I woke from my reverie as the train reached the city. I got off in front of the officers' club and headed for the citadel. The gunners' barracks seemed more mournful than usual.



On the street between the citadel and the main street stood an old palace. Its marble ornaments bore witness to more prosperous times, but it was now falling into ruin: its steps cracked, the walls flaking, and the huge windows bare. The building had a sinister aura. The shabby building housed the Youth Corps, boys still all in their teens, most of them war orphans. At times, they would go on a pub-crawl in Niš. Their laughter made my blood run cold. Rumour had it that they had helped execute prisoners. This did not seem far-fetched for some of their faces revealed the cruelty of seasoned soldiers.

A sentry armed with a submachine gun stood guard. He had a striking face. During the war, I had learned to spot those who had killed defenseless men. The signs were unmistakable: shifty eyes, vacant minds, a glint of pain in their eyes. They often appeared to be conversing with ghosts. Were they seeing the spirits of those they had murdered? Despite their youth,

they resembled mature men wearing apprentice executioners' masks to cover their oftentimes still beardless faces.

Who was responsible for them? Was it the fault of the men beholden to the Grand Master's Master Design for Yugoslavia who were inciting these youngsters to crime, enforcing obedience to the new order through bloodshed?

It was around this time that the idea of living in a divided world came to me. One part was visible, and consisted of professional revolutionaries, heroes of the Serbian National Resistance, who were the first wave of guerilla fighters. Then came the Partisans and all the others: generals weighted down by medals, puppet representatives of the people, unilingual diplomats, journalists who claimed the right over life and death, janitors who watched over every building and who in turn were spied on by other informants, and the list went on. Every day we were bombarded with well-meaning and edifying speeches intended to teach us about our imperfections.

But beyond this visible world lurked a secret and subterranean one and from time to time, fissures opened up allowing us to catch a glimpse of it.

After seeing these prematurely old faces of the Youth Corps, my suspicions were confirmed by the arrival in Niš in August 1945 of Slobodan Penezić, head of the powerful secret police.

I first met Slobodan Penezić back in 1941. War had just broken out in Russia and North Africa, and in Serbia, where an insurrection against the occupying army had resulted in a bloodbath. The flag of an undefined Red Republic was raised in Užice, recently liberated by the Nationalist Resistance fighters. On November 22, at two in the afternoon, the city and the surrounding hills shook with a dull explosion. An underground arms factory had just been bombed. From my Aunt Elisabeth's

house, we could see a thick black cloud slowly rising in the cold autumn air. I ran like someone demented and found myself fifteen minutes later at the underground factory. I joined a group of young people taking turns activating an archaic hand pump, which would have made a lovely collector's piece in a firemen's museum. It served no real purpose. Everyone in the factory's tunnels was killed.

I first saw Slobodan Penezić as he was aiming an automatic pistol at the crowd. His faded-blue eyes feverishly scanned the people who had started to assemble. Some of the workers' wives were already crying. The man with the pistol looked at them, and then at the thick black smoke gushing out of the tunnel. The throng was growing by the minute. Was there a spy or a saboteur among them? Tall, thin, with the pallor of a consumptive, and wrapped in his long officer's cape, Slobodan Penezić resembled a caricature of a Russian revolutionary from the 1800s.

The circumstances of our meeting in Niš were less dramatic, almost friendly. He had come to the city to attend a meeting of the secret police. He had also expressed the wish to visit the surrounding area. One August afternoon, several of us were ordered to the hall of the officers' mess. Towards two o'clock, a door opened and Slobodan entered, as thin and pale as ever. Through the half-opened door, we could see the officers, their collars unbuttoned, chatting over their fruit and cheese.

We had a cordial talk with Slobodan. After a lunch not lacking in alcohol, he was in an excellent mood. We exchanged pleasantries, and mentioned people we knew in common in Užice. Occasionally, he would peer at us as if trying to read our deepest thoughts. It gave me the shivers. Standing before this guardian of revolutionary rectitude, few of us felt above suspicion. Luckily, we were small fry. Despite our forced smiles,

the man probably had no illusions. No one liked him. The solitude of an exterminating angel must be immense. Was he hopeful that one day the whole world would finally be delivered from evil, so that the survivors could love one another like brothers? After ten minutes of fitful conversation, Slobodan Penezić dismissed us, as one would dismiss a servant, and returned to his official meeting. His expression sent a shudder down my spine; for once the heat outside felt quite bearable.



Why pretend? My sense of living in a dual world stemmed from an inability to fall into step with what was happening all around me. Had I been a member of the Communist Party, I may have had a more optimistic outlook on life. Twice my friends gave me the opportunity to join the inner circle of the initiated, and twice I had the impertinence to refuse.

The first opportunity came in Užice on a dull November day in 1944. Evening was darkening into night and a grey sky was threatening snow. The war was only twenty kilometres away, the room was cozy with a good fire crackling in the cast-iron stove. *Carpe diem* — sieze the day, seize the moment. We had learned how to do this.

“If you become a member of the Party, you could take over the political training of my dispatch riders and remain at division headquarters. Why risk being killed when the war is almost over?” asked Captain Boško.

His concern was touching, but his offer caught me unawares.

“But I believe in God!”

“Ah!”

To brandish one’s belief in God to avoid joining the Party was tantamount to blasphemy. The captain looked at me as if I

were the last living specimen of a race on the road to extinction.

“You might keep that to yourself,” he said.

The era of the catacombs was back. We had to keep God buried in the galleries of our conscience.

Our conversation ended there, rather awkwardly. With hindsight, I realise that the captain had just betrayed the Party.

The situation was quite different in Niš. I was approached by one of those creeps who, once the war was over, suddenly discovered their vocation as revolutionaries. With a conspiratorial look, he asked me to meet him in the basement of the First Army’s headquarters. I knew what was coming, and even the phrasing he would use to approach the subject.

“Comrade, you’re an honest man. Your place is in the Party!”

I almost burst out laughing, and was on the verge of replying: “No, comrade, I’m not an honest man, I am deceitful and wicked and, anyhow, the honest men are all in prison.” Apparently, the Party needed a few innocent suckers to regain a sheen of some respectability. Instead I answered: “No, comrade, I can’t become a member. I don’t agree with some of Marx’s theories.”

I had probably never voiced such a foolish argument in my whole life. The sergeant, stunned by the enormity of my comments, was struck dumb. A simple grunt in the signals battalion had dared to disagree with “God.” And I didn’t even know what I was talking about. In high school I had tried hard to read *Das Kapital*, but had given up. Marx’s arguments were just too tedious and abstruse.

The sergeant didn’t insist. Instead of saying goodbye, his last words were: “You asked for it, comrade!”

So far, they had nothing against me, but they could keep me in the army long enough for me to miss registration at the university. I lost sleep at the thought of spending a whole winter doing fatigue duty in the gunners’ barracks.

My fate as a rebel and a nomad was probably sealed on that day.



The sudden appearance of Milenko, my old school friend, broke the monotony of those cloudless summer days, and lifted my morale. We had met in the autumn of 1934 at the beginning of the school year, and since then our shared interests and tastes had made us close friends. He arrived in Niš with the staff of the First Army. Working as a radio repair technician, he enjoyed prestige and privileges that he would not otherwise have been entitled to as a lowly private. All because of his expertise in electronics, which had been his passion since the age of thirteen. It had started when he built a crystal set. With his endless patience and curiosity, he had accumulated enough knowledge to repair the clandestine transmitters of the Resistance. This highly dangerous activity might have cost him his life, for the Gestapo did not deal lightly with people like Milenko.

He became head repairman in the First Army's workshop. Since the autumn of 1944, Milenko had been living like a pasha. In Niš I found him installed in a plush villa overlooking the city. From his room he could walk out into a vineyard lush with lovely amber grapes. Compared to my workshop-dormitory where five of us were crammed into small quarters, he lived in indecent luxury.

We enjoyed chatting about all kinds of things, but especially about our dreams of going to university. He told me, with a certain justifiable pride, that the army had offered him a scholarship to study at Lomonosov University in Moscow. Unfortunately, he had made the mistake of expressing his preference for an American university, and as a result, he never received any

scholarship, not even for Belgrade University. The intrinsic value of a human being no longer had value: only the Master Design counted.

Much to my regret, Milenko did not stay long in Niš. He was demobilized just three weeks after our reunion.



Ten days later, my cousin Dimitri was also demobilized, and more than happy to get back to Belgrade. Since Ćuprija, we had always been in the same division, and his departure now deepened my sense of isolation. Like the other students who were serving in the army, I was champing at the bit, anxious to recover my freedom and to resume my studies. During the German Occupation, all institutions of higher learning were shut down. We Serbs were not allowed to receive an education. In Belgrade, I couldn't bear to walk by the imposing building that formerly housed the School of Engineering, now transformed into the *Kriegslazarett*, the German military hospital, without feeling enormous frustration. The sight of the sentry going back and forth in front of the hospital's sharp-tipped fence filled me with hatred for this soldier, as if the poor devil were personally trying to prevent me from entering the faculty.

The air was rife with demobilisation rumours. Priority would be given to those whose studies had been interrupted by the war. At other times, priority shifted to those who had been the first to enlist. By the end of August a new rumour was making the rounds; those who were temporarily unfit for active duty would be the first to be demobilized. The wording was vague. Why "temporarily?" If one eventually recovered and was considered fit would one be recalled? The news triggered an epidemic of maladies more or less imaginary: allergies

became full-blown, eczema flowered, ankles hurt and flat feet multiplied. As for myself, I was myopic. For once, this disability might come in handy. Unwisely, I rushed to see my commanding officer.

“Comrade Commissar, as someone suffering from myopia, I am unfit for duty, therefore eligible for demobilisation.”

The comrade commissar smiled in a friendly fashion. “Wait a minute, comrade! Not so fast! Who will give me my French lessons?”

I had totally forgotten. I might be useless in an army during peacetime, but I was useful as a tutor for our brave commissar. A shoemaker by trade, he was taking courses to earn his baccalaureate. The army not only distributed promotions, but also diplomas. These French lessons were my revenge for the insipid ideological courses I was forced to take, for when I sat beside the commissar and read: “Here is a pencil ... this pencil is red,” I became his superior. Eventually he must have realised that learning a language was a more serious matter than reciting the Grand Master’s nonsense.

“But, Comrade Commissar, let’s suppose that during battle I break my glasses, how will I aim?”

“Don’t be a smart aleck! You know as well as I do there won’t be a war, at least not for another ten or fifteen years. By then, you’ll be demobilized and if there is another war you’ll be able to guard the bridges.”

The commissar said this laughingly, happy to have countered my argument. I could choose to take his comments lightly. But the prospect of being forgotten in the army worried me. I left determined to reiterate my request.

The next day, I registered for an eye exam. With my myopia and astigmatism, the thing was in the bag. At first, everything went well. In the darkness of the ophthalmologist’s office, the

brightly lit letters flipped by: K, Z, M ... The doctor kept changing the lenses. After the exam, he handed me a prescription for a new pair of glasses. And that is when I bungled.

“Am I temporarily unfit?”

“Oh no! Your vision is now 100%. You are totally fit.”

To avoid any ambiguity, he asked me for the prescription and wrote: “Complete correction, fit for active duty.”

What a fool I was! I called myself by all sorts of names, but of course that would change absolutely nothing. How could I have made such a stupid remark?

Two days later, coming into the barracks and feeling somewhat depressed, I ran into Bazil, a medical student and an old acquaintance from high school days. He was also in the army, in the sanitary services according to the label on his uniform jacket. We exchanged pleasantries and I told him about my aborted attempt to be discharged.

“You should have spoken to me first, old bean! You have to have a different approach, but don’t worry, I’ll fix it for you.”

“How?”

“Let two weeks go by, just long enough for the doctor to forget your face, and then go back for another eye examination. And bring me the medical certificate afterwards. And don’t say anything to anybody. I’ll take care of the rest.”

I was hopeful, but the two weeks seemed endless, like a long day without water. Finally one afternoon I climbed the staircase of the First Army’s ophthalmology clinic. Would the commander remember me? Would he suspect some kind of trickery?

When it was my turn, he invited me to sit on the stool as if there were nothing unusual. In the darkness, the letters followed one another and shrunk in descending lines. These were decisive minutes. Could the doctor hear my heart beat? I recited the letters one by one, and suddenly the idea came to me

to appear more nearsighted than I actually was. I made so bold as to say that I could no longer distinguish the letters when, in actual fact, I could read them perfectly. At the fourth line, I began to stutter.

I cheated, but my conscience was easy. My years at war had taught me how to be crafty, only, I must not have been doing a very good job because the doctor played with the corrective lenses, and perhaps caught on to my game. I became confused, no longer sure whether I should be reading the lines on the board with the lenses he held up to me. I've always been a poor liar.

Speaking in neutral tones, he said: "And do you see better this way? And now, try to read the fifth line."

When the light came back on, he looked at me straight in the eye. I was wearing gold-rimmed glasses. To have the appearance of an intellectual was a serious defect in those days. Did he sense my desire to quit the army? He wrote down my dioptré: oculus dexter less four, oculus sinister less four and a half. I had gained one dioptré for each eye. I can still see the doctor's thin face and swarthy complexion. His eyes looked right through me, as if to say: *Young man, I am not fooled by your trick, but ...* He handed me the paper.

I went down the stairs two by two and ran straight to the Medsanbat. Bazil was my last chance. I repeated like a mantra: *To the Medsanbat ... to the Medsanbat ...* and strangely, for the first time since I had joined the 21st Division, I realised the meaning of this abbreviation: medical and sanitary battalion. What a strange world. Ideas and thoughts shrunk into slogans. The names of institutions had all become acronyms. The Department of Propaganda had become Agitprop, the Central Committee the CC, the political bureau the Politburo and so on.

Bazil reassured me. With a little luck, everything would be fine. According to him, in a few days time I would be called

up before the medical commission who would probably proclaim me “provisionally unfit.” I hung onto this idea with a mixture of hope and despair. I was increasingly alone since the end of August, and time felt oppressive. Every day I would hear of so-and-so being demobilized. The faces of the Belgrade students were disappearing one by one. My cousin Dimitri’s departure made my solitude in Niš even more painful. The thought of spending the winter sweeping out the workshop, firing up the cast-iron stove, and serving as the factotum of the technicians who were secretly delighted to have a university graduate under their orders, exasperated me to no end.

On September 15, the schools re-opened, a sign that summer had ended. The first rains of autumn moved in. There were fewer people along the *corso* and the *café* owners brought in their tables and chairs. There was nothing for me to do but bide my time, sing the blues, and wait for the commission to call me in.

Finally, on September 27, I received a summons to present myself the following day at ten o’clock at the Medsanbat. I asked to see the Commissar so he would sign my leave. He scolded me for not following the normal channels, but as he didn’t want to seem nasty, he signed my leave. At this juncture, the smallest *faux pas* could wreck my plans.

The following morning, at a quarter to ten, I showed up promptly at the Medsanbat, an old one-storey building probably requisitioned from an enemy of the people. My nerves were frayed. I couldn’t stay put so I walked up and down the grey-tiled corridor, alternately sitting on a bench and then pacing. The commission was sitting behind a great white door. Bazil, in his capacity as secretary, kept coming out to call up the next person. When he saw me, he reassured me that the doctor was on our side. As for the other two officers, there was nothing to worry about. They were not very bright. However, despite his

reassurances, I was still very anxious. It can be tricky dealing with such people.

To control my nervousness, I tried to occupy my mind with something else. Seated opposite me was a soldier in his thirties. His whole head was nothing but a festering wound. He was in very bad shape. His eyes had such a look of resignation, of suffering and animal sadness. It was obvious that he had no more expectations. Seeing him made me ashamed of my little scheme to get myself demobilized. But at the same time I was angry. Why had this man not been demobilized a long time ago, or at the very least sent to a hospital? Did the people's army need to hold onto such human wrecks?

Finally, the big white door opened. My turn had come. Basil reminded me to speak as little as possible. I entered the large and almost empty room and gave a weak salute. The commission was in session behind a table covered with a white cloth. There were four men: two officers, a young doctor, and Basil, who was taking notes.

Was this the tribunal that would seal my fate, or was it simply *avant-garde* theatre? It all seemed the same in the end. "Myopia oculus dexter less four and oculus sinister less four and a half." The doctor turned towards the officers and said:

"Provisionally unfit."

The two comrades did not seem to appreciate this diagnosis. If everyone is demobilized, who would remain to serve?

"Comrade Doctor, must we demobilize him?"

"Comrade Captain, the regulation is categorical. If an accident occurs due to myopia, we are held responsible."

"Well, in that case, we'll sign."

Phew! It was over. It was obvious that the comrade officers didn't want any problems. I left the room. Basil joined me in the corridor.

“In two or three days, a demobilisation order will be sent down to the office of the signals battalion.”

I thanked him profusely, but Basil had little time for such effusions, he was already calling the next name. As I left the Medsanbat, I was tempted to throw my cap in the air, to dance, and to hug the first person who came along, but I managed to maintain self-control. War, and my last few months in the army, had made me careful and cunning. What if, in the end, the commissar turned out to be opposed to my demobilisation, dug his heels in, and ordered a new evaluation? You never can tell with a chain of command. It is as mysterious as the Lord's ways. Better not to think about it.

To hell with it. To celebrate my first step towards freedom, I bought myself a big piece of *burek*, a puff pastry stuffed with meat, and a bunch of grapes. Delighted with my provisions, I sat down by the Nišava River and had myself a picnic.

The muddy river flowed by lazily. Soon, it would swell with the autumn rains, but in our army camp, everything would go on as usual. Reveille would sound the beginning of the day's terrible routine: the undrinkable *ersatz* coffee made from chicory, the reports, the reading of the latest speech by Number One or Number Two, the floor sweeping and potato-peeling fatigue duty ... Poor sods! I felt for those left behind. Fortunately, I would be safely removed from the commissar's blather, unless ... unless ...

The days passed, and still my demobilisation order hadn't arrived. I walked by the company's clerk hoping that he would stop and give me the good news. September 30. Nothing. In theory, registration at the university would be over in ten days. On October 1, the daily routine dragged on, but on October 2, just as I was washing out my mess tin after the noonday meal, the company's pen-pusher approached me with a knowing smile

and asked me to report to the comrade commissar's office at three o'clock. After that, everything went very quickly.

My case was proceeding well, but I had to watch myself and not speak out of turn. At ten to three, I was already waiting outside the commissar's office. He was coming back from the mess hall, apparently in high spirits. And why wouldn't he be? The food and wine were excellent, and the waiters wore white jackets and bow ties. Our comrade captain had come a long way since the days of repairing worn-out shoes in a wretched shoemaker's hole in the wall!

"Pray come in, comrade, and please take a seat."

Well, well. The commissar was being very polite. Did that mean that I was no longer under his authority?

"So, it looks as if you'll be leaving us!"

I pretended not to understand him.

"Come now ... you know perfectly well that your demobilisation order has just arrived!"

"I had nothing to do with it. It was the medical commission's decision: 'provisionally unfit.'"

This ambiguous expression, provisionally unfit, made me very nervous, but at the same time I found it pretty amusing.

"What do you mean? Stop pulling my leg," he said.

"I want to continue my education. Four long years lost because of the Occupation is a long time."

"So! You're leaving us because you want to study or because you're provisionally unfit. Let's get this straight!"

I grew confused and kicked myself for having spoken out. Luckily, the commissar had decided to be a good guy.

"It's alright, comrade, I understand. I also wanted to go to high school, but we didn't have the money. You're lucky, you'll become an engineer or a doctor, whereas I ... Well, I won't stand in your way. Your demobilisation form is already signed."

He handed me a small piece of paper and a train ticket, the army's going-away present, along with the uniform I was wearing. The only things I had to hand in were my belt and my rifle.

"One last word, comrade, I have here in my drawer your evaluation, and you must know how important it is for your future. According to the information we have received from Užice, you showed courage in battle, which is to your honour ... It's a pity that during peacetime, you have not been more disciplined, more ambitious. You could have quit the army with a sergeant's rank. That is all I have to say. You're free to go. I suppose you'll be off to Belgrade?"

"Yes, Comrade Commissar, I'm taking the night train this evening."

"Ah! So you can't wait to get away from us ... In any case, you're free to do as you wish. Have a good trip, comrade, and don't think too badly of us."

I left the office in a hurry. I wasn't particularly proud of myself. He wasn't a bad sort. He had started from nothing and ended up a captain, so how could he not swear allegiance to the new masters of the country? He had fought for the revolution and the revolution had made him what he was. A cog in the huge machine that was the Master Design, he was like so many others, trying to promote the ideology that eventually would crush us all.

But who had thought up this confounded machine? Who had the idea of building a new Tower of Babel? Was it the little man with the goatee resting in his sinister mausoleum in Red Square? Or was it the pedantic German philosopher, living in exile in London, filling entire notebooks with his fine Gothic handwriting, the one who declared that owning property was an act of theft. And what if it were Adam, chased out of Paradise by the wrath of God, who swore one day to build a tower so high that

it would give him access to the Garden of Eden? In any case, all this was of little importance now. Soon I would be out from under the Master Design and I would resume my studies.

Before leaving town, I wanted to say goodbye to Fani, a girl I met during my stay in Niš, but she too had left for Belgrade to study French literature at the university. She could have chosen to go to Athens or Paris, or anywhere else in the world for that matter. Her family had Greek citizenship and she was free to leave Yugoslavia legally, an extraordinary privilege at a time when the entire country was trapped inside a cage. There was a charm and innocence about Fani that lingered in her wake as if she were a creature from another sphere. I still smile when I recall the crazy circumstances of our meeting.

Before the army issued me with a thick woolen uniform, I would wear the white anorak of an alpine fighter. The long sleeves covered my hands and at certain angles, it looked as if I had no hands. One hot July evening when I was wearing the anorak, I noticed Fani on the promenade amidst a milling crowd of young men and women. Each time our paths crossed, I would stare at her. Finally, she caught on to my interest. Since the anorak covered up my left hand, she thought I was disabled and had said to her sister: "Poor guy, he must have lost his hand in the war."

A week later, just as we were about to pass each other once again, she saw me gesticulating with both hands. Thanks to a miracle worker, my hand had grown back. After being introduced, we went on a few innocent walks along the streets of Niš. Fani even invited me to her home, where her mother received me in a large drawing room dominated by a grand piano. There was a quaint bourgeois charm about the room, which was very appealing to a young man living in a gunners' barracks.

I also wanted to bid farewell to a young peasant woman from Užice. During my months in Niš, she had often welcomed

Dimitri and me in her family home. Dimitri had met her father in the sinister Zemun concentration camp. Her father had been arrested as a member of the underground resistance network and beaten to death. The SS caught him cheering at the sight of the first American B-52s flying overhead on their way to the oil fields of Romania. Dimitri always kept the circumstances of her father's death to himself.

I hurried over to say goodbye to this young woman and to pick up my Browning, which I had hidden in her home. Afterwards, as I still had a few hours to kill before the train, I treated myself to a dish of grilled meat at a rotisserie near the station.

At eleven o'clock, I boarded the night train for Belgrade, which was scheduled to arrive early next morning. My excitement at seeing the city and my friends after long gloomy months was tempered by the extreme nervous fatigue of the last few days. As soon as the train started to move, the monotonous clackety-clack of the wheels sent me into a deep sleep.

When I woke up, the train was stopped in a station. The locomotive was wheezing in the silent night. On the deserted platform, an employee wearing a red cap was walking alongside the train. The big clock indicated three a.m. Still half asleep, I read the name of the town: Ćuprija — a small place lost in the Balkans. A milky light spilled down from the lamps. After four years of living in blacked-out cities, it was wonderful to see the lights back on again. The war was definitely over.

As the train rolled through the outskirts of town, I thought I recognised the lights of the hydroelectric plant. Not far from the red-brick building on the other side of the tracks, I glimpsed the corn fields and the copses where we had trained in February and March of 1945 while waiting to leave for the front. Much had happened since those days when we played war games in that bucolic setting. Everything seemed so long ago, so childish.

The train picked up speed. A few lights glimmered here and there in the night, and reminded me of how desolate the countryside could be. Settled into my corner, I listened to the monotonous clicking of the wheels hammering out: *to Belgrade ... to Belgrade ...*

And after Belgrade? Who knows, maybe further still.