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Nenad Šaponja

**BUT BRUSSELS
CAN EASILY
BE COVERED
ON FOOT**

A travel journal as a diary

*Budapest – Buenos Aires – Istanbul – Göteborg
– Frankfurt – Sharjah – Brussels – Jerusalem
– Kochi – Visoki Dečani – Beijing*

*Translated from the Serbian by
Vuk Tošić*



Travels Are Not Postcards



A TRAVEL JOURNAL AS A DIARY

People travel, and writers write, believing in the meaning of that which has been written. That the difference. Even when travel masquerades as work, writers mostly travel to reach themselves. In some form. In order to dilute the interior and mix it with the exterior that is different from the ordinary.

Looking at the world through the eyes of the writer is significantly different than seeing through a camera lens or through the stereotype of a tourist brochure. We look at things *behind* and *beneath* both the visible and the universal—and that is why travel journals are always a challenge for a writer. To grasp the ancillary—the invisible angle—is just as challenging today as it was two hundred years ago.

Incidentally, writers mostly keep diaries not to publish them, but to always have on hand a supply of actual authentic material, which comes in handy sooner or later. People who keep diaries keep them for themselves, and generally it would make sense for them to destroy them in the end. If they don't do that—or if they even

publish them—then they are actually keeping them also for others. Why would anyone—even a writer—testify to anyone about anything? Aleksander Tišma, Thomas Mann, Miroslav Krleža, Witold Gombrowicz, Pavle Ugrinov, for example, can testify to us that a diary can at the same time also be an exciting travel journal. And since in their case they are all literary texts of the highest order, we as readers are left simply to enjoy the fact that we have unexpectedly found ourselves in the right place.

For me, one such first-class reading place was Miloš Crnjanski's *Embahade*. Even though not written for literary reasons, but for diplomatic and other informative purposes, these records by the most poetic Serbian novelist—quite minor in his literary oeuvre—are often guidelines for how I should travel to Germany or Italy, for example. And today, *Embahade*—whose lens for observing the world can very easily be applied also to the current political situation in Serbia—essentially demonstrates the writer's superior knowledge of the world (even when he doesn't act as a writer, but as a diplomatic press attaché), as opposed to the knowledge and awareness of a interwar Yugoslav politician (in this specific case, for example, Milan Stojadinović or Aleksandar Cincar-Marković, as opposed to Crnjanski). Fake peace, fake states. And the constant self-overestimation. Namely, this diplomatic world in the late 1930s—i.e. the concept of the diplomatic view of life—mainly consists of wrong assessments (and we see that in the specific case from this historical distance). Countless incorrect assessments. Just as it is now. And it doesn't make any difference.

However, let's go back to the beginning of this text. A random person, who is a writer primarily through the poetic experience of the world, traveling for his current work as a publisher and editor and who perhaps without any good reason thinks that a diary can be a travel journal, is opening to you some of the pages of his diary... Perhaps the readers—those unrealistically unexpected friends—have given me the overrated idea that the personal can also be the universal. Who knows? Of course, I know that everything is connected, therefore the story from Frankfurt is the continuation of the story from Istanbul—which was published before it. However, before Frankfurt we were also in Göteborg, and later—almost as if following in the footsteps of the revelation of different civilizations—in India and in China, and in the meantime we walked on the Holy Land.

All the travels included in this *travel journal as a diary* are related exclusively to literary affairs. As I read these accounts today, in this late summer—although always suspicious—I still warm myself on the spark of their significance. And the significance of walking—once it has become effortless—is a story unto itself.

In 2016 I published several excerpts from the diary that were about stays in different cities, mostly in the parallel worlds of bookfairs (Buenos Aires, Istanbul), in *Danas* and *Vreme*, at the request of the editors of these newspapers, and later different readers convinced me that to them my publishing affairs in these cities have the same meaning as readers' discoveries. I also know several people who—having read these excerpts—started seri-

ously first daydreaming of, and then also planning trips to Buenos Aires.

In the meantime, orders were placed by other editors, and the travel journals became available to readers of the *Polja* and *Eckermann* literary magazines, published as a series of articles in the Novi Sad daily *Dnevnik*, and posted and shared on Facebook and other places online. So, what you see before you is something along the lines of a commissioned public diary, masquerading as a travel journal, written both for the readers and for myself. Let's call it—travel masquerading as both a linguistic and perception temptation.

Approximately at the same time—one might say in parallel with the travels that are the subject of this book—a completely different book (or perhaps the same) was being created, entitled *Izgleđam, dakle nisam* (I seem, therefore I am not). During that period, for reasons that are not quite clear to me, I could write poetry only when I left the surroundings of my own language. I probably needed distance, to be sufficiently nowhere (from the standpoint of my language) in order to recognize something, in the belief that books write themselves and that we just need to tune into their resonance. It was almost irrelevant whether we write or read them. I even occasionally wrote down something in the note that was included in the book.

As my book of poetry *Izgleđam, dakle nisam* was published last year and has a life of its own, I did not include it in this travel diary, even though it is essentially part of it. Even though that isn't necessarily apparent at first glance,

travels are the most likely frame of this book of poetry. And both books, side by side, actually indicate how the literary form is a vehemently *different* view of the world. This type of power is the essential reason why literature is such an intriguing layer of our lives. For us, the literary experience is an experience of the highest order, the one in which we exist completely. For, there is no death as long as there is a future—the only word where meaning most closely is, as much as it isn't.

And travels are not postcards. Especially when traveling as we travel through space we also travel through literature.

Nenad Šaponja,
Novi Sad, Sunday, 9 September 2018

On the road, but at home



NOVI SAD

*Friday, 1 June 2013 (formally Saturday, 1 June,
around 1:30 a.m.)*

It's time to begin. I had promised Goca Nonin and Zdravko Huber that I would hand in my dairy for the *Danas* newspaper by June 1, so to some extent... I don't usually really keep a diary. At least not in this form – with dates and days. I usually write down notes about reality in different registries of my personal literary perception of the world. Whatever that may be. And as far as the dairy's structure is concerned, I prefer to see myself as the reader of these deep intimacies. Diaries of Tišma, Mann, Krleža, Gombrowicz, Ugrinov, etc. I had been writing something that resembles a poetic diary for years, in addition to these sketches—like Paul Valéry's *Cahiers*. But that's a different matter. What follows here is sort of like a commissioner public diary.

Actually, I have just returned from Belgrade. We had organized a promotion of Vladimir Pištalo's novel *Milenijum u Beogradu* (*The Millennium in Belgrade*), at

the Belgrade Fortress, in the Nebojša Tower. Even though it had been published a dozen years ago, this book still fascinates readers, that is to say—we still occasionally hold promotions of precisely this book. This perfectly astonishingly meaningful score of the 1980s and 1990s Belgrade—but even further and deeper and broader—is certainly what our literature will leave behind for some future epoch. When its translation into French was published in Paris a few years ago, this novel not only narrowly missed winning the Prix Femina for best translated novel that year (and there were more than 800 of them), but in only three months the cultural sections of the largest newspapers in France and literary magazine published around twenty highly complementary reviews of this book. At the time, at a bookstore in Montmartre, I saw a piece of paper of unconcealed reader's devotion to this book. A few years ago, during a promotion at the French Cultural Center in Belgrade, director Pascale Delpech told us that this was the book that French diplomats read when they are posted to our Balkan region—because of the precision and depth of the insight into things. Reading it again recently, I discovered within it a powerful dramatic structure and I was surprised that it still hadn't occurred to anyone to adapt it for the stage. It is genuinely the drama of our time: life of the 1980s and 1990s is mutually confronted steadfastly in front of the readers' eyes.

“Anyhow, the promotion,” my collocutor—the reader of this diary—might remind me. It was effective. And this statement always confirms the existence of a twinkle in the audience after the promotion. Those who

were present know what I'm talking about. Vlada had come from America—via Berlin, where he also had a promotion of the German edition of *Milenijum u Beogradu*—and I had arrived from Vršac, from a promotion at the Literary Commune of Vršac, a.k.a. the KOV, the most prominent Serbian publisher of poetry, while having contracted a viral infection along the way. Viral infections are especially unfortunate, especially when you are supposed to speak—sensibly, meaningfully and interestingly, of course—while you keep searching your pockets for a tissue, and it feels that your head is three times larger than it actually is. Yet, almost as a rule, once the event kicks off, when discussion lights come on, all discomfort vanishes, only to increase tenfold once everything is over.

Later on we kicked back on a boat anchored nearby, on the Sava River, eating white caviar, fried cheese, and warm rye tortillas. A dozen of Vlada's friends from completely different walks of life were trying to make up for his nearly permanent absence. As Corax told an anecdote about one of his protagonist—a politician who wanted to have the original of a caricature at any cost—across the table postelection political jokes were being told. It is in the nature of the joke—especially a political one—to be effective and short-lived.

It's half pas two. I've taken this dairy too seriously. I'm off to bed. With the perfectly imperfect *Embahade*.

Saturday, 1 June 2013 (Now actually 1 June!)

I didn't sleep through the previous day. But I also didn't stay sick in bed. Worst of all—from morning to late afternoon it was routine task after another, which always pile up when I'm away for a few days. Several of Agora's books are at the printer's; I have to approve each one (which is something I'm explaining to the reader of this diary—not to myself; diaries generally have a problem of the position of author, because many things from their life is implied, and the reader, fragmentedly like this, neither knows the person nor the context), and there is an ocean of other different tasks related to the daily operation of a publishing house.

And today is a gloomy day; it looks like it's going to rain, but actually it isn't. It's perfect for this viral infection to finally pass.

Sunday, 2 June 2013

I haven't turned on the computer, I haven't checked my email—it's Sunday. For the past year I have allowed myself the luxury of not working on Sundays. Incidentally, running a private business requires ten to twelve hours of work a day, seven days a week. Everyone who does things serious starts out that way, and then realizes that it doesn't really make much sense. Work—regardless of what it is—wears out a person too quickly. At some moment you realize that running long distance requires also economy of rest. And recreation.

Before lunch, I went with Dragoslava on our regular Sunday hike on Mt. Fruška Gora. This time it was from the monument at Iriški Venac, past Hotel Norcev, to the Branko Radičević monument, and back. Sometimes we come across the smell of barbecue, music playing from cars, and even speakers that have been specially brought to vanquish the sounds of nature, but in fact, once you get into the forest, down the hiking—actually walking paths, the main impression is the quiet infused with the pristine sounds of nature. The most interesting one is the unexpected woodpecker.

To get back to the topic of the diary and the notebooks from the beginning. Why would I testify to anyone about anything? Different notebooks are predominantly a storage of actual authentic material, some of which might make its way into literature. If only it were not in the incomplete shape of a thesis, but rather formed, on some lower level of organization this material would be forever lost to me. And that is why a diary in its final form does not exist—at least not in my case.

Monday, 3 June 2013

My second form of recreation—the everyday one—is biking. As of recently the quay in Novi sad (which is actually called the Belgrade Quay) has a bike path that spans five kilometers of the promenade. Pure delight. In the morning, before it gets too warm and before everyday

life, or before midnight—it's the perfect route! It's completely different from the pressure of the city. Three microclimates come together in one small space. I exaggerate, but nonetheless—it's different. From the Navy Yard to the Štrand city beach, from the Štrand to the Towers—four skyscrapers on the Danube waterfront, near the Žeželj Bridge, from the Towers skyscrapers to the Danube—Tisa—Danube Canal. The Danube is amazing. Regardless of how much you look at it, you can hardly understand a thing. And I've been looking at it, from the same spots, since I watched it from the child seat on my father's ancient pigeon-grey Rog¹ bicycle, from a completely different era. Bicycles are different ones now. With twenty-one speeds, the world is quite faster. Of course, I don't take my mobile phone on bike rides. We don't need that type of faster life.

1 A communist Yugoslavia-era bicycle manufacturer from Ljubljana, today a sentimental memento for the generations of Yugoslavs born in the 1960s and 1970s.

Buildings, Anchored Like Ships



BUDAPEST

Tuesday, 4 June 2013

A drowsy morning. We're on our way toward the Hungarian border—Vlada, Željko, Dragoslava, and I. It was almost as if we had traveled to Niš—three-and-a-half hours later we were already strolling down Váci Street in Budapest. The architecture is just like back home. Memories of my previous visit to the city unreeled quite vividly. It was exactly 24 years ago. Dragoslava and I stayed at a student dormitory. We took part in an international student conference. We were in a neighborhood that remarkably resembled Telep.² Generally, Budapest now reminded me of Novi Sad. In reality it's the other way around: Novi Sad resembles Budapest's ten times smaller spatial replica. Anyway, all Pannonian cities are the same. At least at first glance.

² A suburb of Novi Sad.

We are now staying in Tekelianum,³ in the middle of what was once Rakocsi Town. I remember Sima Milutinović Sarajlija's visit to the home of Jakov Ignjatović's father, from Jakov's memoirs.⁴ That was when his literary initiation took place. Albeit, their house was in Buda, beneath the Citadel, in the Serbian part of town called Tabán. Today there is a monument to Serbian linguist Vuk Karadžić nearby.

The literary party was at the offices of the Self-Government of Serbs in Hungary, near the Parliament. We are promoting Vlada's book *Tesla – A Portrait with Masks*. This was the ninety-second promotion of the book since it won the NIN Award. And we had been in negotiations for this event for about two years. Regardless of how you look at it, Tesla is a character with great mystical capacity, and this promotion in Budapest has its special meaning, since it's precisely here, in the City Park, that Tesla, together with his friend Antal Szigeti, drew the scheme of the induction engine—his most important invention.

After dinner we sat with our hosts and Serbian writers from Hungary. I hadn't seen Petar Milošević in 15 years. I spoke at the promotion of his novel *London, Pomáz*, at the Matica Srpska in Novi Sad. We sat at the Roquefort restaurant, near the Ministry of Culture, observing the displacement of the tastes of Hungarian cuisine, while Petar Lastić told us the history of the place,

3 The endowment of the 18th century Serbian lawyer and philanthropist Sava Tekelija.

4 *Memoires* by Jakov Ignjatović, a 19th-century Serbian novelist who lived most of his life in Budapest.

from where, back in 1949, people were taken away to serve lengthy prison sentences. Now it is the dominion of *pörkölt*, rump steak and fish paprikash. While we toast with mugs of beer, Pera Milošević pointed out to us that this isn't exactly customary in Hungary, since the previous '49, i.e. 1849, when Austrian generals toasted with mugs of beer before having the Hungarian revolutionary generals shot. Few people in Hungary know this anecdote, but everyone respects it. They don't toast with mugs of beer.

Wednesday, 5 June 2013

After a twenty-minute stroll down the long, endlessly flat—as Tišma would say in his book *Dnevnik* (Diary)—Rakocsi Street, we reached the Nikola Tesla Serbian Gymnasium. The Church St. Elizabeth, across the street, looks like the Cathedral in Novi Sad (albeit with two spires), just like the school itself resembles the Maršal Tito barracks, on Futoška Street in Novi Sad. We spoke to the students about Tesla. Vlada Pištalo, as a man who lives in two cultures, discussed precisely this advantage—knowing about more than your surroundings—to the children, who also live in two cultures.

After meeting with the students, our host, Vlada Jovanović, and Petar Lastić took us to the City Park, to the place of Tesla's mystical discovery. We walked around the island, past castles that were replicas of Hungarian castles, mostly from Romania, now all in one place, and Pera and Vlada pointed out something to us,

in the direction of the Millennium Monument and Hero's Square, where Nikola Tesla might have been out for a walk on that February day in 1882. We had all already strolled around there, but apparently no one had this vision of the induction coil.

Tourists go around the city, the shopping malls, landmarks. We crossed Árpád Bridge, next to which buildings are anchored like ships, and we entered the former Serb villages of Budakalász and Pomáz, in the direction of Szentendre, and then we followed the trail of toponyms from Petar Milošević's novel. These are sort of the last places where there are a couple hundred Serbs. They are located about twenty kilometers from the city. Albeit, the center of the city is about fifteen minutes from the Budakalász metro station. And this is a typical Sarmian village, as if it were on Mt. Fruška Gora. Colorful houses and greenery passed by. "Such a nice place," said Vlada, and the host Vlada adds "When Andrić⁵ was here, he told his host, Stojan Vujičić, that he had never seen an uglier place."

In Pomáz we visited the house of Tesla's wealthy uncle, Paja Mandić, who greeted him when he arrived in Budapest. Across the street is the Church of the Archangel Gabriel, from the early 18th century. We entered that space as if it were a signal of timelessness.

We also went around the city: the Synagogue, the Basilica of St. Stephen, the West End, the Hero's Square and the Millennium Monument, the Serbian Embassy,

5 Ivo Andrić (1892–1975), writer. Nobel laureate in literature.

Dučić's⁶ dowry, Margaret Island, the Citadel, the grave of Petar Segedinac, a Chinese restaurant. We were dead on our feet.

Thursday, 6 June 2013

Before leaving, we visited the bookfair in Vörösmarty Square. There were about a hundred publishers, cheerful and different, sundry. Similar and different books from those at the Belgrade Book Fair. From somewhere came the sound of a violin. *Besame Mucho* fit well the Pannonian melancholy and then transitioned into a *csárdás*. We came across Vlada's Hungarian publisher, the Kalligram company. They were preparing *Tesla* for the fall, simultaneously in Hungarian and in Slovakian, in Bratislava. The *Eidesviüz Kiado* is the publisher for Mária Szepes, who is also one of Agora's authors. They told me that her novel *The Red Lion*, a literary alchemy search for eternal youth, has been a great hit in Hungary for years. Back home almost no one has even noticed this book. We sat at the Cooltour bar, a café with replicas from Hungarian history, while Vlada bought paints for his little cousin. We were in Novi Sad three-and-a-half hours later. Once again. Stefan, Filip and Tamara were overjoyed by the presents. A bunch of other things also happened. But can everything actually be written down?

6 Jovan Dučić (1874–1943), Serbian poet and diplomat.