

**Iva Papić :**

Born in Osijek in 1981. She graduated in Art History and Latin Language and Roman Literature from the Zagreb University of Humanities and Social Sciences in 2005, where she received her PhD degree in 2019.

Published literary works:

1) A short story *Pete od trinaest centimetara* (Thirteen Centimetres Heels), published in the collection *Balkansko Pero* (Balkan Pen) - a collection of works by the participants of the 3rd *New Sarajevo Literary Meetings - 2009*

2) A short story *Protina žena* (Archpriest's Wife), published in the anthology of author's works for the *KNS* magazine for culture and literature *Duhovna konekcija* (*Spiritual Connection*) – a collection of works by the participants of the 5th *New Sarajevo Literary Meetings - 2011*

Meistens Bettler, meistens Gesinde**by Iva Papić**

- “Illegal migrants!” Renata explains to us, as if we needed any explanation, while we are approaching the camp of Middle Eastern refugees in Vojvodina.
- “Illegal migrants, that’s what they call them!” she repeats once again giving us a side-eye glance from the driver’s seat. “What then are the legal ones?”
- “Legal ones are those who come in accordance with the law, namely, with the consent of the country they are entering”, Kika answers coldly, staring with her icy grey eyes at the men sitting in front of their tents that are behind high wire fences.
- “So, they aren’t migrants, they are immigrants. Or colonists”, Renata frowns upon us again.
- “Yes”, Kika responds coldly. “Actually, we are looking at refugees”, she scoffs disdainfully adding “However, it is politically correct and certainly acceptable to call them migrants. That word doesn’t hold weight. It’s neutral.” She takes tobacco from her bag and puts a white filter between her lips.
- “Yes”, confirms Renata.

I remain silent, looking through the camp fence.

“I won’t start until you turn that off!” said Svetozar Cvetković at the beginning of a play at the Belgrade *Atelje 212* Theatre. It was pitch dark on the Small Stage, and his opening monologue had to take place in such darkness. There was a faint light from mobile phones behind me. “I won’t start until you turn that off!” repeated the actor. Then someone from the audience shouted “Go outside, man! He won’t start until you turn your mobile phone off!” The man turned it off, and the velvety voice of old Cvetković spilled throughout the auditorium.



“I won’t start until you turn that off!” resounds in my ears as Renata parks the car in front of the barbed wire of the refugee camp. If only I could say the same!

“I won’t start until you call things by their real names, until you stop embellishing phenomena with inflated euphemisms and manipulating with terminology in order for the shame to sting less”. However, what ideologists don’t know, while the quantum physicists could explain to them very well, is that you cannot influence one without automatically influencing the other, actually most often with what you do not even want to manipulate with. Namely, in that terminologically conditioned reduction of reality, it is not only shame that is reduced, naturally, the shame of those who feel the pressure to react as humans to the suffering of others, but the eyes are also closed to other layers of that migration phenomena. Refugees from the war, hunger, poverty, slavery and despair, flee to the European Jerusalem to live at least half the life that we, with satisfied and dulled senses, shrink from while complaining; their wish to survive being stronger than our satisfied needs. It could be that they are only tools in the games of the powerful ones; perhaps the pain in their stomach does not allow them to see that their desires are just a string by which their bodies play like puppets. However, no one would consciously agree to be in pain, to be a puppet, to have neither the cake nor eat it. All mass human phenomena are just reactions...

“I won’t start until you turn that off!” I whispered quietly in the stopped car.

*

“It’s hard not to have a vice. Health is for the healthy”, he winks at us ironically smiling while taking us to the container where we have to leave things from Renata’s trunk. “And those who are content”, he adds.

Renata doesn’t introduce us, knowing very well we won’t remember the names anyway. And in such occasions the name is even unnecessary. I’ll call him He. We go back from the container to his tent. We sit on a blanket spread out in the sun. It is with relief that I notice the guard-house nearby.

“I’ve brought you cigarettes; share them if you want.” Renata hands him a paper bag.

He takes it readily and then hides it quickly in his tent. He wasn’t quick enough: other men that are just as stiff in putting up with the burden of the day, sitting in the Sun as we do, jerked as animals do when smelling danger: such things being felt before they are seen.

“Vices have existed forever, just as addiction. Also, both definitely have their function. Try giving up smoking, and you’ll see”, he winks at Kika who starts rolling as soon as we sit.

“Nonsense!” Kika laughs. “I’ve been smoking since I was seventeen.”



“I since I was thirteen. These,” he points to an open pack of cigarettes. “these are my twenty best friends“, he laughs. “I stopped smoking six months ago. I didn’t have money and I felt something burning in my chest. I knew a kind of sickness was to come my way so I decided to quit. The physical addiction disappeared in three days. It’s not a problem. The psychological addiction isn’t a problem either, they are just rituals whose significance you can take away as soon as you demystify them. The problem is much deeper. Longing is the problem. With a big L. L for Longing. Desire with a big D. The body begins to long. Addiction is just an anaesthetic.” He puts a cigarette in his mouth and lights it skilfully.

In groups of four or five men sit on blankets spread on the grass. I fear their suppressed strength. All they can do is sit, while I feel they would do anything except for that.

“It’s like that on the physiological level. It’s not imagination. Everything that creates addiction is a neurotoxin. Namely, it provides artificial pleasure while killing nerve endings in return. It’s like the fairy tale on the little mermaid: she gets legs, but loses her voice. So do we addicts, we get that short pleasure, that artificial orgasm the price of which is the death of a part of our own body. But the real pleasure is not that artificial orgasm, no. The real pleasure is stifling the true one, which addicts realise only when they lose their substance. I couldn’t. As long as I didn’t smoke I didn’t crave a cigarette, no. Quite the contrary and totally unexpectedly, I craved everything else. I wanted fine food, I wanted strong legs, I dreamt of walking on brightly lit streets while the moisture of the freshly washed asphalt glistened in the light of shop windows, I wanted to eat fried peanuts and candied almonds, to walk slowly in a cloud of thoughts pleasing to the body, I wanted to feel soft wool on my skin, a silky scarf, I wanted much and a lot, all the senses wanting everything I couldn’t give them. Everything I had ever dreamt of attacked me as if all of my desires, like devils, had suddenly flown out of Pandora’s box”, he laughed while extinguishing the cigarette in the grass next to the blanket. “I craved a woman,” he said quietly, “but not just any woman. I craved the touch of a woman who desires me. I longed to feel her hand trembling as she passed over my chest, and to feel how she was opening to me as a flower to the rain. I wanted more than I had ever dared even to think. I lasted barely two weeks. Desires kept piling up: my senses, until then anaesthetised with vices, screamed with hunger, suddenly, all in the same voice, while my body was similar to a nest of hungry chicks. I was thirsty and hungry at the same time, and just beginning to open my eyes, and just beginning to hear, and just beginning to sing, and just discovering sexuality, and greed and lust and passion and cry for help and despair. I thought I would entirely disappear in the abyss of the unquenchable desire. I called my twenty woman friends to help. And some bottles of beer. But,” he smiled with his yellow teeth, “vice doesn’t sedate desire only as desire is just the other side of pain. Choose: would you like to feel the pain twice as little or twice as much? If you cannot but suffer the pain, I think the answer is clear. What do I need legs for if they can’t be strong, if they can’t endure miles and miles? If every step hurts like that of the little mermaid because legs want to devour, while they can only tap lightly in a circle, wouldn’t it then be easier to numb them? Have you ever had your heart so filled



with desire that you shudder to think it will either spill out or burst? If I were a poet, I might even wish to suffer such a torture of Desire. Perhaps then it would make sense. If I were a poet I would probably continue to crave and maybe find in it some kind of the orgiastic self-satisfaction. But, I am not. I'm just an ordinary man. I crave food, comfort, a woman; if I have neither of these three, then I don't think that sedation is bad. On the contrary, vice is God's gift which God provided taking pity on slaves and lepers. That's when you adjust your dose yourself. Actually," he grinned, "you increase the dose. This is how the states have found a perfect answer to all the unrest; they only make the borders a little more porous."

*

Renata is Hungarian, originally from *Batina*. She got married in *Osijek*.

"I was quite a lively little girl", she says as she drives us in her official car of the *Draž* fire brigade.

Our itinerary is simple: we first have to leave some things from the trunk for the refugees in the Banat region of Vojvodina, then leave Kika in *Novi Sad*, finally to return to *Osijek* in the dark night.

"My grandfather used to beat me because I was worse than boys", Renata tells us. "Even they did not dare to enter the ossuary under Julka's feet. And not only did I dare to walk among the bones, but I did it knowing I would get beaten at home."

She laughed without any shame or intention, as if we had known each other since childhood. Such a laughter is contagious, we also laughed together with her.

"Never in my life have I met such a grounded and reliable person." Kika described Renata when we were about to leave for the trip, and I cannot but agree with her. She is built like a man, with a large torso and thin limbs; keeping her hair long only so that that she can tie it into a ponytail. Though she got married in *Osijek*, she, like Kika, cannot escape the magic of *Banovo brdo* (Ban's hill) so that she works for the *Draž* fire brigade and also as a security guard of industrial halls.

"I'd rather travel every day than not be on the Danube", she assures us in the car as we leave Baranja and *Osijek* and, on the purple road, sometimes green from the moss growing in the mossy dampness even on the asphalt, we head towards *Erdut*. "I told my husband 'I got married in *Osijek*, but never ask me to be called an *Osijek* woman'."

They went to Hungary during the war and then her native *Batina* dropped to less than a thousand inhabitants, never to recover again. Renata hated being a refugee as, although being a Hungarian and speaking Hungarian in the exile, the welcome melted as quickly as a cake on the summer table. "We went to school in separate shifts and though I knew Hungarian I attended the Croatian one, with Croatian teachers and the Croatian teaching material. In the beginning we were welcomed



with open arms, but as the time went by, it became increasingly clear that we were living on their backs, though, again, we were not to blame for that. Children do what adults say so that soon our peers would wait for us on the way home from school and throw dirty soil or some rubbish at us; in shops we were barely greeted and often driven away for fear that we would steal something. I don't know any Hungarian who did not return to Croatia at the end of the war. Now that everyone is in one's own country, we cooperate excellently", Renata smiled at us over her shoulder.

It is her own experience of a refugee that is the reason why she became active in the *Osijek* branch of the Red Cross once she learned about the refugee crisis, which in swollen waves attempted to destroy the fortress of their Promised Land. Her activism was also the reason for our arrival, actually, the items that could not be sent by the Red Cross van, primarily cigarettes and alcohol, and which Renata herself brought to refugee camps. This time she took the two of us, Kika, who was returning to Vojvodina, and I, accompanying her and following our common theme of research, the one through which we met, namely, the history of the Danube, its swamps and its *Banovo brdo*. Many victims fell to the Danube. In the car, Renata spoke with her family over the phone in Hungarian.

*

"As a child, I played the clarinet", he tells us after two beers which Renata skilfully pulled out of her backpack. "At the age of twelve, I had a lesson in public and my mother asked me if I wanted her to come. 'I don't care', I replied. No, I lied. To be honest, I didn't want to burden her because she had just come from work, and she worked two jobs at the time. That afternoon, when I was supposed to have a public lesson, was her only free afternoon of the week", he squinted at the sun, which, around noon, was already boldly piercing the grey clouds.

"I played, I remember, a composition with a lot of one-sixteenths", he continued. He liked to talk and he did it well. His sincerity, further fuelled by beer, made him quite interesting. If I hadn't been shy, I would have asked Renata for a beer, too. But I knew that this one was meant for him.

"That year it was for the first time that I had one-sixteenth notes in larger quantities, and they pressed on me as if I had chains around my hands because my fingers just wouldn't fly the way I wanted them to. I lied to my mother telling her I didn't care whether she came to see me or not, adding that she had already been to so many of my concerts that it really didn't matter if she missed one. I played, now I've remembered, *Clarinet Express*, that was the name of the composition by A.J. Dervaux. It's a wonder how I've just remembered Dervaux, as never before nor later did I play his compositions. Had someone asked me, I would have said that I had forgotten him forever." He paused for a moment, looking wistfully at some dark point in his memories, resembling a shadow.



“Anyway, when I repeated to my mother once more that I didn’t care if she came or not, she stopped in the middle of the kitchen that was connected to the living room, and, leaning on her hands, with a cloth hanging from her hand and down her thigh, she looked at me questioningly for a few seconds. ‘Are you serious?’ she asked me, and to remove any doubt I replied, ‘And will you be offended now if I tell you that I don’t care if you come or not?’ She calmly responded, ‘Well I will!’ and then she started to approach with slow steps, still in the middle of the kitchen, ‘And, have you...’ she began to speak still in the middle of the kitchen, ‘Have you maybe said that you don’t care because you don’t want to burden me?’ she finished just as she was sitting down on the couch next to me, ‘But, you actually want me to come ever so badly, yet not wanting to seem selfish’, she leaned toward me and gently tickled me under the armpit. ‘Maybe a little...’ I remember barely squeezing out through laughter. ‘Don’t hide your desires from me!’ she gently scolded me and, still hugging me, she promised to come.” He took the last sip of beer and threw the can into his tent.

“That was my last concert. The next year they told me the clarinet is a Jewish instrument, so I quit. Can you believe it? That even instruments have nationality?” he clicked his tongue a few times, licked his lips and wiped them with his sleeve.

“You see, the plan was for me to go first, and then to earn enough for my sisters. Although, to be honest, my mother doesn’t care where she is as long as she’s close to those she loves. She understood well that the tastiest bread is the one you love, and not the one that looks best. Nevertheless, she didn’t succeed in teaching me that. Even though I love her, I hate the bread she bakes. If they brought me back now, I think I’d hate it even more than when I left. I was lured with a dream. For years I’ve been smelling that Swabian bread, which, however, I’ve never tasted. Those overseas smugglers earn more from that dream than from our misery. Mother knew well that every master tramps you down. I trusted others more.”

*

Kika originates from *Banovo brdo*, just like Renata. She left when the war began. When Baranja fell, her father took them to their relatives in Novi Sad. As there was nowhere to go back for a long time, it’s there that Kika completed her secondary school and university education.

“My mother remained in *Popovac*.” I remembered that she used to refer to her grandmother as mother, while her real mother was just *mama*.

“If only you knew how many times we’ve travelled this road...” Kika said as we were crossing the *Erdut-Bogojevo* border. It was crowded because, due to migrants, border-guards were meticulously inspecting each car, while previously, seeing three women in a car, they would just wave to them.

“Almost every weekend to see my mother in *Popovac* and then back to Novi Sad on Sunday evening”, Kika recalled. “Borders were open. In fact, there even weren’t



these borders back then... We'd just drive across the Danube, from one night to another. Always across the Danube..."

"Do you see these tracks on the road?" Kika asked when we finally crossed the border. "That's from tanks... Hundreds of tanks crossed this road. Some of them were always parked next to the border. I hated the border." She fell silent as Renata drove through harvested cornfields and past abandoned relics of concrete plants, blending with the greyness of the misty sky in the autumn morning.

"Then mother fell ill and so my *mama* returned to *Popovac*. Only then did I actually cross the border every weekend, which, in fact, was no longer a border... As long as mother wasn't ill, I could occasionally avoid it by staying in the flat, but once *mama* was back in *Popovac*, skipping a weekend was tantamount to a sacrilege. The tanks never moved. Always the same." She squinted with her icy grey eyes at the first rays of the Sun, which were tenderly piercing through the thick clouds.

"Then mother died and *mama* didn't want to leave *Popovac* anymore. She was tired of moving and she stayed under *Banovo brdo* until she died. Hadn't we sold the house after her death I think I might have gone back. It's possible now."

*

"I've never seen forests like these in my life!" he told us already visibly tipsy, spreading his arms wide and laughing with his mouth wide open.

"Here the forests rise from the water, trees grow from huge ponds stretching for several dozen square meters, and there are some even larger and if I hadn't known that the water in them reached just below the knees, I would have thought these ponds were lakes. The soil here is different. Stepping into it is like stepping into sand, but the sand slips off your shoes as soon as you step out, while here the soil sticks to your shoes, makes them heavier and it feels as if I were walking with weights around my ankles. This foliage, whose colourfulness makes you sigh, is light in towns only, on the asphalt. In the woods, it's like dough sticking over you, literally gluing you to the ground, making it impossible for you to take another step without sinking into the new sediment of the slump that presses you with its weight more and more. I came to know your forests last year. Never again!" The Sun was fading in the early afternoon hours, and the wind continued to swirl the colourful leaves that gathered around the camp.

"We tried to cross the Danube over *Fruška gora*. There are not many settlements there so we thought there wouldn't be much border control. We had a compass and always headed west. Only west. Also," he raised his index finger, "*Fruška gora* forests are tame, there are not many dangerous animals, so we believed we'd be safe. The plan was to cross *Fruška gora*, reach *Spačva's* forests and then make our way through *Bosut's* primeval forests to the EU. That was our goal. You know that saying, 'You can get asylum in Croatia, you just need to get into Croatia!'" he laughed bitterly, and Renata nodded sympathetically.



“It was autumn, like now,” he continued the story opening a new beer. “It was raining. Rain could never discourage me before. Here, it rains for days. Literally days. Day after day the same way. I followed it: every now and then its sound would become stronger and then I would think that now it’ll also get stronger, finally to stop. But, no, it was just a wind that would rock the branches harder with the rain water flowing down from them even harder. It rains here meticulously, relentlessly, as if God were an excellent drummer that could keep the same pace for days; the Sun and the Moon rise and set, the land soaks, soon pouring off it, rivers swell and rivers pour out, but in vain, God keeping the rhythm always uniformly, not losing a single beat, not waving a single chord. The rain was falling for days and dried leaves with it; the wind carried them through the air in short swirls and with them, as with the water, it blew them on us. There were only three of us. This time we didn’t want to pay anyone to take us over the border. That’s also a lottery. We studied maps for a long time, crossings and online maps. We thought that the way we decided to go would sooner or later bring us to the Danube, anyway, it was the wilds and we only had to follow the compass and have the location on our mobile. That’s what we thought. But, of these forests of yours we are not worthy opponents. It was November and our trousers were torn on the stalks of the dead grass. Seriously! That summer the grass reached the thighs, and as it had already shed the leaves, had actually died, only its stalks remained, sticking out in the air, like markers on our graves. I’d have thought that dead stalks would be somewhat softer... I also didn’t know that it was only winter that was going to finish them off and finally lay them on the ground. Perhaps we should have waited for the winter, but I was more afraid of winter than of the efreet. I also thought that vegetation was at least going to protect us, if anything the few leaves that hadn’t fallen yet. Because, when the winter comes, everything is bare. Bare. Ground becomes bare like a woman when she takes the clothes off. It’s only then that can you see everything, how beautiful she is and how ugly, all at once. Anyway, it rained for days and we were wet for days. There was no point in hiding under the trees as the rain flowed down from them just as it poured out from the soaked ground, as if all were fed up, wanting to spit it to someone else. But who to? Our shoes and trousers were already falling apart from the rain and moisture, and I looked at the trees and thought: how much spit enough for you to finally start to rot? Some trees had their roots literally in water, their feet in water, as old women in a wash tub, but none of this happens with the trees which stand upright as if they were on the mountains, only their trunks darken slightly. I remember being confused, how spit that everything here constantly decays, yet nothing dies?! What kind of life is this that constantly feeds on its own vomit? Even death is transient here... It dies and comes back to life again! I’ve seen such trees here: a decayed trunk, rotten as a rotten apple, you touch it and it falls apart, it’s also broken in half by a thunder, and from such a trunk, three new trees can grow. ‘These are its daughters,’ the guard tells me. Willows, I know you know them. Willows. They can deceive even death. And then, once I got used to the uniform rhythm of the rain, then something changed, the rhythm remained the same, but the drummer increased the dynamics and the drops of rain as large as a thumb started falling on us. They even stung a little when hitting the top of the head. Fog came along with them and we couldn’t



see a thing. Deceptive is this swamp of yours: you keep falling into some holes of rotting stumps or the like, which were artfully hidden by thin layers of soil and leaves, then you fit in some ditches, some dried-up arms of rivers, fall into some abandoned canals, fall into the mud lakes that are knee-deep, sometimes rising, sometimes falling, and all fit on a flat surface. While falling, you wonder how fit that you think you're falling from one plane to another and how fit that you're climbing from one plane to another? We encountered people only once. As we were running out of food we came close to a village to steal a chicken or two. It was dusk and we trod through the furrows of plough fields as if stomping grapes; we wanted to get to a small forest as soon as possible. But, it wasn't a small forest, it was a planted forest of young fir-trees meant to be cut for Christmas trees in a few months. Then we walked across another plough field to the forest that, judging by the roofs of houses, seemed to separate the plough fields from the village, at least from a distance. It turned out to be a weekend settlement. Instead of food, we found two men. One was walking with a kind of a shoulder machine while the other was digging with a shovel where the first man had pointed. At first we thought they were cops so we started running across the fields, certain they had seen us. That's when everything went downhill. We were hungry and the forest was full of mushrooms. We mistook toadstools for edible mushrooms. Those two men from the weekend settlement were metal detector guys, poor just like us. They reported us to the police and in this way they saved our lives. Had we not been found, I doubt we'd have survived another rainy night in the forest."

"Have you fallen for seductresses (jack-o'-lantern mushrooms)?" the nurses in the hospital emergency ward laughed.

"We thought they were bolete mushrooms." I could barely utter it.

"Hahaha!" they teased us, though not maliciously. "They aren't called seductresses for nothing! Hahahaha!"

*

I started this journey guided by my research fit into the colonisation of eastern Slavonia, Baranja and today's Vojvodina after the departure of the Ottomans.

"I won't start until you turn that off!" Cvetkovićev's voice still fit in my head.

"I won't start until you turn that off!" If only I could condition others like that.

Colonisations, namely, legal migrations as they would be called today according to the politically correct terminology, began immediately after the expulsion of the Turks. The first focal point which, according to the opinion of the Emperor Charles VI, cried out for German population, was Banat, the very place where refugee camps are now emerging, getting closer and closer to *Horgoš*. *Schwäbische Türkei* was the name for the Germans settled on his Baranja estate by the Savoy Prince, some of whom later went to Banat. However, the real colonisation began in the



year 1712, and *meistens Bettler, meistens Gesinde*, “mostly beggars, mostly servants” were sent into the “grave of Germans”, as German newspapers called Baranja, Bačka and primarily Banat.

“I won’t begin until poverty stops being called opportunity!”

The reason for settling these homeless people, drunkards and prisoners, that “ballast of German principalities” as they were called, was, of course, political. The Emperor Charles VI needed German settlers as a buffer between Romanians, Hungarians and Serbs, who would stabilize German values and loyalty to the Emperor in these newly conquered territories, and also break the compactness of each of the three national communities preventing thus their possible alliance. However, that “ballast of German principalities” fell like flies in the swampy Baranja and Banat: killed by malaria, typhus, dysentery, plague and wars with the Turks which would resurrect every few years. Romanians and Serbs would steal their cattle and, due to the high mortality rate, the disease of German colonists was called *morbus Hungaricus*. They had no drinking water as it took several generations of the dead for them to realise how high the groundwater was and how deep they had to dig wells; the land did not yield crops because it was impossible to drain the swamp in a year; living in muddy and cold wickerwork houses, randomly arranged like tents in refugee camps where dry reeds often seemed to catch fire on its own, also mould and disease was spreading much faster than the offspring was born. In the absence of doctors, the sick and the hungry would die. To prevent the increasingly frequent escapes of German colonists, it was the Austrian hajduks, *Nationalhaiducken*, who were in charge, that is, the same ones who rose against the Turks twenty years ago. In other words, the “ballast of the German principalities” was sent to death through legal migrations, while the Austrian hajduks guarded them from escaping death or illegal migration. To threaten someone with migration to Banat was as if they would have to go to the gallows.

In order to prevent increasing deaths and the bad reputation that the institution of legal migrations had gained in Banat, it was for the second wave of settlement initiated by the daughter of Charles VI, the Archduchess Maria Theresa, that it was necessary to engage in propaganda in order to realise the pietistic idea of the Austrian *Gesamtmonarchie*. The canonical advisor Ignac Kemp composed a nice package of lies in which the immigrants were promised a house, land, cattle and seed upon arrival, as well as the forgiveness of war dues and taxes for up to six years (because it was silently omitted that the swamps had to be drained first). However, not everyone believed him, although, if there hadn’t been wars and hunger, this time they would have succeeded in picking up beggars and prisoners with a shovel and in sowing them in Banat like a handful of rotten seeds. In vain. The grave of the Germans did not become any milder. New settlers arrived who with their corpses seemed to pave the way through the swamp by which the weapons and food could be safely transported for a new campaign against the Turkish Empire. Did they know that their lives served for that purpose only?

“I won’t start until things are called by their real name!”



In the end, the colonisation succeeded; the swamps of Banat and Baranja were drained with great efforts and sacrifices, and the canals, which finally revealed fertile land to the colonisers as fit were gold, were named after the emperors and archdukes of the Austrian ruling house. In the 1920s, the *Schwäbisch-deutscher Kulturbund* was founded in Novi Sad, namely, the Swabian-German Cultural Association within the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and despite the fact that the lives of their ancestors were scattered like a handful of seeds in the rotten swamp, there were no greater patriots and fiercer Nazis than the Yugoslav *volksdeutchers*. And originally they were called Turkish Swabians.

*

“Of course there are cells, what kind of a question is that?” he sneered at me, “You’re saved because you’re Renata’s, otherwise you wouldn’t last long here...” he stopped because Renata grabbed his hand.

“Sorry,” I was sincere. This wasn’t the first time I reacted to uncomfortable and difficult situations by asking stupid questions, as if my foolishness could diminish of what was pressing on me. I was thinking as an ostrich, namely, if I’m stupid, then they’re stupid too, and then everything is stupid!

“We are being recruited around the camp by those who already have asylum. It’s known through whom and for whom some tasks that need to be done are carried out. If some prove themselves, they have a better chance of swimming soon across the *Tisa* near *Horgoš*. If they skilfully collect enough packages from the *Tisa*...”

He grinned without any remorse.

“A crime is revenge. Only liars say they regret the revenge”, he bit his lower lip, already visibly drunk.

“Until when like this?” he spread his arms. “Neither up nor down! And the hole just keeps growing...” he turned his head away from me as if he was disgusted to even look at me. But, I knew I was just a part of the totality that disgusted him.

“You’re funny...” he mocked me, and for him I lost my identity and became just a symbol. “You think that if you sweeten things they will become sweet? Hahaha!” he laughed provocatively and scornfully.

“I don’t owe anything to anyone”, he looked at me with hatred. “And I doubt I’ll ever collect my debts.”

*

Indeed, Kika was returning with us to *Novi Sad*, but it wasn’t that she went to Baranja just to compare the ethnology of the Slavonian and Vojvodinian swamps. She’s never that straightforward. In Baranja, besides her profession, she went to see



yet another house on *Banovo brdo*, having planned her escape from *Novi Sad* for years and an idyllic life somewhere at the foot of Mons Aureus, however, her plans never went beyond dreaming.

While touring Baranja wells, wayside shrines, steep narrow mountain paths, wine cellars and abysses of collapsed rocks that slid down the *Banovo brdo* into the Danube, which for centuries used to melt the mountain just as the tongue melts ice cream, I visited with her a few houses for sale: an old Swabian with a porch, a well and a walnut tree in the middle of the yard in *Kneževi Vinogradi*, an old hunting lodge at the mouth of the *Karašica* into the Danube, a dilapidated mud and reed house, an old wickerwork house that from the top of *Banovo brdo* threatened the Danube and whose yard was spread with the branches of a fallen tree like an octopus. All the houses were good, but for each of them Kika asked the same question, “What do I need that for?”. Eventually, her solitude would convincingly deter her from realising the dream. As if doing something for oneself is not a motive strong enough or the reason to actually do it. For the family, for children, for some development or goal we become capable of moving mountains and valleys, but, when faced with our own reflection only, we can see how each undertaking is full of holes as Swiss cheese, and we admit that even if the undertaking is truly fulfilled in all its ideal perfection, we won’t find the happiness we seek, namely, unambiguous, uniform and absolute, the one for which we are willing to make sacrifices and the one from which, at the end of the day, we throw ourselves on the bed with a smile on our lips. It seems that without a “higher purpose” no one would leave their own basement.

“I have a problem,” Kika says coldly as we travel from Banat to *Novi Sad*. “I hate”.

She fell silent, but we knew her silence was just a preparation before beginning to speak. Sometimes the weight of the autumn fog in the swamp doesn’t allow anything else to be said except confessions. Hate is a heavy word, but it also has its shades.

“I know exactly what your friend was talking about when he talked about addiction”, she addressed Renata. “I quit smoking just as unsuccessfully as he did, two years ago. I didn’t last longer than two weeks. It wasn’t because of a crisis, and he was right about that as I didn’t need a cigarette to calm my body. No. It calms my anger. Wherever I was back then, whoever I was talking to back then, mostly in larger gatherings, I would look at people and instead of their faces and their words, I would see and hear only my own anger growing inside me and erupting. They are all the same, content with little, biting and fighting each other for that little, pretending to be modest, and not even realizing how capable they are of dipping their arms in blood up to the elbows, whenever they are provoked or called out, all of them with fake smiles to hide their stupidity... And me? I’m not calm unless I break something, unless saliva and blood boil, unless it hurts stronger than what’s inside... The pains were fighting inside me. I would talk to people, and in my head I would imagine myself knocking over the tables in front of us and tearing down the ceiling above us, wielding a whip and using its tip to strip off false epaulettes from



the raised shoulder straps, jumping like a frog onto the walls and with the fire from my throat I melt the plastic of the wax masks they love ever so much... I hate. I am furious and I hate”, she said putting the index and middle finger of her right hand over her lips and nose, resting her chin on the palm of her hand. She gazed through the window at the endless plains of the drained swamps of Banat, where the gaze rested as if looking into the depths of the sea.

“It was then that I craved a cigarette, when at the same time I was afraid of my anger and indulged in it like a succubus. A cigarette suffocates everything in its own smoke, everything mine implodes in it. My dummy. My comforter. And with it, I can move among people again. This is why I didn’t last. Every time I light it, I suppress myself. And that’s good for me. As, obviously, I don’t know how to deal with myself alone...” she paused for a moment, rummaging through her handbag, doing what women do every time they want to stop themselves from crying. Renata and I were silent and let her speak. The night was falling outside, and on the horizon a purple sunset shimmered over the plough fields. In the car, the twilight was as warm as an embrace.

“Why do you think I’ve been looking for a perfect house under *Banovo brdo* for years?” Kika provocatively asked me, looking at me as if blaming me for my stupidity, which, consequently, prolongs her hope. “I know in advance that I won’t buy it, but I keep thinking that if I find a perfect one, it will fill that well in me that cracked and dried up a long time ago, and no matter how much I pour into it, it all spills out. My underground waters were cut off then, when we had left. Our land and our wells dried up. Something is deeply missing in me, in myself I’m crying out for something, but I can’t fill it with anything, except for the pain. If I don’t numb myself, the well in me screams even more, asks for more, pleads for more, cries more and more, and I have nothing to feed it with, nothing to satisfy it with. Only the pain can deceive it. And then it’s even more painful. If I return, if I find that perfect house under *Banovo brdo* with a porch, a well and a walnut tree, with tulips and jasmines in flower beds, with three black-haired yard dogs and two grey cats, with an old car in the garage that only starts with a push, and with a view of the Danube through the Latin, Greek and German crucifix, then, maybe, the monster in me would loosen its grip at least a bit.” She licked the glue and skilfully rolled the cigarette.

*

“Actually, I’m not Hungarian”, Renata admits to us when we’ve already moved away from the camp. “At least not pure-blooded. But, I found that out only recently. I did a DNA test of nationality and to my huge surprise it turns out that I’m more than fifty per cent Spanish”, she chuckled to herself and looked at us sideways again. Even though it was dark in the car, I felt her amused look over the shoulder.

“History books say that after Austria had lost the Spanish throne, the Habsburg supporters, mostly from Catalonia, fled to the Austro-Hungarian territory. From Vienna, Sicily and Apulia they were sent to Banat. Allegedly, they were dissatisfied



because the Austro-Turkish wars had not yet ended and, instead of peace, they spent their exile in an area which, like Croatia two hundred years before their immigration, was called *Antemurale Christianitatis*. However, Vienna appeased them by making them all nobles, regardless of their status in the Spanish Kingdom. As if the title meant something to them in Banat!” she scoffed out loud. “But maybe it did! If you have nothing else...” she paused for a moment, then added, “But it was of no use for them. They mostly died.”

Everyone looked out of their window at the darkness growing through the plain like a wave.

“Then, in 1734, the Spanish colony New Barcelona was founded in Banat, into which those who already were in Banat (the rare ones who survived), as well as those who, due the new wave of refugees from what is now in France, once again overwhelmed Vienna with their demands for accommodation, benefits and military pensions. I remember that when I was reading about it, it was said that a large number of the inhabitants of that Spanish colony were war veterans who married German or Hungarian women. The reasons for the collapse of the colony vary among different historians, some state that the colony collapsed on its own because it was continued by veterans and disabled soldiers, less capable of work and already weakened in the struggle against the Banat marshes, while others, whom I honestly believe more, claim that people were killed by mosquitos, plague, war and famine. Nevertheless,” she sneered contemptuously, “they all had noble status!” she laughed bitterly.

“I mean,” she raised her voice and made a dramatic pause in which we expected the continuation of her thought, “were these people whom we have just visited, sent on a mission as the Germans and Spaniards once were, to conquer the territory they want to consider their own, we cannot know. They didn’t know it either! My ancestors thought they were going to an utopian city called New Barcelona! Where a man throws two seeds and four stalks grow! Where they would be exempt from taxes because of their sacrifices for the Austrian Emperor, and not because they have yet to drain the swamp in order to be able to pay dues in the first place! Where they would be welcomed by an orderly society and an organised city, as if from blueprints and plans!, and not prison to which they were sent because Vienna and Pest began to choke under the burden of refugees who were then, again as a ballast of the German principalities, sent to Banat as if to the gallows. They don’t know it either, and no one will know it for a long time.”

She fell silent, pressing her lips together and lowering her gaze, as if she were already forgiving everyone in advance, knowing that as long as the time is measured by periods of power, the victims are not only the ones who don’t need anything.

“Finally,” she continued after a short pause during which we were also silent, “if you happen to be wondering ... Not even four years after the establishment of the New Barcelona colony, the colonists, driven away by the war, famine and plague,



began to return to Vienna or Pest. Allegedly, only 64 Spaniards remained in Banat until the coronation of Maria Theresa.”

It was already night when we crossed the Croatian-Serbian border.

“I searched in the family genealogy for that Spaniard from whom I descended, but all the grandmothers and aunts remember only Hungarians; it’s probable that the patroness of my family was one of those women who married Spanish colonists for pensions and tax benefits. In vain, obviously”, she sneered. “It was not possible to survive in Banat even then. Nevertheless, I found only one clue: my surname in Spanish means ‘refugee’.”