

Chapter 14

The Olive Tree That Brought Salvation to an Old Man

Translated by Farasha Euker

from *Night in Vidovo polje (Vidovopoljska noć)*¹

In 1936, the prostrate old man Mato from Plužine
had a tattered shirt of many colors on his aged body
and an even hundred years that summer.

In his courtyard, grew a tree bearing olives with a sheen like silk
and so it grew two years prior to his first breath.
One day—a Monday—the tattered shirt became a rope
fashioned to extinguish the long-burning flame of old man Mato,
who swung back and forth until he died, he died, he died,
and the old olive branches swayed to and fro,
as if checking to see
if Spring gave birth to leaves of grass from May's red soil.

14.1 Maslina je dala utočište starom čovjeku

Sklopčani starac Mato iz Plužina imao je 1936.
jednu poderanu šarenu košulju na staračkom tijelu
i ravnih štatinu godina tamo negdje u ljeto.

U avliji njegove kuće rasla je svilena maslina

¹One of the principle stećak fields in Bosnia and Herzegovina, located approximately three kilometers from the town of Stolac.

i imala kad se starac rodio nešto oko dvije godine.
Jednog dana (bio je ponedjeljak) od razdrte košulje konopac
napravio je da ugasi svoj dugi život taj Mato starac,
koji je tako kao u njihalci jednoj umro, umro, umro,
a stare maslinove grane malo se zanjihale,
kao da su gledale
je li proljeće izniklo vlati trave iz majske crvenice.

14.2 Stone Keeper, a Commentary by Farasha Euker

I should like to begin by laying special emphasis on what may appear at first glance almost a truism, the importance of not placing any reliance at all on the indirect evidence furnished by translated texts.²

Translation is not only problematic from one language to another, but even within a language. Individuals and societies are born under very specific circumstances and are raised and nurtured within specific cultural, economic, and social structures. For most Bosnians living today there exist only two eras, not BC and AD, but before the war and after the war. With this reality *on the ground* and the cultural heritage of the country being called into doubt,³ the importance of *translating* Bosnian culture for younger generations is more important than ever. The theoretical basis of such an undertaking can be found in the writings of Mak Dizdar, particularly his *Kameni Spavač (Stone Sleeper)*, which exhumes Bogomil culture from its historical grave. With the recent closing of the Historical Museum and the fate of the National Library and National Theater uncertain, a theoretical undertaking of this kind gathers all the more urgency. Dizdar metaphorically digs the graves of persecuted adherents of the Bogomil faith, presenting lived history through their eyes. This *phenomenology in verse* went beyond just the Bogomil faith, explaining, through poetry, the essence of Bosnian culture and identity, both that from abroad, such as Islam, and that which seems to spring up naturally from the land. During a conversation with an imam of a mosque in Sarajevo, he stated that “any Muslim who claims that cigarettes are not allowed according to Islamic law is not a true believer, because it is cigarettes that got

²Toshihiko Izutsu. *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002, p. 4.

³Sabina Nikšić. “Bosnia's Top Culture Institutions Closing Down Amid Funding Issues”. In: *Huffington Post* (2012). URL: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/05/bosnias-top-culture-institutions-closing_n_1186999.html.

Bosnia and the Bosnians through the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian occupation and through the most recent war.” I think it is not cigarettes, but a uniquely strong cultural heritage that gave Bosnians the strength to withstand uniquely difficult times.

Snowflakes are falling ever thicker and blacker like sins
In a life that’s nearing its end

So will we still have eyes
When the apple tree in the garden puts forth its first white blossom?⁴

The strength of Bosnia lies in its past, but not a petrified, ossified past, but a living tradition that can lead to the future. The Bogomils, Abdullah Bosnawi,⁵ Meša Selimović, and Mak Dizdar are only a handful of the luminaries from Bosnia’s splendid past. I certainly understand the impulse to build more and more shopping centers, but what is the cost? It seems as if a new and shiny edifice is being built at the expense of the heart. The heart of a nation is its poetry, and the pure, distilled essence of Bosnian poetry is to be found in the work of Mak Dizdar, but whereas *Stone Sleeper* contains the secret of Bosnia, *Modra rijeka*⁶ contains humanity’s secret. As a foreign visitor to Bosnia, I was awed by many wondrous sites, smells, sounds, and tastes, the most marvelous of which was a February night’s snowfall joined by the distant and not too distant sounds of church bells and the adhan.⁷ Dizdar was the key that unlocked these experiences. I can only hope that Dizdar, that archaeologist of the Bosnian imagination, can act as the key-maker for the current and countless future generations of Bosnian youth.

References

- Dizdar, Mak. *Dark Blue River*. Web. July 2007.
— *Stone Sleeper*. Trans. by Francis R. Jones. DID, 1999.
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Izutsu, Toshihiko. *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur’an*. McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002.

⁴Mak Dizdar. *Stone Sleeper*. Trans. by Francis R. Jones. DID, 1999, p. 169.

⁵One of the greatest commentators on the writings of Ibn ‘Arabi. For more information see: Rešid Hafizović. “A Bosnian Commentor on the Fusus al-hikam”. In: *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* 47 (2010), pp. 87–107.

⁶Mak Dizdar. *Dark Blue River*. Web. July 2007.

⁷The Muslim call to prayer.

Niksić, Sabina. "Bosnia's Top Culture Institutions Closing Down Amid Funding Issues". In: *Huffington Post* (2012). URL: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/05/bosnias-top-culture-institutions-closing_n_1186999.html.