

# Years with Andrić and Years without Him

*Ivo Andrić, the most well known writer of the former Yugoslavia, passed away thirty one years ago, and sixty one years ago published his novel "The Bridge on the River Drina", for which he won the Nobel Prize for Literature.*



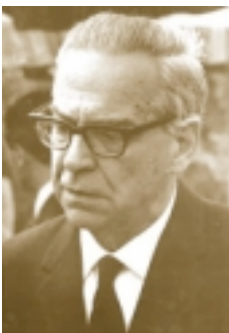
If we add two re-printed and recently published titles - a book of interviews and Ivo Andrić's doctoral dissertation edited by Prof. Radovan Vučković, a prominent authority on his life and work, we have reason enough to remember this writer, especially following the bloody war in the dark Bosnian town in which his most famous novel was set. After the abyss and civil war that tore the region asunder, it is instructive and restorative to read Andrić, a writer who used prose to build bridges between cultures separated by conflicts, convictions and religions.

The galaxy of signs in Andrić's opus is enormous and, at the time of its publication, it shed new light on the world of the absurd or, as the writer said, on "all kinds of scum, Christians and non-Christians alike".

Andrić knew many secrets of the world of his childhood, where he walked a sad path, feeling the freedom of childhood passions but also the despair and anguish of everything that existed in it. Anything that differed or was conspicuous became the prey of invisible and aggressive forces. Many of

the fears that Andrić had accumulated during his childhood he later recalled in proportion to the measure of the passion and anxiety with which he set out into the world.

The book entitled "The Writer Speaks through his Work" - a collection of more or less known interviews with Andrić published by BIGZ - reveals a man of monologue less than a man of dialogue. The book is all the more valuable in that he rarely gave interviews, and even less often did he comment on his work, the events he witnessed and people he knew. He believed that, apart from one's books, a writer had nothing to say. He kept quiet when meeting journalists, as he wanted to avoid a simplification of his poetics. The author of the masterpiece "The Damned Yard", which is today interpreted as a book about the Goli Otok Detention Camp, despised loud places and people, because nobody could hear anyone else. To write was for Andrić a monastic calling and a sort of asceticism. He also disliked when journalists' questions suggested answers, as he took their intonations as aggression. Even the question, "How are you?" rendered him uneasy. In fact, the list of things he disliked is quite long; journalist's theories and lofty speeches, especially when, in his own words, they talked about high architecture instead of houses with leaking roofs. He avoided discussions about daily politics and openly declared that ideology is dangerous and fragile material. In other words - "the more you go public, the less you are your own self" - said the writer. Some of his friends and acquaintances, like Dučić and Ćopić, tried to persuade him to abandon themes from the bygone times of Turkish provincial towns, and to write stories based in his own time. The writer refused, because he felt that new literary streams and fashions generally dispensed with the past and its mythology. Time - the past, the present and the future - always intermingles and a writer cannot renounce it, said Andrić.



The Nobel Laureate never denied that Serbia of the early 20th century, through its culture and literature, had a great influence on his generation across the Drina River, and that the year 1914, "Made us miserable and so crushed us that we haven't collected ourselves since." That summer, caught in the flames of World War One, he described as a time that left a taste of fire and the icy breath of tradition at every step. He never hesitated to admit that "As long as we live we shall divide the world according to whose side one was on, and what one swore by."

Influenced by Dostoyevsky and Mann, as he said in one of his books, he avoided descriptions of nature and landscapes in order to more clearly emphasize the fate of men and characters. He looked on previous ages as "the crushed time". However, a writer must become old to overcome his mistakes. Andrić wouldn't accept suggestions from his friends and his wife to remove from his most famous novel one of the most brutal scenes in all of literature: Radisav's impalement. His reasoning was simple: "Since when is a written account more brutal than the very evil executed?" Andrić never went in for decorations or titles, as he felt they were more of an annoyance and inconvenience. Of celebrations and festivals he would say that they belonged only to the dead - "It is easy to boast and it is the most difficult is to be one's own judge". He was a gentleman, taciturn and detached, always reserved and restrained before braggarts. He never pandered to authorities, but was careful not to displease them.

As a diplomat, he personally met many dictators and felt that they were men of dangerous and bad disposition. He kept them at a distance, looking for a way out from their suspicious eyes. Probably for this reason, he associated with those who could protect him. One writer who analysed Andrić's photographs in the company of many statesmen came to an admirable conclusion - in every photograph of Krleža and Tito, the author appeared relatively relaxed, while Andrić always appeared reserved and alert, as if he were waiting to be arrested at any moment.

Andrić included powerful figures in his cast of literary characters; there were Mehmed Sokolović and Omer Pasha Latas. He saw all too closely the dangerous world leaders who were his contemporaries - Hitler and Mussolini. He bore witness to two world wars, and passed through the prisons of different regimes. He directed readers to Vuk's correspondence

with (Prince) Miloš so they could learn more about their own time. He considered the language of television fake, superficial, and tiring. He said that every book he had written was drawn from talking to Bosnians. At the beginning of the war, he was satanised and his monument toppled.

Writing for Andrić was what weaving is to a spinner or what mining is to a miner, to wit digging in a dark tunnel. In a chaotic world, he saw writing as the possibility of illuminating dark paths, and he saw the library as the place where "the dead live and the living speak." He warned that "a true word is a word of blood" and if it is used too much, "it can become evil." Andrić wrote one of the greatest epics to heroism and the defeat of the Serbian people at the sad crossroads of the East and the West: he wrote about unfathomable historical tragedies - an occupying state that took children and converted them to a different faith. These same children, dressed in the garments of powerful empires, would later return to their native land as conquerors and oppressors of their people. It is no coincidence that Andrić was so attracted to themes of oppression and to stories of men deprived of freedom. Yet, at the end of every path, in his novels and short stories, he builds bridges, because he remembered that on the other side of river looms an abyss. He built bridges even though he knew there were always more Barbarians than builders.



In that distant past Andrić looked for the roots of all the horrors that would happen later and are still happening. After publication of his story "The Bridge On the Žepa", those who built the power plant pleaded with the author to lend them his support to tear down the bridge. The writer said that he felt uneasy and ashamed. No wonder. Who can ask from an author to sign a death sentence for his hero?

In his novels Andrić reminded us of the incorruptibility of our ancestors who didn't succumb to the empty flattery of intriguers and traitors when suffering and ruin threatened their people. "He gives nothing away nor does he want to receive anything", said Herzegovinian writer Duke Zimonjić.

As a writer, Andrić was always on the side of the defeated and insulted, but he also understood the powerful and mighty. To the latter he never wrote dedications, at least in his works, although in everyday life he made a small gesture when pressed against the wall.

Source: JAT Reviewl