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A Small Book about a Big War
(Diary Entries, Articles, Letters, 1991-1998)

O riđanu, Petru i Pavlu—
mala knjiga o velikom ratu
(Dnevnički zapisi, članci, pisma, 1991.-1998.)

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By

Helena Peričić

Translated by Petra Sapun and Proofread by Nick Saywell

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City of Zadar
County of Zadar

To Ema
(Un)forgivably sincerely

Emi
(ne)oprostivo iskreno

So many have been shot that a person can easily get lost in this cemetery. Generally speaking, it is hard to tell who killed whom. Those who killed yesterday are gone today. The same as the ones that they killed, and those who will do the killing tomorrow; they too will be gone tomorrow, and those who will shoot and hang tomorrow won't have any idea that we, today, are the ones they've killed and burned at the stake. Generally speaking, it is hard to know who killed whom and why, and who is still alive and who is dead—
—From Miroslav Krleža's *Aretej*[1]

Tolike su postrijeljali da se čovjek ne snalazi na ovom groblju. Uopće: teško je znati tko je koga ubio. Oni koji su ubijali jučer, tih više nema, upravo kao ni onih koje su pobili, a oni koji ubijaju danas, tih neće biti sutra, a oni koji će i strijeljati ili vješati sutra, ti neće imati pojma kako su ubijali i palili na lomačama nas, danas, i uopće teško je znati tko je koga ubio i zašto, a tko je živ a tko mrtav—
—Iz *Areteja* Miroslava Krleže

[1] Miroslav Krleža, a famous Croatian author (1893-1981)

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FOREWORD

On The Red Horse, Peter and Paul is one of those manuscripts that the author does not want to remember, does not want to check, proofread, or change in any way. Each new reading of a text, in this case a text that stands as a witness to days that are "long gone" but which were survived with great difficulty, presents a reliving of everything that was stated in it.

This is an utterly honest confession consisting of diary entries, published articles or those intended for publication, of texts read on air on radio shows, lyrical fragments, a few stories, letters... The manuscript describes events – both on a collective and an individual level – that took place between 1991 and 1998, even though the perspective and comments (stressed in *italics*) date from a later period (1998–2004).

Not a single person mentioned in this manuscript is a work of fiction; some of them close to me no longer live in these parts, I haven't had any contact with others for a long time, some are gone etc., but each of them is a part of this testimony about a time in which I, the author, bear no importance. I believe that this text is relevant as an individual perspective, as one of *many possible* perspectives. Actually, as it happens, this perspective was very often everything I as the author had in those critical situations, situations such as I previously knew only from my childhood textbooks and readers – never even suspecting that I myself would one day go through anything similar.

In that binary system, the only thing that mattered was "whether you were there or not", as I once wrote. I beg of those close to me and whom I mention here to forgive me for dragging them once again, without even asking, into an era that they barely and with difficulty escaped, and which they probably don't even want to remember. By using their real names, I have tried to show that the individuals and their *individual destinies* – were more important than the "collective events" and "the course of the world". I remember these names with tenderness and gratitude.

—The author
Zadar, early July 2004

PREDGOVOR

O riđanu, Petru i Pavlu jedan je od onih rukopisa kojih se autor(ica) ne želi sjećati, koje ne želi provjeravati, ispravljati, revidirati. Naime, svako novo iščitavanje teksta koje u ovom slučaju svjedoči o danima „davno prošlim" a teško preživljenim predstavlja ponovno proživljavanje svega što je u tekstu navedeno.

Ovo je krajnje iskrena ispovijest sastavljena od dnevničkih zapisa, članaka objavljenih ili planiranih za objavljivanje, od tekstova čitanih u radio-emisijama, lirskih zapisa, od pokoje priče, pisama... Rukopis obuhvaća događaje – kako na kolektivnoj tako na individualnoj razini – od 1991. do 1998. iako se javlja (*kurzivom* naglašeno) perspektiva iz nešto kasnijega/kasnijih doba (1998.-2004.).

Niti jedna osoba koja je u ovom rukopisu spomenuta nije izmišljena; neke od njih meni bliskih ne žive više u ovom prostoru, s nekima od njih odavna se nisam čula, nekih više nema... no sve su one dio jednoga svjedočenja o vremenu u kojemu ja kao autorica nisam bitna. Vjerujem da je ovaj tekst relevantan kao jedno viđenje, kao jedno od *mogućih* viđenja. A događalo se, dapače često, da je to viđenje u stvari bio jedino što je autorici u drastičnim okolnostima o kojima je kao dijete čitala u udžbenicima i čitankama – ni ne sluteći da će ih jednom i sama proživjeti/preživjeti – bilo preostalo. U onom dakle binarnom sustavu u kojemu je „jedino bitno ima li te ili te nema", kako napisah na jednom mjestu. Osobe koje su mi bliske i koje ovdje spominjem molim da mi oproste što ih ni ne pitajući za dopuštenje nanovo uvlačim u doba iz kojega su se teškom mukom iščupale i kojega se možda ili vjerojatno ni ne žele prisjećati. Pokušala sam njihovim imenima pokazati da je individualizirana, *njihova pojedinačna* sudbina – važnija od „kolektivnih događanja" i „gibanja svijeta". S nježnošću i zahvalnošću sjećam se svih tih imena.

—Autorica
U Zadru, početkom srpnja 2004.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There is a particular aptness in the timing of this publication of this book. These days we are commemorating the eighteenth anniversary of the wanton destruction that engulfed historic Croatian cities like Vukovar and villages such as Škabrnje and Nadin. The people whose lives were destroyed in these places will remain forever engrained in our nation's memory. Those who once inhabited these towns and villages and their defenders deserve to be remembered. How many of the readers of this volume are aware of what really happened in those years? If this small volume goes some way towards witnessing to this truth and the communal dreams that were buried during those years, then it will have been a small triumph.

I would like to thank everybody who contributed to the production of this volume and made its publication in bilingual form a reality: publisher Cambridge Scholar Press for having recognized the relevance of the book, translator Petra Sapun, and proof-reader Nick Saywell, who were always generous with their knowledge and their time. In particular, I would like to thank them for their patience in seeing what was a demanding project to its conclusion.

I would also like to express my deep gratitude to a number of people who are close to my heart: my colleagues in literature, Irish writers Mícheál Ó hAodha and Gabriel Rosenstock. Their help was unflagging at all times as was that of my loyal friend and colleague Sintija Čuljat. I would also like to mention dear Ivana Haberle for providing me with some published material relating to the Homeland War.

Finally, I am grateful to all my other friends, colleagues and students in Croatia and abroad, for their good wishes, encouragement and unfailing support.

—Helena
Zadar, 18 November 2009

ZAHVALE UZ OVO IZDANJE

Postoji određena koncidencija u vremenu pisanja ove zahvale. Ovih dana bilježimo osamnaestu obljetnicu uništenja hrvatskih povijesnih gradova poput Vukovara i sela poput Škabrnje i Nadina. Ljudi koji su nekad živjeli u tim mjestima i selima te njihovi branitelji zaslužuju biti zapamćeni. Koliko je čitatelja ove knjige svjesno onoga što se doista dogodilo onih godina? Posvjedoči li ova knjižica o istini i snovima koji su bili pokopani tih godina, bit će to veliki uspjeh.

Zahvaljujem svima koji su doprinijeli objavljivanju ove knjige u dvojezičnom izdanju: prije svega, nakladniku Cambridge Scholars Publishing – što je prepoznao važnost moga teksta. Potom prevoditeljici Petri Sapun i lektoru Nicku Saywellu na njihovu znanju, vremenu te strpljenju u obavljanju zahtjevnoga posla do samoga kraja.

Želim izraziti duboku zahvalnost ljudima koji su mi bliski srcu: svojim kolegama po peru, irskim piscima Mícheálu Ó hAodhi i Gabrielu Rosenstocku. Njihova je pomoć bila nepresušna kao i pomoć moje odane prijateljice i kolegice Sintije Čuljat. Zahvaljujem dragoj Ivani Haberle na ustupanju tiskane građe o Domovinskom ratu.

Konačno, zahvaljujem svim ostalim prijateljima i kolegama te svojim studentima u Hrvatskoj i inozemstvu na dobrim željama, ohrabrenju i nepokolebljivoj potpori.

—Helena
U Zadru, 18. studenog 2009.

INTRODUCTION

"THE AESTHETICS OF WAR": SOME THOUGHTS ON HELENA PERIČIĆ'S WRITING

Until recently, the writing of war diaries or dispatches was often the preserve of men. Helena Peričić has broken the mould in this regard. She has used her pen to dig through the blood-soaked ground, the shattered detritus of war and hatred. Her diaries, her dispatches - call them what you will - relate to the tragic events that circumscribed the Homeland War, the battle for independence which the Croatian people fought in the early 1990s. Strangely, this war is one which is already forgotten in the Western European imaginary. Helena Peričić does *not* forget. As a writer she admonishes us of the moral duty we have to recall, to remember and bear testament to what has happened before, to what is happening again. Peričić's writing is about emotion. Her language and artistic sensibility are new and exciting. Her art is concerned with what happens to the human mind when it is subjected to violence and unspeakable horror. Initially, the spirit recoils from what is frightening and dangerous. It seeks shelter. But the mind is stronger than the body and it rebels in order to seek out the meaning that is at the heart of chaos. The nature that is meaning itself. The mind and the artistic sensibility that is at its core seeks to make sense of human experience, of suffering, of death, whether the body wills it or no. Helena Peričić is writing in an era when many artists and writers have retreated into themselves. They have sidled out of view. Retreated to the relative comfort of their attics and garrets. And yet we express surprise when many people today question the efficacy or utility of art, of writing. When we doubt its power to engender any form of profound philosophical change. In artistic terms Peričić's writing usurps that old tiredness; it challenges us. It is source of a fresh cultural dynamic, the dynamic of testimony and the giving of witness. Her writings asks difficult questions. It asks us to think again. What is the true and nature role of culture, art and tradition in the modern age? How can modern peoples, cultures and ethnicities better relate to one another in an era when a information seems

to fly faster than the sound of the human voice? As Helena's writing demonstrates, the world may change at a bewildering pace but the nature of war, hatred and violence always remain the same. It is appropriate that her book should open with the ever-prescient words of Miroslav Krleža:

> So many have been shot that a person can easily get lost in this cemetery. Generally speaking, it is hard to tell who killed whom. Those who killed yesterday are gone today. The same as the ones that they killed, and those who will do the killing tomorrow; they too will be gone tomorrow, and those who will shoot and hang tomorrow won't have any idea that we, today, are the ones they've killed and burned at the stake. Generally speaking, it is hard to know who killed whom and why, and who is still alive and who is dead.
> —From Miroslav Krleža's *Aretej*

Like all good art, Peričić's literature is formed within the aesthetic firmament that is deep soul-searching and the fear of the unknown:

24 November 1991

On Friday, we travelled to Šibenik while the alert was in force. All the way there, I was afraid of being hit by a shell or stopped by some Serbian soldier. Between Biograd and Pakoštane, suddenly a flaming projectile flew over my head; it flashed and hissed like a shooting star. "Make a wish!" – "I wish we survive."

Or, on the following day:

25 November 1991

…what kind of violence was happening just 15 kilometres from Zadar. That distance today does not exist any more. THEY came to the edge of the city, they "beat us" day and night; they start suddenly, they cut off the electricity and water supplies, they sabotage the local radio-waves by imposing their own Radio Belgrade and Knin, they tear down – as they say – the "stones" of our churches, Romanesque rosettes, Renaissance palaces…

Peričić is not afraid to speak her mind. This is writing with a new, raw edge and with consummate skill she explores the nature of suffering, the turmoil and doubt that always lurk at the heart of the human condition:

That's where Ema and I spent last night. Even though it was officially proclaimed a shelter, that basement across the street is actually not suitable for sheltering: it is full of shelves with files from the building's

offices. We removed the files, stacked them against the wall, and we slept between the shelves on boards covered with blankets. Stacked together like – files…

I've just heard that an attack on Biograd has started and that the shells are falling on the very centre of the town. The thought of death preys on my mind continuously. I pray to the angels and the saints that I do not live to see Ema's misery, that I never become a witness to the inconceivable.

Is anywhere safe? Is there any refuge left in this "fallen" world Peričić asks?:

25 December 1991

I went with Ema to visit my brother in Split for a few days. Last night, Mum and Dad ate cod with their neighbours by candlelight, in the corridor in front of the lift (which is, in a way, the "safest" place on the seventh floor of their building). Shells hit a lot of apartment buildings on Voštarnica[1].

The power of Peričić's work lies in its usurpation of the mundane, the banal aspect that is the dangerous madness of war, the very essence of modernity itself. Peričić's writing calls us back. It remonstrates with us; it demands that we remember and give testimony.

We left for Ljubljana by bus. Our bus was only one of the four or five busses that were leaving for Slovenia at the same time. There was a young woman on the bus, sitting right next to Ema and me, with an eight-day-old baby girl, lying in a newborn's crib. With a baby girl who didn't even have a name yet.

I was among the first who entered the bus so I got the chance to study the faces of the people who came aboard. Near me, an old woman was trying to sit down with the help of her friend. The old woman was very slow, so some woman behind her, about fifty years old, started pushing her and yelling. Among all those lost and teary looks of people – who were no longer capable of any kind of reaction and who just wanted to begin their journey (without ever returning?) – I was the one who had to object and cry out to the heartless, bewildered woman: "Why are you rushing this old lady? Do we really all have to be insane?"

Peričić's writing is beautiful and perceptive. It is evocative. In an age when the beauty of the world is forgotten it reminds us of the power that is

[1] A district in the north-east of Zadar

the written word. One can only do true justice to her work by reading it, by savouring the sensations and the memories, the words on the page. Peričić's writing is memory and poetry as one essence. As with the poetry of mystics such as Jabes and Lévinas, it is life at the living breathing edges of perception, the desert that is the human soul:

> Thought in infinite regress, writing of the abyss. At the edge. But if the trace is in me, beats within me? Every impulse of my body is a recorded, counted trace, multiplied by fever – by love, pain, delirium. The trace is tied to being, to essence, as to the emptiness with which it perhaps resonates.[2]

—Mícheál Ó hAodha *(Irish writer)*
Limerick, Ireland
January, 2010

[2] Edmond Jabes (with Emmanuel Lévinas), "There is No Trace But in the Desert", in *The Book of Margins*, translated by Rosemary Waldrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 161.

18 July 1991

In the scorching, summer dust... All those deaths... *It is not possible to distance oneself from the sentimentality induced by war: when I first started writing this, neither I, nor anyone in my vicinity, was thinking – in literary terms.*

26 August 1991

It has already been a year since the first clashes with the Serbs in Croatia. The initial barricading of the main roads in Lika has in the meantime transformed into crimes that have not been seen since World War II. *Evil and fear of evil must be individualized. When drowned in multitude, war loses its meaning.* I am alone with Ema in the apartment. S. is in Šibenik. Every night before I fall asleep, I pray to the angels to protect the child that is sleeping so peacefully next to me. *Surely, no experience is so difficult and more painful to endure that worrying about the destiny of your own child in the drastic circumstances of war and violence...*

27 August 1991

The war continues. This sunny and quiet afternoon is in contrast to what is happening in the villages in the vicinity of Zadar. I listen to the radio and television news all the time. (I tried to avoid it the entire summer in order to stay calm, but now I am alone with Ema in our apartment and I want to be informed about what is going on around the city.) The radio: instructions in the event of an air raid on the city. S. is leaving for Zagreb tomorrow. I'm considering leaving with Ema somewhere. Maybe to the north, to Rijeka. Maybe to Lovran, to Aunt Ana's place? Would it be cowardice?

The water will be cut off again tomorrow. (Actually, just like any other day lately.) They're talking of digging new wells for drinking water within the city itself. And there's so much that needs to be washed. Ema needs a bath as well... This Ema has just turned a year and a half...

Maybe they will declare war and order a general mobilization. I wonder how long all of this will last? And when it finally does come to an end – because it has to end eventually – the confrontation will continue. Diplomacy and negotiations won't stop terrorism, explosions, cutting off water supplies... What is going to happen – afterwards?

31 August 1991

Today the deadline expires for withdrawing the army from Croatia. Because of this, some people are calling this Saturday "D-Day". I hope

that we will live to see tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, and the one after that...

1 September 1991

Images on the TV news: severed hands, eyes poked out, mutilated bodies of the dead. Everything I write seems trivial in comparison to the reality.

We are spending this weekend in Sukošan[1]. The crickets are chirping in the nearby cypresses and tamarisks like every summer. And like every summer, it is scorching, so I'm looking for some remaining currents of freshness within the "corridors" of the sheets. Just like every summer, the mosquitoes are buzzing and they seem ever more merciless and more resilient. The summer matrix of current life in northern Dalmatia is a setting for the atavistic, instinctive need for hope and belief in any kind of God, who will surely, sooner or later, bring us salvation!

5 September 1991

If by some chance a new Gertrude Stein were to appear today, maybe she would call my generation, the one born in the early 1960s, the "lost" generation. Today Branka, Rade, his brother Branko and I visited Snježana, whose brother committed suicide a couple of days ago (on Monday). He was 28 years old. He was an extremely talented young man, an electrical engineering graduate who recently got a job in Zadar and... He took his life with a revolver. With his father's revolver. Was it loneliness, or longing for some lost love or was his bright and sensitive mind already clouded by this hopeless everyday wartime life, and simply pushed over the edge by one final image of the cruelty surrounding us?

13 September 1991

Today is my birthday. A big one. *Happy birthday!*

Everyone I met and talked to today seemed to be completely awestruck. While I was at the Scientific Library – an oasis of quiet, peace and concentrated dedication to knowledge – my answering machine recorded the following messages: Tina called – she is back in Zagreb from her holiday (how I envy her for being there!); other calls from Zagreb included one from Ana – Ema's godmother – and from Branka B. They all want to know how we are doing: whether there is running water, food... Yes, there is for now, all of that, except for freedom of movement, optimism and laughter. I tried to reach Ana that afternoon at the

[1] A village on the coast, about ten kilometres south-east of Zadar.

Lexicographic Institute but without any success. The phone lines to Zagreb are overloaded. The situation in Zadar is terrible.

Today's news reported from Vukovar, and one of the murdered victims was a five-year-old child. I'm afraid, I'm so afraid: of the knives, the massacres, my own fear... They say that the guns are pointing towards Zadar and that the planes are ready for an air raid on the city – the city of stone, the wide city that is sunbathing in an Indian summer. There is so much sun in the city these days! How can even the sun be so weak when confronted with the smoke from the fires, with the ruins of the centuries-old city walls, with the blood shed on these ancient pavements...? Are these the last minutes of an apparent peace in these parts?

16 September 1991

Saturday's "celebration" of my thirtieth birthday was very short (my friends had already left at 9 pm). I invited some friends over, thinking it might be a good idea for all of us to get together – maybe even for the last time with some of them – *(...which proved to be right!*) in these circumstances. Even though some of them supported my intention to host this get-together, I knew that some were reluctant to come. I thought I would be a cheerful hostess who wouldn't let the party turn into too much bickering over the maladies of war. Over cookies and a few bottles of wine, everything seemed pretty "normal". And then suddenly a helicopter landed at the barracks some 30 metres away. Some of us stepped outside onto the balcony to watch it landing. Explosions began to sound from the Zadar hinterland. But when Marina P. started shivering after hearing the first detonation – her fear caused my own discomfort and some insecurity at first, and then my own first real fear, which completely paralyzed me. So I stopped engaging in conversation and nothing seemed funny anymore. (Not even Rade, who tried to pull off a couple of jokes as usual.) *Rade and his family still live in Zadar. Marina, Nenad and their baby girl live somewhere in Belgium. Tibo and Tanja live and work between Vienna and Slovenj Gradec. Cero is also in Slovenia. Snježana works as an architect in London. Apart from Snješka, I don't keep in touch with any of them…. All that is left from our student acoustic band "Lucida Intervalla" (gigs at KSET, Farmacija, the student halls of residence on the Sava...) is a mere audio tape recording.*

17 September 1991

Am I fully aware of everything that is going on in this part of the world? It's about 2 pm. Ema is asleep and I still don't know if she will manage to sleep through her afternoon nap, or if she'll be disturbed in her

sleep by the sound of the sirens and our descent to the basement of a neighbouring building. That's where Ema and I spent last night. Even though it was officially proclaimed a shelter, that basement across the street is actually not suitable for sheltering: it is full of shelves with files from the building's offices. We removed the files, stacked them against the wall, and we slept between the shelves on boards covered with blankets. Stacked together like – files. Was that yesterday or the day before? – Right: on Monday – when S., Ema and I met, by sheer coincidence, for the first time in the shelter, a nuclear shelter no less. When I took Ema to the paediatrician at the hospital for her compulsory examination for admission to nursery school, we shared the shelter with the medical staff and their patients. *There are only two or three nuclear shelters in the whole of Zadar! During the war, people descended to improvised shelters (which weren't real shelters), into woodsheds and basements, in which – as it happens – many got killed.*

I've just heard that an attack on Biograd[2] has started and that the shells are falling on the very centre of the town. The thought of death preys on my mind continuously. I pray to the angels and the saints that I do not live to see Ema's misery, that I never become a witness to the inconceivable.

18 September 1991

My parents stayed at my apartment last night because it is supposedly safer than theirs, which is situated on the south-east side, seventh floor of a nearby building. I will probably remember last night for as long as I live. We spent it in the modestly furnished kitchen of my rented apartment, in complete darkness. The only thing alive in that gloomy and creepy ambiance was Ema (who just recently turned 19 months) and a battery-operated radio and cassette deck, on which we tried to record a few of the sentences she said.

I don't know how it came to this, but at one point, I said I wanted to leave Zadar with Ema, maybe even leave Croatia altogether. My father jumped up at these words and started yelling at me, threatening to renounce me if I ever even thought about leaving again. My reaction to him was even harsher. I started screaming that I wanted to protect my child, that it was impossible for a small child to live in these conditions: without electricity, water, medicine... I ran off into the bathroom, and my father followed me, yelling that I was a traitor, a traitor to my own family and my own country...

[2] A small town on the coast, about thirty kilometres south-east of Zadar.

20 September 1991

We left for Ljubljana by bus. Our bus was only one of the four or five busses that were leaving for Slovenia at the same time. There was a young woman on the bus, sitting right next to Ema and me, with an eight-day-old baby girl, lying in a newborn's crib. With a baby girl who didn't even have a name yet.

I was among the first who entered the bus so I got the chance to study the faces of the people who came aboard. Near me, an old woman was trying to sit down with the help of her friend. The old woman was very slow, so some woman behind her, about fifty years old, started pushing her and yelling. Among all those lost and teary looks of people – who were no longer capable of any kind of reaction and who just wanted to begin their journey (without ever returning?) – I was the one who had to object and cry out to the heartless, bewildered woman: "Why are you rushing this old lady? Do we really all have to be insane?"

Ema, my Ema, was sitting next to the window and waved goodbye to her grandma and grandpa, who were standing next to the bus. She can't speak yet. However, she can understand a great deal. She knows how to laugh beautifully with her six little teeth. I wondered if she was saving her speech for some better, more peaceful times. Grandma and Grandpa were smiling with tears in their eyes. Or crying with a smile on their faces. God knows if I'll ever see you again, I thought.

While we were driving down the road to Pag, I thought about the macchia shrubbery by the road and wondered whether some Serbian soldier might be hiding in it. We approached Pag Bridge. Some Croatian soldiers were standing on the rocky ground under the sun, in a concrete hut. They approached the bus in order to search it. I showed Ema how to make a letter "V" with her fingers, as in "victory". Of course, she did the Churchillian greeting quite poorly and clumsily. The soldier understood it nevertheless and smiled. Ema then sent him a "flying" kiss with her hand. I thought: a bit of joy for this nameless soldier with an uncertain future.

Somewhere near Crikvenica, our bus had to stop. Something was wrong with the engine. While waiting for another bus, we heard on the radio that Zadar was surrounded by tanks, so I concluded that, with the existing barrier of the sea, the city was surrounded, trapped. I remembered Dad and how he "welcomed" my decision to leave with Ema using some very harsh and ugly words about me being a coward, about me being afraid for myself rather than for Ema... I will probably never be able to get that image and my offended reaction out of my mind.

The other bus arrived an hour and a half later. While we waited, we talked to some workers at the gas station. They were afraid that the

warships in front of Rijeka might start attacking the city. At Rijeka bus station, the young woman with the nameless baby in the crib smiled at Ema. *Later on, I found out that she named the baby – Ema*. We were stopped at the Slovenian border by their police and asked if all the passengers had arranged accommodation in Ljubljana. They say that Ljubljana is overpopulated and not accepting any new refugees. They offer us accommodation at Ilirska Bistrica. We will get food and shelter.

Humiliation and misery... All the passengers continue their voyage to Ljubljana anyway. They have friends and a temporary home there, where there is no panic and no warning sirens.

26 September 1991

After a few days in Ljubljana, staying with some friends, Ema and I flew to London via Klagenfurt.

1 October 1991

The following inscription stands in the centre of Westminster Abbey, in the brightest part of the church, the chapel of Edward the Confessor – the founder of the Abbey – one metre across from the wooden coronation chair dating from 1301:

"Please pray: for all places affected by war and violence, especially Yugoslavia, and for those who work to make and maintain peace."

2 October 1991

The war, the war is over there, in Croatia. We sit at Silvana's place in front of the teletext from morning till late in the night, reading the latest news from our homeland. Staying here feels absurd...

12 October 1991

"It's a rocky road that leads to democracy," said an unknown elderly woman with too much make-up on, sitting opposite me on the London underground.

"You look after yourself, dear. I would so love to visit Dubrovnik once again..."

29 October 1991

Dear Snježana!

It's about time I got in touch with you with a few words. Ema and I have arrived in Zagreb via Ljubljana, as planned, and have been here for over a week now. The situation in Croatia, as you probably know, is still confused and I doubt that it will change any time soon. The fighting is not

abating, and even the situation around Zadar and Šibenik is pretty tight, with the possibility of new confrontations.

Here in Zagreb, we are staying in a very cold apartment, and since we only took the basics with us – we are living like real refugees. No London comfort here. Luckily, we have friends here so we get by. I was told that lectures at the Faculty of Philosophy in Zadar will probably start around November 4th, so I'm currently trying to prepare myself mentally for our return to Zadar. I would be very glad to hear from you. Best regards.

2 November 1991

That insane sound of the sirens!

I remember that during the night, when they were expecting a general alert to be sounded, Pavuša rang us up and warned us about this possibility and that it had been announced on the radio. *What Pavuša and his Department for Protection of Cultural Landmarks did during the war, "patching up" buildings the day after they were bombed – was a heroic undertaking, which is forgotten too easily!* My parents spent that night at our apartment. I called some people to share the news with them. None of us knew what it would be like, were we really going to be attacked, would there be ruins, casualties... We were scared of meeting the monster that was knocking on our door.

3 November 1991

For a few days, I was occupied with the words of *Dulce et Decorum Est* by Wilfred Owen who sarcastically alluded to the Latin idea of a sweet and honourable death for one's country. The atrocities of World War I, which were described by the English poets of his generation, seem like a child's game in comparison to what is happening today in Croatia.

Candles have been burning in Zagreb windows these past few days. Everyone was advised to stay at home, because the cemeteries were possible bombing targets and places of possible shootings in general. Still, many people went to the cemeteries both for All Hallows Eve and All Saints' Day. It was a much more courageous thing to do in Slavonia, Dalmatia...

Ema is still coughing, her nose is still running, and her cold is not getting any better. It's so cold here in Zagreb! We get up late, after nine, in order to avoid the cold; and even at that hour – as we hear on the radio news – the temperature is around zero. Yesterday the sirens announced a general alert at about 4 pm, and today at about 3 pm. In both cases, at S.'s suggestion (or order?), we didn't hide anywhere; we stayed in the apartment, which was on the top floor, under a flat roof.

The public was concerned mostly by what was going on in Dubrovnik, so yesterday's attack on Zadar was barely even mentioned on the TV news. Every time I hear the sirens, I see images of children with bodies mutilated by bombs, of children in hospitals, children with big, scared eyes who don't understand a thing, who can't even ask why. I see helpless newborns born in hospital basements, right next to adult patients, psychiatric patients, trauma patients... A few days ago, a girl named Neža was born in the shelter of Vukovar hospital (or of what is left of it). *A baby girl was born!* Could that first cry of a baby, of a new life, make Neža's mother happy? How is it to create life that is screaming and crying at its first breath of the stale basement air, that is screaming to express the horror and humiliation of a tiny person created just so it can put his or her piece into the mosaic of the turmoil of high politics and ideology? What are those devices, those flesh-grinding machines that sacrifice everything? Even life before life.

A journalist from Vukovar warns that his city has been forgotten by the Croatian public and Croatian politicians. (Isn't it the same with Zadar?) People are dying in Vukovar while elsewhere (unsuccessful) negotiations are taking place.

I often think of Snježana's brother who chose for himself the time and the way he would end his life. I wonder if he had predicted everything that was going to happen, and everything that is now happening in Zadar. I must have made things harder for Snježana with my visit and my sinister tales of going to the shelters. I've noticed that she's adopted some very British characteristics: composure and keeping aloof. She is probably aware of the necessity of being like that, fighting for her job and survival in the context of today's recession- and inflation-ridden Britain with almost three million unemployed.

4 November 1991

Albert Primorac... On the radio news a plea for the girlfriend of Albert Primorac, wounded in Banija, to get in touch with his mother. Albert Primorac... How many other Alberts have already been wounded or killed? For how many Alberts will a candle be burning these days and every other All Saints' Day from now on?

5 November 1991

Ema and I left Zagreb and went to Zadar. The lectures at the faculty start tomorrow. They've enforced compulsory working. I wonder how a one-and-a-half-year-old will manage in these conditions.

7 November 1991

It's Mum and Dad's anniversary today: their 32nd in a row. They've earned a much more cheerful anniversary.

(I haven't had my period for the past two months. And I'm definitely not pregnant, unless I was paid a visit by the Holy Spirit. There's obviously something wrong with my metabolism. Or is it a stress-related disorder?)

19 November 1991

It's started again. They've started again...

Since yesterday at 9:30 am, both an air-raid alert and the so-called general alert have been in force in Zadar. People should be in shelters. First attacks on Nadin and Škabrnja began, then they continued with artillery and air attacks on Zadar. They took about 80 women, children and old people from Škabrnja to Benkovac yesterday; three were killed on the spot. *In Sukošan cemetery: six graves, one next to the other, in black marble; graves of young men butchered in Škabrnja, with whom my brother used to play basketball...* This morning, we found out that several people in Zadar were killed as well, and several people shot; St Anastasia's Church and St Chrysogonus' were hit, as well as many other churches and buildings in Zadar. What awaits us – only God knows. *The Sukošan basketball team is not doing so well today: there are no generations between the cadets and seniors.*

21 November 1991

Fourth anniversary of a (failed) marriage.

24 November 1991

On Friday, we travelled to Šibenik while the alert was in force. All the way there, I was afraid of being hit by a shell or stopped by some Serbian soldier. Between Biograd and Pakoštane, suddenly a flaming projectile flew over my head; it flashed and hissed like a shooting star. "Make a wish!" – "I wish we survive."

It's relatively peaceful in Šibenik. The fighting is going on behind Skradin so the alerts are usually heard in the villages on the north-western coastline. We are staying at S.'s parents on the 2nd floor, under the roof without a "slab", but in a case of an alert, we can go down into the garage, which is partly buried in the ground. I should go to Zadar tomorrow, to work. Ema will probably stay here. I think it's peaceful in Zadar now and there's no alert in force. However, there's still no electricity or water. We

should vaccinate Ema here, because it can't be done in Zadar since there's no electricity.

You and I in two
city-winners
defeated winners[3]

25 November 1991

Dear Professor Vidan![4]

On Friday morning, while the alert was in force, I drove my family to Šibenik to stay with my husband's parents. Even if I wanted to, I could not possibly tell you what it has been like in Zadar for the past few days. Suffice to say, on our way to Šibenik, somewhere around Biograd, shells flew over our heads.

On Saturday, during a phone call with my parents, I learned that your letter with a copy of the offprint from the Belgrade meeting has arrived. I had "given up" on publishing those seminars a long time ago – but still we managed to get them, via Sarajevo. My father read part of your letter to me over the phone, and it both moved and delighted me. Thank you very much for that. Regarding the lectures at our faculty, they have been postponed "until further notice".

I haven't spent the entire war period in Zadar. The same day the barricades were raised in Zadar, I travelled to Ljubljana with little Ema. Then I travelled to my cousin's in London, where Ema and I spent three weeks.

I know that my leaving for England – while my home town was being bombed, its citizens killed and children like my own living in shelters – might be considered an act of treason. However, above all, I wanted to protect Ema from the violence, from its images and sounds. (Ema usually reacts to each explosion by pointing her finger in the direction where the sound of the explosion came from and saying her moving onomatopoeia "dum-dum".)

I don't know if you remember when I mentioned in my letter last spring what kind of violence was happening just 15 kilometres from Zadar. That distance today does not exist any more. THEY came to the edge of the city, they "beat us" day and night; they start suddenly, they cut off the electricity and water supplies, they sabotage the local radio-waves by imposing their own Radio Belgrade and Knin, they tear down – as they say – the "stones" of our churches, Romanesque rosettes, Renaissance

[3] From my lyrical fragment *A Tale of Two Cities*.

[4] Professor Ivo Vidan was the renowned Anglicist who passed away in 2003.

palaces, Baroque concert halls... *In June 1999, the restoration of the last unrestored cultural landmark in our town – the Duke's Palace – was finally began* ...; our vineyards and olive groves are turned into mine fields, and they play a game of "hide-and-seek" on our bridges... They massacre and hang, making real physical and psychological cripples out of the children. How many traumatized generations? How many deaths, Professor? How many lost loves, lost gentleness, parental care, how many desperate children's looks, and finally: how many encouragements for compassion from which – as the Greatest writes in *Lear* – "you can wither away".

All the best.

Your former student,

Helena Peričić

27 November 1991

Dear Jasenka,

I am not sure if I'll be able to send this letter to you. It seems as if I've written it hundreds of times in my head, and now I don't know how to put it all down on paper.

What is happening to us here cannot simply be called horror (or maybe the word "horror" has just lost its weight along the way?). Šibenik is currently peaceful, but as you yourself are well aware, peace can turn into hell and destruction very easily. In any case, the situation is such that one cannot do anything sensible, or create anything, but one can think a lot about all of it, and go mad, slowly. Next to my bed is an alarm clock. The radio is silent and the clock display shows no sign of numbers, just fluorescent red lines and a blinking little dot. Time stands still. Ema is asleep next to me. There are some newspaper cuttings on the destruction of Zadar on my bedside table, among them the one written by Pavuša and published in *Dalmacija* last Thursday. I'm a bit fed up with Šibenik. I don't do any work here because I didn't get the chance to bring my books along with me. I'm rereading *King Lear*. It feels absurd to deal with Krišković (my potential PhD thesis) these days. Everything is absurd...

The war has turned S. into a mummy who spends day and night reading newspapers: *Dalmacija – Nedjeljna* and *Slobodna, Danas, Newsweek*, stupid things, idiocies (I quote Aralica on this one).

I long for gentleness, attention. I get no hugs, let alone kisses. And something "stronger" is out of the question. Last night, I suggested having sex to S. for the first time in a month. He didn't even lift his eyes from his newspaper. He mumbled almost with disgust: "Hm?"

Love,

Helena

28 November 1991

I was angry with S. today when he refused to kiss me in the kitchen, after lunch. Apart from us, his grandmother was the only person in the kitchen, but she was doing the dishes at that particular moment and had her back turned to us. I left the kitchen abruptly and slammed the door in anger. I don't think he understands a thing. That is just what I said to him: "I think I may even understand you, whereas you don't even try to understand me."

I know there's a war going on, that people are dying, that children are being slaughtered. I know that S. is terrified by the idea of being drafted. But: do I really have to think about these things all the time? Don't I have rights, like everyone else, to allow myself even for just a moment to forget all the atrocities and just for a brief second momentarily, seemingly shut myself out of everything? Besides, I need something to give me a bit of strength for all that lies ahead of us.

In order to calm down the tension between us, S. took me to the bathroom in the evening where we allowed ourselves the luxury of a kissing session for two minutes.

25 December 1991

I went with Ema to visit my brother in Split for a few days. Last night, Mum and Dad ate cod with their neighbours by candlelight, in the corridor in front of the lift (which is, in a way, the "safest" place on the seventh floor of their building). Shells hit a lot of apartment buildings on Voštarnica[5].

30 December 1991

—in the ruined hall
among the reliquaries of glitter and velvet
a black piano
on which we used to
with children's fingers
spill (never understanding) Chopin's patriotism
Croatian polonaises are played elsewhere—[6]

25 February 1992

S. has gone off to sea. He left us in the company of bombs.

[5] A district in north-east Zadar
[6] A fragment from my lyrical note