

Meša Selimović

THE FORTRESS

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VULKAN
IZDAVAŠTVO

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To Maša and Jesenka

TRANSLATORS' FOREWORD

This translation attempts to put the original into acceptable English-language form. To this end, sentences have been shortened and, rarely, lengthened. The many foreign names have been retained, since any attempt to do otherwise would appear ludicrous and would detract from the foreign atmosphere that conveys to the reader the strangeness inherent in the text's impact. All Serbian names, be they of people or places, have been adapted to English spelling; the reader may thus comfortably scan them with full confidence. To aid the reader in negotiating these names and terms, we have added a glossary, which includes all terms marked with an asterisk in the text, as well as a few brief cultural and historical references.

E. D. Goy and Jasna Levinger

CHAPTER 1

THE DNIESTR MARSHES

I can't tell you what it was like at Chocim*, in that far Russian land. Not because I don't remember, but because I will not. It's not worth telling of dreadful slaughter, of human terror, of atrocities on both sides. It's not worth the recalling, be it to regret or to glorify. Best to forget. Let people's memory of all that's ugly die, so children may not sing songs of vengeance.

All I'll say is that I got back. Had I not, I'd not be writing this and no one would know that all this really was. What's not written down doesn't exist; it's past and gone. I swam the swollen Dniestr* and so got away. The rest were butchered. With me came Mula* Ibrahim, our clerk, with whom I struck up a friendship during those three months of our journey home to our distant country. He came because, swimming, I dragged his holed boat out of the dangerous current and carried him, sick, half the way, dragged him, urged him on when he fell on his knees or lay on his back, staring, motionless, at the dull alien sky, longing for death.

When we got back, I told nobody about that Chocim. Perhaps it was because I was tired and confused, so strange did all that business of Chocim seem, as if it had happened in some other, distant life and as if I, myself, had been somebody else and not the I who looked, with tear-filled eyes, at his native town, scarcely recognizing it. I felt no regret, no bitterness, no sense of betrayal. I was just empty and confused. When I

quit my post as teacher and left the children I'd taught, I set off for glory, for some light, and fell into the mud, into the endless Dniestr marshes around Chocim, among lice and sickness, wounds and death, into indescribable human misery.

Of that wonder men call war I remember countless details and only two events, and I tell of them not because they are worse than others, but because, do what I may, I cannot forget them.

The first concerns one among many battles. We were fighting over a fortification, constructed of wooden hurdles packed with earth. Many had perished, both ours and theirs, in the marshes surrounding it, in the black waters of the swamp, dark brown with blood. It smelt of ancient marsh roots and of rotting corpses left behind after the battle. And when we'd taken the entrenchment, blown it apart with guns and the heads of our people, I just stood there, tired: What senselessness! What had we gained and what had they lost? Both we and they were surrounded by the only victor: the utter silence of the ancient earth, indifferent to human misery. That evening, seated on a wet tree trunk in front of a fire that stung our eyes, I held my head in my hands, deafened by the cries of marsh birds, scared by the dense mist of the Dniestr marshes that stubbornly enveloped us in forgetfulness. How, that night, I managed to survive the horror both within me and around me and that deepest of all sadness, of defeat that follows victory, I'm unclear even to myself. In that darkness, in the cries and whistling, in the despair for which I find no reason, in that long, sleepless night, in the black fear that was not of the enemy, but of something within me, I was born as what I am, unsure of all that is me and of all that is human.

The second event is ugly and no way can I cast it from me. Often it's there inside me, even when I don't want it.

Everything brings it back, even what is its opposite: someone's merry laughter, the cooing of a child, a tender love song. And my memory always begins at the end, not as I tell it now, so, perhaps, some of it is inaccurate, but any other way you wouldn't understand. In Company 3, a dozen or so of us from Sarajevo stuck together from fear of an unknown country, an unknown enemy, and the other unknown soldiers. Each of us, for the other, contained something that was his, something intimate, one for the other we served as conductors for thoughts of home and

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family, dumb looks and wonder at what we sought in an alien land other than our own and others' misfortune. I joined them as if returning home. They were ordinary men, good men. Some had come to war voluntarily, some because they had to. Ahmet-*aga** Misira, a tailor (I can't remember him ever sober), had long wanted to become an aga, but no sooner had he succeeded than he was immediately called to war, which he certainly didn't want. Grumpy old Hido, an ex-town crier, had fled poverty. The muscular Mehmed Petsitava, always bare-chested, cursed in rudest terms both war and he who had invented it and himself for volunteering, but never disclosed his reasons for doing so. Ibrahim Paro, bookbinder, with the split upper lip, which they say is the sign of a lucky man, had three wives in Sarajevo and joked that he'd run away from them. The two sons of the barber Salih from Alifakovats* had wanted to escape the barber's trade, although one of them, the elder, had brought a razor from his father's shop, but used it only on himself and not for anything would he use it on anybody else. *Hadji** Husein, known as Pishmish, had fallen into debt and taken refuge in the army. Smail-aga Sovo, a coppersmith, joined others under the influence of drink and enthusiasm, but the enthusiasm quickly evaporated with the drink. Avdiya Suprda, moneylender in peace, *bayraktar** in war, was a good and honest man in both callings, and one can hardly say which one is the worse. And they all perished. Ahmet Misira wasn't long an aga, and dearly he paid for it. Ibrahim Paro was freed forever from his wives. He was finished off by three Russians, one for each wife. Husein Pishmish paid all his earthly debts, his head thrust into a Dniestr marsh. The elder of the two brothers cut his throat with the razor one early morning in a Ukrainian village where we'd spent the night.

Apart from me, only Smail-aga Sovo and bayraktar Avdiya Suprda returned. Smail-aga fled home before the end of the war. He disappeared one night and after a few months, just as the war ended, arrived in Sarajevo, mad with worry for his wife and three children. He was hardly recognizable, and once he was recognized, which was immediately, he was hanged as a deserter. Avdiya Suprda, the bayraktar, who feared nothing, who survived a hundred charges and from a cloud of a thousand bullets emerged with a whole skin, took up fruit growing in his village, Lasitsa, when he returned, after the shattering of the army. He fell out of a pear tree and died.

So, there you are. I, the only one left, am telling you about those who are dead. But, to tell you the truth, I am glad it's this way, rather than that they live to talk about me, dead, especially since I don't know what they'd say about me, just as they don't know what I'll say about them. They've done what they had to do, and there's nothing left of them. All that will remain is what I, rightly or wrongly, say of them. And so, these some dozen men from Sarajevo, like thousands of others, were possessed by something they didn't need, and fought for an empire, without thinking that the empire had nothing to do with them, nor they with it; a fact learned later by their children, for whom no one even turned their heads. For a long time I was tormented by the useless thought: How stupid and unjust that so many good men should perish for a nameless fantasy. What business had they in distant Russia, on the far Dniestr? What business had the tailor Ahmet Misira, or the bookbinder Paro, or the two sons of the barber Salih from Alifakovats, what business the coppersmith Sovo, what business the town crier Hido? And if they'd held on to that damned Chocim, if they'd taken somebody else's land, what would have changed? Would there have been more justice or less hunger, or, had there been, wouldn't people have choked on every mouthful won by another's suffering? And would they have been happier? No way. Some other tailor Misira would have cut cloth, hunched over his work, and then set off to die in some unknown marshes. Two sons of some barber from Alifakovats, tied by brotherly love, would rush off to vanish at some other Chocim and on some other Dniestr.

The wise Mula Ibrahim says it's neither foolish nor unjust. It's our fate. If there weren't wars, we'd massacre each other. So every sensible empire seeks a Chocim, to let out the evil blood of the masses and divert the accumulated discontent from itself. There's no other profit, nor loss, be it from defeat or victory. For who ever remained sane after a victory? And who ever gained any experience out of defeat? Nobody. People are wicked children: wicked in action, children in mind. And it'll never be any different.

I didn't agree with Mula Ibrahim, at least not entirely, and for a long time I couldn't be reconciled to the death of comrades in the morasses of Chocim. It seemed to me quite unacceptable, almost preposterous, as though some mindless and dread force were playing games with people. I couldn't free myself from the nightmare of memory, too abruptly had

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I fallen from the peaceful boredom of teaching into the cruel reality of killing. And Mula Ibrahim said it was not a bad thing that I blamed some irrational force. It would be dangerous had I sought an earthly culprit.

But neither I nor Mula Ibrahim, who knew everything, could explain the event I'm about to narrate. Indeed, people changed in the long months of war, grew coarser, more merciless, perhaps because of the endless space that separated them from their homes, perhaps because of the cruelty that war imposes and the constant proximity of death. Or, again, how can people change so much, that in a moment one stands dumbstruck and asks oneself in amazement: Who are these people? They can't be those men whom I knew two years ago. As though war had long plagued them, and the evil in them, concealed till now and perhaps unknown even to them, had suddenly broken out, like a scourge.

At dusk I'd returned from guard duty to my quarters upon a patch of firm earth between pools, where stood a hut in which a woman, still young, lived with her three children and with a skinny and mangy cow in a stall made of reeds. She cared for her children and the cow herself. Her husband was certainly on the other side of the marsh, against us. She didn't speak about him, she didn't speak about anything, nor did we ask her. She kept away from the soldiers and at night shut herself away in the hut with her children.

She resembled a pretty young bride in one of our richer villages by the Sava*, and we'd watch her till she vanished behind the stall, into the reeds, firm, upright, but we said nothing. Perhaps for the children's sake. Or perhaps because of the bayraktar Avdiya, who would have cut the head off anybody for using dirty words about another man's wife. Or perhaps we were ashamed in front of one another.

That day, when all this happened, the bayraktar was absent on some military duty, and I had been on guard. They met me with scowling faces, with a certain threatening malevolence in their eyes. "Go into the cow's stall!" they said. And they just kept on repeating it, like an order, urging me and not replying to my questions. The children were crouched by the hut door.

I went round the hut and the stack of reeds and went into the stall. The woman lay on the ground. Ibrahim Paro, dusting off straw and spider's webs and tightening his belt, came out without as much as a look at me.

The woman lay still, her thighs bare, and, not even trying to cover herself, waited for it all to end. I knelt down beside her. Her face was pale, her eyes closed, her bloodstained lips clenched. The horror had passed over her. I pulled down her white petticoat and covered her and tried to wipe the blood from her face with her headscarf, upon which she opened her eyes and looked at me in terror. I smiled in order to comfort her: Don't be afraid, I shan't hurt you. As though this terrified her even more, her eyes flashed hatred. I took some army biscuits that I'd not eaten on guard out of my pack and offered them to the woman: Here, take them, for the children. She brushed the biscuits aside with a furious gesture and spat in my face. And I? I did nothing, I didn't even move or wipe my face. I was petrified by her suffering. For I grasped it all in a moment. Had I raped her, as the others had, she'd have borne it with clenched teeth and hated us, dogs, for the rest of her life. But human concern and pity, following on rape, which for her was a catastrophe, a plague, a fate sent by God for which there was no cure, suddenly within her awakened her pride and showed her the measure of her humiliation. From a victim of inscrutable fate, she had become a victim of cruelty.

I'd injured that woman, more than all the others. She got up and went toward the door, but changed her mind, took the biscuits, and went out, hanging her head.

The next morning we sat in front of the cow's stall, scowling, angry at one another, angry with ourselves and with the whole world, choked by the marsh fog and by the yet worse fog that rolled over our souls. The woman led out her children one by one and began to wash them on the hut threshold, and then she went into the stall, without looking at us, her face hidden in her headscarf so as to hide the bruises. She milked the cow and took the milk into the hut.

With a sigh Paro swore.

The others sat motionless, silent.

I got up, just for the sake of doing something. The silent tension and the woman's calm hatred were unbearable. I went up to the rotting woodshed and began to chop firewood with an axe I found there. The woman came out of the hut, tore the axe from my hands, and went back inside, bolting the door.

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Suddenly space pressed in on us. We were gripped by a sense of threat. For certain she was standing behind the door with the axe in her hand. How did they get to her last night? By trickery, by force, by surprise? And all this, it would seem, she'd borne in silence so as not to disturb the children. I wondered at her, admired her, pitied her, but of the woman and of that which had happened the night before, I said not a word. Nor did anybody else. But it stuck in our throats like a bone.

The bolted hut and its hidden children were a silent reproach.

The elder of the two sons of Salih the barber from Alifakovats got up and went toward the reeds, no doubt to relieve himself. Since he was a long time gone, the younger brother went to look for him and found him dead. He'd cut his throat with the razor. It must have taken him quite a while to slit his throat from ear to ear, to sever the larynx and the rubbery tissue of the windpipe, blood pouring as from a tap, soaking the damp earth beneath him. The pain must have been dreadful, but he didn't even groan. We were only fifteen paces away, and we didn't hear a thing.

And while we were waiting for someone in authority to witness the death, for he had not died from a bullet or from an enemy's saber, we looked at the gaping wound on the neck, fearing what the younger brother would do. He kept staring at the severed throat, not allowing us to cover the body. All one could hear from him was a stifled groaning.

When Mula Ibrahim and his young assistant had recorded the details, quite unnecessarily, since the reason for the death was unknown and nobody mentioned last night's raping nor could his death be linked with it, the woman wordlessly pointed to a spade, and then locked herself back into the hut with her children.

The younger brother dug the grave himself in the wet earth, placing a sheaf of reeds at the bottom, in the water, and himself lowered his brother into the grave, stubbornly refusing every offer of help. He spread another sheaf of reeds over the body and covered its face with a handkerchief. When he'd filled in the grave, and we'd all thrown a clod of mud on the wet mound, he signed to us to leave him.

For a long time he stood alone over the grave. Who knows what he was thinking or what he said to himself and to his dead brother, whom he loved more than he loved himself. We didn't hear it nor will anyone ever know. Then he went off. He neither bent down nor kissed the grave

nor uttered a prayer. He just raised his eyes from the damp mound and set off toward the marsh. We called him, went after him, begged him to return. He didn't look back, perhaps he didn't even hear us. We saw him wade into the water up to his ankles, then up to his knees, and vanish into the reeds. What he was about, what his intentions were, whether he had lost his reason, is hard to say. No one ever saw him again.

Mula Ibrahim's young assistant, the student Ramiz, stayed the night with us so as not to return in the dark.

He talked with us all, listening more than speaking, yet he spoke strangely and as if he knew all that we knew.

I told him the whole incident, and he said, with a tired smile, "They kill them, and they kill themselves. People's lives are hunger, bloodshed, misery, bare survival on their own land and senseless dying on another's. And the rulers will return home, every one of them, to tell of glory and to suck the blood of the survivors."

Never had I heard such words from anybody. We were used to cursing both heaven and earth, God and people, but we never spoke thus.

"Why did you come here?" I asked him.

"To see this, too," he replied, thoughtfully looking into the dark night that surrounded us.

I've forgotten other events, more important, more striking, more shattering, or, even if I've not forgotten them, they don't haunt me like apparitions. I scarcely think anymore of battles, of wounds, of the cruelties men call heroism, of revulsion at slaughter, at blood, at shallow fervor, and at animal fear. I don't think of the vast Dniestr, swollen with the rains, when we were cut off from the rest of the army on the further bank, when thousands of soldiers perished or were taken prisoner and hundreds were drowned in that terrible river, and when I swam across it, dragging our clerk, Mula Ibrahim, in his holed boat, and he messing himself with fear, a fact he begged me never to disclose. I've forgotten a mass of other things which might well be remembered for the closeness of death, for the shame, but, there you are, I carry with me these two events which might easily be forgotten. Perhaps because I could neither understand nor explain them, and mysteries are remembered longer than the clear truth.

CHAPTER 2

SADNESS AND LAUGHTER

I told all this, for the first time, to a little girl; the first time, from beginning to end, in some sort of order. In this way I put it together as a consistent story, one that had, hitherto, always lost itself in a confusion of isolated parts, in a fog of fear, in a sort of extratemporal occurrence. Perhaps it went beyond any defined meaning, like some bad dream that I could neither accept nor reject. And why to her particularly, and why this, is something I can't explain, even to myself I felt she might have the ability to listen. For sure, she'd not understand, but, then, listening is more important than understanding.

Experience had taught me that what you can't explain to yourself is better told to another. You can deceive yourself with just one part of the picture that happens to impose itself with a feeling difficult to express, since it hides in the face of the pain of comprehension and flies into the mists, into the intoxication that seeks no meaning. For the other, exact speech is essential, and this forces you to seek it, to feel its presence somewhere within you, and to grasp it, it or its shadow, so as to recognize it in another's face, in another's glance, as he begins to comprehend it. The listener is the midwife in the difficult birth of the word. Or, still more important – if he desires to understand.

And she did. Even more than I'd hoped. As I told it, the innocent expression that perhaps had led me to begin this unexpected conversation

vanished from her face and was replaced by something strangely mature and sad. All she said was, "Lord, how unhappy people are!"

And this didn't occur to me at the time, even though it seems now that it was just this I was thinking of. The thought is neither very profound nor original: It's what people have been saying ever since they began thinking. And it was not so much the thought that surprised me, even though I didn't expect it, but the assurance with which it was uttered. It was as if she'd opened her most secret drawer, laying herself bare to me, with a completeness never offered to anyone before. And I was happy to have come upon something, even if only something, for the first time in another person, and for my own sake alone.

Her name was Tiyana, the daughter of the late Micha Byelotrepich, a Christian killed by some unknown and undiscovered assailants two years before, on his way with a load of furrier's goods to the fair at Vishegrad*. The powers that be made little effort to trace his killers, which would suggest they'd little longed for the truth, or that they knew them and left it all to be swallowed by oblivion.

All unusual, all as it should not be. But I didn't choose the circumstances, nor they me: We were like two birds in a storm.

When I got back from the war, I was met by bad news. My family had fared worse than if they'd been at Chocim: My father, my mother, my sister, and my aunt had all died of the plague. I couldn't even find their graves. Hundreds had died in one day, and the living had hastened to bury them wherever they could. Our rickety old family house had burned down, set on fire by Gypsies who'd camped there during the winter. They'd done it by accident, careless, since it was not theirs. Occasionally, I'd go to look at its blackened walls and the dead eyes of a dead building, in which I could no way envisage its former occupants, as though it had been empty from the beginning of time. Nor could I imagine myself as living there, as once I did. I didn't exist in my own memory, as though I were someone else. My garden was a wilderness, the fruit trees choked and overgrown, a miserable and pitiful sight. People wanted me to sell it, but I wouldn't. It was as if I hoped memories might return and that I might have a use for it. But I remembered all this later. At that time I couldn't have cared less. I was indifferent, indifferent in a particular way, without any profound sadness or great mourning.

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I was wrapped in a quiet indifference, neither sad nor happy. I'd seen so much of death that my own survival seemed like an unexpected gift, how or from whom I knew not, yet not far from being a miracle. Perhaps my consciousness was still in confusion, faced with this unusual truth, but my body grasped it entirely. In fact, I was living my second alien, donated life; all the rest was unimportant, unimportant for the moment. This was a bonus, this was luck, luck that thousands of others didn't have and that thousands of others couldn't understand, since they hadn't traveled my road. Few people in the town, perhaps I alone, could say: I am happy to be alive. I didn't say it, but I felt it, powerfully, in every vein. Others couldn't, for they hadn't hung over the abyss.

Nothing else mattered to me. Not even tomorrow's possible pain. Nobody invited me anywhere. Nobody offered me anything. And I bore no one a grudge. To others I may have seemed strange, as if I'd lost my wits. I had no work, no house, nothing, and I couldn't have cared less.

For hours I'd sit on a stone in front of the Begova mosque* and watch the people pass, or look at the sky, or look at nothing. I'd listen to the sparrows and their funny chattering, like good-natured argument or happy gossip concerning this or that. They seemed to me like small, ordinary people, cheerful, innocuous, inclined to be quarrelsome, superficial, peace-loving, satisfied with little, tough in adversity, ready to cheat in small things, without any great pride. They were tame, innocent as children. And I like children, their ringing voices, the rapid tramp of their bare feet, their joyful laughter, the harmless rudeness of their speech. Only when they fought did I shut my eyes and ears, upset.

I liked everything that was not war. I loved peace.

But then even peace disturbed me.

I used to be joined in front of the mosque by Salih Golub, a poor vendor of *sherbet** from Vratnik*. He'd slip the heavy vessel of sherbet from his shoulders and sit down on the stone, breathing heavily. Once a bit rested, he'd start humming, half-aloud, to himself, leaning against the wall, eyes closed. He knew only a few words of one single song about maidens who mourned the departure of their young men to war. He hummed this over and over, beginning again when he reached the confines of his short memory. Pale, thin, with yellow eyelids, he resembled a man close to death. For thirty years he'd supported a blind mother.

For her sake, he'd never married. For her sake, from morning to night, he'd hoisted the heavy, strapped vessel full of sugared water. Whenever he dozed off, the children would come, pour some sherbet, and drink it. I'd smile at them.

Salih Golub had a brother in Gorazhde*, but they cared little for one another. This brother in Gorazhde owned woods and estates and rented other communal lands, lent money at the usurer's interest, and amassed a considerable fortune, which became known only after his death. At Glasinats*, where he kept a large stud of horses, he was killed by bandits led by Bechir Toska, and, since his wife was already dead, his property came to Salih and his mother. So luck came to Salih Golub, overnight, such luck as he'd never dreamed of.

He turned up in front of the mosque on the following day, without a trace of happiness. He told me quietly what had happened and offered me money, either to start some business or to go with him to Gorazhde to help him deal with so large a property. It was as if he wanted to share some misfortune. When I refused, Salih showed no surprise. He looked at his place on the stone where he had rested and hummed for so many years, and went off, hanging his head. He died that same night, be it from joy or sadness. His mother soon wed the hodja* Shahinbashich, who was more like a woman than she was herself. They were both seventy years of age. Neither deceived the other. She had no sight, and he no property. The only one whom life deceived was Salih Golub.

I no longer went to sit in front of the mosque.

I began to seek for water, flowing water, clear, shallow. Perhaps due to the marshes of Chocim, or the muddy Dniestr, vast as the sea. And perhaps also because I could look at the water in tranquility, without thinking. All was flowing, softly, with a murmur. Everything: thought, memory, and life itself, at peace. I was at ease, almost happy. For hours I'd gaze into the clear water, letting its small dense waves flow over my hand, caressing me, as though they were a living thing. And this was all I desired, all I wanted.

Out of this dreaming I was awakened by Mula Ibrahim. His shadow fell on me as I sat there on the bank of the stream, in a world of light.

"You're watching it?" he asked.

His voice sounded pitying, worried. I smiled, but I didn't reply.