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Books

NRO Weekend, June 17-18, 2000

A Balkan Poet

Two distinguished novels by a Bosnian Muslim literary master.

By Stephen Schwartz, Sarajevo writer and author of *Kosovo: Background to a War*

The Fortress, by Mesa Selimovic, translated by E. D. Goy and Jassa Levinger (Northwestern, 406 pp., \$19.95 paperback)

Death and the Dervish, by Mesa Selimovic, translated by Bogdan Rakic and Stephen Dickey (Northwestern, 475 pp., \$17.95 paperback)

The atrocious Balkan conflicts of the past decade have produced many books for foreign readers, but, curiously enough, little interest in the region's own literary productions. This certainly contrasts with the enthusiasm for Latin American writers during the 1980s, when it seemed that sympathy for the Nicaraguan Sandinistas required keeping one of Garcia Marquez's novels within easy reach. Similarly, the intellectual upheavals in Russia and its eastern European satellites during the 1960s and '70s spurred a wider interest in the Czech novelist Milan Kundera and the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz, as well as the Russian memoirist Nadezhda Mandelshtam and, of course, Solzhenitsyn.

In the Balkan case, however, English readers face a vast emptiness. Only one Yugoslav author, the 1961 Nobel laureate Ivo Andric, enjoys name recognition, although few Americans have slogged through his *Bridge on the Drina*. The late Danilo Kis, a brilliant Serbian-Jewish writer, has gained a growing public since the English publication of his *Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, but his works will never, it seems, reach the bestseller lists.

We now have translations of two novels by the greatest

Muslim author from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Mesa Selimovic, who lived from 1910 to 1982, an extremely gifted writer and one of Europe's finest novelists. Both books are set under Ottoman domination, in the 17th and 18th centuries, and present a society ruled by naked power. In this way, both obviously refer, as well, to Bosnia under the Communist dictatorship of Josip Broz Tito.

Indeed, his masterpiece, *Death and the Dervish*, is directly based on a tragic incident in the author's own life. Selimovic's brother Sefkija, a Communist Partisan in the Second World War, was arrested and executed by the Communist authorities. His infraction was exceedingly minor: Put in charge of a warehouse of confiscated property, he had borrowed some small items of furniture. But the Communists, like the Islamic authorities under the Turks, were nothing if not publicly moralistic, and examples of severe punishment were always required to deter others from straying. It is a tribute to the relaxed cultural milieu in Tito's later period that *Death and the Dervish* became a best seller after its release in 1966, although the whole Yugoslav public knew the source of its inspiration. It was made into a popular film and entered the high-school curriculum, since in the Balkans education is still rigorous, in the Germanic tradition.

The Fortress, recently published in paperback by Northwestern University Press, is the lesser of these two works, but well worth reading in its own right. Set in the 18th century, it is the story of Ahmet Shabo, a youthful veteran of the Russo-Turkish wars of his time. Having returned to Sarajevo as one of the few survivors among the Muslim volunteers who rushed off to fight a holy war, he finds his family dead from plague. Survival is difficult; his only job is as a minor scribe. But he also finds great happiness in the arms of his young and beautiful wife Tiyana, who is a Christian, i.e., a Serb.

Such mixed marriages were and remain common throughout the Islamic world, since Muslim men are permitted to marry Christian and Jewish women — daughters of "the people of the Book." But Shabo cannot refrain from attempting to help people with whom he sympathizes, and such acts have dangerous consequences. When he speaks up for a war hero who is reduced to begging, he is beaten and outrageously humiliated, then loses his job and spends the rest of the book in difficult straits. Later, he tries to assist a young Muslim dissenter who has been imprisoned for his radical preaching, but that action too has a horrific outcome. Although his life is never threatened, at every turn his sympathetic words and actions lead in terrible directions, so that he sees himself,

finally, as a meddler who has brought misfortune on others by his attempts to do good.

It is very likely that such a conception could only appear in the writing of a Muslim or Jewish author, because both religions embrace the notion of a divine will that men are powerless to alter. But it is also poignant to realize that a Bosnian Muslim novelist, whose people recently found themselves victimized for their status as "outsiders" in Christian Europe, should so echo the preoccupations of a Kafka or a Singer.

The more obvious theme of the book is that of the fortress itself: the stone bulwark on a high hill above Sarajevo where prisoners of the Ottoman rulers were jailed and executed. That fortress also represents Shabo's increasing social isolation, and the "fortress" of the personality in which some people, community leaders as well as bandits, seem to be enclosed.

Selimovic's local readers seem never to be unmoved by the encounter with his work, and I have met many who say they will keep rereading him until they die. His direct, first-person narrative style is deceptively modest, as are his characters. All of them, like the Bosnian realities described in his books, appear simple and uncomplicated — a cast of rural bumpkins and vain notables drawn within a pastoral setting. But within each of them, and throughout the environment in which they live, abides a ferocious passion, kept in check by harsh discipline. It is the beauty of these works, and of their context, that this inner combat often produces a great, and deeply affecting, generosity, serenity, and wisdom.

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