

A STORY THAT WANDERS ROUND THE WORLD

Holy Father,¹ even though I address you only now, I've been doing so forever and ever. I am calling out to you from the bottom of the universe, where I am living my life both in this world and in the hereafter, so that I know not where I am. I am calling out to you from this madhouse where they placed me while I was alive. I even knew not that I was inside a madhouse, for everything was normal – that house had windows, albeit crooked. When I changed worlds, the madness continued inside my head, which is in a state of total chaos. I am inside a madhouse, but I'm not mad. In this world, where I am ostensibly alive, I am even better off than in that world of yours over there. But my memories are failing me, so that I don't know who I am or where I come from. I don't know whether I was born a Catholic or perhaps converted to Catholicism when those of Greek Orthodox faith were brought back to the faith of their fathers. When those who had been separated from it were brought back to Catholicism, where they could find eternal salvation. I don't know whether I'm a Croat in the body of a Serb, or the other way round, nor whose name I bear, my own or the one I received at baptism.

Names are false, God is the truth.

Holy Father, let me introduce myself as Dobrila Martinović, a teacher who worked at the People's School that was attended by both Catholic and Greek Orthodox children. And this People's School was located in Šargovac, in the vicinity of Banja Luka, which, at the time when the Independent State of Croatia was established, was supposed to be the capital city of this state, called Antetown.² Some will tell you it's Antetown, but it's not true. I put it to you off the top of my head, from within the tamed madhouse that is my head.

History is false, God is the truth.

Holy Father, at that time, no one but Croats could live in that newly established state. As for those who did not want to get converted, the Ustashi knew how to deal with them. It was no sin then to kill a seven-year-old child if it stood in the way of Ustashi progress. And Greek Orthodox children, that Wallachian litter, did stand in the way. Since *greace ides, nula fides*, that is to say, Greek faith is no faith, that Greek Orthodox degenerate breed was to be swept by an iron broom from the People's School in Šargovac, where it was my misfortune to work as a teacher. And your Church, with a view to achieving *Civitas Dei*, did allow the use of the iron broom; it even appealed, relying on your mercy, to give pardon to those who, pursuing their patriotic duty, occasionally overstepped the narrow boundaries of religious morals and ethics.

Pardons are false, God is the truth.

Holy Father, on 7th February 1942, according to the Gregorian calendar, an Ustashi company of Ante Pavelić's Second Battalion, led by 1st Lieutenant Josip Mislov, Captain Nikola Zelić, and a priest from the Petrićevac monastery, where you are supposed to beatify, that is, pronounce a saint, the lay Catholic Ivan Merc, who loved the Church and Christ's Envoy, who fought for the Apostolic See, show-

1 This refers to Pope John Paul II, who came to Banja Luka on 22nd June 2003, to beatify Ivan Merc in his native city, in the Catholic monastery of Petrićevac. To pronounce Ivan Merc, who died in the far-of year of 1928 and who adhered to the principle of *Aut Kathotirus aut nihil*, either a Catholic or nothing, a saint in the very place where, during the Independent State of Croatia, established by the Ustashi, on 6th February 1942 a meeting was held, chaired by Friar Vjekoslav Filipović. In the course of that meeting, it was decided to carry out a mass slaughter of the Serbian population of the nearby villages of Drakulić, Motike and Šargovac, in the course of which 2298 civilians – men, women and children of Orthodox faith, were slaughtered and massacred in a single day.

2 After Ante Pavelić, the leader of the Ustashi movement and the Headman of the Independent State of Croatia, translator's note.

ing the Croatian youth the path to the sun like an eagle. Make him a saint, that's what they call it. Well, that priest from the Petrićevac monastery is Friar Miroslav Filipović, even though others believe him to be Friar Tomislav Filipović, while some claim that he is Friar Vjekoslav Filipović. But whatever the differences in opinion, we're talking about one and the same Satan here. Satan whose name God had given up on.

Satan is false, God is the truth.

Holy Father, Friar Satan made me take the class register and separate the Greek Orthodox children from the Catholic ones, to separate the children whom I loved more than the pupils of these eyes of mine. When I did as I had been told, I don't know what happened to the children afterwards. They say that the Black Shirts, I didn't get to see that, that they made the Catholic children attend that sad spectacle, as if it were some kind of a lesson, and watch those sons of bitches kill their peers, but I know not how they killed them, nor whether they killed themselves or them. And I don't know where they did it, whether in the classroom, in the corridor, on the stairs, in the schoolyard, or in the pages of their reader. The only thing I remember were their blessed eyes, desperately seeking help from me while those bloodhounds shifted some kind of maces from one hand to another, and there was no way whatsoever that I could help them.

That is the most horrifying picture that I have brought from your world in my mind, for I have not been of this world for quite a while.

What happened next cannot fit inside a story.

That which is beyond reason cannot be narrated.

The story is false, God is the truth. Holy Father, it was a month of overabundance, the month of February, a lot of snow had fallen, covering the entire world, up to one's waist, that was when the Black Shirts broke into the school. None of them had any stable colours to their faces. Were I able to draw caricatures, I would draw them in the shape of cockroaches, but I cannot do that. I cannot describe them either, descriptions would not encompass them. Not even words like non-humans, cads, foul-smelling refuse or dirt would suffice.

That is so sad.

Holy Father, words are false, God is the truth. They were armed to the teeth and all of them were from Herzegovina, which I could see from their accent. Afterwards, some of them said that none of them had used firearms, lest the children should get scared. I know not why many of them said afterwards that they had killed even very small children, virtually newborns, with the kind of knife they called the Ustashi dagger, cudgels, axes, pitchforks, bayonets and, most of all, a metal ball stuck onto a wooden stick that they called a Serb-basher. And they also said that they only used blunt instruments to kill them so that no sounds should be heard. This I cannot verify. I only remember their eyes begging for mercy. Those eyes I shall never forget. Eyes wherein there were fear, moans, terror, dying! I do remember one other detail, though. I remember the sight of one of the slaughterers, as he held a Serb-basher in his hand, with blood all over his freshly trimmed fingernails, painting them red, I remember how another slaughterer jumped back lest bits of a child's brain, flying in all directions out of a the child's smashed head, should splatter all over his uniform, and I remember how the snow soaked up the children's screams.

The rest I do not remember.

Only their eyes, which haunted me in my dreams, making me think that I was losing my mind.

No crime can be as hideous as the person committing it.

Crime is false, God is the truth.

Holy Father, what the Italian Consul said in his detailed report – that on 7th February 1942, at the People's School in Šargovac, 56 Orthodox children were killed, is not true; nor is it true that 53 children were killed, as the ever precise Germans recorded. The Germans would have been right had Dragica Kuruzović come to school that day, but she did not. That day, she went to her aunt's in Borik,

so she didn't get slaughtered. I testify to that from that other world, since there is nothing in this world to bind me and prevent me from telling the truth.

Mathematics is false, God is the truth.

Holy Father, when I had the honour of going mad, it was all over. But I didn't go mad because I couldn't carry the images that were constantly reflected in my tears, because I had seen scenes that cleanse one of everything that is transient and very energetically suggest the meaning and meaninglessness of life; I went mad when, after the massacre, those bastards made me enter in the class register, which had turned into a slaughter register, next to the name of each slaughtered child that he or she had died a natural death on 7th February 1942. I shouldn't have allowed this humiliation, entering with my own hand in the class register that those children had died a natural death! I do confess that I sinned there.

In the name of Jesus Christ and Virgin Mary, I beg forgiveness.

Let the Almighty judge me.

Since then, I've been inconsolable. I haven't been able to calm down, and I'll never calm down or save myself.

This improvidence is my punishment. It turned into sensitivity that made me disintegrate into tiny pieces, so that I moved very far away from my perfection. I know very little of how I got mad. Presumably, that which preceded it could not be forgotten. Day and night, my nerves made me fall apart. They were tense and pulsed with horror. I felt all sorts of things, I even felt like a dog. In order to console myself, I dreamed I was nothing, but that didn't help either. I remember a moment when my body turned into a tangled system of nerves, when it got stuck within a thousand chaotic veins, when I started resisting breathing, when I thought that I couldn't possibly live through all that, and I didn't survive this either, I know exactly how I felt when they pronounced me to be of the other side, and then walled me up in despair.

I am now of that other world, in my final world.

A man can survive everything except for death.

Death is false, God is the truth.

Holy Father, since you travel all over the world like a pilgrim, since, as an itinerant Pope, you deal with the indulgences trade, buying up shares and forgiving sins, only someone who has seen both sides, who lives in both this world and the other, has the right to say to you: Quit travelling, stop kissing the runway and raising children in starched shirts and skirts made of lace, caressing their hair, stop blessing your flock by raising your hand – direct your gaze towards eternity.

I'm fed up with sense, I'm fed up with false morality, I'm fed up with tears shed over a mass funeral.

No justice has ever arisen out of slaughter, and this is no exception.

Then I didn't know, but now I know, there is no East or West, there's only the Vatican.

When I found out that, as a travelling witness of the Gospels, you are to visit the place where a terrible crime was sown, that a figure as renowned as yourself would come to the very place where, one day before the slaughter, a meeting was held in which the former Great Rector Viktor Gutić, the Rector of Banja Luka Dr Nikola Bilogrivić, the Court Chairman Stilović and a number of priests participated, I hoped that you would visit, on behalf of the Roman Curia, the People's School in Šargovac. That you would come to a place where a crime was committed under the protective eye of the Holy See. That you would come to today's Srpski Milanovac, a place of dead bodies and smoke, where innocent Christ's blood poured, extinguishing burning embers, to bow before the throne where a people's school was slaughtered. That you would come to hear the voices of slaughtered children wandering through the school, to hear the din their dead voices make, their dead joys, the dead songs they sang and the dead poems they recited.

I had prepared a piece of cardboard, no, not cardboard, but ordinary paper of the kind newspapers are printed on, containing the names of slaughtered children written upon it, but they wouldn't

let me place it or hang it anywhere. Not on the notice board, or the entrance gate, or any tree in the schoolyard.

Not even on the fence surrounding the school.

Just don't ask me who didn't allow this. Imagine, it was the Ministry of Education of the Serbian Republic. The local community was all for it, as were the citizens, the school management and the school board, but the Ministry of Education was against it.

They said, it was not the right moment for doing such a thing. We should be building bridges, whereas a tattered sheet of paper containing the names of slaughtered children would just disturb people. When the Serbian side of the truth should be revealed, then it is not the right moment to do so! Well, it is! The more time passes, the story of the slaughtered children will wander through the world increasingly often, being more and more of a burden for human conscience.

For, there are stories that can never grow old. They move about while staying in the same place. Such stories can outlive themselves, they can provide protection against contusions, earthworms, stings and evil forces, and can last forever.

They cannot be burned, destroyed or mislaid.

They cannot be buried and thus erased.

Slaughtered children cannot be made nameless, they cannot be thrown into the void just like that.

Holy Father, it is not! There is no snow that can cover it, no wind that can tear it, no rain that can wash it away, no sun that can scorch it, no fire that can burn it, no weeds that can cover it, no matter how thin and porous it may be. No matter how faded it may get, how much it may deteriorate or rot, the names of those dead children will come alive from beneath it ever more loudly, the way popcorn crackles.

Radojka, Simeun, Jovan, Jelena, Dušan, Dušan, Jovanka, Dušan, Dragomir, Mara, Milan, Ostojica, Mileva, Đuro, Milan, Dušan, Gospava, Dragica, Radmila, Milorad, Ostojica, Slavko, Dušan, Zorka, Gojko, Zdravko, Milan, Ostojica, Branko, Dragica, Slavka, Ljubica, Mileva, Mara, Mitar, Darinka, Nada, Svetozar, Branko, Vidosava, Jovan, Miloš, Zdravka, Stamenka, Anka, Branko, Mileva, Marija, Nada, Živko, Milan and Milivoje.

There must be some higher form of justice.

There must be a judge who does not err.

Good night, Father!

Translation Novica Petrović