

GORA IN THE PICTURE - GORA IN THE HEART*

It has been said many times before - and it will doubtless be repeated here today, and from very competent sources - that Goranians are a truly unique, specific ethnic community in our lands. They have carried their specific character through the turbulent history of the Balkans, in uninterrupted continuity, since the Middle Ages to this day, and there are irrefutable records to prove it.

What is the true essence of this specific Goranian identity, which history and their neighbours are constantly challenging and threatening, and to which they cling so powerfully and so passionately as a guarantee of their survival?

In short, in our time, the essence lies in that Goranians are Serbs by origin and Muslims by religion, or, even more fatefully, that this is how they want to remain, cherishing both components of their collective being. Can one be a Serb and a Muslim in this day and age? Processes in southeastern Europe, among the South Slavs, their politics and churches, have long moved in the direction where the only possible answer to this question is in the negative. All the forces of the world seem to have come into collusion not for the first time to persuade the Goranians of the impossibility of their survival as they are in their own lands. But Goranians are still here, in their beautiful Šar Mountains, and this is where they want to stay. The Goranian story, thus, is a testimonial to the threatened identity of a small ethnic group of peaceful, good and proud people, the target for the intolerant chauvinistic passions of Balkan nationalism, which Academician Milovan Ekmečić has aptly named "doomsday nationalism". The right to be different, which is all that Goranians ask, is under attack. The message of their philosophy of life is simple: **Be whatever you want to be, but let us be what we are. We leave you alone, so please leave us alone! We are prepared to cooperate with everybody, we can endure and survive even without cooperation with those who do not want to cooperate; the only thing we are not prepared to do is to disappear just because somebody seems to wish and to be trying to make us disappear.** Is it so much to ask? It seems to be far too

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much for the narrow minds and evil intentions of some people today... Anyway, this is not a new experience for Gora and Goranies. This noble oasis of beauty, industry and gentleness has constantly been at the receiving end of hostile intents. There has always been, and always will be evil, in whatever guise it might appear.

Gora, the authentic heaven on earth, is wedged in "between the devil and the deep blue sea." On the one side is Ljuma, with its ever rampant raiders, on the other the Has, at the foot of Paštrik Mountain, bakers of bitter bread for Gora's confectioners. Then there are the first neighbours and kin in Opolje, via which gunmen, with their arms and customs, had come from Elbasan and other Albanian parts into the gentle župa. And the Goranies, when they started going off to foreign parts in quest of work, would go armed with *boza*, the best soft drink in the world, with *baklava*, *halvah* and ice-cream. Guns and cakes! A fate with an earthly outcome that is predictable, and with God's judgement that is still far off.

Goranies have ever been suspect, living in perpetual uncertainty, uncomfortably aware of a constant need to prove - or hide - who and what they are. These sincere and well-meaning people, without an ulterior motive in their heads, have ever been innocent of evil intent. However, their fate has been a long ordeal of distrust and injustice. A friend - one of the Skenderovci clan of Brod, confectioner in Belgrade - told me a while ago that somebody once put a brick through his shop window in the early 1990's, shouting: "Shiptars (derogatory for Albanians), go away!" He told me with melancholy, but without rancour: "And this to me, who watched from my father's shoulders the funeral procession of King Alexander I Karadjordjević in Belgrade in 1934. Why throw a brick! A brick is for building, not for smashing!" And he concluded, like the true Gorany and the true Belgrader, showing innate understanding for the savage act of the unknown perpetrator: "But why should I be angry with him. He does not know..." It is a fair inference that the father of the hate-filled brick-wielder was not in Belgrade in 1934...

Here is another example, which, on the other hand, speaks of the oppressive nature of Gorany specificity. During the past decade, Gorany children in Prizren - their one-time "alternative capital" - as well as in other parts of Kosovo-Metohia, attended the "Serbian school" carrying their school books hidden under their coats or in plastic bags, so as not to be recognised, abused and even beaten up by their Albanian neighbours... There have been attacks even in Dragaš itself!

Thus, Goranies have had to prove to the Serbs that they are not Albanians, and have been persecuted by the Albanians for being "closet Serbs". Benign and naturally inclined to avoid all conflict, they have taken the adverse fate in their stride, shrugging their shoulders and bowing to the inevitable, and even pleading ignorance and poor information in justification of their tormentors.

In order to eliminate, at least among Serbs in Belgrade, this ignorance - which is inexcusable anywhere in a civilised society - the organisers of this round-table symposium, ably helped by the ethnic Gorany community and the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade, have extended their support to Branko Pelinović, master-photographer, to mount an exceptionally valuable exhibition entitled *Šar Mountain - Mother of Gora* (Gora - Serbian for mountain).

In his earlier monograph *Voices of the Eye* (Belgrade, 1997), Branko Pelinović had included Goranies as one of six theme cycles, showing part of the material created between 1988 and 1995.

The new exhibition, due to open on 26 April 2000, will present this rich material according to a broader and better-defined concept. In terms of both the particular and the general, this will be an impressive, suggestive and stimulating display in many respects. The photographs are more expressive and descriptive than the best-chosen words. For instance, one such photograph - of a Gorany shepherd - is one of the best photographs I have ever seen. It stood alongside another on the wall in my office in the diplomatic mission in Ankara and, believe me, it never failed to move my visitors, who were invariably drawn to it and wanted to know its origin and meaning. The Gorany shepherd immortalised by Pelinović's discerning and sympathetic camera very often successfully carried out a diplomatic mission.

Works by Branko Pelinović have great documentary, artistic and human value. The significance, in the documentary and even scientific sense, of these refined visual records, virtually distilled to abstract type, is practically self-evident and requires no explanation. A glance through the study *Gora and Opolje* (1995), for instance, by the great admirer of Gora, Academician Milisav Lutovac, proves convincingly that a good photograph is irreplaceable as a source of information. By his own admission, Academician Lutovac had few photographs at his disposal, but he kept digging for more, refusing to publish his study without proper illustrations. The great ethnographer was fully alive to the complementariness of the verbal and the visual in communicating and receiving information; his text is accompanied with and complemented by some brilliant photographs. For example, the one of a Gorany youth in typical folk dress, with a little girl in his arms, is exemplary of a portrait of an ethnic type, with a soul. I remember how proud was my friend Imer - known in Belgrade as Dragan - of being chosen as the model for this photograph, and with how much respect for Academician Lutovac his cousin Abdullah - known in Belgrade as Dule - inn-keeper and confectioner extraordinary, guarded his copy of the study, showing it only to the chosen. There is, then, the sublimely simple shot of a brook in the Šar Mountains dominating Restelica, and the photograph of a street in Brod, redolent of the authentic atmosphere of an inert kasbah, which has sagely resisted the passage of time for centuries. Interesting and indicative is the caption under the picture: "From the collection of the Hygienic Institute of the People's Republic of Serbia!" We cannot but wonder how the study of the

dedicated ethnographer Milisav Lutovac would have been illustrated if he had been accompanied on his wanderings through Gora by an equally dedicated Branko Pelinović of the day! But, Gora has braved all ordeals and has endured and lived to be visited by our Branko Pelinović and made immortal by his inimitable talent.

With an unerring sense of mission, Branko Pelinović has recorded with the eye of the camera, with a responsibility, which lends supreme social and human dignity to his art, that which is slowly disappearing and might soon disappear altogether. He has done so with compassion born of complete identification, as well as with an understandable disquiet and warning, which emanate from his poetry in black-and-white. Are we not, in fact, all Goranies? Because to be a Gorany today, more than ever before, is to be a Man. Painter-professor Čedomir Vasić, who has for years closely followed the ripening of Pelinović's art, reviewing his photographs of the *Prison Hospital* cycle, wondered: "What is the difference between life behind bars and our life outside?" Similarly, we must ask ourselves here today what is the essential - not superficial - difference between Goranies and the rest of us. We are forced to give consideration to this concern by the strong and, hopefully, timely warning from Branko Pelinović, which inexorably tears down the false and illusory protective walls rising transiently between their reality and ours. We have all long inhabited Gora...

One would almost like to enter the displayed photographs, which is impossible, of course. It is equally impossible to visit today many of the places which they depict, photographed not so long ago... I am sure, however, that these images, which are so much more than just pictures, will find a place in our hearts, become part of our thoughts, feelings, consciences, because we are all in them, if we deserve to be... If we understand and feel that they are our photographs, too, then there is hope not only for our good friends the Goranies, but also for all of us, for the Man in us. The aesthetic here is fatefully imbued with the ethical!