

## Borislav Pekić's Literary *Oeuvre*: A Legacy Upheld

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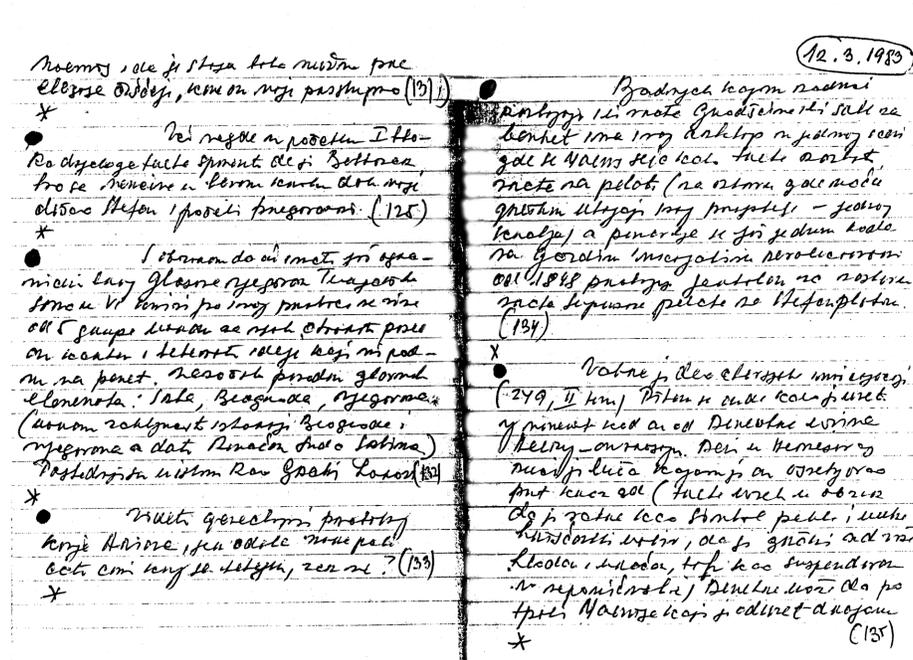
The remarkable literary output of Borislav Pekić continues to attract the attention of literary scholars and the public at large. The seventieth anniversary of his birth was marked by a host of appropriate events. The Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences organized a conference jointly with its Department for Language and Literature and the Council for Research of the History of Literature, presided over by Predrag Palavestra. In addition, the Serbian P.E.N. Center and the Borislav Pekić Foundation took part in the organization of this commemoration. The conference, entitled *O delu Borislava Pekića* (The Work of Borislav Pekić), was convened on 1 July 2000. The program featured papers dealing with Pekić's published major works such as *Zlatno runo* (The Golden Fleece) and *Hodočašće Arsenija Njegovana* (The Pilgrimage of Arsenije Njegovan), and with his unpublished or unfinished manuscripts.

Furthermore, the Borislav Pekić Foundation, in conjunction with the Serbian National Library in Belgrade and the Public Library in Kraljevo, arranged for this occasion an exhibit of Pekić's manuscripts, memorabilia, and printed works titled: *Borislav Pekić ili vreme reči* (Borislav Pekić or the Time of Words). The exhibit was opened on September 28, and was closed two weeks later, in October 2000. The opening was attended by the leading figures of cultural life in Serbia. Predrag Palavestra read the opening speech, which highlighted the importance of Pekić's literary legacy.<sup>1</sup>

The exhibited manuscripts, notes, and artifacts, as well as photographs of Borislav Pekić, the writer and man, chronicled important events of his life as he was surrounded by his colleagues and family members. The compiled material was mainly furnished by Ljiljana Pekić, the careful custodian of her husband's legacy. Moreover, the Borislav Pekić Foundation has enjoyed the steady support of Ljiljana Pekić from its earliest origins, dating from its founding in 1985.

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<sup>1</sup> The author of the exhibit and of the accompanying catalogue *Borislav Pekić ili vreme reči* (Borislav Pekić or the Time of Words) is Dragana Tipsarević (Kraljevo: Narodna biblioteka, Slovo), 2000.



Facsimile page from Pekić's diary

Ever since the publication of his first novel, *Vreme čuda* (Time of Miracles), in 1965, Borislav Pekić's literary output has received a favorable reception.<sup>2</sup> Starting with the miracle at Cana and ending with the Crucifixion on Mount Golgotha, *Time of Miracles* was structured as a set of narratives loosely centered around Christ's travels in Judea. Pekić addressed the universally shared human lot—the fear of the ominous forces of evil that are ever present. He recognized the redemptive power of hope and faith as a means of strengthening resistance to life's tribulations. Pekić believed that the salvation of humankind could only be determined by the singular outcome of individual lives.

Pekić's own life was mercifully saved, thanks, in part, to his reverence for the words of the Bible during his own time of tribulation while serving an unjustified prison term with his friends who belonged to the *Savez*

<sup>2</sup> Predrag Palavestra, *Posleratna srpska književnost, 1945–1970* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1972), 301–02. *Time of Miracles* was published in English translation in 1976 in New York by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

*demokratske omladine Jugoslavije* (Union of Democratic Youth of Yugoslavia). While in prison, Pekić found solace and inner peace in reading the stories of the Old and New Testament. Ljiljana Pekić remembers that Pekić was a diligent student of biblical discourse and that he had read the Bible more than one hundred times.<sup>3</sup>

Pekić tried to push away this dire experience of his youth and was determined never to write about it. As his literary fame grew, he was repeatedly interviewed and often questioned about his imprisonment. These inquiries prompted him to start reading the hidden diary that he kept while serving the prison term. His book *Godine koje su pojeli skakavci* (The Years the Locusts Devoured) presented his account of the oppression and cruelty of a dictatorship that affected many, but hurt the lives of the young and upcoming generations most of all.<sup>4</sup>

Borislav Pekić published another volume featuring recollections of his experiences in prison as well as a selection of newspaper articles, interviews, and speeches that he delivered during the student uprising in Belgrade. This book, titled *Odmor od istorije* (A Respite from History), was dedicated to Ljiljana Pekić because she shared his thoughts and believed in the importance of resistance when confronting political oppression and debauchery. In turn, she supplied the fine portrait of her husband, a pencil drawing, that adorns the front piece in the book.<sup>5</sup> Early in her youth, she was deeply hurt by the tragic loss of her own father in the turmoil of the Second World War.

Throughout his life as a writer, Pekić often worked on several novels at a time, but kept his commentaries well organized with bibliographical references pertaining to the work in question. He appreciated his wife's interest in his work and her willingness to share in his search for various historic sources, books, and art histories dealing with the ancient world, and Serbian, German, and English historical documents and writings. During this intense research, she helped him find the material he needed even when she was temporarily separated from him while working as an architect in the Architecture Department of the Greater London Council, in London, England.

Pekić started transcribing his taped notes and published some of this material in volume 12 of his *Collected Works* in 1985, and, intermittently, in the journal *Književnost* in 1979. After her husband's death in 1992, Ljiljana Pekić decided to continue the transcription of Pekić's notes. She chose for her

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<sup>3</sup> J. Milojković-Djurić, conversation with Ljiljana Pekić, Belgrade, 27 July 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Borislav Pekić, *Godine koje su pojeli skakavci* (The Years the Locusts Devoured) (Belgrade: BIGZ, 1991), vols. 1–3.

<sup>5</sup> Borislav Pekić, *Odmor od istorije* (A Respite from History) (Belgrade: BIGZ, 1993).

transcription the notes which chronicled Pekić's writing of his major novel *Zlatno runo* (The Golden Fleece).<sup>6</sup>

Very seldom has this kind of documentation recording the creative process of a writer been preserved. Very few writers have had the foresight to record their innermost thoughts while approaching and appropriating the not yet fully recovered world of a novel in progress. Ljiljana Pekić described her transcription of her husband's tapes as a continuation of a dialogue that started a long time ago. She is grateful for the wealth of taped commentaries as they provide an opportunity to stay in the world of ideas introduced by her husband. Presently, Ljiljana Pekić is continuing with the transcription of the tapes and also is working on the final draft of Pekić's imagined genealogy of the Turjaški clan that populated the pages of his masterpiece.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, Ljiljana Pekić is dedicated to safeguarding, with due care, her husband's legacy. She takes care of the unpublished manuscripts and taped notes left behind, and she remains instrumental in overseeing the publications of Pekić's writings. Most of all, she provides valuable information about the exegesis of his literary works. Her recollections furnish a unique link to the life and times she shared with her husband. She frequently provides valuable information about the life and literary work of her husband to all who share interest in Pekić's legacy. All these efforts provide valuable assistance to numerous scholars in Serbia and abroad.

Ljiljana Pekić continues to take an active part in the Borislav Pekić Foundation, which was founded by Branko Dragaš and a group of devoted friends. Yearly, the Board of the Foundation bestows a prize upon a young and upcoming writer for the best literary work.

The Foundation has also sponsored a yearly competition for the best literary work written by a high school student. Suggested topics of the competition give emphasis to a particularly selected work by Pekić. This worthwhile initiative strives to encourage the literary efforts of young, upcoming writers. The prizes are handed over on February 2, Borislav Pekić's birthday. The best works are judged by a distinguished jury of well-known writers and subsequently published by the Foundation.<sup>8</sup>

This volume of the journal *Serbian Studies* presents papers dealing with Pekić's literary legacy. The papers by Olga Nedeljković, Gisela Richter, and Jelena Milojković-Djurić were given at the 32nd National Convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies in Denver,

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<sup>6</sup> Borislav Pekić, *U traganju za zlatnim runom* (In Search of the Golden Fleece), ed. Ljiljana Pekić (Belgrade: BIGZ, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Ljiljana Pekić, conversation with author, Belgrade, 27 July 1998.

<sup>8</sup> J. Milojković-Djurić, Conversation with Ljiljana Pekić, Belgrade, September 9, 2000.

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Colorado, in November 2000. These papers constituted the panel *History and Myth in Borislav Pekić's Writings*, which was sponsored by the North American Society for Serbian Studies.

The editor of the journal *Serbian Studies*, Bogdan Rakić, in cooperation with the Editorial Board, decided to dedicate this volume to the remembrance of Pekić's invaluable contribution to Serbian and world culture.