

**Voice from the Darkness:
Borislav Pekić's *The Years the Locusts Devoured***

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Borislav Pekić attained his illustrious position in Serbian literature after the publication of his major work *The Golden Fleece*, which consists of seven volumes and was published during 1978–1986. Pekić aimed to offer a reconstruction of the history of humankind as encapsulated in Greek mythology. He subsequently accomplished his goal by fashioning a tale that traced succeeding generations throughout historic times. Clearly entwined with the history of the Serbian people, his narrative blurs the mythical with historical references as if affirming that in essence the human condition is universal: each generation is following in the footsteps of its predecessors, trying, but not always succeeding, to set a new and higher benchmark on the journey of life. In the end, solace lies in the acceptance of the continuation of the journey of life in quest for a higher truth that is elucidated by the insights and personal life journey of Borislav Pekić—a writer of lasting stature.

Pekić's exceptional contribution was not limited to the literary world. Born in 1930, he became politically active after the end of World War II—at the time he was only fifteen years old and enrolled in the Third High School for Boys in Belgrade. With a group of friends he frequented the democratic club, which had been newly formed by outstanding young men of his generation. He and his friends managed to publish only seven issues of their paper titled *Democracy*, which openly criticized the communist regime led by Josip Broz Tito. Subsequently, this spirited group of young men formally organized *Savez demokratske omladine Jugoslavije* (Union of Democratic Youths of Yugoslavia) in 1947, and Pekić served as its secretary. He also wrote the Statute of the Union, which he considered, at the time, to be a “masterpiece of a sort.”

Pekić and his friends, members of the Union, were eventually accused of treason, tried, and sentenced in 1948. Pekić was sentenced to fifteen years of imprisonment but released after five years spent in prison. He recalled that while in prison he never would let his keepers see him suffering, even under dire conditions. He would pretend that he could master imposed difficulties and pretend that everything was easy. He found the strength to accept his lot

by reading the Bible and delighting in the stories of the Old and New Testament, which brought him inner illumination about the inevitability of the human quest and the disregard of tribulations and sufferings.¹

Pekić never thought that he would write about the time spent in prison, since one tends to push away these experiences. Later in life, while writing about the desperate experience of his youth, he relived the empty years in prison with a new feeling of loss. The unabated sorrow surprised him and he could not hide or pretend that the suffering and humiliation were forgotten. His book *Godine koje su pojeli skakavci* (The Years the Locusts Devoured) presented his recollections of both his personal afflictions and those of his generation, which was coming of age at a cruel time of dictatorship, oppression, and censorship of free speech.²

Pekić decided to reexamine the diaries that he kept during his imprisonment. They start in 1948 and continue until his release from prison in 1954. While reading the faded pages, the hardly readable notes seemed to vaguely suggest to him the outline for a work of fiction or a novel in progress. He subsequently acquired copies of the documents filed in the process conducted against him. Moreover, he had his own memories of the prison experiences and of others who were close to him. Yet, the reality of prison life seemed blurred and fleeting.

That is why Pekić decided to return to the prison as preserved in his subliminal thoughts and not to the vestiges of his physical confinement. The diaries were not necessary for such an approach. Pekić decided to select episodes from prison life without regard to chronology; he was determined to encompass the essence of the imposed confinement. He selected stories, similar to spontaneous snapshots, centered around prison life as if taken out of the temporal sequence. Notwithstanding, there is a recognizable linear development since the investigation led to the court procedures, trial, sentencing, and serving of the allotted term.

Pekić supplied his prison diary with the characteristic title *Tamo gde loze plaču* (Where the Grape Vines Cry). Alluding to the noble process of “the creation of a man,” he also added the subtitle *Antropopeia*. The projected of-

¹ Pekić published his first novel *Vreme čuda* (Time of Miracles) in 1965. This novel marked the precipitous arrival of Pekić on the Serbian literary scene, and his literary output received a favorable reception. The novel is structured as a series of narratives loosely centered around the visitations of Jesus Christ during his travels in Judea.

² *Godine koje su pojeli skakavci* (Belgrade: BIGZ, Jedinstvo, 1991), vols. 1–3. The first volume of this book was published for the first time in 1987. According to the poll conducted by two major newspapers in Belgrade, it was declared as the best book published in 1987. The second volume, published in 1989, received the Miloš Crnjanski Prize. The third volume followed in 1990.

ficial objective suggested that during the time in prison the alleged offender would be rehabilitated into a useful member of society. In reality, Pekić decried this process as a lamentable destruction of man which could also be declared “as a creation of sorts.”³

Pekić compared his life during the investigation to a suspended state of expectation and waiting for a discharge. Life outside the prison walls also entailed periods of waiting and expectations, although such aspirations were fleeting and generally new from day to day.

In contrast, life in prison consisted of dreaded repetitions day in and day out: going to interrogations, the unending questioning by the interrogator, and the return to the so-called “home” in the assigned cell. While in the cell, the prisoner contemplated his responses and prepared mentally for the next round of interrogations. Many sleepless nights were spent in the cell rehearsing and planning the statements in order not to contradict oneself the following day. Thus, Pekić compared this period of imprisonment to the staging of a play that became, in due time, life itself. There was a glimmer of hope that one might be released during the interrogations, but soon enough one was waiting for the day in court.

Pekić compared the interrogation to brainwashing bent on forcing a series of statements in order to confirm charges and expand them. The interrogator, asking for specifics about the incriminating actions, aimed to uncover partial truth, if not the whole truth. During the daily interrogations, the investigator would eventually find out a lot about what he thought he needed to know, but not what he really needed. The accused would not learn what the punishment for his willing or unwilling encroachment on the guarded governmental domain would entail.

During this painful process, the accused would unexpectedly acquire the most precious knowledge of himself, his true identity. He would learn what kind of man he really was, provided that he was brave enough to accept it. Therefore, Pekić thought that the locusts had not succeeded in completely devouring the years spent in desolation. Pekić gave the characteristic heading for this chapter: “The Investigation as the Theater or Self-Investigation.” Although relatively brief, he considered this chapter to be of crucial importance in understanding the uneven battle between the torturer and his unprotected victim.⁴

Having in mind the artificiality of the whole situation and the ample amount of acting by the accused, Pekić compared the process of investigation to a rehearsal in front of a mirror before coming out on the proscenium. While

³ *Godine koje su pojeli skakavci*, 2: 32–33.

⁴ *Godine koje su pojeli skakavci*, 1: 337.

one was adhering to the assumed role in the investigator's office, rehearsed previously in the cell, a psychoanalysis of a sort was usually entwined in the process. The complexity of this situation was apparent, and it could be compared to preparing for the difficult role of Shakespeare's Hamlet. While probing Hamlet's innermost thoughts, the actor was concurrently exploring his own spiritual being.

The investigator acted as the devil's advocate; however, all along the main fight was not between the accused and the accuser but within the man himself. The process of investigation and self-investigation emerged ultimately as complimentary and dependent upon each other. This internal turmoil and self-examination were dangerous, though a valuable source of knowledge of oneself. The role of the investigator was to force the accused to think and to realize that it would be better not to think, which would entail a taciturn attitude, withdrawal, and silence leading to possible death. The desire to cut the interrogation short grew increasingly, but one had still to endure it. In order to speak, one had to think, and, although dangerous, it had to be pursued.

During the daily investigations everything was centered around that one thing, and the prisoner was forever listening to the footsteps of the guard calling him to the office of the interrogator. Pekić compared this bleak human constellation to a solar planetary system in reverse. While the solar system provided life-giving light and warmth in proportion to its relative proximity, in the prison an ominous "black sun was the center of the prisoner's planetary system" and the very proximity of it was undesirable. The feeling of comfort was only attainable when far away from it.⁵

In 1948, the infamous resolution of the Informbureau brought almost overnight the revision of the Stalinist cult. This change of the political discourse trickled down to the prison world. At one point during the interrogation, Pekić alluded to the previous resolve to follow the Soviet example and pointed to principal flaws of Stalin's rule. He was swiftly rebuked by the interrogator and reminded that he was not supposed to criticize Stalin. The interrogator defended Stalin and somehow did not comprehend the danger of his own position. Soon enough he was sent to a prison located in an old quarry on Goli Otok, a desolate island in the Adriatic and home to the most feared prison camp in Yugoslavia. The prisoners were for the most part political and ideological opponents of the regime, but were treated badly and often

⁵ *Godine koje su pojeli skakavci*, 1: 337.

tortured by the prison guards. Goli Otok had a precursor in the Soviet system and was similar to the Gulag described by Solzhenitsyn.⁶

In turn, Pekić was sent to solitary confinement, without any source of light, dubbed by the prisoners as *tamnjača* (a dark hole). Pekić pondered, in retrospect, about these strange circumstances and concurred by quoting a Latin proverb, but with a new twist: *Quo licet Iovic non licet bovis—and vice versa*.

While remembering his prison years, Pekić was surprised that some incidents would resurface which he had previously overlooked. Pekić's solitary confinement took place in February of 1949, during a very cold winter. The lockout had no light source and was not heated. A spy hole in the door was the only link with the outside world. After entering it, Pekić assessed the perimeter of the cell by walking in complete darkness around the walls in order to gain a reconnaissance of his new space. Later, he would walk often along the four dark walls in order to exercise and keep himself warm. He would rub his chest and legs to stimulate the circulation of the blood that seemed to be frozen in his veins. Sometimes, touching the walls, he would conjure some strange shapes under his finger and, from time to time, it would appear to him that he was sailing on the Amazon river or climbing the Himalayas.

With a comb and a smuggled needle he tried to write the following verses:

Vratićemo se kao refren što se vraća,
U elegije vaše dovršene bedom,
U mašte vaše oblik, biće redom,
Naša će scena ko pan s frulom da korača.

We will return like the refrain,
In your elegies that ended miserably,
In your imagination our picture will form,
Like the Pan walking with his pipe.

He also remembered the verses of the poem by the venerable poet Aleksa Šantić:

⁶ Among many others, the writer Dragoslav Mihailović was incarcerated on this island, and he left a detailed description of the horrors that the prisoners had to endure. Dragoslav Mihailović, *Goli otok*, vol.1 (Belgrade: Politika, 1990); *Goli otok*, vol. 2 (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, BIGZ, 1995); *Goli otok*, vol. 3 (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, BIGZ, 1995).

I tako dalje, tamo, do Golgote,
 I kad nam muške uzmete živote,
 Grobovi naši boriće se s vama.

And further all the way to Golgotha
 And when you take our manly lives
 Our graves will fight with you.

When the spring arrived and the weather became warmer, Pekić changed his routine of passing the time while still locked in the *tamnjača*. He tried to imagine pleasant happenings from the past. He would endeavor to remember his very first day in elementary school and to reconstruct the chronology of his schooling, even to the most insignificant details. He would not let his mind and imagination wither and waste away, although his body became weaker and he had headaches, vertigo, and fever. In spite of the bleakness of isolation, it seemed to him that he had succeeded in preserving his innermost private recesses of thoughts and feelings. His memory served him well, and some distant events would resurface all of a sudden without prior recollection,

In the course of the one-month confinement in *tamnjača*, Pekić would sometimes imagine long walks through the streets of Belgrade, choosing known districts like Neimar or Čubura. He would picture the early evening dusk permeated with the scent of burning leaves while trying to renew his impression of all the details of the surrounding landscape. He would expound upon the unusual elevations and roof-lines of the situated houses. Looking back, Pekić thought that his imaginary walks had preceded the subliminal images anticipating his novel *Hodočašće Arsenija Njegovana* (The Pilgrimage of Arsenije Njegovan, translated into English as *The Houses of Belgrade*).⁷

Sometimes he would try to remember the signs of artisans' shops advertising their craft and merchandise on display. These solitary explorations were eventually transformed into the midnight walks of Simeun Njegovan *Gazda* (The Boss) during the Serbian takeover of the fortresses and cities in 1867, during the rule of Prince Mihailo Obrenović. These episodes became part of Pekić's major work *Zlatno runo* (The Golden Fleece).⁸ Pekić would continue his walks as long as he could, and he would stop only when he would reach

⁷ *Godine koje su pojeli skakavci*, 1: 295. The novel *Hodočašće Arsenija Njegovana* was published in 1970 and brought to Pekić the coveted NIN Award as the best novel of the year.

⁸ *Godine koje su pojeli skakavci*, 1: 295; *The Golden Fleece* comprises seven volumes and was written during the eight-year period 1978–1986. Pekić received for this work the Njegoš Prize for Literature in 1987.

an unknown dismal place. Thus, the return to his cell seemed a natural ending to his prolonged imaginary walks.

At one point during his incarceration, he remembered the white snow flakes of the winter of 1946. Pekić recalled his gazing through the window of his classroom in the Third High School for Boys in Belgrade. His best friend Miron Flašar was as usual seated next to him and was taking notes.⁹ Their homeroom teacher, Mrs. Ema Strundelić, known as Aunt Ema, was presenting a new chapter of analytical chemistry. She was glad to see Pekić seated at his bench without a novel in his hands. Pekić remembered that entertainment was already planned for the evening of the same day and it included a jazz session with records borrowed from the American Library.¹⁰ All of a sudden, while Aunt Ema was still explaining the new chapter, the whole school was summoned to the assembly hall. The meeting turned out to be a staged denunciation of all the students who were declared to be followers of Western thought and thus hostile to the communist government. These students were singled out and beaten by their accusers, the young communist leaders, members of the SKOJ (*Savez komunističke omladine Jugoslavije*—Union of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia).¹¹

Pekić recalled this lamentable incident with compassion and sadness. He and his friends were just a group of teenagers ideologically opposed to communism but essentially incapable of presenting any real threat to the new regime. Looking back at the innocent time of his youth, Pekić saw his friends as young people who liked to attend parties, eager to enjoy their young lives. He and his fellow students were not a band of fanatics planning to destroy the government. The savage beating and humiliation of young men who were among the best and brightest of their generation foreshadowed the beginning of further hardships, all leading to the infamous incarceration.

Pekić aimed to elucidate the dangers of totalitarian ideologies by providing a historical perspective. He carefully thought about the destructive effects of the dictatorial regime outside the prison walls. While discussing the communist ideology, he decried the travesty and perils of dictatorial forms of government past and present.

⁹ Flašar became a distinguished classical scholar and was eventually elected, as was previously Borislav Pekić, to the ranks of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences.

¹⁰ *Godine koje su pojeli skakavci*, 1: 321. The American Library was a popular place containing hard-to-find books and magazines in English and a good selection of music records. The communist regime had a different opinion and considered the library an outpost of reactionary ideology. The patrons, mostly young people, were surveilled on and off. Pekić remembered that one evening a number of his friends were beaten by unknown thugs who waited for them near the entrance to the library.

¹¹ *Godine koje su pojeli skakavci*, 1: 323–32.

In his novel *Kako upokojiti vampira* (How to Pacify a Vampire) Pekić pointed at the dangers of totalitarian ideologies. In the subtitle, Pekić described his novel as a *sotie*, a poetic-narrative genre combining autopoetic utterances with mimetic and fantastic sequences. In addition to satire, *sotie* contained songs and dances, while mixing reality with imagination. Pekić thought that the free form of a *sotie* enabled him to express his thoughts about the dangers of totalitarian ideologies in general.

Pekić's *sotie* chronicled the emergence of national-socialism and the events of the Second World War as presented in letters written by Konrad Rutkowski. Rutkowski, a German professor teaching at the University of Heidelberg, served during the Second World War as a Gestapo officer. Rutkowski letters were addressed to Hilmar Wagner, an equally learned colleague and professor. These letters contained observations regarding the demise of national-socialism and at the same time testified to the gradual delusion of Rutkowski as a witness and victim of a corrosive totalitarian ideology. While presenting the ideology of national socialism as the fruition of intellectual pursuit of Western civilization, Pekić decried the travesty and perils of dictatorial forms of government past and present: "I did not have national-socialism solely in mind when I wrote about the phenomenon of totalitarian consciousness that gave birth to ideology and to processes of their reciprocal recreation. In the course of the 1970s, when the novel was written, national-socialism as an ideology was, historically speaking, dead, except in the minds of the survivors and in the propaganda of the regime whose totalitarian ideology boasted the solution of the human question." Pekić inferred that he had the ruling dictatorial regime of his native country in mind when referring to the dangers of totalitarian ideology in proclaiming propagandist slogans of righteousness and the unmitigated happiness of its population.¹²

Comparing the situation in his native country during the 1980s with earlier times, Pekić discerned a pervasive sense of apathy and a feeling of disinterestedness in defining possible choices. After some forty years of life in a police state, even the enlightened people with liberal democratic orientation expressed doubts about the inherent values of any political system. Such doubts, to Pekić's mind, showed an alarming estrangement and lack of knowledge and information. The citizens at large eventually became accustomed to conducting their lives encumbered by various limitations that infringed on their civil rights and liberties. Pretending that some justice existed

¹² Borislav Pekić, *Zamka ideologije*, Novija srpska književnost i kritika ideologije, Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, Odeljenje jezika i književnosti, ed. Predrag Palavestra (Belgrade/Niš, 1989), 62.

for all, regardless of their social status and political perspectives, people had unwillingly accepted the philosophy of mimetic survival.¹³

After release from prison, the prisoner faced re-entry into the civil life brought into existence by the dictatorial regime. The former inmate would aspire to join the ranks of the working people, which was made even more difficult since it had to be achieved swiftly. While living in prison one had to adapt to specific techniques in order to survive. Outside the prison walls such ways were often unacceptable. After the prisoner's release, his period of adaptation was cut short in comparison to that of others who had already joined the labor force and somehow become adept in dealing with the realities of a dictated social order. All along, everybody was compelled to silence while pretending that there existed some independence in making critical choices.

Pekić thought that this "shared civic cage" became a source of danger. Some of his friends, former members of the *Savez demokratske omladine Jugoslavije*, suffered a great deal and were fired regardless of their professional expertise. The prison term that they served became an ominous appendage to their official biography.¹⁴

Pekić tried to explain the reason for this course of action in the widespread psychosis of fear and hate among the ruling bureaucrats who comprised the new political nomenclature. Even the former partisan fighters and members of the Communist Party who chose to support the Informbureau were not trusted after they served a prison term, admitted their sins, and even promised collaboration. They remained enemies of the regime in spite of their so-called political rehabilitation. These individuals eventually became shadows of their former selves and were ignored by their former friends and colleagues. They often retired to their native cities, where they remained in their own private world in imposed anonymity.

The *cause célèbre* was Milovan Đilas who was abandoned by all his former friends from the Communist Party. In accordance with Bolshevik militaristic doctrine, Party members were considered "soldiers of the Party" and had to identify entirely with the objectives of the Party. Even Ivo Andrić complied with this principle and declined to read Đilas' book *The Land without Justice*, written at the time. The poetess Desanka Maksimović acted as an intermediary and brought Đilas' book to Andrić, but Andrić declined to accept it and read it, mentioning his Party affiliation and his respect for its rules. The writer Borislav Mihajlović-Mihiz, as well as Desanka Maksimović, came to visit Đilas since they were not Party members and acted out of human con-

¹³ *Godine koje su pojeli skakavci*, 3: 274.

¹⁴ *Godine koje su pojeli skakavci*, 3: 277.

cern and kindness—they understood Đilas’ loneliness and lack of support. They did not condone the boycott of a censored writer, regardless of his political beliefs and convictions.¹⁵

Pekić’s own release from prison was a joyous reunion with his family and friends. They offered their love and emotional support, although they were limited in material means by many imposed obstructions and encumbered by regulations of the police state. Pekić concluded that the life of citizens in a totalitarian regime resembled in many ways life in prison. The process of disintegration of the personality of a prisoner, or of a citizen outside the prison walls, was always conducted in accordance with the ideology of the Communist Party without any regard for human bonds or ethical and moral issues.

Pekić argued that his book was not a memoir since he omitted writing about many fine people he met in prison. While acknowledging the intense struggle in shaping a narrative, Pekić described the essence of the writing process “as an internal civil war that every writer conducts within himself as he confronts the rational and irrational, learned and experienced, appropriated and imputed, falsehood and truthfulness, personal and literary consciousness, civic and artistic morale, inspiration and planning, a war between the reality that is fluid and reality within that is static, and above all imagined omnipotence and veritable helplessness to express oneself.”

Pekić was fully aware that the picture he projected would not be favorable. After recounting the specificities of the convoluted system of justice, he realized that his former fear and hate were gradually transformed. His newly gained insight into the wasted years of senseless isolation that robbed him and many others of dignity and creative energy harmed the ruling nomenclature in an oblique way. All these “soldiers of the Party,” who forfeited their integrity, were also limited and imprisoned by their assumed roles. Pekić transcended his own grievances and declared Tito’s dictatorial regime a bequest of the historic time.

Pekić summed up his thoughts in the conclusion of his second book: “If I have wronged anybody with my diary, I did it *bona fide*. I did not do it as a man who remembers in order to hate but as a writer whose job is to write and writing is the way to forget.”¹⁶ Yet Pekić’s recollections produced a sobering reexamination of the ruling dictatorial regime’s propensity to proclaim propagandist slogans “of righteousness and the unmitigated happiness of its population.”¹⁷

¹⁵ *Godine koje su pojeli skakavci*, 3: 282. Pekić quoted Đilas’ recollections of this incident presented in the book *The Land without Justice*.

¹⁶ *Godine koje su pojeli skakavci*, 1: 33.

¹⁷ *Zamka ideologije*, 62.

The mirror that Pekić offered to Yugoslav society at large helped to delineate the aspirations of the generations that were coming of age during the mid- and late-1980s, at the time of the publication of Pekić's trilogy. The demand for a democratic society and respect for the rule of law grew in strength during the turbulent 1990s.

Pekić continued to speak about social injustice since he passionately believed that a writer who belonged to the political opposition "has a duty to speak up about all that is wrong." He joined the peaceful protest of the students from the University of Belgrade in 1991 and marched with them in the streets. In one frightening moment he was hit by a gendarme's stick—a moment of horror captured on television; it generated wide support from the citizenry, and many joined the students marching in the streets of Belgrade in silent protest. Pekić died in London in July of 1992, too soon to follow the rise of democracy in his native country—a cause that he supported until the end of his days.

