THE LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF IVAN VELAT

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It is not surprising that a holograph will can contain much interesting cultural and linguistic information. After all, the testator is generally not mimicking legal formulas but is simply recording his decisions about the division of property and goods upon his death. He tends to write as he speaks though one can assume that on such a serious occasion he would have a tendency to use some stilted phrases.

And thus we can picture Ivan Velat, a težak (‘peasant’), sitting at a table in his home in Veli Varaš (‘Big Town’), now a part of the city of Split, on March 18th in the year 1825 and carefully setting down his instructions and admonitions in his last will and testament. The will which rests in the Historijski arhiv in Split is a three-page document written in the Croatian language of that time and that area; two notations in Italian on different pages indicate that the will was officially recorded in 1830; one note has June 12, 1830, while the other gives June 14, 1830.¹

What is surprising is that Velat was literate and had good, almost elegant handwriting. Was the will perhaps written by a notary or the parish priest? Velat informs us, however, in two different passages that he wrote the will in his own hand: ja pisem mojom rukom ovu najzadnju odluku i misal. (‘I am writing with my own hand this last will and thought’), and Ja Ivan Velat vaš otac pisà s mojo rukò [sic] i da bude svaka moja izvršena usve i posve. (‘I, Ivan Velat, your father wrote this with my own hand and may all my [wishes] be carried out completely.’)

It is not condescending on our part to question whether Velat actually penned this will.² He was a peasant and the Croatian language was not taught in Dalmatian schools until the second half of the nineteenth century. Croatian, where it appeared, was written in Italian orthography. But there were Croatian documents, particularly the rule books of the church brotherhoods, and Grga Novak, the great historian of Split, notes that there existed Croatian translations of the epistles and gospels for use by the congregation at the Latin Mass. In addition, the cultural level of Dalmatian cities had been higher than that of the hinterlands.³ And so I take it as a fact that Velat was literate and indeed wrote his own will though his mixed usage reflects an uncertain grasp of the written language.

Here is the first part of Velat’s will in the original (i.e. Italian) orthography on the left, accompanied on the right by a version in current Croatian orthography and followed by an English translation.

U ime Isusovo amen dan -18 Misseca
Marca Godischia Gospodinova -1825- u Splittu uellom Uarrosa Buduchi ia uan uelat pokoinoga Tomme od ueloga Uarossa zdrau u pameti i u razabranosti u težika i znaduchi da iman umriti a neznaduchi cassa ni ure Kada ima smart priti ia Pism moiom rukom ouu naj zadugu Moiu odluku i misal i Koja imma bitti izvarsena u sue i posue po moioi smarti a sadda ga ostuaim sue i moioi Xeni Ducho zdhnostia ouom da nemose prodati ni raczimiti poniedan. U ime Isusovo amen dan -18 miseca marca godišća gospodinova -1825- u Splits Velom
varoša. Budući ja Ivan Velat pokojnoga Tome od Veloga varoša zdravu [-?] u pameti i u razabranosti u jezika i znadući da iman umriti a ne znadući časa ni smrt priti ja pisem majom rukom ouu najzadnju moju odluku i misal i koja ima biti izvršena u sve i posve po mojaj smrtni. A sada ga ostajam sve i mojoj ženj Dukki s dužnošću ovom da ne može prodati ni razčiniti po nijedan način nistare, ni drugomen ostaviti, a po
nacin nistare ni drugomen ostaviti a po smarti Moie Xene Dugche onu Polouicu Choiase pristoi occu dati a otač ostauia a Darige sue tancho po tancho stose occu pristoi a otač Anti i ossibu darie i ostauia za ono Uasse Milosge stoste cinili Uassen occu i uaso Matteri.

(‘In Christ’s name, amen—the 18th of March, the year of our Lord 1825—in Split, Veli varoš. Since I, Ivan Velat, son of the late Tomo from Veli varoš, in my right mind and in control of my language, know that I must die and not knowing the hour or the moment when death will come, I write with my own hand this last decision and thought that must be carried out after my death. Now I leave everything to my wife Dujka under the condition that she cannot sell or distribute anything in any way, or leave to anybody else, and after the death of my wife Dujka that half which it is fitting for the father to give will be left and given exactly as it befits the father. The father gives and leaves this to Ante and Osib for your kindness towards your father and mother.’)

The language of this will is representative of the Split dialect as we know it from earlier and later documents. One surprising feature in this otherwise cakavian text is the use of što, ‘what,’ instead of ča; also ništa, ‘nothing,’ and zašto, ‘because.’ The reflex of *é is consistently ikavian, e.g. vreme (standard Croatian vrijeme), ‘time’; dite (dijelove), ‘parts’; srića (sreća), ‘happiness’; mjeseca (mjeseča), ‘month’; nevista (nevjesta), ‘bride’; odnili (odnijela), ‘took away.’ Fina -l is retained, e.g. mital (mitao), ‘thought’; diš (dio), ‘part’; vrtal (vrtao), ‘garden.’ The combination lj sometimes appears as such in verbs, and at other times is replaced by j, e.g. ostavljaj, ‘I leave,’ but ostavja (ostavlja), ‘he leaves’; in nouns only j appears, e.g. zemju (zemiju), ‘land’; u polju (u polju), ‘in the field.’ Fina -n alternates with -n in no consistent pattern though there are more instances of -n, e.g. govorim, ‘I say’ but iman (imam), ‘I have’; oznanjem (odznanjem), ‘I proclaim’ but also oznanjen; mojom rukom, ‘by my hand’ but žalosnim trudom njihovim, ‘by their backbreaking labor.’ Typically for the Split dialect (and many others), the letter h does not appear, e.g. tija (tjio), ‘is able,’ but so also does its Split variant more. The plural of the noun sin, ‘son,’ is sinovi. As in the modern Split dialect Italian loans appear in Velat’s text, e.g. dota (mira), ‘is able,’ appears but so also does its Split variant drugomen (drugome), ‘to another’; konen (kome), ‘to whomever.’

The masculine singular of the past tense relies on the stem vowel for its ending, e.g. potpiso se (potpisao se), ‘he signed’; dava (davao), ‘gave.’ Other past tense verbs have the added ja for the masculine ending, e.g. ti nisi tija (tjio) ‘you didn’t want’; odnija je (odnio je), ‘he took away,’ but Velat is capable of using both the bare stem and the ja ending in the same sentence: namiri sail je . . . sam je ja otač namirija. ‘I took care of her. . .I the father took care of her.’ Unlike the modern Split dialect which has infinitives in final -t, Velat’s writing employs the full -ti forms throughout, e.g. posadić, ‘to plant’; izradići, ‘to withdraw’; pitać, ‘to ask.’ Standard Croatian može, ‘is able,’ appears but so also does its Split variant more. The plural of the noun sin, ‘son,’ is sin (sinovi). As in the modern Split dialect Italian loans appear in Velat’s text, e.g. dota (mirao), ‘is able’; gostaju (koštaju), ‘cost.’ The instrumental of means is used once without a preposition and once with one, e.g. mojom rukom, ‘by my hand,’ but s mojo ruk [sic] with the same meaning.

Velat’s speech, as reflected in his will, is štokavian-ikavian with characteristics of the local Split dialect. But why što instead of the ča which one would expect in a cakavian area? As Vidović points out, there had been extensive immigration into Split from Bosnia and Zagorje, the mountainous region behind Split. In fact, the wide-spread hostility towards Vlajši (Vlah, Vlası), ‘outsiders,’ which exists in Split to this day: Pusti zeca, ubij smrti moje žene Dujke onu polouicu koja se pristoi ocu dati a otac ostavija a darije tanko po tanko što se ocu pristoji a otac Anti i Osibu darije i ostavija za ono vaše milosje što ste činili vašen ocu i vašoj materi.
Vlaja ('Let the rabbit go, kill the Vlaj') dates to this early influx. The newcomers were stokavian-speakers and, if they came from the upper villages of nearby Poljica, they would be stokavian-ikavian. It is really not surprising, then, that in a peasant community like Veli varoš in the early 1800's the ancestral village dialect would dominate.4

Who was Ivan Velat? Though we cannot be positive about his identification, we do know that the name Velat appears on the listing of members in more than one bratovština; the bratovštine or ‘brotherhoods’ were associated with particular churches and have existed in Dalmatia for centuries and exist to this day.5 In the membership list for the brotherhood Sveta Manda po Ubogih (Saint Manda of the Poor), in Veli varoš, an Ivan Velat is listed as the župan or chief administrator for the year 1794, some 31 years before the time of the will we are considering.6 That this Ivan Velat is the author of the will seems quite likely since the župan in 1782, twelve years before Ivan’s tenure, was Bartul Vrdoljak; in his will Ivan identifies his father-in-law as Bartul Vrdujak; with his mixed usage of ijij and the possible raising of the vowel before j, Ivan’s Bartul Vrdujak is most probably his fellow lodge member Bartul Vrdoljak.

In the year 1825 Split was a small Dalmatian city with a population in the city proper (grad, which also included the site of the Roman Emperor Diocletian’s palace) of about 2,500; the city was ringed by zagrada/predgradja, ‘suburbs,’ though a more precise rendition would be ‘adjacent settlements.’ These settlements, called at that time varoši, ‘towns,’ were actually more like selo, ‘villages,’ both in appearance and in the peasant makeup of their populations. A varošanin, ‘town dweller,’ was distinctly different, sociologically and economically, from a Spličanin, ‘resident of Split,’ and these differences lasted until the beginning of this century. Split was the cultural center, the cathedral seat and the residence of the upper classes, nobles and functionaries. The language of Split or Spalato was Italian, that of the varoši (Veli varoš, Lučac, Dobri, Manus) was čakavian-ikavian Croatian for the most part but also stokavian-ikavian in particular family clusters. At the time Ivan Velat wrote his will, the population of his town, Veli varoš, was at least 2,000.7

In his study of English medieval wills Sheehan (1963: 56) writes: “Sometimes the document may begin with a bald statement: 'This is the will of X,' then proceed to describe the donor’s gift in the third person. At other times the donor is made to speak in the first person, so that the will reads like a report of his actual words.” Velat’s will does both: sometimes he speaks directly to one of his children, other times he refers to himself in the third person but at all times it is clear that it is Velat speaking. Thus, a otac Ante i Osibu darije i ostavja za ono vaše milošje što ste činili vašen ocu i vašoj materi ('and the father gives and bequeaths [this] to Ante and Osib for your kindness towards your father and mother'); but I ti Kate odnila si što te moglo doći, i ja sam te i tebe Kate namirija ('And you Kate took that which was coming to you and so I provided for you Kate.') A mixture of references can be seen in that portion of the will quoted above: ‘Now I leave everything to my wife Dujka . . . and after the death of Dujka that half which is fitting for the father to give will be left and given exactly as it befits the father.’

The family Velat, as recorded in the will, consisted of Ivan (whose father was Tomo); Ivan’s wife Dujka (whose father was Bartul Vrdujak); three sons: Ante and Mikula, both married, and Osib who is to be married; and three daughters: Kate and Dvaka/Dujka, both married, and Marija. Dvaka’s husband, Pero Kostre, is mentioned. Other names in the will are those of Velat's tenant farmers: Menij/Menije Faracin in Kopilica, Pjero Slavić in Gripe, and Pjero Alberti in Pojud (Poljud). There is a puzzle about the name of one daughter which first appears as Dvaka (original orthography Duaka) but thereafter as
Dujka, the same name as that of the mother. The mother is consistently referred to as moja žena Dujka and so it is clear that the daughter is meant in other uses of Dujka because her name is associated with the names of the other daughters; undoubtedly Dvaka (‘the second?’) was a nickname for the daughter Dujka.  

Dujka, Ivan’s wife, brought to their marriage a dota, ‘dowry,’ of 150 tolors and 5 libras. It is interesting that Ivan specifies that this dowry will be kept separate from the general property and will be disposed of as Dujka wishes. Some problem, not clear from this will, is associated with the dowry of daughter-in-law Ivanica: Ja opet otae i::govaram i:govorim što je moja nevista Ivanica donila dote ţa nima pitati da joj se namisti a ja otac nisam se popisa pod nje dote. Ko se potpisa neka i odgovara. Ante koji se potpisa neka i odgovara (‘I the father again declare and state that whatever my daughter-in-law brought in her dowry she should not ask that it be placed at her disposal as I, the father, didn’t sign for her dowry. Whoever signed for it, let him be responsible. Ante who signed for it, let him be responsible.’)  

Understanding the exact value of the various currencies mentioned in the will is difficult and perhaps impossible at this late date; generally, the more valuable currency is mentioned first, e.g. tolors, then libras. The word tolor comes ultimately from German Thaler (English dollar), while libar/ libra stems from Latin libra, ‘pound,’ which also yields Italian lira. The currencies mentioned more often are the fijorin, ‘florin,’ originally a gold ducat and later silver named for the city of Florence (in Italian Firenze but earlier Fiorenza), and the karantan, ‘copper (coin)’ from Italian carantano; there were 60 karantans to 1 florin. Daughter Dvaka/Dujka received 61 florins and 40 karantans for her dowry, daughter Kate took clothing and other things worth 57 florins and 26 karantans. Son Mikula took 40 florins and 8 karantans, the reason not specified. And when the third daughter Marija finds ‘her happiness or marriage,’ she is to be given the same amount as Kate received: 57 florins and 26 karantans. In addition, Velat instructs Ante and Osib to give Marija 6 florins: da vi dva brata date sestri Mariji fijorini -6- od onoga što ste vi dva posadili što je s van radila u poju (‘you two brothers give to your sister Marija 6 florins from that which you two had planted and for her work in the field with you.’)  

Son Mikula does not fare well in his father’s will and the reason is: za ono tvoje nepoštovanje u vrine tvoga matrimonia i tvoje žene kako trataš svoga oca i svoju mater (‘for your dishonesty at the time of your wedding and for your wife because you didn’t treat your father and mother well.’) But Ante and Osib are instructed to compensate Mikula with 6 florins for the ‘little work’ he did in planting on the land at Firule.  

Velat’s property consisted of his ‘land on Gripe, Kopilica, and Poljud, the house, the yard and the garden, nothing more.’ Ante and Osib were the diligent sons who worked the land and evidently supported their parents: ‘I, the father, again declare that the property could not feed me or your mother but that Ante and Osib did it with their work because the work of your father and his property could not feed us.’  

Velat’s last sentence is the one mentioned above: Ja Ivan Velat vaš otac pisa s mojo ruko [sic]. . . Towards the end of the will Velat makes a request of his favorite sons: A sada sini moji Ante i Osibe ja van ne ostavjan da mi date nego samo očena i zdravu Mariju za dušu vašega oca da se spomenete (‘And now my sons, Ante and Osib. I don’t want you to do anything but give me an “Our Father” and a “Hail Mary” in memory of your father’s soul.’) This would seem to be a fitting sentiment with which to terminate the will but Velat remembers another detail and so returns to property concerns: Ante otac govoriti da dai od komuna Osibu kano i tebi dva prstena i jednu veru i osan srebreni botuni što si da tvoj joj ženi zlato i srebro i ostale stvare koje gustaju fijorini 23 tako i bratu Osibu (‘Ante, father
is telling you to give Osib from the property the same as was given you, two rings and a
wedding ring, eight silver buttons that you gave to your wife, gold and silver and other
things that are worth 23 florins; so do the same for your brother Osib.

In the last will and testament of Ivan Velat we have a unique record of a peasant patriarch
talking to members of his large family in the year 1825. He reminds the family of the
dowries paid out for two of the daughters and enjoins his heirs to provide an equal dowry
for Marija, the as yet unmarried daughter; he rewards his faithful sons, Ante and Osib, and
punishes Mikula who committed some reprehensible act at the time of his wedding. He
is as scrupulous as an accountant in calculating sums of money, even rings and buttons,
given to or owed to members of the family. As a good husband, he provides for his wife,
even separating out her dowry for her own disposal. Except for a few stilted phrases (e.g.
‘Now I again say and declare...’), Velat’s text is almost an exact transcription of his
everyday speech with its repetitions, mixed syntax and, above all, its directness (e.g. ‘And
you Kate took that which was coming to you and so I provided for you Kate.’) In 19th
century Dalmatia where most records were in Italian, Velat’s will stands out as a personal
document written in the Croatian of his time and place. Short as it is, the will tells us much
about life in Veli varos in the early 1800’s, about the concerns of a typical (i.e. peasant)
family and about the local version of the Croatian language.

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REFERENCES

1. 1830 is most likely the year of Ivan Velat’s death when his heirs submitted his will for official
action. Each page of the 3-page text is 5.25 inches/13.3 cm wide and 8.25 inches/21 cm long
but Ivan occasionally begins a sentence in the margin. I am grateful to my colleague, Prof. Dr.
Dušana Jutronic-Tihomirović of the University of Split, for her help in elucidating some obscure
passages.

2. Appropriately, Velat’s name is probably derived from the adjective veli-i, ‘big’ (as in Veli
varos)+ ār; compare the surname Milat (from mil-i, ‘nice,’ + ār. There is a handful of Velat
families in Split today with one family living in Veli varoš. All the place names mentioned in
the will (Veli varoš, Gripe, Poljud, Kopilica, Firulel designated in 1825 settlements and fields
outside of Split but are today sections of Split.

3. Novak (1964) is the prime source of information about Split and environs in the 19th century
but Vidović (1973: 16-48) has a good summary of the language situation during that century.

4. Vidović (1973: 59-60) writes; “...up to the end of the 18th century...the main immigrants
into Split were people from Poljica and their descendants gave an ethnic and linguistic stamp
to the settlements around Split. Accordingly one can assume that this population group spoke
a dialect which was, in the case of the first immigrants, more čakavian (in the 16th century) but
later showed ever more stokavian characteristics, and that difference depended on the time, the
century in which they settled and also on the part of Poljica from which they came: Upper,
Middle or Lower. ...Already in the 17th century immigration from stokavian regions (Bosnia)
was greatly increased and in succeeding centuries was even greater and more extensive...in
the period 1611-1644 about 70% of the new immigrants were from čakavian areas, 23% from
hybrid stokavian-čakavian areas (Poljica and Žrnovica) and only 7% from stokavian areas
(Bosnia, Imotski, Sinj) [but] in the period 1645-1700 the percentage of immigrants from
čakavian areas falls 52%, from hybrid areas it rises 17.7% and from stokavian areas it rises
39%.” It seems, then, that the Velat family in Veli varoš or their ancestors came from a
stokavian-čakavian area, most likely one of the villages of (Upper) Poljica, a former ‘peasant
republic’ southeast of Split.

5. I have written a popular article about brotherhoods in Korčula, “Easter in Korčula.” Since the
magazine in which it appeared (The Penn Stater) is unlikely to be in many libraries, I shall be
happy to send a copy upon request.

6. This brotherhood was associated with the church of Sveta Manda i Sveti Lazar in Veli varoš. A župan was elected each year. For a listing of members and officers see Bezić-Božanić (1984: 121-2).

7. My population figures are extrapolated from those given by Novak (1965: 400) for the year 1817: 2263 for the grad (i.e. Split) and 3887 for Veli varoš and Dobri combined.

8. Another puzzle seems to involve a place name u opinju (original orthography u oppignu) in the sentence: moja žena Dujka ka je nosila od svoga oca u opinju u moju kuću od svoga oca Bartula Vrdujak a dote. . . (‘my wife Dujka who brought from her father in Opinje/Opinja(?) from her father Bartul Vrdujak a dowry. . .’). The only possibility I have come across, and it seems remote, is Opine (fem.pl.) which the Yugoslav Academy Dictionary identifies as a village in Hercegovina.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


POVZETEK

POSLEDNJA VOLJA IVANA VELATA