

THE VISOKO CHRONICLE

XI.¹

Translated by Timothy Pogačar

The Lord's hand was upon my house! Heavy as iron and as hard as rock set in the bowels of a mountain from the time it was created! We prayed, we assisted at divine service—but the Lord did not relent because He could not forget Jošt Schwarzkobler's bloody death! And he was so angered that He crushed the children of both men and their children's children, for both were great sinners, Polikarp Khallan as well as Jošt Schwarzkobler!

I do not know how many weeks later it was that my neighbor Debelak stopped before my entrance on his way from Loka. I saw that he would like to speak with me. At that time, we neighbors lived together in mutual love: what hurt one, the other felt as well, and if one cried, the other did not laugh, as is like to be the habit among the Germans. Since the time they had taken Agata away from us not much work was done at my place. We only saw to it that the livestock did not suffer and was not thirsty; in other things we folded our arms and secretly wiped our eyes. Neither was the master an example to others; he behaved as the family behaved.

That afternoon, when my neighbor was returning from town, I was thus sitting idly on the bench in front of the house. My brains were consumed with thoughts: How in the name of beloved Jesus the Christ, could she have sinned? What did Agata actually do that the law could bring her in? In church and everywhere we were taught that the law does injustice to no one! Everything was aspin in my head, everything was awirl in this head, that I would have lost even the little bit of sense that the Lord God gave Visoko's sons had not my patron St. Izidor taken up my defense!

Thus Jakob Debelak stopped in front of me. I noticed that he was searching for the words that he wanted to speak. The blood had gone from his face and his lips were trembling as he tried to open his mouth. We looked at each other for a few moments and I immediately noticed that my neighbor's eyes were all watery. "The rock will break loose," I said to myself, "and as it crashed down on my father's grave, so now it will crash on me!" My neighbor composed himself and began with forced ease:

"The new bishop arrived yesterday. Loka was in a dither. He has two names. They call him Janez Frančišek."

¹ This is one of fourteen chapters in the novel. For an explanation of its significance, see the foregoing article by Jožica Jožef Beg.

I knew that that was not what he wanted to tell me. I fixed my stare on his troubled face and did not answer.

“He was coming in the Water Gate,” said Debelak, “and the elders greeted him. He’s called Janez Frančišek, I’m telling you.”

“Did you hear anything about our girl?” I stammered fearfully.

I was not blind and I saw that it was just on account of the girl he had come to see me. He looked skyward and the words came to him with difficulty.

“Just wait and I’ll tell you! I met the town scribe on the square, you know him after all, Lord Boltežar. And he ordered me to tell you... Just wait and I’ll tell you...” Beads were gathering on his forehead. “What was it he ordered me to do? Just wait and I’ll tell you... The new bishop arrived, and Lord Boltežar, who is your friend, would advise that you to go before the bishop. It would be well and it won’t do any harm...”

“On account of... the girl?” I stammered.

“Fuehrnpfeill says that it’s on account of the girl! Wait, exactly on account of the girl, and that it won’t hurt...”

“Does the bishop bother himself with such trifles?” I asked uncertainly.

“Fuehrnpfeill says that he does!”

I sobbed, “For God’s sake, just what do they have against the girl?” The answer was slow in coming. Debelak turned to look in all directions and he ran his fingers through his gray hair. He finally replied glumly:

“They accuse her of having caused the hail, of riding your pigs above your house, and of making love to the devil.”

I shot up. The blood started to boil in me and the world fell to pieces about me!

“Jesus Christ!—Are they idiots!—Our Agata, my Agata...”

Jakob calmed me: “Just wait and I’ll tell you—I don’t know a thing. Fuehrnpfeill says that Marks is giving some sort of evidence and that he wants to testify...”

“Marks Wulffing?!” I shouted.

Something burst inside of me and as if from afar I heard my neighbor’s voice: “Fuehrnpfeill says to hurry, he says that the executioner has already come from Ljubljana, that they are already putting up a pyre on Gavžnik...”

Neighbor
Debeljak
relates
terrible
things and
that a pyre
is being
built on
Gavžnik

A dark cloud covered me. I fell to the ground and I had a sense of flying into a deep abyss.

When I awoke I was lying in the upper house and they were daubing my head with water. I had been lying in my bed for two days or more and I did not recognize the world around me. I was turned toward the ceiling and before my poor soul stood... Agata, with her sweet face beneath a golden crown of golden braids, and she had two eyes that shone with virgin innocence. For that woman the heart of Visoko's master yearned! Since she had been gone I missed her every day; and at every step I took, something within sighed for her to whom I was inseparably bound by the spilt blood of Jošt Schwarzkobler! Each moment I thought of her who was destined for me. And now? What had Fuehrnpfeill said? They locked her up because she made love to the devil and she committed sins like wicked witches commit??? I would toss about on my tick the whole night long and the whole night I would pray to Our Lady of Gora to grant me the favor of finding out whether there are witches in the world or not. My dear Savior, Jesus, help me! But everything screamed to me that there are witches, there are, for otherwise they would not have been burning them on pyres for centuries and up to the present day! And yet I also knew that they burned them only after they themselves would remorsefully admit everything. There are witches—that I can say; but that Agata was not a witch—that, too, I write, for Jesus in His glory would surely not have destined Polikarp's son to make recompense for the blood of a murdered man in that way! Holy Godhead—and if, after all, she was! So many sins are committed throughout our land that only the Creator knows all of them. And should the Visoko master enter into marriage with one who, perhaps, flew to Slivnica near Cerkno or even to Klek in Croatia! Saint Izidor, come to my aid lest I lose my mind, lest my reason dry up and all understanding abandon me!

I was like a broken branch washed into the Sora in a flood: The water bears it along and it cannot stop. Such a branch was my soul. God's wrath hurried it along and nowhere could it stop!

On the fourth of August, on the feast of St. Dominik Guzman, I had recovered enough to set out for Loka at the break of day when there was as yet neither horse nor man on the road. No one then was showing his face, even in the huts, and thus I could hide from all living things, for shame had come upon the house and I had to look at the ground and nowhere else. I followed the words: "If a man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me!" (Matthew 16:24). And a heavy cross I bore on my shoulders on my way to town!

Loka was still celebrating because the Škofja Lokans had the great good fortune of having in their midst the person of their wise and most kind new master. As for myself, I did not partake of that happiness and truly took

fright of the great flag that waved from the castle tower. The thought oppressed me that soon I would travel a most bitter path to that castle, to him who was a mighty and also, certainly, a hardhearted lord. As I have already said, the burghers were festively dressed and so were the menials. Yet not many of them were coming to the square, for our nature is such that we avoid high lords, even if we love them.

Mihol Schwaiffstrigkh stood in front of Wohlgemuet's tavern looking morose.

"You come to see the new bishop, too?" he asked me sullenly. He did not mention Agata at all, for which I was thankful to him, for a man does not like to talk about his misfortune with a beadle.

He added, "If he'd just soon off to where he came from!"

"Are you being wronged?" I asked.

"What can I tell you!" Schwaiffstrigkh raged. "Everything has been turned upside down at the castle, everything is a mess, and Lord Joannes Franciscus is giving commands like some Swedish general. The words he uses—you're already shaking before he says them! They say he used to be an officer before he entered the Church. Maybe he was, maybe he wasn't, but he acts like it! If you could see our 'Flekte' today! He'd shrivel up to nothing right in front of you before you could pick him out in the sand underfoot! You think I have anything to say! Even less than a rat in the cells! He brought some violet with him. 'Violet, do this' and 'violet, do that,' and we who are carrying out our honorable duty have to hold our tongues!"

He grumbled on and then he said, "I already know you won't give me anything for drink!"

He set off and one could see that he was glad to leave my company because he probably decided that I would start asking about Agata, whose jailer he was. But I gathered from his words that my path to the castle would be even thornier than I thought. What can I say? God have mercy on me!

I waited in front of the town hall for the town scribe, Boltežar Fuehrnpfeill, to come. When he arrived, he headed for the castle and later notified me at Wohlgemuet's that with the help of the young provost he had persuaded the most merciful lord bishop to allow me to see him in his room at two, and that I could perhaps convince him not to burn Agata, who was accused of such terrible evil. This frightening message could beat me down no more, since I was already beaten into the ground!

He took his leave, saying, "Just be sure you keep your head on your shoulders, else you'll accomplish nothing! And don't be too afraid; the high lord has a sharp tongue but he doesn't think so badly! At least that's what the

provost told me. So keep your courage up no matter how much Lord Joannes Franciscus screams in French!”

When he was walking away he added, “Come on time or else you’re on the outs right off! After come and tell me what you accomplished.”

He said that with a purpose that was not lost on me: for his services he demanded pay, which he was due and for which I already had a couple of gold coins in my pocket, but I couldn’t hand them to him on the square.

At exactly two o’clock I stepped into the castle yard. There was no life to be sensed in the large edifice. Only the lord provost from St. Jakob’s was marching to and fro along the passage in front of the bishop’s quarters reading a book. It was the young lord Urh Falenič, nephew of the one-time Poljane pastor. Besides his large parish he was performing the service of castle chaplain since his mercy had come to his castle. He noticed me and right away hurried up.

“It’s good that you’re on time!” he praised me, “because our lord doesn’t like to wait! —Wait here a moment!”

He left me in the passageway. My heart was beating like never before in my life, because I had never spoken with a real bishop, as was the merciful lord Joannes Franciscus, who was probably not much less than the German emperor. And it was like a sharp knife pierced my heart when I looked at the wide, black castle tower that rose just before me against the sky. The deep, dark cells in which the prisoners could not stand or lie down, opened before my eyes, and it actually seemed to me that I could hear the clanging of heavy chains. Once again I write, Jesus, have mercy on me!

Lord Urh soon returned and took me into some sort of anteroom.

He was saying:

“Our lord is wondrous! In spite of all the danger, he took up residence in the room where the two servants murdered their bishop Konrad. He wants to battle people’s fears and every night he sleeps on the martyr’s bed. But don’t worry too much, Izidor, all the same he’s a good lord!”

Here he turned to some man with a heap of flax on his head and ordered him: “Valet de chambre, announce us to his illustrious mercy!”

This man was probably the “violet” Schwaiffstrigkh told me about. He approached the door with quiet steps, opened it and said something, after which he gestured to me to enter.

Lord Urh remained in the anteroom, and I went into the bishop’s room, which had not changed since the time I had seen it. The cross on the wall was still there and so was the modest bed. There was a table by the window and several chairs around it. On one sat our new lord bishop.

My thorny
path to the
Loka
castle and
about all I
underwent
before the
lord
bishop
Janez
Francišek

Joannes Franciscus, how wrongly a man would judge you if he judged you by your harsh words!

I must write that I imagined the powerful master of a large bishopric differently than my eyes beheld him that afternoon. On the wide chair sat an insignificant person, as thin as a stalk in the middle of a hay field, in worn clothing that showed a great many stains, and I could have sworn that the Poljane pastors went about in better robes than the one Joannes Franciscus wore that day. What indicated an heir of the apostles was the red embroidery on the robe and the buttons, which were also red. He was not wearing a gold chain about his neck as the lord bishops usually do. However, a large gold cross could be seen between the buttons on his chest, but it was not especially adorned with precious stones. There were two small white patches around his neck that testified to his clerical station.

Such was the small likeness of our new bishop! But his tiny face, which I could have covered with my palm, nevertheless spoke for all of the bishop. Every little feature on that face said that Joannes Franciscus was not a man to joke with. That small face, surrounded by a small gray wig, had iron features, and although his eyes looked kindly on the world, I was soon convinced that the thin mouth below his somewhat coppery nose could command like the highest church shepherd commands his subjects. The high lord did not hide the fact that he liked the drink that is born of the green vine—that is, in moderation, and with the fondness that older, wise lords have for that fruit of the blessed land, be they of clerical or lay estate. That is to say, at that moment Lord Joannes Franciscus raised his silver goblet and slowly drank from it, savoring the worth of each drop he quaffed. It was most probably the best Črnikal, which was always in supply in the castle cellars for any occasion. Then his hand reached for the gilded dish that was piled with tiny whitish figs.

The merciful Joannes Franciscus was quite assiduously bearing those figs to his mouth, despite my presence. He only glanced sideways in my direction, and then he immediately reached for the dish again. Therefore, I was led to think he was not pleased that I was not yet kneeling, as is obligatory when you come before a bishop. I immediately knelt and humbly beat my breast.

At that moment the bishop turned to me and gave a shout: “Pierre, valet de chambre!”

The old man with the light step and heap of flax on his head appeared at the door and bowed deeply before his lord.

“Pierre,” he said firmly, “tell this man that one does not kneel before a person! Do you think that I am ‘Flekte,’ for whom God made a head but forgot to make brains?” He began laughing in such a way that every feature

on his little face laughed and his little eyes shone like sparks. And he repeated, “Who do you think I am, Flekte?”

When the servant disappeared, Joannes Franciscus pointed to a chair by the table: “Sit down!”

This honor affected me so keenly that I did not know when and how I got to the chair.

Then he grabbed a whole fistful of figs and scattered them on the table in front of me: “Eat!”

And once more the room was filled with his loud and healthy laughter.

I did not like eating before such a lord but I had to, and I could not swallow the mouthful.

In the meantime, Joannes Franciscus shuffled some papers, then he asked:

“Izidor Schwarzkobler?”

I replied, “Khallan. . . If you please, you may also write Khallain, your grace!”

“So, it’s not your sister? Perhaps your plighted?”

I could not say that, for the master of two holdings at Visoko could not admit that a woman who was in jail for witchcraft was his plighted! But I explained to the gracious lord how Jošt Schwarzkobler’s granddaughter had come to my house, though I did not mention the murder that my father already had answered for at his heavenly judgment.

Lord Janez Frančišek’s tiny face shrank somewhat and his eyebrows come right together when he asked,

“So it’s not love for the unfortunate woman that has brought you to me but love for your two holdings, which would come to shame if we condemn Agata Ema Schwarzkobler?”

I reluctantly groaned, “It’s hard to live with such shame!”

The bishop laughed dryly:

“I don’t know what will happen! This sinful Agata Ema is accused of very terrible things. I read that she actually had conjugal relations with the devil, and I’m surprised that nothing was born of that infernal union, not even a few piglets, so she wouldn’t have had to borrow them from you when she felt like riding in circles above your house! And she went right into that Marks Wulffing’s flesh, and my sagacious Mändl included with the documents the flint that Marks removed from his wound with his own

I had to
eat figs,
but eating
them
with a
high lord
isn’t
good.

hand! By the saints in heaven, everything fits, everything is proven, and divine providence has sent me to this place just in time!”

Each crease on his very fine face took on a satanic expression. His small figure leapt from the chair and flew about the room causing the little robe to dance about it.

“Agata is lost!” I began quaking within and I started praying the Our Father to myself.

I did not know French curses then, but later, in various engagements, I got used to them, too. Therefore, I can write that Joannes Franciscus was cursing as he galloped about the room. He was cursing in French because our forsaken Agata’s proven sin so enraged him!

“Mon Dieu!” he shouted, “an *exemplum* must be set. I want to provide an *exemplum* in these lands so that they will no longer be battered by hail, and Lucifer and his brothers will no longer sow their illicit piglets among them! Parbleu!

He complained about some Jesuit *pater* who was sleeping* and he said some other things that were beyond my peasant ken. Once again, he galloped up and down the room and I could clearly hear that he was grinding his teeth; his face began to burn and he had crumpled each hand into a fist. Poor Agata!

When he calmed down a little he asked me sharply and caustically, just as if poking a sharp knife into my ear:

“What’s going to happen to your pigs now?”

The high lord even thought of that. I replied:

“There are six of them and they are getting nice and fat.”

“Why wouldn’t they fatten well when after all a witch is giving them their slop?!” yelled the gracious lord bishop. He yelled! I cannot say otherwise, for even high lords are wont to yell when they are angered. Oh, Saint Izidor, bishop Joannes Franciscus was then angered to the fullest measure! He added, “Maybe she sat on one of them, maybe on all six! Diablo!”

I stammered:

“If you condemn Agata, the family will not want to eat them; I will kill them and bury them in the forest, where the foxes will dig them up; there are many of them in the Visoko woods. If you don’t condemn her, then I will slaughter them.

* The Jesuit Spee!

The bishop laughed menacingly: “That’s right! You’re a sensible master, Izidor Schwarzkobler!”

“Izidor Khallan, your grace!” I humbly corrected him

“Izidor Khallan then! An empty pot is empty, call it Schwarzkobler or Khallan!”

He sat down in his chair, drummed his fingers on the table and looked out the window at the plain, bathed in gold.

“The sun’s shining and we have nice enough weather,” he said calmly.

“The weather is good and the crop won’t be bad,” I responded bravely.

“The crop—that’s what comes first for you!” He was tapping on the table so sharply that I did not dare answer.

Joannes Franciscus was silent for quite a while, but then he quickly turned to me with a pleasant look and a light smile on his lips and addressed me thus:

“Izidor Khallan, imagine that you are at holy confession with your spiritual pastor, and imagine that I am your spiritual shepherd! Answer me this: Do you believe there are sorceresses or enchantresses or witches in the world? Answer me just as you would your God if He were to call you before Him!”

Holy Trinity, help me! That was the question I was shuddering at all the days since they had taken Agata from me! I was afraid of that question and I hoped that it would not come up. But it did, and I had to answer as I would answer the Lord, who dwells in the holy tabernacle. If Agata was damned, I did not have the right to mortgage my share in the heavenly kingdom!

The most gracious bishop watched me brightly, and I was beginning to think that his burning gaze would bore through me.

I answered: “Christ is my witness that I believe!”

“That there are witches, that there are sorceresses? Would that the Lord Jesus give me plenty of such subjects!” the high lord exclaimed. Then he asked in a hushed voice: “How do you support this belief of yours?” Again he reached for the figs in the gold dish.

But in no way did I want to become deserving of eternal damnation! I answered like this:

The
merciful
Joannes
Franciscus
puts a very
hard
question to
me.

“As far as I recollect, the world has persecuted them, and the authorities have always condemned them and brought them to the pyre. But no one was burned who himself didn’t first and sincerely admit infernal evildoing.”

The merciful lord brought his goblet to his lips and fortified himself with a sip of sweet Črnikal wine. When he had done so he fixed his eyes on me so that I felt as if two pointy arrows were piercing me.

He laughed bitterly: “You’re well-schooled. Perhaps you’ve already been in my Loka tower, where even today we have wonderful stores for getting the admissions you’re referring to!”

“The authorities are mistaken here and there,” I answered, “but for them to be mistaken in every case, why, it would be a sin to claim such a thing.”

It now happened that one of the highest nobles of the holy Church began laughing so hard that there was reason to fear he would suffer an overwhelming seizure.

“You’re right, my son, the authorities are rarely mistaken! Only it’s odd that it was you who litigated again and again against Albreht Sigismund when you had been denied the right to litigate at the time of Vid Adam!”

It is easy to confuse an awkward farmer, so I was silent.

He also asked: “Isn’t it odd, dear young man, if Agata is so powerful, if she consorts with the devil, who is, you can believe me, a great lord, that she doesn’t help herself, flutter out the window and thus shake herself free from Loka’s onerous justice?”

Here again I did not know what to answer.

He put the question once again: “What then? Do you still believe that there are witches in the world?”

Now I could but stammer, “I don’t know.”

“You’re surely kin to Saint Thomas! Now listen to your bishop, listen to your ruler! He answers you, ‘I don’t believe.’” And Lord Joannes Franciscus got up and flew about the little room once more.

Bishop Janez Francišek doesn’t believe in witches, but I don’t believe him!

Everything was atumble in my head and I perceived nothing but the crucifix that signified the bitter death of blessed bishop Konrad. Despite this my conceit was not yet erased and my heart still cried out that the master of Visoko could not take a woman that had been dragged through the Loka cells because of witchcraft.

“If you’re able,” screamed the bishop, “open your ears and listen! We’re going to test her by water. If by any means—by any means—Agata comes out of the water alive, her innocence is proven.”

He pronounced the words “by any means” twice and put special stress on them. But in vain, for my head would not clear, and so I did not know whether those words were meant to convey anything special.

My feebleness did not go unnoticed by the bishop. He stopped by me and disgustedly pronounced these words:

“You want to rescue the sinner? You want to rescue her from the pyre? You won’t rescue her! You’re a...” He thought it over for a while and then he added very frankly, “You’re a dunce!”

At that bitter word I crumpled and broke into such a sweat that the clothes on me became wet. Since I had been the master of both Visoko holdings I had not been stung by a word like the one that the magnificent lord bishop Janez Frančišek hurled at me that moment! Such words are appropriately directed at a servant, but never at a master, even if he does not have as many fields or as many pack horses as I have altogether at Visoko!

He called out, “Valet de chambre!”

The old man with the huge wig entered.

“Pierre, take this man out!”

I left as if drunk and so forgot to pay the homage that the whole world pays to the heirs of the apostles!

Perhaps I was mistaken, perhaps I heard correctly—at the door it seemed to me that I heard laughter from his grace. It was poisonous laughter, but then I did not yet know Janez Frančišek’s golden heart that was hidden behind that laughter and the blessed benevolence that was in every drop of blood flowing through his frail body!

That day I left the Loka castle with the knowledge that the Freising bishop did not want to help us.

On the way back from Loka my soul wept and I thought of her who was in chains and whom I did not have the courage to visit. I thought of her... but the rich grain fields and green Visoko meadows, all of which were my property, also lay before my eyes. Now and then something stirred in a far corner of my soul: Should I take a woman who was to be tried before the whole world? When God abandons a man he is like a flag that is forever flapping in the direction the wind blows!

My brother Jurij was waiting for me in front of our home. He had simply withered during these days, so that there was almost nothing left of him in his clothes.

“Were you with her?”

“I was with the bishop,” I answered, “but I didn’t dare ask him to let me see her. He was like a thorny bush that you don’t put your hand into.”

“Did he say anything about her?” he asked very worriedly.

“He said something about wanting to test her by water, and if she comes out of the water alive—that is, by any means—then her innocence is proven. But how can a man know what’s what in the speech of high lords, who are so fond of mocking us poor peasants!”

Jurij walked away.

Afterwards we lived on. We lived like a flock on Blegoš, from which a bear has carried off the most beautiful ewe!

At the end of July Schwaiffstrigkh again came to Visoko. He came as an emissary of the court (Weisbot) and brought me and Jurij sealed papers. They were summoning us to Škofja Loka on the eleventh day of August, the day of St. Tiberius martyr, for us to testify at the hearing, when Agata Ema Schwarzkobler would be tried for most evil witchcraft.