

And Josip Vidmar's final thought: "Should we Slovenes give up our historical ideal, the ultimate dream-vision which granted us the strength to live though one thousand years of servitude?"

Aleš Debeljak's "Spremna beseda" to Josip Vidmar's essay, *Kulturni problem slovenstva*, addressed with a rhetorical formula, "Konec slovenstva—Ne, hvala!" represents a graceful apologetic retreat from his earlier—by one year—"Recollection of a Lost Yugoslavia," the subtitle of his *Twilight of the Idols*.⁵ Now the author alludes to the, "transcendental sense and consciousness of the cultural tradition to which we, Slovenes, are attached by our entire existence." And to the sequel:

Tako spoštovanje tradicije navsezadnje ni samo naša eksistencialna potreba, marveč tudi svojevrsten imperativ etične odgovornosti: nacionalne kulture namreč nismo podedovali od svojih prednikov, ampak smo si jo izposodili pri naših vnukih.⁶

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Paul Laric, *Maribor Remembered*. Great Neck, NY: Todd & Honeywell, 1989. 131 pp. (paper).

Given the small number of Slovene-American books that one could classify as fiction, Paul Laric's seemingly autobiographical narrative, *Maribor Remembered*, comes as a surprise. First, because it is not in fact autobiography, and second, because it is so well written. The jacket informs the reader that the book "is a nostalgia trip turned mystery," whereas the author's introductory note states, "The story ... is fiction. While certain liberties were taken with historical events, some of the

⁵ Aleš Debeljak, *Twilight of the Idols, Recollections of a Lost Yugoslavia* (Fredonia, NY: White Pine Press, 1994). The "lost Yugoslavia" here, surely not in semantic variations of the verb *lose, lost, losing* (sub verb Transitive 3, or verb intransitive: "to undergo deprivation of something of value.") See *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, sub *lose, lost, losing*.

⁶ Aleš Debeljak, commentary, *Kulturni problem slovenstva*, 38.

characters are based on actual personalities or combinations of personalities. Certain other characters are entirely imaginary.”

The story is about an elderly American couple, a Slovene-born businessman named Pete Kovar and his French wife Dani (short for Danielle). During a raging snowstorm at Val d'Isere in February 1984, they watch the Sarajevo Olympics, and a sense of pride coupled with nostalgia awakens in Peter. They decide to visit Yugoslavia at the very next opportunity. Peter renews his contacts with long-forgotten schoolmates whom he last saw in 1941, and they set off. Meeting his one-time schoolmates brings back old memories, and he experiences an emotional reunion with his pre-war sweetheart. The meetings take place at Kranjska gora, where Dani and Peter, both enthusiastic skiers, start their tour of Slovenia, in Ljubljana and Maribor, at homes and in public places, allowing the author to include numerous geographical, gastronomic and other details of locales. Conversations with schoolmates and their spouses are his major sources of information on current politics and economics. Yet, eventually, the Kovars' visit centers on one question, How did Peter's schoolmate, Tomi Dornik, really die? They repeatedly hear one and the same story concerning his capture by the Gestapo, but the analytical Peter soon discovers certain inconsistencies. His probing proves successful; his suspicion that another schoolmate, Hinko Gribec, bears blame is confirmed at the farewell dinner just before the Kovars leave for the U.S. They return home and a few weeks later receive a piece of unsigned mail. The envelope contains a newspaper clipping reporting that the battered body of a male had been found near the restaurant where the farewell dinner was held. There is no clue to the identity of the victim, but Dani and Peter know who it was.

Paul Laric may not be a completely unknown literary name in the U.S. and Canada; in a letter to the managing editor of *Slovenija* magazine he mentioned that his “book generated considerable demand from among expatriate Slovenes in the U.S.A.,” but he is certainly little known at best in Slovenia.

Past and present merge in the novel. Past events are related via old and new letters as well as through dialog. Truth is stronger than fiction seems to be Laric's motto. The truth about Tomi's death cannot remain hidden forever. Although glimpses of political and economic

reality do surface now and then, Laric does his best to avoid Adamic-like analyses. He makes his protagonist say that he does not want to be drawn into any political discussion; his primary aim is to see his old friends and to enjoy himself. Laric's elegant as well as enthusiastic descriptions of the protagonist's friends hospitality and their willingness to make the Kovars' visit a success are therefore not intended to represent the average Slovene's life. Peter's friends are the elite in every possible sense: they are educated people occupying important positions and they are well-off. This is not surprising, though, since they all appear to have been on "the right side" during the war, which made it easy to meet post-war political standards. But these characters are deeply human, too. Although some of their stories are tragic, Laric manages to relate them without sentimentality. Take Slava Zoran's, for example, "the sole surviving Zoran in the world" (90). She was Tomi's flame and they had a date on that fateful day when he fell prey to the Gestapo. Forty-five years after its composition, Peter makes Slava read Tomi's presumably last letter, which describes the carefully planned, upcoming rendezvous in one of Maribor's best hotels. The old wounds open and, too late, Peter realizes that he has committed a great error. "Slava couldn't continue. She wiped her tears, first with the back of her hand, then with a small handkerchief, but the tears didn't stop. she avoided looking at Peter" (90). A few lame apologies later she is gone and Peter, now alone, "was beside himself with fury and shame for having turned what should have been a high point of his visit to Maribor into a sorry, embarrassing mess" (90-91).

Laric was inspired by the circumstances of his childhood and young manhood to dramatize a world in which the past burdens the present. His idea was to write a book about events that took place during and after the Second World War, events from the inside instead of the outside. A critic categorized the novel as local color due to the prevalence of regional detail. No doubt the narrative can be read as such, especially if the reader is unfamiliar with Slovene topography and other points of interest, but it also evinces a deep and true sentiment of loyalty where one might expect indifference. Although the novel is unfortunately set during the final period of Yugoslavia's history, a time many Slovenes do not wish to remember any longer, it should be read in the first place as a record of friendship that extends beyond both time and differences between people.

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