

Erica Johnson Debeljak, *Tujka v hiši domačinov*. Trans. Jana Cedilnik. Maribor: Obzorja, 1999. 201 pp., 3,132 SIT [= \$17] (paper).

When President Clinton visited Slovenia in the summer of 1999, Slovenian television of course covered the occasion as a political event, with Jurij Gustinčič doing his best Jurij Gustinčič. But much more interesting commentators that day were the team of Erica Johnson Debeljak and her husband, the poet Aleš Debeljak, who gave this viewer the impression they were covering the Rose Bowl parade. Which is, of course, precisely what the occasion called for. Erica Johnson, an American become a Slovenian, covering an American president's visit in her advanced learner's Slovenian, is already a winning combination. When she covers her past in America and the soul of the Slovenia she has landed in, the result is the little masterpiece, *Tujka v hiši domacinov*.

Erika Johnson wrote *Tujka* in English. It reads smoothly in Slovenian, but a certain kind of reader will have the wonderful impression of reading two books at once. There is EJ telling us about the moment just before the moment she met Aleš, her "lirična modrooka usoda," and she says world-wearily that the man she was talking to was a "škripajoče snažni Amerikanec" and indeed "g. Pravi." You know, of course, that she wrote "squeaky clean American" and "Mr. Right" and it is interesting to hear the phrases translated into Slovenian, but the real effect, here and throughout the book, is hearing both languages at once, like two voices in harmony. However, I do want to read the book in English too. We should all be looking forward to the English version, not only because it will be a perfect introduction to Slovenia for American readers, but because it has a value far beyond that, for it is as rich as a novel. It gives a novel's pleasures.

Readers somewhat acquainted with things Slovenian will enjoy another harmony. During the Rose Bowl commentary, EJ would occasionally turn to Aleš because her Slovenian only carried her so far. And he would, as it were, start singing her part. In the book, as well, you can hear his voice as her main source for her idea of Slovenia. Sometimes, at least for this reader, this creates problems. Her orthodox, shorthand version of what happened in Slovenia during WW II (10) she will find herself revising once some objective history is written. It is surprising how somebody like Aleš Debeljak, who can be so unorthodox about the former Yugoslavia, to the point where he is maligned for his love of it, can have transmitted so orthodox a lesson about the

domobranci and *partizani*. But this is a quibble by one who does not fully accept the *domobranska* version either. At any rate, we love to hear a new voice doing the old standards. EJ already believes with all of Slovenia that Bled is world-famous (81).

Sometimes Erica Debeljak improvises on a standard seemingly written by Aleš Debeljak. Readers who remember AD's ode to Stulič's "Netko me voli" in *Twilight of the Idols* will have another chance at the thrill of reading EJ's account of a performance of "Selma" by Bijelo Dugmeš Željko Bebek in post-Yugoslavia Ljubljana.

Vse gledališče, še prašni delci v zraku, vse je padlo v zamaknjeno omedlevico. Vsi v tem zatemnjenem prostoru-- najstniki, ki se niso niti rodili, ko je bila ta pesem na višku priljubljenosti, sivolasi pesniki katerih dela so terjala višjo zvrst kulture, pijani norci, ki so komaj vedeli, kako jim je ime vsi so zaprli oči in peli. S strastjo so izgovarjali vsak slog, hlipaje so intonirali vsak vzdih, ki se je dotaknil srca. Ko je prišla goreča prošnja v refrenu, prošnja dekletu, ki zapušča bosanskega fanta v domačem kraju in z vlakom odhaja v daljne kraje: "Selma, zdravo, Selma! Putuj, Selma! I molim te ne naginji se skoz prozor" je občinstvo eksplodiralo, tarnajoči glasovi so peli skupaj s Bebekom. Ni jim bilo treba iskati besedila; vcepljeno je bilo v kolektivno dušo vseh, ki so bili zbrani v mali dvorani (65).

I, although I was part of that Yugoslavia only as an occasional visitor, can feel the emotion even now because of the fine writing. I can't wait to hear the passage again in English, though, amateur translator that I am, I know that having the narration and the Serbo-Croat song both in the same English will miss much. And how to catch the allusion to the warning about leaning out windows written on all European trains in all those languages? But for a rare treat, read Aleš Debeljak on Stulič and Erica Johnson Debeljak on Bebek side by side.

Tujka is above all the story of Erica's coming to Slovenia to marry Aleš. It is thus an immigrant bride's story and immediately interesting because it is the story of a wrong-way immigrant. I wish Henry Christian, our Adamic scholar, were here to read it. More such stories are sure to follow. Perhaps EJ is a new Herbert Grün. Perhaps we will one day have Erica Johnson scholars the way we have Louis Adamic scholars. As an immigrant's book, it is of course as much about the old country as the new. And for her (imagine!) the "old country" is

America. The book is rich because it is at once about California and Dolenjska, Delano and Loški Potok, San Francisco and Ljubljana, Otočec and New York. The texture comes from the inextricableness of all these. These are great materials beautifully woven.

There is other intertwining going on. The book is after all an epithalamium and is thus, yes, about sex. It is the sexiest Slovenian book I have read. EJ has come to Ljubljana because of Aleš and the first night in tiny Ljubljana meets "Andrej S.," one of the few people she knows there, the man, coincidentally, who invited her to the New York party where she met Aleš. Here is how Andrej S. looks at her and how she reacts:

Njegove smejoče oči so mi povedale da že ve kakšne narave je moje poslanstvo. Kdo pa ni? Oropana svojih običajnih samozavestnih velemestnih preoblek—jeklene bankirke, naličenega dekleta na zabavah, razsodne tekačice zgodaj zjutraj—sem odvrnila pogled od njega, neneadoma v nerazložljivi zadregi, z ognjeno rdečimi lici (58).

She has already told us how she used to handle New York:

Ko sem čutila poglede ki so drseli po meni v New Yorku, sem se umaknila v varno preobleko. Včasih sem se predrzno zibala v bokih, z rahlo zavihanimi ustnimi koticami, zavarovana z oklepom skrivnostnega notranjega zadovoljstva. Drugič pa sem upočasnila korak, žalostno povesila pogled in se ogrnila v mikavno vlogo tragične figure. Sledila sem trenutnemu razpoloženju, saj nihče ni vedel, kdo sem v resnici (57).

But in Ljubljana?

Toda na samotnih ljubljanskih ulicah sem imela grozljiv občutek, da vedo, kdo sem. Vedo, zakaj sem prišla v njihovo mesto. Zlahka so uganili, kaj je v mojem srcu, vdrli so v njegove komore in videli, kako njegovi prekati črpajo trepetajoče kri hrepenenja. Ni bilo kraja, kamor bi se lahko skrila. Ameriška nevesta, slečena do golega (57–58).

I did not know Slovenian had it in it. She writes the book so that our eyes "drsiyo po njej." It is indeed sometimes so open that it is, as the English say, shy-making. What an American book, what a New York and California book, and here it is appearing first in Slovenian!

Tujka is also a shrewd look at the Slovenian character. There is nothing like somebody from the outside seeing you truly and telling you what's what. Needless to say, such criticism is not always welcome. EJ has the easy Slovenian racism spotted and yet understands her own potential American superiority complex. Wait till you read about the Slovenian language lessons which involve the song about the "zamorčki." EJ is able to see clearly how the Slovenians, so easily scornful of the "južnjaki," are themselves "južnjaki" to Western Europeans. Her recounting of the obstacles the Slovenian state put in the way of her marrying Aleš is sad and funny and angry and says what needs saying about the Slovenian inferiority complex. The authorities actually wanted official attestation from the U.S. government that America had nothing against an American's marrying a Slovenian. A mere Slovenian? By the way, in her anger at the authorities, EJ says that "etnični Slovenci, katerih predniki so že pred več rodovi zapustili domovino, lahko pridejo iz vseh koncev sveta---in po nekajdnevnem bivanju v Ljubljani znova dobijo državljanske pravice (119)." To me, a Slovenian-Canadian born to Slovenian parents in Ljubljana but who cannot get Slovenian citizenship unless I apply as a foreigner, her account seems an exaggeration.

I hope this wonderful book will interest an American publisher. I can not imagine that it would not be. It is lovely writing. The only thing standing in its way might be Slovenia. That old problem of "Slo-what?" It will, however, have to be rewritten somewhat for it is even now a little confused about its audience. It sometimes seems to be explaining to Slovenians things that they already know and in English it will have to give a bit more background without somehow ruining the beautiful texture.

I can not avoid commenting on the sort of artifact this book is in a small place. I would like to think it will make Erica and Aleš beloved. But you do not have to think of Slovenia to fear the reaction of small places. Alice Munro has a story about small-town Ontario called "Who do you think you are?" which title sums up the attitude of small places to people who try to outgrow the said small places. Home is the place, says Munro, where they cut you down to size.

I still have not done the book justice, especially the American part. Read it to meet EJ's ACLU mother, for instance, with her religious devotion to the American constitution; and her playboy father, for

another, with his collection of *Playboys* and his king-size bed (which by the way gets translated into Slovenian in such a way that we are reminded why it got to be called king-size in the first place). Speaking of translation: are those “stručke, na debelo namazane s topljenim sirom” (20) bagels and cream cheese?

Not everything is translatable. After the beauties of the Slovenian version, I want the book in English, and I want it now, and I want it illustrated.

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