Introductory Comments on the First Publication of Milka Žicina in English

Until very recently, few people in Serbia recalled the name of Milka Žicina (1902–1984). Even though she published several novels, beginning with *Kajin put* in 1934, and wrote a considerable amount of unique autobiography she seemed on the verge of sliding into post-Yugoslav obscurity. This seemed mystifying to some observers, especially given Žicina's uncommon life path from interwar activism and travels to post-1948 imprisonment, from a significant engagement with rural conditions in socialist Yugoslavia to her own struggles with cancer. Fortunately, the tide seems to have turned. Due to the efforts of scholars such as Stanislava Barać, Jelena Petrović, Radmila Gikić Petrović, Slavica Garonja Radovanac, Žarka Svirčev, Katarzyna Taczyńska, and others, Žicina is now receiving more of the critical and historical attention she deserves.

This story, or essay, is from a book of journalistic writings published by Žicina in 1950. That year was part of a brief, and atypical, phase in the development of post-war Yugoslav literature, coming as it did between the defeat of the Axis and the assumption of power by Tito's Partisans, on the one hand, and the active quest by Yugoslav elites throughout the early 1950s for new sources of domestic and international legitimacy that would gradually coalesce into the country's "third path". Although the book *Reportaže* was published two years after the heralded Tito–Stalin split, the changes in Yugoslav society and official ideology were not immediate and universal; Žicina also gives an internal date to the writing of the story as 1949, with the other stories in the volume dating from 1946 and 1947, which allows us to conclude, at least provisionally, that the piece can be said to contain significant elements of socialist realism (as opposed to later

official or tolerated characteristics of Yugoslav writing, sometimes know as "partisan realism" or "socialist aestheticism").

This story takes place in Lika, a rural region that is today in Croatia. At the time of writing, Lika had long been a part of the Habsburg Empire but had become a constituent part of the post-World War I Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, which was soon renamed Yugoslavia. The plot of this piece turns on the quiet activities of young people, especially two sisters named Narandža and Danica, to show support for emerging working-class movements; vital to the story is also the historical awareness of their grandfather, whose far-ranging narrations about changing modes of economic life, emigration, and political repression form one of the chief sources for the girls' maturing world views.

The other pieces in this volume by Žicina are somewhat shorter than this one, and they take place in Fruška Gora, Belgrade (two of them), Bosnia-Herzegovina, a village near Lazarevac in Serbia, and Aleksinac. This translator is currently at work on one of these stories, "Stari turist u Novoj Bosni", from 1947, and plans to publish it soon as "An Old Tourist in the New Bosnia". At that time, a longer explanatory note will be published examining more of the themes that link these stories, but it can be noted now that, on the basis of these stories, Žicina's approach to "social literature" is very effective because of its dramatic elements and, above all, for its sense of empathy for characters of diverse social backgrounds. She does not foreground only industrial workers; domestic and office workers such as house-cleaners and secretaries, and peasants and students, especially women students, are have active and consequential roles as protagonists in these writings.

The source text for this translation is entitled "Devojke iz Končareva kraja" in Žicina's volume *Reportaže* (Beograd: Rad, 1950), pp. 1–22.

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The Girls from Končarev Kraj

MILKA ŽICINA

Like a bouquet of white flowers that the early spring sun has enticed, with its warm caress, out of the seclusion of winter, the bosoms of the two girls gleamed white amidst the newly verdant clearings. Next to the bushy hawthorns, the whiteness of the wide sleeves of their shirts and their calico scarves stood out. They were sitting on the dirt, on the *karst* of their rocky world. Spiky grass and saplings were bursting forth, juicy and green, from beneath every stone; they snaked their way around boulders, taking meager nourishment from beneath their heavy loads, but they poked up stubbornly, and every year they were more powerful, patiently dissolving the rigid and seemingly eternal stone massif. This was at the very end of April. Like always in spring, the sun shone sweetly down, in luxurious mercy, to cheer up the sullen earth. In the golden web of warm rays, everything quivered, flickering beneath the airborne power, crackling with youthfulness. Yesterday, and the day before that, everything was yet in anticipation; the buds were swollen, but it was only today, all of a sudden, overnight, that everything had put out leaves and donned its festive holiday clothing. The twittering sparrows hopped around mischievously on the blushing little branches and jumped out of the bushes, intoxicated with sun, taking to the air elatedly, flying into the serene blue sky and into the dark boughs of a colossal fir tree, the pointed crown of which towered over the entire region.

This aged fir tree, on whose trunk the years had amassed knots and scars, has for a span of many years looked out onto the road of white stone

that traverse the village of Babin Potok in Lika, rising as it goes on towards the Plitvice Lakes.

The older girl is around sixteen; her face is large and round, and she has black eyebrows that curve down over her flashing eyes, and this gives her a stern appearance; the younger girl, slender and muscular, with big, merry, brown eyes, is around fourteen. She's holding a thin booklet on her knees and reading aloud from it in a flat, quiet voice. The older girl is listening, while her head is bent over her needlework. Now and again, when she raises her head to keep an eye on her lambs, the sun lights up her face. The lambs nose about for the young grass, and they begin to caper like well-rested healthy children: they hop about, rejoicing, and then one of them suddenly stops playing and, pampered and tearful, starts to bleat. The others then take it up too – they are thinking back to the milk and their mother. Then the younger girl presses the opened pages of the book to the ground and, running and jumping, gets the flock together and drives it into the bushes closer to the place where they're sitting.

From up above, that is, from Končarev Kraj, a new flock announces itself with adorable cries – there are ten lambs gamboling over the uneven terrain towards the road; far behind the flock strides slowly a tall, angular man, wrapped in a winter jacket, with a shepherd's rod in his hand. After clearing his throat, he says something and raises his arms like blackened wings, and he threatens the unruly flock before him.

"There's Grandpa Marko," the younger girl pipes up. She's not happy about it. The older girl, gathering up the fabric and yellow thread she's embroidering with, spreads out over her lap a large piece of linen decorated with printed blue clusters of grapes and leaves.

"Doesn't matter. Keep doing what you're doing: Grandpa doesn't see well, and he doesn't care about needlework," the younger girl says and rushes out to meet the newly arrived lambs.

"G'morning, Grandpa!"

"God willing, my child! Ah...so that's you, Danica. And who's that down there?"

"That's Narandža, Grandpa," Danica replies as she drives up the lambs.

"So it is, so it is," the old man agrees, speaking through his drooping mustache, and then, tapping on the rocks with his darkened stick, he approaches and looks at her from beneath his lowering eyebrows:

“And where are your little ones?”

“They’re there, Grandpa: some of them are with the sheep, and a few of them are watching the foliage. There’s a sparrow hawk in there...”

“So be it, so be it...” Grandpa says again and drapes his winter jacket over a square stone, He slowly sits down on it. He looked at the lambs and at Danica, and called out to her:

“Yes, indeed!”

Danica comes twirling up, as light as a bird, and sits down on a wrinkled jacket. She looks attentively at the old man. “Grandpa, where did you take your lambs this morning?”

A mild, fresh breeze dances about; under its touch, which is like that of a soft hand, the saplings, still tender, bend and straighten back up. Grandpa fingers the buttons on his shirt and answers:

“With the lambs? Here. I was around here, with the boys.”

In the early spring, the old man always drove his lambs to join those of other people, and that’s how it came to be that the junior shepherds were watching his flock. The entire first part of the day he would preside over the pastures from his place on the jacket-covered stone, or he might move, tapping his heavy stick, to more amenable spots. Spending time with the little boys was boring for him; they didn’t know how to have a conversation or how to listen. When he was in their company, he was alone. Only when the sheep’s bleating rang out and the lambs got restless, obsessed with milk and racing to their mother’s calls, did their grandfather leave his stone; he raised his rod with one hand and his coat with the other, intercepted the lambs and gave an order to the cluster of inexperienced little shepherds:

“Spread out your coat! Use your clothes!”

And then, his voice like a trumpet, turning towards the village, he yells out to the shepherds:

“Drive them along! Walk on!”

His voice echoes and breaks up over the rocky landscape, across the banks and hollows; the shepherds hear him and quickly push the sheep on; the bleating fades, as do the cries of their keepers. The only remaining racket here comes from the boys who are staying with the small flock. They thrash the air with their clothing, and only when the determined lambs are ready to forget their mothers’ voices and start vying, to sad sounds “baa,” for the green tips of grass, does Grandfather sit back down on his jacket. With two dark, bony fingers he pats the pockets of his vest, searching for

crumbs of tobacco, and, not finding any, he smacks his charred old pipe of cherry wood on his palm. It sputters uselessly in his mouth, and he sinks wearily into thought while staring at the empty road.

Without stirring, pipe in his mouth, the old man sits through all the dusky winter afternoons, watching through the little window-pane as the snow piles up on the clearing in front of his house, on the bushes and the trees. Since he's now past eighty, no one relies on him for work anymore. On those long winter evenings when the womenfolk spin wool and knit, he sits on the three-legged stool by the hearth; occasionally the fire beneath the cauldron would blaze up and then settle back down, and the yellowish-red flickers of the fire would play across his bronze-colored face. At times he would complain:

"Look at this. As soon as folks don't have to work anymore, they slowly start to die..."

And if there's somebody there to listen to him, then he'd talk about the strength he used to have, and which he expended on clearing his own land and harvesting grain in Slavonia, and in American mines and on the railroads there. He loved to talk, and he had a great memory; speaking about the past animated him so much that he seemed literally to return to his more robust days.

"You know, people used to have such a hard time of it, and they had to put up with every kind of trouble and difficulty!"

And now the old man sits peacefully on his jacket and does not notice as Danica signals to Narandža to unfold the embroidery with the yellow thread: she's impatient and wishes to see what became of yesterday's design of theirs from behind the house; hiding from their younger sisters and brothers, they had spread out a piece of table-cloth fabric and superimposed on it their smallest sickle. Then using a pencil, they had traced its outline on the canvas. When they were satisfied with their work, the girls exchanged conspiratorial smiles; Danica even clucked enthusiastically with her tongue, and they inquire of the old man:

"Grandpa, is this fir tree really old?"

The old man doesn't move, and it seems like he hadn't heard what his granddaughters had asked. The profile of his face makes it seem like he is an old-fashioned picture, something sculpted with just a few sharp strokes into grayish stone: the stark, slanting line of his high forehead, and a nose created by two quick blows, beneath which the line of his lips disappears

into the gray mustache descending over his angular chin. The old man is lean and bony all over, withered and wrinkled with years. Leaning forward, with his elbows on his knees, he appears to have been sitting there for ages, and he stares at the rocky road shining white in the sun and at the bright greenery.

"Is it, Grandpa?"

Slowly the old fellow turns his head, looks the tall tree up and down, and replies thoughtfully:

"This fir? Well, yes...It's ten or fifteen years older than I am."

The fir was the tallest tree growing along the road in the whole region. The old man looked at its rejuvenated crown adorned with brilliant sparkles of sunlight. He pointed at the tree with his empty pipe and affirmed with a sense of friendship born of old age:

"So it is. Yes...It has seen all kinds of things in its lifetime!"

After casting a look at his lambs, and at the girls, he smacked his pipe against the palm of his hand and began to murmur:

"If it would just start telling us its own story..."

He was lost in thought, observing his old acquaintance from childhood as it, the old fir, all decked out with spring, sunned itself and contentedly waved the tips of its drooping branches.

"Ah yes, it's older than I am," the old man sighs.

He plunges deep back into his past, and his eyes descends to the road; it stretched drowsily through the hot time of the day, moving gently amidst the soft, light-green shrubs.

"And people, Grandpa, how did people live when this tree was just a sapling?"

The old man's reply is like a low-pitched echo that came bouncing back from the distant past:

"When that fir tree was a little girl, the farm laborers were ceasing to be serfs..."

At the same moment, both of the girls turn and lock their eyes on the old tree. The things they had learned in secret, in small groups of young people, about those distant times, were suddenly right there, next to them, hidden in the obscure shadows of the tree's crown.

"Tell us about it, Grandpa."

These little girls from Lika, who had read the *Narodna Čitanka*, or *People's Primer*, in secret, and other books that comrades they didn't know

sent them from Belgrade and Zagreb, and who were embroidering, in stealth, a large hammer and sickle, took a passionate interest in the youthful years of this tree, which they referred to as an old lady. The tree – which for almost the whole spring continues carrying the fierce Lika winters under its heavy façade, shivering restlessly or furiously only when the north wind brings its message from the mountains known as Kapela and Velebit – now rustling fragrantly in the mountain wind, fragrant with spring. The girls are enthusiastic about its youth and its adulthood, too, because this day, the eve of the first of May in the year 1939, holds in store for this old tree – that had already lived through so much – one more experience.

"She and I are old, old, old."

These two old creatures – Grandpa Marko and the fir tree – speak in hushed tones about ancient things, paying no attention to the youthfulness gleaming in the quick, inquisitive eyes of these girls from Končarev Kraj; they, carried along by the wide underground current of freedom-loving unrest, had started to read while they followed their little lambs around.

"How did people live back then?" This is their question to those two old figures who were sunning their knotty bark and swollen blue veins and tendons; and everything that those two remembered, the girls put together with what they were discovering from the little notebooks that people passed from hand to hand.

So the old ones went on and on talking softly about old times, about how once, here in the region of the Habsburg Empire known as the Military Frontier, all men, women, and children were called "the Kaiser's people," and they were deployed in companies and regiments in order to defend the Austrian border from the Turks, and how all of the Military Frontier had to be ruled according to the strict military regulations of the frontier troops, so that when a commander of the local watch caught someone in violation of it, they had to then "run the gauntlet."

"And my older brother, children, whose name was Stojan, may he rest in peace, ran the gauntlet of thirty other boys. Three times out and three times back. They scarred up his entire back, and for a week he had to dunk his shoulder blades in the cooling waters of the spring."

And while the peasant-border guards lived under the birch rod of the officers of the Military Frontier, in the province proper, in Civil Croatia, the peasant-serfs simultaneously rebelled against feudalism…

“And the nobles, by God, got scared, and they saw how the peasants extricate themselves from serfdom and they could not squeeze them anymore; so now they’re starting to negotiate in the assembly in Budapest: you can sign the arrangements or not sign them, but all across Croatia not a single serf had for a long time gone off willingly to do compulsory labor for the lord of the manor.”

The old man shakes his head and adds, measuring his words: “Children, the people are like a frightful behemoth: they wriggle and squirm for a long time long, but when they get to their feet and start moving – it’s over!”

The girls’ eyes glowed avidly: their heroine – the old tree – had come of age during the transition between two systems: she’d witnessed the collapse of the Croatian nobility and watched a new social formation, a new class, arise along that very road.

“Great amounts of grain started being carted from Karlovac for export, via Senj and Rijeka, and herds of horned cattle were being driven past.”

Singing Illyrian folk tunes (“Straight as an arrow flies the bird…”) the domestic merchants and middlemen grew wealthy.

“And, well, sure enough, rich Hungarian and Croatian nabobs began to bicker and quarrel over this trade.”

Feeding themselves on polenta topped with a sauce of brine, the frontier soldiers of Lika guarded the borders of the Empire; regional deputations limped along on the Louisiana Road between Karlovac and Rijeka, and carts overloaded with Danubian grain raised dust from Vienna to Budapest and from Budapest to Vienna, and agreements were made at the expense of the Slavic population. The simple folk cried out: “We don’t speak German or Hungarian! We are Croats, do you understand?” And from Imperial Vienna came the reply: “To His Supreme Apostolic Grace it is permitted to the rebellious Croats to proclaim to foreigners ‘Živio’, in their language, instead of ‘Hoch’. His untrustworthy subjects then translated ‘Hoch’ as ‘Down With’. Franz Josef then heard, across Croatia and Slavonia, false translations of his Apostolic command. When no one was looking, he winked at the uprising of the common folk of Herzegovina and Bosnia, and he eavesdropped on the poet Đura Jakšić as he cheered from Serbia: “Into battle, into battle, off we go to holy battle!” Smoothing his gray mutton-chops, he then occupied Bosnia.

“Well, children, that’s when they did away with the Military Frontier. The Turks had been driven out of Bosnia, true enough, so what was the need for the Military Frontier anymore? Our people from the Krajina weren’t able to find their feet, though. It’s a very serious matter to have lived for that amount of time under military rules! Back then I was a hale and hearty twenty-six year old. ‘Now you are free’, they tell us, the people. ‘You don’t belong to any company or any regiment.’ And the people thought: ‘Heaven help us! There is no law anymore!’ The beatings at the hands of the border guards were over, and the people found it strange. ‘What is all this?’ they said. ‘They aren't going to knock us around anymore?’ Punishments switched over to a civil model from the military one, and the people got accustomed to just appearing before the gendarmes with a song on their lips about ‘taking a rest under the Kaiser’s roof.’”

“Ugh,” says Danica, interrupting her grandfather’s narration. “They were so naive!”

Her grandfather removes the pipe from his mouth and gives the two girls a look of surprise. He turns away, offended, and admonishes them:

“Every age has its own wisdom.”

“Don’t interrupt him!” Narandža reminds her sister. Tilting her head, she carelessly spread the yellow sickle onto the linen in front of her. But the old man doesn’t see it; he is facing the street and keeps puffing nervously on his empty pipe.

“Tell us what they did, Grandpa!”

“Well, in those days, powerful outlaws appeared. The *hajduks*. The middlemen and carters and crews of wranglers would stop along these roads when they were on their way to a fair in Karlovac or Udbina...Money came into the villages and the family cooperatives were completely divided up, and only usurers and lawyers made a good living. There were no shops of any kind, and some of the forests were cut down for export, while down below, in the areas with plum trees, they made *rakija*...And so, once more, powerful people came: whoever had pockets deep enough to shell out five *forints*, he went to Slavonia; if you could raise at least twenty-five *forints*, you could go to Prussia; and if you scraped together two hundred *forints* – you went to America. People started raising the funds for their steamer tickets by going to savings banks with their property deeds and co-signers...”

Here Grandpa Marko falls silent. He presses his lower lip up into his mustache. He arches his eyebrows high. The old man is thinking back to those new times, which had introduced new words and new social relationships into the villages of the frontier guards. Before then he'd been a privileged soldier and border guard, and not a landowner's serf brought up just on military discipline and trained only for the army. He found himself suddenly surrounded by "savings banks" and "steamer fare," and instead of facing his district commander he stood "at attention" before a usurer.

"The villages were teeming with immigration agents from various companies. The mighty Austrian Empire couldn't figure out what to do with so many young people looking for work, but America – America needed basic laborers. Therefore, over ten years, from 1903 to 1913, around 30,000 healthy people immigrated from Croatia to America.30,000!"

The girls listen as the old man, clenching his empty pipe in his teeth, goes on softly but at length about the past, checking off individual events the way someone walking down a long, monotonous road taps the stone mile markers on the wayside.

"Did the peasants rebel, Grandpa?" the girls ask.

In Narandža's lap, slowly, stitch by stitch, the yellow handle of a hammer is taking shape next to the plump sickle.

"Did they ever! The times were such that you were either just about to have an uprising or you were in the midst of one."

Grandpa recalls that people working in Karlovac loading freight forcefully removed bilingual signs in the railroad offices and stations.

"'Why did you nail these things up?' they said. 'In Hungarian? We speak Croatian.' All across Zagreb they busted up or pulled down all the signs like that, and when people in the villages heard about it, they started attacking men from high society, merchants, government officials..."

"And the youth, Grandpa, did they sit this out?"

"The young people? Oh, my. Right in front of Kaiser Franz Josef himself, when he came to Zagreb, they burned the Hungarian flag there by the statue of Jelačić. They forced Khuen-Héderváry to abdicate his position as the viceroy of Croatia. They sat it out, all right like that!"

Grandpa tells them that for years he had "emptied carts in the mines" of America, and sent back home, to Lika, everything he earned.

"And Lika is a bottomless pit. The folks here could hardly support themselves."

The father of Narandža and Danica, just like their grandfather, also had to go abroad. He pounded iron in Belgian factories, and in the crisis of 1931 he came back home empty-handed – and with a case of tuberculosis. And now this Petar, their father, tall and thin and with a chest sunken from his toils, sits coughing as he carves decorative handles for scythes; he talks about how the life of the industrial worker is just as hard as that of the impoverished peasant. In the evenings, with the logs of beech crackling and popping in the fireplace, and water bubbling and boiling up through pockets of air in the corn meal, Grandpa notes that at the turn of the century emigration agents hung tin tablets around the necks of illiterate people from Lika, the way you put a tag on a dog with the exact designation of which steamship line they were taking to America. His son Petar keeps the conversation going, with a new story of what it's like to look at the long list of lay-offs posted at the factory gate and come across your own name. And while the managers are at a loss about what to do with their products, the fired worker Petar Končar, returning to his home district, continues eating with a wooden spoon out of a wooden bowl, as his grandfather had done, and he remains sitting by the hearth on a three-legged stool, just as his great-great-grandfather had done.

Narandža and Danica and their peers listened to what they said, crowded together around the flickering lamp; they also read what the Party had given them by way of explanation. The time had come to cast off the capitalists, so that the people could take over and work for themselves.

The old man moves with difficulty; he stretches out his leg, which has fallen asleep, and looks at the sun, which has risen high in the sky. He notices the agitated lambs and gets slowly to his feet, directing his granddaughters:

"It's time."

The girls fold up their needlework, now completed, and decide to assemble the lambs and drive them to the house of their uncle, where their grandfather lives. And then, after whispering for a long while with their mother, they heat up a pot of water, pour in red dye, and submerge the best bedsheet they have.

It was the eve of the First of May. Dark shadows lash the forests and paths, casting them into shadow and then covering them more and more deeply moonless night. In the house everyone had already gone to sleep, the

father was coughing and clearing his throat in the hayloft above the stalls, and the two young women, keeping a sharp ear out, carefully descended through the darkness towards the road. Behind the hulking bushes another shadow arose; it was a young man of their age. Without a cap, in a black vest; he silently fell into step with the girls.

The old fir tree was quietly rustling some message; it was as tall as a tower, mysterious in the nocturnal blackness, and – so it seemed to the girls – much closer to the road than it looked by the light of day. It seemed like a haughty old lady, defiantly stepping out ahead of its counterparts. But when the young people were flush and snug beside its aged and knotty trunk, it covered them benevolently with profound darkness. Its bark, with its bulges and bumps, accepted the agile soles of Danica's feet as her muscular arms skillfully propelled her upwards, through the black branches and towards the crown.

The first of May dawned sunny and quiet. The girls drove the lambs up above the house, onto the opposite side of the road. From that side, out of the green beneath the dazzling gilded face of the early sun, the song can be heard:

"The girl behind the mountain is singing beautifully,
Sublimely sings the girl behind the mountain..."

The girls were knitting socks and singing a song in their harmonious, slightly raw voices – and it seemed that powerful spring juices were circulating on the rocky, overgrown ground.

And then some unsettling news reached them. A tall woman, with a black kerchief wrapped around her head, stopped where the girls were, let her sack of wool sink to the ground in front of her, and nodded with her head towards the road:

"On the tallest tree over by the side of the road, a red flag has shown up. Perish the thought!"

The girls, looking surprised, put down their knitting.

The woman used her hand to adjust the kerchief a bit on her forehead. She squeezed her colorless eyes and asked confidentially:

"What does it mean?"

The girls looked over at the spot where the flag was hanging. Then Narandža, as if she had all of a sudden just discovered it, cried out:

“May Day! Today is the First of May, Aunt Jeka! So what’s the flag like?”

“Oh,” Aunt Jeka began, arching her eyebrows, “It’s big! It’s three or four meters across! And when it blows in the wind, there’s a hammer and sickle that are easy to see up on top of the tree. I stopped and looked at it, by God. It’s silk, you know; it’s made of pure red silk, and it really shines!”

The woman easily picks up her sack again, puts it under her arm, looks back, and says in amazement:

“Who could’ve gotten it all the way up there?”

And across the whole of the spread-out area known as Končarev Kraj, and all across Babin Potok, the electrifying news quickly spreads by whisper:

“A red flag is waving by the side of the road!”

Thus men, and women, walked down the road in order to see the rebellious salutation. They passed by with their heads held high; they were looking up, at the crown of the fir tree, upon which fluttered this daring greeting of liberty. High up in the sky, on prominent display even as it was buffeted by the wind, it swelled and sparkled in the sun. The flag waved in a friendly and encouraging way, like the hand of a dear friend beckoning to you.

Eyes shining, but with inscrutable faces, the people walked along, and their souls were full of feelings of faith and pride: *You can see it! Here, among us, a hidden living power is growing, and nothing will crush it!*

Before noon, a gendarme rushed up from the village, and he began screaming at the resident of the house closest to the tree. It was an old man, who was sitting on the stoop of his dwelling.

“And why didn’t you, bunch of bandits, come report this to me? Eh? Why should the whole village and the entire district find out before me? Nobody says anything, bunch of communists that you are, and I just got the news now, in the noontime hour. From some man who was riding past on the bus!

The gendarme shouted and looked around, while the old man got up feebly and with difficulty from his warm spot on the stoop, placed a gaunt hand around his ear, leaned forward towards the man with the flushed face and asked, stone-deaf as he was:

“Huh? What’s that you’re saying?”

The gendarme visited the nearby houses, yelled at the members of the household he found there, and, embarrassed and angry, summoned them in the name of the law to the scene of the crime. There they were to tell him who hung up the flag. The people, spitting through their teeth, shrugged their shoulders.

"Who knows who put it up there?"

Some of them refused to go "to the scene of the crime," with the following justification:

"I've already seen it! It's big, and red, and it has a hammer and a sickle on it. I saw it!"

The gendarme, like a hyena in a cage, runs around and around that tall old fir tree and, turning his head back and forth, gives an order to a passer-by whose cap is down over his mocking eyes:

"Climb up there and remove it!"

"It wasn't me who put it there!" the young man says and casually shrugs a single shoulder. He stands there, provocatively; he puts a hand on the back of his head so his cap won't slide off and tosses his head:

"So how did anybody manage to climb way the heck up there?"

The gendarme is continually fingering the leather pouch at his hip. He snaps around like a thief in a stranger's house and gives an order to a barefoot boy in a ragged little coat who is serenely watching, with his big round eyes, everything that's going on:

"Up you go!"

The boy sniffles and takes a few steps back. Then he shakes his shaggy head:

"Ay-yay-yay! I'm not getting mixed up in this!"

"God forbid! Who knows…" an old lady pronounces piously. She has bloodshot eyes and missing teeth and wore hand-knitted clothes of coarse, undyed wool. Slowly she crosses to the other side of the road.

From the village blow, the *pandur*, a local policeman, rushes up on a bicycle. He dismounts awkwardly and reports with great excitement:

"They called from Vrhovina and asked if the rebellion has been put down!"

Standing astride the middle of the road, the gendarme screams at the policeman:

"You fool! You alcoholic nincompoop! 'Has the rebellion been put down?' I'll show you a rebellion!"

And he mounts the bike and speeds towards the village. Behind him, scratching the back of his head, the *pandur* follows on foot.

A multitude of branches on the tall old fir tree now begin to move. There is disdain in this rustling message.

From above, where Končarev Kraj is located, Grandpa Marko descends slowly. Tapping his stick, he stops above the spot where he'd sat that morning with his granddaughter. Seeing the old fir tree reanimated in the sun, he says to her approvingly:

"So be it. Yes, indeed. She's seen all kinds of things in her lifetime."

The red flag "of purest silk, with a hammer and sickle sewn in place with golden thread", the people take note of it with concealed enthusiasm. It flutters there for the whole day, on that first of the month of May in the year 1939, up on the soaring fir tree by the side of the road that leads from Babin Potok to Plitvice, below Končarev Kraj.

The next day at dawn, some unknown person took the flag down.

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THE END

Translated by John K. Cox

Source: "Devojke iz Končareva kraja", from Milka Zicina, *Reportaže* (Beograd: Rad, 1950), pp. 1–22.