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REMEMBERING GOLI OTOK IN DAVID ALBAHARI'S NOVEL DANAS JE SREDA

Abstract: Since the 2010s, interest in Goli Otok has increased in the successor states of former Yugoslavia. Numerous artistic works deal with the former prison island in the Adriatic Sea, where supposed supporters of the Soviet Union were imprisoned after the break between Tito and Stalin in 1948. One of these works is the novel *Danas je sreda* (2017) by David Albahari. In the novel, the son learns about the past of his father, who was imprisoned on Goli Otok and now suffers from Parkinson's disease and dementia. However, the father is not only a victim but also a perpetrator himself: As a party commissioner, he acted brutally, and so he behaved within the family. The first-person narrator did not experience Goli Otok himself but became a secondary witness through his father's narrations. By exploring the narrative strategies for coping with the traumatic past in *Danas je sreda*, this article aims to shed light on the depiction of Goli Otok in contemporary literature from the region.

Keywords: Goli Otok, post-memory, (secondary) testimony, David Albahari, *Danas je sreda*

The break between Tito and Stalin in 1948 and the expulsion of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia from the Communist Information Bureau triggered the Yugoslav regime to unleash a surveillance campaign against its internal and foreign enemies. (Calic 2020,228–230). Sometimes, a false comment or a joke was reason enough to be imprisoned. Most of the political prisoners were taken to Goli Otok¹, an island in the Croatian Adriatic Sea. Many knew about Goli Otok, yet no one dared to discuss it. The Yugoslav secret police forbade the released inmates from speaking about Goli Otok. Before their release, inmates had to sign the so-called “Commitment” (obaveza), committing them to collaborate with the secret police and not to speak about their experiences in the camp with others (Previšić 2019: 491). The children were usually told their father (or mother) was “na službenom putu”² - on a business trip.

In the 1980s, triggered by the death of Tito, a liberalization of social and political circumstances began, which made it possible to take up topics that used to be taboo (Calic

1 The nearby island of Sveti Grgur held a similar camp for women.

2 *Otac na službenom putu* (1985) is the title of the most famous and successful Yugoslav film, directed by Emir Kusturica, screenplay by Abdulah Sidran. The film won the Golden Palme in 1985.

2020: 380). The best-known novels of this first wave of literary reappraisal are *Kad su cvetale tikve*³ by Dragoslav Mihailović, the autobiographical novel *Levitani* (1972) by Vitomil Zupan, Branko Hofman's *Noć do jutra* (1981), *Tren 2* (1982) by Antonije Isaković, *Pismo/Glava* (1982) by Slobodan Selenić and the play *Karamazovi* (1980) by Dušan Jovanović. (Münnich 2005, 135-136) The well-known Yugoslav film *Otac na službenom putu* (1985) deals with the topic of Goli Otok and the political and social circumstances after 1948, as do the films *Balkanski špijun* (1984), directed by Božidar Nikolić and Dušan Kovačević (who wrote the same-titled play on which the film is based) and *Srećna nova '49'*, set in Macedonia. However, the interest in Goli Otok did not last long because it did not provide any points of contact for the (ethno) nationalism that emerged in Yugoslavia in the 1980s (Münnich 2005: 138).

Numerous artistic works⁵ since the 2010s show a renewed interest in Goli Otok in the region. While many authors from the 1980s draw on their own experiences, these artists belong to the subsequent generations and do not have their own memories about Goli Otok. Instead, they have “postmemories”, as Marianne Hirsch (1997) calls the memories of the subsequent generation of a traumatic historical event. Hirsch differentiates between “familial” and “affiliative” postmemories. While familiar postmemory refers to the descendants of victims and survivors of a catastrophe, “affiliative” postmemory also includes those not directly affected. According to Hirsch (2008: 115), “[...] less-directly affected participants can become engaged in the generation of postmemory, which can thus persist even after all participants and even their familial descendants are gone.”

As the numbers of living primary survivors of a collective catastrophe wane, how subsequent generations deal with the traumatic stories of their ancestors (or of the previous generation in general) becomes more important. Scholars from various disciplines discuss the nature of secondary witnessing, mainly in the context of the Holocaust.

3 Mihailović, who died in 2023 in Belgrade, was imprisoned on Goli Otok in 1951/1952 and was one of the first who took up the topic of Goli Otok. In the novel, Goli Otok is not mentioned by name, but it is made unmistakably clear that it is the infamous island; for example, at the passage: “Ne boj se ti, Šampione, za njega. Tamo će malo da radi. Malo će da tuca kamen” (Mihailović 1980, 44). “Knocking stones” can be read as a reference to the person being taken to Goli Otok, the “bare,” rocky island. A year after the publication of the novel in 1968 by Matica Srpska, the stage version of the very successful book was ready. On October 6, 1969, the premiere took place at the Jugoslavensko dramsko pozorište. However, the sold-out play was taken out of the repertoire after only the fifth performance - a decision taken by the party leadership of Josip Broz Tito, Edvard Kardelj, and Marko Nikezić. It was not until 1984 that the play was performed again, at the Narodno pozorište in Belgrade, as well as on other stages in the country (Hodel 2018, 70-74).

4 The film from 1986, directed by Stole Popov, was among the nominees for the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 1987.

5 For example the novels *Oko otoka* (2009) by Vanja Bulić, *Otkup sirove kože* (2011) by Abdulah Sidran, *Zlotvori* (1997/2017) by Dragoslav Mihailović, *Beogradski trio* (2018) by Goran Marković; the documentaries *Goli otok* (2012) by Darko Bovoljak, *Grebanje duše* (2014, HRT) or *Goli* (2014) directed by Tiha K. Gudac (winner of the Srce Sarajeva Prize) and the movie *Kad su cvetale tikve* by Marko Novaković and Slobodan Skerlić; Andreja Kulunčić's artistic project “Vi ste Partiju izdale onda kada je trebalo da joj pomognete” from 2022 or the exhibitions “Dobro došli na Goli otok” by Milimir Kovačević.

This article examines how the topic of Goli Otok is represented in David Albahari's novel *Danas je sreda*, published in 2017. The nameless first-person narrator is confronted with his father's conflict-laden past: As a young party commissar, the father (also nameless) had humiliated and tortured wealthy farmers and pastors. He had even belonged to a firing squad. Later, he himself fell victim to the political purges and ended up on Goli Otok. Now, he has fallen ill with Parkinson's disease and dementia, and his son cares for him. The first thing that came to the father's mind after his diagnosis is not the family, as one may suppose, but: "Nikada neću videti Rio"⁶ (Albahari 2017: 17).

During their daily walks in Zemun, a suburb of Belgrade, the father remembers his dark past and begins to talk about it. The walks represent not only a physical movement in space but also a movement in time. The walks are interrupted by resting on a park bench due to the father's physical condition. The radius of their walks becomes smaller and smaller, like a noose that tightens. This limited possibility of movement correlates with the waiting for the father's total dementia. The walks always take place along the Danube River, reflecting the father's stream of memories. The river is a sense-structuring element for the plot in the sense of a chronotype, as Bakhtin 1975 described the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature (Bakhtin 2008). The motif of the river in connection with the father's dementia brings to mind Lethe from Greek mythology, the river of forgetfulness and one of the rivers of the underworld of Hades.

The narrative is strongly structured by temporal aspects, already indicated by the title and the first sentence: „Danas je sreda, dvanaesti jun, sedam sati ujutro.”⁷ (Albahari 2017: 5). The story begins with an abrupt entry into the everyday life of care of the father. In Serbian folklore, Wednesday is considered an auspicious day, a day well suited for starting something or going on a journey. For the father in Albahari's novel, it is a journey into the past that ultimately ends in oblivion due to his illness. His confessions are a kind of relief. "Sretna sreda" is wished to sick people in some areas of Serbia for a quick recovery.

Soon, however, a new dimension of the novel opens up when the theme of illness is joined by the political and historical, as the father begins to tell the son about his past. Their walks always take place at noon, the hour of Pan⁸, as it is considered in Greek mythology.

[...] već jedino mirovanje podneva, vreme bez senke i samim tim bez dokaza o postojanju, vreme kada i jesi i nisi, kada te i ima i nema, kad si i sve

6 "I will never see Rio." (Translated by the author of this article, LH)

7 "Today is Wednesday, June 12th, seven o'clock in the morning." (Translated by LH)

8 Pan, a mix of man and goat, the son of Hermes and a nymph, is one of the numerous phallic gods that can be seen in connection with fertility and growth. Pan's nature is dark and terrifying, but vicious only when his sleep is disturbed at noon (Abenstein 2016, 99). The theme of sexuality is also taken up in the novel when the father demands the sexual enhancer Viagra. He has a sexual interest in one of the nurses (Albahari 2017, 6-7).

i ništa, večan početak i stalan kraj, i da i ne, i tačka i belina bez tačke.⁹
(Albahari 2017, 91)

The noon hour represents a special moment because there is no shadow, and nothing can be hidden or concealed. Thus, maximum light is shed on the father's confessions about his atrocities.

The former family tyrant and feared party commissar has himself become a victim due to his imprisonment on Goli Otok, but also due to Parkinson's disease, which he sometimes sees as God's punishment (although neither he nor his son believe in God). The illness turns the once-feared party commissar into a ridiculous figure. "Ništa nije smešnije od golog punačkog postarijeg muškarca koji, nogu zapetljanih u izbledele gaće, pompežno objašnjava sudbina svemira"¹⁰ (Albahari 2017: 5). Tragedy and slapstick merge when the son gets fits of laughter seeing his father stumbling and falling – a side effect of his illness: "Za to vreme, ja sam se tresao od smeha. Ima, naime, ljudi koji se histerično smeju, pa čak i plaču, kada vide kako neka pada, i ja sam jedan od njih"¹¹ (Albahari 2017: 92). The comic element is composed of a mixture of tragedy and grotesqueness of human existence and decay. This is reminiscent of a style of comedy as described by Bergson at the beginning of the 20th century. In the first chapter of *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Bergson describes the comical in human weakness. The human being is reduced to something mechanical, like falling and laboriously picking himself up again (Bergson 2018).

The novel questions supposed truths about perpetrators and victims. The father was brought to Goli Otok by his wife, the mother of the first-person narrator. This was her revenge for his faithless behavior and especially for the fact that he had tortured one of her relatives at that time (Albahari 2017: 134). The description of the mother as a poisonous snake on the father's chest – "ščućurena kao zmija otrovnica na njegovim grudima" (Albahari 2017: 134) – once again brings to mind Greek mythology: the Erinyes (or Furies) are three implacable goddesses who take vengeance on behalf of a person who has been wronged (Hansen 2020: 156). With snake hair and black skin, equipped with whips and torches, they mainly avenge offended or killed mothers but also defend the rights of higher family members. Later, the Erinyes transform into protectors of justice and hold other moral and social functions (Abenstein 2016: 88). Thus, the novel opens a discourse on the change from revenge and vigilante justice to justiciability. This change is recognizable in the novel through the generational constellation of father and son.

9 "a single resting of the noon, a time without shadow and already thereby without the proof of its existence, a time in which you are and are not, in which you exist and do not exist, in which you are everything and nothing, an eternal beginning and a constant end, a yes and a no, both a point and the whiteness without a spot." (Translation by LH)

10 "Nothing is funnier than a naked plump old man who, his feet tangled in faded underpants, pompously explains the fate of the universe." (Translation by LH) It is remarkable how Albahari writes about a disease from which he himself suffers.

11 "Meanwhile, I was trembling with laughter. There are people who laugh hysterically and even cry when they see someone fall, and I'm one of them." (Translation by LH)

While the father himself becomes a victim of revenge for his former victims¹², the son does not break with the father but continues to care for him, even though he condemns his father's actions.

Regarding his suffering on Goli Otok, the father is a "moral witness." According to Margalit (2002: 148), a moral witness both witnesses and experiences suffering inflicted by an unmitigated evil regime. At the same time, however, the father had always acted manipulatively and was even a perpetrator himself as a party commissioner. This calls into question his credibility and authenticity as a witness. As Schmidt (2017) showed, perpetrator testimony is not unconditionally accepted as witness testimony. The father, indeed, is an unreliable narrator, and the son doubts his credibility – not only due to his dementia but also because the son assumes that he is probably telling a version of the story that is embellished in his favor. Only when it comes to Goli Otok does the narrator believe that the father is speaking the whole truth. This truth is difficult to bear: it turns out that the father not only willingly denounced other prisoners on Goli Otok in order to obtain better prison conditions (as many prisoners did), but he even denounced the fellow prisoner who saved his life during the cruel trellis upon arrival on the island (Albahari 2017: 135).

An intertextual reference to David Grossman's¹³ novel *See under: Love* (1989) initiates a conversation about conscience between the father and son. The father sees his illness as a punishment, and his conscience is thus relieved.

Tog popodneva prepričavao sam mu odlomke iz romana Vidi pod: *Ljubav*. Prva dva dela romana nisu ga zainteresovala, ali se zato desilo nešto čudno kada sam počeo da prepričavam priču o Jevrejinu koji nije mogao da umre i o nacisti koji nije imao savest. Počeo je nešto da šapuće, mrmoljio je sebi u bradu, huktao i odmahivao glavom dok su mu se ruke nekontrolisano trzale.¹⁴ (Albahari 2017: 29)

The father eases his conscience by transferring the burden of his memories to his son. Insofar, the father is dependent on the son, as he is the only audience of his confessions of his atrocities, but also of the suffering he experienced on Goli otok. In conversation with the father and as his listener, the first-person narrator becomes a witness, too, a secondary witness. On the occasion of the work on the Holocaust Archive "FortunoffVideoArchive," Dori Laub (1992: 85) classified the interviewees as witnesses as well, since "[...], the interviewer-listener takes on the responsibility for bearing witness that previously the narrator felt he bore alone, and therefore could not carry out." In his

¹² The sister of the first-person narrator also takes revenge on her father. She cannot forgive him for his unloving and tyrannical behavior toward her mother, who has died of cancer. She stays out of her father's care and behaves indifferent to his suffering.

¹³ The Israeli author has also written a novel about Goli Otok. His novel *More Than I Love My Life* (2019) is based on the life of Eva Panić Nahir, a Yugoslav Jew who was imprisoned on Sveti Grgur.

¹⁴ "That afternoon I retold to him excerpts from the novel *See under: Love*. The first two parts of the novel did not interest him, but something strange happened when I began to retell the story of a Jew who could not die and a Nazi who had no conscience. He began to whisper something, murmuring to himself, hooting and shaking his head as his hands twitched uncontrollably." (Translation by LH)

function as the narrator, the son retells the story of his father. He must find a way to deal with the fact that his father was both victim and perpetrator. The more he learns about his father's past, the more incomprehension and criticism he develops, but he does not break with the father. Instead, he, at the least, tries to approach his father's experiences through imagination and empathy. He succeeds in this quite well, and thus, the son has the chance to cancel out the conflicts of the past.

The story ends with the disappearance of the father after his hospitalization. What exactly happens to the father remains unanswered. The first-person narrator admits: "Od tog trenutka, moje sećanje postaje krajnje nepouzdana."¹⁵ (Albahari 2017: 154). It is not clear whether the father is already totally demented or whether he may have calculated everything. After all, he has acted selfishly for most of his life. Maybe he went to Rio? Or maybe the first-person narrator is not trustworthy as well?

The novel *Danas je sreda* relentlessly depicts the disease from which the author himself suffered. Albahari, however, manages to extract a portion of black humor from the disease. With *Danas je sreda* Albahari achieved "an artistic and moral victory over this disease," as Ilma Rakusa says in her laudation on occasion of the awarding of the Aleksandar Tišma Prize (Rakusa 2022). The topic of illness and care is interwoven with a complex presentation of Goli Otok, opening discussions about moral and ethical questions on perpetrators and victims, guilt and revenge, responsibility, illness, and care.

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15 "From that moment on, my memory becomes extremely unreliable." (Translation by LH)

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