

**VUK
DRAŠKOVIĆ**

The
Memoirs
of **Jesus**

Translated by
Mary Thompson Popović

■ Laguna ■

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*For he did not kill me in the womb, with my
mother as my grave, her womb enlarged forever.*

*Why did I ever come out of the womb to see
trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?*

JEREMIAH 20: 17-18

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To the foreign reader

I was born, learned to walk, started school, fell in love, finished university, became a soldier, journalist and writer in a large and wonderful European country, the America of the Balkans – Yugoslavia. It was the country of the Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Albanians, Hungarians, Romanians, Slovaks, Bulgarians, Jews and Roma. The leading religions of the world, Christianity (Roman Catholic and Orthodox), Islam and Judaism were preached in its churches, mosques and synagogues.

That Balkan America is no more. Created after World War I and the magnificent victory of the Serbian army at the Salonika front, occupied and dismembered by Hitler in 1941, Yugoslavia was restored in 1945, only to be pushed to her death in the last decade of the 20th century. Torn apart from within

in a terrible war of neighbor against neighbor, they killed her.

The hero of this story, a press photographer, bears testimony to the death of Yugoslavia: the crimes, the criminals and the main culprits for this great tragedy. Lame, but with a Christlike soul, his nickname is Limping Jesus.

At the same time, the apostles of hatred and madness directing the war often draw the mask of Jesus over their bloodied faces. They say that this is “a holy war” to fend off heretics and unbelievers. Their Jesus is a monster, a murderer, an avenger. They kill Him in His own name. Their crime in crucifying Him is far greater than that ancient one, long ago at Golgotha.

Finally, as author, I too play a part in this book, the part of Maksim – not a speaking part, but almost all the characters, including the hero, speak of me and in their mirror, my face is not without scars.

The Author

The Square

Veljko Vujović is hopeful that this March day¹ will be his day, his chance to outshine all the other news photographers and cameramen. He shivers with excitement, exhilaration, an apprehension such as he has never felt before.

It's all there before him, an anonymous man with a bad limp from the boondocks of Herzegovina, here in the capital of Yugoslavia, of Serbia, watching it all, photographing it, the red star cut out of the flags like in Bucharest two years ago. There they did for the communist flags first, then the dictator and the dictator's wife. It's Bucharest in Belgrade today, thinks Veljko.

Through the eyes of his Leica he captures the heated faces around the monument to the prince², assassinated over a hundred years ago, killed by the Serbs,

not the Turks³, although bare-headed and cast in bronze as he rides his prancing steed, he points an extended forefinger towards Istanbul, showing the Turks the way out of Serbia.

This afternoon it seems the young prince is pointing a finger at another power that surrounds the Square from all sides, ordering it to fall back. Under this impression, Veljko Vujović, half crippled, his left leg short and crooked, giving him an obvious limp, torso oddly hunched towards the shoulder that carries his bag, starts to run towards the armed mask-faces peering out under the helmets, darts forward towards these faces mounted on horseback, the armored personnel carriers, the attack dogs crouching at the feet of their handlers, comes up to them, aims, clicks, aims, clicks in the midst of the uproar around the prince, around The Horse as the Serbs call the statue. Veljko's forehead breaks out in sweat, even his good leg seems to buckle from the shouts of *Gang of reds, Gang of reds*, the roar from thousands of throats. He focuses the Leica on the balcony of the theatre not to miss the speakers inflaming and urging on the encircling people, although fear is in all their voices, even the voice of the one calling out: *Shake, shake, shake the tree of tyranny!* Veljko doesn't know who he is; he doesn't know who the rest of them are either as they take their turn before the crackling microphone. Only once did he see the ringleader

of the revolt up close, the one whose name they're chanting around the Square. He has heard all sorts of things about the man; he doesn't feel the hatred his father does for him, but has no great liking for him either. He tries to snap him, the face in the lens is a blur, the faces of the other speakers are dark too. The Square boils like a cauldron; many are shouting *We don't want war!* others yell *Get the Ustasha!*⁴ *Gang of Reds! To the Bastille!*⁵ – to the Serbian Television – the chant echoes across the Square and Veljko notices that the horseman, the Serbian prince, is grasping the flag with the hole where the red star used to be, and he thinks that the dead man called out *We want the King*, summoning his people to strike at the *Bastille*, or so he imagines. He takes a picture of the prince with the flag and a cluster of youths hanging around the horse; they and not the prince are in command, and all at once Veljko feels sorry for the red star. He was born under it, learned and grew up under it. He feels a wave of pity for himself, his life, his father Gavro, but the feeling soon passes because suddenly, he sees the star as a hydra ready to pounce on him and all those around the prince. It is on the caps and helmets of the troops, on the steel APCs, on the belts of the attackers, even on the forehead of a white horse which Veljko spies and, turning to take its picture, he clicks on empty, he's run out of film.

Quickly he takes out the Nikon and aims it. *Say no to war*, the Square chants, *To the Bastille*, and Veljko is about to take up the call of the most belligerent among them but is afraid. It's a long walk to the Television building, really long, he's lame, he'll be the last to arrive and today he must be the first and fastest everywhere, his pictures must – at last – be published in the Belgrade papers, in Paris and Moscow and in the USA. All the leading dailies and TV stations are here today on this Square. He is done with jobbing for the small-time sheets of Herzegovina and Sarajevo, today he's bound for the top, the heights, it must be so, it must, but he's not going to make it if this crowd really sets off for the Television building. Under his breath he curses Maksim, the rebel ring-leader. What's the lunatic going to do in front of TV Bastille? President Marko Lazić has read the book of Bucharest well, he won't leave the gate of the television-dungeon open like in Bucharest, he won't be another Ceausescu. It's certain he's ringed his Bastille with troops and set up machine guns and cannon inside. Don't go to the Bastille, Veljko almost shouts, but is prevented by the smoke; some young men are burning the flags with the star. Like witches sizzling at the stake, the fabric burns. He snaps away with his camera and the tears rise, whether from the smoke or from a sadness he hides and tries to subdue. This burning stake would kill his father, his heart would

break to see it. In his father's eyes, the dead Marshal Tito⁶ still lives, Yugoslavia is neither a Serb mistake nor a Croatian prison. Gavro won't admit that the red star has been done away with in Russia and all of Russian Europe, that it's been torn down in Slovenia and Croatia and lingers on only in Serbia and Bosnia, in Montenegro and Macedonia, but then most Serbs think that's all Serbia anyway.

Who's that on the balcony talking about flowers? Who's that singing of peace and love on the Square, he wonders, stumbling towards a girl holding out a bunch of flowers to a uniform and the German shepherd beside the uniform. Will she smile and stick the flowers in the revere of his tunic, maybe kiss the young trooper? But she's met by a raised arm and an icy stare from beneath the helmet. He aims the camera, the German shepherd growls, its handler pushes Veljko back with his rifle butt and says: *Move it, gimpy!*

He sways but doesn't fall; the bag slips off his shoulder, he lifts it and only then falls, because at an order he has somehow missed, infantry detachments and APCs and mounted police and handlers with dogs move into the attack, a low-down, all-out attack. A huge red tanker-truck carrying a water cannon moves up too, the people on the Square are drenched with torrents of water, bombarded with canisters of tear gas. As he picks himself up off the sidewalk, Veljko thinks they were firing real grenades,

they burst with such force. Clouds of whitish smoke hide the prince and the prince's people; the attackers lash out all around them with police batons, rifle butts and their boots, trampling the fallen, herding the people towards the monument. They trample over him where he lies curled up on the cobblestones. Lying, crawling, he photographs this hell-let-loose and sees nothing, eyes bloodshot and gummed shut from the tear gas; it penetrates his throat and lungs; he weeps and coughs but goes on snapping. The viewfinder catches the smoke, the sky, the blood-smearred faces, arms crossed protectively over eyes, batons and rifle butts in mid-swing, but no camera can capture the screams and cries of the thousands of the unlucky moving back towards the monument, tripping and trampling on one another, can't capture their coughing, desperate cries and curses, choking like victims in a gas chamber.

Veljko chokes too. He's given up trying to get up off the Square. He is struck down, flattened, unmoving. Multicolored flashes dance before his eyes. He thinks he's dying. Soon he thinks he's going mad, that he'll die mad, because he seems to see a silhouette under an enormous turban: it's him, it's Sultan Suleiman commanding the definitive charge on the defenders of Belgrade, and he's commanding his troops from here, from this very Square that was a meadow in August 1521. The defenders of Belgrade

were in the Roman fortress, the heat was unbearable, but suddenly, a gentle wind cooled the Sultan's face, refreshing him, he smiles with satisfaction and cries out three times *Koš hava, koš hava*, which means a fast wind, a swift, strong wind, which the Serbs were later to call the *košava*, the east wind that today, 9 March 1991, is blowing toxic gas into the eyes and lungs of the defenders of Belgrade, that's it, that's it, the *Koš hava, koš hava*.

Veljko Vujović is becoming delirious. He's sorry now that history has been his passion because if it hadn't, he wouldn't have known about Suleiman's *koš hava* and perhaps, today, on the agora, on the Square by the Serbian prince, the *košava* wouldn't be blowing. He sees nothing, hears nothing, not the order to *Charge, charge*; maybe he does hear it, but he's afraid it's a hallucination. The spring of close-packed bodies up against the monument suddenly uncoils in a charge, in salvation, to prevent everyone from being crushed and mashed as the attackers intended, so it seems to Veljko, who is trampled on again. *Charge, charge*, reverberates around the Square. Veljko regains his sight, the attackers are fleeing in panic, many without caps or helmets, many with bleeding faces, the APCs are burning, young men are climbing on to the water-cannon truck and turning the jet on the attackers, the mounted troops are leaving the scene at a gallop. *Ustasha, Ustasha!* The jeers ring out around

the Square. *They've poked Milica's eye out! Where's my cap?* A farmer is running across the Square carrying a piece of flat timber, battering any uniform within reach. *Boro's captured the machine gun.* Did that happen or is Veljko dreaming? *They've killed Gradimir, communist mothers!* The wind wafts the smoke from the tear gas into the surrounding streets, but in the Square clouds of black smoke billow from the flaming cars and APCs. Veljko begs someone to help him to his feet so he can get it all on film. *Serbia's got more tears than you've got tear gas.* A German shepherd, its leg broken, is whining somewhere in his vicinity. *They've killed Miloš!* Where is the shooting still coming from? Who's that singing? Why are they singing above the bodies of the dead, above him, and he's next thing to dead? *From Topola to Ravna Gora,* a Chetnik⁷ song. If Gavro were here he'd give it to them and no mistake, might even fire at them. To this day he's still in Tito's army with the partisans. As far as he's concerned, the King was deposed, the Royal Army defeated and Topola and Ravna Gora were symbols of atrocities.

They've broken my arm! It's a woman's voice but he can't see the woman. Ambulance sirens wail. *To the Bastille!* To Veljko's dismay they're off to the Bastille while he's left lying crushed on the Square. Yesterday was his thirtieth birthday. He was born on a Friday and they were going to call him Petko, Friday,

but today is Saturday. What made him remember his birthday? He's smothering in the smoke from burning car tyres and raving about the *Koš hava*, *Suleiman*, he thinks the dead prince ordered the charge from his bronze horse. Lazić will put it to the people that it was the prince who attacked the forces of law and order, yes, yes, the forces of law and order, that's what he'll say; he'll blame a dead man and the people will swallow the lie, all they do is swallow lies and evil, their favorite food, they eat lies for breakfast and lunch and supper. He read somewhere that someone had called the people cattle, obnoxious cattle.

We have injured here and people who can't move! someone shouts at the top of his lungs, *Send more ambulances!* No, no, can't have that, he's not getting on any stretcher, he has to go to the Bastille to get pictures, he has to get up off the Square, he must, he must. He struggles painfully to his feet, gets up and weaving drunkenly, his body weightless, he falls on to the Square, bangs his forehead on the paving stones and sinks down somewhere, sinks or floats upward. He seems to be flying upward on the wings of the angels in a story he heard as a child from Grandma Andjelija.

Immobilized, diagnosed with concussion and possibly internal injuries from being trampled on (many of those injured on the Square had serious internal

injuries), he lay in hospital, attached to a respirator and a drip. They rinsed the tear gas from his eyes but found nothing in his bag, his jacket or the pockets of his jeans that gave his name, profession, place or date of birth. To the doctors he was N.N., an unknown male in a coma. Doctors and nurses bustled constantly in and out of the ten-bed ward, the phone rang in the corridor outside. No one came to look for the lame press photographer and he heard nothing of what went on around him.

Deep down in a dream, if indeed it was a dream and his thoughts, ghost, spirit, whatever, were not already on the border between this world and the next, between life and whatever happens after life, he was a child, a boy of six with a sound leg, leaning on a crumbling village wall on Mt. Tavor in Herzegovina. His grandmother told him that the mountain's real name was Javor, but a long time ago, even before the Turks, a hermit had changed it to Tavor, no one knew why. It was his grandmother, too, who told him the wonderful story of the best man in the world, the best and most righteous, who loved everyone, did good to everyone, who healed the sick, turned water into wine, even raised the dead from their graves. People nailed this man to a wooden cross, drove nails into his hands and feet, scourged and tortured him as they had never tortured anyone. He gave up the ghost on the wooden cross but later he

rose from the dead. Childish imagination embellished the tale with much else besides. Little Veljko presented the story of Jesus to his village playmates as his own, not his grandmother's. This best and most just of men slept on the clouds, he told them, and sometimes you could see him. The three boys spent hours staring at the skies, trying to catch a glimpse of Jesus among the clouds. One day, a day that Veljko floated into from his coma in a Belgrade hospital ward, the four boys made a crucifix out of two planks, nailed them together and propped them against a ruined wall. Veljko wanted them to tie his hands and feet to the cross so that, crucified like Jesus, he could show them the cloud occupied by this best of men and see what he was doing up there.

A nurse heard the alarm go off on the heart monitor and ran to fetch the doctor. The wall collapsed on the boy on the cross. The patient emitted an odd cry and jerked about on the bed, but very shortly afterwards everything settled down and calm descended on patient, monitors and doctors.

The left leg was so crushed below the knee that the doctors in Nevesinje told Veljko's father, Gavro, that amputation was inevitable and immediately dispatched the injured boy to Mostar hospital. He was already on the operating table when surgeon

Esad Ćatović hurried into the theatre and staunchly opposed the amputation, entirely on his own initiative. The operation took six hours. Like the magician he was, Esad removed the fragments of bone from the crushed tissue, reconnecting severed blood vessels and nerves. Luckily for the boy, his youth, coupled with antibiotics, prevented the onset of gangrene. Within the next few months, Esad operated twice again. Veljko was sent to Belgrade on crutches for yet more surgery and from there to Igalo, a sanatorium by the sea. There he was to spend two years. He threw away the crutches, but one leg remained twisted and shorter than the other. When he got back to the village, he was no longer Veljko Vujović but Limping Jesus. The nickname was given him by the boys he was playing with before the accident, as they knew why they had made the cross of boards and why Veljko had asked them to tie him to it. The story told by the three boys and the nickname of Limping or Hopalong Jesus spread from Veljko's village of Čemernica to Nevesinje and throughout Herzegovina. Crippled and saddled with a hurtful nickname, he started school three years later than the others. Neil Armstrong was walking on the moon when Jesus from Čemernica was squaring up to the first three letters of the alphabet. He learned quickly and easily, managing to squeeze two school years into one. His teacher spoke of his particular gift for precisely retaining everything he read or heard;

Grandma Andjelija was sure that this had fallen into her grandson's lap straight from Heaven, from the cloud where Jesus sat. Veljko dreamed of studying history one day, but his father, Gavro, wanted his only son to do medicine at Sarajevo or Belgrade. However, it all turned out differently. At Nevesinje high school, Veljko was placed in the natural sciences section although he wanted to do literature, to act and recite at the school concerts. His teachers did not deny his talent for acting and reciting poetry, but because of his lameness and the nickname Jesus – probably – they redirected him towards the science department; the pupils there collected herbs and flowers, pressed butterfly wings or carried out experiments in the chemical lab and had nothing to do with concerts or showing-off in public. His great friend Momir took him to his father Boriša, whose photographer's store in downtown Nevesinje was like an artist's studio. The surfaces of the walls of two large rooms were hung with photographs which immediately riveted Veljko. They were fascinating, alive, whether they were of lined peasant faces, bulls sparring, a smiling girl, crows on a tree, a column of marching soldiers, a hare in mid-leap or a coffin over a grave.

“No writer or poet could evoke anything like this,” said Veljko in his coma, unreachable by doctors or hospital equipment, a coma in which snatches of film from his life unfolded before him.

“Photography is above all the other arts,” replied the photographer.

“But not above cinema,” argued his son, Momir.

“Above that too, way above. The moving picture is just a flash. Like lightning it blinds us to the real thing, to the detail,” replied Boriša, and his studio became Veljko’s school.

The experienced master taught him to take pictures, taught him easily on a Russian Leica: what to do in sunlight or in cloud, how to select an objective and when to press the button, how to judge distance and angle, how far to open the shutter. Soon, Veljko was limping off on forays of his own, anxiously watching Boriša develop his films in the dark room, transfer them to special paper in a cold-water bath and wait until the paper’s whiteness came alive. In the first few months, he didn’t photograph people, he avoided them. He took on another world, the world of the quick and the dead that surrounds people, the world they do not see: a bee on a flower, and on that bee another bee; a dog dozing with a cat sprawled on top of him; a log by the river that looked like a monk. He hunted down these details with the Leica and Boriša, the master, marveled at him. In token of his recognition, he made him a present of the Leica and a heap of film rolls. Veljko couldn’t do any developing at boarding school at Nevesinje or at his father’s house in Čemernica. He took the films to Boriša and

Boriša sent the best stills along with the films to the *Zavičaj* (*Homeland*) weekly in Mostar and the Sarajevo daily, *Oslobodjenje* (*Liberation*). Little by little, some of the illustrated weeklies began to publish his photos, but never over his name.

He barely managed to finish school. His passion for photography diverted him from medical studies and spoiled relations with his father, Gavro. Even the fees he received from many publishers, either to the bank account which he opened as soon as he came of age, or in cash into his hand, did nothing to diminish his father's ire. These were solid earnings and they increased, although he was not employed anywhere and didn't want to be. He wanted to be free, to be his own man. "If you weren't nicknamed Jesus, you'd be Evliya Celebi⁸ with a camera," the editor-in-chief of *Zavičaj* told him. And if he hadn't been nicknamed Jesus, the Mostar paper would have sent him, all costs paid, to Belgrade to attend Tito's funeral, although he was only twenty at the time. The nickname and the beard he grew after a slight skin infection prevented Veljko from becoming accredited.

Quarrels between father and son became more frequent after Tito's death, in the years when their once large and powerful country began increasingly to look like the wall of the house – the one-time house – that had crushed Veljko's leg. Everything upset Gavro. He accused "the unvanquished internal

enemy” for the growing hatred between Serbs, Muslims and Croats, always pointing the finger at the Ustasha and the Chetniks. He bitterly blamed the dead Marshal, his supreme commander in wartime and after, for not having “cleared Yugoslavia of every last weed”. If he had had Tito’s power in his hands, Gavro was wont to say, he would have banned Orthodox priests, Catholic friars and Muslim mullahs alike. “What else would you’ve banned?” Veljko once asked him. “Scribblers and fighters for democracy, like that Maksim, the one you went blind reading the books of. I’d fill the prisons. And I’d shave that beard of yours off for a start⁹,” snapped Gavro. “Good morning!” said Veljko, jumping down from his chair and starting to limp around the room. Wake up, Gavro, it’s morning, was what he wanted to tell his father, but that would be too provocative, and he hated long sentences. *Leave it be; terrific; wait a minute* – this was how he usually expressed disagreement. “Good morning”, as said to his father, had become a sort of verbal crutch, even when he wasn’t disagreeing with anyone. He greeted everyone with “Good morning”, on meeting them, on the telephone and whether it was morning, noon or night.

“Good morning!” he said to the doctor by his bedside when he suddenly swam out of his coma and opened his eyes, although it was nearly midnight.

“Good morning,” she smiled.

“My equipment,” he said.

“What equipment?” she asked in surprise.

“The cameras, where are they?”

“They’re here, they’re here, your equipment and your bag and jacket and jeans and your orthopedic shoe, it’s all here, don’t worry,” she barely managed to calm him and stop him from springing out of bed.

“What date is it?”

“Very shortly it’ll be the twelfth of March.”

“And the TV, the Bastille?”

“It fell. The director and four editors have been dismissed.”

“Did he get inside?”

“Who?”

“Beardy, Maksim.”

“He’s been arrested. He’s in prison... They arrested hundreds of our guys...” All at once, the young doctor pulled a mask over her face because an older doctor had come into the ward, a senior consultant, the ward chief. “You mustn’t get excited,” she told her patient. “You got off lightly. There were people killed, the hospitals are full of the wounded.”

“You’ll be going home in a few days,” the consultant told Veljko.

“I’m off tomorrow, as soon as it’s light. I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine, man, neither am I, neither is anyone in this country. That gang has demolished Belgrade, breaking into jewelers, smashing store

windows, looting everything... Not to mention the policemen killed or wounded. If I were president, I'd send the lot of them to hard labor, to the mines or the fields."

"Terrific," said Veljko.