

The Judgment of Richard Richter

Elijahova stolica

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The novel "The Judgment of Richard Richter" published in 2006 by a Bosnian-Herzegovinian writer, Igor Štiks (born in 1977), portrays the complex fate of its protagonist, whose family members are entangled in the so-called great history. The events of the Second World War and the bloody breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s serve as elements that bridge the main character's biography. Although the novel is set in modern times, it is deeply rooted in the historical context, reaching back to the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries. The tragic and turbulent fortunes of all characters are determined by political mechanisms that have remained unchanged for centuries. These mechanisms target communities, religious and ethnic groups, forcing them to hide and wander, which become the only means of survival. In the novel "Elijah's Chair" we observe a portrait of Europe in constant motion, haunted by spectres of its past – a history of migration, exoduses, displacements caused by wars, the disintegration of states as well as national and ethnic conflicts. As a result, identity becomes a source of frustration and oppression. Great politics and great history contribute to the destabilisation of the lives of nations as well as (ethnic and religious) communities, ultimately causing individuals to suffer.

The myths of Oedipus and Odysseus are woven into the novel. The protagonist represents a new homo faber who is unable to escape his fate, and Odysseus, returning – as he admits – to the wrong Ithaca. The work also explores the inheritance of trauma across generations, the burden of carrying the guilt of others (such as the responsibility for the Holocaust) and the history of others, like the descendants of the Balkan Sephardim who live the myth of returning to their ancestral homeland.

The central figure of the plot is Richard Richter, a middle-aged, somewhat burnt-out writer originally from Vienna but living in Paris. Richard accidentally learns that his biological father was likely a Yugoslavian Jew who was murdered in a concentration camp. Richard sets off on a journey to the war-torn besieged Sarajevo in 1992 to search for his roots. A visit to Sarajevo's Jewish Community, followed by a trip to an old Sephardic synagogue, becomes a pivotal moment in the novel. The titular Elijah's chair refers to an ornamented synagogue chair closely tied to Judaic tradition, particularly to the rite of circumcision of newborn boys. When Richard inadvertently sits in Elijah's chair, he becomes like characters of Greek tragedy who cannot escape their fate. Against the backdrop of besieged Sarajevo and the disintegrating multinational and multicultural Yugoslavia, the old Jew called Simon appears along with the old story of the Sephardic exodus from the Iberian Peninsula to the Balkans. Jews, expelled from Spain in 1492 by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, arrived in large numbers in the Balkans. They began to call Sarajevo Yerushalayim chico (Little Jerusalem), and in the state then governed by Sultan Bayezid II, they found security, religious freedom and favourable conditions for economic activity. In Štiks' novel, the blue notebook conceals a family secret and fifty years of lies. Several interesting paradoxes constitute the storyline

elements. Richard's foster father, who was conscripted into the Wehrmacht, helps to save the half-Jewish boy by marrying his mother. The child, in turn, as the foster son of a German soldier, throughout his life carries the burden of inherited guilt for the crimes of Hitlerism. The new, recovered semi-Jewish identity places Richard on the side of Holocaust victims and makes him an heir of Jewish heritage stigmatised by the myth of eternal wandering. In both cases, the protagonist grapples with psychological suffering, which Dominick LaCapra describes as secondary trauma.

The novel has an interesting structure, weaving together several narratives. The first concerns Richard Richer's intricate life. The second, introduces the Sephardim, their fate and exodus from the Iberian Peninsula, where together with the Muslims and Christians, they formed a symbiotic culture. In the third layer, Štiks places the Balkans and its perpetually traumatised inhabitants, who face old and new conflicts, instability, life of constant uncertainty amidst ever-changing borders. The novel has a story-within-a-story structure, with several other narratives emerging as it progresses. These include the Second World War, Nazism and the Holocaust, the war in Yugoslavia and the fleeing of Sephardic Jews from the Iberian Peninsula at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries. The main narrators are Richard, followed by Simon, and, toward the end of the novel, the Bosnian Ivor – the alter ego of the author. Through Ivor, Štiks explores Bosnia and the Balkans, revealing the spectres of the past and the issues of contemporary Europe. When, as a result of the post-Yugoslav war, Bosnia was destroyed as a multi-ethnic state, Jews – the smallest ethnic group – could no longer envision a future there. The character of Simon carries a universal message condemning the madness of wars, tangled identities, and human dramas – both individual and collective. The novel reflects on the absurdity of war, the cyclical nature of historical events, and political decisions resulting in harm, suffering and exile. The myth of a multicultural, tolerant and diverse Europe is contrasted with the nomadic, migratory reality created by refugee crises. In Štiks' novel, yet another European xenophobia is revealed in the Balkans and periods of peace and relative political stability are merely interludes successive wars.

LANGUAGE: Croatian / Hrvatski

This title was not censored before publishing