

Götz and Meyer

Gec i Majer

Presented by: Karlo Držaić

The short novel *Götz and Meyer* by David Albahari follows the narrating main character as he investigates the genocide of Belgrade's Jews during World War II. Central to his research are Götz and Meyer, two SS officers who drove a truck turned gas-chamber. Albahari examines the concept of the banality of evil and subjective responsibility, as well as the limits of historiography and its relationship with fiction.

The narrating main character, an unnamed Belgrade professor of Serbo-Croatian language and literature of Yugoslav nations, decides at the age of fifty to research his family tree and realizes that it almost entirely breaks off in 1942, when Belgrade's Jews were interned at the Sajmište camp, executed by poison gas, and buried in mass graves in Jajinci. While visiting archives, museums, and libraries, the narrator comes across a report from mid-March 1942 that mentions the arrival of a special-purpose truck and two specialists, SS officers, in Belgrade. These two men are Wilhelm Götz and Erwin Meyer.

The special task of Götz and Meyer was the extermination of Belgrade's Jews. They were not merely "cogs in a vast machine who didn't know what the machine was for" (pp. 19-20), but were well aware of their task and active participants in the genocide. They were the ones who, halfway from Sajmište to Jajinci, inserted a pipe that directed exhaust fumes into a metal box attached to their truck, in which around a hundred Jews were crammed.

Through meticulous research, the narrator uncovers detailed information about how the genocide of Belgrade's Jews was carried out. He knows the exact number of meals distributed at the Sajmište camp, the estimated value of the confiscated Jewish property, the brand of the truck driven by Götz and Meyer, even the truck's wheelbase and how many people could fit into its gas chamber while keeping the vehicle stable. However, despite this historiographical knowledge about the technology of genocide, he is unable to fully bring them to the level of subjects of history.

The titular "heroes," as individuals, are never fully comprehended by the narrator. Early in the novel, he admits, "I can only imagine them" (pp. 5). Throughout the novel, the narrator imagines Götz and Meyer, their lives before the war, their conversations while driving the truck, their desires, thoughts, and dreams. Yet, he never knows which one is which, who is Götz, and who is Meyer. "For instance, one time they had a long discussion about the benefits of dried plums for good digestion, and on another occasion, Götz, or Meyer, the one who perhaps wasn't married, suggested to Meyer, or Götz, the one who perhaps was married, that fresh fruit, if more available, could soothe his daughter's frequent sore throats" (p. 37).

The alternation between Götz and Meyer is a fundamental technique that recurs throughout the novel, through which the author fully realizes the idea of the banality of evil. The narrator envisions

the truck drivers as ordinary men with typical lives, families, dreams, desires, and problems. After long research and reflection, he even begins to see himself in Götz and, or, Meyer. Although Götz and Meyer are ordinary men in a time when evil becomes banal, the narrator does not reject their subjectivity in their participation in genocide, concluding: "Anyone could have been Götz. Anyone could have been Meyer. And yet, Götz and Meyer were just Götz and Meyer, no one else could have been them" (p. 72).

David Albahari published the novel *Götz and Meyer* in Belgrade in 1998, writing it in Canada, where he, like many Yugoslav writers, went into exile due to the outbreak of the post-Yugoslav wars in the early 1990s. From the narrator's age and his profession (a professor of Serbo-Croatian language and literature of Yugoslav nations), it is clear that Albahari situates the novel in the years just before the outbreak of post-Yugoslav wars and the mass crimes that followed, in a period when the Europe that emerged after the victory over fascism was disappearing.

LANGUAGE: Serbo-Croatian / Srpskohrvatski

This title was not censored before publishing

Storytelling

The Political Novel: A Palimpsest

By: Ivana Perica