Bora Ćosić

The Role of My Family in the World Revolution

Uloga moje porodice u svetskoj revoluciji

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The Role of My Family in the World Revolution is one of the most important works of Yugoslav literature of the second half of the twentieth century. Despite its anti-socialist and anti-communist message, the novel was—perhaps surprisingly—awarded the prestigious NIN Award for Best Novel of the Year in communist Yugoslavia. However, the film adaptation of the same name, directed by Bahrudin Bata Čengić, was banned following its premiere at the Pula Film Festival in 1971 and never received a theatrical release in Yugoslavia. This may have influenced the Polish censors' decision in 1972 to prohibit publication of the translation.

The novel follows the fortunes of a multigenerational bourgeois merchant family whose ancestors included numerous Orthodox clergymen. The extended family: a neurotic mother, a drunken father, a grumbling grandfather, two aunts skilled in handicrafts and enamoured of American film stars, and an uncle, lives in Belgrade during the transition from fascist to communist totalitarianism. The narrative spans the Second World War and the early post-war years, as a new ideological and social order was being established in Yugoslavia. Political visions of the country's development were shifting, as were notions of citizens' "loyalty" and the loyalty of members of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia itself (renamed the League of Communists of Yugoslavia in 1952), particularly in the context of Tito's break with Stalin and the move from Soviet-style socialism towards self-management socialism. "We were participating in the very important work of building a new society in an indoor, at-home, kitchen sort of way." The novel is partly autobiographical and narrated by a boy observing the world around him and the popular revolution of 1945. The child's perspective serves as a vehicle for political analysis.

Although the book may seem to be a family chronicle full of humour and anecdotes, its real subject is social revolution and the impact of ideology on everyday life. Ćosić's family finds itself at the very centre of sweeping political changes. The child's innocence and lack of awareness allow Nazi and, later, communist terror to be portrayed through humour: (1) "They arrested Father, but it was because of a badge in his lapel. On the badge there was a crossed spoon, fork, and hammer; the badge said everything about the hardware trade […]. The hammer bothered them the most, as a sign of rebellion, but the spoon and fork said the opposite, so they let Father go. They arrested others too, all because of some little badges or similar things.". (2) "But we still suffered from our innate stupidity and thus allowed the same hostile work to continue to impossible limits […]. We saw many terrible scenes of the professor being thrown out of his apartment so one of our comrades could move in, but the worst part was that we later retold this. Comrade Jovo Sikira beautifully

explained to us that we hadn't seen what we actually saw and we resisted and this led to undesirable consequences."

The characters struggle to find their bearings in a world of new slogans, institutions and authorities, often failing to understand the forces shaping their reality. In many episodes, the narrator interprets propaganda terms and political slogans literally, producing humour while exposing the emptiness of official Newspeak. Revolution emerges as a disorienting process, full of misunderstandings, absurdities and laughter, but—crucially—also danger. Laughter runs through nearly every page, offering both release and subversion: it helps make reality bearable while questioning the official version of it. It serves both as social criticism and as a means of exposing the absurdity of ideological language and the mechanisms and rituals of the new regime.

Despite its "bourgeois" past, the family manages to survive in post-war Yugoslavia thanks to its earlier communist sympathies and involvement in underground activities. Yet a former partisan and communist activist moves into their home, occupying five of its six rooms and leaving the family of eight crammed into a single small room. Rather than interpreting events through official frameworks, the narrator notices above all their strangeness and inconsistencies.

The novel's political dimension also emerges in its portrayal of the creation of the "new man". The revolution aims to remake society, but Ćosić's characters are hardly exemplary socialist citizens. Despite their "proletarianization," they are cast as participants in the revolutionary project regardless of their actual social status. The narrator's family retains its habits, weaknesses and eccentricities, continually eluding the project of political modernisation.

"We were admonished to stop using the idiotic props of the past, like an umbrella, toothpaste, and the like, but we persisted, though it was difficult to justify" (p. 26). The family thus becomes a site of resistance to political conformity, even if that resistance is unconscious.

The Role of My Family in the World Revolution offers a subtle yet penetrating analysis of the political consequences of revolution and life in an ideologically driven state. Most notably, it reveals the mechanisms of indoctrination and how propaganda language displaces genuine human relationships. By combining a child's perspective, grotesque humour and critical reflection on the workings of power, the novel remains one of the most compelling literary portrayals of post-war Yugoslavia, as well as a universal exploration of the relationship between the individual and politics.

LANGUAGE: Serbo-Croatian / Srpskohrvatski

CENSORSHIP STATUS: