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The A to Z of death and hope

The Last Window-Giraffe by Péter Zilahy, translated by Tim Wilkinson, Anthem Press, pp130, ISBN-13: 978-1843312840

Adrian Grima

As I sat down to write this review of Péter Zilahy's ingenious book, *Le Monde* announced the arrest, after over a decade defying the vagaries of human justice, of Radovan Karadzic, the "poet, politician, psychiatrist, psychopath, war criminal".

In one of those mediatic twists of fate, Dr Karadzic alias Dr Dragan Dabic, "a genocidal butcher disguised as a New Age quack," as Jasmina Tešanovic calls him, practising alternative medicine in Belgrade, was apprehended barely a week after the 13th anniversary of the Srebrenica massacres. In July 1995, 8,000 Bosnian men and boys were systematically gunned down, one busload after another, by Serb gunmen, and buried in mass graves by the same men who were next in line to be shot.

Before becoming a politician, Radovan Karadzic wrote poetry books for children, and composed Serbian folk music.

In *The Last Window-Giraffe*, the Hungarian writer Zilahy gives us snippets from a first-hand account of the demonstrations that were held in Belgrade against the regime of Slobodan Milošević when the Yugoslav authorities tampered with the local election results in November 1996. Milošević was then President of what was left of Tito's mighty Yugoslavia and (according to Zilahy) the puppet master of Karadzic. But the crowds also gave special attention to Sloba's wife, Mirjana Markovic. Apparently, in her diary she wrote that she likes to read Shakespeare and Chekhov. "That woman has no weak points, an enemy of hers once said."

Zilahy's illustrated book is a joy to read, more obviously because of its memorable quips and often powerful photos taken by the writer himself. More fundamentally, it's a joy because of its utterly subversive literary style. Zilahy has come up with a captivating literary form that is both immediately amusing and rich in echoes, both anecdotal and multi-layered in meaning, both hilarious and profoundly serious. He manages to strike a careful balance in tone that conveys both cheerfulness and deep scepticism. He communicates eloquently his philosophical irony and the silliness of history, but he does not banalise the value of brave individual or collective acts and the ultimate sacrifice of unexpected heroes. He makes fun of the picture dictionary he tries to emulate but there is little doubt that he has nostalgia for it and the childhood he associates with it.

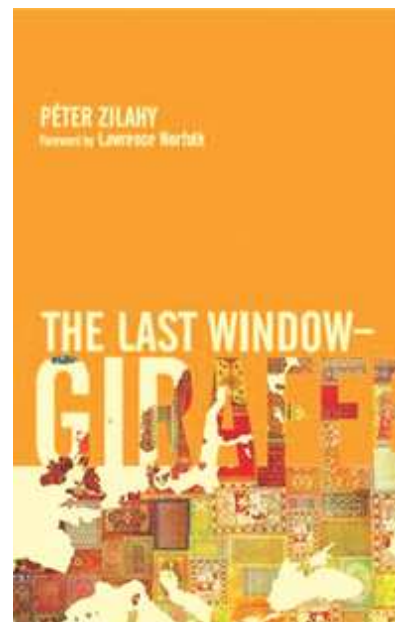
"The Window-Giraffe made the world intelligible to us in alphabetical order. Everything had its rhyme and reason, symbolic or mundane. [...] The Window-Giraffe is my childhood, the changing room, the PE class, the continual growing taller, the age before a better age, goulash communism, my homework, my innocence, my generation. The Window-Giraffe is a book one of whose characters was myself."

In a more philosophical vein, under "sz" ("szótár," dictionary) Zilahy writes about how dictionaries, like class registers, juxtapose words that you never find together in real life, how they raise the accidental to the status of law. They're a bit like crowds, I would add, or traffic, or even life itself. The alphabet, however, establishes some kind of arbitrary order. In Zilahy's childhood, only that which was written down in a dictionary had meaning, and this gave it "a superhuman authority".

As any post-war Hungarian would know, the original book guided young students all the way from "ablak" (window) to "zsiráf" (giraffe). "An alphabet," writes Lawrence Norfolk in his foreword to the English version, "is a net to throw over the chaos, or a jig to knock it into shape." The pictures in Zilahy's book include reproductions from the popular primer he refers to, typical Soviet style art for kids. They're so raw you might be surprised anyone could have ever taken them seriously - but that's what you might say about *Id-Denfil* or *Ġrajjet Malta* - styles change. Julian Evans of the BBC rightly describes the book as "not only a great piece of literature but a visual feast as well." It's a pity Zilahy chose not to include at least some captions.

You have to read Zilahy's book against the backdrop of police states and military regimes in Soviet-occupied Eastern Europe and the horrific events of the Balkan wars in the early 1990s. Zilahy seems to assume that you know your 20th century European history. He would not have made any such assumption had he written this book for many Maltese, supposedly well-educated, 18-year-olds who barely know their Iron Curtains from their Berlin Walls.

In his entry dedicated to "k", Zilahy introduces his piece about Radovan Karadzic by quoting his childhood *Window-Giraffe*: "To say a person is two-faced does not mean he has two faces, just that he is acting as if he were something other than he is." And yet, in another passage, Zilahy draws our attention to "a Karadzic poster on a road sign: 'The man who did not betray us'." Perhaps the thousands who failed to turn up for the demonstration in July 2008 in favour of their



idol from the past, are not so sure anymore.

Péter Zilahy wrote to me the day after Karadzic was arrested. "The guy was caught on a bus, which is surreal but it is also a sign that the surrealism of Serbia may end. Looks like the wind is turning and finally Serbia's decade-long denial of reality (or reality as we conceive it) can come to an end."

- *Dr Grima is a poet and academic. This year he has read his work in London, Algiers, Cairo, Alexandria, and Lodève.*

The review copy of this title is the reviewer's own.

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