

Liudmila MINDOVA ¹

The Dangerous Book.
Observations on the Prose by Danilo Kiš, Aleksandar Hemon and Igor Štiks

Abstract

The text compares three books by South Slavic authors: *A Tomb for Boris Davidovic* (1976) by Danilo Kiš, *The Lazarus Project* (2008) by Aleksandar Hemon, and *Elijah's Chair* by Igor Štiks. In different genres, all three books analyse possibilities to defend human rights, and particularly the freedom of speech and thought. In these literary worlds, Europe exists mainly with its philosophical and cultural history, but also as a place with a very long tradition both in the defence and in violation of human freedom. Of course, the book as a main symbol of wisdom and thought is the primary subject of these works, and therefore it is not surprising that their writers devote important space to 'dangerous books' and knowledge, and ask about ethic and poetic borders between permission and prohibition.

Keywords: Balkan cultures and literatures; Jewish culture; urban culture; comparative literature

Опасната книга.

Наблюдения върху прозата на Данило Киш, Александър Хемон и Игор Щикс
Резюме

Текстът сравнява три произведения на южнославянски автори: *Гробница за Борис Давидович* (1976) на Данило Киш, *Проектът Лазар* (2008) на Александър Хемон и *Елияховият стол* (2006) на Игор Щикс. В различна жанрова форма и трите книги анализират възможностите за защита на основните човешки права – на живот и свобода на словото и мисълта. В художествените светове на тези произведения Европа съществува най-вече чрез своята философска и културна история, но същевременно и като място с дълга традиция както в нарушаването, така и в защитата на човешката свобода. Книгата и в трите творби е възприета като основен символ на познанието и мисълта и затова не е изненадващо, че техните автори отделят специално внимание тъкмо на 'опасната книга' и познанието, поставяйки въпроса за етическите и естетическите граници между разрешеното и забраненото.

Ключови думи: Балкански култури и литератури, еврейска култура, градска култура, сравнително литературознание

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*Books – angels, house gods – you crowded
my apartment in Sarajevo...
As if doves were alighting on my open
palms, and taking off. As if I, too, had grown wings.
The wings of angels that have protected me
since childhood from many human evils.²*

Josip Osti

Danilo Kiš is one of the most well-known writers from the former Yugoslavia and I believe it is not necessary to introduce him to the literary public in detail. It is not surprising that the Slovenian author Aleš Debeljak describes him as “the last Yugoslavian author”, referring, by the way, to Kiš’s words written for the Budapest paper *Népszabadság* in 1989: “I don’t want to give special examples, but in one way or another my destiny is a Kafkian one. This also means: it is a Jewish destiny, as well. And what is more: this is the destiny of a Jew in Central and East Europe. Some people think that this destiny could give a feeling of identity. I don’t believe that. Not because I am half Jewish, but because my life has passed through many cultures, many languages and many countries. Perhaps I am the only one in the world who considers himself Yugoslavian writer.”³

In certain circumstances, the connection between literature and national identity is overemphasized and Kiš is one of the authors who wrote about that. A Hungarian Jew on his father’s side and a Montenegrin Serb on his mother’s side, his origin is too varied to be bound only to one nationality. In his *Advices to the young writer*, he wrote the following: “If some minority tries to misappropriate you, check yourself up”⁴. Here we are not talking about the political question of the national identity. The issue of identity is important here only in its literary aspects. Because making good literature for Danilo Kiš is making literature without political, ethnic, religious pressure. One important distinction in Kiš’s poetics is the distinction between *Homo poeticus* and *Homo politicus* in looking for the point of intersection between ethics and aesthetics. We could add that Kiš highly appreciates the ethical choice but he never tried to impose his opinion on others and he never played the role of a moral judge. At the same time, he openly wrote, “The nationalist is an ignoramus by definition”⁵. Thus, ethic and aesthetic choice is something very different from the ethnic choice. The

² Osti, Josip. *Books – angels, house gods*. Translation: Mia Dintinjana. In: Blesok, No 50, September-October 2006, Skopje, p. 7.

³ Debeljak, Aleš. *Balkanska brv*. Eseji o književnosti „jugoslovanske Atlantide“. Ljubljana, 2010, s. 146.

⁴ Kiš, Danilo. *Život, literatura*. Intervjui i eseji. Priredila: Mirjana Miočinović. Beograd, 1990. In: Kiš, Danilo. *Sabrana dela*. CD I. Priredila Mirjana Miočinović. Beograd, 2003.

⁵ Kiš, Danilo. *Čas anatomije*. Beograd, 1978. In: Kiš, Danilo. *Sabrana dela*. CD I. Priredila Mirjana Miočinović. Beograd, 2003.

question of “blut-und-boden” is a mark of provincialism of the mind, a provincialism with heavy effects on human life.

The influence of Kiš’s prose on the young generations of post Yugoslavian authors is evident⁶ and the prose by Aleksandar Hemon and Igor Štiks is one of the memorable cases of this influence. However, in this context it is important also to note what particularly Aleš Debeljak says about him, and not because Debeljak wrote essays about Kiš, Hemon and Štiks, but because he is one of the most influential intellectuals and remarkable poet from the former Yugoslavia: “Danilo Kiš was a writer-hero for me. With his moral insistence that the central question for writers of the twentieth century was the question of camps, Auschwitz and Gulag; with his lyrical procedures that accommodated both, the reveries over the litany of provincial railway stations and the tremor of an anxious soul; with his claim that kitsch is indestructible like a plastic bottle; with his resigned, yet not defeatist understanding of the fact that to him, having lived the second half of his life in a voluntary Parisian exile, contemporary French intellectual debates were familiar while the debates of his native realm remained alien to his French peers; with his persistence in a belief that literature is being written with the totality of one's being, not only with the language alone, which made him cling to his Serbo-Croatian literary idiom despite the false comforts of French, the adopted language of exile's everyday life; with his principled attitude of Jewish apertain who cannot be oblivious to the destructive consequences of chauvinist elevation of a “chosen nation” to the level of a metaphysical idea which justifies each and any means to advance its protection; with the comprehensive narrative of his life and work, Danilo Kiš for me represented the most noble accomplishment of the Balkan imagination.”⁷

Aleksandar Hemon and Igor Štiks were born in Bosnia, but we cannot include their poetics only in the scope of contemporary Bosnian literature. Aleksandar Hemon (1964) is mainly described as Bosnian American writer and this is reasonable because he has written and published only his first book in his mother tongue. As for Igor Štiks (1977), he writes his prose in the Croatian language, but he lives in more countries and languages (Zagreb, Belgrade, Paris, Chicago, and Edinburg) and his poetics is wide open for cultural hybridity of microcosmic cities like Sarajevo. However, that is why one of the characters of his novel *Elijah's Chair* says: “the aggressor will have won on the day that the defenders of the city turn it into a single national or religious denomination. Then the battle for the city will be lost, regardless of the military outcome.”⁸

⁶ Igor Štiks talks about that on the roundtable on Danilo Kiš’s prose in 2005 in Belgrade. Štiks namely reminds of the literary inquiry in 1995/1996 when young generations of post Yugoslav readers set Kiš at the top of the literary hierarchy. See more: *Danilo Kiš (1935-2005) između poetike i politike*. Međunarodni skup pisaca. Pripredila Mirjana Miočinović. Beograd, 2011, s. 43-44.

⁷ Debeljak, Aleš. *My Balkan Master*. In: <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2004-01-07-debeljak-en.html>

⁸ Štiks, Igor. *Elijah's Chair*. Quotation according to Andrew Wachtel's translation. In: *Wasafiri magazine*. Issue 78, summer 2014, p.23-25.

In 2005 Sarajevo literary magazine *Sarajevske sveske* published Aleksandar Hemon's short essay *Čiji je pisac Danilo Kiš* ("Whose writer is Danilo Kiš") and it is an important text in relation to Hemon's perception of Kiš's poetics. After repeating some basic Kiš's concepts on nationalism, Hemon switches things over to the main issue of the literary, not national genealogy. Hemon says: "Actually Kiš is part of the transnational family of writers like Franz Kafka, Jorje Luis Borges and Bruno Schulz and the fact that his historical background includes Kolyma and Auschwitz at the same time is very important for his own identity"⁹.

Although Hemon shares with Kiš some genealogical similarities (his father is of both Ukrainian and Bosnian descent), their literary propinquity is much more interesting. Hemon also shows intertextual connections with the prose of Bruno Schulz and not only in the collection *The Question of Bruno* (2000), but also in the novel *The Lazarus project*. However, we could define *The Lazarus project* as homage to Danilo Kiš in the same way as *The Elijah's Chair* by Igor Štiks is. Both novels are connected with Kiš's book *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich: Seven Chapters of a Single Story* (1976) sharing the main topic of these stories – the dangerous book.

In one of the key stories in Kiš's collection ("Dogs and Books") the persecuted character, Baruch David Neumann, says: "And I told them not to tear them because many books are not dangerous, only one is; and I told them not to tear them because reading many books leads to wisdom, but reading only one leads to ignorance armed with madness and hatred"¹⁰.

"Madness and hatred" are a short enough and eloquent description of the life during the war that Hemon and Štiks present in their novels. Neither Hemon nor Štiks consider themselves spokesmen of non-nationalistic peaceful attitude. Just like Kiš they undoubtedly consider literature as "the last asylum of common-sense" (which is the title of one of Kiš's essays). However, we have to point out that Bosnian war and genocide intensified the abyss between utilitarian writings and "literature as such", the abyss that existed in Tito's Yugoslavia in a similar way as it exists in the world where politics domineers and defines the boundaries of the mind. But being against intervention in literature is not less dangerous for the quality of literature than defending this intervention. It is not surprising that most of the best-known authors who lived under totalitarian regime in the XX century faced the question about this danger.

The Lisbon conference on Literature (A Roundtable of Central European and Russian writers) that was held in May 1988 is one of the most important documents about the relationship between literature and totalitarianism just at the end of the Cold War. Among the participants in that conference

⁹ Hemon, Aleksandar. *Čiji je pisac Danilo Kiš*. In: *Sarajevske sveske*. No 8/9, 2005. s. 10.

¹⁰ Kiš, Danilo. *Grobnica za Borisa Davidoviča*. Beograd, 1978. In: Kiš, Danilo. *Sabrana dela*. CD I. Priredila Mirjana Miočinović. Beograd, 2003. See also: Kis, Danilo. *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*. New York: Penguin, 1980. p. 110.

were: Péter Esterházy (Hungary), Ismael Kadare (Albania), Danilo Kiš (Yugoslavia), György Konrád (Hungary), Czesław Miłosz (Poland), Josef Škvorecký (Czechoslovakia), Adam Zagajewsky (Poland), Joseph Brodsky (USSR) etc. The question of Central European culture was the main topic of the roundtable and soon became a reason for really hot arguments among the participants. Although Milan Kundera didn't take part in the conference, his essay *The Tragedy of Central Europe* (1984) predetermined the directions of the conversations.

Czesław Miłosz pronounced one of the most important opinions about the dangers confronting the writer: “Martial law in Poland was a disaster for literature – not because of censorship and not because of the oppressive regime, but because all literature moved to the noble-minded side: namely, to be against the dictatorship, to be against the crushing of *Solidarity* with tanks, was a noble cause. And those things are very dangerous for literature. I realized it very early and tried not to contribute – with some exceptions, I should say – to that atmosphere of noble-mindedness and high-style morality. Many times I was inclined to say *non serviam*, as young James Joyce said about the Irish cause, and I was torn internally between a desire to practice what I consider perfection in literature and to cry of indignation and anger.”¹¹ Danilo Kiš spoke in support of the same attitude and he wrote a lot about this problem in his essays and particularly in his polemic book *Anatomy Lesson* (1978). That book, which appeared two years after *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, is an answer to the denunciations in plagiarism by some of Kiš's colleagues who were provoked or directly supported by the secret police UDBA in Tito's Yugoslavia. Although the reader of the book can clearly see the main specifics of Yugoslavian politics and literature, *Anatomy Lesson* is at the same time one of the brightest examples of poetics in the world literature. It is here that Kiš defends “literature as such” and here he describes some of the main characteristics of intertextuality. Kiš often points out: “Literature is a phenomenon of the spirit and it has its own laws and it is not the political reality that creates a literary book. Only a book can bring to life another book.”

At the *Lisbon Conference on Literature* Danilo Kiš pointed out that “we are seen as spokesmen of certain dissident trends and we would like to be much more than that. At the same time, we don't want to be cowards; we want to retain this political dimension, too. We would like to do formal research and deal with substance, as well... I think it is worth making the effort to overcome this opposition between form and substance, for the cultivation of this concept is at the very nerve centre of our writings.”¹²

¹¹ The Lisbon Conference of Literature: Central Europe and Russian Writers. *Cross Currents. A Yearbook of Central Europe Culture*. [Volume 9 (1990), pp. 75]

¹² *Ibid.*

It is obvious that Aleksandar Hemon and Igor Štiks carry on in their writings and develop some of the major subjects that occupied Kiš's imagination and reflections in the new political and literary situation. It is remarkable that the main characters in their books are Jews, which is of course only one of the signs that show the literary relationship with Danilo Kiš. Besides, both Hemon and Štiks pointed out Kiš as their literary teacher¹³. However, we could say that Kiš is not only their teacher, but the teacher of several generations of readers in the same way as, for instance, Zbigniew Herbert is not only for European, but for world readers¹⁴. As for the Jewish descent of the characters in the novel, Jewishness for Kiš is first of all a symbol of humankind: "Jewishness has a double (literary) meaning in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*. On the one hand, thanks to my earlier books, it creates a necessary link and widens mythologemes with which I operate (and in this manner, through the Jewish question, I gain the license to approach a particular theme, if one in fact needs a license). On the other hand, *Jewishness here, as in my earlier books, is only an effect of defamiliarization*. Whoever fails to understand this understands nothing of the mechanism of literary transposition."¹⁵

We can presume that Jewishness in Hemon's and Štiks's novels is of Kiš's fictional type because all three books show radicalization of "the banality of evil". But one can ask: "Why Jewish destiny after all? Why not Serbian, Croatian or Bosnian?" One possible answer is given above by Kiš, but the novels by Hemon and Štiks give much more: in Hemon's case the character of Lazarus Auerbach was chosen exactly as a literary metaphor (*Lazarus project* is a literary project!); in Štiks's case Jewishness is a question of great (again literary) drama of a hidden identity. So, we can say: in these books Jewishness is a question of aesthetic, not ethnical, belonging.

What about the Jewish drama of identity in Igor Štiks's novel: *The Elijah's chair*, a special chair at the circumcision ceremony, is the place where the main character of the novel meets the old Jew who will lead him away to his true identity. Besides, the character had already known his true father's name from the revealed "Blue notebook" of his mother, this Blue notebook is not the only "dangerous book" in the novel and *Elijah's chair* is a point of intersection of all intertextual connections in the book. From that place on, the ancient Greek drama occupies the character's life absolutely

¹³ See more about that in the papers from the roundtable on Kiš's poetics where Hemon and Štiks participated: *Danilo Kiš (1935-2005) između poetike i politike*. Međunarodni skup pisaca. Priredila Mirjana Miočinović. Beograd, 2011, 256 s.

¹⁴ The Iranian poet Mohsen Emadi (1976) who has been a political emigrant since 2009 is one of the founders of the literary project *Report from the Besieged City*. The title of the project comes from the famous Herbert's poem and the project itself connects poets from all over the world. Besides, it is symptomatic that Mr. Emadi describes the political circumstances and particularly the life situation in the Middle East in a way similar to the Yugoslavian writers during the war. Mohsen Emadi says: "Being a Middle Easterner is like having a cancer, especially now, when everything is getting worse". See more at: <http://mohsenemadi.org/2014/05/11/113>

¹⁵ Kiš, Danilo. *Čas anatomije*. Beograd, 1978. In: Kiš, Danilo. *Sabrana dela*. CD I. Priredila Mirjana Miočinović. Beograd, 2003.

literally (by then the ancient drama is evoked only in the context of the Bosnian war). So, we can say that *The Elijah's chair* is the spot between Richard Richter and Richard Schneider – the two names of the same person.

It is remarkable how Štiks succeeds in gathering in one destiny the persecutor and the persecuted – figures who are fundamental for Kiš's writings. Furthermore, at the end of his novel *Hourglass* Danilo Kiš quotes the Talmud: "For us it is better to be among the persecuted people, than to be among their persecutors"¹⁶. Igor Štiks consciously titles one of the chapters of his novel namely *Hourglass*¹⁷. On the one hand, Richard Richter should be of German descent, an heir of Jew's persecutors. On the other hand, without knowing, he is a child of a persecuted Jew. What is more interesting is that as a writer, an angry young man, Richards himself sympathizes with Jews, not with the man he had thought to be his father. In this intuitive attitude of the character, Štiks first evokes the elements of the ancient drama, namely combining human life and mystery in only one word – the destiny, which is so typical for the ancient Greeks.

From all three books, the most limited in space is *Elijah's chair*. The novel is set mainly in Wien, Sarajevo, and occasionally in Paris. *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* is set in Europe and great parts of Asia representing different cases of people persecuted for their convictions during the long history of the old continent. Although Kiš's book provokes the anger of the Yugoslav political higher class, first because it is a book about GULAG and thus opens the dangerous theme in Yugoslav political daily life (for speaking about fascism and Stalinism is at the same time speaking about nationalism and hatred, speaking about life and death of all these people who were in the Goli otok, Yugoslav concentration camp), *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* is a book that includes larger period of the "universal history of infamy". Borges is a great teacher of Kiš, and like Borges, for him is more important to create a really successful literary network than to stay only on the borders of one century and its banality. What is particularly important on that plane is the story "Dogs and books" that makes a connection between the persecution of the Jews in the XX century and their persecution during the Inquisition.

The Lazarus Project has the widest geographical scope. The narrator of the novel is a Bosnian writer who lives in America and who is looking for the life story of some Lazarus Averbuch, a Ukrainian Jew who was killed in America in 1908, just one century before the narrator started looking for the story that would make him a great writer. The connection between the name of the Ukrainian Jew and the name of the main character of the first Borges's story in his collection *A Universal History*

¹⁶ Kiš, Danilo. *Peščanik*. Beograd, 1972. In: Kiš, Danilo. *Sabrana dela*. CD I. Priredila Mirjana Miočinović. Beograd, 2003.

¹⁷ Štiks, Igor. *Elijahova stolica*. Zagreb, 2006, s. 187-283.

of *Infamy* (1935, 1954) is not accidental. The title of this Borges's story is *The Cruel Redeemer Lasarus Morell* and it spreads out from the time of Inquisition to the XIX century. This Borges's story shows important signs of the relationship between Kiš's and Hemon's books. Kiš wrote a lot about his attitude towards Borges in his essays and particularly in the book *Anatomy Lesson*, but during the roundtable on Kiš's writings in 2005, Hemon reminded the readers: "Kiš succeed in being in a dialogue with Borges, as well. It is well-known that *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* is a dialogue with *A Universal History of Infamy*, with Borges. They are, more or less, formally identical as regards titles and stories about various criminals. (...) He does all that to take away the history from the victors, to take it away from those who opened concentration camps, from those who are in power. And this project is possible in the prose at least because it must be in a dialogue or in a conflict with this fictional rhetoric of historical documents and stories about people, great events and heroes."¹⁸

The main character of *The Lazarus project* is a would-be criminal on suspicion of anarchism. The investigating officer investigated the presumable anarchism of Lazarus Averbuch (they really found and confiscated a lot of "dangerous books" in Lazarus's flat¹⁹, but after all Lazarus is not a criminal but a victim of the police paranoia, as David Baruch Neumann is a victim of Inquisition paranoia in Danilo Kiš's book). In contrast with Lazarus Averbuch and David Baruch Neumann, Lasarus Morell from Borges's story is undoubted criminal (although he "was not about to let himself be confused with those anarchists."²⁰), but he was never caught and he died in hospital under the assumed name of Silas Buckley. Changing names is typical for the world of criminals and we see "that technique" in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*. Besides, we see this in two ways – in the world of *hangmen* and in the world of *victims*. But for us the "changing" of names in history is more interesting, namely the connection between Boris Davidovich Novski and Baruch David Neumann who are separated by several centuries. They both are the real characters of the book, two victims with the same anxious soul. The repetition and parallelism in political history and history of the spirit is something that interests Borges and Kiš, but also Hemon. Without this type of repetition, perhaps *A Universal History of Infamy* is impossible, but we can find this idea in Borges's story published a few years earlier. The first sentences in the story *The Avatars of Tortoise* are: "There is a concept which corrupts and upsets all others. I refer not to Evil, whose limited realm is that of ethics; I refer to the infinite."²¹

Infinite is the history of persecution and this is emphasised most definitely in *The Lazarus project*. Being intertextual replica to Kiš, Borges, Schulz, etc. Hemon's novel consciously includes in

¹⁸ Danilo Kiš (1935-2005) između poetike i politike. Međunarodni skup pisaca. Priredila Mirjana Miočinović. Beograd, 2011, s. 82.

¹⁹ Hemon, Aleksandar. *The Lazarus project*. New York, 2008. p. 57.

²⁰ Borges, J. L. *The Cruel Redeemer Lasarus Morell*. In: Borges, J. L. *Selected fictions*. New York, 1999. p. 24

²¹ Borges, J. L. *Labyrinths*. Selected Stories & Other Writings. New York, 1964. p. 202.

its texture well-known names. Here we can find not only the barman Schulz, but also Khrushevan from Kiš's *The Book of Kings and Fools* and herr Taube from *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*. In the same way we can find in Štiks's novel important notions on procedure of denotation and human names. As the name Lazarus connects Hemon's novel with Borges's story and The New Testament (there are several references to the raising of Lazarus and it is interpreted in different, metaphorical and direct, way), the name of Richard Richter connects *Elijah's Chair* with a large cultural tradition. Štiks shows that the names are important in the narrative directly. The meaning of Richard's surname (Richter means "Judge") is interpreted by two characters in the novel, both with key functions in the narrative – Alma Filipović and Simon. Alma is a theatrical actress; Simon is the old Jew who Richard met in Sarajevo synagogue. Alma is the last love of Richard, but at the same time, she is the person who suffers together with Richard the drama of identity, because they both learn too late that they are children of the same father – Jacob Schneider. Thus, the story of Walter Faber, *Homo Faber*, which the actress Alma Filipović turned into an amazing performance with her theatrical company in the besieged Sarajevo, gains totally real dimensions in her life and in Richard's life, too. The history invades in their personal lives as in the story that György Konrád told at *Lisbon conference on Literature* in 1988²². However, in *Elijah's Chair* Richard's description about his meeting with Max Frisch in 1976 is no less important. At that meeting, a young writer asked Max Frisch if he had gone through something similar to his novel, namely if *Homo Faber* was based on a true experience. After the rest of the young writers reacted sarcastically to this question, Frisch explained that in his own life and in the lives of his friends there was a potential for the story and finally he asked his young colleagues: "Is there something real in what you write, gentlemen?"²³

The connection between fiction and facts is always present in Kiš's prose and this connection is, let's keep in mind, "Literary transposition". Autobiographism in Kiš's case is that "real something", which makes the narrative structure more complicated – the facts are included mainly as an example in its metaphorical dimensions. Even more, we can say that after Borges, the permeability between life and literature becomes again as apparent as in the time of the baroque. People live in book and their lives are nothing less fictional than the lives of imaginary characters. Therefore, contemporary

²² György Konrad told then the following: "I guess the only wealth that people in our part of Europe have is history and memory. We share a common history with people with similar ethnic and national backgrounds... A time ago I lived in a village and in this village there was a butcher. His house was on a street corner and the street was on an incline. In proximity of this village there was a military base. Once, while the butcher's wife was in the bedroom changing sheets, a tank came through the wall into the room because the road was icy, slippery, and the front of the house was destroyed, but not very much. The next time I saw the butcher, I asked him what happened. "History came in", he said. Probably that's a typical relationship of people with history: they don't jump in but history jumps in." – *The Lisbon Conference of Literature: Central Europe and Russian Writers*. Cross Currents. A Yearbook of Central Europe Culture. [Volume 9 (1990), pp. 75]

²³ Štiks, Igor. *Elijahova stolica*. Zagreb, 2006, s. 148.

literature meets real and fictional persons and authors put themselves in their narratives not only as narrators but also as characters. For that reason, the story of Lazarus Averbuch is so similar to the story of the narrator in Hemon's novel. And even more, after all peripeties the narrator isn't sure of his own identity at all: "Everybody was me, I was everybody and after all it was no matter if I am going to die"²⁴.

In *Elijah's Chair* autobiographism is presented in a different manner. Here the narrator Ivor is a kind of author's double. But also Richard Richter himself has in his destiny some similarities with the writer of the book, at best with his traveling around the old continent. What is also very interesting in this novel is how Štiks includes real persons and characters from other books. Daniel and Simon are not accidentally chosen names. The old Jew, Simon, who has a very important part in the novel, reminds the readers of the character from the first story in Kiš's book *The Encyclopedia of the Dead*. The name of this character is Simon Magus. And really, Simon in Štiks's novel has something in common with Kiš's character, namely "the knowledge of good and evil". Just as Simon Magus says: "They offer you eternal salvations... I offer you knowledge and the desert. All who so wish may join me."²⁵, Simon from Štiks's novel says: "The truth will be uncovered. It is always revealed. That is awareness. And after that desperation comes... That is destiny, that is fortune"²⁶. And as Simon Magus asserts that the God of Peter and Paul is "A God of animosity, of hatred and jealousy"²⁷ and therefore he is not the only God in heaven, thus Simon in Štiks's novel holds that Sarajevo is one of the last microcosmic cities all over the world having many different languages, peoples and religions. As for Daniel, whose story is told by Simon in *Elijah's Chair*, he undeniably is a fictional double of Danilo Kiš. The character tells the story of his own creator, as Joseph Brodsky says that "language is not only, and not so much, the poet's instrument, but the poet is the instrument of language."²⁸

In comparison with *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, Hemon's and Štiks's novels show in different ways the radicalization of evil. They both suffered the destruction of Sarajevo and they saw how Kiš's words on banality of nationalism, namely totalitarianism, proved its authenticity in their own lives. "Is there something real in what you write, gentlemen?" is an irrelevant question in their cases because it is clear that history invaded their lives and they have pretty vast material for a lot of books. But what they spectacularly do is not reducing their literature to an archive of moral convictions, but defending it from mediocrity of demagogic *Newspeak*. Much more – through their novels literature

²⁴ Hemon, Aleksandar. *The Lazarus project*. New York, 2008, p. 251.

²⁵ Kiš, Danilo. *The Encyclopedia of the Dead*. Northwestern University Press, 1997, p. 5.

²⁶ Štiks, Igor. *Elijahova stolica*. Zagreb, 2006, s. 167-169.

²⁷ Kiš, Danilo. *The Encyclopedia of the Dead*. Northwestern University Press, 1997, p. 9.

²⁸ Brodsky, Joseph. Interview with Natalya Gorbanevskaya. *Russkaya mysl*, 3 February 1983, p. 9.

majestically rushes into history, to fill it with significance and honour again; in the name of microcosmic cities and their inhabitants.

In his excellent book *Balkanska brv* (“Balkan footbridge”), Aleš Debeljak includes essays about the most memorable authors from the former Yugoslavia. Among them, Danilo Kiš, Aleksandar Hemon and Igor Štiks have their special places. Debeljak, who reminds the reader in one of his essays that “literary citizenship”²⁹ is the one and only true citizenship, writes in his book the following: “The inheritance of the Balkan hybridity, mixing and percolation between cultures in XX century remained only in Yugoslavia. Here is the source of the title of my book. And footbridge is here because I’ve created the book as a device at hand for overcoming obstacles or rivers, abysses or gorges... Reading and writing books is a conversation with the others.”³⁰

I hope the restored Sarajevo library owns already this Debeljak’s book and along with it, all these books it refers to. Because “many books are not dangerous, only one is”. And because we can say the war is over when we raise the bridge of words over the ruins.

²⁹ Debeljak, Aleš. *In Praise of the Republic of Letters*. In: *World Literature Today*. March 2009.

³⁰ Debeljak, Aleš. *Balkanska brv. Eseji o književnosti „jugoslovanske Atlantide“*. Ljubljana, 2010, s. 25.