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Pavao Pavličić:

A Chronicler's Sin

Once upon a time, during the reign of terror, mass arrests became the order of the day. Most often they took place at night: a group of hooded men would knock at the front door and order the sleepy host to get dressed and then would take him to one of the many small prisons mushrooming all over the town. Sometimes the gendarmes would arrest whole families together with their callow children and grandmother that slept on the hearth. The number of people in the town was shrinking and all night long sabre-rattling patrols could be heard leading people away from the streets, from a great many houses: that was why many people remained dressed in the evening and would spend their nights dozing with bundles under their heads as if travelling, expecting to be arrested. People wondered that there was so much room in prisons but then one house after another was turned into a prison, and one would languish in somebody else's house as if in gaol: the rich in poor people's quarters and the other way round, soldiers in schools, priests in barracks, doctors and patients in brothels, debauchees in convents.

There was an increasing shortage of labour and prisoners did most of the jobs. Since they were dressed like other people they did not differ from free citizens; their numbers were kept secret. Finally, it was difficult to know who was a prisoner and who was free, and in the end the prisoners were used for arrests: carried sabres although they were prisoners.

The number of arrests was rising – among the first victims were members of the notorious City Authorities – and it was difficult to know who was still free. Priests, merchants, chiefs of staff, sentries, clerks and others were taken away. In the end they were all made prisoners, even members of the Administration themselves. Everybody spied on the other, everybody was a prisoner and nobody knew who was actually in charge, issuing orders and arrest warrants. Everybody had the feeling that they were taking part in the running of the town, in the arrests and in the serving of their time in prison. And as all of them were dressed alike and enjoyed the same rights – all of them being arrested! – they went on doing their jobs as if nothing had happened. They lived their

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ordinary lives and, had someone asked them, they would probably have said that they were happy.

Several years later they would even deny that any arrests had been made at all, and claimed that it was all a fabrication of an inadequately censored and therefore undoubtedly malicious chronicler.