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# DOSSIER: ANTUN ŠOLJAN

## Shrapnel

Antun Šoljan

I am looking at the piece of shrapnel on my desk. A grey piece of heavy alloy, ten centimetres long, its edges so sharp you have to be careful not to cut yourself when you touch it. It's been sitting there since the day Zagreb was bombed — this splinter flew in through my window, cutting the frame, hit the wardrobe and fell, red-hot, onto the carpet. I noticed it among the broken glass and plaster because the carpet had started to smoulder.

I recognized it immediately and greeted it as an old friend. In the Second World War, we children used to gather them to play with or to sell as scrap iron. We called them by their German name, »geller«, though the bombs were American. This time the bombs are Serbian, but the shrapnel is equally lethal. At the moment this one struck I was in the flat: had I been sitting in another chair I would have lost my life — as it is, I only lost about two score window panes and some flower pots.

— So they missed me, — I thought as I picked it up from the floor, tossing it in my hands like a hot potato.

Because they were aiming at me.

Now, somebody will say: not at all, you must be paranoid — they were aiming at the Presidential Palace, Zagreb in general, they were aiming at ALL OF US. Or at least at all the Croats. But this kind of logic is well known from Heller's novel *Catch 22* — where the American pilot complains that total strangers want to kill him. If they are shooting at everyone, does it mean they aren't shooting at me? I therefore inform all those who are interested: they wanted to kill me. As far as I know, they still do.

Who are they? And why? Far be it from me to harbour any ethnic prejudice, but, judging by his name, it was a Serbian pilot in, judging by all the evidence, a Serbian aircraft, and I can't see any reason for his wanting to kill me except that I am a Croat.

War has been declared on me, then.

Now, at my advanced age I am even less belligerent than I used to be, and I have always been a peace-loving person tending to avoid trouble. But I must be in someone's way since he is even trying to kill me, and I do not see how I could get out of it. For I have no other country. True, everybody is talking about a Europe without frontiers, but if I wanted to flee, it would soon become quite clear where the frontiers are. A European minister warned me in advance: »In Europe there is no room for new states and you probably don't want to move to another continent!« I therefore don't see how I can reject the war that has been declared on me. I cannot avoid it.

All those who, in this general tragedy, think this war was avoidable — »somehow«, »anyhow« — are deluding themselves. Its roots are over seventy years old; during the past ten years it has been prepared carefully and in cold blood in academies, committees and staff headquarters — war is the guarantee of their survival — and that Serbian pilot was guided on to me as precisely as a missile.

I have always considered that a war is a kind of natural disaster in which there are only losers. I therefore accept it as I would accept a natural disaster: a flood, the eruption of a volcano, the plague. These things happen. What's happened to me are the Serbs.

Come on, you will say, it's not the Serbs, Serbia is not at war.

I accept war because I have no choice, but I cannot accept the lies and hypocrisy that go with it, however grandiloquent. They say that borders between states are unimportant, incidental, superfluous — and I agree as long as I am not being attacked across them by tanks. They say war does not solve any problems, and I agree, but they are firing at me and my problem is that I have to defend myself — so that they may not say afterwards, when the conquerors write history, that I provoked them, that it was I who attacked myself, or at least: »It is not clear who started it!« And that they may not say, »We are all equally to blame!« — just as after World War II some smart cynics blamed the Jews for Auschwitz because they did not defend themselves vigorously enough. They »overemphasized their Jewishness« and were therefore guilty of being Jewish, in the same way as I am guilty of being a Croat.

I would have to defend myself even if I were as fanatical a pacifist as, say, Bertrand Russell, who suggested on the eve of the Second World War that England, if attacked, should disarm and surrender to the Germans. The English did not follow his advice, nor indeed did they do so more recently, when they fell out with Argentina over the Falklands — »like two bald men fighting over a comb«, as Borges said — a territory just as rocky and barren as the Krajina around Knin.

They say it's not Serbia that's at war, it's not the Serbs who are attacking me but »Serbo-Communists«, it's not all the Serbs but only the »Chetniks«, and it's not the people but the

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»soldiery« — and I agree and will never say as that desperate man did: »I hate the Serbs for making me hate them«. I won't say it, but even Jesus Christ — as a poet observed recently — who said you have to love your enemy, still calls the enemy »enemy«. Or am I being fired at by some collective abstraction?

Though the shrapnel missed me, something else hit me: not one of my many Serbian friends, not one of my Serbian colleagues found it necessary throughout the harangue which led to this war and during the war itself to call and tell me, at least in private if he could not do so publicly, that he wanted no part of this general hostility, to at least offer an apology, if not accept responsibility, for that shrapnel. At least to ask whether I had been hit. They too, then, have tacitly declared war on me.

And while Serbia is touting its innocence and claiming blatantly before the whole world that it is »not at war with Croatia«, what will the Serbs say after the war? Will they say that I myself threw that shrapnel into my house, as they are already saying that the Croats themselves bombed the Presidential Palace? That they killed their own people, destroyed their own cities and villages, shelled their own churches, drove themselves out of their own homes like lemmings? Are they going to say: it wasn't us but those other Serbs?

Among them will be some of my former friends and they will say: it wasn't us, it was them! We didn't want you, you were hit by accident! We didn't want to hit Zagreb, Vukovar, Osijek or Dubrovnik, we didn't want to get the Croats but the »Ustasha«. And then there will be nothing else for me to say but: I don't want you either!

I mean that as a Christian I will not seek revenge but I shall not want to have anything to do with you. This thing on my desk is much more than the fragment of a shell — it is a fragment of a shattered illusion which lasted a long time and for which we have all paid a high price.

They are going to protest: we are not »Serbo-Communists«, »Chetniks«, we are not the »soldiery« — and I will answer: I don't want the Serbo-Communists and Chetniks because they are what they are, but I don't want any of you by accident. They are going to swear their innocence: we are not »extremists«, we are »intellectuals«, we are above national divisions — and I will answer: you watched passively as the tanks rolled over Vukovar and cannibal songs were sung in its streets. Worse, you cheered them on, but you are not extremists: you raised your voices, for example, against the plundering of Dubrovnik, but only when your villas were endangered, and what you shouted then was that Dubrovnik was »both Serbian and Croatian«, that it was »international«!

They are going to demand: you must draw distinctions! What shall I answer: everybody has the right to be singled out and I will make a distinction between the extremists, who claim Dubrovnik for Serbia, and the moderates, who want it to be international — only not Croatian! I will differentiate between extremists, who burned and killed, and the moderates, who were silent until the last moment, letting the extremists do the dirty work for them.

I can see very well how we are going to play-act hypocritically after the war! Because, as we all know, we shall have to live together — with our neighbours in the villages and with those across the border. But as somebody rightly asked: what does »cohabitation with snipers« mean? Shall I keep peering into their faces in order to identify them for the sake of my personal safety?

I know you must love your enemy, but nobody can make you want him. As a citizen and democrat, I know it is my duty to ensure for him all the rights and liberties I enjoy, and I shall do it, conscientiously and to the best of my ability. But nobody can demand my confidence and friendship! For now I know: if I should embrace him, he'll shout that I'm strangling him, that he feels threatened. If I should give him a

book, he'll say it is not in Cyrillic print and that he feels threatened: If I should ask him to work, he'll say that he doesn't know how to work but he knows how to fight! Should I give him a Christian burial, he'll shout from the grave: »This is Serbia!«

Or, if he is a bit more two-faced: »This is Yugoslavia!«

Because these same Serbs, especially those who considered themselves dissidents, who were telling me for years that Yugoslavia was a Croatian-Comintern plot, are now trying to kill me with shrapnel in the name of Yugoslavia and the Comintern! They are waging a war half for Yugoslavia, half for Serbia, whichever way it turns out. For them it's the same thing anyway.

In disasters like this one, our personal impotence is frightening. I believe there are Serbs who feel this impotence just as I do — but the fact that their voices have been so few and so late hurts more than the shrapnel. I feel the impotence like a lump in my throat and it is my only weapon. I am not ashamed of it — because the whole of Europe was impotent — unable to be Europe at the moment of trial. It is not the impotence of the weak, but that of the unprepared, the impotence of those who did not believe in lunacy and savagery but trusted reason, agreement, justice — and it took them a long time to believe their own eyes. It took a long time for that feeling of impotence to change into wrath.

And the longer this war lasts, the lump of anger grows bigger and harder, and I cannot help recalling that sentence of Brecht's *Mother Courage*, who tells the offended soldier not to vent his anger without restraint, because it will be short-lasting. What one needs is »long anger«.

So this is what I think looking at the piece of shrapnel on my desk: for what is happening to us, I, my country and Europe need conscious, deliberate, long-lasting anger.

*Translated by Vera Andrassy*