

## Serbian Pieta

*by Boris Milvich*

Here is what had happened in a classroom one day many many years ago, actually many decades ago, when I was a little boy in a small town of Serbia, a part of the former socialist-communist country of Yugoslavia.

A few years earlier, the country was “liberated” by the Russian army at the end of the Second World War, establishing a socialist-communist regime in the country.

The teacher lectured about the enemies of socialism who were supposedly determined to sabotage and overthrow the peoples’ “elected” government led by the “beloved” president, the communist leader Marshal Tito.

The teacher declared: “There are subversive and reactionary forces among us. We have to fight the enemies of the people and our socialist government.”

Then, with his raised voice, with anger and threat, he said that the enemies of socialism are also in our classroom.

We gasped guessing who that might be. Maybe me or my family, everyone must have thought.

There were three rows of massive benches in the classroom. I was seated with another boy on the last bench in the row to the right.

There was a dead silence in the room now. The air was full of fear and anxiety.

The teacher raised his hand and with his finger pointed at the little girl sitting in the last bench of the row to the left, near the windows. With a sharp and threatening voice the teacher announced: “Here is the enemy. Here is the traitor.”

I leaned forward, turned my head to the left and saw her, sitting still, serious and frightened.

She was just a little girl, a scared little girl with white hair, white eyebrows and white eyelashes.

With her head lowered, looking down at the bench, she was waiting for the punishment.

The teacher informed us that she was the enemy of socialism. Her crime was that her parents did not conform to progressive socialist’s ideas and also that she failed to come to school on Saturdays because of their religious belief. That was her crime, her treason, her act against socialism.

After a tirade of accusations, the teacher asked us to vote by raising our hands as to whether she should be expelled from our class and school.

He asked us—the little children; not the teachers, not the communist party; but us, her friends, her peers, to pass the sentence against her.

But we were all frightened and confused, as we were all aware of all the excesses committed during the civil or ideological war, that is following the world war.

A few pupils felt anger at her for being the traitor and the enemy of socialism. Their hands went up quickly.

The teacher scanned the room of pupils. His eyes fell on me.

I was petrified. The fear hit me. I felt a flash of excruciating pain hitting the pit of my stomach.

By itself, involuntary, my trembling hand started to go up hesitantly.

The teacher’s eyes moved to other children.

I quickly lowered my hand. Shamefully, I realized that I—I also voted for her expulsion.

I really, really did not want to vote. But the fear hit me so strong. I did not know what I was doing. I wanted to take my vote back. But it was too late.

The vote was unanimous. The little girl was expelled from the class, from the school and our midst.

Leaning forward and looking to the left, I continue watching her. Sadness mixed with fear was all over her face. But, in that sadness, there was dignity and solemnness.

She did not cry. She did not know what to do next.

Triumphantly, the teacher announced that the class—her classmates, had voted she does not deserve to be part of Tito’s progressive socialist’s youth.

He ordered her to gather her belongings and leave the class, now.

She hesitated at first, not realizing what had happened. Then she stood up slowly, with measure and composure, yet trembling. She slowly placed her things in the book bag, looked once more that she gathered everything, and looking down at the floor, she started walking not sure of herself.

All eyes were upon her. She must have felt it.

Her head down, serious and lost, she walked slowly in the aisle between the two row of benches with seated pupils, heading toward the front of the classroom.

She reached the front two benches. She was now approaching the teacher, who looked at her with anger and contempt.

Her fear increased. It must have been horrifying to walk toward him. She tried to keep the distance by turning right away to the right, toward the door, that seemed too far to walk and endure.

She was now passing by the big blackboard and the picture of Marshal Tito above it, who looked at her with scorn and threat, murmuring after her: “We know how to deal with traitors!”

Walking slowly, body stooped down, she passed the first bench of the middle row. Then she passed by the first bench of the first row.

She was getting close to the door. Transferring the bookbag to the other hand, she lifted her hand cautiously toward the door handle.

The solemn silence seemed to last forever. Everyone held their breath, witnessing something extraordinary, something unreal.

Making great effort not to make any noise, she lowered the door handle ever so gently, so slowly and with caution, not to make any noise or disturb anyone.

The door slowly opened just enough for her to pass through. Timidly she stepped out, turned around and started closing the door ever so slowly, so timidly.

With her eyes on the outside door handle, she finally closed the door. We saw the handle slowly released.

I realized that my heart was pounding. But, how about hers, I thought? How did she feel at that moment when she was finally outside the classroom?

Did she cry?

Was the ordeal over for her, or just beginning?

I learned the following day that the evicted girl was forced to attend the reform school in a building not far away, with classes held in the evening. The building was on the same street as our school.

With anticipation and anxiety, I was eagerly waiting for the classes to end.

It was dark now.

When the street was clear, I approached the reform school building. Facing the street, it had a decorative facade, easy to climb, with windows way up.

I looked around so no one could see me. I was convinced I was doing something wrong, something traitorous, something against the law. I believed everyone knew my thoughts and what I was up to. I was particularly afraid of being seen by teachers leaving our school building and face my own expulsion.

I could feel my heart pounding, but I was determined.

When I was sure there was no one on the street, I hurriedly climbed the facade, all the time watching the street.

I reached the window quickly. Peering cautiously through the bottom left corner of the window, among many chairs arranged all around the large room, against the walls and windows, with a huge empty space in the middle—there she was.

Seated to the right with much older girls and women, she was doing something with her hands—may be knitting.

Seeing her being out of place, seated with expression of sadness, of fear and dejection, my heart filled with pity and sorrow, as her face became dear to me.

I could feel the atmosphere in the room. No one was happy. They were all condemned as traitors. The sense of guilt and rejection was on everyone's face, all condemned to reform school, to confess their crime, reform their decadent ways and embrace socialism.

As in our classroom, she was looking down, sad, abandoned and condemned.

I looked again up and down the street, fearing my crime may be discovered. There was no one, so I continued looking at her.

When I checked the street again, I saw in the dis-

tance a silhouette of a man approaching.

I was sure he was after me. I quickly descended the facade and ran into the darkness.

I repeated my adventure for a few evenings.

After leaving the building, and her, while walking home, or when lying in bed, I daydreamed many hero-like rescue stories of me freeing her from one or the other ordeal.

My reward at the end was always the same: me and her, holding hands; we walked, just walked; proud, free and content.

One day I learned that she and her family left town. Nobody knew where they went.

Sure enough, that evening, when I climbed the facade once again, I saw her empty chair. She was not there. I felt enormous disappointment, enormous sadness and loss.

Over many decades of time passing, of history's many twists and turns, of wars and changing governments, of many follies of humanity, many things have now changed in that small tragedy-ridden country of Serbia.

But—then, many decades ago, that is what had happened one day in a classroom when I was a little boy, a scared little boy, and she was just a little girl, a scared little girl with white hair, white eyebrows and white eyelashes.