

Serbia

Stefan Ivanović interviewed **Dragoslav Mihailović**

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Ivanović: Good evening. My name is Stefan Ivanović, I am a political scientist based in Berlin. Next to me is my brother Grigorije Ivanović, a theologian and musicologist from Belgrade. We find ourselves in Room 316 of the Serbian Arts and Sciences Academy with Dragoslav Mihailović, one of Serbia's most prominent writers and a man about to enter the tenth decade of his life. Good evening, Mr Mihailović, and thank you for taking the time for the European Archive of Voices.

At the age of fourteen, you watched from a hill above the village of Senje as Allied light bombers bombed your native town of Čuprija and, soon after, you witnessed the entry of the liberating Red Army into town. Which memories do you associate with this period? What do you still remember, has any emotion remained to this day?

Mihailović: At the moment Čuprija was bombed—and I have to say that, in my lifetime, Čuprija has been bombarded *three* times, multiple times within three periods. First it was bombed by the Germans in '41, then in '44 by the Americans or the British, I can't say exactly which. Those were light bombers that we called *twin-boomers* because they had two bodies. The airplanes had two bodies and they bombed Čuprija multiple times. And they all had the same target: the main street and the bridge over the Morava river. It is very interesting that these airplanes were unobstructed by German anti-aircraft—I am talking about the year 1944, when the occupation was still ongoing. They aimed at the bridge and managed to hit it only once, but the shell went through the bridge floor into the river, leaving the bridge intact. The bridge was demolished in October of '44, prior to the liberation—Čuprija was liberated by the Red Army—and that's when the Germans destroyed the bridge. The bridge was, of course, already rebuilt by the year '45. Čuprija was bombarded once more in 1999 when NATO concluded they should bomb it¹, so Čuprija was bombed once again.

Ivanović: To what extent did you—at the age of fourteen—understand what was happening around you?

¹ Refers to the 78-day NATO bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo conflict, March-June 1999.

Mihailović: To be honest, I cannot say that I understood it. I turned fourteen in November of '44, whereas Ćuprija was liberated on 13 October 1944—so I had not turned fourteen yet. I had taken cover in the village of Senje. That is a village ten kilometres from Ćuprija, where my mother's roots were. She came from the Todorović family. This family had seven children. The youngest—my mother Ljubica, aged five—was adopted by her eldest sister, who wasn't the oldest child; she was second oldest. She first raised my mother. And then it happened that my mother died at the age of twenty-three, so my aunt Milica adopted me.

Ivanović: You also lost your father at a young age. He died before your eighteenth birthday.

Mihailović: That is correct, he died in March of 1948. I was seventeen-and-a-half.

Ivanović: Do you remember your grandparents? Did you ever meet them?

Mihailović: I do remember. One set of grandparents had perished in the First World War. My grandfather, Milivoje Mihailović, was killed about a few days into the war. With his wife, he had four sons aged five to twelve. Upon learning of his death, my grandmother had—as people say—dropped dead. So, the children, four boys aged five to twelve, were left on the street.

Looking at photographs of the way the Serbian population looked in the First World War is enough to see and sense the gravity of the situation in Serbia. What, for example, history avoids mentioning—and, frankly, I didn't know it myself either—is that in the First World War, Serbia was defeated and occupied by Germany, and the Germans consigned the entire right shore of the Great Morava—a large part of Serbia, about half of Serbian territory—to Bulgaria for occupation. Serbia was not only occupied, but also in other ways terrorized and oppressed. I only learned a few years ago that, say, all Serbian family names—for example Mihailović—were changed to a Bulgarian form, so that all Mihailovićs became Mihailovs, Jovanovićs became Jovanovs, and so on. It is interesting that Serbian historiography does not mention this, as it is a very, very dangerous form of terror over the occupied population. Of course, upon liberation Serbia returned to its original family names ending with *-ić*. But it truly perplexes me that nobody mentions it; I haven't even heard it from the people who survived that first German-Bulgarian occupation.

Curiously, in the Second World War, the Bulgarian army held that very same right shore of the Great Morava under occupation. But whereas in the First World War the Bulgarian terror against the Serbian population in central Serbia was immense, that was not the case in the Second World War. It was much more moderate. In my home town of Ćuprija,

the Bulgarian army were stationed in our barracks, but no Bulgarian soldier committed any heavier crime.

Ivanović: How important is history, even mythology, in a broader European context? How important is it to preserve tradition and historical information for sustaining an identity?

Mihailović: It is *very* important. If you cause a rupture in the history of a nation—especially the cultural history—you have killed that nation. In the Second World War I survived the German-Bulgarian occupation. And Bulgarians did not pose a problem to the Serbs, as far as I know. And I was a boy aged eleven or twelve up to fourteen. The schools continued operating, despite the closure of the main buildings in Ćuprija. Not only the military barracks, but also the grammar school and one primary school were taken by the Bulgarian army. But the schools continued operating in private homes, maintaining their same curriculum, as far as I know. There was no pressure with regard to the school curriculum.

Ivanović: You were raised by your aunt, whom you deeply cherished. One may say that, throughout your works, the genuine heroes are female characters. They are empathetic, endearing, almost martyr-like. Not only Petrija², but also the sister and the mother of Ljuba “the Champion”³ and Milena, Officer Čiča’s wife⁴. Where do these remarkable characters come from?

Mihailović: This simply came with my—if I may say—gift for literature. I have not thought about my characters in this fashion, but rather as if they were living people—even though they clearly were not living people. Hence it is a great compliment for me when I hear that my female characters have succeeded, in a literary sense. Because whatever you do, you want to do it well. Then, of course, if you have, by circumstance or by improving the situation, succeeded in establishing yourself as a writer—that makes it that much more important, because these characters remain in literature.

Ivanović: In a scene at the beginning of your novel *Gori Morava* („Morava Burning“), an older woman performs a ritualistic chant for the young and frail character’s health. Is there anything in your memories—a tradition or a ritual—that you associate with your home?

Mihailović: My aunt Milica is my greatest treasure in life. She raised me, and whatever good things I may have learned in life, I would say I learned them from her. At the age of sixteen, I was endlessly miserable when she passed. And I think that in one of my books

² From the novel *Petrijin venac* (Petria’s Wreath), published in 1975.

³ From the Novel *Kad su cvetale tikve* (“When Pumpkins Blossomed”), published in 1968.

⁴ From the novel *Čizmaši* (“The Men in Boots”), published in 1983.

there is a story about my experience of her illness. That is the story about my aunt Milica and how I experienced all that. The most important person had departed my life, and after that—as I had previously not lived with my father either, because my mother died when I was a year-and-a-half—I lived alone. A year and a half after Milica, my father passed too. Here, I have to say, there is another difficult issue: my father was an alcoholic and he was not able to take care of me. And so, with Milica's death, my great tragedy had started, and lasted almost up to my fortieth year.

Ivanović: Were you able to imagine any future in that period? And if yes—how did that future look?

Mihailović: *Nothing* existed. Nothing existed when my aunt Milica died. An endless period of starvation had begun and my entire future was under a question mark. I was just a boy when it all happened. I couldn't plan, I couldn't think, I couldn't imagine my future. As early as primary school, I had somehow envisaged a life as a writer. Whether I was able to see any of that when my aunt Milica died, I cannot say—nothing existed. Recently I mentioned at a literary evening—for the first time in my life—these severe periods of starvation that I experienced after all the difficult events I went through. Some of it was handed to me by history, but a lot more by my family situation. Including the German-Bulgarian occupation during the war and my aunt's death, I count seventeen full years of starvation in my life [*smiles*].

This wasn't exactly easy to accept, to understand. But that's how it was. It was not like you ate nothing, but you don't have three meals—perhaps one or two. I have had tuberculosis three times in my life. It is possible that it came, partly, from there. The other part comes from my mother's family. It is believed that my mother died of tuberculosis. One of my uncles died too. One of my books contains a short story that I love and that I later incorporated into the novel that you just mentioned: *Ujka Dragi sedi pod jabukom* ["Uncle Dragi Sits under an Apple Tree"]. This is about one of my uncles from the family of my grandfather Ljubomir Todorović and my grandmother Leposava. Tuberculosis came along with the starvation; it was somehow connected.

Ivanović: It seems that fear was a constant in your life, always present. To what extent did it affect your life?

Mihailović: I have indeed had great fears, but I must say that I am also somewhat tough and have not given in to the fear, but rather have fought both the fear and the terrible living conditions. For example, when Tito [Josip Broz Tito (1892-1980), leader of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, 1944-1980] attacked me in his speech in Zrenjanin and withdrew my piece *Kad su cvetale tikve* ["When Pumpkins Blossomed"] from the Yugoslav Drama Theatre's repertoire, I was afraid for one minute only. But when a man told me about it—because I didn't hear it on the radio; I don't know if I had a radio, so I didn't know

about Tito's speech—he said, “We will not arrest him”—I knew that I shouldn't be terrified, as he wouldn't arrest me unless I helped him with my mistakes [i.e. if he continues trying to write and publish] [*smiles*]. So I threw out the first two books that I had written thus far. Afterwards, I wrote *Petrijin venac* [“Petria's Wreath”], which had also provided material for his book of hate [figurative speech essentially referring to Tito's “black list”] towards me. But, thank God, he did not read or know about it. Hence my book was published nine years later without consequences. I even received a nice literary award for it. This was the start of the historic recognition of my literature. I got very lucky in that regard.

Ivanović: For a long time, you could not make a living from your calling, your writing. Mainly due to political reasons. What was your first job?

Mihailović: I started working very early. For instance, one summer I was a scaler on a threshing machine. I had already lost my aunt and my father, and somehow I got the job as a scaler, weighing bags of wheat coming out of the threshing machine. I had also gotten social support from the Čuprija municipality. It is possible that the brother of my father's uncle, a man named Dimitrije *Mita* Mihailović, who was the president of a district council, had helped me get the threshing job. That might have been my first job. I can't exactly remember; I have not thought about this. Early on I started selling books door to door. I sold books for at least four or five, maybe even six years. Even two years after graduating from the Faculty of Philosophy, I still sold books and made a living from the commission I made off of sales.

Ivanović: You have earned a degree in Yugoslav literature and the Serbo-Croatian language in 1957. You just mentioned that as early as primary school you knew you wanted to become a writer. How did you know that?

Mihailović: How I decided that, I do not know. I think that one summer during primary school I read a book that later appeared in the *Golden Book* series issued by Belgrade's Prosveta [a Serbian publishing house, one of the largest in former Yugoslavia, founded in the immediate aftermath of the World War II in 1945]. That is when I chose this profession, the book-writing profession. Of course, it took thirty years before I had written my first book and seen it published.

Ivanović: That was *Frede, laku noć* [“Good night, Frede”, published in 1967.].

Mihailović: *Frede, laku noć*, yes. Here, the circumstances were on my side. If I was targeted by bad luck on other occasions, this time it worked to my advantage, because the book came out in 1967. I had submitted it in 1965, then it got delayed for a year or two. Almost two years had passed. And then it happened in 1967, a year after Josip Broz demoted his main flunky Aleksandar Ranković [Yugoslav communist politician, considered to be the third most powerful man in Yugoslavia], who was in charge of internal

affairs, prisons, the UDBA [the secret police organization of the SFR Yugoslavia], plus Goli Otok [barren, uninhabited island in present-day Croatia that was the site of a political prison operated between 1949 and 1989] and whatever else fell under it.

Ivanović: Speaking of this book, described as modern realism by the critics, *Frede, laku noć*, expresses a strong anti-systemic, counter-ideological sentiment. At the age of nineteen, you defended two friends who got in trouble with the regime because of political jokes. What motivated you to stand up for them and, in doing so, risk losing your own freedom?

Mihailović: There was no politics involved. Those were two of my friends—one was five years older than me, the other two. When you are eighteen and someone is five years older than you, he is like a good old man. He could have been married, a father, etc., and I was a kid. So, what happened was, when these two young men from my high school class got arrested, I was a SKOJ-er⁵, i.e. a member of the Communist youth of Yugoslavia. Hence, as a member of that committee, I had concluded that I have the right to my *own* opinion: how can these young men be arrested for no reason? And then, for several months, I led a campaign for their release. I was visiting the people in Čuprija who had some power, more or less—and they all had little power. And I was receiving messages from the UDBA to cool it, to stop doing that. But I didn't cool it, not until the end of the school year. Afterwards, I went to a work action [voluntary labour projects involving young people, often to build infrastructure projects], so it stopped. It stopped also because those two young men were—either simultaneously or separately—released from jail. Thus the cause of our dispute had disappeared, and I continued with school. I may have already enrolled the university. But they had not forgotten how I reacted to their decision. Truth be told, I, too, hadn't forgotten how they reacted to my youthful attempt to help some people who were in trouble. So, in 1949, perhaps 1950, I fell ill with tuberculosis for the first time. Čuprija did not have running water or a sewage system. Instead, we had a pump in the courtyard. One morning, while washing my face, I coughed blood out of my lungs. Sure enough, I visited a doctor and tuberculosis was diagnosed. Some kind of a treatment started. I lived in a small house that we had, in Ravanička Street. Two and a half months after being diagnosed, I got arrested. I was still sick. And then I spent five and a half months in pre-trial detention. After that, I was sent to Goli Otok, where I spent another fifteen months as a prisoner.

Ivanović: Goli Otok is perhaps the only concentration camp of this kind in postwar Europe. What was the most difficult part of it? What had the hardest effect on you?

⁵ Member of the Young Communist League of Yugoslavia (in short *SKOJ*), the youth wing of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia from 1919 to 1948.

Mihailović: Perhaps I have written this down somewhere: When I was in the camp from the age of twenty to twenty-one, I was able to imagine that pre-trial detention was a real improvement to one's situation in life [*laughs*]. The camp differed widely from the prisons that I had been through. Upon arrival at the camp, I was already an experienced prisoner with almost half a year of jail time. And if I could have imagined better days, those were the days of the pre-trial detention.

Ivanović: Whom did you blame for what was happening to you? Who were you angry at? Did you hate anyone?

Mihailović: Ah, of course, it was the regime, the main people in the regime, Broz and the others. Surely, when you live in a community, you will certainly deal with the people representing that regime. Whether I had clashed with them, I no longer remember. But one day, they arrested me, and they absolutely left a mark on my life. Since that moment I could not longer say that I hadn't felt the dark side of a terrorist regime on my own skin.

Ivanović: Can those who have never lost their freedom ever truly appreciate it? How did the concept of freedom change for you after those events?

Mihailović: I was still constantly terrorized. Somehow, I was managing to find work—miserably paid, but paid nonetheless. If you earn, you will eat. But I kept getting fired. I was directly persecuted. I had already enrolled in the university. I had completed the first year when I got arrested. Afterwards, they noted that I had de-registered from university. But, as far as I remember, I hadn't. I completed the first year as a non-regular student and started working at a company trading in leather and technical oils. I got that job thanks to my two uncles, who were shoemakers. Their stores got closed, so they started working in leather acquisition. They had helped me get a job there and I worked for ten months. Then I stopped, determined to return to university. But I got arrested.

Ivanović: If you could go back in time—for example, to your attempt as a young man to help your friends—would you change anything? Or would you do the same thing all over again?

Mihailović: I think that I would do it again. My aunt Milica was illiterate, but very noble, fulfilled in her life. She had the courage to stick up for those who were weaker, and those of us who were around her—we knew that. She was capable of adopting five children of her brothers who had died. She embraced them. My aunt was my great blessing. What I managed to learn from her is another question.

Ivanović: You said on a few occasions that you admired Miloš Crnjanski⁶, Ivo Andrić⁷, and Bora Stanković⁸ [Serbian writers], as far as Serbian national literature goes. When did you encounter their work for the first time?

Mihailović: Those were authors I was assigned to read in school. I was a good student. In me, the professors had a guy who understood what they were talking about. I have read a lot throughout my entire life; I read to this day. So they could be happy with my work. Mathematicians, chemists, and physicists [*sighs*]*—not really.*

Ivanović: Do you have any role models from European literature more broadly?

Mihailović: I have, of course, also read world literature. Russian literature above all is a great school for every writer. But my literary beginnings were not tied to any role models from literature itself. *Au contraire*, I was—to the extent that I could know this then—against literary role models. I was trying to find my own path. Whether and when I started succeeding, I honestly do not know.

Ivanović: Did you learn any foreign language in school?

Mihailović: Yes, I learned French and Russian in school. Those two languages I also loved.

Ivanović: For a while you were a lecturer in Serbo-Croatian in France.

Mihailović: For a short time, one trimester. The way we have semesters, two annually, they have trimesters—a school year divided into three parts. I spent a few months as a lecturer at the university in Poitiers.

Ivanović: Have you had the chance to travel around Europe?

Mihailović: I did have that chance, especially after my fortieth or forty-fifth year. I do not know exactly when I got the passport—I had not even applied for it initially. I simply didn't have time for traveling. I was a sedentary person doing what he loved to do. From the first to the twenty-second book, I always did only what I loved.

Ivanović: When after the war did you hear about the creation of the European Union? About the concept of a united Europe?

Mihailović: I truly did not know anything about that. I have not followed this. After that episode of my life called Goli Otok, I did away with politics—as an obsession, as a

⁶ 1893-1977, Serbian writer and diplomat, poet of the expressionist wing of Serbian modernism.

⁷ 1892-1975, Yugoslav novelist, poet, and short story writer who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1961.

⁸ 1876-1927, Serbian writer belonging to the school of realism.

profession, as a possibility. And I never returned to it to resolve any of my ideals or problems.

Ivanović: Do you follow politics today?

Mihailović: No, to this day I don't follow it. That is, I follow it the way a farmer or a clerk does it. I buy one newspaper and sometimes read something in it. Of course, I am mostly interested in the culture section.

Ivanović: On one occasion—you had already been marked, nearly excommunicated by the system—Ivo Andrić supported you.

Mihailović: A magazine called *Serbian Literary Pamphlet* had published an excerpt of a manuscript written by an older journalist, long retired, including this story: Andrić, myself, Stevan Raičković⁹, and a few other writers were invited to Bora Stanković's anniversary in Vranje. Andrić, who was almost forty years older than me, was sitting with some of his peers. Stevan Raičković and I were around the same age and we were separated. [*Laughs.*] According to the journalist, as I entered the hall where Andrić was sitting, someone asked, "Who is that man," referring to me. Andrić explained who I was, saying, "I have found a writer for myself in Serbian literature." I don't know if he used those words. "I told my wife that I have discovered him as a writer *for myself.*" I wished to live my literary life out of the public eye, but I failed. The same way Andrić failed. [*Laughs.*] But he was in this regard much more successful than I. But, hey, I have also tried to hide from the public like he did. I have nothing to say to people other than what is in my books.

Ivanović: But I think that your books skilfully show how politics affects people's lives.

Mihailović: Well, of course it does! [*Laughs.*] But I think that people should protect themselves from politics. I am protecting myself from it quite successfully, I would say. I was basically a kid when politics forcefully embraced me and sent me to a terrible concentration camp, one that other European countries—which are, of course, much larger than we are—did not have. Well, it is what it is. I was rehabilitated, which was my goal for all the people from Goli Otok. And so it happened. I was one of the people fighting for the exoneration of prisoners. And a law on rehabilitation was passed. Whoever was persecuted, imprisoned in a jail or in a camp and wanted to be rehabilitated, could. And I find this very good. That was my final engagement in the field of politics, if this can be considered as such.

Ivanović: Did you consider it your duty to help work for the rehabilitation of those people?

⁹ 1928-2007, Serbian poet, writer and academic.

Mihailović: I did, yes.

Ivanović: If the legacy of your entire body of work had to be summarized in one sentence, according to Ljubiša Jeremić it would be “The Tales of Suffering and Mercy.”¹⁰ And this is almost at the level of a classical tragedy. To give you an example, a moment of catharsis: in chapter twenty-three or twenty-four of *Kad su cvetale tikve*, Stole’s mother approaches Ljuba, the Champion, and asks him whether he killed her son. And, in a way, she forgives him for what he did. Then they part in a decent way. He says “goodbye,” she says “goodbye.” What can we learn from the suffering and the mercy, the forgiveness?

Mihailović: I have no intention to teach people how to behave. If they find something like this in one of my books, they can count on it that these are not the only opinions they might have. Instead, they should simply observe the world around them and decide what to do. A man is not always capable of generating certain political opinions. Some people do this professionally, so let’s see what they can bring. Hopefully the conclusion will not be that we need another war. Even though history tells us that life cannot solve some problems other than with weapons. Not all of us have to participate in that. Yet history tells us that wars and disagreements in the world are commonplace.

Ivanović: In your opinion, what is the societal role of literature?

Mihailović: This is a known thing in every history of literature, in every school, in every university. If a story, a poem carries a moral, it does not need to be directly stated in the text. If you feel a human blessing in the text—that is the correct interpretation of literature. Never has a novel or a poem called for a war, and hopefully they never will. If I live another ten months, I will turn ninety. I have never seen a person in my hometown of Čuprija older than eighty. And here I am approaching ninety. I have never intended for my books to give concrete advice. That was not my idea. I recommend that people try to be peaceful. It would be really good for this world if people tried to imagine it in peace, and not in war.

Ivanović: What are you currently working on?

Mihailović: I am still working on this damned “Goli Otok”. When I was twenty-one and saw that abomination hovering over human fates . . . I walked around the camp, that stone pit, and watched people in short pants, wounded, miserable, stumbling and falling. And I said to myself, “Someone ought to write something about this.” And, honestly, I absolutely didn’t have that plan. But *Titoism* was taking hold. And now, once more, the papers often write about Josip Broz, who was nothing but a criminal crook. And I didn’t want it; I protected myself for a long time. But then I realized that the UDBA would only write how wonderful Goli Otok was. So I got to work and started gathering testimonies. In the

¹⁰ Ljubiša Jeremić, *Critical views on Serbian literature of the 20th century*.

meantime, by the time I had completed that and submitted the book for publishing, some books had already come out. Perhaps even thanks to some of my statements, the people who were imprisoned woke up, rather than those who were the beaters and the killers in that camp. Thus, I wrote several thousand pages. One cannot even read that, let alone write it. And now, in deep old age, I am still working. After publishing those books, I have met with some of the survivors and every time I took notes of our conversations. Now I am transcribing those notes from some notepads and notebooks. Who knows if I will manage to complete it. It would be my twenty-third book. That's there. I didn't want to feel an obligation to write about Goli Otok, but I had to do it because there was nobody else. And I did what I had to do.

Ivanović: Thank you once again and we hope that you will complete this twenty-third book. It would be important.

Ivanović stops the audio recording.

Mihailović: Thank you! [*Laughs.*] Journalism seemed appealing for my work because there are no fixed hours and you can be free. Hence, I, too, have taken advantage of this profession as much as I could to gain some freedom. I think that journalism was helping me. But I also know that journalism can be dangerous for emerging literature, for a writer attempting to create literature. Because literature and journalism are not same things, but when they get mixed up – literature takes the toll.