

Over the course of their Winter and Spring terms, the University of Chicago's undergraduate students (Ayse Kocakulah, Rada Yovovich, and William McKinstry) in advanced BCS taught by Nada Petković have translated a novella by the Serbian writer, Laza Lazarevic, *Švabica*. For the first time this classic piece of Serbian literature will be made available for English readers in the journal, *Serbian Studies*, edited by Bogdan Rakic. It will be published in this coming Fall's edition (2005). This, the first 6 of the 45-page work, is available here for your enjoyment.

THE GERMAN GIRL
By Laza Lazarevic

When I returned last year from Italy, this manuscript fell into my hands. I read it under the impressions left on me from Pompeii. When I was leaving from Pompeii, I sang the song, "*Human Vanity Ceases at the Grave.*" Oddly, that song was lingering on my mind even after this manuscript. What's even more striking is that my companion in Italy, my friend and editor, when I read this incomplete manuscript to him, he offered to trade his album of Pompeii for it. I agreed to this swap, laughing at the old anecdote about moths and lava.

LETTER I

.....pleasant female company.....Her mother, brother, a lieutenant..... ... manov, Popesku, comptroller in the Ministry of Housing, one German student called Max But you're already familiar with the most prominent residents in these boarding houses, particularly her. During the day, we each are at work. For breakfast, lunch, and dinner we gather in the dining hall where there is also a piano and a dozen or so newspapers and journals. The dining hall is actually our international ground. We all feel at home here. Whoever has nothing to do, sits here, reads newspapers, slams on the piano, visits with Ana, raps their knuckles on the windows, leans by the fire, and Ana of course is always there either with work or with leisure. Tumanov with his deep bass and even deeper mustache
..... proud like
..... *D minor*
.....

She rubs her legs with petroleum jelly, and sometimes, the poor thing, she comes in the morning from the square panting and at the same time she demonstrates to us, her cadets, the contents of her baskets.....like a skunk, and they call it *haut gout*¹.

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LETTER II

You probably think that I've done nothing else but fantasize about her. No, my friend, still in me an honest heart beats - well, at least, I can claim this to you! What do I have with her? Even if I were sure that she - I'm embarrassed to say that she loves me; I would withdraw from the world of love even sooner. Would I be playing with a young girl's heart?

If I'm to tell the truth, at any rate, I enjoy her company, and indeed, why wouldn't I? But of course all of this is far from any kind of feeling which even resembles love. Occasionally, I glance furtively, and I think to myself: "so young!" But nothing further than that, of course. Even if I were completely indifferent towards her (as she is towards me - and so it is, so help me God!), I would still be cautious of any move that would lead to any declarations or agreements. You know she is not of age to 'pursue love,' to stand the whole night in front of the front gate and wait for the "lover" and kiss so passionately until they're red in the face, in other words without giving God a second thought. I want to say: she's not of age to play love scenes – giving "signals" like holding hands, meaning "be mine." There is no such joke. A few more months and I am leaving school and standing on my own two feet, and even frivolous steps in love would be steps towards a marriage and you know very well that I cannot marry her. Dear God! What would my parents say? What would my friends, and in the end, especially you yourself? What's more, she's not even Serbian, maybe not even beautiful, but poor. And her family, at least her mother is all right, but the lieutenant and you know that I am getting too old for excess. At one time I thought I would be able to marry a maid, live with her on crumbs and be the happiest man. Perhaps, these years are the ones that make a man wiser. I

¹ refined taste

would spit on them, but still I can't be crazy. Everything passed. I would be embarrassed before the barber who shaves me three times a week.

Well, my dear friend! Without planning I made this introduction. Joca is to be blamed for this. When he visited us he spied on us and later he gossiped about it in front of you out of which you made this entire acquisition from which I am defending myself. The story is completed, believe me! I am only a gentleman with her: I accompany her on the piano when she sings; I pick pins when she drops them; I throw the cloak on her when she heads for a walk, etc. However, calmly and peacefully, I mind my own business and in two or three months I hope to become a doctor. Who will be worthy of me!

Can you believe what crazy Nikola did - he shaved his mustache and enrolled in the Bursche! As the oldest medical student, I dared to give him a lecture. In response, he threatened to challenge me to a duel, at which Vidak the Smoker slapped him in the face.

Someone knocks at my door.

Ana calls me for dinner.

Your Friend

LETTER III

.....

Since some time ago, our correspondence has been only about Ana. I do this perhaps, for a reason that you wouldn't suspect: "Now he is silent, he is not writing anything about her. It is clear to me I know what it means!" You are just such a skeptic. Now at least you are going to believe that there is nothing between us, because she left to visit her sister in Gota five days ago. We are left alone - don't laugh at me when I tell you that we are all somewhat sad. She kept us together; now we sit at the table silent and one can hear a pin drop. Max makes bad jokes at which we politely laugh. We talk to Tumanov a lot when we are in his room. Since it is hard for him to speak German he hates to start when we are all together, and then he starts to speak Russian which no one else except for us can understand - you know it's very rude.

Our 'Don Carlos' continues to be a complete opposite of the name we gave him. He continuously looks furtively, combs his hair forward, wears short pants, large big shoes, and big red scarves on which he wipes his nose. He has a razor that has one side

he uses only for corn. I noticed that the other day when Spalding took his razor to sharpen the pencil. He reads the paper all day long from the over-filled display rack. He sinks into the sofa and pulls them out, one after another. Sometimes having found something very important, he pulls it away, holding it in his left hand and looking at it from a distance. Then with his right hand, he hits the paper and looks at the person sitting closest to him and nods his head importantly and exclaims: *Natürlich*² or *Na-nu*³ or *Donnerwetter noch einmal!*⁴[R C Y1] And then he starts attentively underlining everything in red pencil and after he blows away little particles on the paper, and sits comfortably on the sofa and continues to read.

These underlined pages are used the following by Ana's mother to wrap the jars of compote.

He still talks without stopping about the war with France. About the world consisting only of Germans, about "the might of the German Empire", etc, etc. His nose already got red, and as he enters through the door you can hear how the beer shakes in his belly. Tumanov will usually whispers, "*Kraftige deutsche Natur!*"⁵ and spits.

Always spalding, he talks about how he hates Germans. He beats up waiters when they want to cheat him for ten cents, but then he gives them a dinner for a tip. He drags his German-English all the time wherever he goes and has beefcake tartar for breakfast. I watch so that I can learn as much English as I can, and then I tell her.

Her brother, the lieutenant, is bland in the same way. He's ecstatic when he can assure us that he can't wait to fight the French again: *die Hunde haben noch immer die Jacke nicht voll*⁶. When there is talk about Serbia he keeps on insisting that we need to start a war with the Turks, and with any luck defeat them.

"Eh, if you people had just one of our corps, you would easily be done with the Turks!"

I had enough:

"If you knew the Serbian army and its campaigns, you would be embarrassed to say such a thing."

² Naturally

³ Uh-oh!

⁴ Fire and brimstone, again!

⁵ Strong German will!

⁶ These dogs still need to be beaten.

Tumanov started to tell a story in his mangled German to tell a story. You know that he's well informed in our affairs. Now, he is translating the memoirs of Prote Nenadovic into Russian. You still don't know the two Romanians who are with us, one is a high school student here, the other a mathematician - a very good and responsible man.

LETTER IV

You wonder, I'm sure, why I've been silent – I am ill, or, better to say I was ill. I didn't want to write to you, for fear that you'd worry, but now everything is fine. Even after this hiatus I still have nothing to write to you about.

From my last letter with my story with Ana, you didn't draw any conclusions and asked to tell you only in details what happened between us. And twice you underlined the words in *detail*.

Fine, my friend. You don't realize that you yourself are the one who creates this kind of drama. I now pay attention to every little gesture. You are actually to be blamed that I started to be interested in her, to tell you honestly, more than I'd like to be. I keep thinking: what should I write him now?

Here is what I gathered for this short letter, as my letters usually are.

When she arrived from Gota, I was feeling better enough that I even had lunch with them. Until then I ate in my room because I was too lazy to get dressed. She arrived in the evening; I heard Popesku and Tumanov open the doors excitedly and how the whole house suddenly became filled with joy. Tumanov ran into my room (I don't know what's gotten into him) and sure that I would be happy to hear the news: “C'mon, Ana has arrived!” I got dressed and went to the dinning room to eat.

When I entered the room, she was pulling out some gifts from her sister sent to her mother.

“A,” she said in a voice that moved me, I couldn't resist, “are you ill?”

“No, I was, Miss. And how did you know?”

She got a little confused.

“Mr. Tumanov told me,”

“Yes,” Mr. Tumanov told me in his typical fashion. “The young lady asked the moment she opened the door how you were doing”

I looked out of the corner of my eye. She pretended that she wasn’t listening anymore, and continued to unpack the gifts for her mother.

I sat in a corner near the hearth and watched her. Maybe because I missed her or maybe because she was flushed from the road, she appeared to me unusually beautiful.

I didn't say anything else. When her mother left to see to dinner and Popesku went to buy tobacco, we two stayed alone – she and I. Tumanov read the papers and asks every once and awhile: “*Kak ztapo russki*”⁷ She came and sat with me at the hearth.

“But you are now completely recovered?” she asked me, with hesitation.

“I am on the way to being completely recovered.”

“But you are so pale!”

“I haven't eaten anything for eight days.”

“Thank God it’s almost behind you. You don't take good care of yourself, and you are the doctor!” And then she burst into laughter. “I cannot do anything against your orders and yet you won't let yourself notice anything. From now on, so help me God, I'm not going to listen to you.”

“You? No, you were always a good patient. You won't jeopardize that reputation now, especially under my watch, please.” And I started to laugh, wanting to show her that I didn't think that she cared about me so much.

She did not say anything in response. I made another discrete glance, but she didn't look at me. It seemed as if I posed a question that she couldn't answer, and as if I cared a lot about her. These kinds of situations irritated me. It vexes me to no end whether she actually cares for me as you all try to assure me.

That evening, after dinner we played checkers. She played very well. She won the first game, and looked at me sharply. I understood what that it meant, "Why don't you play seriously?"

⁷ “How do you say this in Russian?” (Translation)