



Vladimir Pištalo, born in 1960 in Sarajevo, published his first collection of short stories, *Picture-books*, in 1981. In 1986 he published two books, *Manifestos* and *Nights*. The novella *Korto Malteze* was published in 1987, the short story collection *End of an Era* in 1990, *Stained-Glass Window in Memory* in 1994, *Tales from All Over the World* in 1997. His essays, published in *Vreme*, have been translated into French, German, Dutch and English. Pištalo is the founder / editor of three Almanacs of the Belgrade Manufacture of Dreams. He is currently pursuing post-graduate studies in the U.S.

Vladimir Pištalo, rođen u Sarajevu 1960. godine, objavio je prozne knjige: *Slikovnice*, 1981, *Manifesti*, 1986, *Noći*, 1986, *Korto Malteze*, 1987, *Kraj veka*, 1990, *Vitraž u sećanju*, 1994, *Priče iz celog sveta*, 1997, *Aleksandrida*, 1999, i *Milenijum u Beogradu*, 2000. Zastupljen je u više antologija bosanske i srpske književnosti. Njegovi eseji, objavljeni u časopisu *Vreme*, prevedeni su na francuski, njemački, holandski i engleski. Momentalno živi u SAD, gde završava disertaciju iz oblasti Moderne američke istorije.

VLADIMIR PIŠTALO

Brotherhood of People in the Universe

After the Boston musicologist Franco Mazzari turned sixty-five, his ten years younger wife started telling him every day:

"Retire!"

If anybody told Mazzari he looked tired, the wife would raise her eye-brow and sharply whisper to him:

"See? People are noticing you're getting old. You look pinched, you look wrinkled. Which means it's time you retired."

What was going on between Franco Mazzari and his wife is usually called the "authority struggle". In fact, the wife was telling the musicologist: I'm important! You're unimportant! It's time you admitted you're unimportant!

After twenty years of ironing, Mazzari's wife found a publisher for her translation of Italo Svevo's *The Confessions of Zeno*. She lifted her left eye-brow, and passionately explained her translation work to her acquaintances. Then she lifted her right brow and berated everything her husband was doing. And, if during his monthly medical check-up, the doctor praised Mazzari's fitness, Catherine pretended she couldn't hear it and shook her head:

"It's high time you retired."

Franco Mazzari was an expert in the Baroque, author of a book on Buxtehude, and he occasionally gave lectures on music in various New England towns. The aged Mazzari didn't feel like giving up his job in the Weidner library in Cambridge. During the day, everything was fine with his decision to continue working, but at night the situation was getting worse. In the unhappy musicologist's dreams, his wife's condemning forefinger turned into the fiery sword of the archangel Gabriel. The archangel Gabriel gaped like a

cavern, and – in a voice which sounded like the neighing of a wild horse – cried to the distraught Mazzari:

“Retire! Retire!”

There was no-one the dispirited Mazzari could turn to. Most of his friends had known him and Catherine as a couple for decades. Mazzari couldn't just interrupt the usual flow of conversation and start lamenting: She's sucking my blood! Mazzari's situation got better when a refugee from Bosnia, Emir Bajgorić, moved to Everett near Boston. He was a man who was willing to listen to the musicologist's wailing.

Mazzari had once played host to the violinist Danka Bajgorić, who performed at the summer festival in Lenox, Massachusetts. The war in Bosnia had separated Danka from her husband Emir. Danka fled to Norway, and now lived on the very “top” of the earth. Emir somehow got to America, where he was helped by Mazzari. Now the fortresses and the towers of Boston impatiently awaited Danka's arrival. When they got settled, the couple planned to bring to Boston Emir's sister from Ljubljana and Danka's brother from Belgrade.

Although Bajgorić was a good deal younger than Mazzari, the educated American Italian and the pure-blooded Herzegovinian quickly became friends. Mazzari felt lonely, so he was spending more time than was necessary with the refugee he was helping. And then more, and more ...

Electrical engineer Bajgorić was grateful to Mazzari for helping him find a job in his field. Mazzari respected Emir's willingness to listen indefatigably to his marital problems:

“You're a true Christian!” he once said to him.

“I'm a Muslim,” Emir replied.

Emir Bajgorić, with his fair hair and protruding chin, reminded one of the French actor Gerard Depardieu. He spoke English – which grammatically doesn't distinguish between formal and informal address – with a Mostar accent. He called Mazzari “Franco” ever since their first meeting. To the newcomer from Mostar, Franco – with his posture, shape of brows and expression round the mouth – seemed like a true New England puritan. However, the impression changed the moment Mazzari started to speak. As soon as he opened his mouth, the musicologist's face charmed everyone with the smile he inherited from his mother, who used to serve spaghetti on the chequered table-cloths in the “Verdi” inn at North End.

“You look like a Bostonian Brahman until you smile,” Emir said to him.

A smile flickered in Emir's eyes. With this man in an “extraordinary” situation he could have “extraordinary” conversations. Both men loved to cook. They met every Friday to buy groceries and select wines. Then they made gourmet dinners in Emir's apartment in Everett. At the beginning, Mazzari felt it was his duty to ask Emir questions about the “situation” in Bosnia. However, Emir soon noticed that Mazzari forgot in a week everything he told him. From this fact he figured that for Mazzari, those people “there”

were a different kind of people, to whom something happened that could never happen to "us". Emir was honest with himself, and admitted that he'd once had the same attitude towards the misfortunes of the people in Lebanon. To the humane and intelligent man that Mazzari was, all the information about the Balkans was slipping through the fingers like sand. In any case, if the "New York Times" said that Mostar was in southern Bosnia, then it was in southern Bosnia. And let it be! Emir didn't exactly burn with desire to remember everything he'd experienced before he fled from Mostar. So he avoided the Balkan topics, which constantly demanded additional information, and decided to talk only about what his friend already knew.

The last Friday before Christmas found the two friends in Emir's dining room in Everett. Decorative lamps were flickering in the neighbouring windows. The two buddies were washing down their food with the Australian wine "Wolf Blas", discussing "life in general", and particularly women. Neapolitan songs performed by Luciano Pavarotti screeched from the gramophone. Whenever they clinked their glasses together, Emir was sorry Danko wasn't there, and Mazzari was glad he'd escaped from Catherine. And those were the right moments for Mazzari to really open up his soul. With great relief he started talking about his personal problems. He sighed, and confessed to Emir that he was gradually losing faith in his own judgement, and started feeling guilty for turning down his wife's demands that he should retire.

"This is because you're a masochist," said Emir mercilessly. "It's a global trend. Today the woman is the plant that's gaining power. And do you know what the man is? The man is lichen."

"Lichen ...," repeated Mazzari like an echo.

"I'll tell you a story," Emir said significantly. "And you'll feel more familiar with Bosnians and Herzegovinians ..."

He sipped some wine, waved his hand in the rhythm of a Neapolitan song, and changed his mind in an instant:

"No, before I tell you what I wanted – and it's a famous and very instructive story about Ramiz and Behka – I'll tell you what happened to my neighbour in Mostar. My neighbour was a colonel. And then he – this colonel – retired."

Emir paused, winking:

"I'm not sure, but I think he died soon afterwards. It's no wonder. Many active people die as soon as they retire. Anyway, even if he didn't die, it doesn't matter, that's not the point of my story ..."

I met this neighbour of mine a month after he retired. He was standing in front of the building, staring emptily. I asked him: How are you, Dražen? He sighed and said to me: You won't believe it, but it's all the same to me if I now go to the right or to the left ..."

Emir paused for dramatic effect, and repeated:

"It was all the same to him whether he turned right or left. Is it your ambition to become like this?"

"God forbid," whispered the musicologist, frightened.

"No, no," Emir went on, pretending he didn't understand Mazzari. "Don't rush! Don't breathe! Jump to no conclusions until you've heard the story about Ramiz and Behka. Ramiz and Behka were from Mostar, they were the parents of a good friend of mine. Of course, this was before the war ... There was life before the war ... Ramiz was a journalist then, he had "his" table on the terrace of the Hotel Neretva. Every afternoon, over a brandy, he would gaze at the greenest Neretva river, whirling and flowing on. Ramiz had a straight nose, thick eye-brows, a brilliant smile. The women loved him. He was a real man, six feet seven inches tall, the heart of every company. Behka was a housewife. She had only one advantage over Ramiz: she was ten years younger. Behka stayed at home, and it must be admitted, suffered Ramiz's occasional outbursts. She baked pies, and waited for her moment."

With lifted forefinger Emir suddenly stopped. Pavarotti sang from the gramophone:

*Catari, Catari
perche me dice sti parole amare,
perche me parle e'o core me turmiente, Catari.*

(Catherine, Catherine
why are you saying these bitter words,
why are you saying them and tormenting my heart, Catherine.)

Emir put on a pained expression. He shook his head and continued:

"So, Behka was baking her pies and waiting. What was she waiting for? She was waiting for Ramiz to retire. Here I mention an important detail: There's a poem by Tin Ujević called 'Brotherhood of people in the Universe.' This brotherhood exists between you and Ramiz. You're not aware of it, but you'll soon understand. You'll see right away! So, Behka was waiting, and her moment came. Ramiz retired. He kept to the house, and got that distracted look that pensioners have. He became careless."

Emir's face now expressed disgust:

"And soon he started physically shrinking. And Behka started growing. Behka was at her best, master of her kitchen, queen of her home. Ramiz was getting smaller. His confidence vanished. He became like an actor who's lost his role. The admired Ramiz became a dwarf. And do you know what he did? He started following Behka around. He trailed her all over the house. You know, like a dog."

Emir's eyes rolled with theatrical horror:

"Like a dog!"

He clapped his hands:

"And now you tell me – is this what you want? To experience Ramiz's fate? Is this really what you want? No, seriously, tell me if this is what you want! If you want it, then – in this case – no problem ..."

The musicologist outstretched his arms, defending himself from Emir's verbal outburst, which threatened to outdo the southern Italian:

"You've convinced me," he exclaimed. "I'll never retire. As soon as I retire I'll start shrinking."

As if he was already shrinking, the Italian quickly added:

"I promise I'll never retire in my life! I won't retire before I've written a libretto for the opera 'Ramiz and Behka'. You know, like 'Daphnis and Chloe'."

"Why don't you call it 'Brotherhood of People in the Universe'?" the Bosnian emigrant raised his glass.

"This opera will give a musical expression to our time," Mazzari raised his glass too.

"Perche me dice sti parole amare," sobbed Pavarotti.

Translated by Lili Potpara