

**LAZAR
STOJANOVIC**

*In Place of a Last Will
and Testament*

As a visiting M.D. in an outpatient clinic attached to a refugee camp in a West European country, I was asked by an old man to record his testament and if possible, to pass it along to his family. An interpreter translated it orally, and I tape-recorded both the statement and the translation. However, it was impossible to trace the old man's family, neither through the Red Cross, nor through the local authorities in his former country. He expired two days later. I thought that it would be a good idea to publish the statement, because I got the impression that he actually wanted it to be made public in some way.

So here it is:

I've lost all
but life.
That is mine
and I alone
am bound
to use all of it.

I can't give it to anyone else, even if I wanted to do so. One who has nothing is really not in a position to imagine making a serious declaration of his will and testament. However, I feel like saying a few words before I leave for good. Nobody should expect any material gain from these words. Those who care only for profit might as well stop listening right now. I think that my children may be happy to hear from me, and perhaps some other caring soul will be glad to read these words as well.

Possessions come and go. Nothing to regret. Just less to worry about. I didn't have very much anyway. Some furniture, basically, a fridge, an electric cooker and a TV set. Also some dishes, clothes and books. The apartment belonged to the timber plant where I was employed as an accountant before I retired. The company doesn't exist anymore. People fled and most of the equipment was stolen. All the books were burned. I wonder why they also wanted to destroy the whole building. Someone could have used it for many more years. Instead, they fired their canons from the nearby hill. They were anti-aircraft canons. The building was left full of holes and cracks. There was nobody inside and they knew it. But they really enjoyed destroying the building anyway. So I left all my things behind and went to the new authorities to ask where I should stay. They sent me to the camp, claiming that I was an agitator. My wedding ring, 180 German Marks, my wrist watch, my father's pocket watch and six silver tea-spoons were confiscated from me in that prison. If they hadn't been taken from me, I would have swapped them for food, most probably. Now that the hunger is over, it doesn't really matter. My pension, which I'd received for over eight years, wasn't exactly taken away from me. It simply came to an end with the collapse of the state. Some people are being given pensions again in the new states, but I'm not there to claim mine and after all I'm glad I'm here. They would probably kill me as an enemy, and I wouldn't get my pension anyway.

My health is perfect considering my age. It is much better than before the war. I quit smoking when I was imprisoned. There was no money to buy tobacco, so I just dropped the habit. Now I'm happy about that. All my hair turned grey. Aging speeds up. That's normal, I presume. I'm slowing down. But I don't understand why they keep me in this hospital. They say I

**LAZAR
STOJANOVIC**

*In Place of a Last Will
and Testament*

should rest. I was resting even before they brought me here. They check my heart every morning. I feel all right, perhaps just a little drowsy and exhausted, but I think this is owing to the drugs they are giving me. When I try to explain, they only smile. Once a week the interpreter comes, and then they tell me that I should stay longer. Food is better here than in the barracks where they normally keep us. However, I don't eat much. When I don't walk enough, I have no appetite. Also, there is nobody to talk with here. I don't speak their language and nobody speaks mine. It was better in the barracks.

As for my family, I'm widowed but I had two boys and one daughter. The younger son was killed. I don't know how. He was just found dead one morning at the very beginning of the war. The elder one is an army officer. He stayed with the army and I never heard from him. When I was in the camp I mentioned that, but nobody knew him and they didn't care. They said he must be a traitor because he didn't come over to fight but instead stayed in safe territory across the river. It is a different state nowadays. Or maybe it isn't. Some say yes, others say no. Anyway, I lost track of my son and his family. My daughter escaped immediately after the war broke out. She was a student. She wrote a letter from Italy eighteen months ago and I got it through the Red Cross, but I don't think she is there any longer because she said she was going to go to Australia. So I don't really know where you might find my relatives.

This isn't even that important because I have nothing to leave them, and anyway they will assume after some years that I'm dead. But I want to use this opportunity to say something to whoever may be interested. I have given it a lot of thought. It might be stupid, but I feel much easier saying it than keeping it to myself. It may help someone doing something useful.

I have come to realise that there are people who want to fight, while the majority of others don't want to. Fighting is for armies or for various sorts of villains. I had my war when I was young. After it ended, it became clear that we got a worse state than the one before the war. But nobody was allowed to say that in public. Most people who participated in that war, just as in this one, didn't have any choice. Living where they did, they had to fight or to die. Few of them were able to escape.

**LAZAR
STOJANOVIC**

*In Place of a Last Will
and Testament*

Luckily, my name was on the Red Cross list and I was allowed to leave when the camp was abolished.

When all that was behind me, I started thinking that most of the people would leave if only they could. Not just children and the elderly, but most of the drafted soldiers, as well.

Perhaps at a certain point, even some of the leaders would prefer to abandon their enterprise. It would be much cheaper and safer for the rest of the world simply to give us some space where we could continue living peacefully, while waiting for things to settle down in our country. What is the point of sending food and counting the dead?

If someone wants to fight the invaders, and he has the arms to do so, all right. But let those who really can't or don't want to fight leave in peace. I know it's expensive, but we could repay the costs by working, and that's surely cheaper than sacrificing all these lives. Someone might try this some day. It's not fair that people get turned into hostages in every single war. That's what I wanted to say, and this is my last will. There's nothing else I could leave to anybody.

New York, April 1995