

# More than 20 years after his death,

Danilo Kiš's status as "the most cosmopolitan and innovative Yugoslav writer of the post-World War II period"<sup>1</sup> is secure. His complete works fill 15 volumes, five of them superlative. Even the television plays and book reviews have an exemplary quality. Everything he published was strained through filters of stylistic excellence, tempered by self-doubt.

Towards the end of his life (born in 1935, he died in 1989), Kiš took to calling himself "the last Yugoslav writer." He meant that his fellow authors had abandoned the commitment to a cosmopolitan vision and embraced its opposite: blind loyalty to one or another brand of nationalism, rooted in the politics of sectarian resentment and its shameful literary corollaries – sentimental lyric poetry, faux-naïf epic fiction, and preening polemics. For Kiš, this choice (and he insisted it *was* a choice, unforced by blood, birthplace or culture) was ethically unacceptable and professionally self-destructive. Why so? Because it tempted writers to cease the restless interrogation of form, and settle for a narcissistic relation to their material and their public.

He was a highly autobiographical writer, drawing explicitly on childhood experience, transmuted and generalised through the alchemy of words. Above all, his work is about the parent-child relationship. But there is an extraordinary imbalance in his treatment of this theme: while father figures loom large and vivid in his books, mothers are pallid by comparison. Was it that Kiš's father liberated his creative imagination, where his mother curbed it? If so, why was this? And does the answer illuminate anything more than one artist's solitary condition?

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1. This tribute is from *The Columbia Guide to the Literatures of Eastern Europe since 1945*, edited by Harold B. Segel (2003).



*Danilo Kiš, holding the ball, with his sister Danica and their parents, Edward and Milica.*

The biographical facts are quickly straightforward. Milica Dragičević was born 1903 in Cetinje, the pocket-sized capital of tiny Montenegro, into a family which had played its honourable part in the country's struggles against the Ottoman Empire. She did not leave her native land until 1930, when she paid a visit to one of her two sisters, whose husband worked for the Yugoslav state railways in northern Serbia.

During this stay she met Eduard Kiš, who had been born Eduard Mendel (or Emanuel) Kohn, in 1889, in south-western Hungary. Eduard was an assimilated secular Jew who worked on the Habsburg railways and moved to the new South Slav state after the First World War. He settled in Subotica, a stone's throw from the Hungarian border, and took Yugoslav citizenship. Eduard and Milica were married in 1931, and their first child, Danica, was born the following year. The second child was born on 22 February 1935: "Danilo, male, Jewish" reads the entry in the registry of births. In 1939, Eduard and Milica had Danilo baptised in the Eastern Orthodox Church, as a protection against the growing threat of anti-Semitism in neighbouring Hungary.

The family was living in the nearby city of Novi Sad when Germany invaded Yugoslavia in April 1941. Novi Sad was occupied by Hitler's Hungarian allies. Early in 1942, Hungarian forces massacred several hundred Jews and Serbs there. Eduard Kiš survived by a fluke, and decided to move the family across the border to his birthplace, where his sister had taken over their parents' home and business. She lent them a converted stable to live in. Milica set up as a seamstress, sewing and knitting for the villagers, while the children went to school, on alternate days when it was cold, because they shared a single pair of shoes. At weekends they tended cattle and ran errands for their neighbours, in exchange for pennies or milk and potatoes.

Eduard was a sensitive, troubled man and probably a difficult husband. He had twice been hospitalised in the 1930s for psychiatric disorders. Back in his native village, his mind weakened under the strain. He wandered around the village, getting drunk when he could, carousing with gypsies, talking to himself, sleeping under hedges, provoking the villagers' sharp dislike.

The family survived in this backwater until the Nazi occupation of Hungary in 1944, when the Final Solution was implemented with utmost speed and efficiency. It was probably late April or early May when Eduard was taken to the improvised ghetto in the nearby town of Zalaegerszeg, where the guards were reckoned to be especially brutal. By early July, the ghetto held 3,209 Jews, mostly from the outlying communities. Deportation was carried out on 5 July, only two days before transports were suspended. At least 15 members of Danilo Kiš's family died in Auschwitz, including Eduard and five of his six siblings.

Milica and the children lived on in the village until 1947, when she sent a postcard to Cetinje asking if any of her relatives were still alive. The card reached her father Jakov, who had assumed that she and her children were all dead. Milica's brother Risto brought them home. Danilo and Danica re-learned their mother tongue; he enrolled at Cetinje's famous grammar school, while she entered the new school of fine arts. When the school was transferred to a town on Montenegro's coast, Danica moved with it, married one of her tutors, and lives by the sea to this day.

Soon after bringing the children to the haven of Cetinje, Milica fell gravely ill. It turned out to be cancer of the spine, and she was quickly hospitalised. Danilo was allowed to sleep at her bedside,

and for three years he divided his time between school and hospital, until her death in 1951. Before the advent of palliative techniques, patients in Milica's terminal condition had to endure excruciating torment, with no hope of improvement. At one point, she begged Danilo to bring her a pair of scissors, so she could put an end to it all. He refused, just as he had – on prior instructions from his mother – refused his father's identical plea 12 years before, in the psychiatric hospital at Kovin.

As she lay dying, Milica urged Danilo to reject his Jewish inheritance. "A year before she died, when I was 15, she encouraged me to tear up my birth certificate from the synagogue in Subotica, because being Jewish meant nothing but trouble. Although I agreed about that, I did not want to cheat with my own life and disown the suffering of an entire world. A vanished world." Even on her deathbed, Milica did not give up; in a makeshift will, she instructed Kiš to burn all the documents connected with his father. He did not comply; on the contrary, his father's papers would become the foundation of his literature.

Kiš only wrote once about these terrible events: in a brief essay, the year before he died. "The worst thing was, she suffered so much that her death felt like a relief. Like the end of a dreadful existence that she had taken upon herself in an effort to spare her children as much as she could. Just as she must have felt my father's disappearance as a sort of liberation, in spite of the monstrosity of it." The experience had destroyed his belief in God. "This is how I reasoned it: if someone like my mother has to suffer so much and so long, this is proof that there is no God... That was my starting point, and it's still as far as I've got." The refusal of reconciliation in that remark was defiant, as it was in something else he said around the same time; he had, he told a friend, spent three years caring for his mother while she "rotted away": a savage expression that measured the abiding distress of her slow death.

From school, Danilo went to university in Belgrade, where he became the first to graduate in 'World Literature', a very ambitious new degree that pushed comparativism to the limit, taking students from Homer and the Bible through to Kafka. He lived in cheap digs, sometimes sleeping rough in the city parks; he worked all day in the library, and caroused with friends far into the night. Student life suited him so well that he never abandoned it. He quickly became a legend at



Milica Kiš

the faculty: some of his essays were still mentioned ten or 20 years later as standard-setting achievements.

After one or two false starts, Kiš found his voice as a writer with *Garden, Ashes* (1965), a first-person fiction of childhood that combines filigree attention to sensory detail with reflection on the mythopoetic power of memory. The detail is overwhelming to the point of lushness, like the tropical house in a botanical garden. It is an extraordinary re-creation of the intensity of childhood experience, which uses adult art to evoke a child's perceptions.

By comparison with *Garden, Ashes*, other novels of Jewish wartime childhood (Appelfeld, Kosinski, Kertesz) feel too grown-up, too much in control of the memories that nourish them. Eva Hoffman,

the child of Polish survivors, suggests that children of survivors – or of victims – sense the inward meanings of calamity before they understand them, “and have to work their way outwards towards the facts and the worldly shape of events.”<sup>2</sup> Kiš shows the childish mind’s bafflement by meanings and facts alike, grasping at the shape, colour, smell and sound of people and events, registering these data with phenomenal sharpness and interpreting them in its way – which is not an adult way. The novel’s texture frustrates any attempt to detect a historical or even chronological narrative; hints of political reality are half buried and easy to miss.

The narrator is named Andi, an anagram of Dani, which was Danilo’s actual nickname in the village. At the centre of the book stands Andi’s father, Eduard Sam (the strange surname means ‘alone’ in Serbo-Croatian). Eduard is conjured in richly metaphorical prose as protean, wonderful, out of control and uncontrollable, a doomed force of nature, a genius and a buffoon. The young narrator’s mother, Maria, is two-dimensional by contrast. Self-effacing and devoted, she watches over her children with no thought for herself.

Only after Eduard’s inexplicable “disappearance” does Maria take on some colour of her own. Toward the end of the story, Andi evokes long evenings with his mother in the benighted Hungarian village, when she tells stories about her homeland to cheer herself up, and in the process infuses him with her yearning for home:

Then, in a long lyrical monologue, she would tell me the story of her childhood, spent amidst fig and orange trees, an idealised childhood like those in Biblical stories, because there, as in the Bible, golden-fleeced sheep grazed and donkeys brayed, and the fig was the chosen fruit. My mother tried to counter the fairy tales told by the autumn rains with a legend of her own, fixed in space and time: as proof, she would bring me a map of the world (on a scale of 1:500,000, found among my father’s possessions) and point with the tip of her knitting needle to her Arcadia, this sun-drenched Eldorado of her idealised childhood, this illuminated Mount of Olives, this ‘black mountain’, this Montenegro. Above all, she wanted to diminish the rain’s power and liberate me from the spell in which it held me with its

triplets and quatrains. So my mother lit up the landscape of her childhood with eternal sunshine and bright summer colours, setting it in a cultivated piece of land, an oasis between mountain ranges and fields of boulders. Carried away by her own storytelling and mythmaking, she always reverted to our genealogy and, not without a touch of pride, she would discover our ancestors in the distant and clouded history of the Middle Ages, among medieval lords and ladies of the court, linking them with the rulers and princes of the republics of Ragusa and Venice as well as with Albanian heroes and usurpers. The family tree, which shone in the pale glow of the oil lamp like the illustrations on medieval parchments radiant with gilt lettering, included on its more remote branches knights, ladies-in-waiting, and renowned seafarers who sailed from one end of the world to the other, from Kotor and Constantinople to China and Japan.

This fairy-tale vision has a touching silliness and warmth unlike the harder-edged comic writing about Eduard. Valiant Montenegro, eclipsed by a knitting needle! It is unique in Kiš's work. Never again did he write about his mother with this ironic but heartfelt pathos. (The stories in his collection *Early Sorrows* (1969) have pathos but lack the balancing irony.) He told friends that he could not write about her because the truth about her suffering was too terrible for irony; and irony was the key to fiction. For he had witnessed her suffering so closely that imagination had no room for play. Even when the mother does not endure Milica's extreme wretchedness, this may not be an unusual condition for a literary son. In a famous poem about his own mother, the English poet William Empson wrote: "Stars how much further from me fill my night, / Strange that she too should be inaccessible, / Who shares my sun. He curtains her from sight, / And but in darkness is she visible."

His father, by contrast, was a remote figure even before he "disappeared" in Auschwitz, so his fate could only be imagined. Just as important, however, was Eduard's restless, troubled life. He could be re-created as a vagrant spirit, a Wandering Jew, blessed and cursed with a relish for impossible liberty. His mother's mute suffering, on the other hand, compliant and self-sacrificial, rebuked the playfulness of fiction.

Can it be coincidence that the other absence from Kiš's books, which he also regretted, is Montenegro, his mother's

homeland, which he visited for the first time with her, at the age of four? Apart from the passage quoted above, and a chapter of his masterpiece *Hourglass* (1972), Montenegro is hardly present in his work, although he had wanted to write about it since the mid 1960s. He planned to research a historical novel set in Cetinje, perhaps something related to the period before the First World War when the capital was crowded with embassies to the court of King Nikola. Time passed, and the book remained unwritten. In 1982, he told an interviewer: "I owe myself a book about my Cetinje years ... Some sort of book, a novel – this exists in me. Whether and when I will write it, I don't know. It's a technical question. It is difficult to encompass this material. I hope I'll write it some time."

Why could he not write this book? He once said ruefully that Montenegro was "a petrified world, and very difficult for literature". For *his* kind of literature, he might have added. For Montenegro lay almost wholly outside the field of Kiš's cosmopolitan temperament and modernist ambition as a writer. Its history and culture were dominated and shaped by the struggle for survival against the Ottoman Empire. Its patriarchal clan structures, cult of martial heroism, droning oral poetry, ferocious traditionalism (with what he once called its "cruel moral climate"), backwardness and poverty could not stir Kiš's creative imagination, his compassion for victims of terror or his love of fiction that avowed, in his words, "the inherent *presence of culture* by way of allusion, reminiscence or reference to the whole European heritage". Defining himself as he did and had to do, against the petrified world of Montenegro, Kiš could not become what he had some credentials to be: the fictional chronicler and ironic interpreter of Balkan heroic culture: its twilight, its final flare of partisan glory in the Second World War, then its posthumous recycling as coercive stereotype and pastiche.

But the deepest source of these absences in Kiš's writing lay elsewhere: Milica had, in effect, forbidden her son to write about her. This veto was imposed when Danilo was just a boy, and Milica's death sealed its authority forever.

Let me explain. In a short autobiographical text, called "Birth Certificate" (1983), Kiš wrote three sentences about his mother:

Among my ancestors on my mother's side is a legendary Montenegrin hero who learned to read and write at the age of 50, adding the glory of the pen to the glory of his sword, as

well as an 'Amazon' who took revenge on a Turkish brute by cutting off his head. (...)

From my mother I inherited a propensity for telling tales with a mixture of fact and legend; from my father - pathos and irony. (...)

My mother read novels until her twentieth year, when she realised, not without regret, that novels are 'made up' and rejected them once and for all. This aversion to 'pure invention' is latent in me as well.

The first of these sentences reads like a preview of the rich traditional material that Kiš might have reworked in the never-written novel about Montenegro, and a reminder of why he didn't write it. The second sentence traces his complex, antithetical literary personality back to his parents and their unlikely union.

It is the third sentence, however, that carries the strong prohibitive charge. Kiš was always quite clear, both in his own mind and with his readers, that the figure of Eduard Sam in his fiction was not to be mistaken for his actual father, Eduard Kiš. Of course, the two men overlap in many respects, but Eduard Sam is evidently a construct, whose formation owes much to cultural archetypes from Noah to Leopold Bloom. Kiš was fascinated by the 'doubling' power of the imagination to create endless representations of singular reality; and by the way that imagination strains against intellect, yearning to believe in the truth of something that is (we know) fictitious. When this yearning is satisfied, fiction is free to cast its blissful spell and also, by the same token, to delude us in ways that will be boring if prolonged, and may even be fateful. (He wrote a brilliant story about *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the worst of all modern novels.)<sup>3</sup>

From Kiš's point of view, well-written fiction convinces us of its truth while it refuses to let us luxuriate in that illusion. It is a paradox, but not – by any means – a contradiction in terms. Yet this task cannot even be attempted if the imagination is not free to invest a fictional character with attributes that convince in *literary* terms. Kiš enjoyed this freedom with his father but not with his mother, for she had spurned and condemned fiction as something unworthy. Milica the loving saviour of her children was also a bitterly disappointed wife and widow. Her deathbed entreaties for Danilo to disown his father's

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3. This story is "The Book of Kings and Fools", collected in *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* (1983).

Jewish legacy were surely, at some level, a final attempt to possess the boy completely, wresting him forever from the shade of his crazy irresponsible fantasist of a father.

For Danilo to reinvent his mother in fiction would constitute a betrayal: an unimaginable act for an adoring son. For him to write fiction at all, in the face of Milica's undying disapproval, verged on a contradictory pursuit. Surely this helps to account for the Spartan splendour of his prose, with its triple-distilled compactness and metaphorical density, unlike anything else in the language. Ascetic perfectionism of style was a tribute that must be paid for breaking the maternal veto. It was also, of course, a foundation of his greatness as a writer. For parental legacies are rarely simple, as Kiš knew very well. As proof of this, Milica herself was not hostile to fiction when it came in the form of traditional stories; quite the contrary. After Eduard disappeared, she helped the children to pass the dreary evenings by relating folk stories and epic ballads from Montenegro, making things up when her memory failed. Her stories filled the desolate hut where they lived, and filled the village, and filled Danilo's world with their reassuring spell. Kiš catches this magic beautifully in *Garden, Ashes* where Andi and his mother listen to the tale told by the rain "in long rhythmical lines without a break ... a long epic-lyrical poem like Omer and Merima,<sup>4</sup> a poem about the witches that lie in ambush behind the chimney, waiting to pounce, about a nymph passing by all in white, veiled, lit by lightning-bolts, and a brave hero who rescues her at the last moment, about a lake with swans, about gypsies brandishing their knives and picking blood-stained gold coins out of the mud."

Andi or Dani grew into an author who would not write about brave heroes and cosy villains, but who never forgot what it meant to believe in such things, and carried the wonder of that belief into his books.

**MARK THOMPSON'S** biography of the Yugoslav writer, Danilo Kiš, will be published by Cornell University Press. His most recent book is *The White War. Life and death on the Italian front 1915-1919* (2008). Author of *Forging War: The Media in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina* (London, 1994 and 1999), a widely acclaimed analysis of the role that media played in the final crisis and breakdown of Yugoslavia, Thompson also wrote *A Paper House: The Ending of Yugoslavia* (1992).

4. The Death of Omer and Merima is a famous folk poem about doomed love.