Tall Crosses and Safety Pins: A Historical Note to Isidora Sekulic's "Madam Nola"

John K. Cox

Professor of East European History, School of Humanities, North Dakota State University

In the writer Isidora Sekulić (1877-1958), Serbia has one of its greatest and most unusual women intellectuals. Sekulić, or simply "Isidora" as most Serbs refer to her, is most often read today as a novelist, although she wrote far more literary and art criticism and philosophical travelogues than fiction. She also published ethnographic works and short stories. In 1950, she became the first woman admitted to the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, a fact that, along with some of her modernist tendencies, puts her in somewhat the same category as Marguerite Yourcenar, who was the first woman admitted to the Académie Française (in 1981). Only a few short works by this great writer exist in English translation, although in Serbia she is frequently referred to in films, radio dramas, and tourist guides, and some of her works feature prominently in school and university curricula. "Madam Nola" is one of her most frequently anthologized pieces, and it has never been englished before the (partially completed) project you have before you. "Madam Nola" is the longest constituent part, and the second in sequence, of the novel Kronika palanačkog groblje (Eng. The Chronicle of a Provincial Town).

Little background is necessary to understand this story. We are presented, in clear contours, with a beloved but loveless main character, whose life of sacrifice and achievement lives on after her death through the many lives she touched. In addition, as in most of Sekulić's writing, historically accurate economic, social, and religious conditions are set forth in clear terms. But some historical context will make it more enjoyable for the non-specialist reader. The first salient issue is the setting of the piece. The time is around the turn of the 20th century, when Belgrade was the capital of the newly independent state of Serbia and was located on its northern border along the Danube River, adjacent to Austria-Hungary (the Habsburg Empire), which was historically both its rival and patron. The place is the region known in the 20th century as Vojvodina, or Vajdaság in Hungarian. This Habsburg, and later Yugoslav (and now Serbian) region, which consists of the older historical region known as the Banat plus parts of adjacent areas, is a fertile agricultural

zone with a great diversity of ethnic groups. In it, Serbs and Hungarians predominate, but Sekulić includes many other representative characters: Germans, Slovaks, Jews, Hungarians, and Italians in this story, and many other groups in the rest of the novel.

Reading this author is, however, not always easy due to some stylistic features. It is very characteristic of Sekulić that she employs a wide-ranging lexicon, for instance. It is the translator's duty to make sense of (and reproduce the sense of) archaic or regional vocabulary, but it is worth noting that "Madam Nola" has rich terminology that reflects the history of the region. In this short passage alone, for instance, we encounter the words salaš, štajervagn, rakija, and vladika, which come respectively from Hungarian, German, Turkish, and Montenegrin. These terms have been retained in the text, and explained through context, to enrich the reader's sense of place. Finally, Sekulić's syntax can also be challenging. We are faced with long paragraphs containing mixtures of reported speech and narrative exposition, multiple speakers, unclear attributions, variable punctuation, nicknames, family names and patronymics, and feminine surnames. Not all of these are major points, or drawbacks, but one does hear from Serbs that her writing was jumbled or breathless or crowded or digressive. It is hoped that the current translation balances a sense of Sekulićs style with the need for intelligibility (achieved through minor textual interventions).

The large, oft-reprinted and oft-republished but never translated book that is the source for this story was published in Yugoslavia in two versions. The first version came out in 1940, shortly before the country was absorbed in the bloody fighting of World War II; a second, expanded version came out in 1958, the year of its author's death. The work is considered a novel, and although it is quite canonical in Yugoslav and Serbian literary histories and school curricula, it is not traditional, in terms of its composition, as a novel. It is a set of lengthy, or very lengthy, stories or novellas, which some scholars think are separate novels. They are, however, held together by their common location, a graveyard and its surrounding city just outside Belgrade, in the province of Vojvodina (at the site of modern-day Zemun), and by a common time period and some recurring characters. Furthermore, the feel of the constituent elements and the narrative structure are the same. All of the stories are deeply entwined with the history of greater Belgrade, but only its peripheral or rural parts. Sekulić plants many maxims and bits of wisdom between the descriptions and conversations, in a manner somewhat reminiscent of Thomas Hardy. Many scholars consider Sekulić to be an exponent of general philosophical pessimism and modernist decline, but the stories, which represent a kind of dialogue between the inscriptions on the

inhabitants' tombstones or grave markers and their lives and reputations, often accentuate the positive, especially in individual virtues, and concentrate on strong female characters.

We shall now offer a thumbnail sketch of each of the other novellas in the volume, so that the context of "Madam Nola" becomes clearer. In "The Town and Its Last Greeks," the emphasis is on the dying out of cultures, as well as religions and, for lack of a better word, castes (occupational-ethnic categories), especially among the region's Cincar and Greek populations. "The Children" examines life in the small city through the experiences of young people, and their teachers, doctors, and parents, especially in periods of great tragedy due to natural disasters and crime. "Kosta the Earthquake" traces the life of a good-natured and honest tailor, who had been rejected by his own military family and ends up isolated from his own, because his sons go off to work in factories in distant Budapest (Hungary) and Romania. Kosta earns his nickname through his colorful way of talking, and he is highly respected among the other masters and apprentices in his town, until he drops everything and becomes a fruit farmer. "Ambitions, Smoke" tracks the squandered lives of the brightest students from the local schools. In "The People of Kašikara," we are confronted with the lives of the working-class residents of the upper town of Zemun, on the Austro-Hungarian side of the border with Serbia. The story might remind a reader of something by Emile Zola or Ivan Cankar. We encounter coachmen, washerwomen, servants, and day-laborers, cobblers (and other tradespeople), court clerks, and bargemen, as well as a few wealthier veterinarians, government officials, and merchants in the trade on the Danube running between Vienna and the Ottoman Empire. While some of the poor emigrate to America, others dream of owning land and supplement their income by harvesting the nuts of the giant walnut trees on the shady streets and working in the pork export business between Serbia and Austria. Finally, "The Vlaovićes" is a chronicle of a powerful rural family that has died out and is only buried in the town graveyard because of a long-running feud with their village priest. This family is proud and stubborn and spiteful, and its extreme wealth "had no biography" or personality. The townspeople were afraid of them and now tell stories about their strange behavior on their estate and elsewhere.

In conclusion, it is hoped that the publication of this excerpt from "Gospa Nola," which is in turn one of the constituent novellas of the fictional work Kronika palanačkog groblja of 1958, will spark interest in the anglosphere about the rest of her writing. Publication of this extract, which forms the first part of the second part of the novel, will also be a spur to this translator to continue his efforts to translate the entire, extensive book. Born

in Austria-Hungary, Isidora Sekulić lived in a Serbia that was part of two different Yugoslav states during her lifetime. Her career thus spans a very wide, and typically Central European, set of historical and political events. Her colorful biography, often discussed in Serbia but still not researched in full, is considered both inspiring (for her palmary achievements as a female intellectual) and mysterious (her marital status and even her lexical choices). Her ethnography extols the virtues of traditional Serbian nationalism, her fiction celebrates common decency and common sense, her milieux foreground ethnic diversity and multi-culturalism, her personal career path focuses on Western Europe (Germany, England, Norway, France, and Hungary), and her art criticism salutes the achievements of Russia. It is a joyful thing that Isidora Sekulić remains one of the rare Serbian women to have a secure place in that country's literary canon; and one may readily believe that English-speaking audiences will benefit from study and appreciation of her works and ideas as well.

**The source for this translation is: Isidora Sekulić, *Kronika palanačkog groblja* (Novi Sad: Matica ssrpska, 1960). The translator would like to express his thanks to Tereza Bojković and Vesna Stamenković for their help with archaic and rural phrases in this text.