

Isak Samokovlija

Didn't know he was a writer. My folks called him Doctor. The title made me uneasy. I was afraid that the doctor would give me an injection or have me drink cod liver oil. The doctor, however, would only smile amiably and with an obligatory "the lad is growing bigger" with go with my father to the other room to "talk film". Although my mother told me that "a film be made based on story by Uncle Isak", it was not clear to how a doctor could write a story. Doctors, I thought, are serious, stern people and they do not care much about stories. I confided my thoughts to my mother. She told me that before the war the doctor had worked in Busovača, where a gorgeous Gipsy girl, Hanka, lived; she fell in love with a local hunk Sejdo. Sejdo fell for her too, but he flirted with lasses so Hanka decided to make him jealous and lied to him that she had been with neighbour Mušan, and was pregnant. Furious, Sejdo pulled out a knife... Later, doctor Samokovlija, who examined Hanks's corpse, told him that Hanka had been a virgin. The story moved me deeply for some reason. I felt sorry for both of them. Somehow, I hoped against hope that events would take a different turn, so I started, at first shyly and in a low voice, asking the doctor for details that were not in the story. I could not understand why Sejdo flirted with others if he loved Hanka and why Hanka did not admit that she had only been joking when she said that she'd been with Musan. I did not like the fact that Sejdo had been arrested and taken to prison, for I thought that was a place for crooks , not for those who were unhappily in love, but I wasn't happy that Sejdo had survived either, because I expected him to commit suicide out of desperation. I asked about the time and place of the murder, and whether the doctor had known them before ("I didn't". "And how did you know then, what happened to them before? You haven't made it all up, have you?" Laughter: "No, I haven't. A writer does not make things up, he only imagines how things could have happened"). Uncle Isak must have tired of my tedious questions (to which my aunt merely shook her head: "Dear me, I hope this boy doesn't become a philosopher..."); one day he bounced me on his knee: "Giddy-up! Giddy-up, on all four, all wooden four..." The next day he brought me a picture book. "I wrote this for my granddaughter", he said. On the first page there was a picture of a curly-haired little girl in a

pleated skirt, and under the drawing the verses read: "The curtain rises, Sonja materialises". Sonja, I thought must be a princess. Many years later, I met Sonja, realising that life and imagination are not necessarily linked.

The film was soon to start shooting. The director Slavko Vorkapić, a renowned Hollywood film editor, insisted on seeing Sejdo. Samokovlija agreed, reluctantly. "Now you'll see the man Uncle Isak wrote about", he told me on the way. In front of the house, squatted a skinny, unkempt man staring at the ground. "do you remember me?", asked Samokovlija. Sejdo darted a quick nervous glance at him and bowed his head even more. "Can you recall, I am the doctor who examined Hanka..." A wrinkled woman in the curious crowd remarked: "Mr. Doctor, Sir, don't hold it against him, he hasn't spoken a word ever since. He fell silent from the day he killed her." On the way back, Vorkapić grumbled., but Samokovlija was not listening. He only sighed.

Then, one day my father told me, somewhat hesitantly, that Uncle Isak had died. He was to be buried at the old Jewish cemetery. They did not take me with them to the funeral, but I ran out into the street with other children: traffic had been stopped, there was the horse-drawn funeral carriage laden with wreaths, the funeral music, the long line of Sarajevans. The beautiful day was briefly interrupted by a mild rain. A lanky chap next to me adjusted his beret: "He was a great bloke, he was..." Years later I went to Busovača on some business or other. At one point I asked a local if they knew who Sejdo was. "Sure we do, we talk about him day and night. Never said a word, our Sejdo. One day he just got up and went away. God-knows-where. Vanished. Who knows if he's still alive..." It occurred to me that it is so like a literary character to step back into the story. But, I refrained from saying anything...

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