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A love letter to Novi Sad

László Végel: Neoplanta, or the Promised Land



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"To be a citizen of the free royal city of Neoplanta is a truly marvelous vocation, my dear friends, it means to be the very best in everything we do in this life," proclaims optimistically, yet naively Mr. Dornstädter, one of the most memorable characters in László Végel's new novel about his beloved and much thematized home city, Novi Sad. Diving deep into the traumatic past of the largest multiethnic city in the province of Vojvodina (today part of Serbia), the book gives a remarkable account of how the fragile hopes for peaceful coexistence are shattered by the violent waves of history. By following the tragicomic and sometimes absurd stories of various individuals who either want to conquer the city as some kind of Promised Land, or just survive the repeated regime changes in the 20th century, the novel paints a unique, lively and representative fresco of Central Europe.

As Mr. Dornstädter proudly recounts in the novel, even the foundational story of the city somehow destined its inhabitants for a special, harmonious way of life. According to the chronicles, in 1748 the German, Serbian, Hungarian, Jewish and Armenian locals commonly decided to create a city for themselves, so they gathered all their saved money, sent their elders to Vienna, and petitioned Maria Theresa for the title of "free royal city." The Empress granted their request, and upon finding out that the petitioners did not propose a name, wrote on the official document: "Let it be named Neoplanta, and each of the inhabiting nations should call it in their own language." So the town was called Neusatz in German, Novi Sad in Serbian, and Újvidék in Hungarian. Moreover, it was the anecdote of this original alliance at the dawn of the modern age which gave birth to the noble, yet illusory tale of a cosmopolitan ethos in the city.

The narrative frame of the novel is built on a long, digressing conversation between two odd friends: an old Serbian coach driver by the name of Lazo Pavletić, doing most of the talking, and an unnamed Hungarian writer, who listens emphatically to the stories. Sharing a deep love and knowledge of the city, all of the remarkable episodes and striking characters are presented through the filter of their memories, and their aphoristic comments. Lazo, the last coachman in Novi Sad at the time of the narration, is an iconic figure in the book who represents the intercultural nature of the city, having a mixed ethnic background and speaking all three main languages of the region. As such, he is the living remnant of a different, pre-World War II world, while during his long life, he was witness to the transformation of the city and the people around him.

His friend, the anonymous writer, who can be linked to Végel himself through a few biographical details, already belongs to a subsequent era with its own myths and practices. Growing up in socialist Yugoslavia, and being a member of a minority labeled as Nazi collaborators, he enthusiastically identified with whatever was left of the tradition of cosmopolitanism in Novi Sad and the official, universalist slogan of the Yugoslav federation: “brotherhood and unity”. As Végel writes in an essay entitled *Hontalan lokálpatriotizmus* [Homeless Local Patriotism], he wanted to see the modern city as a kaleidoscope of cohabiting nations, as the peaceful intermingling of various cultural, ethnic and spiritual worlds, adding up to create a “multifaceted, ambivalent, prosperous oasis on the banks of the Danube.”

The stories of Lazo reveal that the fragile and balanced interethnic peace of Novi Sad in the interwar years was shattered first by the invading troops of Horthy and Hitler, then by the reconquering armies of Stalin and the partisans of Tito. The violence, destruction and incendiary rhetoric turned neighbors and friends against each other, resulting in mass murders, disappearances, thefts, and finally, deportation or forced emigration. As the once enthusiastic writer finds out: with such a traumatic past behind, the idealistic, brotherly ideology of Tito was built on crimes, lies and secrets, and upheld by the silence and amnesia of everyone involved. Far from harboring an oasis, according to Lazo: the Danube is rather a multicultural mass grave.

The seriousness of the topic, combined with the book’s narrative power, make *Neoplanta* an emotionally engaging and intellectually rewarding read. Very much in the vein of writers like Ivo Andrić, Bohumil Hrabal, Ádám Bodor or even Jorge Amado and Salman Rushdie, László Végel manages to combine the remarkable skills of storytelling with the sensitive, authentic depiction of hybridity and interculturality. His bold and uncompromising approach to the most sensitive issues of the region’s history is paired with a detailed knowledge and adoring description of the city. Végel’s novel is a genuine love letter to both the imaginary and the real Novi Sad.

Szabolcs László