Zagreb’s literary ghosts

by Rudolf Abraham

S
eated on a worn and silvery metal bench, on
a quiet tree-lined terrace in Zagreb’s Gornji
grad (Upper Town), a lone figure gazes out
over the red-tiled roofs and Secessionist facades of
the city below. He sits, evidently lost in thought,
his arms flung languidly across the back of the
bench. The man is seemingly quite untroubled by
the traces of graffiti on his chest and legs. Some-
times a passer-by joins him on his bench, perhaps
leaning against him or slinging an arm loosely
around his silvery neck, and on such occasions it
is not always entirely clear who is keeping whom
company.

The figure is Antun Gustav Matoš (1873–1914), poet, critic, journalist and essayist, writer of
short stories as well as travelogues and one of the
most celebrated figures in Croatian literature. He
is to be found on his regular bench throughout the
year, lightly dusted with snow on a cold winter’s
morning, silhouetted against the warm golden
light of a summer evening. The statue is arguably
one of the most beloved in a city rich in outdoor
sculpture. It is not just by chance that we find him
'Let Zagreb be!' you said, and Zagreb was. For towns with no poets are not towns at all.

Antun Gustav Matoš writing about the Croatian novelist August Šenoa

Here, though his final resting place is in the great cemetery at Mirogoj. Matoš was especially fond of this spot on Strossmayerovo šetalište (Strossmayer’s Walk), writing in 1909 that “there is a bench, from where Zagreb is most beautiful in its autumnal days”.

The statue is the work of Croatian sculptor Ivan Kožarić, an artist particularly noted for his remarkable ‘Prizemljeno Sunce’ (‘Grounded Sun’) which sits like a giant bowling ball among the numerous cafés in Bogovićева. Kožarić’s monument to Matoš dates from 1972 — so it has had plenty of time to acquire its pleasingly worn, smooth appearance. It is just one of the many sculptural works which grace Zagreb’s public spaces — from street corners to squares, gardens and fountains. Often standing at street level rather than raised on a plinth, they seem — despite their silence — to interact with the everyday life of the city, as if they are somehow still very much part of Zagreb today. “Walk up to Grič at night,” wrote Matoš, “and, as if from a mysterious phonograph, you will receive the message of the city, soil, people; you will experience the spirits of Grič: kings and bans, traitors and martyrs, sinners and saints.” They are at once one of the most familiar and one of the most endearing features of the Croatian capital.

What is remarkable about these statues is the high proportion of literary figures and intellectuals. Most European capitals celebrate their rulers, soldiers and kings. Zagreb takes a different tack. Aside from the prominent equestrian statues of King Tomislav in front of the city’s main railway station, and Ban Jelačić on the eponymous main square, the majority of sculpture and statue subjects are drawn from the ranks of Croatian writers and intellectuals from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Celia Hawkesworth notes in her book Zagreb: A Cultural and Literary History: “There is a section
of the city where the streets are named after some of the rulers of the Croatian lands... But other than Tomislav, none is depicted in a statue, while poets, novelists, thinkers and scholars abound.”

So, in Varšavska, a pedestrian street leading onto the bustling Cvjetni trg (Flower Square), stands the towering, oversized figure of Tin Ujević (1891–1955), poet, essayist and translator. He wears the rather floppy, broad-brimmed hat that was his trademark, and a long, heavy overcoat. His physical size, together with his slightly dishevelled appearance, convey both the enormous presence of his character and his famously bohemian lifestyle — he was expelled from Belgrade in 1925 for his “vagrancy, indolence and bohemian disorderliness.” The statue, dating from 1991, is the work of Miro Vuco.

Towards the bottom of Tuškanac, we find the polished black and decidedly rotund form of Miroslav Krleža (1893–1981). The sculpture is near his former home on Krležin Gvozd, now happily turned into a memorial museum to Krleža. The writer wears a rather whimsical expression, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, as if somewhat surprised to find himself here. Krleža is considered by many to be the greatest Croatian writer of the twentieth century, celebrated for his original and complex use of language and fervent reaction against Austro-Hungarian subjugation of Croatian language and culture. A number of Krleža’s works have been translated into English, among them Na rubu pameti (‘On the Edge of Reason’) and Banket u Blitvi (‘The Banquet in Blitva’). Perhaps his most famous character is the peasant Petrica Kerempuh, the narrator in one of his epic poems — a statue of whom (by Vanja Radauš, 1956) is hidden away behind the stalls of Dolac, Zagreb’s central market.

At the corner of Stara Vlaška, August Šenoa (1838–1881) leans nonchalantly against a pillar, his gaze turned downwards. The location is appropriate: Šenoa, whose life and work is intimately linked to Zagreb, was born in this very street.

Markov trg in the heart of Zagreb’s Old Town is dominated by St Mark’s Church with its famous multicoloured roof (photo by Rudolf Abraham)
is appropriate: Šenoa, whose life and work is intimately linked to Zagreb, was born in this very street. As well as forming the subject and setting of his novels and poetry, he served his native Zagreb as clerk, local magistrate and (from 1871) senator — a position he still held at the time of the great earthquake in 1880. The statue is the work of Marija Ujević-Galetović (1987). Inscribed on the pillar next to Šenoa are lines from his poem Zagrebu:

Povrh starog Griča brda
Kao junak liep i mlad.
Smjele glave, čela tvrda.
Slavni stoji Zagreb-grad.

Above the old Grič hill
Like a hero handsome and young.
Bold headed, strong browed.
Stands famous Zagreb town.

Reading these lines, the gaze inevitably wanders past Šenoa’s profile, to the green roof and neo-Gothic spires of the cathedral, and the city beyond.

In a small park above Zelengaj, the tall, solitary figure of Vladimir Nazor (1876–1949) paces among scattered trees. There is a nearby bandstand, and the setting is a favourite venue for locals walking their dogs. Poet, writer, translator and politician, Nazor was born on the island of Brač, the folk legends of which informed one of his best-known works, Pastir Loda (‘Loda the Shepherd’). During the Second World War Nazor joined the Partisans, and was later appointed first president of the Croatian parliament in Tito’s Yugoslavia. Appropriately enough, he wears a Partisan hat and cloak. The statue was removed briefly during the Tuđman era (along with a few other references to the Partisans), but was later reinstated.

And to one side of Tkalčićeva, not far from the cafés which spill into the street, is the figure of Marija Jurić Zagorka (1873–1957), popular novelist and prominent journalist, striding along with umbrella in hand. Zagorka attended school in Zagreb, before being married off to an older man by her parents and sent to live in Hungary — a union from which she managed to escape after three years, when she returned to Zagreb and began making her mark as a journalist. One of her best-loved works is Grička vještica (‘The Witch of Grič’), a cycle of novels about witch-hunts in Zagreb. Her statue is the work of Stjepan Gračan (1991).

There are many, many others — the poet and Franciscan monk Andrija Kačić Miošić, by Ivan Rendić, in Mesnička; the Renaissance writer Marko Marulić, outside the wonderful old National and University Library (now the Croatian State Archives); the soldier-poet Petar Preradović on Cvjetni trg — to name just a few.

Yet if there is a spiritual heart to Zagreb’s sculpture, it is to be found tucked away in a narrow lane in Gornji grad. This is the former home and studio of Ivan Meštrović, at 8 Mletačka ulica, now the Meštrović Atelier. Meštrović (1883–1962) is the
towering figure in the history of Croatian sculpture, and arguably of twentieth-century Croatian art in general. Born into a poor family in Slavonia, he spent his childhood in the Dalmatian village of Otavice, before becoming an apprentice to a stonemason in Split. He later studied in Vienna, and travelled to Paris and Rome among other cities. He bought three plots on Mletačka ulica in the early 1920s — somewhere he could “collect and store [his] works... and have a place to stay when coming home from time to time.” In 1947 he moved to the United States, and a few years later donated the houses in Zagreb and Split, together with a large body of his work, to the Croatian state.

Meštrović’s work is scattered through the streets of Zagreb and beyond — among them is his ‘History of the Croats’ — a powerful female figure sitting cross-legged in front of the Faculty of Law, supporting a great slab of stone inscribed in Glagolitic script.

The Atelier is an outstanding museum in a city with no shortage of museums and galleries. It is beautifully kept — all dark, carved wood and creaking floorboards, and airy rooms flooded with natural light. Entering through the large, heavy wooden door (the work of Drago Ibler), the visitor arrives in an open courtyard surrounded by arcades in stone from the island of Brač — distinctly atypical of Zagreb — and filled with sculptures. On the far side of this lies what was once Meštrović’s studio — now transformed into a spacious gallery — and a small garden, also filled with the artist’s work. To the left of the courtyard is the former residential area, in which much of the original furniture is preserved (the massive wooden table and chairs are particularly impressive), and where numerous other works are displayed in the various rooms.

Meštrović’s work is also to be found scattered through the streets of Zagreb and beyond — from his ‘Well of Life’ in front of the Croatian National Theatre, to his ‘Bishop Strossmayer’, on Strossmayerov trg, and his ‘History of the Croats’ — a powerful female figure sitting cross-legged in front of the Faculty of Law building of the University of Zagreb. Lying across her knees is a great slab of stone inscribed in Glagolitic script. Perhaps his most familiar work to visitors to Croatia is the enormous, wizard-like Grgur Ninski, who stands behind Diocletian’s Palace in Split — his big toe polished smooth by a million passing hands.

Further afield we find Meštrović’s work on both sides of the Atlantic — from the Njegoš mausoleum, on top of Mount Lovćen in Montenegro (a spot described by J.A. Cuddon in his wonderfully anecdotal Companion Guide to Yugoslavia as “probably the loneliest and windiest grave in the world”), to his ‘Archers of Domagoj’ in London (once to be found on the library stairs of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, now in the Tate), and the enormous Chicago Indians (‘The Bowman’ and ‘The Spearman’) in the United States.

A modest ‘sculpture alley’ has been developed in recent years on the bank of the river Sava. Its posi-
tion outside the historic centre (a deliberate choice to try and draw people further south to the river) places it beyond the orbit of daily city life, unlike those figures which interact so casually with the lives of Zagreb’s inhabitants.

Matoš wrote that “towns with no poets are not towns at all.” Despite having travelled widely in Europe, he always maintained a deep affection for Zagreb. Walking among the streets and parks of the city today, in the company of the ghosts of its literary past, it is hard not to feel that Matoš would have approved.

Rudolf Abraham lived for two years in Zagreb and remains a regular visitor to the Croatian capital. He is the author of ‘Walking in Croatia’, published by Cicerone Press, and has just updated the Bradt Guide to Croatia. Rudolf writes regularly for hidden europe. Find out more at www.rudolfabraham.co.uk.

You can find out more about the Meštrović Atelier at www.mdc.hr/mestrovic. The Atelier is open daily except Mondays.