

RELJA POPOVIĆ

BELGRADE, SERBIA

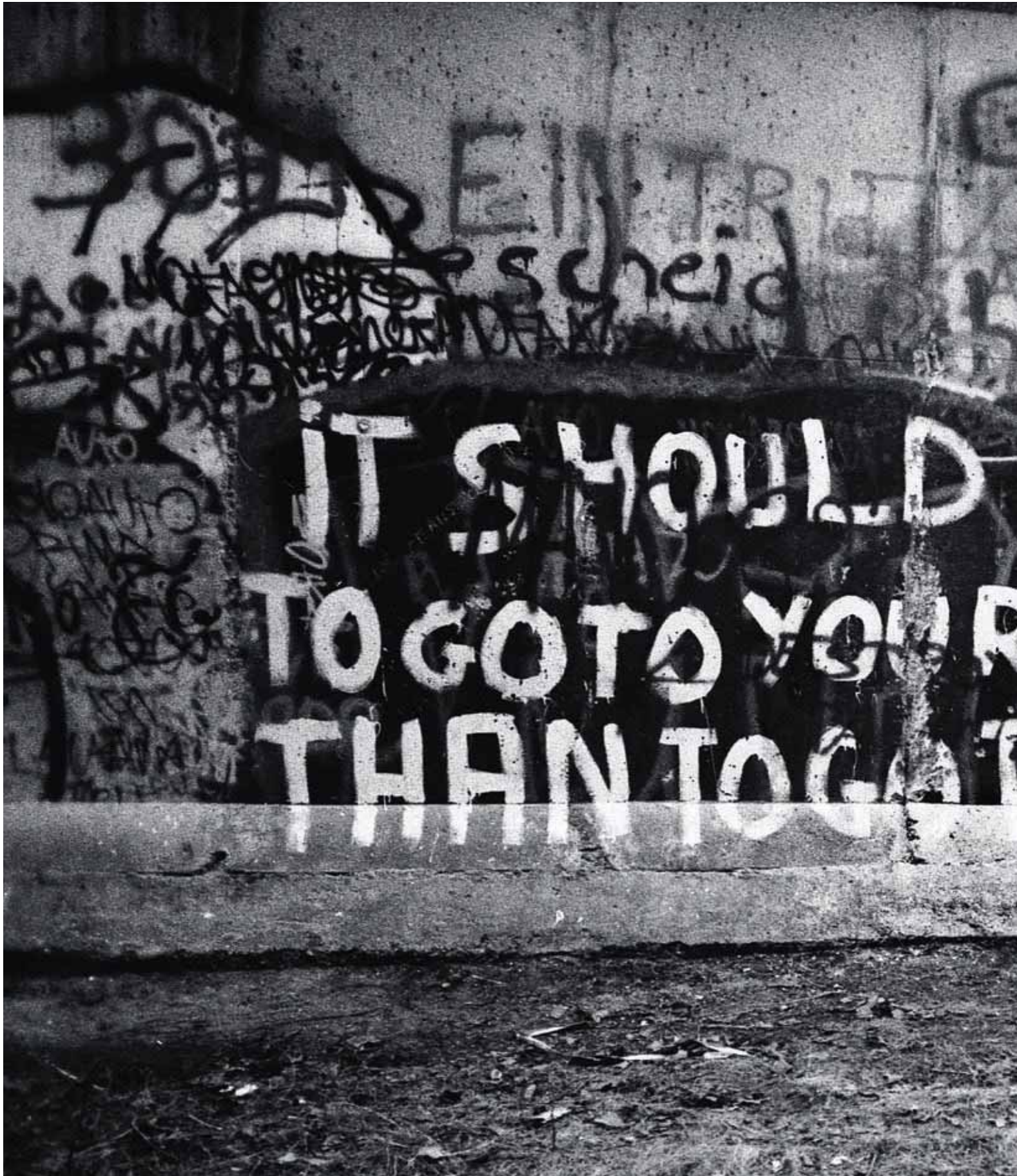
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As always, we were playing in front of the building. My impression is there were a thousand of us, but I think there were no more than 20-30 boys here. Pajče, as we used to call him, was the only friend in the neighbourhood who had a football. More accurately he was the only one who had any kind of ball we could play football with in front of the tall apartment block. It was some sort of rubber ball, but it was the only one around.

It was in front of the apartment block that I got my first beating. My impression is that two friends I'd fallen out with had been beating me for hours, although probably it didn't last more than two minutes. Pajče's father asked why my elder brother Miša hadn't gone down to break it up since he had a yellow belt in karate. My best friend, Vlada, thought at the time that I had leukaemia. In fact I had frequent nose bleeds and had very close-cropped hair – almost bald, but Vlada had watched a lot of films where bald-headed boys had nose-bleeds and then the doctors would tell them they had leukaemia.

I'd heard somebody in the neighbourhood mentioning "communards and Chetniks"*. My mother had said how terribly insulted my grandmother Dušanka had been when anyone said the word "Communard" in her presence because grandmother had liberated Belgrade and had even got as far as Trieste with the liberators. I tried to imagine how you would reach Trieste on foot, although I had no idea how far away this Trieste was. It was certainly much further than, let's say, Karaburma, where grandmother Ljuba lived, and I would never have walked to Karaburma. It wasn't at all obvious to me but it's what I heard.

I knew about the football teams Zvezda and Partizan, but knew nothing about these communards and Chetniks, nor did I know who they supported. Later I found out that people weren't divided by who supported Zvezda or Partizan, but it still wasn't clear to me. We used to take shots at the goal and I used to get angry at those that called us "communards". I felt grown-up whenever I answered any of them back by saying how insulted my grandmother would be to hear them telling stories because she had defended Belgrade. But I was standing between the goalposts and wasn't able to defend even that goal, and because of that my grandmother Dušanka, who had liberated Belgrade from fascism, was even more fascinating. It was obvious to me that she hadn't exactly liberated it herself, but I calculated: if there were eleven players in a football team, there can't have been many more at the liberation of Belgrade. The reserve bench possibly, but I was sure my grandmother would certainly not have been on the reserve bench. As a small boy I trained for several sports. I trained for volleyball one



day and as soon as the trainer sent me to the reserve bench to watch the boys who had been there longer, I decided it wasn't for me. For swimming I trained for two months and was in the non-swimmers' group. It wasn't my aim to watch those who, allegedly, swam better than me. The most training I did was for basketball because I spent less time on the reserve bench. And so I believed there was no way my grandmother could have been on the reserve bench – even in the “team” that liberated Belgrade.

People have said that the times we live in are hard times. I was happy when mother took us out for an ice-cream cone. Marina, the pastry-shop owner, often used to treat my brother and me to two scoops of ice-cream each and I, without fail, would take two scoops of chocolate. I used to eat the cone from the bottom, letting the scoops slip down my throat. I was the thinnest of all the children in the neighbourhood and wanted to gain weight by any means. I used to think: if hard** times are here, I should be heavy myself. In fact, I often saw a terribly fat neighbour who drove the best car in the world. So I came to the conclusion that in hard times only fat, or “heavy” people had an easy life. There was a certain logic in this because neither my mother, nor Miša, nor I put on weight while the hard times lasted, nor later either, but our fat neighbour got fatter and fatter and his life got better and better. Mother worked ten to fifteen hours a day and never brought us presents after work. Grandmother Ljuba made us mashed potatoes and fried egg and I, after eating it, would wipe the plate with the bread so that Ljuba wouldn't have to wash it up. I could never understand why at the end she always washed it up anyway.

My father died when I was two, and Miša's father disappeared three months before Miša appeared from his mother's stomach, but mother always used to say how rich she was. I couldn't quite understand that. We had no money for a new ball, but she kept repeating how we were her greatest treasures. Together Miša and I were probably as heavy as one of our fat neighbour's legs, which in my estimation meant that we could possibly buy one of his car tyres. And mother kept saying how wealthy we were...

Today we no longer play around the building. We've grown up. I assume. Today all the boys have the best balls, and those who have a ball like Pajče's are really poor. When Pajče had that rubber ball, we were all poor but then it didn't matter. Two teenagers have beaten up my little neighbour and hit him on the head with a stone. The government would probably think it was war because only in war films do people have bloody heads. My little neighbour Djole doesn't have a father and his friends call him “woman's fart”. He doesn't

understand. He's just in love with Thea and because of her he plays with Barbie dolls. He's also been told he's “Ustasha”*** and that his mother is a whore because she was screwed by a Croat. He doesn't understand that either and replies that they are Chetniks, but that doesn't stop them since they think they really are Chetniks.

My neighbour Filip has played all the sports there are, as well as those that aren't, on his new computer. He's never done any training because he's constantly sitting in front of his new computer. There's a huge family pack of ice-cream in the freezer and he eats it from a bowl. He doesn't eat ice-cream cones because he believes that only those who can't afford to buy huge ice-cream packs eat them. He's fat and mother calls him “chubbykins” in baby-talk while she watches with satisfaction as he overeats on lamb. There's always some food left on his plate which he throws away afterwards like the bread, which he could clean his plate with so his grandmother doesn't have to wash it up. She doesn't wash up the plate, she's bought a dishwasher. Today there are no hard times but Filip regularly puts on weight – just in case. His father has bought his mother the most expensive wedding ring and has taken her on a cruise for their honeymoon, but she still complains how poor they are. I kissed my mother when I came back from college. I ate egg and mash, wiped my plate with bread, and laughed with my mother when I told her how it had upset me that Ljuba would wash the plate up anyway when I cleaned it. I no longer have such close-cropped hair so the government doesn't need to worry too much and I still watch films. And I'm still thin but I don't have nose bleeds any more, and Filip's father is still terribly fat and drives a new Audi.

I check my bank account to calculate how wealthy we are. I warmly congratulate the cashier who tells me I still have four euros in the account.

My mother hasn't bought me a present today but has told me she loves me... She sleeps peacefully, works less and is happier than ever. Because she knows that now even we understand how wealthy we are!

But I've learned one thing at least: that times cannot be so hard that people can be poor in spirit.

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Translator's note

* Chetniks: Serbian nationalist movement in World War II

** “Heavy” in Serbian

*** Ustasha: Croatian fascist movement in World War II

RELJA POPOVIĆ

BEOGRAD, SRBIJA

Jurcali smo, kao i uvek, ispred zgrade. Imao sam utisak da nas je bilo hiljadu, a verujem da tu nije bilo više od 20-30 dečaka. Pajče, tako smo ga zvali, bio je jedini drugar iz susedstva koji je imao loptu za fudbal. Tačnije, bio je jedini koji je imao bilo kakvu loptu s kojom smo mogli da igramo fudbal ispred solitera. To je bila neka gumena lopta, ali je bila jedina u celom kraju.

Ispred solitera sam prvi put dobio batine. Imao sam utisak da su me satima tukla dva drugara s kojima sam se posvađao, iako to, verovatno, nije trajalo duže od dva minuta. Pajčetov tata se pitao zašto moj stariji brat Miša nije sišao da ih prebije, kada ima žuti pojas u karateu. Moj najbolji drug, Vlada, u to vreme je mislio da imam leukemiju. U stvari, meni je često išla krv iz nosa, a bio sam vrlo kratko očišan – skoro celave glave, a Vlada je gledao mnoge filmove gde celavim dečacima curi krv iz nosa, i onda im doktori kažu da imaju leukemiju.

Čuo sam da neko u komšiluku govori „komunjare i četnici“. Mama je rekla kako bi se baka Dušanka strašno uvredila da pred njom neko izgovori: „komunjara“, jer je baka oslobađala Beograd i stigla s oslobodiocima čak do Trsta. Zamišljam, kako je peške stići do Trsta, iako nisam imao ni predstavu koliko je daleko taj Trst. Sigurno je mnogo dalje nego, recimo, Karaburma, gde je živela baka Ljuba, a ja ni do Karaburme nikad ne bih išao peške. Meni to nikako nije bilo jasno, ali šta ću.

Znao sam za Zvezdu i Partizan, ali o tim komunjarima i četnicima nisam znao ništa, niti sam znao za koga navijaju. Kasnije sam saznao da se ljudi nisu delili prema tome ko navija za Zvezdu, a ko za Partizan, ali mi i dalje ništa nije bilo jasno. Šutirali smo našu loptu, a ja sam se ljutio na one koji kažu „komunjara“. Osećao sam se odraslim kada bih nekome od njih odgovarao kako bi se moja baka sada naljutila da

ih čuje kako pričaju, pošto je branila Beograd. A ja sam stajao na голу i nisam umeo ni taj gol da odbranim, te mi je zbog toga bila još fascinantnija moja baka Dušanka, koja je oslobodila Beograd od fašizma. Jasno mi je bilo da ga nije baš sama oslobađala, ali sam računao: ako u fudbalskom timu ima jedanaest igrača, ni u oslobođenju Beograda nije moglo da ih bude mnogo više. Možda još rezervna klupa, ali sam bio siguran da moja baka ni u kom slučaju nije bila na rezervnoj klupi. Kao mali sam trenirao više sportova. Odbojku sam trenirao jedan dan i čim me je trener poslao na rezervnu klupu da gledam kako igraju dečaci koji su tu duže, otišao sam kući. Plivanje sam trenirao dva meseca i bio u grupi za neplivače. Nisam imao nameru da posmatram kako neki tamo, navodno, plivaju bolje od mene. Košarku sam trenirao najviše, zato što sam retko bivao na toj klupi za rezervne igrače. Te tako, verovao sam da ni moja baka, ni u kom slučaju, nije mogla biti na klupi za rezerve. Čak ni u tom „timu“ koji je oslobađao Beograd.

Ljudi su pričali da su vremena u kojima živimo „teška vremena“. Bio sam srećan kada nas mama odvede na sladoled u kornetu. Poslastičarka Marina je mog brata i mene često čašćavala s po dve kugle sladoleda, a ja bih neizostavno uzimao dve kugle čokolade. Jeo sam kornet odozdo, puštajući da mi se kugle slivaju niz grlo. Bio sam najmršaviji među svom decom iz komšiluka, i želeo sam pošto-poto da se ugojim. Mislio sam: ako su već tako teška vremena, treba i ja da budem „težak“. U stvari, viđao sam često nekog užasno debelog suseda, koji je vozio najbolja kola na svetu. Tako sam došao do zaključka da u teškim vremenima samo debeli, odnosno „teški“ ljudi, žive lako. Bilo je tu neke logike, jer se ni mama, ni Miša, ni ja nismo ugojili sve dok su trajala ta teška vremena, pa ni kasnije, a naš debeli sused je bivao sve deblji i živio sve bolje.

Mama je radila deset do petnaest sati dnevno, i nikada nam nije posle posla donosila poklone. Baka Ljuba nam je pravila krompir pire s jajetom na oko, a ja bih, kad to pojedem, omazao tanjir hlebom, da Ljuba ne bi morala da ga pere. Nikad mi nije bilo jasno zašto ga na kraju, uvek, ipak opere.

Moj tata je umro kad sam imao dve godine, a Mišin tata je nestao tri meseca pre nego što je Miša izašao iz maminog stomaka, ali nam je mama uvek govorila kako je bogata.

Nisam to baš razumeo. Nismo imali novca za novu loptu, ali nam je uvek ponavljala kako smo joj mi najveće bogatstvo. Miša i ja smo, zajedno, verovatno, bili teški kao jedna noga našeg debelog suseda, što je, po mojoj proceni značilo, da možemo da kupimo, možda, jednu gumu s njegovog automobila. Mama je i dalje pričala da smo bogati... Danas više ne jurcama oko zgrade. Porasli smo. Valjda. Danas svi dečaci imaju najbolje lopte, a onaj, ko ima onakvu kakva je bila Pajčetova, istinski je siromah. Kada je Pajče imao tu gumenu loptu, svi smo bili siromašni, ali nam to nije bilo važno.

Dva dečaka su prebila mog malog suseda i udarila ga kamenom u glavu. Vlada bi, verovatno, mislio da je rat, pošto samo u ratnim filmovima ljudima krvari glava. Moj mali komšija Đole nema tatu, a drugovi ga zovu „ženski petko“. On to ne razume. Samo je zaljubljen u Teu i zbog nje se igra s barbikama. Rekli su mu još i da je ustaša i da mu je mama kurva, jer se jebala s Hrvatom. On ni to ne razume, i odgovara im kako su oni četnici, ali njima to ne smeta, pošto misle da zaista jesu četnici.

Moj sused Filip je igrao sve sportove koji postoje, kao i one koji ne postoje, na novom kompjuteru. Nikada nije trenirao ništa, jer stalno sedi pred novim kompjuterom. U zamrzivaču ima veliko porodično pakovanje sladoleda i jede ga iz činije. Ne jede sladoled u kornetu, zato što smatra da to jedu samo oni, koji ne mogu da kupe veliki sladoled. Debeo je, a mama mu tepa „Bucko“, dok ga zadovoljno gleda kako se prežderava jagnjetinom. Uvek mu ostane nešto hrane u tanjiru, koju posle baci, kao i hleb, kojim je mogao da očisti tanjir da ga baba ne pere. Ona ne pere tanjir, kupila im je mašinu za pranje sudova. Danas nisu teška vremena, ali se Filip uredno goji, za svaki slučaj. Tata je kupio njegovoj mami najskuplju burmu za venčanje i vodio je na krstarenje za medeni mesec, ali se ona i dalje žali kako su siromašni.

Poljubio sam mamu kad sam se vratio s fakulteta. Pojeo sam pire s jajetom na oko, omazao tanjir hlebom, i smejao se s mamom dok sam joj pričao kako me je nerviralo što je Ljuba ipak prala tanjir kada ga očistim. Nisam više tako kratko ošišan da se Vlada ne bi previše brinuo, pošto i dalje često gleda filmove. I dalje sam mršav, ali mi više ne ide krv na nos, a Filipov tata je i dalje strašno debeo i vozi novi Audi.

Proveravam račun u banci, razmišljam koliko smo bogati. Srdačno pozdravljam blagajnicu, koja mi kaže da imam još 4 eura na računu.

Mama mi ni danas nije kupila poklon, ali mi je rekla da me voli... Spava mirno, radi manje i još je srećnija. Zato što zna da sada i mi shvatamo koliko smo bogati!

A ja sam naučio bar nešto: da ne mogu biti toliko teška vremena, koliko ljudi mogu biti siromašni duhom.

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