AFTERWORD: THE BELGRADE CONNECTION

This novel is a challenging and bracing exploration of movement. Its movements are multiple, maybe even legion, and they are tied to bodies and brains, ideas and ideologies, and countries and conflicts. *The Road to Birobidzhan* is a feminist novel, but it is also a medical novel, a Jewish novel, and a political novel. It is a profound statement about alterity in history and the fragility of memory.

Who Was Judita Šalgo?

Judita Šalgo was born in Novi Sad, a large, cosmopolitan city in northern Serbia (then Yugoslavia), on February 6, 1941. Her family suffered grievously in the Shoah. She studied world literature at the University of Belgrade and worked for decades as a literary editor at various institutions and journals. She married Zoran Mirković (1937–2015), a medical doctor and a writer, in 1967, and they had two children. She won several major literary awards before dying of cancer on September 12, 1996. She is buried in the Jewish Cemetery on Doža Đerđ Street in Novi Sad.

Today Šalgo is considered a very important figure in the evolution of Yugoslav feminism, as well as in the development of experimental prose and poetry in the cultural capital of Serbia's northern province, the Vojvodina. She spoke and worked in Hungarian as well as Serbo-Croatian (the language that is today know as Serbian, Croatian, Bos-

nian, or Montenegrin), and, like her husband, identified primarily as a Yugoslav, although her heritage also contained Hungarian, Serbian, and Jewish elements. Towards the end of her life she was active in movements for peace and national reconciliation in war-torn Yugoslavia.

The Plot of the Novel

The forward progress of this novel — its plot, although that noun would need to be understood as a hybrid of history, micro-description, and conversations, compounded with the movements mentioned above — is strongly informed by geography. There are, broadly seen, major journeys or motions in the book that run in intersecting directions: a north-south journey, involving Bertha Pappenheim, Jewish populations (especially women who have been sexually enslaved or otherwise trafficked), and a young woman from Belgrade named Flora Gutman; the east-west journey, or axis, involves opposite ends of the Diaspora: Jewish immigrants to the US and Jewish settlers in Soviet Birobidzhan, a province for Jews created by the USSR, along its border with China, in the 1920s. The city of Belgrade is at the intersection of these two journeys. Powering much of the movement in the novel is the phenomenon of hysteria, brought to modern prominence by the Viennese psychiatrists Breuer and Freud but depicted here as a pillar of Western patriarchy and medical science dating back to Classical Greece. Sometimes hysteria is supplemented by Jewish characters' quests for the Lost Tribes or for a Promised Land, or by more secular utopian aspirations. But hysteria is such a huge factor in

the novel that its repeated invocation by Pappenheim and others could be seen as an effort to "take the term back," to reappropriate and repurpose it into a search for a "female continent," or a more just society for women. Perhaps it resembles, in this function, the self-identification of British activists, referred to several times in the novel, as "suffragettes." One can think of other examples of "reclaimed" epithets in the popular culture of our own time.

What the novel is "about" is a question that one could attempt to answer, at the simplest level, with the terms hysteria, Holocaust, and homeland. The novel shows a wide variety of people in a number of countries "on the move," sorting through competing ideas about utopia and justice, often against the backdrop of Nazism and Hungarian fascism, the Shoah, the Soviet dictatorship, and the Cold War.

Contexts

Any reckoning with this powerful novel must encompass the language, style, and form in which it is written. Šalgo's writing is demanding. Novels by poets are often rigorously composed, either in terms of their compression or their lyricism. Since Šalgo's work on *The Road to Birobidzhan* was "interrupted" (a term that people close to her prefer to "unfinished"), it is possible that the text contains some repetitions or inconsistencies. Still, the main reason this text is demanding is because Šalgo wanted it to be that way. A complex subject deserves a complex treatment; or, put another way, form can reinforce function (or message) in beautiful ways in art. It was not a goal of this translation

to "spare" the anglophone reader, or to tidy things up; at times, adding a comma or a period, or clarifying the relationship between competing clauses in a long sentence, seemed like a reasonable concession to readability. None of this can disguise the fact that there are many moving parts in this work. There are so many of them that readers must be prepared to fight for their understanding.

Part of Šalgo's style, or part of her postmodernism, are the elements of the *nouveau roman* and magical realism in her prose. The use of so many historical figures in the text, from Rothschilds to Rosenbergs, from Bertha Pappenheim ("Anna O" of Viennese renown) to real-life poets and presidents, of course reminds one of a "historical novel" (but aren't all novels historical?), except that these elements are mobilized and deployed in a thoroughly modern, playful, and poignant way that does not dally in "romance" or "cultural literacy." Šalgo makes her own marvelous compound of all of this, while telling a unique story. At times, perhaps unexpectedly, except that they, like many other parts of the book, are lyrically inspired and satisfying, descriptions can rear up mightily, towering over the text, accumulating like lessons in baroque imagery, as at the very end of the book, when a factory full of people building Tito's socialist Yugoslavia becomes aware of the existence of distant Birobidzhan.

While academic studies and literary criticism of *Birobidzhan* have thus far focused on its feminist message, and rightly so, there are signs that other facets of the novel are also meeting with critical appreciation. Tijana Matijević, for instance, has pointed out that the novel marks, in peri-

odization, the beginning of a unique form of post-Yugoslav literature, while a number of scholars are examining the range of ways in which Šalgo's writing is emancipatory. And then there is history. Not the history behind or of the book — what I mean here is history itself. We meet it in Šalgo's novel. Very early on, one character is seen "expounding a comparative history of the world based on arson and bonfires" — an undertaking more modern than topical in its sensibility! Elsewhere there is a reference to a history of what are essentially epidemics of love. And other characters refer to the "open waters of history," which are the scene of great adventures and sufferings, while others seek alchemical interpretations of contemporary events through literary hints and personalities. Individual malice can turn a "hangover into history," by clouding judgment and creating victims. And what if history is actually chained to words, to characters and letters, and humans are speeding it up by writing so many things down?

Every author, or even every longer literary work, has a set of frequently-used words that jump out at a translator or other close reader. In Šalgo's case, these words provide an opportunity, or even the necessity, to translate individual lexica in various ways; as I see it, varying translation (through close synonyms) is a nod towards the honest recognition of polyvalent vocabulary; no one benefits from a translator refusing to make a tough call on a word or phrase, however, and of course repetition for emphasis or lyricism needs to be captured and conveyed, but alternating between commonsense translations of frequent word in a text can also be an embrace of the openness and possibilities of

expression within and between languages. The words that seem to recur most frequently in this novel are terms related to *grč* (spasm or cramp), *mučan* (painful, nauseous, tedious), *tok* (course or duration), and all shades of words signifying journey; tracks or traces; miserable or wretched; to scream or to shout; and to intimate, suspect, and intuit.

There are puns — always hard to translate — and straightforward humor as well. Presenting the reader with the interplay between "home" and "gnome" in a speech, or "*banja*" (spa) and "*banovina*" (a unit of territory akin to a state or province) are little stretches of cool shade in a text that sometimes feels ready to overheat. Some examples of Šalgo's humor would be the out-of-control dinner party where the master of the house threatens to throw pastry at an obnoxious guest, or the sarcasm of a student in the late 1940s grumbling over being assigned *Dead Souls* and *War and Peace* in a society already saturated with death and Russians, or the cringe-worthy *faux pas* of a hostess at a salon; Šalgo also uses French, German, and Hungarian words in characters' thoughts and speech to convey authenticity or emphasis shared European context; in the Hungarian case, some of the terms almost seem to be meta-comments, or notes to herself about what she was trying to convey in the Serbian text.

Conclusion

The world needs more Judita Šalgo. Let us hope that this novel will only be the first of her books to appear in translation. There is no doubt that the growing list of able and motivated literary scholars looking at her work will

present us with new techniques and unexpected interpretations. As for this translator and historian, I can confirm that Šalgo's writing is as rich as it is rigorous. Little did I expect how much the poet was going to analyze the mechanics of history as discipline and its construction as text. Those of us who write and teach about bad ideas and failed projects know (as we are all coming to realize nowadays about conspiracy theories) that "this history leaves in its wake indisputable tracks and marks, even if its sources are dubious." But in particular I leave this translation inspired by Šalgo's perspicacity, hopeful that a sense of the historical beyond the episodic, even in the century of Auschwitz and the atomic bomb, is actually possible.

John K. Cox

Fargo, ND (USA)