How we are still fighting the First World War: A deeply engaging historical novel through the life of Freud's closest associate

Sibila Petlevski has written the *Taboo* trilogy (*The Time of Lies,* 2009; *We Had it So Nice!*, 2011; *The Twilight State,* 2013), which centres around the figure of Viktor Tausk, a lawyer, psychoanalyst and one of the first trained psychoanalysts – a distinctive personality who belonged to Sigmund Freud's inner circle. Viktor Tausk was just forty when he took his own life, but his biography is rich enough to span the whole era and transcend it. What is equally fascinating is that Petlevski has succeeded in spanning those four decades and transcending the era. But Tausk's biography is only the *spiritus movens* of the trilogy with its many in-depth studies, unique in Croatian literature, where people and events return from oblivion, but a compelling parallel is also drawn with us in the present. Petlevski intended the novels to be read separately and clearly follows the approach of combining several distinct literary genres and narrative strategies, with a clever variation of styles, to create a whole that addresses

ideas we don't like to confront today: that we are responsible for the era we live in; that a third world war is happening right now through the lack of personal responsibility, that lessons of the past have not been learned and so we repeat the mistakes, and that we are subject to manipulative strategies that blur consciousness and prevent us from recognising the most significant taboo of our day: 'indescribability', as the author herself defines it – the power of the media to establish a hegemony of profitable content and suffocate much that is of real value. Petlevski's well-considered concept allows the novels to be read in a different order than they were published: you can begin with *The Twilight State,* for example, which is 'transhumanist science-fiction', documentary prose and a parable about evil; then move on to *The Time of Lies,* an intense spy story and military prose in today's fashion of studying the Great War and its effects; and finish with We *Had it So Nice!,* which tells us Tausk's life story but also the tale of the large family and broad circle of intellectuals he moved in, while at the same time being a largely political novel. The title of the second book, *We Had it So Nice!,* sums up the verve of the fin de siècle and is also ironic not only about the destiny of the protagonist but also the times (and ours as well, because 'we had it so nice' can only be said from the perspective of the horror we know today – while it lasts, the present does not know what beauty is). In the best appraisal of the novel, the Belgrade critic and translator Vladimir Arsenić claimed it was written using the psychoanalytic technique of free association, with a chain of details enabling reconstruction not of the whole, but of its essence. This technique brings out the common fate of intellectuals and members of various minorities (ethnic and sexual), ultimately creating a holistic image of the age and extending to a large part of Europe. For Tausk lived not only in Vienna and Berlin, but also in cities of what was Yugoslavia: Sarajevo, Mostar, Zagreb and Belgrade. What makes this novel particularly fascinating is the certain domination of female characters, around which males more or less successfully build their lives. However much the author let the flow of the story guide her in the process of writing, she emphasises the importance of this aspect. *We Had it So Nice!* is a novel about strong women, because Tausk was only truly attracted to high-power, intellectually superior women – from his wife Martha Frisch, a social democrat and feminist, who has a square named after her in Graz, to the psychoanalyst Lou Salomé, celebrated actresses and intellectuals like the Vienna Burgtheater prima donna Lia Rosen and the journalist Lucy von Jacobi, and the pianist Hilde Loewe, whose pseudonym Henry Love is linked to the melody of the film *The Third Man,* which we still whistle today.
It has been long since we have seen a research effort as huge as that which preceded the writing of the *Taboo* trilogy, and yet the material is used wisely and in moderation. The documents have not swallowed up the literature, and the researcher's passion is subordinated to the

passion of the belles-lettres. With her finely honed style, manoeuvring skilfully between genres and epochs, she has written an unforgettable book. We should bravely acknowledge that Sibila Petlevski has created an outstanding work, one of the best in modern Croatian literature, and of universal appeal.

Sibila Petlevski: *We Had it So Nice!*

FRAKTURA PUBLISHING HOUSE, 2011

The sharp, aromatic fragrance of tobacco always brought him to consciousness. It would bring him to a bearable reality, back from the torture chamber of moral uncertainty swirling through his brain in vivid colour at the close of the war, as if explosions flashed through maelstroms of dust before his eyes and clumps of earth were raining down on his head. No, he could not write about those things. He would tear up the piece of paper and try to write out warm, calming, conventional sentences. In the end, that was all he wanted to send to those he loved: only the tenderness he had once had but no longer found in himself; the warmth of an imagined embrace that his arms had long been unable to form naturally. He felt a terrible strain, as if something were physically preventing him from stating ordinary, familiar feelings. The irritation of the tobacco on the roof of his mouth and the smoke of *Orient* cigarettes in his nostrils was not a pleasure but true happiness, an anaesthetic with a brief, yet powerful impact, and the smoky effect extinguished, at least for a moment, Viktor's feeling of isolation – a fundamental, desperate separation from everyone and everything, and most of all from those socially acceptable forms of himself that enabled him simply to stick his finger between the legs of any woman and know she was ready. That lack of effort, the ease with which he could predict how others would react to the shrewdly constructed stereotypes of his own identity, the fishy smell of a needlessly and pointlessly moistened vulva – that suddenly made his stomach turn.

Bosnia Cigarettes. Something Quite Special – was printed on the pack that Hilde Loewe, a pianist, took out of her handbag the first time she set foot in Viktor's Vienna practice. She had taken along that ugly blue pack of cigarettes produced in Berlin before the war as a kind of ticket of admission into a world she found exotic. According to the stories of those who had recommended him to her, Tausk was a representative of something 'completely different'.

'He's just returned from the front,' commented Raoul Aslan, an actor, adding with a serious expression, 'via Belgrade.'

Raoul had stirring, maybe even overly expressive eyes and a strong, Greek profile about which he himself joked that the contours of his face were not those of a classical hero. Rather, his nose was shaped

for the tragic roles in the new age. This Armenian, born in Salonika, proud of his employ at the *Deutsches Volkstheater,* was also an actor offstage. He raised one thick, black eyebrow, tilted his head to one side and brought his lips so close to Hilde's face that the fine, almost invisible fuzz on her ear stood on end. He whispered:

'But the bit about Belgrade, that's a different story.'

He put the stress on *different* as he was thinking of the circumstances that had kept Viktor in Belgrade for almost two whole years, and about which Vienna's artistic circles had been buzzing in coffee-house gossip sessions. Viktor had been in Serbia from December 1916, when he was transferred from the Lublin garrison, up until 18 November 1918, when he returned to Vienna. He had left Belgrade a day before Serbian and French troops marched in to liberate it. The reason was not, as one might easily assume, a fear of the 'enemy', but a fear of routine. Viktor had made himself completely at home in the Belgrade milieu; he had a lover, a buxom widow with whom he lived in a villa she had inherited, and he had no need of hiding the affair. He was accepted as a person and valued as a physician and psychoanalyst. He was offered a position at the university; he could have become the head of the clinic. But he was seized by a need for change, for turning a blank, new page in the notebook of his inner life, as had happened many times before. It would have been too simple to say he had run away from his responsibilities, because after the wartime horrors he had experienced his strongest desire in life was the longing for emptiness.

When she strode into Viktor's practice on Raoul's recommendation, Hilde did not come as a patient.

'She didn't have a problem –,' Viktor would say later, recalling their first meeting, 'she was looking for one.'

She wanted to extract some topic from within herself for an intellectual conversation. Psychoanalysis interested her and she thought she needed that form of spiritual exercise just as much, if not more so, than the physical exercise she did in the early morning hours so she could later be in control and need no rest when she passionately pursued her various hobbies: horse riding, tennis, swimming and skiing. Her shoulders were a little too broad for a woman. A swimmer's shoulders – Viktor concluded – and a long swan's neck on them. Orange lipstick on her lips accentuated the pale complexion of her skin and made her almost unreal: as if she were entirely a black and white graphic, except for the powerful mark of femininity on her fine lips. Sensual and childlike, they seemed too small on a face with such strong, resolute jaws. Her large, dark eyes watched attentively, but it seemed to Viktor that they looked through him, to somewhere in the void. She took out a pack of *Bosnia* cigarettes, smiled and said:

'Ordinarily I don't smoke.'

'I prefer *Orient,'* said Viktor.

'Well, aren't they all alike when it gets down to it?' Hilde, said, stopping him without a hint of embarrassment.

'Almost,' he answered and added, looking her straight in the eye, 'but not quite.'

Something about this woman disturbed him deeply. But again,

even the first time he looked at her – at her supple, athletic body, seemingly covered up but really more accentuated by the simple cut of her dark clothes – Viktor couldn't escape the impression that what caused such irritation in him was at the same time the impulsive cause of purely physical arousal. The desire that suddenly flooded through him could only lead in a single, predictable direction, and he was completely aware of it, from the very beginning. There was no desk between them. They were sitting on uncomfortable wooden chairs facing one another. Between Viktor's legs, which he spread slightly, just enough for her to notice, there throbbed an animal need, which rose in warm waves up his spinal cord and returned down the same path, at ever shorter intervals.

'Doctor, I wanted to ask you a question: when someone gets carried away listening to music, is that in and of itself a guarantee that the composer's message in the score has reached that person? Because I don't think it is. Rather, it's the complete opposite.'

Viktor reached out and put his hands around her waist, but she remained in the same position as if nothing had happened and tried to continue speaking in the same tone, as if that were now her strategy to take their relationship back to its starting point:

'... I personally think that the listener is so preoccupied with his own emotions, which the melody has aroused, that hardly anything else can reach him. Sometimes it seems to me that music hampers its very self. What do you say? Is that thought too heretical?'

It would be heretical to seduce a patient, Viktor thought, but Hilde wasn't a patient. Suddenly it seemed to him that those two dark eyes of hers that looked through him, that pair of black berries on proud evergreen under the hoarfrost of eternal winter, were indubitable signals of harsh Nature beckoning him to give himself over to the void and, aided by a random female body that might have a completely different form of longing, to cross the last line he had drawn to separate himself from worthlessness. That borderline was at the same time the limit of self-respect, the last line of defence of Viktor's war-weary ego that suffered from alternating attacks of guilt and an infinite lack of concern for everything and everyone. That spiritual care of his, that strange altruism, his habit of offering and giving things to people, threatened to grow instantaneously into a murderous impulse, a need to hit out as hard as he could at people's frozen souls, to smash them with an ice pick. And it could be that the call to consciousness came too late – postmortem – like a convulsion or the grimace of a corpse, which might have led him to wonder, had he not been a physician: Is it death or awareness that hurts?'

He felt Hilde freeze up under his hands, but that drove him to squeeze her tighter. The next moment he had already lifted her up and forced her to sit on his knees, and he thrust his tongue between her thin, hot lips that beneath the waxen layer of lipstick concealed a mild taste of castor oil, an essential ingredient of women's makeup that Viktor always thought he could taste somehow, even when it wasn't there, in which case it was purely a figment of his imagination, a memory from his childhood:

'Just keep it up: if you're not good you'll get a spoonful of castor oil,'

his mother would promise sarcastically.

What did it even mean to 'be good'? When the world today could incite anyone to stick to any moral habits to be a part of some hypocritical *Yes but...*, of some petty bourgeois affectation of monkeys that every few years smash their skulls, naked with hate, only to return from the manly herd to their homes, their wives, to don suits and take them out to some elegant provincial soirée to dance a palace dance more elegant than folk dances and the quadrille. Instead of parade horses, their dressed-up fiancées and wives: they traded socially fixed, pretty dance positions, but everyone understood that society envisioned only one position for these pious, provincial women. It was never spoken aloud, of course, and it was unseen and hidden in petty bourgeois bedrooms decorated in the recently outmoded fashions of the great metropolises: the mare's mounting position. Viktor had the impression that wherever he went he carried the provinces in which he had spent some of his childhood, like a bundle on a stick. In those places everything stayed the same for a few centuries at a time: things were different in Croatia, the music was different and the high society there kept to itself and danced the same hypocritical quadrille over and over again to every rhythm and melody. They were not deaf. They had an ear for music, but they stuck to tradition because their *forefathers* had danced, fucked and died like that, 'the way we do things', but really at the behest of others, in silly, outdated uniforms, in the eternal parade of foreign powers and their influence. And the Bosnia of his youth? Had it ever learned to dance to the Austro-Hungarian tune, or did it like the Turks better?

'Let me have one of those *Bosnia* cigarettes, since you were so polite as to bring them,' Viktor said and offered Hilde an opportunity to retreat.

He took his hands off her body – one could say he was suddenly fatigued – and only then did she feel strange: released from Viktor's embrace, she was sitting without support; half her bottom was on his knees, and she might fall off at any moment. There was something silly and foolish in that, as when a very large dog, until recently a puppy, climbs onto its master's lap. She got up unsteadily and grabbed the blue pack on the table – her admission ticket to a world she imagined to be something *Quite Special*. She pulled a cigarette halfway out and proffered it just as she had half an hour before.

Viktor took a first drag and blew the smoke into Hilde's face. If she thought he was not going to go through with his intention, she was mistaken. The desire that had started out as an impulse had turned into a premeditated plan. She would not be able to escape its execution. He wanted to take her out to the execution site and condemn her to himself, because he considered himself deadly. It was not going to be a matter of him pulling out his swollen member with its purple vein and show it like a weapon to that young woman who was twenty years his junior and literally stick its barrel down her throat. No, he did not want to threaten her; he did not intend to rape her, humiliate her or cause her pain. He wanted to be the mediator of Justice, which came from above. He wanted her – who behaved flightily, as if the whole world had not gone to hell – to also be aware of the conse-

quences of her curiosity. He wanted to condemn her to himself so she would not escape her brutal kismet, seeing as she had come to him to get a taste of *something completely different*. He wanted her to realise what her part was and the manner in which every day, every damned hour and minute, she was taking part in the general fate of the world; he wanted to communicate to her with his body that if the world was falling to ruin she could not pass unscathed. But as he was still trying to get a clear grip on his motives, suddenly that 'mission' to Hilde also seemed to be a wretched, superfluous change of argument. What point was there in using a veil of metaphysical reasons to cover up a simple fact – the need without further ado to have his way with a girl full of false self-confidence? The problem lay in the fact that he no longer valued himself. Condemning someone to himself did not mean much to Viktor: in his manner of fatal seduction, which he had practised over time to perfection, there was more irony than tragedy; it boiled down to a mere offer to someone to share defeat with him.

He held the smoke in his mouth, pulled Hilde close and literally blew it into her lungs. His tongue began violently exploring her straight, white teeth down to her gums and beyond them, which, Hilde would later admit, was for some reason more shocking to her that some other things they did, which, objectively speaking, could have provoked greater revulsion. When he lifted her onto the desk and thrust himself into her while standing, she cried out in a way he had not heard for quite some time and did not expect just then. She gave the impression of an experienced woman who did not believe in the traditional division of male-female roles and who was maybe even inclined to be the dominant one in a relationship, but Viktor had been mistaken in his psychological assessment of Hilde. He should have paid attention to the great effort she made to give the impression of an intellectually cultivated, independent and emotionally fearless woman and it was this that should have made him doubt the authenticity of the role she was playing before him. He withdrew – literally: in a physical sense he no longer wanted to continue, and rationally it made no sense either. After checking once more with his hand, with the routine attentiveness that any physician would have shown, he determined that her hymen had been perforated. Her thighs were trembling, cold with fear and the new sensation. And Viktor did not know whom to pity more: himself, who had fallen into the trap of the taboo of virginity, or her, the brave virgin of a new era who had accompanied her 'loss' with the same cry of surprise and the same earnest pathos that had been passed down among women from generation to generation. He was then forty-three years old; Hilde was twenty-four. He looked at her attentively: her dark, opaque eyes that were really looking directly at him for the first time, streaming with tears of reproach. Viktor could not figure out at all how such an attractive girl had kept her virginity for so long. Maybe she had subordinated her life to music; maybe her only reality was an intellectual fiction in the interstices between strenuous sessions of piano practice. Maybe she had come to seduce him with premeditation just as ancient and banal as his feigned educational intention that concealed an unbridled physical hunger. *Once again cruel nature tricked the beasts and they set about mating, and*

each beast had an intelligent reason to cover up the horror of the trap it had fallen into, Viktor wrote. He was sorry: not because of the act itself, but because he did not like the way they had done it. He thought they both deserved better. 'Now I should tell you that you should have told me, but it doesn't matter anymore. Give me another chance and I'll try to make it so you're not sorry, because I am sorry, I really am, and I'll be even more sorry if you don't give me the chance. I only want a chance to prove to you that you don't have to be sorry and that it's good that it happened because it needed to happen, maybe not like it did, but it still needed to happen. I have no doubt about that. No doubt at all. And if you relax now, I'll take care of the rest. You don't even need to say what you want. It's enough for you to relax.'

He carried Hilde over to a threadbare sofa he kept for psychoanalysis in his Vienna office, which he called 'new' even though it was chock-full of old junk and things he had borrowed. He had renovated the practice in November 1918, only a few months before the *incident* with Hilde. Privately, Viktor considered what had happened between them to be an incident, because until then it would have been inconceivable for him to flout the custom that imposed a distance between a therapist and his patients, especially ones of the opposite sex. *She did not come as a patient* – yes, that was what he tried to tell himself as he carried her from the desk over to the sofa, but he had the impression that he had violated the sacredness of the room and that this in and of itself was enough to summon an incurable unease, that terrible feeling of guilt he could barely wrest himself from in those post-war days, or at any other time. It had been lunging at him from behind for months, sometimes completely out of the blue, rarely for any reason as clear as the one on that day with Hilde. He spread her dark labia with his fingers and licked a trail of virgin blood over her mons Veneris all the way to her belly button. There was something unbelievably harmonious in the folds her unspent femininity, in that only seemingly creased perfection that was equal to the beauty of a rose – something so harmonious that he thought about bringing her a mirror so she could see it herself, and witness it. But first he had to deal with the taste of violence that he had already partially rinsed with saliva; to wait a little for the juices of welcome and to force the girl to feel herself a woman for the first time.

Viktor had been bitten by a dog only once in his life, and he remembered that now, with his head between Hilde's thighs. It was a little dog. Viktor could not work out why it actually happened. Someone before him had probably irritated the animal, so it was just waiting for someone to vent its rage on. He loved animals. He knew how to handle them and was proud of it. He kept to a simple rule: the animal must not be allowed to smell fear, but it must also not sense a threat. First he would hold out an open hand as a sign that he was not hiding anything dangerous. And the dog would move its snout closer; when it smelled his scent, and if it licked him, that meant it accepted him, and he could pet it and run his fingers through its fur. Not even that time, when those tiny, sharp teeth drew his blood, did he want to pull back.

'Look what you've done! Look!' Viktor repeated with reproach but

without raising his voice.

It was a nervous little dog with short legs that some lady had left chained to a light pole in Preradović Street in Varaždin. At that time Viktor was a pupil in his last year at the Varaždin lyceum. He had transferred from Sarajevo after being expelled from school there as the main instigator of a student rebellion against religious instruction. Already at that time it seemed nothing was going right in his young life.

'Look what you've done. C'mon, look at what you did!' Viktor scolded the little dog and again offered him the same hand, which was dripping with blood.

The dog gave in and started obediently licking the place it had previously bit until it had completely cleaned and dried up the wound.

With his face between Hilde's thighs, Viktor laughed softly, and she gave a few quiet sighs.

'I'll bring you a mirror,' he said. 'It's a pity for you not to see it.'

The very fact that she found no reason to refuse to look at the reflection of her pleasure truly turned him on. Much more than the mere sight of her body, supple and taught, used to daily gymnastics, but so awkward in lovemaking and scandalously innocent like a calf on a pasture, like any other young flesh into which he could press his own flesh, quickly and without enthusiasm.

Hilde nevertheless managed to gather courage – she had the capacity for happiness, Viktor would write later, and it was that spontaneous quality, lacking in him, that he admired the most. He was charmed by people who, unlike him, had an inner reserve of happiness and were not forced to question themselves again and again, to seek pleasures outside themselves and leave only a residue of bitterness inside. Viktor was courageous in everything except the search for personal happiness. He marvelled at how people could look at their image in the mirror and develop their feelings based on that 'recognition': he wondered how they could so unreservedly tie their emotions to the stupid reflection of their faces. Knowing himself well did not mean that he automatically had to love himself too. He wished to take Hilde's capacity for happiness to its limits, to push her boundaries as far as they would go, and even further: over the edge. He was overcome with a powerful rush of physical arousal, and he knew from experience that he would not be able to free himself from it for some time to come:

'And now we're finally going to make love,' he said, aware that he would awaken in her (as he did in most of the other women with whom he had affairs) a passionate and painful dependence on him as a source of pleasure. And that – he thought bitterly – was based only on the naked physiological fact of his own indefinitely postponed pleasure, a fact that was his greatest advantage during the act of sex, but also a personal curse in which he saw a symbol of the spirit of Denial, which had followed him his whole life long. Forcing her to beg him to stay inside her as long as he could, until he was exhausted, until the muscles of her thighs, which were spattered with pink spots of unwiped virgin blood, began to quiver uncontrollably – that was easier than coming. But again, Viktor felt quite unexpectedly, the narrow opening of her tender innocence was maybe a way out for all his

accumulated problems. Maybe it was not too late to surrender himself. The seed of that surrender was a sentence for both of them. She would be the captive of his fruit, and he would be the captive of a look that went past him: a captive of *a pair of black berries on proud evergreen under the hoarfrost of eternal winter,* of her opaque, dark eyes – cruel signals of nature that was calling him to surrender to the void.

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'The marriage to Miss Loewe was an opportunity for Doctor Tausk to prove he was not a deserter from love,' would be the remark of a patient that Paul Federn inherited from Viktor after his suicide. It was an open secret in Vienna's intellectual circles that Hilde Loewe, a pianist whose career had suddenly taken off, had gotten pregnant by her physician and that he, after picking up a wedding suit from his tailor, shot himself with his officer's pistol and simultaneously hanged himself with a curtain cord (just in case) at dawn on the 3rd July 1919. In those days one did not need to know either Viktor or Hilde to mention them, in passing as it were, as a subject of gossip.

The patient, whose initials were FL and who was also mentioned in Viktor's files as *happy Franz,* was an interesting man of pleasant appearance, an amateur poet who came to Federn's psychoanalytic office and said he had been a comrade of Viktor's at the front, a good friend in fact, and that Viktor's death had shaken him so badly and awoken such unpleasant wartime memories in him that he felt a need to speak about it all with someone else who had known Viktor. He told Federn that he had been Tausk's patient at the military hospital in Lublin after the trauma of an artillery explosion and a brief loss of memory; his therapy was successful and the two of them had grown close 'on account of their natural intellectual affinity discovered through long conversations about life and the world'.

'Unfortunately Viktor died before I managed to visit him in his new office,' Franz said, and it seemed to Federn that principles of morality and collegiality bound him to accept Tausk's friend and let him come for therapy sessions.

Federn thought about the real reasons for Tausk's suicide. It seemed to him that his act really was connected to a *desertion from love,* but he did not want to limit it to the simple possibilities of interpretation offered by the sentimental entanglements of man and woman. He thought it was more likely a matter of a betrayal of the emotional relationship between teacher and student, of an abrupt and radical desertion from Freud's psychoanalytical 'unit', more deeply rooted than the departures of some of Freud's other students, his colleagues, who – like Viktor – once they were deprived of the grace of the Great Father, had no alternative but to save themselves by escaping from Freud's shadow. In the bonds of the love of mutual psychoanalytical séances, Freud had to consent to analyse Tausk, perhaps not so much for objective reasons – Viktor's depression and wartime trauma – as on account of a natural right based on the hierarchy in the psychoanalytical movement. For Tausk had nevertheless been in the highest

circle of 'officers' of the psychoanalytical order from the very beginning! When Ludwig Jekels asked Freud why he had not taken Viktor for analysis, he answered:

'No way; he might kill me!'

But even being rejected like that – so Federn thought – Tausk found a way to take his revenge: suicide was a radical form of desertion from love. By killing himself, Viktor could finally kill the Freud in him, amputate the Great Father, and excise him from himself cleanly, as if with a scalpel, without pity or reproach.

Martha Frisch, Tausk's former wife, burned all of his remaining papers according to his express wishes, and so Federn was left without the key to understanding the case of FL, whom he had inherited from his dead colleague. Happy Franz presented himself to Federn in a light completely different to the one in which Viktor had seen him, but that is not the object of our investigation now.

We would rather return to Viktor's Vienna office, a few minutes after coitus with Hilde. The leisurely exhaled smoke from another pre-war *Bosnia* cigarette, which Hilde thought looked like a horse's muzzle, now wrapped Viktor in a haze of memory, and he felt the need to be alone.

'Does it bother you when I'm quiet?' he asked and smiled dryly.

'Not at all,' she answered politely. 'I'll be dressed in a second and be off.'

He was overcome with melancholy, and in it there flashed an image of a row of barren trees along a railway track in late autumn, and then a station building with a large, protruding signboard. *Dervent* was written on it in Cyrillic letters. That two-storey building with its red roof always increased the feeling of senselessness in him, as did the screech of a braking freight train and a high fence along which Gypsy children were sitting. In 1905, after a year of service as a junior clerk, he had been authorised by the royal court to act as legal counsel, a crucial *stallum agendi* that was to provide his family with security. He was the father of two small boys and his marriage to Martha had already fallen into crisis. He was twenty-six years old at that time, and it suddenly became crystal clear to him that he did not want to earn money through the misfortunes of others. He did not believe in justice. Interpreting the law was for him like telling a tale with rules in it. But that was still telling tales, like any others. Much of it depended on the persuasiveness with which he himself – enamoured in the tale of justice – would present fiction as truth. He was carried away by it at the outset of his legal career; he had to be carried away by something, since he had not received permission from his father to study medicine. The connection between the profession that had been forced on him and the one he had always been drawn to existed somewhere in the sphere of philanthropy.

Only later would Viktor realise that the sphere he liked so much was in fact an eternal no-man's land between warring ideologies, barren ground sown with the gloomy totems of empty ideals.

'All I want to do is help people. That's the job for me,' he declared in the university library in Vienna where he met Martha, his future wife. She looked at him with a mixture of adoration and a continual need

for intellectual competition:

'That's not a job, it's a world-view. Believe it or not, you're an incorrigible humanist,' she said.

A lock of her disobedient blond hair that had been wound into a slipshod bun, which hairpins would fall out every so often, was in her eye again. She blinked rather than move it. It took Viktor a full month spent with her, mostly studying together and discussing various political and social topics, to reach out and move the disobedient lock of hair out of her eye. His fingertips touched her tender, pale skin, which was sprinkled with almost invisible freckles, and tarried there a few moments longer than the occasion required. He caressed her cheek with two fingers, as if lightly scratching something on it, and immediately withdrew his hand. She smiled gently. Martha was about to graduate from a higher school of commerce.

Translated by Stephen M. Dickey

Additional Information

SIBILA PETLEVSKI was born in 1964 and is an award-winning novelist, poet, playwright, performer, theatre critic, editor and translator. She has written more than twenty books in different genres of fiction, non-fiction, drama and poetry, and is a member of International PEN. She received the Tportal Novel of the Year award in 2010 for *The Time of Lies,* the first part of her much-acclaimed *Taboo* trilogy. Her poetry collection *A Hundred Alexandrian Epigrams* (1993) won the prestigious Vladimir Nazor National Prize for Literature and Arts in 1993. Her play *Lyrebird* was selected for a stage reading at the 10th Women Playwrights' International Conference in Cape Town in 2015.

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MOST RECENT BOOKS:
Theatre of Shame: Identity as Witnessing (non-fiction, 2015); *Taboo* trilogy (novels, 2009-2013); *Les Mots de passe de l'oubli* (poetry, 2013)

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