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# A Difficult Spring: To Love Or Not To Love, That Is the Question.

*Evgen Bavčar*

**A** *Difficult Spring* is one of the most peculiar and unusual literary documents in the writer Boris Pahor's battle between life and death. A unique challenge and a creative outgrowing of the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century, this hard-to-define work, in its conception, represents a unique contribution to the rich tradition of European novel set in the world of sanatoria - a successful inclusion, both aesthetically and in subject-matter, in a long line of thematisation of health institutions, starting with *The House of Our Lady Help of Christians* by the Slovenian Ivan Cankar, through Thomas Mann and Solzhenitsyn. At the same time this novel represents a milestone in the work of this Slovenian-language Triestine author, an existential crossroads between past, present and future, a mysterious door which opens inward and outward simultaneously and thus enables the reader to descend into the very core of Pahor's literature, rooted in one of the most tragic periods of European history.

With *A Difficult Spring*, the author becomes an even more effective critical conscience, memory and witness to the deadly ideologies of the twentieth century, from Italian Fascism, through Nazism to exceptionally prophetic anticipations of Stalinism. In the protagonist, Radko Suban, we can recognise the subject of European history; after the loss of his own name in the period of Italian Fascism he became the victim of the irreparable reduction to a mere number in a death camp. With this progressive loss of human identity he changes into a powerless body, struggling against planned, technologically perfected destruction in a kingdom of crematoriums. Following his story from the native Trieste to the death camp in the Vosges and elsewhere, we are astounded by the iron, incontestable logic of flame, which finds its source and cradle in the town on the bay. From the gutted ruin of the

Slovenian National House in Trieste in 1920 (two years before the official beginning of Mussolini's regime), fanned by the wild winds of deadly ideologies, these tongues of flame take over the whole of Europe. Radko Suban recognises their long-term mission of evil while his eyes are gazing at a red flower, a red tulip, rising above the chimney of the crematorium in Struthof. We discover a unique archaeology of evil in the novel, as the writer here, as in many of his other works, returns convincingly to the very beginnings of the European tragedy, to its cradle, swinging over Slovenian land.

Set within a sanatorium, the novel traces a love story between Radko Suban, a returnee from the death camp, and a young nurse, Arlette. Their story is at the same time a symbolic attempt to return to the living all those who had been permanently marked by the Second World War's laboratory of death. Their individual experience is interwoven with the universal experience of humanity. Depicting through Radko the painful dilemma between *thanatos* and *eros*, this story becomes the writer's most convincing testimony against death. The nurse Arlette on the other hand is overcoming and overgrowing the principle of deontology with a childlike playful sense that Radko perhaps doesn't need medicines alone, but needs also her redemptive love. The protagonist is constantly battling with the guilt of survival, which he internalises so deeply that it is now confining his heart, like a hard chain, to the domain of death. Therefore the outer and obvious physical freedom cannot be enough for him while he carries in himself invisible manacles to a past which persistently pursues him. Perhaps his understanding and experience of love could best be described by Lacan's quote from the poet Antoine Tudal: "Between man and love there is a woman, between man and woman there is a world, between man and the world there is a wall". Suban's wall, which separates him from love, is reinforced by the barbed wire of the camp, described in Pahor's *Necropolis*. It is the internalised barriers, constantly restored and consolidated by the feeling of eternal guilt for being still here, still being alive, while so many of the convicted were transformed into smoke, rising above their last dwelling-place. Radko is painfully aware that they are for ever up there, not resting tight, as Paul Celan puts it, the way they would if their humiliated bodies had been buried in the graves of ordinary

cemeteries. The sanatorium, where Radko, although living in a place meant for finding new health, is returning to the disappeared, is thus, in the second half of the twentieth century, its own Kafkian penal colony. The machine perfected to engrave guilt, sin on the back of the convict turns here into an invisible stigmatization of the convict's spirit and soul, i.e. into an internalised guilt, and thus unjust sense of crime. Nevertheless the writer is telling us that "love is first the attraction of two bodies", the completing of the mystery of one with the mystery of the other, man in the woman, and woman in the man. The hospital bed along with a healing massage thus turns into a cosmic principle of the conception of the world, and their first theoretical meeting into its birth. This is further underlined by Radko's realisation that love, and with it the woman, is the only bail into a new world he is trying to reach through internal battles and dilemmas. On this path he is persecuted, like Hamlet, by phantoms of the dead, thus constantly wavering between whether to love or not to love, as the most crucial question of his post-camp existence.

This point concentrates one of the strongest premises of Pahor's writing, and one which gives it its unique and unrepeatable originality: the love story of the protagonists represents a substantial contradiction between their physical closeness and their internal discrepancy. It is important to stress at this point Radko's fidelity to the memory of his Triestine love, Mija, which gains mythic proportions and thus becomes a feeling of an absolute nature. The memory of Mija grows into a symbol of absolute love as the exchange between the two of them - the reciprocal giving of one to the other - is not possible anymore, the memory becomes an erotic law, a love principle, which will accompany him for ever on his *itinerarium crucis* to the new love. Perhaps he is not aware enough of the fact that this very feeling is the ethic and the human guarantee of his unequivocal right to happiness in a new, better world. The story which unfolds between Arlette and Radko is full of twists, games, hints and - of course - painful misunderstandings. One of these is the episode with the cat Minette, the death of which causes deep sadness to Arlette, its mistress. Radko remembers the images of the dying Alsatian girls in Struthof, described more in detail in *Necropolis*, and he cannot understand Arlette's pain at the loss of the loved animal, while

he himself had experienced the loss of so many innocent lives in pride and silence, unable to reach female dignity. In this episode the novel reaches its peak and discloses the painful irreconcilability of two outlooks on the world, two seemingly complementing love principles. Therefore we cannot perceive *A Difficult Spring* exclusively as victory over death, but must see it also as an honest representation of numerous lost battles. Beside the astonishing love story *A Difficult Spring* represents an exceptional literary testimony of European history at the start of the Atomic Age, marked by a new, even stronger Nothingness of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Radko's thinking includes critical traces of scepticism towards the possibility of a new humanism despite his swearing by the only possible mirror of the European subject, which should be the image of the other and not another new ideology. Masterfully elaborated dialogues exalt and give a new meaning to Radko's intimate language, Slovenian, which Mussolini's fascism had forced into silence. However, it is important to notice that Radko returns to his mother tongue, to the privileged expression of love, through French, the language of communication between him and Arlette.

*A Difficult Spring* offers the reader a key point of entry into this author's rich opus. Although its better understanding often depends on the reader's familiarity with Pahor's other works, in a deeper sense it is this novel that represents those miraculous doors which open simultaneously inward and outward. It gives us the freedom to enter the writer's internalised consciousness and testimony, as well as the opportunity for a rich walk through the complicated paths of European history.

The story between Radko and Arlette is accompanied by interesting thinking, some of which is central even today, about the condition of the human spirit in post-war Europe and the world, which includes several prophetic reservations about the new historic era. A high level of originality and difference is reflected in the protagonist's attitude to nature, which is in accordance with the views of certain philosophical principles of the twentieth century. Along with the scenery nature provides to the love idyll of the protagonists, the author proffers the notion that nature cannot be ruled by enslaving it. It is only possible to live with it in harmony. Allied to this nature is the feminine, to which Radko resorts and within which he

looks for a unique asylum on the way to freedom, to new beginnings. Nature and woman give him in their infinity the opportunity to forget because they incorporate the mysterious restorative from the river Styx, the river of oblivion, for which the protagonist's hands, like the longing hands of the author himself and his intimacy, wounded by history, had often reached in despair.

The novel is also a hymn to the body, the dwelling-place of desire and a sacred place of memory. Radko's body is symbolically escorted by Mija's coat, a kind of internalised armour of warmth, imbued with her gentleness and love. When Radko loses this magic cover (he only gets it back with the humane gesture of Dr. Lebon at the end of the book) his exposed body is ready for all possible tests and tortures in the laboratory of death. And if the attraction between the body of a man and a woman is the condition of new love, the latter is so much more fatefully needed in the case of these protagonists, marked as they are by history and its barbarity. The body as an antipodes to the ash from the camps becomes the element of resurrection of memory and its overcoming of death. It is therefore possible to say that in this novel the writer Boris Pahor does not dip his pen exclusively into ash, albeit mixed with Eros' tears, but dips it also into loam of new opportunities and yet unimagined beginnings. Only in this way does the abovementioned dialectic of thanatos-eros turn into eros-thanatos, when the written word, in the acknowledgement of the necessity of testimony, defeats death and oblivion. That, perhaps, is why in this novel the ethical nature of writing becomes one of the most convincing forms of a higher and truer love towards the victims, towards the other, and of course towards the resurrection of humanity.



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## A Historic Context of the Novel

**August 1913:** Boris Pahor is born.

**1914-1918:** First World War.

**Till 1918:** Trieste is an important port in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

**November 3, 1918:** Trieste is occupied by the Italian Army and officially annexed to the Kingdom of Italy with the Treaty of Rapallo in 1920, becoming a part of the Region Friuli Venezia Giulia.

**July 13, 1920:** The Fascist extremists burn down the National House (“Narodni dom”), designed by the architect Max Fabiani. The building functioned as the cultural centre of Trieste’s Slovenians.

**October 28, 1922:** The Fascists come to power after the March on Rome (“Marcia su Roma”). From this period onwards, the public use of Slovenian language in Italy is prohibited, all the Slovenian associations are dissolved, and names and surnames of Slavic and German origin are Italianized. Under the Fascist regime, 80,000 Slovenians from the region are forced to emigrate to several European countries, the USA and to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

**1930:** Slovenian antifascists and their collaborators in the Julian March are arrested and put on trial in the First Trieste Trial. In September 1930, four people are sentenced to death.

**February 28, 1933:** The Nazis attack a Reichstag Building in Berlin and set it on fire. This is the beginning of Nazi Germany.

**March 12, 1938:** The *Anschluss* of Austria. Nazi troops occupy the Republic of Austria and make it an official part of Germany.

**September 1, 1939:** Second World War begins with the occupation of Poland by Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union.

**1939:** By this year, there are six large concentration camps in Nazi Germany (Dachau, 1933; Sachsenhausen, 1936; Buchenwald, 1937; Flossenbürg, 1938; Mauthausen, 1939; Ravensbrück, 1939). In 1938, the SS in collaboration with several German companies begins to use the camps as a source of forced labour for profit-making ventures. During World War Two, the camps become also the centres for mass extermination of Jews and other non-Aryan people, as well as centres for torture and annihilation of the European antifascists.

**1941:** The Second Trial of Trieste: many Slovenian antifascists are sentenced to death or to life imprisonment.

**May 1941 - September 1944:** The Nazi labour camp Natzweiler-Struthof (50 km away from Strasbourg) was operative in this period.

**Winter 1942 - September 1943:** Fascist Italy establishes several concentration camps. The Slovenians are usually sent to Gonars near Palmanova or to the island of Rab (Arbe), together with Croats and Jews. In both concentration camps, the prisoners die mostly of hunger, contagious diseases and harsh weather conditions.

**September 1943:** After the capitulation of Fascist Italy, the Nazis occupy Trieste and the Julian March.

**1944-1945:** Pahor is arrested by Slovenian Nazi collaborators in Trieste who suspect him because of his connection to the journal *Dejanje* ("The Act"), edited by the Slovenian poet and freethinking intellectual Edvard Kocbek. Pahor is handed over to the Gestapo and sent to Natzweiler-Struthof. From September 1944, he is forced to move to several other concentration camps (Dora, Harzungen and Bergen Belsen). In April 1945, with four other inmates, he escapes from Bergen Belsen.

**May 1, 1945:** Yugoslav forces take over Trieste from the Germans and hold full control of the city until June 12 when they hand the city on to the Western Allies. According to the so-called "Morgan line", the border territory between Yugoslavia and Italy is divided into two zones: the western zone with Trieste/Trst as a capital comes under a joint British-U.S. military administration, while the eastern zone with Koper/Capodistria as a capital is headed by the Yugoslav military administration.

**August 6 and 9, 1945:** the USA drop atomic bombs on the cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima (Japan).

**August 15, 1945:** Japan surrenders to the Allies.

**September 1947:** With the establishment of the Free Territory of Trieste, under the Paris Peace Treaty in September 1947, the part under the British-U.S. military administration becomes “Zone A”, while the part under the Yugoslav military administration becomes “Zone B”.

**October 1954:** The Free Territory of Trieste is abandoned because of the London Agreement which provides for the annexation of “Zone A” by Italy and “Zone B” by Yugoslavia. Both countries agree to respect the rights of each other’s minorities. The London Agreement served as a base for a special law that is in force from 2001 onwards and protects the rights of the Slovenian minority in Italy.

**1975:** The border between Italy and Yugoslavia, as well as the status of the ethnic minorities in the areas, is settled permanently with the Treaty of Osimo. In 1992, the same line becomes the new border between Italy and Slovenia.



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## About the Author

**Boris Pahor** (26 August 1913, Trieste) is a member of the Slovenian minority in the Trieste region. Until the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he was recognised as a great writer neither in Italy nor in Slovenia (Yugoslavia). Only in 1992 did The Republic of Slovenia award him with the “Prešeren Award for life work”. The wider reception of Pahor’s work began after the novels *Le pèlerin parmi les ombres* and *Printemps difficile* had been published in France. Later on, he received the “Officier de l’Ordre des Arts e des Lettres” (by the Ministry of Culture of France). In 2001, the novel *Nekropolis* received the prize of the book of the year (Bestenliste) in Germany. In 2007, Pahor received the “Chévalier de Légion d’honneur” from the president of the French Republic. Pahor has been also proposed to the Academy of Sweden for the Nobel Prize for literature. In 2008, he was awarded with the “Premio Internazionale Viareggio Versilia”, the “Premio Napoli” and the “Premio Latisana”. *Nekropolis* became the “Book of the Year“ at Fahrenreit - Radio 3. It was only in 2008 that Pahor appeared on the map of the great Trieste authors, such as Claudio Magris, Italo Svevo, Umberto Saba. In 2009, Pahor became ordinary member of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts. His descriptions of the Nazi concentration camp experience place him in the company of Solzhenitsyn, Primo Levi and Imre Kertesz.

As a child, Pahor witnessed the Fascist extremists burning down the National House, the cultural centre of the Slovenian population in Trieste and the surrounding area. In 1935 he began studying theology in Gorica/Gorizia, but dropped it two years later. When on service in the Italian military, he was sent to Libya in 1940, he came back the same year as a military translator, and enrolled into the Faculty of Arts in Padua. In 1943, after the capitulation of Italy, he joined

the Slovenian resistance movement, but was arrested in January 1944 and sent to the Nazi concentration camp Natzweiler-Struthof in the Alsace. During his prison years, he was sent also to other camps (Dachau, Bergen-Belsen). Pahor spent the first post-war years in a sanatorium in Paris in order to recover both physically and psychically from the concentration-camp period. In 1947, Pahor finished his studies in Padua (with a thesis about a Slovenian poet, partisan, politician and soon-to-be dissident, Edvard Kocbek) and from 1953 he led the double life of a high-school teacher of Italian language and culture, and of a Slovenian writer in Trieste.

Pahor's literary opus is closely connected to his personal experience of the most destructive moments of the first half of 20th century history. The experience of Fascist Italy is described in his collection of novellas *A Bonfire in the Quay* and in the novel *The Villa by the Lake*. The macabre experience of his concentration camp years provided the material for the novel *Necropolis* (1967) and partly for the novel *A Difficult Spring* (1978). These two novels reveal that the Fascist violence in Trieste and the well-systematized Nazi death factories had the same monstrous face. In *A Difficult Spring*, Pahor deals with the struggle of an ex-prisoner who tries to live anew despite the guilt of the survivors. The essence of Pahor's writing thus reveals itself as an acknowledgement of all wounds and all deaths, but also as the urge and responsibility of every individual to transform his/her inner death into life. The most potent force for this inner struggle is love. In his 2004 interview, Pahor talks precisely about this ethical dimension of physical love: "[D]espite all the destruction, in every individual remains a capacity of loving and thus creating anew in order to overcome evil. It is not something that I myself would have invented, such a view on love is found already in Sophocles' *Antigone* and in the Gospels. My invention is an emphasized physical dimension of love. [...] I always emphasized the body precisely because of the conviction that the destruction of the body is so typical in the 20th century. [...] That is the reason why I tended to describe an act of loving in a pronounced and chosen form - even though that was not necessary from the point of view of the novel" (Literatura, September 2004, 16/159).

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