

Planica

December 26, 1984

I received a letter from Niko Križanc, the Secretary-General of the Planica ski jump committee, asking me to write the introductory essay for a commemorative volume that will appear in March of next year to mark, in all major languages, the 50th anniversary of Planica. Though I haven't replied to him yet, I have in fact already agreed – mainly because I had already written something similar some seven years ago, at that time for the Mladinska knjiga publishing house; they paid me, but the piece was never published.

As I look over that old manuscript, I rewrite, trim and, above all, remain aware that I'm leaving my work as a writer to step into the irrational sphere of the collective will for unbridled validation. I'm also aware that I can far more ably challenge my passions, as much as I possess, in the area of sport than in any other part of my life. Here there are pre-established rules and, in the end, it's all just a game.

The four-thousand-year-old myth of Icarus, of the ambitious young man and his over-ambitious flight towards the sun, has been told in countless variations throughout history – perhaps as many variations as there are nations and peoples. In our Slovenian version, this myth is aptly expressed by the original idea of a man-bird on skis who, through creative courage, struggled through a long series of difficulties until the establishment of ski jumping as an independent sports discipline. Mainstream acceptance removed none of the sport's mythical aspects, since it always played itself out in the dichotomy between man's unfulfilled dreams and his actual abilities. And our nation, which is known more for its petty-bourgeois orientation than for its inventive risk-taking, reveals, in the context of this myth, its surprising second face: an unheard-of creative expansion and courageous exploration of the very

edges of the possible. Though we have never lacked depth, albeit a rather masochistic sort of depth, with Planica and ski flying we also assumed breadth and sharpness.

In the beginning, Planica was just the collective naivety of a handful of enthusiasts, a craftsman's simulacrum of something already familiar and accomplished: they would build, in the valley below Ponce, a ski-jump for one of the FIS championships. However, this naivety was of the youthful variety, not only of one or two people, but the fresh naivety of an entire, small, non-historical nation that suffers in its non-historicalness and wishes, from the confines of its limitations, to burst out into the broader world, no matter the cost. And so, the craftsmen's take on the familiar and the accomplished was but a pre-text, a means by which they would fool those sceptical petty-bourgeois souls who are afraid of any sort of risky undertaking.

In truth, Planica is an outcry against the Slovenian nation's inhibitions. When the engineer Stanko Bloudek first contemplated the ski jump, he was really thinking about a ski flying hill, since he was an aircraft designer and was primarily interested in flying. But in this he, like his other outstanding countrymen from the field of engineering – Janez Puh, Milan Vidmar and Josip Plečnik – who all came to their laboratories and institutes from home workshops, primarily relied on his skills as a craftsman. Grand ideas and paper calculations made him suspicious: he believed in tangible results more than the spark of fancy, which he arrived at and verified by means of practical work, and he sought to reliably counterbalance his creative spirit with manual labour. He therefore reached out to the experienced builder, Ivan Rožman, for assistance, and even on the day of the first competition, he was still tinkering with and improving the ski flying hill, on the basis of the first jumpers' experiences, even using snow in the process. His knack for correcting mathematical errors by means of practical experience led to surprising results, to a sports facility that was almost organically linked with man, as well as to the establishment of work methods that would be adopted by all the subsequent builders of ski flying hills. Slovenia's economic backwardness, which drove people to manual labour as the only sort of work with moral and material value, thus expressed itself as a flexible approach that holds value and worth even in the audaciously-conceived modern world.

But there's another important aspect to all of this. Even the first event in Planica attracted an enormous number of people to the ski flying hill. This despite the fact that the location was nestled in a romantic corner of the Julian Alps, then difficult to access even from the capital city, Ljubljana, since getting there entailed a many-hour train journey and a long layover in Jesenice, and a long walk to boot. And every event at Planica, even in the pre-war years, was reminiscent of a Slovenian pilgrimage and the people's assemblies of yore, each one a national holiday that lacked neither piety nor zeal. In fact, they went even further: Planica touched the soul of almost every Slovenian, and became their collective intimate possession.

This plebiscitary decision in favour of Planica and of ski flying is so profound that it exposes our contradictory natures: at Planica every Slovenian is, in one way or another, on bad terms with himself. His rational decisions are exposed to the onslaught of irrational emotions, his proven and established ways of life are entirely called into question. In the soul of every Slovenian, Planica is something controversial. With Planica, a bold idea and risky undertaking asserts itself among an otherwise cautious people, national expansion in an otherwise complacent and unpretentious collective, cosmopolitanism between typical lovers of a domestic Alpine world, lavish spending among frugal individuals, boldness among modest souls. . . . What's more, with Planica, the almost sinful challenge of death asserts itself among an otherwise God-fearing people, and an elitist sports industry, otherwise intended for only a small circle of the elect, experiences recognition in the most general concept of physical culture, that normally advocates only mass accessibility. This ambivalence can only be explained by the curious fact that Planica is so deeply written into the soul of every Slovenian that it shakes his very essence and even revives in him a forgotten and suppressed nature.

In this context, one should note the Slovenian people's peculiar attachment to nature, especially the mountains, which is likely second to none. "Triglav, my home," these words are at the core of our finest folk songs. And it is no wonder, since our distant ancestors came to these places when the land was already, for the most part, populated, at which point they settled, like nomads, scattered across virtually inaccessible hills

and mountains. The valleys and towns were foreign to them back then, and they remained foreign to them long after, for they were populated with a people that spoke a different language. And so, ever since our arrival in these lands, we have had a most peculiar relationship with the city and with urbanization: it attracts us as the most socially and economically developed form of living, but at the same time repels us as a contrived, unnatural way of existence, in which man's original link to nature has been severed. For us, the city is most often a breeding-place of corruption, while unspoiled nature is a source of honesty, health and beauty. . . (In the social sphere, this spiritual division of ours is even more shocking: if we want to be faithful to our nationality, we must forgo the city and social promotion and remain faithful to farming and the land; in the name of the nation we masochistically define ourselves as poverty-stricken and suffering). During the time of urbanization, when this disunity sewed into our souls the gravest doubts, the poet Simon Gregorčič sang, sentimentally and with resignation: "Back, back to the mountain paradise. . .!" And even in the Slovenian people of today, there still lies a belief that the urbanized have lost their identity. More than any other nation, we are touched by the conviction that urbanization has robbed us of a part of our true selves and that, by returning to nature, we return to our true home. Love for nature and the mountains is not expressed merely as bourgeois amateurism, an active rest and relaxation, neither is it expressed as the typical middle-class sporting recreation, and it does not entail an escape from man, either. For us, it is a quest for a lost identity. For us, nature is true paradise.

It is therefore no coincidence that the Sports Centre in Planica and the ski flying hill were constructed in the nook of one of the loveliest Alpine valleys, below a bouquet of mountains... Here, one had to build, one had to return...! The mere announcement of Planica created an air in which even the most modern of Slovenians donned their folk garments, or at least those pieces they could scrap together to imitate the national costume, put on their mountaineering boots, swung a bag across their shoulders and departed – back to where they are actually most at home.

Planica has yet another cultural and sporting side to it. In one way or another, the shaping of all the peoples of Europe

is linked to the development of physical culture, and sport is, everywhere, an integral part of the national movement. Here we are no different. For us, this connection is all the deeper and more significant, because we are not only a small nation, but also economically underdeveloped and in every respect a latecomer. Sport, therefore, allowed us to feel included in the modern structures of life, present in the modern world... But as a nation, ever since our beginnings we have, instead of territorial appetites and economic expansion, written "culture" upon our banner – culture and only culture, actually, only literacy and literature. And because of our linguistic insignificance, we remained painfully unfulfilled. Instead of being in dialogue with other nations, we have been constantly in a monologue, talking to ourselves. To communicate with and assert ourselves in the world, we needed a second language. Certainly a cultural one, though one beyond the written and the spoken, one more direct and communicative, and easier to understand: a much more visual language, perhaps, one spoken with the human body. Mime. Dance. We have already spoken in a similar tongue, namely in 1924 at the Olympics in Paris, and that was the language of Štukelj's masterful twists and turns, the body language that everyone understood and that conquered the entire world. Ski jumping, man-bird on skis, is then yet another language like that.

Only in this way can the Slovenians' singular, deep, fanatical affection for Planica and ski flying be understood, their enthusiasm for the ski flying hill and their idolatry of our ski flyers. From the very start, this has been a value that has united us, while at the same time allowed us to fiercely display ourselves to the world, where we may finally assert ourselves as a nation among nations.

And this is precisely the reason for all the conflict and struggle. In its early days, Planica was too revolutionary, too violent to enter the world without any turbulence. With Planica we, as representatives of a small nation, stormed into the world of great nations, too unbridled for them to accept us without reservations: nations with a rich sporting tradition could not allow this invasion of unproven, reckless and rash ideas from a complex-ridden upstart. Their accolades would lose sheen, the until-then reserved Slovenians would rise to the podium as winners, a podium that had hitherto been reserved for them.

But this fight, too, we won: today sky-flying is recognized as an independent sport and an Olympic discipline.

When Planica was finally recognized and the battle won, the same thing happened as happens everywhere, as if by some unwritten rule, at the end of every pioneering era: the impulse moved elsewhere and shifted into other hands. Within the framework of a sturdy, legalized structure of life, there was a boom in ski flying hill construction among our neighbours and elsewhere in the world: the excitement travelled to Germany and Austria, to the Czech Republic and to Scandinavia, the United States and Canada, while almost dying out here. All of a sudden Planica was no longer the single and biggest ski flying hill in the world. While the rest of the world, in Oberstdorf, in Kulm, Vikersund, Ironwood and Harrachov, built ever-larger structures, innovated and experimented, the giant below Ponce fell into disarray, and even decay. We repaired it, upgraded it, but it nonetheless became a worn-out old ski-jump, about which there was no longer a feeling of national genius or enthusiasm.

In such crisis situations, yet another local paradox expressed itself to the fullest. The facility and the movement, which since the start had been an integral part of the nation's character and expansion, was left to the care of a handful of enthusiasts, an informal group of citizens, so to speak. This reveals yet another Slovenian specialty: the absence of large-scale institutional statesmanship. At the same time, this handful of enthusiasts were also a prime example of Planica's endurance: through their initiatives, time and again, these people not only managed to revive tradition and expertise but also the very spirit of Planica, which then gave rise, on each new occasion, to a plebiscitary mood, and reinforced Planica's folkloric presence. Even in the poorest of times, this small group of individuals managed to squeeze generous voluntary donations from a miserly people and transform lethargy into enthusiasm.

Thus is the Slovenian version of the myth of Icarus again revived, in all its strength. Again, the young man's longing to fly to the sun comes to the fore. And when dreaming started again in the Tamar Valley, dreaming with open eyes, when the thought was voiced aloud that man could soar 150 metres and beyond on skis, and when the search began for a suitable piece of land, we were once again there to take up the task, in

that torn temptation which, though it may fill us with fear, we can never resist. The Slovenian's conflict with himself had once again begun, and with that also the unusual condition of his reality.

This conflict is now more forceful than ever before, because ski flying has been taken to distances that make even the boldest of its proponents question the sense and sanity of the practice. And yet, without wishing harm on any ski jumper, the fans protest and whistle if the judges, on account of the jumpers' safety, shorten the in-run by a single metre: they want them to jump even farther, beyond the achieved and the known. Thus, the final and decisive word, the one that would forbid these challenges and risks, has not yet been spoken. The temptation remains too seductive. We still oscillate between the two poles of our reality: the tendency to stay safe and the desire to test the limits of danger, between existing in the comfortable and the propensity for the unproven, between clinging to life and challenging death. Engineers, jumpers, judges and spectators, everybody who partakes of this alpine event argues with himself: they protest against the senseless depths that open up below one's feet, and at the same time desire even deeper descents so that they might fly even more skilfully and beautifully, always torn between the extremes that they are supposed to master and assuage. And without really wanting to assuage them because, after all, they live for these ambivalences, as if saying: may safety and challenging death, the known and the unknown, the achieved and the unachieved, the flyer and the sun – may all of these come to an agreement, conform and settle, but do so somewhere beyond our lives.

(Freedom and nation. Diary notes, 1988)