

INTRODUCTION

Prežihov Voranc is the pen-name of a Slovene writer whose real name was Lovro Kuhar. A self-educated peasant from Slovene Carinthia, he was discovered by the Slovene literary public just before the Second World War, when his short stories appeared in the sophisticated literary magazine *Sodobnost* under his newly acquired name. At that time Voranc was already in his forties.

He was born in 1893, in Podgora near Kotlje, a village in that part of Carinthia which after the First World War became part of Yugoslavia. He was the son of a tenant farmer whose land was the property of a German count. The Kuhars were a proud family and worked hard towards purchasing their own land. When they finally succeeded, Lovro - or

Voranc in the local dialect - had already left home.

As a child and youth he experienced first-hand the back-breaking drudgery of farming steep mountain slopes, fighting the cruel soil which kept sliding from under the plough into the gullies below. Like the heroes in his stories, however, he lived for his land, sharing his toil and his rest with the beasts of burden and his fellow labourers, in harmony and in awe of the magnificent natural setting and passing seasons. His native mountains and the people who inhabited them remained the focus of Voranc's philosophical contemplation and an inexhaustible source of material for his writing for as long as he lived.

Voranc had very little formal education. He finished only elementary school and, a few years

later, a couple of courses in cooperative management. However, he was an extremely bright and curious man, and all his life he kept studying and reading, so that he accumulated a solid knowledge of literary matters as well as socio-political and economic doctrines. In his native village practically the only books available were those published by a Catholic publishing house, **Mohorjeva družba**, in Celovec (Klagenfurt). Some books were lent to the eager boy by the local teachers. He also read the newspaper **Mir**, published in Celovec, and the magazine **Domači prijatelj** which was published in Prague by a coffee dispatcher and sent to customers free of charge. The editor of this magazine, a Slovene writer, Zofka Kveder, encouraged talented beginners to send her their contributions, and it was she who first prompted Voranc to try his hand at writing. In 1909 he sent her his first contribution. It was published. Since then he continuously contributed to **Domači prijatelj** little sketches reflecting the life of farm labourers and picturesque characters from his immediate surroundings.

In 1911 he was seized by wan-

derlust. He left home to go to America; however, he got only as far as Trieste. For about a year he shared his life with unemployed drifters. They provided him with new material for his writing. He began sketching the miserable existence of these social misfits and sending his contributions to the Social-Democrat paper **Zarja**. His stories were realistic and showed as much influence of Gorki as his first stories had shown his Slovene models, Jurčič and Tavčar. But already at this early stage, the resemblance to models was only superficial. Voranc always found themes in his own surrounding and observed people with a sharp eye, always empathizing with the unfortunate and unjustly treated. In 1912 Voranc returned home to his beloved mountains which had forever cast a spell over him, and where he would later return after prolonged wanderings all over Europe, or from other parts of Slovenia and Yugoslavia. In 1914, at the beginning of the First World War, he was drafted immediately, but in 1916 he escaped from the Austro-Hungarian army and spent the remaining two years of the war

in POW camps in Italy. As a soldier he continued writing, again finding themes in his immediate surroundings: he probed into the psychology of soldiers whose fate he shared, and drew naturalistic scenes of life in the army. His experiences during the war left vivid memories, and from these he would much later produce the war novel, **Doberdob**.

He returned home in 1919 and obtained a job in the offices of a workers' co-operative at the steelworks in Ravne. He became more and more involved in political activities: immediately after the war, and during the Carinthian referendum, he campaigned for Yugoslavia; in Ravne he became a dedicated leftist organizer. He wrote less than before the war, although he now contributed some stories to the magazine **Pod lipo**, and in 1925 he prepared his first book, the collection **Povesti**. But in spite of his many years of writing, the author of the book, Lovro Kuhar, was unknown to the elitist cultural circle in Ljubljana. Nobody knew the self-educated peasant writer who had until then published his stories in different magazines under different pseudo-

nyms. In 1925, narcissism and expressionism reigned supreme in Slovene literary reviews; simple stories did not evoke any admiration. He was dismissed with a brief notice about "a talented proletarian, a self-taught writer," in spite of the fact that some of his stories already contained elements that were later to develop into his highly acclaimed realistic style. (Among them was the story "Vodnjak" which would appear more than a decade later in his most accomplished collection, **Samo-rastrniki** [The Self-Sown]).

After the fiasco with **Povesti** Voranc threw himself deeper into political activities, and when, in 1930, he was threatened with arrest, he crossed the border to Austria. For a while he lived with relatives in Logaves, then he moved to Vienna, and from there, in 1931, to Prague and in 1932 to Berlin. From these cities he travelled to Roumania, Bulgaria, Greece, France and Norway, always on some errand, propagating socialist ideas and organizing industrial and farm workers. From 1932 to 1934 he lived in Vienna as coeditor of the newspaper **Delo**, and from 1934 until his return to Yugoslavia in

1939, he was mainly in Paris working as a librarian. During his travels he was often arrested; in 1937 he spent a prolonged period in Vienna jails.

The decade Voranc spent abroad, mostly on the run, brought a change both in Slovene literary circles and in Voranc's career. The elitist literary magazine, *Ljubljanski zvon*, which had looked at Voranc's contributions with suspicion, was no longer the only prestigious literary review in Slovenia. In 1933 a new literary review, *Sodobnost*, was founded. It began propagating a new literary doctrine: socialist realism. The need for a new literary style in the 1930's arose quite naturally from changing socio-economic conditions. The economic depression forced writers away from soulsearching and narcissism, and demanded realistic, accusing, finger-pointing descriptions of the world. Slovene socialist realism, although modelled on the Russian example, never became dry and dogmatic. This was due to the fact that the authors who adopted the realistic style were men whose artistic force surpassed their political and philosophical orientations and

enabled them to produce works of lasting value. Prežihov Voranc was one of these critical realists. Between 1934 and 1939 he created his best work, which represents a monumental contribution to Slovene literature and on which his literary fame rests.

Voranc was "discovered" by the Slovene literary world in 1935, when *Sodobnost* published his first story "Boj na požiralniku". This small masterpiece, describing the tragically hopeless fight, of a poor peasant's family against the swampy, sliding land, exhibits all the characteristics of Voranc's unique style: realistic events intermingle with impressionistic descriptions of landscape and with the symbolism of colour and sound; the characters are larger than life, their fate outlined with dramatic, ballad-like intensity; the authenticity of the narrative is greatly enhanced by the colouring of the literary language, with vocabulary and metaphors from the local dialect. The story caused a sensation. Voranc's style had no predecessor in Slovene literature and it was not based on any contemporary social, political or literary dogma. It was new, fresh and

mightily in its simplicity, honesty and unobtrusive message.

"Boj na požiralniku" was followed by five more stories: in 1936 "Jirs in Bavh" and "Odpustki," in 1937 "Samorastniki," in 1938 "Prvi spopad" and in 1939 "Pot na klop." All deal with peasant living on the Carinthian mountain slopes, a region that before Voranc had never been described in Slovene literature. The peasants he created are heavy-footed and rough-spoken, with an enormous physical and mental capacity for suffering. Yet their core is soft, their appreciation of monumental wonders of nature verging on humble worship. They are superstitious, ignorant, slow, egoistic, wicked; but they are also guileless, brave, noble and faithful. The meticulous taste of Voranc, the artist, never allowed political slogans or clichés to mar his stories or his characters, whose physiognomies are illuminated only through their daily toil and their honest, primary human emotions.

All of the above stories were heavily edited by the editor of *Sodobnost*. Voranc, who was at that time living mostly in Paris, did not mind the corrections; he

was a humble man and he realized that his language had never benefited from the polish which comes only through long years of formal schooling.

In 1939 the literary circle around *Sodobnost* decided to publish a collection of Voranc's stories. Josip Vidmar, one of the editors, went to Paris and obtained Voranc's agreement on the title *Samorastniki*, on Vidmar's introduction to the book, and on Ferdo Kozak's corrections. The book was published in 1940. In addition to the stories published in *Sodobnost*, it contained the story "Vodnjak," which had already been published in 1925 (although unnoticed at the time), and a naturalistic story about a rural Venus and her lover, "Ljubezen na odoru (Passion Above the Precipice)," written specially for the collection. At first the title of the book was to be *Na požiralniku*, but then the story "Samorastniki" was chosen for the title, because it was not only the most poignant and moving and the most critical of all Voranc's analyses of social injustices, but also the most symbolic. Vidmar's introduction emphasized that with Voranc Slovene literature had obtained

a writer of great talent, an epic giant, a dedicated humanist. By the time *Samorastniki* came out of press in 1940, Voranc had already returned to Slovenia, where he was to spend only ten more years of his life.

After his return in 1939, he lived for a while in different suburbs of Ljubljana; then he moved to Mokronog, a small town in Dolenjsko region. He lived the life of a loner, hiding and unwilling to meet with anybody. He spent his solitary days re-living and re-evaluating his past experience and writing and re-writing about it.

His first major project after his return was the novel *Požganica*, which he had begun writing in the Vienna prisons. The novel, dealing with the days of the Carinthian referendum immediately after the First World War, pulsates with real life and depicts some eternally human problems, in spite of the fact that it is marred by some overly naturalistic scenes, by oversimplification of some characters, and by political preaching. It was published in 1939 by the publisher of *Samorastniki*.

After *Požganica* he began polishing *Doberdob*, his novel about the First World War,

which he had sketched years earlier, before leaving Ravne in 1930. However, on the run, this first draft got lost. In Vienna he wrote the novel from memory, but the manuscript was stolen. He re-wrote it and sent it to his wife in Carinthia. It was seized by the police. The third version, which the indefatigable author produced in a Vienna jail, was first confiscated, then returned to him, and it was this third version that he took with him to Paris and finally brought along to Mokronog. *Doberdob*, a string of anecdotes and meditations, is mostly of biographical and historical values, but it is a strong manifestation of Voranc's belief in human dignity and goodness, and of his burning nationalism. It was published in 1941.

In 1940 he had begun writing his third novel, *Jamnica*. It is the story of the village Kotlje between the two wars, when rural society and its values were challenged by industrialization. Dealing with his tough Carinthian peasants again, he attempted - according to some literary critics - to counterbalance the peasant novels by Knut Hamsun which he had read during his wanderings through Europe.

He considered Hamsun a fore-runner of fascism and was revolted by what he considered Hamsun's glorifying and falsifying the life and toil of peasant labourers. *Jamnica* was finished in 1941, but it was not published until 1946, since Voranc observed the so-called cultural silence during the Second World War.

In 1941 the Germany occupied northern Slovenia, while Ljubljana with Lower Carniola, or Dolenjsko, was occupied first by the Italians and then by Germans, following the capitulation of Italy in 1943. Voranc had left Mokronog and, after leading a life of hide-and-seek in Ljubljana for a while, he fled to Zagreb. But in spite of his proclamation that he intended to lie low and just survive the war years somewhere in a remote part of Bosnia, he returned to Ljubljana and took legal residence there. He did not join the guerrillas, and he did not play any particularly important role in the resistance movement. His best known political act during the war was his presiding over the clandestine meeting of Slovene artists on September 11, 1941, where the so-called cultural silence was

proclaimed. It prohibited publication, exhibitions and performances by Slovene artists for the duration of the occupation. (On Voranc's suggestions, the theatre was exempted from this "silence.") At the same meeting it was decided to issue a clandestine volume *Slovenski zbornik*, which was distributed in May of 1942, and to which Voranc contributed the article "Za samoodločbo Slovenije." For a few months he also worked for a clandestine radio station in Ljubljana, preparing broadcasts on culture and internal and foreign political matters. Generally, however, he kept a low profile, visiting friends and educated men of letters, theatre and literature experts. He read, studied and wrote. He completed his sketches of his roaming years over Europe, which were published in 1946 in the book *Borba na tujih tleh*. He also wrote a travelogue describing, again, his beloved native valleys and villages; it was published in 1945 as *Od Kotelj do Belih vod*. During the war he also wrote two exquisite short stories, "Ajdovo strnišče" in 1941, and "Solzice" in 1942. The latter became the title story of his last book, written after the war, a

collection of stories about the innocent, suffering children of the "self-sown," a mellow counterpart and commentary to *Samorastniki*, with many moving autobiographical reminiscences. In spite of his quiet existence, Voranc was arrested on January 8, 1943. After the Italian capitulation nine months later, he was transferred from Ljubljana first to German jails, then to concentration camps at Sachsenhausen and Mathausen, where he remained until the end of the war. He returned to Ljubljana sick and more withdrawn than ever, not able to establish communication between himself and his former comrades. He then went to live in his native village, and although active in the affairs of his immediate surroundings, he remained alienated from the political actualities of the new, socialist Yugoslavia. When Josip Vidmar, and old friend who was now an important executive of the new government, paid him a visit - accompanied by heavy guard - Voranc, the simple peasant, had nothing to say to him.¹ In Kotlje he worked on Solzice, on a his-

torical novel, on a novel on World War II, but in the middle of his literary plans he succumbed to the disease which he had brought from the concentration camps, and he died in 1950, as alone as he had lived. It is significant that Voranc remained faithful to his first humble friend, the publishing society *Mohorjeva družba*, which had played such an important part in his early years of self-education. During the interwar period the Society had moved from Celovec (Klagenfurt), Austria, to Celje, Yugoslavia, where it was later disbanded by the German occupiers. After the war, Voranc used his influence to help the Society re-establish itself in the new political environment, one that was vastly removed in spirit from the Society's Catholic tradition.

The Self-Sown

The story "Samorastniki" is considered the peak of Voranc's artistic achievement. The story centers on the universal problem of unwed motherhood,

exposed and analyzed in the socio-economic context of a small segment of nineteenth-century Slovene rural society. Marriage laws and customs have almost universally condemned births out of wedlock, but the form and degree of condemnation has varied from society to society as well as from time to time. The same medieval ignorance which caused women to be burned as witches has imposed various, often primitive measures on unmarried mothers up to the most recent past. At the same time, their offspring have suffered social as well as legal disadvantages. In Voranc's story both of these aspects are brought into sharp focus: the suffering of an unwed mother, Meta, and the fate of her children.

The central story - the story of a seduced maiden who becomes the unwed mother of a large family - is narrated by the youngest daughter of the unwed mother. She is an old woman now; she pours out the balladlike tale of her mother's suffering to the author and his friend, who have come upon her remote dwelling on their meanderings through the Carinthian mountains. The two

friends had been discussing socio-economic reasons for the disappearance of once mighty farms high on the mountain slopes, and Meta's story should illustrate some of these reasons. If this discussion had been Voranc's primary aim, he certainly experienced the phenomenon of artist overpowering the philosopher. However, because of the ominous note on which the story ends - the "self-sown" strewn through the valleys, gullies and fields of Carinthia are clamouring for justice, for the right to life, to land and to its bounty - some critics have interpreted "Samorastniki" as Voranc's forecast of the social revolution, the whole story being just the means through which Voranc, the social reformer, conveyed this message. One of the critics perceives "Samorastniki" as "a tale about the economic fiasco of a mighty house of a Carinthian mountain farmer, who was destroyed in the second half of the previous century by an economic crisis," as well as a story in which "Kuhar ... employed symbols and allegory in order to put across his message that poor peasants have the right to own their land and enjoy its

¹Josip Vidmar, *Obrazi*. Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1980, p. 360.

products."² Another critic classifies it as a story about forbidden love between a poor, beautiful girl and a rich farmer's son³, disregarding the fact that Voranc does not describe a single love scene between Meta and Ožbej, and does not deal with the trials and tribulations of the heroes in the style of a romantic love story. Another critic analyzes Meta's character from the point of view of "Meta - the peasant woman." He explains her physical endurance and her ability to suffer as another manifestation of the iron will which all Voranc's peasants share. According to this critic, Meta is primarily fighting for property and loves Ožbej only as the future master of Karnice, whether she is aware of her situation or not. Like other peasants, she is incapable of emotions surpassing her immediate greed for property, and the stubbornness with which she fights for it.⁴ It appears that the critics have over-emphazized Voranc's socio-economic message, even read their own ideas into the story

(dealing mostly with the economic and social issues arising from the gap between the rich and the poor, the masters and the exploited), and have nearly entirely overlooked the central theme: the injustices and horror perpetrated on an honest, hard-working, loving woman who is forced by circumstances to live as a public sinner. Yet, it was the fate of Meta, the unwed mother, which caught the attention and compassion of the reading public in 1937 and which has been the reason for numerous re-printings of "Samorastniki" since then, as well as for a film based on the story. With all the force of his unique epic talent, Voranc told a shattering story of super-human love and sacrifice, and created a unique portrait of an unwed mother from the backwoods of the Slovene countryside, a portrait carved with all the brutality of realistic detail, yet with such passionate involvement in the exposition of an outrageous social injustice that he gave it an aura of supernatural beauty and universal

² Anton Slodnjak, Slovensko slovstvo. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1968, p. 423 (translated I.O.).

³ Lino Legiša, Zgodovina slovenskega slovstva, vol. 6. Ljubljana: Slovenska Matica, 1968, p. 396.

⁴ Prežihov Voranc, Samorastniki, ed. by Marjan Kramberger. Maribor: Založba Obzorja, 1969, p. 266.

meaning.

The character of Meta is shown in its gradual development, the message worked into the story unobtrusively and becoming clearer with each step. We first encounter Meta at the age of seventeen, when she comes to serve at Karnice:

At the age of seventeen, Meta was the most comely wench in the whole parish, and most likely in the whole Podjuna valley. She was of medium height, her face was fair, her eyes blue, her hair dark and long like strands of hemp; her skin was velvety and her figure as slender as a pine on the Obir.

Meta is an innocent, naive, obedient girl. Unaware of any evil and not guilty of any transgression, she nevertheless prays and does penance according to her mistress's command. When she falls in love with Ožbej, she does not speculate about her lover's social position and wealth, therefore she cannot understand old Karničnik's demand that she should give up Karnice, the mighty farm. Since she does not own it, how could she give it up? When they demand that she give up Ožbej, she cannot understand either.

How could she give up the father of the child, the child who is part of both of them?

But with the torture at Karnice, Meta, the innocent girl, suddenly grows up. She realizes not only that her lover is a cowardly weakling, but also that a horrible injustice is being inflicted upon her: she is being punished for someone else's wrongdoing, denied any defence, any rights, only because she is poor. Her naivete gives way to courage and self-sufficiency. Voranc describes the scene of her transformation from a young girl into a determined, strong woman:

She was overcome with horror and disgust, yet she found enough strength to get up, walk towards the carpenter's bench with a firm step and sit down on the torture stool, resigned to her fate. Her mother's behaviour, as well as pity for Ožbej, filled her with courage of which she had not been conscious a few moments earlier. Her sobbing subsided, and the tears which were still pouring from her eyes were not those bitter tears that flow because of some heart-felt misery; and even these dried up soon; the feeling of her new-found strength grew inside her

as she sat down on the torture bench...

The second step in the formation of Meta's strong, determined character comes during the torture at court. This time it is not the compassion for her mother and the pity for her lover that toughen and sustain her throughout the brutal whipping: it is her feeling of a horrible injustice and her disdain for her tortures. Her body is broken, but her spirit is stronger than it had been before. She pulls herself up and walks away, proud and erect.

After that, Meta lives the life of a hard-working, honest woman; she is brave and independent, her pride growing with her suffering and her physical deterioration. This new Meta is vividly shown in the encounter with the hysterical women from Karnice, who unsuccessfully attempt to drive her out of the village cemetery:

The slut did not bend her head, the whore stood there, erect and tall, in front of the people, emanating a halo of untamed charm and beauty, of motherhood and power... She stood there, overcome with an until then unknown feeling of self-confi-

dence, a sense of equality, which evoked in her a cold, superior contempt...

This feeling never left Meta again; it awakened in her a rebellious disdain for her prosecutors and a pride in her ability to survive in spite of them. Supporting her broad with hard work, toiling in the fields, spinning, knitting, weaving and carving, Meta reached the final step in her development. Calm and serene, she finally realized that her suffering had not been an isolated case of bad luck, but a product of the social system in which she lived. She knew now that she was not a sinner and that the society had perpetuated a gross injustice upon her. Therefore, she did not hide her life story from her children; instead, she taught them to defend their honour wherever they might be, instilling in them self-respect and hatred for hypocrisy and injustice.

The portrait of Meta, the tortured unwed mother of nine bastards is part of Voranc's composite tableau of the people inhabiting the remote slopes and gullies of Southern Carinthia in the days he lived among them. All of these lumberjacks, sinewy well-diggers and labouring

tillers of the skimpy soil on the mountain slopes are sturdy, tough people whose passion for life is mixed with medieval attitudes and fears which make them victims of their own ignorance. Meta stands among them, defiant and peaceful, the proud mother of the proud brood of the self-sown.