

The Battle of Kosovo

Translated by John Matthias and Vladeta Vuckovic

Fragment

(...)
Sultan Murad fell on level Kosovo!
And as he fell he wrote these few brief words
Sent them to the castle at white Krushevats
To rest on Lazar's knees in his fine city.
"Lazar! Tsar! Lord of all the Serbs,
What has never been can never be:
One land only but two masters,
A single people who are doubly taxed;
We cannot both together rule here,
Therefore send me every tax and key,
Golden keys that unlock all the cities,
All the taxes for these seven years,
And if you do not send these things at once,
Bring your armies down to level Kosovo
And we'll divide the country with our swords ..."
When these words have come to Lazar's eyes
He sees them, weeping cruel tears
(...)

The Downfall of the Kingdom of Serbia

Yes, and from Jerusalem, O from that holy place,
A great gray bird, a taloned falcon flew!
And in his beak he held a gentle swallow.
But wait! it's not a falcon, this gray bird,
It is a saint, Holy Saint Eliyah:
And he bears with him no gentle swallow
But a letter from the Blessed Mother.
He brings it to the Tsar at Kosovo
And places it upon his trembling knees.
And thus the letter itself speaks to the Tsar:
'Lazar! Lazar! Tsar of noble family,
Which kingdom is it that you long for most?
Will you choose a heavenly crown today?
Or will you choose an earthly crown?
If you choose the earth then saddle horses,
Tighten girths- have your knights put on
Their swords and make a dawn attack against
The Turks: your enemy will be destroyed.
But if you choose the skies then build a church-
O, not of stone but out of silk and velvet-
Gather up your forces take the bread and wine,
For all shall perish, perish utterly,
And you, O Tsar, shall perish with them."

And when the Tsar has heard those holy words
He meditates, thinks every kind of thought:
"O, Dearest God, what shall I do, and how?
Shall I choose the earth? Shall I choose
The skies? And if I choose the kingdom,
If I choose an earthly kingdom now,
Earthly kingdoms are such passing things-
A heavenly kingdom, raging in the dark, endures
eternally."

And Lazarus chose heaven, not the earth,
And tailored there a church at Kosovo-
O not of stone but out of silk and velvet-
And he summoned there the Patriarch of Serbia,
Summoned there the lordly twelve high bishops:
And he gathered up his forces, had them
Take with him the saving bread and wine.
As soon as Lazarus has given out
His orders, then across the level plain
Of Kosovo pour all the Turks.

Supper in Krushevats

The Serbian Tsar will celebrate his Slava
Here in Krushevats, a well-protected fortress.
All the high nobility and all
The lesser lords he seats around the table-
All will honor now his holy patron saint.
On his right he places old Yug Bogdan
And next to him the nine brave Yugovichi.
On his left Vuk Brankovich sits down,
And then the other lords according to their rank.
Across from Lazarus is Captain Milosh;
And next to him are these two noble knights:
The first: Ivan Kosanchich,
And the second: Lord Milan Toplitsa.
Now the Tsar lifts up the golden goblet,
Lazarus thus questions all his lords:
"To whom, I ask you, shall make this toast?
If I must toast old age - to old Yug Bogdan then,
If I must honor eminence - to Brankovich;
If I must trust emotion - to the nine brave
Yugovichi,
Sons of old Yug Bogdan, brothers of my queen;
If I must bow to beauty - to Ivan Kosanchich;
If I decide by height - to tall Milan Toplitsa;
But if heroic courage must decide me
I shall drink to noble Captain Milosh.
Yes! to Milosh- to nobody else at all.
I'll only toast the health of Milosh Obilich.
Hail, Cousin! friend of mine and traitor!
First of all my friend- but finally my betrayer.
Tomorrow you'll betray me on the field of Kosovo,

Escaping to the Turkish Sultan, Murad!
 So to your health, dear Milosh, drink it up,
 And keep the golden goblet to remember Lazarus."
 Then up on nimble legs springs Milosh Obilich
 And to the dark earth bows himself and says:
 "My thanks to you O glorious Lazarus,
 My thanks for that fine toast and for your handsome
 gift,
 But I can't thank you for those words you spoke.
 Let me die if I should lie to you!
 I have never been unfaithful to my Tsar-
 Never have I been and never shall I be-
 And I am sworn to die for you at Kosovo,
 For you and for the Christian faith.
 But Treason, Lazarus, sits beside you now-
 The traitor sips his wine right up your sleeve.
 It's Brankovich, Vuk Brankovich I say!
 And when on Vitus-day tomorrow morning
 We make our dawn attack upon the Blackbirds'
 Field
 We'll see right there at bloody Kosovo
 Who is loyal to you and who is not!
 I swear to you in God Almighty's Name
 That I shall go at dawn to Kosovo
 And slaughter like a pig the Turkish Sultan,
 Put my foot upon his throat.
 And then if God & good luck aid me I'll return
 For Brankovich & bind him to my lance,
 Bind him like the wool around a distaff.
 I'll drag him like that back as far as Kosovo!"

Captain Milosh and Ivan Kosanchich

And Milosh says to Ivan Kosanchich:
 "My brother, have you seen the Turkish army?
 Is it vast? and do we dare attack them?
 Can we conquer Murad here at Kosovo?"
 And Ivan Kosanchich answers him like this:
 "My noble friend, O Milosh Obilich!
 I have spied upon the Turkish army
 And I tell you it is vast and strong.
 If all the Serbs were changed to grains of salt
 We could not even salt their wretched dinners!
 For fully fifteen days I've walked among those
 hoards
 And found there no beginning and no end.
 From Mt. Mramor straight to Suvi Javor,
 From Javor, brother, on to Sazlija,
 From Sazlija across the Chemer Bridge,
 From Chemer Bridge on to the town of Zvechan,
 From Zvechan, Milosh, to the edge of Chechan,
 And from Chechan to the mountain peaks-

Everywhere the Turks line up in battle gear:
 Horse is next to horse and warriors all are massed.
 Their lances are like trunks of forest trees;
 Their banners are like endless sailing clouds
 And all their tents are like the drifting snows.
 Ah! and if from heaven a heavy rain should fall
 Then not a single drop would ever touch the earth
 For all the Turks and horses standing on it.
 Turkish forces occupy the field before us
 Stretching to the rivers Lab and Sitnitsa.
 Sultan Murad's fallen on the level plain of Mazgit!"
 Then Milosh looks at Kosanchich and asks:
 "My brother, tell me next where I can find
 The tent of mighty Sultan Murad For
 For I have sworn to noble Lazarus
 To slaughter like a pig this foreign Tsar
 And put my foot upon his squealing throat."
 And Ivan Kosanchich replies like this:
 "O Milosh Obilich, I think you must be mad!
 Where do you suppose that tent is placed
 But in the middle of the vast encampment-
 And even if you had a falcon's wings
 And flew down from the clear blue skies above
 Your wings would never fly you out again alive!"
 Then Milosh thus implores Ivan to promise:
 "O Ivan Kosanchich my dearest brother-
 Not in blood, but so much like a brother-
 Swear to me not to tell the Tzar
 What you have seen and said to me just now.
 Lazarus would suffer anguish over it;
 The army under him would grow afraid.
 We must both of us say this instead:
 Though the Turkish army is not small,
 We can easily do battle with them
 And defeat them . . . This is what we've seen:
 Not an army made of knights and warriors
 But of weary pilgrims, old and crippled hodjas,
 Artisans, and skinny adolescents
 Who have never even tasted blood
 And only come to Kosovo to see the world
 Or earn a crust of bread, a cup of dark red wine . . .
 And if there is a real Turkish army,
 That one's fallen sick from dysentery and has lost its
 way.
 Far from here they shit upon the earth
 In fear of us ... and even all their horses
 Suffer illnesses, ruined by distemper, laminitis,
 Spreading fatal hoof and mouth disease
 To captured cattle and to captured sheep."

Musich Stefan

In Maydan where they mine the purest silver
Musich Stefan drinks the dark red wine
That's brought to him by Vaistina his servant
To a table in his lordly castle.

When he has satisfied his thirst he says:

"Vaistina, my dearest friend and servant,
Drink and eat while I lie down to rest
And then go walk before our lordly castle:
Gaze into the clear transparent skies
And tell me: is the bright moon in the west?
Is the morning star rising in the east?
Has the hour arrived for us to journey
To the level plain of Kosovo

And join forces with the noble Tsar?
My son, you will remember that grave oath-
Lazarus exhorted us like this:

'Whoever is a Serb, of Serbian blood,
Whoever shares with me this heritage,
And he comes not to fight at Kosovo,
May he never have the progeny
His heart desires, neither son nor daughter;
Beneath his hand let nothing decent grow-
Neither purple grapes nor wholesome wheat;
Let him rust away like dripping iron
Until his name shall be extinguished!'"

Then Musich Stefan rests upon soft pillows
While Vaistina his friend and loyal servant
Eats his meal, drinks his share of wine,
And goes to walk before the lordly castle.
He looks into the clear transparent skies
And sees the moon- bright and in the west;
The morning star is rising in the east.
The hour has thus arrived for them to journey
To the level plain of Kosovo
And join forces with the noble Tsar.

Now Vaistina takes horses from the stable-
Battle-horses, one for each of them-
And saddles them, arrays them beautifully.

Then he carries out a noble silken banner
All embroidered with twelve golden crosses
And a brilliant icon of Saint John,
Holy Patron Saint of Musich Stefan.

He puts it down before the castle keep
And climbs the stairs to wake his master up.

Now as Vaistina ascends those stairs
The wife of Musich Stefan stops him there,
Embracing him. Imploringly she says:

"O Servant Vaistina, in Jesus' Name!
By God Almighty and by Holy John,
Till now you were my good & faithful friend.
If you are still my brother then I beg you:
Do not awaken now your sleeping master.

Pity me; I've had an evil dream.

I dreamed I saw a flock of doves in flight
with two gray falcons flying on before them,
Flying right before this very castle.

They flew to Kosovo and landed there
In Sultan Murad's cruel vast encampment-
But never did I see them rise again.

This, my brother, is a prophecy:
I fear that all of you are going to die."

Then Vaistina the servant speaks like this:
"Dearest sister, honored wife of Stefan!

I cannot, my sister, be unfaithful
To the master of this noble castle;
You are not bound as he and I are bound
By Lazarus's bitter exhortation:

I tell you truly- this is what he said:
'Whoever is a Serb, of Serbian blood,
Whoever shares with me this heritage,
And he comes not to fight at Kosovo,
May he never have the progeny
His heart desires, neither son nor daughter;
Beneath his hand let nothing decent grow-
Neither purple grapes nor wholesome wheat;
Let him rust away like dripping iron
Until his name shall be extinguished!"

Thus I cannot, sister, be unfaithful
To the master of this noble castle."

Then Vaistina goes up and wakes his master
Saying this: "The time is now upon us."

And Musich Stefan rises on strong legs
And washes slowly, puts on lordly garments.
He belts around his waist a well-forged saber,
Pours himself a glass of dark red wine

And toasts his holy patron saint,
And then a quick and providential journey,
And last of all the saving cross of Jesus.

All this in his castle at his banquet table-
Where Stefan will not eat or drink again.

Then they walk before the lordly castle,
Mount their ready chestnut battle-horses
And unfurl the cross-embroidered banner.

Drums and trumpets break the morning silence-
Off they ride to battle in the name of God!

When the brilliant dawn has cast its light upon them
Over Kosovo, that flat and graceful plain,

There suddenly appears a lovely maiden
Bearing in her hands two empty golden goblets.

Beneath her arm she has a noble helmet
Made of wound white silk with feathers intertwined
Which are worked in silver at their ends
And sewn with precious threads of yellow gold-
And all embroidered at the top with pearls.

Then Musich Stefan speaks to her like this:
"May God Almighty bless you and be with you-
But where can you have found that noble helmet?
Were you yourself upon the field of battle?
Give it to me, dear one, for a moment,
For I will know at once which hero wore it.
I promise by my providential journey
That I will never injure or betray you."
The lovely maiden answered him and said:
"Greetings to you, warrior of the Tsar!
I was not myself upon the field of battle
But my mother woke me early to get water
From the river Sitnitsa that flows nearby
And when I got there- what a flood I saw!
Of muddy water, horses, dying heroes,
Turkish calpacs, fezes, bloody turbans,
And the helmets worn by noble Serbs
Made of wound white silk with feathers intertwined.
I saw this helmet floating near the bank
And waded out a bit to reach it there.
I have at home a little younger brother
And I wanted him to have it for a present.
Besides, I'm young myself; I like the feathers on it."
She gives the helmet to the mounted knight.
As soon as Stefan has it in his hands
He recognizes it and starts to weep;
Tears flow down his stern & noble face.
He slaps his side so fiercely that he breaks
A golden cuff link joining his right sleeves
And tears the velvet of his trouser leg.
"May God in Heaven help me and protect me!
Now the curse of Lazar surely falls!"
And he returns the helmet to the girl
And reaches in his pocket with his hand
And gives three golden ducats to her, saying:
"Take them, dear one, lovely Maid of Kosovo,
For I am going into battle now
To fight the Turks in Jesus' Holy Name.
If God allows me to return alive
I'll have for you a better gift by far-
But if, my sister, I should die in battle,
Remember me by these three golden ducats."
Then they spurred their horses into battle
Across the flooding muddy river Sitnitsa
And rode into the camp of Sultan Murad.
Musich Stefan fought and killed three pashas,
But when he met the fourth that warrior smote him-
And there he died beside his Servant Vaistina
And with his army of twelve thousand souls.
Great Tsar Lazar also perished on that day
And with him died a good and ancient Empire-
With him died the Kingdom of this Earth.

Tsar Lazar and Tsaritsa Militsa

Now when at Krushevats the Tsar is camped
And takes his supper on the eve of battle
Militsa his Queen implores him thus-
"O Lazar, Golden Crown of Serbia,
You ride tomorrow out to Kosovo
And take away your servants & your knights,
You leave me no one at the castle, Sire,
Who'd ride out with a letter to the field
Of Kosovo and bring an answer back
You take away with you my nine dear brothers,
All the Yugovichi ride with you
I ask you this leave but one behind
Leave me just one brother here to swear by."
And Lazarus thus speaks to her and says
"My Lady Militsa, my dear Tsaritsa-
Which brother is it you would like for me
To leave with you in this white castle tower?"
And she:- "Give me Boshko Yugovich!"
And he, noble Prince of all the Serbs.
"My Lady Militsa, my dear Tsaritsa,
Tomorrow when the white day brightly dawns,
When the day dawns, the sun bright in the east,
And when the portals of the town are opened,
Go and stand beside those city gates
For there will pass the army in its ranks
And all the horsemen with their battle-lances
Boshko Yugovich will lead them all
And carry high the cross-emblazoned banner
Give him all my blessings and say this.
That he shall give the flag to someone else
And stay with you in this white castle tower "
When dawn has broken early in the morning
And the portals of the town are opened
Out she walks, Lazarus's queen,
And goes to stand beside the city gate
Where all the army passes by in ranks
Out before the warriors with their lances
Comes her brother, Boshko Yugovich,
Riding in his noble golden armor
On his golden-harnessed battle stallion
Holding high the cross-emblazoned banner
Which envelops him, my brothers, to the waist.
On the staff there is a golden apple,
And on the apple golden crosses stand
From which there hang several golden tassels
Dangling in the breeze about his shoulders.
Now Tsaritsa Militsa goes up to him
And takes his horse's bridle in her hand.
She puts her arms around her brother's neck
And thus she softly speaks to him and says:

"O my brother, Boshko Yugovich,
Lazarus has given you to me
And tells you not to go to Kosovo;
He sends his blessing to you and he says:
To give your flag to anyone you like
And stay with me at white-walled Krushevats
That I will have a brother here to swear by."
Boshko Yugovich then speaks like this:
"Go back, my sister, to your castle tower
It is not for me to go with you
Or give away this banner that I hold
Even if the Tsar would give me Krushevats;
What would all my comrades say of me?
Look upon this coward Yugovich!
The one who dares not go to Kosovo
And spill his blood for Jesus' Holy Cross
And for his faith to die upon that plain."
With that he spurs his horse on through the gate.
And next rides out Yug Bogdan, Boshko's father,
And behind him seven Yugovichi;
One by one she stops them and implores them
But not a one would even look at her.
She waits in misery beside the portals
Until her brother Voin comes riding past
Leading close behind him Lazar's horses
All caparisoned with golden trappings.
She stops his chestnut, takes it by the bridle,
And then she throws her arms around her brother.
Thus she softly speaks to him and says:
"O Voin Yugovich, my dearest brother,
Lazar gives you to me for a present!
He sends his blessing to you and he says:
Give to someone else those noble horses
And stay with me at white-walled Krushevats
That I will have a brother here to swear by."
Her brother Voin thus answers her and says:
"Go back, my sister, to your castle tower-
For as a warrior I may not return,
Nor would I leave these horses of the Tsar
Even if I knew that I would perish.
I ride out to the level field of Kosovo
To spill my blood for Jesus' Holy Cross
And die with all my brothers for the faith."
With that he spurs his horse on through the gate.
When Lady Militsa has seen all this
She falls down fainting on the cold hard stone
And lies unconscious, still as if in death.
Glorious Lazar, Prince of all the Serbs,
Is next to pass, and when he sees his queen
He weeps, and tears flow down his cheeks.
He looks around him turns to left and right,
And calls out to his servant Goluban:

"Goluban, my dear and faithful servant,
Dismount at once from your white horse
And take my lady in your strong white arms
And carry her into the narrow tower.
I free you before God from your grave oath.
Do not ride out to fight at Kosovo
But stay with her inside the castle tower."
When Goluban has heard his master's words
He weeps, and tears flow down his cheeks;
As ordered he dismounts from his white horse
And lifts the lady up in his white arms
And carries her into the castle tower.
But yet his heart torments him: he must go
And ride to battle on the Blackbirds' Field.
Turning back at once to his white horse
He mounts and rides to level Kosovo.
As in the east the morning brightly dawns
Two black ravens fly to Krushevats
From Kosovo, that wide and level plain,
And land upon the narrow castle tower,
The castle tower of Lazarus the Tsar.
The first bird caws, the second starts to talk:
"Is this the tower of Glorious Lazarus,
Or is there no one home in this white castle?"
Only Lady Militsa is there to hear,
And she alone walks out before the tower.
Thus she speaks and asks the two black birds:
"Ravens! in the name of God Almighty
Tell me where you come from this bright morning.
Could it be you come from Kosovo?
Have you seen two mighty armies there?
And did those armies join in furious combat?
Great black birds: which army won the battle?"
Then the ravens answered, both together:
'In the name of God, Tsaritsa Militsa,
We come today from level Kosovo,
And we have seen two mighty armies there;
Those armies met in battle yesterday
And both the Tsar and Sultan have been slain.
Among the Turks some few are left alive,
But fewer still among the Serbs yet breathe,
And all of them have cruel bleeding wounds."
Even as the ravens speak those words
The Servant Milutin comes riding up:
His own right arm he bears in his left hand;
Bleeding from his seventeen grave wounds,
He reins his sweating blood-drenched war-horse in.
Lady Militsa thus questions him:
"What happened to you Servant Milutin?
Did you abandon Lazar on the field?"
And Servant Milutin replies to her:
"Help me down, dear lady, from my horse,

And bathe with cool water all my wounds;
 Quench my thirst with red reviving wine;
 These evil wounds will be the end of me."
 The Lady Militsa takes him gently down
 And bathes his wounds with cool water there,
 And gives him dark red wine to quench his thirst.
 When she has thus attended to his needs
 She questions him again & softly asks:
 "What happened, Milutin, at Kosovo?
 The noble Tsar & old Yug Bogdan- dead?
 The Yugovichi, nine of them, all dead?
 Vuk Brankovich and great Lord Milosh- dead?
 And Strahinya the Ban beside them all?"
 The wounded servant answers her and says:
 "All remain, my lady, on the field
 Where the glorious Tsar has bravely perished.
 There are many broken lances there
 Belonging both to Turks and noble Serbs-
 But many more of ours have broken, Lady,
 Than the Turks' defending Lazarus,
 Fighting for our glorious Lord and Master.
 And old Yug Bogdan, Lady, lost his life
 At the beginning, in the dawn attack
 Along with his eight sons, the Yugovichi,
 Where brother fought by brother to the end
 As long as he could strike and cut;
 But Boshko Yugovich remains there still,
 His cross-emblazoned banner waving high,
 Where he chases Turks in frightened herds
 As a hunting falcon chases doves.
 And Strahinya died too where blood rose to the
 knees
 While Milosh, Lady, lost his noble life
 Fighting near the river Sitnitsa
 Where many dying Turks lie all around.
 But Milosh killed the Turkish Sultan, Murad,
 And slaughtered many Turkish soldiers with him.
 May God Almighty bless the one who bore him!
 He leaves immortal fame to all the Serbs
 To be forever told in song and story
 As long as Kosovo and human kind endure.
 But ask me nothing of Vuk Brankovich!
 May the one who gave him birth be damned!
 Cursed be his tribe and his posterity,
 For he betrayed the Tsar at Kosovo,
 And led away twelve thousand men, my Lady,
 Led his knights away with him from Kosovo."

Tsaritsa Militsa and Vladeta the Voyvoda

Tsaritsa Militsa went out to walk
 Before the castle at white Krushevats,

And with her there were her two daughters:
 Vukosava and the pretty Mara.
 Then up to them came Vladeta the Voyvoda
 Riding on a bay a charging war-horse;
 Vladeta had forced the horse into a sweat
 And it was bathed all over in white foam.
 Tsaritsa Militsa spoke to him and said:
 "In the name of God good knight of the Tsar,
 Why have you so forced your horse to sweat?
 Aren't you coming from the field of Kosovo?
 Did you see great Lazar riding there?
 Did you see my master and your own?"
 And Vladeta responded in his turn:
 "In the name of God Tsaritsa Militsa,
 I have ridden from the level field,
 But I fear I did not see the Tsar.
 I saw his war-horse chased by many Turks,
 And thus I think our noble Lord is dead."
 When Tsaritsa Militsa had heard that news
 She wept and tears ran down her face.
 And then she looked at Vladeta and asked:
 "Tell me more good knight of the Tsar,
 When you were on that wide and level plain,
 Did you see my father and my noble brothers there?
 Did you see the Yugovichi and Yug Bogdan?"
 And Vladeta thus answered her and said:
 "As I rode out and over level Kosovo
 I saw the Yugovichi, nine of them, your brothers,
 And I saw your father, old Yug Bogdan, there:
 They were in the midst of all the fighting
 And their arms were bloody clear up to their
 shoulders,
 Their tempered swords clear up to the hilts;
 How their arms grew weary though and sank
 Struggling with the Turks out on that field!"
 Again the wife of Lazar spoke to him and said:
 "Voyvoda stay with me and wait!
 Did you see the husbands of my daughters?
 Did you see Vuk Brankovich and Milosh?"
 And Vladeta the Voyvoda replied:
 "I have gone all over level Kosovo,
 And I have seen what I have seen.
 I did see Captain Milosh, Milosh Obilich,
 And he was standing on that level field;
 I saw him lean upon his battle lance
 And saw that it was broken
 And the Turks were swarming on him
 Until now, I think, he surely must have died.
 And did I see Vuk Brankovich at all?
 I did not see him- let the sun not see him either!
 For he betrayed the Tsar out on that field,
 The noble Tsar, your master and my own."

The Kosovo Maiden

On a Sunday early in the morning
The Maid of Kosovo awoke to brilliant sun
And rolled her sleeves above her snow-white
elbows;
On her back she carries warm, white bread,
And in her hands she bears two golden goblets,
one of water, one of dark red wine.
Seeking out the plain of Kosovo,
She walks upon the field of slaughter there
Where noble Lazarus, the Tsar, was slain,
And turns the warriors over in their blood;
Should one still breathe she bathes him with the
water
And offers him, as if in sacrament,
The dark red wine to drink, the bread to eat.
At length she comes to Pavle Orlovich,
Standard-bearer of his lord the Tsar,
And finds him still alive, though torn and maimed:
His right hand and his left leg are cut off
And his handsome chest is crushed and broken
So that she can see his lungs inside.
She moves him from the pool of blood
And bathes his wounds with clear and cool water;
She offers him, as if in sacrament,
The dark red wine to drink, the bread to eat.
When she has thus attended to his needs,
Pavle Orlovich revives and speaks:
"Maid of Kosovo, my dearest sister,
What misfortune leads you to this plain
To turn the warriors over in their blood?
Whom can you be looking for out here?
Have you lost a brother or a nephew?
Have you lost perhaps an aging father?"
And the Maid of Kosovo replies:
"O my brother, O my unknown hero!
It is not for someone of my blood
I'm searching: not an aging father;
Neither is it for a brother or a nephew.
Do you remember, brave and unknown warrior,
When Lazar gave communion to his army
With the help of thirty holy monks
Near the lovely church of Samodrezha
And it took them twenty days to do it?
All the Serbian army took communion.
At the end there came three warrior Lords:
The first was captain Milosh Obilich,
The next was Ivan Kosanchich,
And the last the warrior Milan Toplitsa.
It happened that I stood beside the gates
As Milosh Obilich passed grandly by-

There is no fairer warrior in this world-
He trailed his saber there upon the stones
And on his head he wore a helmet made
Of wound white silk with feathers intertwined
A brightly colored cloak hung down his back
And round his neck he wore a silken scarf.
As he passed he turned and looked at me
And offered me his brightly colored cloak,
Took it off and gave it to me, saying:
'Maiden, take this brightly colored cloak
By which I hope you will remember me-
This cloak by which you can recall my name:
Dear soul, I'm going out to risk my life
In battle for the great Tsar Lazarus;
Pray God, my love, that I return alive,
And that good fortune shortly shall be yours:
I will give you as a bride to Milan,
Milan Toplitsa, my sworn blood-brother,
Noble Milan who became my brother
Before God Almighty and Saint John:
To him I'll give you as a virgin bride.'
After him rode Ivan Kosanchich-
There is no fairer warrior in this world.
He trailed his saber there upon the stones
And on his head he wore a helmet made
Of wound white silk with feathers intertwined,
A brightly colored cloak hung down his back
While round his neck he wore a silken scarf
And on his hand he had a golden ring.
As he passed he turned and looked at me
And offered me the glowing golden ring,
Took it off and gave it to me saying:
'Maiden, take this golden wedding ring
By which I hope you will remember me-
This ring by which you can recall my name:
Dear soul, I'm going out to risk my life
In battle for the great Tsar Lazarus;
Pray God, my love, that I return alive,
And that good fortune shortly shall be yours:
I will give you as a bride to Milan,
Milan Toplitsa, my sworn blood-brother,
Noble Milan who became my brother
Before God Almighty and Saint John:
I will be the best man at your wedding.'
After him rode Milan Toplitsa-
There is no fairer warrior in this world.
He trailed his saber there upon the stones
And on his head he wore a helmet made
Of wound white silk with feathers intertwined,
A brightly colored cloak hung down his back
While round his neck he wore a silken scarf
And on his wrist he had a golden torque

As he passed he turned and looked at me
 And offered me the shining golden torque,
 Took it off and gave it to me, saying:
 'Maiden, take this shining golden torque
 By which I hope you will remember me-
 This torque by which you can recall my name:
 Dear soul, I'm going out to risk my life
 In battle for the great Tsar Lazarus;
 Pray God, my love, that I return alive,
 And that good fortune shortly shall be yours
 And I will take you for my faithful wife.'
 With that the warrior Lords all rode away-
 And so I search upon this field of slaughter."
 Pavle Orlovich then spoke and said:
 "O my dearest sister, Maid of Kosovo!
 Do you see, dear soul, those battle-lances
 Where they're piled the highest over there?
 That is where the blood of heroes flowed
 In pools higher than the flanks of horses,
 Higher even than the horses' saddles-
 right up to the riders' silken waistbands.
 Those you came to find have fallen there;
 Go back, maiden, to your white-walled dwelling.
 Do not stain your skirt and sleeves with blood."
 When she has heard the wounded hero's words
 She weeps, and tears flow down her pale face;
 She leaves the plain of Kosovo and walks
 To her white village wailing, crying out:-
 "O pity, pity! I am cursed so utterly
 That if I touched a greenly leafing tree
 it would dry and wither, blighted and defiled."

Fragment

"Who is that fine hero, who's the one
 Sweeping with his tempered sword,
 His tempered sword in his right hand,
 To cut off twenty heads?"
 "That is Banovich Strahinya!"
 "Who is that fine hero, who's the one,
 Impaling four before he's done
 Upon his lance and heaving them
 Behind him in the river Sitnitsa?"
 "That is Srdja Zlopogledja!"
 "Who is that fine hero, who's the one,
 Riding on the great white stallion,
 Holding high the banner in his hands,
 Chasing Turks around in bands
 And plunging them into the river Sitnitsa?"
 "That is Boshko Yugovich!"

The Death of the Mother of the Yugovichi

Dear God! How great the wonder of it all-
 When the army fell on level Kosovo
 With all the Yugovichi in its ranks-
 Nine brave brothers and the tenth, their father!
 The mother of the Yugovichi prays
 That God will give her quick eyes of a falcon
 And a swan's white wings that she might fly
 Out over Kosovo, that level plain,
 And see the Yugovichi- all nine brothers
 And their father, noble old Yug Bogdan.
 And God Almighty grants her what she asks-
 Eyes of a falcon, white wings of a swan-
 And out she flies over level Kosovo
 And finds the Yugovichi lying slain-
 All nine brothers, and the tenth, Yug Bogdan.
 Driven in the ground nine lances stand
 With nine gray falcons perching on their ends;
 Beside the lances nine brave horses wait,
 And near the horses nine grim rampant lions.
 She hears the horses neigh, the lions roar,
 The nine gray falcons scream and croak and caw,
 And still her heart is cold as any stone
 And no tears rise at all, and no tears fall.
 Then she takes with her the nine brave horses,
 And she takes with her the rampant lions,
 And she takes with her the nine gray falcons-
 Slowly leads them off to her white castle.
 From far away her sons' nine wives could see her-
 And out they walk before the castle tower:
 And as the mother hears the widows weeping
 She hears the horses neigh, the lions roar,
 The nine gray falcons scream and croak and caw.
 And still her heart is cold as any stone
 And no tears rise at all, and no tears fall.
 When it is very late, when it is midnight,
 Damian's gray horse begins to scream;
 The mother goes to Damian's wife and asks:
 "O dearest daughter, my son's beloved wife,
 Why does Damian's stallion scream like this?
 Is he hungry for the choicest wheat?
 Does he thirst for cool Zvechan waters?"
 And the wife of Damian answers her:
 "O my mother, mother of my Damian,
 The stallion does not scream for choicest wheat,
 Neither does he thirst for Zvechan waters;
 Damian used to feed him oats till midnight,
 And at midnight he would ride the roads;
 The horse is grieving for his noble master-
 That he did not bring him here upon his back."
 And still the mother's heart is cold as any stone,

And no tears rise at all, and no tears fall.
 When dawn has broken early in the morning,
 Two black ravens fly up to the castle,
 Their wings all red and bloody to the shoulders
 And their beaks all foaming with white foam.
 They carry there a warrior's severed hand
 With a wedding ring upon its finger
 And they drop it in the mother's lap.
 The mother of the Yugovichi takes the hand
 And stares at it, turns it in her lap,
 And then she calls to Damian's faithful wife:
 "O my daughter, beloved wife of Damian,
 Do you know whose severed hand this is?"
 And the wife of Damian answers her-
 "O dearest Lady, mother of my husband,
 This is the hand of Damian, your son;
 I know because I recognize this ring
 Which is the ring I gave him at our wedding."
 Again the mother takes the severed hand
 And stares at it, turns it in her lap:
 Softly then she speaks to that white hand.
 "O dear dead hand, O dear unripe green apple,
 Where did you grow, where were you torn away?
 Dear God! you grew upon this mother's lap
 And you were torn away upon the plain of
 Kosovo!"
 And now the mother can endure no more
 And so her heart swells and breaks with sorrow
 For the Yugovichi- all nine brothers
 And the tenth of them, Yug Bogdan.

The Miracle of Lazar's Head

When they cut off Lazar's head upon the Blackbirds'
 Field
 Not a single Serb was there to see it
 But it happened that a Turkish boy saw,
 A slave, the son of one who had been made
 Herself a slave, a Serbian mother
 Thus the boy spoke having seen it all:
 "Oh have pity, brothers; Oh have pity, Turks.
 Here before us lies a sovereign's noble head!
 In God's name it would be a sin
 If it were pecked at by the eagles and the crows
 Or trampled on by horses and by heroes."
 He took the head of holy Lazar then
 And covered it and put it in a sack
 And carried it until he found a spring
 And put the head into the waters there
 For forty years the head lay in that spring
 While the body lay upon the field at Kosovo
 It was not pecked by eagles or by crows.

It was not trampled on by horses or by heroes.
 For that, Dear Lord, all thanks be to Thee.
 Then one day there came from lovely Skoplje
 A group of youthful carters who conveyed
 Bulgarians and Greeks to Vidin and to Nish
 And stopped to spend the night at Kosovo.
 They made a dinner on that level field,
 And ate and then grew thirsty afterwards.
 They lit the candle in their lantern then
 And went to look for waters of a spring.
 Then it was that one young carter said:
 "See the brilliant moonlight in the water there."
 The second carter answered him:
 "My brother, I don't think it's moonlight,"
 While the third was silent, saying nothing,
 Turning in his silence to the east,
 And all at once calling out to God,
 The one true God, and holy sainted Nicholas:
 "Help me God! Help me holy Nicholas!"
 He plunged into the waters of the spring
 And lifted out into the quiet air
 The holy head of Lazar, Tsar of all the Serbs.
 He placed it on the green grass by the spring
 And turned to get some water in a jug
 So the thirsty carters all could drink.
 When next they looked upon the fertile earth
 The head no longer rested on the grass
 But rolled out all alone across the level field,
 The holy head moving towards the body
 To join it the way it was before.
 When in the morning bright day dawned
 The three young carters sent the tidings off-
 A message to the holy Christian priests
 Which summoned some three hundred of them
 there
 And summoned bishops, twelve of them,
 And summoned four old patriarchs
 From Pech, Constantinople, and Jerusalem.
 They all put on their holy vestments then,
 Put on their heads the tall peaked caps of monks,
 And took into their hands the ancient chronicles,
 And read out prayers, and kept long vigils there
 For three long days and three dark nights,
 Neither sitting down nor seeking any rest,
 Neither lying down nor ever sleeping,
 But questioning the saint and asking him
 To which great church or monastery he would go:
 Whether Opovo or Krushedol,
 Whether Jaska or Beshenovo,
 Whether Rakovats or Shishatovats
 Whether Djivsha or Kuvezhdin
 Or whether he would rather go to Macedonia.

But the saint would go to none of these,
And wished to stay at lovely Ravanitsa,
The church he had himself endowed
Which rose below the mountain of Kuchaj-
His own church, the one he built himself,
Built with his own bread, with his own treasure,
And not with tears wept by wretched subjects,
In those years he walked upon this earth.

The Death of Duke Prijezda

Message after message after message:
Who is sending them? Just who are they for?
The Turkish Sultan Mehmed sends them all
And they are for Prijezda, Duke of Stalach;
They come to him in his white castle there.
"O Prijezda, noble Voyvoda of Stalach,
I demand you send me your three treasures:
First, your deadly tempered sword
That cuts so easily through wood and stone,
Through wood and stone and even through cold
iron;
Second, send your gallant war-horse, Zhdral,
That flies across the wide and level fields
And leaps the height of double rampart walls;
Third, I want your faithful wife."
Duke Prijezda studies what he reads,
Studies it and writes a short reply:
"Sultan Mehmed, Tsar of all the Turks,
Raise as large an army as you like
And come to Stalach any time you choose.
Whatever way you may attack us here,
I will not give you any of my treasures;
For myself alone I forged my sword,
For myself alone I fed my gallant Zhdral,
And for myself alone I took a wife:
I will not give you any of my treasures."
The Turkish Sultan Mehmed raised an army then,
Raised an army, led it off to Stalach;
He bombarded Stalach three long years,
But not a single stone did he dislodge;
He found no way to conquer that white city,
Nor would he end the siege and march back home.
One fine morning on a Saturday
Duke Prijezda's wife climbed slowly up
The rampart walls surrounding little Stalach
And from those heights she gazed into the Morava,
The muddy river down below the city.
Prijezda's wife thus spoke to him and said:
"O Prijezda, O my dearest master,
I'm afraid, my master and my lord,
The Turks will blow us up from underground!"

Duke Prijezda answered her and said-
"Be silent, love, do not talk like that
How can anybody tunnel under Morava?"
After that Sunday morning dawned,
And all the nobles went into the church
To stand and hear the solemn mass of God,
And when they left the church and came back out
Duke Prijezda spoke to them and said
"My Lords, my powerful right wings,
My wings by which I fly to eat and drink and fight,
After we have eaten and have drunk our wine,
Let us open up the castle gates
And make a flying raid against the Turks,
Letting God and fortune give us what they want!"
Thus Prijezda calls out to his wife
"My love, go down into the castle cellar
And bring us up the brandy and the wine."
Jelitsa then took two golden pitchers
And went below into the castle cellar,
But when she reached the bottom of the stairs,
She saw the place was full of Turkish soldiers
Drinking cool wine out of their boots
And toasting first the health of Lady Jelitsa
And then her husband's death, the death of Duke
Prijezda
She dropped her pitchers on the cellar stones
And ran upstairs into the castle hall
"Your wine is bad, my lord and master,
Very bad, your brandy is worse still!
The castle cellar's full of Turkish soldiers
Drinking cool wine out of their boots
First they drink my health and then they drink to
you,
But you- they bury you alive,
They bury you and then drink to your soul."
Duke Prijezda then leapt to his feet
And opened up the portals of the town,
They made a sortie out against the Turks,
And closed with them and dueled with them there
Until some sixty of the lords were dead,
Sixty lords, but thousands of the Turks;
After that Prijezda rode back home
And locked the city gates against the Turks.
He took his deadly sword out of its sheath
And cut the head off Zhdral, his gallant war-horse:
"Zhdral, Zhdral, O my precious dear,
The Turkish Tsar will not ride on your back."
Then he broke his sharp and tempered sword:
"O tempered sword, O my true right hand,
The Turkish Tsar must never belt you on!"
Then he sought his lady in the castle
And he took his lady gently by the hand:

"Dearest Jelitsa, wise and faithful lady,
 Will you choose to die with me today
 Or will you be the lover of a Turk?"
 The Lady Jelitsa shed many tears:
 "In honor I will die with you today;
 I will not be the lover of a Turk
 Or trample on the honorable cross,
 They cannot force me to betray my faith."
 Then they joined hands, the two of them,
 And went up on the ramparts above Stalach;
 There it was that Jelitsa thus spoke.
 "O Prijezda, O my dearest master,
 The waters of the Morava have nursed us;
 The waters of the Morava should bury us!"
 And holding hands they leapt into the river.
 Sultan Mehmed finally conquered Stalach,
 But he did not obtain a single treasure
 Bitterly he cursed, this Turkish Tsar:
 "May God destroy you, O Stalach castle!
 I had three thousand men when I arrived;
 Now I start for home with just five hundred!"

Marko Kraljevic and the Eagle

Marko lies beside the high road of the Tsar,
 His spear behind his head, planted in the earth:
 He draws around him there his dark green dolman,
 Covers up his face with silver-threaded cloth.
 Sharats stands beside him, tethered to the spear-
 shaft-
 And on the top of it there perches a great eagle.
 He spreads his wings, making shade for Marko,
 And gives him cool water from his beak,
 Cool water for the wounded hero.
 But suddenly a Vila cries out from the woods:
 "In God's name great gray eagle there,
 Whatever kind of goodness did this Marko do for
 you,
 What act of kindness or of charity
 That you should stretch your wings and shade him
 in this way
 And bring him water in your beak,
 Cool water for the wounded hero?"
 And now the bird, the eagle, speaks to him and
 says:
 "Silence, Vila! Shut your stupid mouth!
 What sort of goodness has this Marko failed to do,
 What act of charity has he not done for me?
 It could be even you remember this-
 The army dropping off like flies at Kosovo,
 The two Tsars dying on the field-
 Murad dying, great Tsar Lazar dying-

And all the blood rising to the stirrups,
 Rising even to the silken belts of heroes,
 Men and horses floating in it, swimming,
 Horse by horse & hero next to hero-
 And then the coming of the hungry birds.
 As we ate our fill of human flesh
 And drank our fill of human blood
 My wings grew wet and sticky in the sun
 Which burst out flaming in the crystal sky
 And suddenly I could not fly at all
 So stiff with blood & scorched had grown my
 wings.
 When all the other birds had flown away
 I alone remained on level Kosovo
 Trampled under foot by horses and by heroes.
 Then God sent Marko to me on that plain
 Who plucked me from the flowing blood of heroes
 And set me down behind him on the back of
 Sharats.
 He took me straight into the nearest woods
 And put me on the green branch of a pine.
 Then a gentle rain began to rain.
 It fell down from the sky and washed my wings,
 Washed away the blood of noble heroes,
 And I could fly above beyond the forest
 And join all the eagles, join my swift companions.

Appendix

John Matthias

"To V. V.; On Our Translations of the Kosovo Fragments"

Vladeta the Voyvoda! knight who brings the news
 From Kosovo to gracious Militsa,
 Lazarus's queen, sister of the Yugovichi,
 Daughter of Yug Bogdan- that's the stock you're
 made of!
 In the name of God Almighty
 As they all repeat in these old epic poems
 We struggle with (and even in the name
 Of Allah maybe) what could ever bring
 A hero and a Serb To South Bend, Indiana?
 Where Ivan Mestrovich petered out his talent
 In the awful portrait busts and bland madonnas

Of his exile we meet beside
The only decent piece of work in town-
His Jacob's Well and puzzle over
Fates as dark as those of Lazarus
And Milosh Obilich sung down centuries
Of Turkish occupation by dusty peasant guslars
Who didn't need to know that fancy alphabet
Saint Cyril left behind in which reforming Vuk
Spelled out phonetically a living language
Where one itches through the final syllables of
names
And scratches at the surface of a destiny
In verbal fragments of a people's epic past.
How unlikely, Vladeta, that we should meet at all.
In 1941 when I was born beside a silly field
Of vegetables that noncombatant types
Were urged to cultivate- officially they called
Such doubtful husbandry a "Victory Garden"-
You at just eighteen had taken to the hills
With Tito's Partisans where every urgent message
Sent to Stalin (later on to Churchill)
Was the same: *More Boots!*
The rugged karst that cut away your soles
Kept "the occupier" as the euphemistic
Tour books call him now (for, after all, he's rich)
An easy target in the villages & towns.
Did you swoop right down on him like Marko on
the Turks?
You did- but couldn't live with
Certain knowledge of unspeakable reprisals.
Nazi mathematics was a good deal easier
To follow than your theory of recursive functions
Hammered out in hiding six months later in Vienna-
For every officer you blew up in the town
They shot a hundred villagers.
And who is more within his rights
To moralize on firing squads than someone who
himself
Would stand before one-
Trying you summarily, your
Brothers tied you to a tree and lined up in a nasty
file
With leveled rifles aimed to blow your very useful
brains
To far less squeamish hills.
You can laugh four decades later since you've lived
to tell
The tale: "But my uncle, who as fate
Would have it, is in charge of this grim liquidation,
Couldn't shoot his nephew.
That was 1941; two years later
And he would have."

He cut you loose and kicked
You in the ass and shouted: run!
In the ballad, Vladeta survives to tell the queen
What he saw at Kosovo: "Tell me knight," she says,
"When you were on that wide and level plain
Did you see great Lazar riding by?
Did you see my father and my noble brothers there?
Did you see the husbands of my daughters?"
And Vladeta must tell of slaughter and betrayal
-the guslar singing mournfully in lines of just
Ten syllables, sliding over pauses at the fourth
Where prosodists would quickly place
Twin horizontal lines- Yes, Vladeta must tell
The queen exactly what annihilation feels like.
That I see you sometimes standing among
memories
Like this other Vladeta before the queen
Or Mestrovich among his early works
Or even like Lord Milosh on that open plain
You find, of course, unspeakably absurd-
"With my broken battle-lance, no doubt,
As all the enemy press in upon me fighting
Near the river Sitnitsa. One account says Milosh
Killed twelve thousand Turkish soldiers after
He had polished off the Sultan. In fact they
Took him in the tent and cut off both his arms!"
you open up me slivovitz and go on with your tales
Which, my friend, for all the jokes and ironies
Required for the telling never cease to bleed-
And in your cups you sing to me Prince Lazar's
fatal choice,
You sing the ancient downfall of the Serbs.
"Which Kingdom is it that you long for most?
That's the question that the falcon asked the Tsar.
*If you choose the earth, he said then saddle horses,
Tighten girths- have your knights put on
Their swords and make a dawn attack against
The Turks: your enemy will be destroyed.
But if you choose the skies then build a church-
O not of stone but out of silk and velvet-
Gather up your forces, take the bread and wine,
For all shall perish, perish utterly,
And you, O Tsar, shall perish with them. "*
As you break your words for our inadequate
exchange
And give me phrases which in token of their real
worth
I give you back in scribbled & devalued English
notes
I hear you choose the earth even as you tell me
otherwise
And laughingly declare: *the skies, the skies!*

For you are out there on that wide & level plain;
You see yourself great Lazar riding by;
You see the father of the Lady's brothers there;
You see the husbands of her daughters-
And when your uncle cuts you loose
You stumble through the villages & hills
Playing tokens for survival, whispering
In code to border guards & agents, prostitutes &
poets,
Fellow travelers and their wealthy following
Of contraband tobacconists an anagram
compounded
Of the talismanic words that wound the clocks
In old Ragusa: OBLITI PRIVATORUM PUBLICA
CURATE-
Forget your private business
And concern yourself with public life, that's
The gist of it- knowing well that only those
A man can trust will whisper the correct response.
For if a man's a friend he knows that underneath
Those proudly chiseled words above the lintel close
beside
The Rector's palace there's a dusty little shop
Whose owner chalks (in lingua franca too!)
Upon a blackboard hanging in his narrow window
The reply: ANYTIME FRIED FISHES.
And that's the phrase, you tell me, answers Latin.
That's the phrase that took you underground!
Obliti Privatorum Publica Curate you intone, and I
cry out:
Anytime Fried Fishes! and we hug each other like
Two drunken Slavs and weep like sentimental
Irishmen & leave our empty bottle on the pedestal
Of Mestrovich's well.
Vladeta, my Voyvoda, my dear unhappy friend,
There is no Kingdom left for us to choose-
Neither of the earth nor of the sky
But peace, peace, to all who wander
For whatever reason from their stony lands
Bringing all the heavy cargo of their legends
Humming in a cipher in their lucid, spinning minds!

- John Matthias