

Vladimir Bartol, the Author of Alamut

Vladimir Bartol is one of the most enigmatic authors of Slovenian literature, who has a specific position among men of letters of 1930's.

Life

He was born on 24 February 1903 (in the same year as George Orwell) in the village of Sv. Ivan (St. John) near Trieste as a son of Gregor Bartol, a post office clerk, and of writer Marica Bartol-Nadlisek. He was their third child out of seven. Both his parents were extremely tolerant and broadly liberal and they offered their children extensive education. His mother introduced her son to painting, and his father to biology. With adequate stimulation, various horizons opened for young Vladimir. He always described himself in his autobiographic short stories as an oversensitive and slightly odd child with rich fantasy. He was interested in many things: biology and philosophy, psychology, art, and of course in theatre and literature. As a scientist, he collected and researched butterflies.

Vladimir Bartol began his elementary and secondary schooling in Trieste and concluded it in Ljubljana. Afterwards, he enrolled at the University of Ljubljana to study biology and philosophy and with special attention researched the work of Sigmund Freud. He graduated in 1925 and continued with his studies at Sorbonne in Paris (1926 - 1927), for which he obtained scholarship. In 1928 he served the army in Petrovaradin in today's Serbia. From 1933 to 1934, he lived in Belgrade, where he edited the Slovenian Belgrade Weekly. Afterwards, he returned to Ljubljana where he lived as a freelance writer until 1941. After World War II, he moved to his hometown Trieste, where he spent a whole decade from 1946 to 1956. Later he became an associate member of Slovenian Academy of Sciences And Arts, which he worked for until his death on 12 September 1967 in Ljubljana.

Work

His first short stories were published from 1927 to 1928 in literary magazines *Ljubljanski zvon* (Ljubljana's Bell) and *Modra ptica* (Blue Bird) and were a few years later gathered in a collection *Al Araf* (1935, second edition 2002). Some of them were actually a preparation for his masterpiece, the novel *Alamut*. Contrary to prevailing social-realism in literature of that time, his prose contained psychological and philosophical elements. By describing the destinies of international demonic and eccentric adventurers, he developed themes related to will, power and absurdity, with which he became a forerunner of existentialism in literature. Bartol followed Plato in the extensive use of dialogue and Edgar Allan Poe in narrative technique. Nevertheless, the thinkers that influenced him most were Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevski, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud.

Bartol's other works include drama *Lopez* (1932), tragicomedy *Empedokles* (1945), and collection of short stories *Trieste's Humorous Sketches* (1957). Since he wrote for many newspapers and magazines, his texts are quite abundantly scattered around and a lot of them were only posthumously published as single pieces of literature; among them are collections of short stories and essays *Demon And Eros* (1974) and *Between Idyll And Horror* (1988), novel *Miracle in the Village* (1985), story *Don Lorenzo* (1986) and autobiography *Youth at St. John's* (2001). He also wrote over 280 literary, theatre and art reviews. Important are also

his essays from 1930's with which he was the first to introduce the principles of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung in Slovenia and in Yugoslavia as well.

Alamut

Bartol saw the essence of Alamut already in his youth during World War I when the image of distant gun flashes from the Soca Front (1915 - 1917) that he could observe one day while walking home over a hill with his cousin Boris penetrated his consciousness. Decisive inspiration that finally triggered his wish to write the novel came in 1927 when critic, translator and politician Josip Vidmar (1895 - 1992) draw his attention to historical events that had been described by Marco Polo. At that moment he set a time limit of ten years to finish the novel - and he also did finish it exactly ten years later in 1937. Bartol was an obsessively meticulous person, so it is no wonder that he thoroughly researched numerous historical sources, philosophical works, especially Niccolo Machiavelli's *Il Principe* (The Prince, 1532), and, of course, the Koran in order to write his novel.

Based on the actual historical events, the story of Alamut is set in northern Persia (today's Iran) in 1092. Hassan Ibn Saba, known as the "old man of the mountain", is a demonic and charismatic leader of Assassins, a Persian sect of Ismailis. In his fortified castle - Eagle's Nest - of Alamut, he teaches his faithful fedayeen blind obedience and trains them to become "live daggers" in order to fight a holy war against Seldjuk Turks that rule Iran. He cunningly turns them into fanatics: with hashish and beautiful girls in harem he gives them an illusion of paradise, which is promised to brave martyrs. Usurping the world's great religions and philosophies for his own gain, Hassan implants in his followers spiritual yearnings and delusions, manipulating them in order to carry out a plan of mass destruction. Shortly thereafter, he sends his kamikaze warriors off, drunk with ideology, to assassinate and massacre for the greater glory of their master. In less than a year's time, the Seldjuk Empire is shattered into pieces.

The novel is a sophisticated allusion to totalitarian regimes that emerged in Europe in 1930's. Bartol wrote in his notes to the second edition of Alamut in 1958 that at some point of writing his characters started talking to him, and live fluid of world historic events infused into his novel: in the north, Hitler with his fanatic SS corps pressed against the border; in the west, Mussolini, who had already subjugated a third of Slovenians and a large part of Croats, threatened Slovenia and the whole Yugoslavia; in the east, mysterious Stalin took over the heritage of Lenin's revolution and began with his monstrous processes. In brief, Alamut is a quite faithful account of the beginning of Ismailis' history in 1092, who established a sect of Assassins led by Hassan Ibn Saba, and at the same time a vivid allusion to the period of terrible dictators between the two wars.

Literary Recognition

When it was published in 1938, the novel did not receive very favourable reviews. His contemporary critics considered it too exotic, too adventurous and not Slovenian enough. However, time was on Bartol's side. Already in 1946, Alamut was translated into Czech and in 1955 into Serbian. A real boom came in the last two decades of the previous century. Up to now, Alamut has been translated into more than 19 languages and has been widely read from Spain to Germany, from France to Italy, from Bosnia to Greece, and from Turkey to Iran and Korea. Unfortunately, some deviations did happen in between, thus, the German readers (and probably not only them) read "a copy of a copy" - their Alamut was translated from French

into German, and not from Slovenian, whereas the Anglo-Saxon world has yet to discover it. In 1990 a symposium about Bartol's work was organised in Ljubljana; in 2002 a fourth Slovenian edition of *Alamut* was published and widely praised by media and critics; *Alamut* became an obligatory reading for pupils in the final forms of secondary schools. The work of Vladimir Bartol has finally received appropriate recognition at home and has been included in Slovenian literary canon.

But why does *Alamut* appeal to its readers so much that it became part of global pop culture? There are at least two reasons for it. One of them are undoubtedly the events of 11 September. For contemporary readers, *Alamut* has become a metaphor for threatening Islamic terrorism and after Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin, Hassan Ibn Saba found another echo - in Osama Bin Laden. The second reason for its popularity is the fact that *Alamut* is a highly readable novel with dramatic plot which deals with eternal themes and can be read from different viewpoints: as an adventure novel, historical account, love story, psychological study of a man in power, antique tragedy, or as a philosophical representation of nihilism. Vladimir Bartol admitted that while writing the novel he had a feeling that he was creating it not only for his contemporaries but also for the readers that had lived fifty years ago, as well as for the readers that would live fifty years after. His own words are the best to explain the tremendous popularity of the novel: "*Alamut* is a sort of vision, even better, a kind of image that originates in prehistoric genealogical memory in the sense of Jung's Archetype."