Saša Stanišić

Where You Come From

Herkunft

Presented by: Krystyna Pieniążek-Marković

The novel *Where You Come From* can be read as an autobiographical narrative of memory, migration, and identity, as well as an exploration of how political decisions shape the lives of individuals and families. Saša Stanišić recounts the history of his own Serbian–Muslim/Bosniak family against the backdrop of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbian nationalism in his hometown of Višegrad, and the experience of displacement. “My family lives scattered around the world. We shattered along with Yugoslavia and have not yet been able to put ourselves back together again.” (p. 29)

Stanišić, born in 1978 in Višegrad, Bosnia and Herzegovina, emigrated to Heidelberg in 1992. The novel recounts the story of a boy named Saša, who flees Višegrad with his mother and begins a new life in Germany. They are later joined by his father and his maternal grandparents, who are Bosniaks. Through frequent shifts between childhood and the present, the novel follows its protagonist (a writer living in Hamburg) as they negotiate an identity shaped by ethnic and cultural origins, exile, and the effort to put down roots in a new culture and language.

Where You Come From engages with autobiographical and individual experiences while also retaining social and political relevance, documenting historical events and reflecting contemporary debates on migration, integration, and the culture of remembrance.

The dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia represents the novel’s primary political context. Stanišić portrays pre-war Višegrad as a space of multiethnic coexistence and his own family as transcending ethnic and religious divisions, a dynamic fostered by the Yugoslav policy of “brotherhood and unity”: “I was the child of a multi-national state, the product and confession of two people who loved each other, whom the Yugoslavian melting pot had freed from the coercion of difference in origin and religion.” (p. 55) During the Tito era, religion remained on the margins: “I never went to religion class. No one in my family openly practiced any faith […]. For a while I thought—and I’m not joking—that you’re a Muslim because you don’t eat pork.” (p. 54) Grandpa Pero was probably the only believer in the family. He believed in the victory of socialism […].” (p. 54)

The publication of the Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (1986) first arouses unease within the family. The document played a crucial role in legitimising Serbian nationalism and laying the intellectual foundations for the policies later pursued by Slobodan Milošević. It popularised nationalist interpretations of the Yugoslav crisis, provided the ideological underpinnings for the policies of Serbian elites, and provoked defensive responses among Yugoslavia’s other nations, fuelling a spiral of competing nationalisms. The critique of nationalism is one of the work’s central political messages. The narrator consistently challenges the notion that

national identity is a person's defining characteristic. In his narrative, the question of origins is answered through specific people, places, and relationships rather than abstract national communities. Although written in German, *Where You Come From* belongs to the tradition of post-Yugoslav literature that understands nationalism as a mechanism of symbolic and political violence.

Stanišić illustrates the consequences of processes set in motion by the rise of competing nationalisms: the disintegration of a shared Yugoslav space, the imperative to define oneself in ethnic terms, migration, and the fragmentation of families and local communities. "The bond that was the multi-ethnic ideal was giving way under the pressure of the destructive force of nationalisms." Tito […] turned out to be irreplaceable. New voices struck a false and brutal national note. Their manifestos could be read as instructions for ethnic hatred. They were supported by intellectuals, disseminated by the media […]". (p. 55) War thus emerges as the product of nationalist mobilisation and decisions made by political elites rather than the inevitable outcome of age-old ethnic conflicts. Migration offers an escape from war and the extermination of the Bosniak population. Yet long after the war's end, photographs of the Serbian war criminals Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić remain prominently displayed in the home of a Serbian family in Oskoruša, a village in the Republika of Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Saša's grandfather was born. The visit to Oskoruša prompted deeper reflection on origins, extending beyond his own:" I wrote about Brandenburg, about Bosnia, the geographical location didn't make much difference at all, struggles with identity don't care about the latitude. I wrote about racism, violence, fleeing." (p. 248)

Stanišić does not focus exclusively on disintegration and division; he also evokes paradoxical scenes of enduring unity across newly established borders and continued allegiance to the ideology on which Yugoslavia was founded. Republic Day was celebrated in the SFRY on 29 November. On this date, people who nostalgically recall the Yugoslav era continue to gather in cities across the successor states, displaying the flags of a country that no longer exists, singing its anthem and other songs celebrating Yugoslavia, and reminiscing: "For one day and one night they let Yugoslavia rise from the dead, complete with full board, celebratory speeches, they bring […] photographs from the fifties and sixties; the bolder ones even show those from the eighties. […] children of socialism, brotherly nations." (p. 55) Stanišić also evokes these gatherings to expose the mechanisms through which the less honourable aspects of Tito's rule: censorship, political imprisonment, economic crisis, and other failings, are erased from memory or downplayed: "Yugoslavia was also good at leaving out things that weren't perfect." (p. 55)

The question "Where do you come from?" proves to be both biographical and political, since origins shape social expectations, stereotypes, and opportunities for action. The novel addresses issues of migration, borders, citizenship, and discrimination against immigrants that remain pressing in Europe. The host state determines immigrants' legal status and their educational, economic, and social opportunities.

In Germany, his mother, a political scientist, works in a laundry, while his father, an economist specialising in business management, works in construction. Lacking funds, they furnish their home with discarded items left on the street, which evokes in the protagonist feelings of shame and disgust. After several years in Germany, his parents face deportation to an ethnically cleansed Višegrad, now dominated by Serbian nationalism. To avoid this, they emigrate to Florida in 1998. There, they secure positions they could only have dreamed of in Germany. Upon retirement, they move to Split, Croatia, although this requires them to spend three months in a country outside the Schengen Area after each year of residence. Stanišić also observes that Croatia is yet another state blind to migration issues. The situation of migrants in Germany is likewise far from idyllic:

“Immigrants are being demonized and the Hitler salute hangs over the present.” (p. 96) Yet the critique of immigration policy extends to the European Union as a whole: “If we had to flee now - meaning if the regulations at the borders in 1992 were as restrictive as they are today on the external borders of the European Union - we would never have made it to Heidelberg. The journey would have ended in front of the Hungarian razor-wire fence.” (p. 96) The narrative’s engagement with the present also encompasses the contemporary refugee route through the Balkans.

Saša remains in Germany, but his position is precarious, contingent on administrative decisions, asylum procedures, and social stereotypes. Stanišić shows how immigrants are often reduced to a single label, such as “a refugee from the Balkans” (“When I arrived in Germany, I didn’t want to be two people: a Yugo and a refugee.”, p. 54). Individual biography gives way to simplistic notions of origin, prompting the protagonist at times to pose as a Slovenian longing for the Alps.

Reflection on collective memory and its politicisation is another important dimension of the novel. Stanišić challenges official national narratives of history, including the version advanced by Emir Kusturica through the construction of Andrićgrad in Višegrad, which he describes as an unimaginative, kitschy phantasmagoria. Andrićgrad is a Serb-centric project and a site of selective remembrance, embodying the symbolic exclusion of Bosniak historical memory and the dominance of a Serbian narrative in a space marked by wartime violence. In place of monumental history, Stanišić offers a private history woven from family anecdotes, memories, and fragments of everyday life.

The novel’s political dimension emerges not only in its subject matter but also in its narrative structure: fragmented, replete with digressions and alternative versions of events, particularly endings. The author relinquishes a single truth in favour of multiple perspectives, a choice that can be interpreted as an aesthetic counterpart to democratic thinking: reality is not reduced to a single ideology or national narrative but remains complex and polyphonic. The book’s form thus becomes an act of resistance to authoritarian modes of narrating history.

LANGUAGE: German / Deutsch

CENSORSHIP STATUS: