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Milan Jazbec THE SHINING STAR WITH THE LIONS MANE

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The collection of poems *The Shining Star with the Lions Mane* is a unique project of seven bilingual books written originally in the Slovenian language by Milan Jazbec, a professor of diplomacy, ambassador, poet and writer. Ambassador Jazbec served his diplomatic term in North Macedonia from September 2016 to July 2020. As a highly singular particularity, he also did his military service in the former Yugoslavia in the Macedonian city of Štip. After more than three decades he came back as an envoy connecting the two newly emerged states.

The poems are translated to Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, Roma, Vlach, Serbian, and Bosnian, which are the seven languages that are taken note of in the Macedonian Constitution. It is a rare example of a linguistically rich and subtle case of statehood that seven languages are in daily use in one country as well as formally evidenced in its constitution. Additionally, it should be pointed out,



that these languages are spoken and understood across the region of the Western Balkans, and even broader, from Slovenia to Turkey, where poet Jazbec was posted as the Slovenian ambassador as well. The overall symbolism of this collection of poems could be of use to a diplomat serving in any given region around the

globe. Ambassador Jazbec is sending this message to any interested capital and not only to his respected government. There is an impression that with this collection of poems and selection of languages he presented his humanistic mantra.

The project is completed by an eighth book, containing forewords, essays, comments, impressions and even a composed melody, by intellectuals from all walks of life, whose contributions were issued accompanying the many books authored by ambassador Jazbec in the past 20 years. The eight books were formed in the Collection Odyssey. Diplomats travel, observe and report; with cables and with poetry. They search for meaning and work for understanding, using Her Majesty the word.

The extremely diverse compilation shows the wide reach a diplomat can have through his literary expression. The written word has been accompanying diplomacy ever since and has proved to be a part of this far-reaching mission. Promoting friendly relations between states rests at the very core of the diplomatic business, hence diplomats have to use each opportunity to broaden and deepen them. An ambassador that is equipped also with the strength of literary expression can reach further and softer in the receiving state. Poetry with its both clear and veiled messaging is a highly appreciated means for this, as the Indian diplomat Abhay Kumar elaborates: "There seems to be a connection between

poetry and diplomacy as several diplomats over the ages have excelled in poetry. [...] Diplomacy is generally conducted in short sentences, which reveal as much as they hide. Poetry is no different" (p.31).¹

In the words of the author, the inspiration for the aforementioned project was born on May 7, 2019 in Skopje, where at a high-level diplomatic meeting, dignitaries were addressed by Pope Francis. On his apostolic journey to Bulgaria and North Macedonia, the pontiff came to emphasize messages of peace, respect and unity within diversity. He stated that: "The particular beauty of [North Macedonia] comes from the variety of cultures and ethnic and religious affiliations that inhabit it." This inspired Ambassador Jazbec to celebrate North Macedonia's richness in a way unique to him – uniting his diplomatic skill with literary expression. He took it upon himself to bridge the gap between institutionalized diplomacy, which is largely separated from those not part of the elite and focus his reach on the youth, to whom he and his co-editors have dedicated the concerning collection of poems.

"The power of art, of music, of dance, and of sports, is the power to inspire, to lift spirits and move the soul – and go where traditional diplomacy cannot. Traditional diplomacy most often happens in the halls of government, but cultural diplomacy plays

¹ All citations from the collection of poems *The Shining Star with the Lions Mane*, book eight.

out where people spend their time – in performance halls, community centers and stadiums” (Ryan, 2016, p.30). Attempting to understand another’s culture, motives, ideas and values is often the first step towards building trust and opening a dialogue with the community of another country. This could be taken as one of the many definitions of diplomacy, which do not contradict, but complement each other.

It is exactly this, that the specific strength of a verse harbors. Poetry is an exceptional approach as it is a very honest expression of the variety of human emotions, and as such, it can easily reach anyone willing to listen. In addition, Jazbec’s poetry has proven to be extremely versatile. It has already merited numerous enactments in many different variations. Particularly meaningful was a school performance on November 14, 2018 in the City Theatre of Veles, North Macedonia, where students have accomplished the poems in rap versions and have recited them in different (even non-native) languages. To add, musician Sandra Jordanova has, in a subtle manner of Joan Baez, sung the poem ‘Sam’ (Alone) to a beautiful melody she composed herself. The collection was promoted during the official visit of the Speaker of the Slovenian Parliament Dejan Židan to North Macedonia, marking the Slovenian Day of Culture, February 8, 2020, as a part of the programme of the visit. A variety of pieces have been brought together to a kaleidoscope

of messages inspired by this collection.

“Cultural exchange gives people an opportunity to explore both their differences and their similarities, and to learn from each other. In many cases, we find that even radically different cultures have elements in common. [It] may give people the opportunity to discover, in non-threatening ways, that they have shared values and shared interests. It can reveal the potential for working together, and create the desire to do so” (Ryan, *ibid.*, p.30). Indeed, the many translated books had successfully brought originally Slovenian poetry closer to all people speaking one of the eight languages and a liking for the written word. It is truly an excellent example of effective cultural diplomacy, where friendship and a positive dialogue are being developed as a consequence of a literary contribution by a Slovenian diplomat to his host country North Macedonia.

In the foreword to the collection of poems the President of North Macedonia prof. dr. Stevo Pendarovski states: “Every literary work inspired by or written in North Macedonia becomes part of the Macedonian literature regardless of whether the author is a Macedonian citizen or not. [With his unique project] Ambassador Jazbec add[ed] a new dimension – that is not only the deepening of bilateral Macedonian-Slovenian relations, but also the interethnic relations in the Macedonian society

itself” (p.19). With this act, respect was shown for North Macedonia in all of its diversity, and in the words of President Pendarovski “Jazbec puts in practice the idea of European unity of diversity” (p.20).

A similar idea can be found in the Council of Europe’s European Cultural Convention (Paris, 1954), where it is emphasized in Article 2, that the reciprocal study of languages, history and civilization by the Contracting Parties can contribute to achieving the goal of greater unity among the Council’s member states. It is also in line with several European Union documents, which emphasize cultural diversity as the key value that needs to be respected for the European identity to flourish (Leitner, 2000). What is more, the first paragraph of Article 151 of the EC Treaty specifically mentions the concept of regional diversity, when it states that: “the Community shall contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity”.

This is the particular contribution of Jazbec’s collection of poems, also

mentioned by Pendarovski. Certainly, this project will assist diplomatic relations between the two countries and can support North Macedonia in its path towards European integration, and in its process of becoming a member of the EU. With its multicultural and multilingual richness this candidate country already puts forth an example. Small states are keen to stand out by their soft power approach.

Furthermore, it can forge connections between people on an everyday basis and facilitate the exchange of ideas and experiences between those coming from different cultures. Sometimes a view from the outside tells more and clearly. Ambassador Jazbec managed to reflect that view skillfully. Undoubtedly, the collection of poems *The Shining Star with the Lions Mane* is beyond the classic ambassadorial mandate and so the effects will also be lasting far into the future. Moreover, it shows the extent to which art, more specifically poetry, can have a positively unifying effect on the peoples of different nations and can assist in developing greater understanding and friendly relations among all nations.