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m DOSSIER: JANKO POLIĆ KAMOV **o**



The house where Janko Polić was born in Pećine.

Chronology

1886

Janko Polić was born on November 17 in Pećine near Sušak, not far from Rijeka. Fourteen children were born in this family. In the same year as Janko's birth, Ante Kovačić published the unfinished novel *Među žabari*, Ksaver Sandor Đalski the collection of novellae called *Pod starim krovovima*. A year earlier Kranjčević's *Bugarkinje* had appeared.

1892-1902

Polić's childhood was spent in the affluent if declining home of a leading Senj trader. His youth in this middle-class family partook of the illusions of his surroundings. The patriarchal Croatia of the time worshipped the idols of religion, patriotism and the Šenoan line in literature. He received his elementary and secondary schooling in Sušak. He was expelled from this school because he "spat in the face of a master who had given him a better mark than he deserved, and his friend a worse one", as his brother Nikola wrote. After this, he was sent to the ultra-clerical boarding school called "Ožegovichianum" in Senj. Although he had been a fanatical believer, he lost his faith at the age of 15 and became a rabid atheist and a furious rebel. His character was being born. Politics interested him because it provided an opportunity for fierce engagement, because it was a form of protest against the world.

1902

At a meeting of young people in Lokve, Polić gave his "Programme of the Pupils' Movement" speech. He said: "Comrades. From the entire history of the human race we can see where a gigantic struggle for existence is taking place. From being a struggle for bread, this fight develops, is elevated into a higher battle for the survival of thought, for that eternal bread that people need. And the great idea of progress emanates from this battle. The people can no longer be halted, for the idea of progress is in its nature, a great passion, and a great need too. It is here among us Croats that the craven and wretched present drives us to progress, and the progress of other nations is driving us as well, for if we stand still while they advance is not the raising of the people, but the death of the national being." After this speech, he was expelled from the Senj school, and went back to his family, which had in the meantime moved to Zagreb, after the father's firm went bankrupt as a result of the failure of a big Genoese firm with which it had been heavily involved. Janko enrolled in the Upper Town Gymnasium in Zagreb. He took part in the movement against the Khuen regime and was sent to prison for three months, becoming acquainted there with Stjepan Radić.

1903

The fall of Ban Khuen occurred without the assassination that the high-school progressivist Janko Polić had

been hoping for. He turned his back on politics, and began to be interested in music. He had a particular liking for gypsy music. But he was repulsed by the unnaturalness and forced sentimentality and grandiloquence of the repertoire of the Zagreb theatre, Demeter's *Teuta* and Franjo Marković's *Karlo Drački*. He read Gorky, and was enthralled by Kranjčević.

1904-1905

Out of sheer defiance, Polić stopped going to school. He ran away from home and spent some time in a travelling theatre troupe. In Cetinje he took part in a performance of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, but only as prompter. He was coming up to twenty, but still had not found a place in life. Was he ever going to discover it?

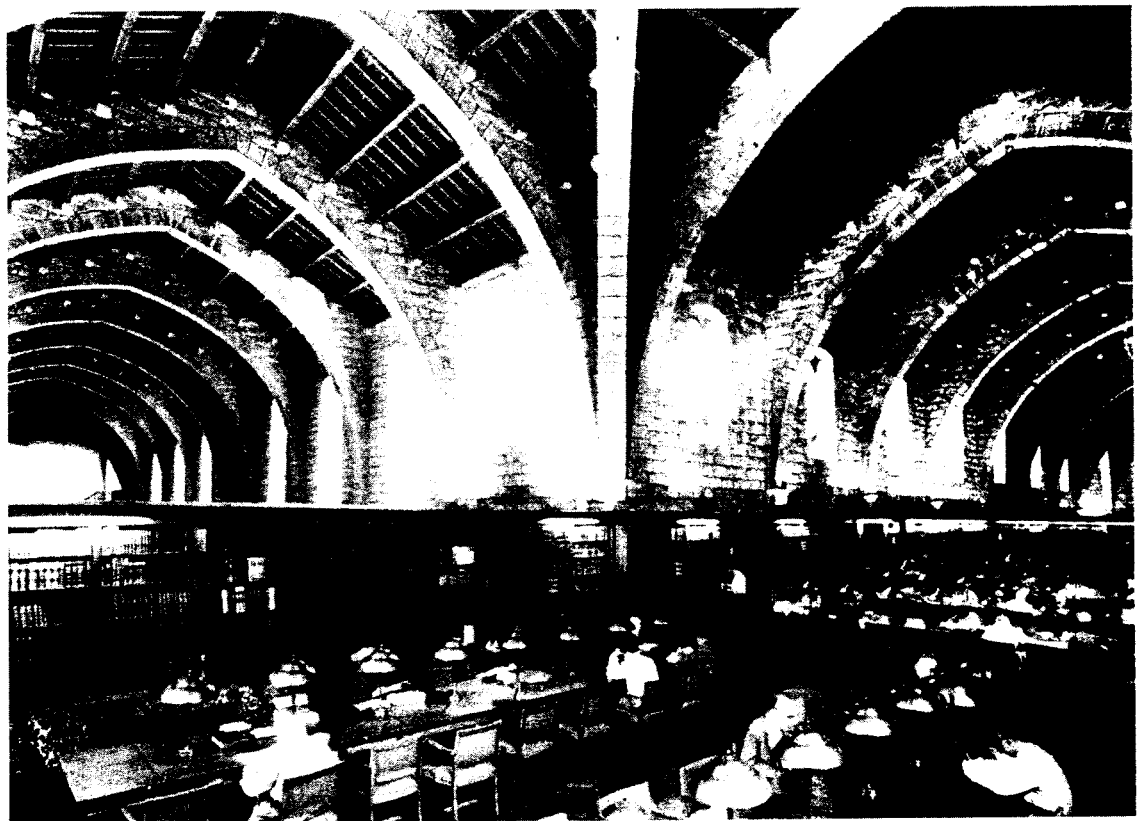
He obtained a brief position as a travelling salesman for *Singer Sewing Machines*, a job which sent him various places in the provinces. He lasted in this job for only two months.

1905

He returned home, lived in Zagreb and started writing. He read Turgenev, Zola, Dostoyevsky, Poe, Wilde, the Scriptures. Lombroso, however, had less influence on him than has been thought. It was his experience of life however that most opened his eyes as a writer. At the beginning he wrote the poems of *Swearword* and *Paper Pinched*. He began to live for writing, but it was clear that he could not live from it. This was to be his problem



The ward in Santa Cruz Hospital in which Janko Polić Kamov died, August 8, 1910.



The ward in which Kamov died is today the central reading-room of the *Biblioteca de Catalunya*.

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until the very end, which was not so far off. There was no solution for him.

1906

He became a writer, who was to live until the end of his life with the generous help of his older brother Vladimir. He travelled to Venice, visiting his brother Milutin, who was at the Conservatory; here he worked out the idea for the farce *On Native Ground*. Fate destined him to be one of the most tragic figures of Croatian literary bohemia. Taking refuge in literature, he still remained a nomad. "Kamov means for me, then, a programme for literature in a name" he wrote in a letter to his brother. In parallel with his last, lost poems, and the first dramatic farces, he started to write the introductory part of the novel *The Dried-Out Slough*, and the farcical novellas.

1907

The first newspaper columns came out. Polić himself published four books in Zagreb: *Swearword*, *Paper Pinched*, *Tragedy of Minds*, *On Native Ground*. These books, and the reviews of Galović, Marjanović, Matoš and others, speak for themselves. From the viewpoint of today, *Swearword* is not less interesting a book than Vidrić's *Poems* that came out in the same year. Plays by Nehaj, Galović, Hrčić and Vojnović came out in the same year, but Kamov's farces are by far the most original. However, there was only doubt and uncertainty before him. Which direction was he to go in? He travelled; when in Rome wrote the dramas *Monks' Orgy* and *Virgin*.

1908

His psyche was moving from rebellion to scepticism. His work for the progressive weekly *Pokret* interested him less and less. Isolated, disappointed with the puppet-like absurdities of the life around him, he found himself in a phase of ironic observation of the mechanism of human folly. After the *Monastery Dramas*, he wrote the tragi-

comedy *Humanity* while in Punit. The book of novellas called *A Book of Farces* was in manuscript. There were no publishers for it, and the Zagreb theatre refused his dramas. The writing of *The Dried-Out Slough* was also nearly at an end. But he did not have much time left. As he confessed in his letter to Vladimir, he began with a swearword, and ended with a sigh of tolerance.

1909

He lived in Punit and in Zagreb, continuing to write. He was to say that at least while he was writing and thinking his freedom was complete. The manuscript of *The Dried-Out Slough* was completed, and would wait for decades before publication. He could feel his proper domain however in the dramatic farces that he was writing. The comedy of life, however, insisted that two of them, *Farce of Our Times* and *Women*, should be lost. And a third, *Mama's Heart*, was never staged. The theatre of the time was also unwilling to accept him. This year saw the writing of his (lost) novella *Smrčanska trilogija*, a parody in prose of Vojnović's grandiloquent sentimentalism for the theatre. In this year Nehajev published his novel *Bijeg* (*Flight*), and Matoš's *Umorne priče* (*Weary Tales*) came out. Kamov got ready to travel to Spain.

1910

Matoš published his book *Naši ljudi i krajevi*, and Nazor *Lirika*. Towards the end of his life, Kamov was starting to put together a collection of poems, sonnets, that have also been lost. Janko Polić Kamov died on August 8, 1910 in a Barcelona hospital. The Austrian consul informed his family that the cause of death was an abdominal infection; later myths developed that he had died on the barricades, or of starvation.

(Adapted from the account in Bruno Popović: *Ikar iz hada*, Kolo, Zagreb 1970.)



Mirko Uzorinac: Janko Polić Kamov, drawing (*Kritika*, Zagreb, February 1921)



Mirko Uzorinac: Janko Polić Kamov, drawing from memory (Mirko Lenac Gymnasium, Rijeka)

Janko Polić Kamov:

Knjiga latendija

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 1. Hada, Torino, u fotoprodukciji 1978.
 2. Ikar iz hada, Kolo, Zagreb, 1970.
 3. Ikar iz hada, Kolo, Zagreb, 1970.
 4. Logika, Kolo, Zagreb, 1970.
 5. Kalamita, Kolo, Zagreb, 1970.
 6. Opasna igra, Kolo, Zagreb, 1970.
 7. Ikar iz hada, Kolo, Zagreb, 1970.
 8. Ikar iz hada, Kolo, Zagreb, 1970.
 9. Ikar iz hada, Kolo, Zagreb, 1970.

Facsimile of the manuscript of the *Book of Farces*