

REVIEWS

Luka Boršić, Ivana Skuhala Karasman, *Naše žene: Leksikon znamenitih žena Hrvatske od X. do XX. stoljeća*, Naklada Jurčić, Zagreb 2016, 189 pp.

A book *Naše žene: Leksikon znamenitih žena Hrvatske od X. do XX. stoljeća* [Our Women: Lexicon of Famous Women of Croatia from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century] presents a panorama of nearly eight hundred women's figures related to Croatia, spanning more than a thousand years, from the tenth to the twentieth century (with 31 December 1929 the latest birth date). This is the first attempt in Croatia to organize vast historical materials entirely devoted to females, who to just a small extent have a permanent place in the general consciousness. Some of these women still function only on the outskirts of historiographic or—more broadly—humanistic discourse and only occasionally appear in other studies. Probably due to this fact, the authors of the volume, Luka Boršić and Ivana Skuhala Karasman, decided to adopt the lexicon formula, focusing primarily on compiling an alphabetical list of names and providing a biographical note on each character.

Besides the name and surname, the structure of each entry contains—if possible to determine—dates of birth and death (the earliest noted figure is Queen Jelena [Helena], who died in 976), place of birth and burial, and then an epithet defining their dominant field of activity along with a concise description of the life of the given character. The authors of the lexicon do not forget that the names of many women active in the past, especially in distant centuries, are impossible to find due to a lack of historical sources, which is why in the Introduction they remind us of the existence of anonymous everyday heroines. The life story—the last, most extensive (though necessarily short) and central part of the entry—serves on the one hand as a comprehensive overview of the biography and on the other as a clear highlighting of these events and achievements—in various spheres of life, including science, art, politics, and society—which resulted in granting the characters the status of “znamenite žene” (famous

women). Among them are painters, architects, writers, thespians, and singers, as well as researchers, doctors, social activists, soldiers, economists, and politicians. Some of the names are also accompanied by a list of important works (scholarly studies, literary texts, paintings, theatrical roles, compositions) created by the entry subject. What is worth emphasizing is that each time, the describing/classifying noun has a feminine suffix, which serves not only to reinforce the forms that already function quite well in the contemporary Croatian language but also introduce and record new feminine professional names whose presence has not yet been recognized and validated by daily use, for instance “ornitološka” (female ornithologist), “časnica” (female officer).

Although in the Introduction the authors do not state to whom the lexicon is addressed, we can guess that the book is a publication prepared for a wider audience. The lexicon can be used by all interested in the participation of women in the history, culture, and social life of Croatia who want to expand their knowledge about this area, including those who are neither experts in this subject nor academic researchers. In reading, we learn about the first female officer in the hussar troops (Mária Lebstück); the first woman to earn a Ph.D. at the University of Zagreb (Milica Bogdanović who received this degree in 1907); and also the first woman in Croatia who was accused of witchcraft and as a witch was sentenced to be burned (Bara Kramarić in the seventeenth century). For readers with more serious cognitive ambitions, it may be helpful to find a bibliography at the end of the book that would allow them to undertake further individual research. The source literature includes encyclopedias and lexicons which register the names of some of the women as well as a number of supplementary sources (studies, monographs, scholarly and press articles), in which the figures and activities of these women are described. Aware of the difficulties and omissions associated with the preparation of a publication of this kind, the authors point out that some dates and facts were difficult to verify, so it is possible that subsequent editions may bring some material changes. As the authors are open to readers' comments and willingness to cooperate, this will certainly help improve the later supplemented editions which will not omit such figures as photographer Elvira Kohn (1914–2003) or a writer and journalist Eva Grlić (1920–2008). It seems valuable that Boršić and Skuhala Karasman emphasize the role of private documentation in the process of recreating the past. As Svetlana Tomić writes, often even among researchers of the

past in Serbian female literary culture, archival research is sometimes underestimated, overlooked, or plays too insignificant a role.¹ Yet, as it turns out, many memorable female source texts are still waiting to be discovered, and private archives can play a significant role in reclaiming the history and memory of women.

Certainly, navigating within the lexicon, analysis and comparative studies of the characters could be facilitated if there were an index of the names depicted, along with their birth and death dates at the end of the book. The reader's eye will not find a photo or a drawing, which, especially in the case of more distant historical characters, would surely have a greater impact because—as rightly stated by the authors of *Pisarki polskie od średniowiecza do współczesności: Przewodnik* [Polish Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present Day: A Guide]—"the memory holds dates and titles the shortest, and faces – the longest."² It also seems that an interesting solution that could enrich the reading of the lexicon would be to include a description of historical background that would contain the basic aspects in the context of subsequent epochs. A continuous narrative which would present the profiles of each character in chronological order, containing interpretative suggestions or general remarks, could become an exceptional item among historiographic books, a unique guide to the country's past.

The criteria for selecting the described women are not completely clear and therefore are partly incomprehensible. This concerns the "Croatian" component which is assumedly the point connecting all the women who were born in Croatia and were active there as well as outside its borders, or whose actions in the country or abroad contributed to the development and enrichment of, for example, political, cultural, and scientific life in Croatia. My goal here is not to accuse the authors of exaggerated ideological patriotism or even of nationalism hidden in the pages of the lexicon, but rather is an attempt to show how going beyond national Croatian sources could open the broader perspectives of reading about a given figure in history. On the one hand, it seems obvious that it is difficult (if at all possible) to create absolutely undisputed and perfect criteria that would unambiguously classify the characters. On the other

¹ Svetlana Tomić, "Neki arhivski primeri neiskorišćenog kulturnog kapitala," *Poznańskie Studia Slawistyczne* 11 (2016), 72.

² Grażyna Borkowska, Małgorzata Czermińska, Ursula Phillips, *Pisarki polskie od średniowiecza do współczesności: Przewodnik* (Gdańsk, 2000), 6.

hand, in the case of the Balkan region or more strictly speaking post-Yugoslav area, limiting the presentation to aspects directly related to Croatia's past can lead to incorrect conclusions and (at best) yield an incomplete representation of a given character to the detriment of her reception. The exemplification of this problem may be the person of Jelica Belović Bernadžikovska (Bernadzikowska), who was presented in the lexicon as an ethnologist, a writer, a journalist, and the author of works in the field of pedagogy and child psychology. The description of Belović Bernadžikovska's activities lacks the information that she was one of the chief editors of the almanac *Srpkinja: Njezin život i rad, njezin kulturni razvitak i njezina narodna umjetnost do danas* [Serbian Woman: Her Life and Work, Her Cultural Development and Her Folk Art until Today], published in 1913 in Sarajevo and intended solely to present the activities of women. This special publication was at that time a unique act on the part of women's societies and, as Magdalena Koch notes, it can be treated as "an attempt to break the organizational isolation of women and to create an intellectual forum for the exchange of ideas, views, and information."³ As the note on the last page of the book emphasizes, Belović Bernadžikovska contributed the most to the preparation of the volume.⁴ Taking into account the characters who worked/work on the border of cultures (a phenomenon characteristic of the Balkan region) is a clear signal that the authors perceive the notion of "Croatian heritage" also in its broader, less national and homogeneous sense. However, it would be reasonable, I think, to take a transcultural approach to bibliographic sources and subsequently to introduce a diversity of identity into the entries. The absence of such a classification, which seems particularly important in the context of the thematic issue "Balkan Jewish Women" of *Studia Judaica*, makes the reader feel lost and unable to discover, for example, the tragic history and fate of the Jews in Yugoslavia from the entries (the reader can only guess which of the women were of Jewish

³ Magdalena Koch, ...*kiedy dojrzujemy jako kultura... Twórczość pisarek serbskich na początku XX wieku (kanon – genre – gender)* (Wrocław, 2007; Serbian edition: Beograd, 2012), 56.

⁴ *Ibid.* In 2016, a scholarly session devoted to the achievements of Belović Bernadžikovska, entitled *Jelica Belović Bernadžikowska – Ethnographer, Pedagogue, Author...*, was organized in Serbia as part of the project "Knjiženstvo: Theory and History of Women's Writing in Serbian until 1915." The content of abstracts can be traced on: http://www.knjizenstvo.rs/Jelica%20BB_e-book_ISPRAVKE2_FIN.pdf [retrieved: 1 Feb. 2018]. See also a chapter about Belović Bernadžikovska in Ivana Pantelić, Jelena Milinković, Ljubinka Škodrić, *Dvadeset žena koje su obeležile XX vek u Srbiji. 1. deo* (Beograd, 2013), 27–31.

origin). This may lead to misleading conclusions, universalization and instrumentalization of the experience of Jews, as well as of other important minorities living in Croatia.

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