

# Value Determinants, Mentality and Identity of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian Village at the Beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century according to Ivan Softa's Literary Works

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**Abstract.** Ivan Softa (Sopta) (1906–1945) was a Croatian writer from Bosnia and Herzegovina. In his realistic novels *Dani jada i glada* (*Days of Misery and Hunger*) (1937) and *Nemirni mir* (*Restless Peace*) (1940), as well as in his other literary achievements, he describes the life of the Herzegovinian village at the time when the First World War was about to start. It was an ambience dominated by bare stone, hot sun, sharp north wind called bora, with somewhat scarce and sparse land that made an easy life impossible. These resources that abound in this Western Balkans region also shaped the specific (Dinaric) mentality of the people of that time: hard as the stone on which they grew up, aggressive and easily flammable like the sun that they were exposed to and unrestrained like the wind, the whipping of which they mercilessly suffered from. But it happened that even from that fiery temper some kind of an original mountaineering-like honesty and confidence, empathy and readiness for self-sacrifice had emerged. Personal martyrdom turning into self-destruction – something that seems to be completely inconceivable to modern man – is embodied in the female characters, whereas emotional rawness and hardness are more characteristic of the author's male characters. The tragic circumstances of war and famine caused emigration to regions where there was bread. These tragic circumstances resulted in the tragic fate of the characters who left the Herzegovinian environment and, like many others, fell apart on the side roads of life.

**Keywords:** World War One (Bosnia-Herzegovina), mentality of the Herzegovinian village at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, famine in Herzegovina during the First World War, the Great Depression (1929–1933).

## XX a. pradžios Bosnijos ir Hercegovinos kaimo vertybės, mentalitetas ir tapatybė pagal Ivano Softos kūrinis

**Anotacija.** Ivanas Softa (Sopta) (1906–1945) – kroatų rašytojas iš Bosnijos ir Hercegovinos. Realistiniuose romanuose *Dani jada i glada* („Vargo ir bado dienos“) (1937) ir *Nemirni mir* („Nerami ramybė“) (1940), taip

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pat kituose literatūrinuose kūriniuose jis aprašo Hercegovinos kaimo gyvenimą prieš prasidedant Pirmajam pasauliniam karui. Tai buvo aplinka, kurioje vyravo plikas akmuo, karšta saulė, atšiaurus šiaurės vėjas, vadinamas *bora*, o žemė buvo neturtinga, todėl lengvas gyvenimas tapo neįmanomas. Minėti ištekliai, kurių gausu šiame Vakarų Balkanų regione, taip pat suformavo specifinį (dinarų) to meto žmonių mentalitetą: kieti kaip akmuo, ant kurio jie užaugo, agresyvūs ir lengvai užsiliepsnoję kaip saulė, kurios buvo veikiami, ir nevaržomi kaip vėjas, kurio plakimą jie negailestingai kentėjo. Bet atsitiko taip, kad net iš to ugingo temperamento atsirado kažkoks originalus, tarsi kopimui į kalną būdingas sąžiningumas ir pasitikėjimas, empatija ir pasirengimas pasiaukoti. Asmeninė kančia, pavirstanti į savęs sunaikinimą – tai, kas šiuolaikiniam žmogui atrodo visiškai nesuvokiama – įkūnyta moteriškuose personažuose, o emocinis nepadorumas ir „kietumas“ labiau būdingi autoriaus personažams vyrams. Tragiškos karo ir bado aplinkybės paskatino emigraciją į regionus, kur buvo duonos. Šios aplinkybės lėmė tragišką herojų, palikusių hercegovinišką aplinką ir, kaip ir daugelio kitų, sugniuždytų gyvenimo keliuose, likimą.

**Pagrindinės sąvokos:** Pirmasis pasaulinis karas (Bosnija ir Hercegovina), Hercegovinos kaimo mentalitetas XX a. pradžioje, badas Hercegovinoje per Pirmąjį pasaulinį karą, Didžioji depresija (1929–1933 m.).

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## Introduction

Ivan Softa (Sopta) was born in the village of Smokinje near Široki Brijeg approximately in the year 1906 and died in 1945. He was a Bosnian-Herzegovinian and Croatian writer. The authentic literary achievement of this first Croatian worker writer (Hrvatska, 2008, p. 86) was noticed with the novel *Na cesti* (On the Road) (Softa, 1936). The novel received several awards and had several editions.

The novel *Dani jada i glada* (Days of Misery and Hunger) (Softa, 1937) takes place in a village near Lištica during the First World War (1914–1918), which began when Softa was an eight-year-old schoolboy. The novel *Nemirni mir* (Unsettled Peace) (Softa, 1940) develops its plot in the same setting after the end of the war and follows the fate of several characters who moved to Slavonia. In the two mentioned novels, the author “visits the graves of earlier illusions and faith in life” (Softa, 1936, p. 59). The novel about “an unemployed worker” *On the Road* follows the life of the main character Filip, nicknamed “Sumnjivi – Suspicious”, in his search for employment between Zagreb and Vinkovci. In this work, Softa conveys his mature thinking, created in conjunction with the merciless reality of life, and it seems to be his most complete literary work. The novel covers the vagabond period of Softa’s life, from moving to Slavonia in 1926 (the most probable year) to moving to Zagreb in 1934. One part of that period is covered by the plot of the unfinished novel *Razlaz poznatih* (Separation of Famous People), which refers to the time of his employment in the Vinkovci brick factory: “In honour of the working class among whom I spent ten years of hard life, and in memory of my comrades, whose fates are presented in this novel, albeit under changed names” (Softa, 1994, p. 130). Softa also published several short stories. Dugandžić (2006) states that Softa planned to write a novel with the title *Vijekovi se smiju i plaču* (Centuries Are Laughing and Crying) dealing with the economic and political life in the Herzegovinian village from the arrival of the Ottomans to the Second World War (1463–1941), as is stated in *Napomena* (The Note): “The worker and the homeless returns to his native village and there he is confronted

with the power of the primeval, his own origin, which suddenly relativizes proletarian internationalism and the rhetoric related to it” (Softa, 1996, p. 69).

Values are all those properties of a physical being, an abstract entity, a process or an act that express moral, vital, aesthetic, economic or any other quality. Values are what should be strived for, what is better for people to do in order to live better. They are ethical or philosophical principles. A value is also an assessment criterion, an ideal one strives to achieve (Kutleša, 2012, p. 1240).

Value determinants, mentality and identity of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian village at the beginning of the 20th century are explored in the first part of this paper and are shown through the circumstances that decisively influenced people and their destinies: war and famine in the novel *Dani jada i glada* (Days of Misery and Hunger) and their echo in the novel *Nemirni mir* (Unsettled Peace); unemployment in the novel *Na cesti* (On the Road). Fragments of the village code of conduct are presented and only hinted at as an antithesis in the experiences of the characters who live “on the road” and in Slavonia.

In the Preface to *The Collected Works*, Dugandžić (2006) provided precious details about Softa’s life and work based on his own research and the family memories of Softa’s descendants. Tomić (2007) wrote about the religious themes that Softa dealt with. Softa was also mentioned in several anthologies of Bosnian-Herzegovinian and Croatian literature (Alilović, 1989). The first edition of Softa’s *Collected Works* was published in 1994; then in 2006 on the centenary of his birth the second edition appeared (Hrvatska, 2008, p. 86). A continuation of this present article *Value Determinants, Mentality and Identity of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian Village at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century according to Ivan Softa’s literary Works* will come later in a lecture by Tomić (2022). In that lecture entitled *Changing the Value and Educational Paradigm of Herzegovinian Emigrants to Slavonia at the Beginning of the 20th Century according to the Works of Ivan Softa* (Subotica, Republic of Serbia, November 2022) Tomić will show how the moral paradigm of immigrants has been radically changed in the new Slavonian environment, primarily in relation to the family community, followed by its relation to work and a drastic change in the understanding of sexuality. It will be pointed out that solidarity has disappeared as well as that alcoholism and physical violence have reached incomprehensibly large proportions. Furthermore, it will be highlighted that all these are emphasised by Softa’s descriptions of inhumane working and living conditions.

## Crucial External Circumstances: War and Famine

**War.** Softa writes about the echoes of the First World War in Herzegovina with a 20-year delay in the novel *Dani jada i glada* (Days of Misery and Hunger), which begins in the summer of 1914 and ends in 1918 with the return of men from the battlefield and with the arrival of the victorious army in Lištica. While the shadows of war hovered over the village of the author’s childhood and the anticipation of news from the battlefield, Softa’s mental state also changed, as indicated by the words of one of the characters: “And I felt some fear, confusion, ‘something’, which I could not understand at all, and which I have

not understood even to this day. Or to tell you honestly, I don't even know what that 'something' is. I just feel it, in all my work and thoughts. It is the first major scar on my soul, which cannot be erased and healed" (Softa, 1936, p. 30).

In what serves as a scene for the declaration of war there is description of a bloody Sunday clash of village youths, those "wanton and drunken primitives because of their youth and life and proudness of their strength" (Softa, 1937, p. 6). The horror of the battlefield "full of bloody bodies and deafening screams of disfigured faces" was alluded to through the thoughts of the local priest (Ibid., p. 9). In general, the war changed priorities. People – normally occupied with a certain rhythm of work and survival – were torn out of their everyday life by the war. They faced something that was beyond them, something that they did not understand and in which they did not see any purpose: "To me, who was familiar with nothing else but the Christian Lord's Prayer, the hoe and sweat, and now they dragged me into a world, so dirty, that even the soul sweats with disgust" (Ibid., p. 43). The author raises questions about the legitimacy of the war: "May the devil took away that war, God forgive me, it really is a big trouble". And who puts it on our necks. So he gathers your people and drives them somewhere to Tyrol and the Carpathians, and kills them there. Oh, oh, they run into something. May God grant that you disappear! But, well, who would know what's going on with these people today" (Ibid., p. 18). There is also the question of the moral justification of war, the question of who has the right to destroy another person's happiness, the question of why someone has to leave everything he owns and go to war: "... to leave Janja and my mother and our village gathering and my friends. To leave everything, everything one has possessed and that has been nice and dear to him, and to go somewhere to an unknown world, world that is terrible and bloody" (Ibid., p. 13). Furthermore, there is the issue of the meaning and benefits of war, since people could do and want to do something more useful: "When I remember, that my land that has been cleared from undergrowth in the village of Progon is still untouched, as I left it, that the land has not been dug, and my mother is hungry. What she digs, it is just as nobody has touched it. It just buries the seeds. What can she do? And I hang out here" (Ibid., p. 87).

Softa gives more than only a description of the war operations themselves by trying to reveal the mental state of a man around whom death buzzes and dances, looking for an opportune moment to descend on him and suck his life. The author marks this anticipation of his own expiration with a more terrible state and a more merciless judgment than in a verdict of a quick court (Ibid., p. 43). The pressure of the inextricable proximity of death makes it impossible for the characters to reflect. The instinctive struggle for survival imposes animal behaviour on them: "A man goes and kills! And dirty instincts are born in him... – The fear of death drives him and he runs away, and reaches a woman, knocking her down under him. He throws the corpse of her child under her head and wipes its blood on her body, takes it and goes on, to take, kill, destroy and spit on what he himself created in the hours of consciousness, when he was still a man" (Ibid., p. 42). Despite the strong desire to return home, the very continuation of the former life was as painful for many as was their absence. "They laughed and were happy, but that laughter was like

a mask... it was fake. Their souls were full of pain, deceived and miserable. They were restless and upset, which was especially noticeable after the first sign of joy..." (Ibid., p. 96). After four years of walking around in blood and corpses, it was difficult to decide to take up any kind of work; it was funny to pick up a hoe and cultivate the land, to bear the smell of the earth, to hear the singing of birds and the blowing of the wind (Ibid., p. 97). Conversations bogged down (Softa, 1940, p. 26–27), many questions about war and killing remained unanswered.

**Famine.** The great drought, especially during the war year of 1917, resulted in an unprecedented famine in Herzegovina. People fed on grass, tree barks, everything that was edible. That hunger, like the war, overwhelmed the heroes of Softa's novels: "Hunger has no eyes or consideration. Hunger is to blame for that. Their souls are born in that darkness and in terrible anticipation. Their first thought in the evening and their last thought in the evening was: How to eat full?" (Ibid., p. 36). The year of 1918, which was somewhat more fruitful, was described as follows: "The hunger has eased a little, since there is plenty of grass. Mulberry leaves are the sweetest. Mulberry branches are bare as in winter, we have stripped all the leaves. We no longer bake bread from maple bark, since the new barley arrived. We pluck the ears, dry them and grate them. Dear Stanko! We have slaughtered all the goats, leaving only three for breeding. We have also slaughtered that calf from Bilava (name of a cow)" (Ibid., p. 88). Hunger, as an echo of times gone by, is also present in the novel with a post-war theme *Unsettled Peace*: "... as if once again he heard the cries of hungry children, which were tearing his ears" (Softa, 1940, p. 5).

What remained in his memory from those days of misery and hunger is that people in that indescribable famine sang: "They are hungry, and they still sing. Strange people! I don't understand them, as if I were not one of them, as if I hadn't grown up, in the same place where they grew up? ... When I passed this way with a hoe on my shoulder, with a sweaty and black face and calloused hands, I would sing. Whenever I left home from work, I was hungry and tired but I always sang ... – They only eat grass... and they still sing" (Ibid., p. 54). In the starving region of Herzegovina, it was recounted with disbelief that in Slavonia even the poorest have white bread and bacon (Ibid., p. 82). Because of the famine, thousands of children were transported to Slavonia to have access to food. The hunger for life is great as long as they believe in it until they have learnt to know it in all its appearances. That is the moment when Softa's heroes either become empty or go crazy or destroy themselves and others only by brooding over their miserable life (Ibid., p. 98), while others hand over themselves and their family to anyone who wants to pay (Softa, 1996d).

## Cultivating the Land

The Herzegovinian peasant, as portrayed by Softa, has a strong desire to cultivate the land, despite the merciless nature, despite the war (Softa, 1937, p. 78). In Herzegovina, arable land is synonymous with treasure and wealth. The one who has land is a rich man; he is independent from both nature and people. Owning and cultivating the land provided some

kind of security for survival. Those who cultivate the land (those who dig) also sing; they sing because they can cultivate the land. A person that owns the land, longs to buy more land. Softa's characters Ivan Zadrušić and Bariša Jukurov (they could be persons from Softa's childhood) earned money in America by means of which they wanted to buy land. Ivan Zadrušić: "I am going to earn a lot of money, buy a lot of land and build the most beautiful house in the village" (Ibid., p. 102). Another example of money earned in America that was used to buy land can be seen elsewhere: "When Bariša Jukurov went to America ten years ago, he left with a cry on his lips: land, land! And he returned home, but the cry did not stop. And all the time he spent in the American mines, foundries and factories, his heart cried and wailed, and the ears listened to the accompanying cry from home: land, land!" (Softa, 1940, p. 53). With the arrival of the Yugoslav state (1918–1941), *The Landowner (agha)* was in two minds about whether or not to sell the land on which he had based his power until then: "What will the aghas and beys say?! Should I do it too? Have I fallen to that low level? Where are the rights, where are the old laws, where is my power?!" (Ibid., p. 52). In the novel *Razlaz poznatih* (Separation of Famous People), Luka Ćorić is in doubt whether or not to sell his property in his native region, even though he and his family have irretrievably moved to Slavonia: "That's my patrimony!" (Softa, 1994, p. 151).

## Family Community

A brief but content-rich vision of a harmonious family idyll in Herzegovina is beautifully presented in the novel *Dani jada i glada* (Days of Misery and Hunger): "When you come home from work in the evening, I will meet you in front of the house. I will prepare water for washing, I will roast coffee. You will come and sit, drink coffee as if you were a boss; I'll be preparing our dinner, goats will be bleating in the yard, my daughter-in-law will be closing them into the stable and the children will be running around and shouting. I will be shouting at them and at the same time threatening them with my finger like a real woman" (Softa, 1937, p. 53). And the workers in the Vinkovci brick factory, uprooted from their villages and previous lives, tried to create a new home there (Softa, 1994, p. 135). Due to war and famine and because of different human destinies, many of Softa's characters failed to bring their own family idyll to life.

In a harmonious home and village community, they lived according to some unwritten laws, a kind of an established order, never seeing themselves as something special outside of that community (Softa, 1940, p. 108). In family relationships, respect for elders in terms of age and authority was very pronounced, especially to those who held the position of hosts in the family cooperative. Mothers were also respected. Daughters-in-law used to respect their mothers-in-law very much, and this is well presented in the novel *Nemirni mir* (Unsettled Peace) (Ibid., p. 17).

Softa singles out as special cases those instances in which there is no mutual respect in a family or family cooperative. This is the cause of the disintegration of the family unit (Ibid., p. 94). Bad human nature is mostly to be blamed for division and discord. Jukur and Markan endured Andrijinica's nagging, while she was dissatisfied in the community.



They were thinking of what to do so that she could be satisfied and calmed down They were sorry to part for the sake of Andrijinica's children (Ibid., p. 56). In the novel *Dani jada i bijede* (Days of Misery and Hunger), the American (the name of a character in that novel) separated his sister-in-law and her children from the family cooperative while his brother was fighting in the war. Others, including himself, blamed him for that. In the novel *Nemirni mir*, Jukur did not want to drive out one of his younger sons, and when the latter insisted, Jukur chased him away. He did not want to drive out his late son's wife, either, so this happened while he was in hospital: "Andrijinica, went to the house, took a burning log from the hearth and carried it to another house" (Ibid., p. 95). One gets the impression that Softa did not approve with those who left family cooperatives.

In the novel *Na cesti* (On the Road), the hardships and disintegration of several working families, one from Zagreb, another from Sisak, and the third from Novi Sad, are described in more detail. In that novel, the main characters used to have families, relatives and friends, but in the state they are in now, they do not have them and cannot have them. They are left with almost no memories of their families (Softa, 1936, p. 65). The character *Suspicious* wanted to found his own family and marry Caca (the name of a character). He declared his love for her. She refused him as she had stopped believing in love and family (Ibid., p. 56).

## Spouses

In the harsh environment of Herzegovina, husbands used to beat their wives and children for no reason at all. The following is a description of how the American beat his wife Grizeljuša. "He punched her in the back of the head. She fell. Then he kicked her stomach, went back to the house and took away the enamel cooking pot from the fire. She was writhing in pain and sobbing. The children huddled against the wall and were trembling. When he had prepared lunch, he invited the children inside. They ate unwillingly" (Softa, 1937, p. 20). And later, when he lost his mind: "... I will kill Grizeljuša, pound her with my fists, so that she swells up like a dead goat..." (Ibid., p. 91). Softa also stated that Ivan Zadrušić "tyrannically tortured his wife" (Ibid., p. 89). In general, men did not tolerate complaints, especially not counselling from women, let alone children. If they did give in, as Jukur gave in to his daughter-in-law Andrijanica, when he had enough, then he would punish her for any little thing (Softa, 1940, p. 58).

After his retirement, former policeman Dudalić moved from the city to the countryside with his wife, to his old family home. She considered herself a lady. She was twenty years younger than him, so, distressed by her return to the village, she once called him "old ram", to which he reacted violently: "Then he slapped her hard, and she stumbled from the slap, grabbed onto the bed and, sitting on it let out angry words towards Dudalić that were unintelligible because of her crying. And he stopped at the threshold and began threatening, which he interrupted with a slap... In this house, women always listened to men. You will also have to listen to me. My father used to beat my mother for the slightest disobedience, so see to it that I do not have to often apply the science I had learned from

him. I told you and you heard it, so you know it and understand it. And don't whine for too long, because the women in this house didn't do that either. So stop it" (Ibid., p. 34).

Although women respected their husbands, sometimes they would also get sick of their behaviour. Ivan Zadrušić's wife, Grizeljkuš, once addressed her husband in the following way: "How long will you go on like this, Ivan? What am I? Am I your bitch or wife? If I'm a bitch, put me on a chain and throw a bone to me, or chase me into the hill with the cattle, and don't let the bitch poo on you, because she might bite you. If I'm your wife, don't drink my blood any more! You ... devil! Even a lamb budes and makes sound with its leg when you bore it with caressing, let alone a woman under beatings. You torture like the devil, and in torture, whether you want to or not, you have to think. Pain makes you. You can't do it like this anymore, *American* (name of a character from the novel), you can't do it like that anymore! When the disease throws you to the ground, if you need to defecate, and it is difficult to defecate for a frantic patient, a madman. When you rise up, then you are a torturer, worse than the devil himself" (Softa, 1937, p. 89). Later she encouraged herself that it was good that she resisted (Ibid., p. 92).

Marital morality and marital fidelity in the Herzegovina of Softa's childhood were an unquestionable reality. The author mentions only a few cases that were contrary to customary behaviour. This happened in a neighbouring village, where a woman "made love with Turks from Vitina". In the village of Softa's childhood, it was recounted with horror that in Slavonia every married woman had another man. They were so immoral that they took to the streets and asked if someone wanted them, and it was recounted in disbelief that there were some who made a living from this business (Ibid., p. 81). Mothers feared that the children they sent to Slavonia would become corrupted in such an environment (Ibid., p. 82). Janja, a 17-year-old girl sent to Slavonia for supplementary feeding, became drunk and was then used by Franjo Kelin. Because of something that was not her fault, she in her thoughts said goodbye to her native village: "Will I never see my mother again? ... Dad? ... Grandma? ... Friends? ... Will I never again be singing while walking over the hills? Has everything failed? ... Oh, it has! ... I must not return to my mother's house. ... She would curse me if she found out what happened to me. ... And where, where should I go now? ..." (Softa, 1940, p. 67).

In Softa's novels, female characters outside the family environment are often tragic for themselves, and disastrous for other people. The plot of the novel *Na cesti* (On the Road) follows several tragic lives of female characters. Misery and poverty made their nature very rough and violent. They did not show tenderness towards anyone; they retaliated with rude and simple remarks. They were as rough and simple as their life that brought them to such a situation (Softa, 1936, p. 119), they got drunk in order to fill their emptiness of life with something (Ibid., p. 24), they were forced to sell their bodies (Ibid., pp. 93–95).

### **Honour Your Father and Your Mother!**

In the Herzegovinian rural cooperatives, as Softa describes them, children used to be a common concern and no distinction was made between them with regard to who their



parents were. Markan is given the children of his two brothers who had been killed in the war and reflects like this: “What am I going to do with so many children now? I have to take care of my brother’s as well as of my own children. Andrija has three sons, Ivan has two, and I have two. Seven sons, seven headstones. If I built a house for everyone, there wouldn’t even be land left for a midden” (Softa, 1940, p. 45). His family with his brother’s children looked to him like a fired grenade, whose fuse is burning out and is expected to explode at any moment. And when it cracks, where will the pieces go? Where will they fly to, where will they fall? Will they fall into the mud so that they would rust; or will they fall onto a stone so that they would break, or will they land on soft grass? (Ibid., p. 55). In the short story *Brother*, Lovro worries similarly: “The seventh son, and no daughters. God bless him and may he live long! But what will you do in a situation like this having only sons? ... A daughter gets married, leaves home. But a son! How will I be able to build houses for seven of them. Seven sons, seven beggars. But may God give them long life!” (Softa, 1996a, p. 25).

Children were brought up with beatings and strict discipline. The obedience of the son to his father is illustrated in the short story *Brat* (Brother). Martin contradicted his father: “His sharp voice called him to consciousness. – You’re saying to me: you won’t?! To me? To your Dad?!” (Ibid., p. 23). In the short story *Brak bez ljubavi* (Marriage without Love), twenty-four-year-old Iva marries Ikeša against her will at her mother’s behest (Softa, 1996b). In the novel *Dani bijede i gladi* (Days of Misery and Hunger), a father punched a character named Iko and would have killed him if his grandmother had not protected him (Softa, 1937, p. 24). Here is the reflection of a child who feels awe towards his father in the same situation: “Oh, if I could only become invisible, untouchable and powerful as the evening darkness! Then my father wouldn’t beat me!” (Ibid., p. 17). Another young male character whose name is Ikeša lies to his grandfather about where he has spent the night, so the grandfather beats him on the head with a stick. In Slavonia, a character referred to as Ružica worked as a day labourer for village bosses and earned whatever she could. Her father was an alcoholic: “Her efforts to show herself to be more valuable, valid and modest every day were in vain” (Softa, 1940, p. 87). Caca’s father was not a drunkard, but when he did get drunk, he would create an infernal noise in the house, he would beat his wife and children, he would give them no peace. And after sobering up, he would be sorry (Softa, 1936, p. 14).

The adults justified their beating of children with the following explanation: “The small thorn is sharpened. That is what I always say, and that is the truth” (Softa, 1937, p. 36). They were terrified when they sent their children to be fed in Slavonia (Ibid., pp. 57–58). They hoped that their children would listen to them in the way they listened to their parents (Ibid., p. 57). That is why they used to beat them up – out of love (as they put it) – and the children were mostly obedient, despite the extreme hunger (Ibid., p. 35). The elders were convinced that if children do something, it should always be checked. “You can never rely on children” (Softa, 1940, p. 16). They must also not be left to their own devices: “... even a child must not be left to do what he wants, if the elders think that it is not good” (Ibid., p. 57). “To some extent, the strictness in which Jukur raised his grandchildren was also to

be blamed. He did not allow them to go around the villages in their younger years, nor did he allow them the small joys of the village youth in decorating and various games in the village gatherings. That's why Ikeša, when he became his own master, lived excessively in everything" (Ibid., p. 122). On the other hand, no one used to beat Lela, who was the daughter of the head of the cooperative. However, she also wondered to herself that the usual feelings of a child towards a sick father did not appear in her. She felt grumpy that her father's illness messed up her plans: "Leaving his bed, a thought suddenly came to her ... and she said: – It would be better if he dies..." (Softa, 1940, p. 117).

In the novels written by Ivan Softa, a mother's love for her children is strongly emphasized, regardless of whether the children are small or have already grown up. The following is a description of the reaction of a mother character, Mara, in the novel *Nemirni mir* (Restless Peace) when her son Markan after several years of absence returned from the war without a leg, whereas her other two sons did not return: "after he had been away for four years, she awaited his arrival every day and always imagined a different welcome, but at that moment, when she heard the much-desired screeching that the shoe rivets made on the stones, nothing came to her mind. Out of happiness, which brought tears to her eyes, and mother's joy, which stretched her heart to bursting, she seemed to have lost her speech. She was shocked and couldn't utter a word out of her mouth. She ran towards her son, wringing her hands and flailing them. Only occasionally did she put her joy into words and say: – Son! My child!" (Ibid., p. 13). "A mother's love took over her, and she wanted to caress her big crippled child, as she used to, when he was small, but it seemed childish to her, and she restrained herself by getting up and sitting down. As it usually happens, a person always remembers beautiful experiences from the past first, and Markan remembered them, watching his mother's joy. Beautiful days lined up in front of him and caused sadness that brought tears to his eyes. Even those difficult days, shrouded in the past, seemed to him like a dear memory" (Ibid., p. 18). The situation seemed to be similar when her bride Stana saw her son Ante in Slavonia after four years. "Stana stood as if frozen and mute, overwhelmed by her mother's joy, and spoke slowly: It seems to me, son, that my heart will burst. He still has the desire to see Janja" (Ibid., p. 121). Female characters were more expressive in showing their love for children, whereas men used to hide their feelings.

The problem of pregnancy termination is hinted at through the character of Tereza Starošević from Slavonia. She did not give birth fearing that she would become ugly, and then she would consequently stay alone without a husband. She took in a child (Antuka Markan's) to get additional food and adopted him: "She squeezed and hugged him, as if by his proximity she wanted to destroy the loneliness that was creeping into her soul, and cried bitterly, deeply and painfully, as if she had wanted to cry out the misery of a self-willed barren woman and with her sobs she wanted to drown out the imaginary sobs of children strangled in the womb" (Ibid., p. 46). Softa includes a dialogue between Teresa and her conceived and unborn children. It is interesting that Tereza transfers the same approach to Antuka's wife: "I persuaded her not to give birth. She will become ugly from pregnancy, and he will kiss younger and prettier ones" (Ibid., p. 127). Lela (the name of

a character) also mentioned that she would not have a child or marry. She knew what she had to do to prevent the child from being born (Ibid., p. 100). Janja gave birth to a child in some kind of mud while being completely drunk. She intended to kill both herself and the child (Ibid., p. 130). In the novel *Razlaz poznatih* (The Separation of Famous People) Softa notes such behaviour in the working families of the brickyard: “What is regarded as a horror in their village is regarded as something ordinary here. They have been giving birth to bastards here for fifteen years. Here’s Herman’s. Not just that! Luca sees and hears even worse things. They take them out of their wombs dead. They kill them as embryos” (Softa, 1994, p. 153). In the presence of many children, Lovro, the father of a large family, reflects in the following way in the short story *Brat* (Brother): “She is right. Martin also told me that a little while ago, and I and all of us think so, but what can we do. How can we live differently. Should we slaughter children in their mother’s womb, like some of them in the city. I won’t do that, even if all seven become beggars” (Softa, 1996a, p. 25).

## Sexual Morality

Softa describes several young lovers in the Herzegovinian village atmosphere whose companionship took place according to certain rules. In his conversation with Lela, Ikeša explains the youth village gathering in detail: “And, as for pinching, this is our custom: A man has been staying with the same girl for years and has only pinched her occasionally. And it happened stealthily” (Softa, 1940, p. 78). In the novel *Nemirni mir* (Restless Peace), Lela, a daughter of a policeman and a politician (people’s representative in the governing body), brings from the city to the closed rural environment views of free love and youthful relationships. For a while, she also lived according to the morals of the *petit bourgeois* laws from which she later dissociated herself with ironic disdain. Lela explains the new attitude towards sexuality to her own mother as follows: “This war that has just ended has burned away many misconceptions about the rights and duties of women. You should just see what a torrent of freedom is flowing in married life in this town now. Concepts that once gave women moral chills are now laughed at” (Ibid., p. 75). Lela entered into a relationship with a village youth whose name was Ikeša. Due to his different upbringing and views on sexual morality, his conscience tormented him for a while (Ibid., p. 97), but then he started a relationship with Lela’s mother. In the novel *Na cesti* (On the road) (scenes taking place in Slavonia), Softa gives brutal descriptions about sexual behaviour: a lawyer sexually exploited a 13-year-old room-maid, a fat grandmother exploited a tramp in exchange for dinner and lodging (Softa, 1936, pp. 114–115), a man lured another tramp and used her (Ibid., p. 105), men exploited, tortured and humiliated vagrant women (Ibid., p. 26), and other prostitutes for a coin or two or in exchange for lodging. The following can be read about the same phenomenon in the work entitled *Zeleni gaj* (Green Grove): “... you get a piece of a woman’s body as well as a glass of sparkling water” (Softa, 1994, p. 135). There are hints of forced sexual relations (rape) in Softa’s works. They have been present since the Ottoman era: an agha raped Jurkur’s younger sister (Softa, 1940, p. 4), Jukur’s granddaughter suffered

a similar fate in Slavonia (Ibid., pp. 84–85), financial police officers committed violence against women who smuggled tobacco (Softa, 1937, p. 60).

### Mocking, Quarrelling and Revenge...

Those who did not fit in or those who violated the unwritten rules of behaviour used to be mocked by the villagers. They made fun of the policeman: “He knew that in the village they mocked him because of his frequently used word “daklen” (meaning *therefore*) and he knew that they didn’t use any other word to refer to him in his absence, and he didn’t get angry openly because of that, and he did not resent the children whose anger turned into insolence” (Softa, 1940, p. 36). They mocked his daughter Lela and the young man Ikeša: “Boys and girls are mocking you, that you started with me... Shepherds who met them on the way or happened to see them from a nearby hill used to shout after them and laugh. Some of them would sing a mocking song that they made up about them...” (Ibid., p. 118). They mocked the policeman’s wife Liza because in the country she dressed a mixture of country-town clothes (Ibid., p. 68). In *Razlaz poznatih* (The Separation of Famous People) Luka Čorić is mocked because his wife gave birth to a child with another man (Softa, 1994, p. 151). Even Markan, who returned crippled from the war, was afraid of mockery: “And here, that mocking word *Čolo* (The meaning in English would be something like a Red Indian who has grown up among the European white population) has destroyed all the joys of returning home and has cut even deeper into his soul the painful starvation and bloody war life. The closer he got to the house, the fear of mockery gathered all the experiences of three years of mud and lice-cracking into one heavy and murky gooeey feeling, through which the whole future seemed muddy and gooeey to him. And because of that, the closer he was to home, the less he was in a hurry” (Softa, 1940, p. 12). But, as time passed, Softa stopped paying attention to such things: “The main thing is that they cannot tell me: You have killed, you have stolen and you have cheated” (Softa, 1936, p. 53).

Additionally, quarrels and even blood feuds took place. Quarrels happened because of intentional or unintentional destruction of other people’s property, over wood and water, the cattle and pasture and other things (Softa, 1937, p. 96), especially because of water during long droughts (in the year of 1917) (Ibid., p. 71). Revenge is not emphasized, but it is present in Softa’s literary works. For example, in *Dani jada i glada* (Days of Misery and Hunger), a neighbour gave away a hiding place of a *zelenoš* (a person who fled from the battlefield and was hiding to avoid being punished or drafted again) because of the humiliation of breaking a *burilo* (a flat wooden vessel for carrying water). In the novel *Nemirni mir* (Unsettled Peace), it seems that Jukur left to become a *hajduk* (bandits during the Ottoman Empire) after taking revenge for the rape and death of his younger sister. A policeman whose name is Matiša Dudalić is thinking about possible revenge and realizes it after returning to his native village: “Jukur’s father killed my father! Jukur’s father killed my father! And his son wanted to kill me this morning. And his son wanted to kill me this morning! And his son wanted to kill me. So, it’s him killing me again! And do they always have to kill us?” (Softa, 1940, p. 35).

The attitude towards religious phenomena has been described elsewhere. Religion had an important influence on the formation of mentality and the value system. Descriptions of Sunday meetings around and in the church are present in the novel *Dana jada i bijede* (Days of Misery and Hunger), which begins with a description of events around the village church: “Every Sunday there is life and joy, because people from five villages meet in that place. One hour before the mass, they start coming from all sides with the continuous singing of boys and girls. It’s as if four huge rivers meet on four sides, collide and flow into each other with a deafening noise, and through it various folk songs can only be slightly heard, like somewhere in the distance the melodious sound of a flute, or the overpowering shriek of a dipele, which give an impression of a sound, as if a woman’s desperate cry broke out of the frightened crowd” (Softa, 1937, p. 5). In that environment imbued with customs and piety, every disorder was even more pronounced. For example, the belief that the punishment of God in the form of war took place because of a brawl between young men on a Sunday (Ibid., p. 25). In such an environment, the words that Softa put into the mouths of returnees from America or those returning from the battlefield sounded especially blasphemous as they openly asked questions about what kind of God there is if a man-animal has been created in his image (Ibid., p. 42).

In the often painful events of the war and post-war years, Softa inserted very beautiful descriptions of nature, especially in the novel *Dani jada i bijede* (Days of Misery and Hunger). Descriptions of a summer storm with hail, autumn rain, wind and rain, and, especially, summer heat stand out... It is even possible that Softa testifies about himself when he writes about little Iko Grizeleljuša that he was a dreamer, that he liked to listen to the rustling of drops and watch the rain fall (Ibid., p. 16).

## Conclusion

In his novels and short stories, Ivan Softa, drawing on his own childhood memories and later conversations with the inhabitants of that time, tried to portray the life of the Herzegovinian village immediately before and during the First World War, as well as the life of the interwar period between the two world wars. His literary creations are not full of well-rounded moral expressions but they are full of images, each of which carries a lesson. Extraordinary circumstances (war and famine) were a great challenge, but they did not decisively affect the mentality and the way of life in the Herzegovinian countryside. These extraordinary circumstances were the reason for the displacement. The new environment in which Softa’s characters found themselves, now unprotected by established norms and lifestyles, was mostly fatal for them. Many of them did not only eat enough – and that was the main reason for their emigration – but they also failed morally, they were permanently disgraced, without the possibility of returning to their place of birth.

The common feature of all Softa’s emigrant characters, regardless of where they found themselves, is the desire to return to their homeland, to continue living where their life once stopped, preferably without hunger and poverty. However, the return itself, if it happened, was mostly painful. The returnees used to be burdened by acquired experiences;

this was the case with those who returned from the war or from working abroad. Getting involved again in the established rhythm of village life was not easy. For many, the return often became as painful as their earlier absence from home itself.

The Herzegovinian peasant, as portrayed by Softa, has a strong desire to cultivate the land, despite the merciless nature and despite the war. In Herzegovina, land is synonymous with treasure and wealth. Those who do not work are forced to steal. Being a thief was considered a particularly bad personality trait and a great shame. In the novel *Na cesti* (On the Road), Softa questions exactly what theft is, so in a way he justifies it. Those who did not steal had to beg, and begging is what many of Softa's characters are ashamed of. However, they cannot earn their living.

Softa repeatedly wrote about sexuality from different perspectives. In the region of Hercegovina, sexuality used to be defined by a clear code of conduct both for young men and women as well as for husbands and wives. In the Herzegovina of Softa's childhood, marital morality and marital fidelity used to be an unquestionable principle. It was only after the war that a couple of individuals brought with them views about free love and youth relationships from the city to the closed rural environment. Such attitudes were viewed with contempt and ridicule. Softa dealt with sexuality issue more freely when describing the Slavonic environment. This was the region where violence and fraud and the sale of bodies took place.

Finally, it is possible to reconstruct family relationships from Softa's literary works. Softa's characters mostly cherished their love for the home hearth. In a harmonious home and village community, they live according to an established order, seeing themselves as part of that community. Respect for elders in terms of age and authority is highly expressed. In the novel *Na cesti* (On the Road), the hardships and disintegration of several working families are described with more details. Due to war, hunger and unemployment and due to differently realized human destinies, many of Softa's characters failed to bring their own family idyll to life. Men used to be more authoritative and ruled over their families. Women, at least those living in Softa's birthplace, were full of compassion and love, self-sacrificing towards their husbands and children. In Softa's novels, female characters outside the family environment were often seen as tragic and disastrous for other people. Children were brought up with a lot of beating and strict discipline.

Softa's ubiquitous theme was being torn from a tradition and from the abode of one's life. From the life stories he presented, all of which are real stories, one gets the impression that those who left their native Herzegovina fared much worse, be it because of war, famine, employment or something else, than those who stayed in their village and ate grass and tree bark. Through the fate of the emigrant characters in Softa's novels and short stories, one gets the impression that the author became aware that it would have been best for him if he had never left his birthplace. But most likely, he would not have been aware that it was the best for him.



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