

SAMPLE  
TRANSLATION

LOJZE KOVAČIČ  
REALITY

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## Lojze Kovačič: Reality

### excerpts

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#### Excerpt from the beginning of the novel

He wanted to report what had happened to him, but the sergeant was in a hurry to get to the unit field office for the changeover. The grinder emptied slowly. He felt naked and cold and shivered so much from the inside that his hands shook like an old man's. The training camp was veiled in sweltering humidity. He looked around: nothing was happening. In the corridor lined with guns, mortars and anti-tank weapons, flies were dancing and buzzing around. There wasn't a spot of cool or shade in sight. With his huge boxer bandages, under which he felt hot and was sweating badly, it occurred to him that he should hide in a corner somewhere, since anyone might take this hanging around in the sun in the empty grinder as skiving off. He felt it wasn't right to hide, but he had to, if possible inside himself, under his own skin, protected so he would never ever be found, become invisible as it were. As soon as he stepped into the corridor amidst the stomping of his oversized boots, even the laziest and sleepest of guards would notice his figure appearing at the open door at the end of the corridor and he would instantly be branded a pest, a skiver, a saboteur and an enemy, and be reported with his name and company rank shouted down to the field office door - of course, only if he was stupid enough to approach the irritated panic-monger at the weapons stand. So the best thing to do was to disappear, slip out of the side door of his unit's sleeping quarters, although even there, right in the nest of all the loafers and layabouts, one had to be careful. He squatted in the red corner, under the shelf where the manuals were kept, sweating and tired, his half-shut eyes peering at the bright rectangle of the small window, gleaming from the reflection of the sun-drenched training yard outside. His fear could smell that something was about to happen at any moment - it sensed the smell of the hollow Balkans and of rotting cabbage, of officers' uniforms and zealous punishment, which was sure to hit him without reservations. But nothing had happened yet. He breathed in the thick air, filled with the buzzing of insects that covered the ceiling and the blankets on the narrow iron bunks. Was he at fault? Of course he was. He closed his eyes. He had transgressed against the kind of life he had begun to live six months ago. If only he could hide somewhere. What if he killed himself like the little Frenchman? He remembered Vincens Noset a Frenchman, well, in fact, the son of a Slovene émigré, a miner, who was determined to live in his father's homeland. So he ran away from his home in France where all his family lived. At first he took part in all the youth work brigades, until last year, in '48 when he was twenty, when he was called up to the army. He was a car body shop mechanic in his civilian job, a weak, pale boy with a small crooked mouth who spoke an incomprehensible mixture of Serbo-Croatian, Styrian Slovene and French. He was his friend; he had also moved back to Yugoslavia, with his father who was an émigré in

Switzerland, but before the war. Vincens was made fun of because he didn't fully understand the language and couldn't carry the heavy mortar base plate. After four months he could no longer take the army atmosphere, the shouting, the teasing, the continuous punishment, so he slashed his wrists with his bayonet before the bugle call one morning. When he didn't jump out of his bed in the morning, Sergeant Čuš decided to wake him up by pulling his feet and throwing him off his bed, only to discover a bed full of blood. There was panic, an investigation, unit meetings; the major in command of the regiment rode up to the barracks, furious. "How could he," he shouted over Vincens' bed, "destroy something like this, the lazy bastard!" An icy chill went down his spine: no, he can't even do this. He would be shamed even in death. But what can he do? And at that moment, just as he was falling asleep, it suddenly began. Shouting started and footsteps rang out on the wooden floor of the corridor. He could hear Čuš, "Private ..." and his name accompanied by the high-pitched voice of the young ensign, the company captain. Still squatting he shouted "Yes Sir!" in reply and only then stood up and, with surprising ease, staggered through the row of beds. Čuš and the ensign immediately appeared in the middle of the room. He went towards them with mechanical steps, thrusting his feet, one at a time, into the emptiness. He saluted only by clicking his heels as he was unable to raise his right arm. A veiled petrified shudder ran over their faces. "Here you are!" Čuš said. "Here!" the ensign repeated with relief. They both spoke with a hollow inner rage in which fear was so fresh it had almost outgrown the pair of them and made him scared as well. "Report to the Commander and the Party Commission Officer of the regiment," Čuš said, without the usual personal dislike displayed when he would drive him on in the training field or when his cap was stolen, but with a distant indifferent general hatred. "Get on with it!" He stepped into the corridor and they both turned to follow him in silence, accompanying him like a pair of body guards. He felt cramps in his stomach and his body tearing apart. He stepped out into the furnace of the midday sun, without feeling the heat. One of the men following him stepped on his heels. He took him by the scruff of his neck – though this might have been the second guy – and, gripping hard, shouted: "Hurry up!", and pushed him forward so his head dangled. From the sleeping barracks they had to cross the endless grinder towards a distant stone building in the artillery quarters where the regiment staff was located. The smell of rotting vegetables, uniforms, polish and leather straps appeared again. A tin can lying in the dust, shining with the reflection of the sun took on a meaning of real misery. They walked behind him like a pair of shadows, in total silence. They guided him along like a horse, without words, but with noises, movements, shadows and the changes in air pressure created by their bodies. In the shade of the artillery building soldiers were creating a garden bed out of bricks and stones, depicting a hammer and sickle and slogans all round the outside of the building. He crossed the sector as if he was walking over a field of metal spears. A row of steps dug out of the bank of compacted earth led up towards the low entrance into the stone building. In the coolness of the loudly echoing, ground floor hall where they had all handed in their civilian clothes when they had first arrived – this was the first time in ages he was back in the stone-built house and the echoes and evocations of echoes that suddenly amassed around his head utterly confused him –, his guards pushed him up against the wall. Expressionless, the ensign

checked all the buttons on his shirt, his shoes and collar. He shook nervously as Čuš took his cap, straightened out the bent metal star, stuck it back onto his head, bent down to check his spats, stroked both his cheeks to see that he was clean shaven and pushed his chin up. He knew that the pair of them would be blamed – and didn't think that was right – if he came over to the regiment staff from the artillery sector looking scruffy. Then, they pushed him forward. They went through a black swing door and down a pleasantly cool stone corridor, up a stone staircase that reminded him of student residences. The walls were covered in slogans, notice boards and paper flags far less faded than the ones they had on the wooden living barracks. Their colours remained bright as if they had only just been mounted on the walls. There was a strong smell of boot polish. Upstairs, behind a wall that stuck out into the middle of the high echoing corridor and had a narrow full length opening in it, was the black entrance the staff. The ensign knocked on the door and Čuš drove away all the other soldiers, emptying the space between the gray-white plastered thick walls. Despite this, the odd shaven head or two kept appearing at the opening in the wall and the guard outside the office smugly observed him with his head lowered. The ensign entered. "Stand like a soldier," Čuš said in a friendly way. Despite his fear he was so astonished by Čuš's tone that he turned to look at him. He stuck his hands against the seams of his trousers and put the leg that was shaking most next to the other. The door opened with a thrust and the tall thin commission officer stepped out. With his pale, child-like face, probably just a few years older than himself, this guy had already achieved more than he was ever likely to achieve in his entire life. "Attention!" Čuš ordered, resounding down the stone corridor. The officer stepped towards him with a wildly strained face, looking at him like a piece of war, stubbornly and irrefutably thrown in front of him. "So this is him?" he shouted. "Who are you?" "Private..." he gave his name and surname. "You no longer want to be a soldier. Do you realise what you did today?" He remained silent. "Do you realise what you did today, ah?" "I don't, Comrade Captain!" he replied at the top of his voice. The echoes and evocations of echoes down the stone corridor still bothered him. It was as if, at this moment, the most important things were the voices and the echoes that he must become used to. "Do you realise? Do you? You put the entire company in jeopardy and gave the soldiers the worst possible example of revolt. Are you aware who feeds us all, the entire army?" He remained silent. "Are you aware who feeds us all, are you?" he shouted, his voice echoing all the way to the stairway. Who should he mention? The farmers? The workers? "The people, who have to tighten their belts in order to feed the army. And so you too can stuff your mouth, you saboteur. You spat at and threw away food provided by our people. That's what you did today!" "That's not what happened!" "Woo hoo! What do we say?!" Čuš shouted at him, deafening him. "Comrade Captain, that's not what happened!" he said running out of saliva. "You call me your comrade?! ... Go on, tell us, what did happen!" the commissioning officer said slowly and sharply. "Comrade Captain", he started to speak in his childish Serbo-Croatian, "the soldiers didn't want to contaminate the canteens, they didn't want to have the peppers because they were thirsty... they would have had to wash out their canteens with water they wanted to drink ... their water portions are small ..." The officer shook with rage and the thoughts that held his head like a pair of giant paws. "So, you pass the blame onto the soldiers..."

on the water supply ... onto your elders ... Do you think we don't know you, ah? Do you think you could hide who you are, ah? We have known you well ever since you stepped into the army, and your character references before that ... You are our enemy, a rebellious, quarrelsome, slandering foe, with a hostile stance, airing propaganda on the inside, here in the army ... Slavoljub, call Comrade Major."

This was the end. The last sliver of hope just sank into a pit so tight and deep that no hook on a club of any length could ever fish it out again. The guard knocked on the door. "Enter!" The guard opened the door. "Comrade Major, Comrade Captain wishes to see you." The Major was sitting in front of an ancient typewriter amidst sheets of white and carbon paper at one of the many small, narrow, blotted writing desks, more fitting for a high school than the army. He stood up and stepped to the door. He was tall and strong, with black hair, a black moustache and a healthy rosy face. He looked at the frowning soldier. "Not this riffraff again! Jail him! After interrogation, send a proposal to court marshal him!" He went back into the office. "Call Lieutenant Zlatarević!" the Captain ordered the guard and left. The guard ran along. The Captain and the ensign went into the office. Then the ensign stepped out again. He observed him. He looked a pale shade of gray, as if he had spent a few years in solitary between going into the office and coming out again. This sent shivers of fear right to his bones again. The guard forwarded the order. Lieutenant Zlatarević was called. Footsteps were heard in the stairway. Now he could differentiate the original sounds from the echoes. Then, all went quiet. He stood to attention with a pain in his stomach. All he could see were creases of human skin and the wall. The guard returned. "Zlatarević isn't around," he swore. The ensign knocked on the Party Commission Officer's door and entered. Oh, if only he could run away! Somewhere into the mountains. God knows whose hands he would fall into. The farmers' perhaps, or the locals' up in the hills, or the PAO or some other guerilla group on the Greek side. The Captain stepped out. "Lock him up in the sleeping quarters. At four o'clock Captain Simić will interrogate him." The Commission Officer left. The door closed, shrouding the gray-green wall with darkness. Now he knew this was the end. "Come on!" Čuš said. He turned around and went with them. Soldiers from the artillery section were hanging over the fences outside. They saluted the officers and then started: "Look at the son-of-a-bitch, the one who rebelled!" "Saboteur!" "Squealer!" They would have spat at him from the fence, had the two seniors not been accompanying him.

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### Excerpt from the end of the novel

Suddenly, he thought of a place where he would be able to sit down and sleep a little at least – under the arches of some hallway in town he would instantly be found. His feet hurt, as if he was having to break ice with them at every step. But he decided to give his arteries some fuel. He ran down the hill, across Saint Peter's Bridge and up the street, until he reached the crossroads between the church and the municipal garden nursery. This was quite a run. It was worth it, despite the fact that his feet were like a couple of frayed melting frozen logs. He went along the torturous architecture of the sunken, hideous, grey-black Tabor building, and went past the red-brick church of the Sacred Heart, which he, of all the churches, actually liked most – he had lain there once as a child, flat on the floor of the side-chapel with other school children and pilgrims of all sorts, feeling the church floor with the entire length of his body, with the cardinal saying mass on the occasion of the Eucharistic Congress, surrounded by gold-clad bishops, bright electric lights and candles, with the smoke from infinite incense burners at the main altar. He marched on, past the army barracks and the gasworks, covering the stony distance, the road, the mist, the crossroad, all coming at him like tunnels, continuously emerging out of, running through and ending in their own blackness.

When he arrived at the wide empty crossroads at the Workers' Union building – a symbol of a sort of protected poverty with a canteen in the basement and an impoverished library on the top landing – he descended, stiff as an ice man, down to the wide open red and white railway crossing. He had passed through here when he arrived on the train from Macedonia that morning; how long ago that seemed already! Then onwards, between the local sports club's swimming pools, its outdoor gymnastics grounds with metal cross-bars set in the arches of its concrete perimeter wall, past the old market place under the chestnut trees in the side street, on towards Tivoli Park. He kept clear of the sports stands and stepped cautiously and surreptitiously, almost tiptoeing, like a mime artist in the role of a nymph spirit, and continued through the patchy dark blue avenue of chestnut trees that was virtually free of mist, this copious white poison. Sand ground beneath his feet and when he avoided stepping on it, the grass and forest undergrowth were silent with only the occasional snap of a twig giving a sense of warmth. Reaching the top, in the sparseness of a patch of mixed forest, he found a chunky wooden bench, surrounded only by trees. In the darkness he touched the damp table surface, a plank of wood stuck on a single trunk as a base, and sat at this piece of open-air furniture. As soon as his buttocks touched the cold damp wooden surface he stood up again, as if he had sat on a toad. What should he do? He snapped a few branches from the centre of the treetops where they were dryer and laid them on the bench. What he would have liked to have seen was a healthy wild beast with a thick coat of fur he could use. He looked up at the trees around the table. These too were like tall buildings with their roots in the ground, but not like the grotty buildings in the old part of Ljubljana with their rat infested foundations in the rotting earth. But the cold made him see the trees more as firewood. There was a thicket behind him. Despite the cold he felt sleepy. He would wait here till morning. If he felt cold he

could always get up and walk around a bit until he warmed up. He could also light a fire. But this would be visible and there was no way he wished to draw attention to himself again, better to hide, to disappear. He tried to settle down on the branches, but couldn't. He tried again, but again he couldn't settle. And again. The body, this guardian of the treasure of the spirit, would not obey him. He then started to curve slowly towards the branches, though this body, iron stiff from the cold seeping through his worn-out clothes (also, probably not enough size was used when the material was being made), resisted with all its might and did not want to bend at the joints to lie down. He began to push down his head, this frozen sphere, to break the body's resistance. All this was happening within the glare of his own bright patch. But, it seemed that his head deliberately resisted settling his body into any one of the unusual positions that it kept inventing. To his astonishment – so genuine and so detached from all this mess that it was as if he was being observed from above by a distant onlooker – these positions seemed quite beyond his control, continuously evolving into new positions, greatly contributing to the uncomfortable condition of his aching bones. Using all the violence of the so called light, he simply threw himself onto the bench and tried to keep still. But he had to move. If he lay on his side, his back was cold, air blowing right up the crack of his arse as if it were a trumpet. If he lay on his back, his legs, abdomen and chest froze. When he lay on his belly it was the same right up his back. He tossed and turned until he at last managed not to fall asleep, but to close his eyes, gazing downwards into his own darkness, with his knees under his chin, his hands wrapped around his thighs and calves, joined at the bare ankles (giving the occasional heat to his back and his rear end by twitching his head and the muscles in his buttocks) in the proverbial foetal position, the warmest of all.