

Redemption: The Story of Velimir Karran (Men's History and Culture)

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REDEMPTIONThe Story of Velimir KaranbyD. MrkichCommoners PublishingOttawa, Canada2004© D. Mrkich and Commoners Publishing 1990, 2004Published by Commoners' Publishing, 631 Tubman, Ottawa, Canada K1V 8L5E-mail: editor@commonerspublishing.comInternet: www.commonerspublishing.comFax: 613.260.0401 Tel: 613.523.2444ISBN: 978-0-88970-080-2 (paper) 978-0-88970-165-6 (ebook)This story was published in part in Voice of Canadian Serbs, under the title From Tomorrow On.Drawings by Lynn OwenThis story is dedicated to my wife Susan.The time he was living in was too fantastic for anyone to look it square in the eye.Hugh MacLennan: Return of the SphinxThe cover photo shows immigrants to Canada leaving Europe on the Seven Seas, 1959.The young man at far left on the front cover, not looking square at the camera, is the author, age 19.Other books by D. Mrkich:Of Times and Places*Nikola Tesla: The European Years*Summer Was Only Beginning*Passengers to Points North*The White Spectre and Other Poems*Redemption*Mountain Laurel* (Translation) Kosovo** Also available from CommonersPrinted in Canada by Cheriton Graphics, Ottawa

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â€œSet thine house in order...â€• New York.He looked at the little piece of paper in his hand that read: United Nations TEMPORARY PASS Mr. Val Karran Representative of CANADA Issued 11 Nov. 1974. ExpiresDuring the morning briefing at the Canadian Mission to the United Nations, the Ambassador said, "This delegation does not represent anybody. We do not recognize the Palestinians' claimed right to an independent state at this time. I intend to abstain from the vote. Not that it will make any difference, but if the western countries are to go down to this so-called non-aligned camp, at least we'll go down fighting".Karran was sitting in the dead man's corner with one of the Secretaries in the Mission, Sever Duvivier. The briefing closed unexpectedly, and there was an air of achievement in the room. Duvivier and Karran returned to Duvivier's office."Today is a bad day here, although actually, it is only a little worse than usual. The Palestinians inside, the Jews outside. The North Koreans distributing their usual fantastic leaflets. Val, what do you think of New York?" "It is the city. The great theatre," Karran replied. He spoke with an east European accent."It's all a show here. How long are you staying?" "Just for the day." "Tell me again, how can I help you?" "As you know, the United Nations has designated the years 1973 to 1983 as the 'Decade for Action to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination'. I would like to sponsor a series of seminars across Canada, prepare some educational material, learn what other countries are doing, see how much we can do in our time." "You still have another eight years in the decade," Duvivier said. He had met Karran only that morning and immediately recognized that Karran could in no way advance his career and was now annoyed at having to look after him. He called his secretary and asked her to arrange for an official car to take Karran inside the U.N. grounds."Thank you for your kindness, sir. It's wonderful just being here," Val Karran said.The

refugee sheik had just gone in to address the General Assembly. There was a crowd of demonstrators before the closed gates and helicopters were flying about the U.N. buildings. Karran went up to the office of Public Information, walked in noiselessly and saw sitting behind the desk a tall gaunt woman who looked exactly as she sounded on the telephone. "Ms. Toula Jones-Ocon?" he said. Ms. was just then a new word. She looked up. "Yes?" "I'm Val Karran from Canada." "Mr. Karran. Very glad to meet you, sir," she said, stood up and offered him a chair. "Please sit down. I thought for a moment that you were some minister of state." "Thank you." He sat down. "I hope you will not be disappointed with your first visit to the United Nations." "No, ma'am. Today, the world is encircled with catacombs of refugee camps and homeless and destitute people set adrift by war, repression, famine, social injustice and environmental disasters. The only body that can offer impartial help to all is right here. One has nowhere else to turn." "My dear sir, the United Nations is an institution of governments. Under the present stewardship, it is a daily struggle simply to avert a complete failure on a world-wide scale." "The Austrian Secretary-General?" She neither agreed nor disagreed. Twenty minutes later Karran was on his way to one of the assistant directors in the Human Rights Division, one Lee Seberg. Seberg was not in, so Karran spoke to I. I. Luchenko. He explained to him why he had come, and Luchenko said, no; there was nothing he could help him with at the moment, other than the material that had already been distributed to the usual outlets in the member states. The Division was in the process of moving to Geneva, and it would be best to contact them again, once the relocation was completed and full activities were resumed. Karran asked if the assistant director could possibly tell him what these activities might be. Luchenko sat up in the chair. "The United Nations has no business in domestic matters of its member states." "Human rights take precedence over national or government interests." "The Declaration of Human Rights may admit to different interpretation," said the Soviet representative. "But in socialist countries, everyone already has full human rights." "Except for the freedom of thought." Karran replied, and with a wave of hand, left Luchenko. He went on through a maze of offices over to Mr. Krishnaswamy Ayoub, one of the special assistants. He found him in an office full of packing boxes, many of them marked "Garbage." On the yellowish wall of Ayoub's office was a series of four grey posters illustrating the human rights covenants. "Now, that is something I could use," Karran said, pointing at the stiffly stylized posters. "I could run a school contest, illustrating each covenant in a contemporary way; produce it in a book form and offer it to schools as a teaching aid. I would throw in the Canadian Bill of Rights too, for Canadian content," he said with a smile. "Well, well, well; it's quite an interesting concept, Mr. Karma. And now that you've mentioned it, why, we could do it ourselves too." "Of course; everyone in his own country." He asked Ayoub to give him one set of posters to take with him. Ayoub rolled the posters into a cardboard tube, and handed it to him. Karran left and, for a while, wandered through the building. In the hallways, little groups of men huddled together. One or two, he thought, carried handguns under their expensive jackets. In one little group, black Africans were speaking French:—What is this place? A rich man's club?—A flag of convenience for a handful of colonial powers to promote their interests.—They can have my vote if they will pay my electricity bill.—We Africans got to stick together. He found his way to the Visual Services section, where he bought a print of film-footage highlighting progress in human rights. Every article at the UN had a double price, one for the rich countries and one for the poor, and Karran, coming from Canada, paid the top price for whatever he bought. There was nothing else to do. No one else to see. He had a lot of time on his hands. He went to the dining room. It was a sunless, cold day. He watched the great city, the city of Walt Whitman, of James Dean, the city at the end of all fantastic hopes and promises in life. "I will write to the United Nations! I will tell the world!" He had been a refugee too, and it was the United Nations that fifteen and more years earlier had fed him and given him a new ticket in life. In this place, in this city, and at this time of the year, he wanted to recall those days gone by and to recount that experience. He bought a bottle of wine, drank a glassful, quickly refilled the glass and looked at the sullen sky, heavy with approaching snow. This is his story — marked by the passage of time, by one's inability to remember, by interpretation, hindsight, and most of all, by a heart and soul no longer fully at attention. **PART ONE CHAPTER ONE Flight in the Winter***Velimir Karan was eighteen then, full of

expectation and longing, and his every thought stretched toward escape into the world. But the mere wish was forbidden. He wanted to be far, far away, rootless and displaced, full of confidence, living in history. But there was nowhere to turn, and nobody paid any attention. He tried to enter the theatre, but the director advised him to get more education. "I can't," the boy said. "You see, I don't have money to go further, to university." "What about a scholarship?" "They won't give it to me." "Perhaps there will be means later. Be patient." "Ha!" The director of the city's people's theatre looked at the shy boy dressed in clothes that came from the old clothes market, and looked at his hunched shoulders, tense face and here, where people recognized each other as soon as they opened their mouths, he could place exactly the peasant dialect the boy spoke, and he wanted to do something for him, though not in the theatre, of course. He just wanted to question him more. "I have noticed that you are out much of the time alone, walking aimlessly." "And that's banned?" "It is a rebellion of a sort." A smile escaped Velimir Karan. He looked sideways at the director of the theatre. The director fixed his big black eyes on the boy. "Somebody all by himself is nothing. In our society everyone belongs and ought to obediently follow the directives of the leaders, and not break ranks and go over to the enemy. What about your father?" "He's dead. He wasn't on the right side." "What the devil! If the society makes it possible for you to finish high school, it can't just leave you... Let me place a telephone call or two." "No, don't." The director dialed, and then proceeded to report the boy's name and circumstances, then there was that silence as he listened, nodded several times, and finally, said, "We-ell." Karan wanted to leave, but the man suddenly raised his head and his eyebrows and stared at him. What the director had been told was that the young man's father was not only not dead, but that all the men in the family had been always on the correct side and that the fellow could not be given a stipend because he had once already escaped across the border and had been expelled from the communist youth organization. Furthermore, there were suspicions that he had stolen the supply of training rifles from the gymnasium, was said to have threatened the school director's wife, and there was also a rumour that for his senior matriculation examination last Spring, he had come to school with a pistol in his pocket. None of these rumours was substantiated, but obviously the young man was no good, and the best that could be done under the circumstances was to draft him into the army and this was already in process. The theatre was empty, with all the doors open and there was a cold wind blowing through the chestnut trees in the park. The director of the people's theatre put down the receiver and looked again at the fellow before him, looked at his bright yellow American T-shirt with NASHVILLE TENNESSEE written on it, looked at his boxer's nose, effeminate hairstyle, a twisted stance and, rising from the chair, hissed, "...beat it! Get out of here! Out!" The young man blushed and smiled and quickly left through the nearest door. He buttoned his white summer jacket and without hurrying went through the park beneath the rows of chestnut trees, kicking the yellow leaves in front of him as he went. "Why did I go to that...? That butcher?" He went on toward the main corner. "A butcher, once a butcher, always a butcher, even if he is now a director of the theatre. Why should he do me a good turn?" He pressed the thumb of his left hand against the side of his nose, pushing it from left to right until he heard the grating of the bones. He pushed two or three times. Velimir Karan spent the night in the railroad station, sitting among the peasants who had come to town for the market the next day. * * In the morning he went home to the village. He used an already cancelled bus ticket; the bus driver gave him a long look, but did not say anything. It was Fall all the way. The hills were already bare and the valley was white with frost. Mist hung above the willow-sheltered stream and the road beside it which led to the main road and the town. Smoke coiled from the chimneys. He heard his mother milking the cow and cursing, and then he heard the sound of horses stomping on the wooden floor of the stall, and then against the threshold; his father was harnessing the team to go plowing. Behind the house, in the waist-high weeds stood a still and beside it a large cake of yellow corn muck out of which a potent vinegary stench was rising. From the ford on the village stream came the sudden beating of the wooden paddle on the wet clothes. Several pistol shot-like cracks, and then it ceased. The neighbour's servant, a woman with a small boy, was stoking wood under half an oil-drum preparing to wash the clothes. The barefoot child skipped from one foot onto the other on the frost-covered stream bank. "Are your feet cold, my only one, my crown? Mother is making a fire,

it'll catch presently, and look, the sun already rises yonder on the Karan hill." He had \$20, given him by a peasant with relatives in America, as a bribe toward future talks about taking his grandson across the border. Enough to get me out of the country, he thought. He also had another banknote that was his grandmother's. It had been meant for her son, his uncle, who was in the army and two weeks ago was on the train passing through the town. The two of them, grandmother and Velimir, had gone to town to see him in the station, and to make sure that her son got the money and the little parcel wrapped in the newspaper, she gave both to Velimir, but he then shook off the old woman and went alone to the station and he gave his uncle the package with a fried chicken in it, keeping the money. Uncle's dignity prevented him from asking if Velimir had any money for him and Velimir went on telling him how everybody at home was fine, and then the train started pulling out of the station, and he had in his pocket enough for a journey to the border. Karan went back to where his grandmother was waiting, asked her how she had got lost, and when she realized that the train had gone and she wouldn't see her son for another six months, she sat down and wept. Velimir said that the uncle looked fine, that he had given him the money and the chicken, but baba only said, "You monkey, you bum," and then he could only see two streams of tears running down her white sunken cheeks into her black apron. He needed the money. And yet, this wasn't the whole truth: the real truth was that he had left his grandmother behind because he was ashamed of being seen with her, of being seen in the town with any peasant. He didn't want anyone in the town to know who he was and who his people were, although he knew that everyone in the town knew it anyway. Just then he heard a cart and, looking toward the bend of the road, he saw a cart full of stone; it was drawn by two grey horses and the peasant, walking beside them, sang: "The stag and the doe on the hillside And the pair of quail in the woodland fair, Each creature has a place of its own But this child alone...." The song trailed off. The peasant then cursed in an entirely different voice, cursing God and the saints, the sun and the moon, and began to whip the nearer horse. He went into the house. Now in the morning the one-room thick-walled house, with a dirt floor worn smooth by naked feet, was still dark, but the fire in the brick clay-coated stove was bright red and warm. The younger children were getting ready to go to school and looked for their books and notebooks, greased and blackened by soot from the pots. Thin shirts and rough sweaters covered their nakedness and they were still barefoot and would be barefoot through the fall rains and until just before the first snow. Poverty. There were three beds in the room and one in the attic, above the sooty ceiling. Grandmother was kneading a loaf of wheat bread. Her face red from the stove, she offered him cornbread and milk. He didn't want to touch anything. He stood by the stove and through the window watched the yellow line of the sunrise coming fast down the hillside across the valley. The morning sunbeams gave the treetops a gilt-edged halo. He heard the cart jolting down the road; heard it pass the house, creaking steadily. "Eeyo!" the drover yelled at the horses. "The devil take you; may snakes suck out your eyes!" he went on shouting, wolf-like, crazy, and the whip whistled across the horses' buttocks. "How will you plow all morning, hungry?" grandmother asked.

Velimir Karan escapes from Yugoslavia to the 'faroff' world and dreams of opportunity. Rootless and displaced, he's rejected in his attempt to immigrate to the United States but accepted as a farm labourer to Canada. Here's a gritty, humorous view into the community of ethnic workers, their view of Canada and their mother countries. Velimir goes to school and Canadianizes his name to Val Karran, seeking somewhere to belong, justification for a life's redemption. Still an outsider, he travels the world, revisits his home town in Yugoslavia only to discover he doesn't belong there, either. Returning to Canada, he's employed as a civil servant, marries and has children. His reputation for reliable but unimaginative work advances his career but he still feels an outsider. A trip to the United Nations as Canada's Human Rights

Co-ordinator gives him an air of success – which he tries to reconcile with the weight of his past as a refugee, his present as a cog in a stifling bureaucracy. Life and death, humour and insight, survival and obsession, prose and poetry: a classic Serbian epic tale underlies this deceptively modern novel based on a true experience.

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