Passages from “The Bridge over the Drina” (publ. 1945, transl. 1959)

Week 1

The Srebrenica massacre, also known as the Srebrenica genocide, was the July 1995 genocide of more than 8,000 Muslim Bosnians, mainly men and boys. Destruction of the Mostar bridge.

Narrative begins in 1650’s.

Chapter IV. The executed peasant (named Radislav of Uniste p. 34) - sacrificial victim to the Ottomans and their grandiose project to build the bridge - the beginning of their effective occupation of Bosnia-Serbia.

His final words p. 53 “The Turks...the Turks... the bridge.”

p. 54 “Those who were Slavs felt a certain easing of the spirit, as at an invisible victory.” READ ON to p. 55

Plevlje’s - Abidaga’s henceman’s - fate. P. 60 Abidaga’s banishment by the Vezir, Mehmed Pasha.

See the legend of Radislav on p.59. Then, God sends his winter blizzards to put a stop to the construction of the bridge. Cf also the historic floods.

Other folk lore legends - of Memed Pasha himself, originally a captive Christian child taken by the janissaries as blood tribute.

A new set of leaders are appointed: Arif Beg, Tosun Effendi, Mastro Antonio, the young Arab who is crushed at the fall of the capstone of the central pier. No more forced labour. Building of the “han”, caravanserai.

Now there is a reversal - enthusiasm for the bridge-building and the future promise of prosperity for Visegrad. READ p. 66 - the feast, the “kolo” Pp. 64-5.

Cynicism of Ahmedaga Sheta p. 65-6 - compares with Alihodje, later.

But the bridge now becomes an emblem of stability - see end of Chapter 4: “its ageing could not be seen by human eye. Its life, though mortal in itself, resembled eternity for its end could not be perceived.”

Chapter VII. The Serbian revolt of the early 19th Century (later called, the Karageorge insurrection). “This town on the very frontier of Bosnia and Serbia had always been in close connection and permanent touch with everything that took place in Serbia and grew with it ‘like a nail and its finger’.”
The insurgents light their fires by night on the local hills between Veletovo and Gostilje. Divisions are discernible now between the Turks and Serbs in their responses to the revolt. READ p. 83

Nevertheless social relations are outwardly unaffected - common provincial courtesies are exchanged “like counterfeit coin which none the less makes communication both possible and easy.” READ summary on pages 83-84

A military blockhouse is now erected on the beloved kapia of the strategically important bridge.

Anecdote of the old wandering mendicant, Helisije from Cajnice. He is in some ways a visionary prophet for the “Serbian Empire”. He is executed along with another harmless innocent, the simpleton Mile, caught singing Karageorge as he cut wood in the forest. They are the first of many similar “suspects”, victims of the imperial repression - the kapia “from then onwards, as long as the revolt lasted, was practically never without such decoration.”

A temporary defamation of the kapia - QUOTE last paragraph on page 90 “Even the Turks passed that way unwillingly while only those Serbs who were forced to crossed the bridge hastily and with lowered heads.”

Nevertheless whenever the rebellion hots up, page 91, “When the insurgents burnt some of the villages above the town, the anger of the Turks passed all measure. No only did they arrest all insurgents and spies, or those who they considered such, and brought them to the Captain on the bridge, but in their rancour they even wanted to take part in the execution of the sentence.”

After the revolt, Andric suggest that old peaceful relations - typified by the bridge as a place of meeting and popular pleasure - are restored to their former tranquillity.

Chapter 7. In the mid-19th Century the Turkish Empire is “consumed by a slow fever”. The border between the pashaluks of Bosnia and Belgrade becomes significant as a state frontier. “That changed the conditions of life for the whole district and for the town also... and the mutual relations of Turks and Serbs.” (Note how he classifies the ethnic groups - not as Muslims and Christians. Religion seems a secondary matter, reinforcing family and ethnic loyalties.)

The incidents at Veletovo where the frontier is surveyed and marked out by Jovan Micic, deputising for Prince Milos of Serbia. The villagers are then informed of the agreement of the Sultan: Milos now administers Serbia in the Sultan’s name as a
semi-independent province. (Compares with Egypt under shared Turko-British rule.)

The new arrangement stems from a treaty between the Sultan and the Russian Czar following the peace of ?? What’s more, there will be further revisions.

QUOTE p. 95 The Turkish leaders of Visegrad assembled on the kapia “squirmed unintentionally at his words and caught hold of the stone seat with their hands, as if some powerful and invisible force were shaking the bridge beneath them”.

The new process is gradual, extending to thirty years but gradually the Turks are removed from Serbia and processions of refugees cross the bridge from Uzice en route to Serajevo. The old migrant “white all over from the dust of the road” gives a warning p. 98: “You sit here at your ease and do not know what is happening behind Stanisevac. Here we are fleeing into Turkish lands, but where are you to flee when, together with us, your turn will come? None of you knows and none of you ever thinks of it.”

An accurate description for p. 99 “next day everything was it had always been, for the townspeople did not like to remember evil and did not worry about the future in their blood was the convictions that real life consists of calm periods…”

Max Frisch - “The Fire Raisers”

This Chapter, again, ends with a philosophical reassurance that woes not appear to be ironic - “Life on the kapia always renews itself despite everything and the bridge does not change with the years or with the centuries or with the most painful turns in human affairs.” A more universal perspective?

Chapter iX. A second Serbian rebellion in the late decades of the 19th Century, 70 years on. Visegrad itself seems to remain a haven of peace, however Turkish and Serbian house are seen in flames on the hills around the town - at Zlijeba, Gostilje, Crnice and Veletovo. Heads of decapitated Serbs appear impaled on the bridge.

In 1878 it looked like Bosnia would be ceded to the Serbs and families who, thirty years before, had fled from Uzice make preparations to cross into the Sanjak region.

See Mujaga’s history of his family’s repeated exiles pp. 292 - from Uzice into Bosnia “where there was still Turkish rule”; then ten years after, flight from the Austrians into the Sanjak evacuating that refuge area when it is abandoned by the Turks in the Balkan Wars of 1912.
Back to 1878 when the mufti of Plevlje appeals to the townsmen to join in the fight against the invading Austrians. The Visegrad people have a longstanding reputation of preferring “to live foolishly rather than to die foolishly” pp. 113-114.

Here we are introduced to the independent-minded Alihodje, whose family had traditional responsibility for administering the Stone Han now fallen into neglect with the withdrawal of Hungarian monastery support.

READ p. 115 for his general sceptical common sense and resistance to the idea of armed rebellion. Argues with the delegate Osman Effendi.

This phase is one of Turkish, not Christian Slav, resistance to encroaching imperialism - Austrian rather than Ottoman.

After the Austrians take Serajevo, retreating Turks re-group in Visegrad and a second disputation with the nationalist Osman Effendi and Alihoje ensues.

READ bottom page 117.

Karamanli, the military leader, demands a defence of the bridge basing his rhetoric on a legend that Sheikh Turhania will rise to their side if ever an infidel plants a step on the its stonework. Karamanli retreats before the Austrian advance but orders that Alihodje be nailed to the kapia by his ear as a sacrificial victim. This punishment is a sort of low level, semi-comic re-enactment of the more heroic sacrifices in the earlier history of the town; but its effect is to present Alihodje more modern hero in his own right. A figure of passive resistance and of a more general and generous acceptance of that life brings rather than a nationalist given to futile acts of violence.

Released by an Austrian medic, whose arm-band with its cross becomes a symbol of Christian victory and domination (as well perhaps of peaceful humanitarianism), Alihodje reads the duplicitously-written imperial proclamation -

“It comes as a friend to put an end to the disorders which for years past have disturbed not only Bosnia and Herzegovina but also the frontier districts of Austria-Hungary” etc.

“His ear did not pain him as much as that leaden and bitter pain which had risen in his breast after reading ‘the imperial words’.”

He refuses the Austrian soldiers offer of protection. “I can myself... I need no-one’s help”.
Chapter X. Humiliation of the civic leaders of the Visegrad community by the new authority - the “small, undistinguished, overtired, unpleasant and aggressive” Austrian colonel.

Pop Nikola, son of Pop Mihailo beheaded by the Truks and a former exile who has returned to be the much respected parish priest. Mula Ibraiham, hodja of Visegrad noted for his generous nature. The self-regarding schoolmaster Hussein Effendi, a pretending scholar. And the rabbi, David Levi.

p. 132 “All of them were disillusioned. For the day before and all through the previous night, in which not one of them had slept much, each had asked himself a hundred times what that moment would be like when they had to welcome the commandant of the Imperial Army on the kapia. They had imagined him in every sort of way, each according to his nature and intelligence, and had been ready for the worst.”

The officer “saw all men and all lands only as a subject or an occasion for war and conflict, and (who) behaved as if he were waging war on his own account and in his own name……

A strange sort of bastard, on my grandmother’s soul.”

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Week 2

Epics have seven main characteristics:

1. The hero is outstanding. They might be important, and historically or legendarily significant.
2. The setting is large. It covers many nations, or the known world.
3. The action is made of deeds of great valour or requiring superhuman courage.
4. Supernatural forces—gods, angels, demons—insert themselves in the action.
5. It is written in a very special style (verse as opposed to prose).
6. The poet tries to remain objective.
7. Epic poems are believed to be supernatural and real by the hero and the villain

Conventions of epics:

1. It starts with the theme or subject of the story.
2. Writer invokes a Muse, one of the nine daughters of Zeus. The poet prays to the Muses to provide him with divine inspiration to tell the story of a great hero. (This convention is restricted to cultures which were influenced by Classical culture: the Epic of Gilgamesh, for example, or the Bhagavata Purana would obviously not contain this element).
3. Narrative opens in medias res, or in the middle of things, usually with the hero at his lowest point. Usually flashbacks show earlier portions of the story.
4. Catalogues and genealogies are given. These long lists of objects, places, and people place the finite action of the epic within a broader, universal context. Often, the poet is also paying homage to the ancestors of audience members.
5. Main characters give extended formal speeches.
6. Use of the epic simile.
7. Heavy use of repetition or stock phrases.
8. It presents the heroic ideals such as courage, honour, sacrifice, patriotism and kindness.
9. An epic gives a clear picture of the social and cultural patterns of the contemporary life. Beowulf thus shows the love of wine, wild celebration, war, adventure and sea-voyages.

Chapter 16

At the assassination of the Empress Elizabeth at the hands of an anarchist from Italy, a new proclamation is posted on the kapia and becomes a matter of concern for the town. This event interrupts a time of general prosperity when mothers enjoyed high expectations for their children: “May he live and be healthy and may God grant him easy bread!”

The story of Maistor-Pero’s minor victimisation illustrates a potential for blaming the foreigner, but his troubles come principally from street children whereas the majority of his neighbours offer him sympathy and reassurance.

The schoolmaster - a nice pen portrait here - pontificates generally on the exceptional event, his banal theme being that good and evil men have always existed in the world and always will do. READ to p. 203 -

“But looking through their cigarette smoke into the distance beyond the inscription and the placard” his aged listeners “seemed to see somewhere in the world another and different life of great ascents and great falls, in which greatness mingled with tragedy and which in some manner maintained a balance with this peaceful and monotonous existence of theirs on the kapia.” The sense of equipoise is destined to be disrupted by the future impact of the greater world on this lesser one.

Two paragraphs on p. 204 register the general return to monotonously safe normality and an almost imperceptible advance to prosperity and subtle existential changes. Alihodje’s characteristic disgruntlement (fanned by his three marriages and multiple children) allows him a voice of general disapproval of virtually all innovations - at this point his grudge is with the repair of the bridge which he suspects (rightly) as some sort of conspiracy, concealing an unknown secondary plan.

He is a comic presence in the narrative in many ways, nevertheless also (like the old wanderer who the Turks executed a hundred years before) a man capable of prophetic utterance upon matters that he intuitively understands. In this Chapter his pronouncements are given additional weight in opposition to the schoolmaster’s self-regarding clichés. READ His description on pp. 206-7, then his argument with the two wastrels at his shop door. This begins with another folkloric stock-in-trade:

“While the Drina is the Drina the bridge will be the bridge. Even if they had not touched it, it would last its appointed time.”
This of course is a platitude that stems from a half-considered Islamic fatalism, disapproved by the writer:

"They would have dragged on their idle chatter indefinitely had not Alihodje interrupted.

‘And I tell you nothing good will come of their interfering with the bridge...’"  READING this section forward, past the fable of Allah and the devil, to p. 209 - “The townspeople, for the most part, were indifferent to the work on the bridge, as they were towards everything which the newcomers had been doing for years in and about the town. Only the children were disappointed...”

Further improvements under the Empire include the introduction of fresher water (which Alihodje scorns) and the construction of the railway inking Serajevo to the frontiers of both Serbia and the Turkish-held Sanjak of Novi Pazar at Uvce. “Much was said and written about the political and strategic significance of this line, of the impending annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, of the further aims of Austro-Hungary through the Sanjak to Salonica and all the complicated problems connected with them. But in the town all these things still seemed completely innocent and even attractive. There were new contractors, fresh hordes of workmen and new sources of gain for many.”  P. 210

SEE Alihodje’s comments on the railway p. 213. “All you can see is that you can ride, but you do not ask what the machine brings here and takes away other than you, yourself and others like you... The time will come when the Schwabes will make you ride where you don’t want to go and where you never dreamt of going.” (Echos of Christ to St. Peter?)

SEE also the ending scene of the peasants waiting for the trains to arrive - “they could not get it into their heads that the machine was not some sort of swift, mysterious and deceitful contraption invented by the Schwabes... which had only one idea in its mind: how to cheat the peasant and leave without him.”  P. 214

Lotte’s story.

Chapters 14 pp. 147 ff & 20 pp

The Stone Han was demolished for a barracks, then Municipal offices and, it seems, much of the Zahler hotel were constructed from the remaining stone. Lotte’s brother-in-law
being a ineffectual and lazy proprietor, Lotte equipped with her innate “masculine energy” took over most of the day-to-day running and administration.

READ pp 178-9 but ESPECIALLY the final paragraph beginning “Men who knew the world and its history often thought that it was a pity that fate had given this woman so narrow and undistinguished a part to play…”

She is one of the obscure and ordinary-life heroines of the history of the town - one who would have been a notable name in a different social context.

THEN p. 180 - as a business woman in a wider Eastern European world, Lotte acts as the hub of her extended family of (originally Galician) Askenazi Jews. Her shrewd monetary investments enable her to assist the many needy members of this wide-stretched circle and we are told that her more degraded existence in dealing with drunken customers is elevated by her loyal activity on the family’s behalf. Here, “she found her sole real satisfaction and a reward for all the burdens and renunciations of her life. With each member of the Apfelmkaier family who rose even a single step in the social scale, Lotte felt that she too rose and in that found her reward for her hard work and the force to struggle onward.”

The bridge briefly provides a figure for her own dependability and persistence. (p.181).

For Lotte’s effect on others extends beyond the financial. She is also esteemed as a family counsellor and peace-maker, a marriage-adviser or -broker and distant carer for the sick. Her single personal relationship is with Alibeg Pasic, the eldest of his family, who is another “unhistoric” figure with no aspirations to a more successful or noteworthy style of life yet wholly contented in himself.

QUOTE “He is one of those men who bear their social position as some heavy and noble calling which completely fills their lives: an inborn, great and dignified position justified by itself alone amnd which cannot be explained, nor denied nor imitated.”

The novel as an elegy? Ivo Andriv of lowly origins which he seems regretful of osing in some ways like John Clare. This effect becomes stronger when we witness the demise of Lotte’s fortunes and her life’s general usefulness toward the ending of the novel.

READ bottom p. 257 to 9. In her decline, she now finds herself in shameful competition with Terdik, the Hungarian who has opened a noisy brothel nearby. Her customers are fewer, although the loyal Alibeg Pasic is still in attendance each afternoon.

Lotte’s investments have suffered a reverse in the wider economic reverses at the turn of the Century, whilst other money has been lost by her brother-in-law’s, Zahler’s, ill-considered speculations. Her niece, Mina, is an embittered spinster (Lotte is incapable of
providing for her as in previous years) and her young nephew is a “miserable” mentally
deficient.

There is a pitiful scene - representative of the more general misfortunes of Visegrad in
these years - on pp.263-4 where Lotte’s loses her admirable self-control at the news that
the family prospective saviour, Albert, destined to become a lawyer and replace her own
position as buttress for all the rest, has turned Socialist.

“She wept for Albert as though he were dead and then never spoke of him again.” BUT
READ ON to the postscript about the niece who marries a rich stock-dealer at the Pest
Bourse who is a Calvinist and requires his new wife to convert, then most unfortunately
dies. This reprise into temporary but evanescent good fortune underlines the severity of
Lotte’s tragedy; yet admirably, she refuses to succumb.

Andric puts in a point of comparison of Lotte’s complete failure to understand political
activity and the nationalistic movements of the time with a short excursion into the world
of Pavle Rankovic, a minor presence in the narrative. READ from middle p. 259
Now a leader of the trading community, “He was bewildered by the new times and the
clamorous onrush of new ideas and new ways of life, thought and expression. All these
things were embraced for him by the single word ‘politics.’”

Pavel feels alienated from the new younger generation, even his own children.

p. 260 “This way of thinking without limits, this speech without consideration, and this
life without calculation and hostile to every calculation, drove Pavel, who had worked all
his life by and with calculation, to frenzy and desperation… When he asked them for an
explanation which would convince and reassure him they replied disdainfully and
haughtily with vague and high-sounding words; freedom, future, history, science, glory
greatness. His skin crawled with these abstract words. Therefore he liked to sit and
drink coffee with Lotte, with whom he could talk about business and events, always base
on a sure and admitted calculation, very different from the ‘politics’ and the high,
dangerous words that questioned everything, explained nothing and affirmed nothing.”

Let’s now look at the parts of the book that have the younger generation in the
foreground. In Chapter 19 the young men of the town gather on the kapia, many of them
enthused with the new politics - specially those, like Janko Stikovic, who have been away
to university in Graz or other cities and their younger followers from Sarajevo high school.
There is also Nikola Glasicanin from a family too poor to allow him to finish schooling, who
therefore has a humdrum job at a timber mill and export business. However, “He came
from a decayed landowning family at Okoliste”.

It’s with Stikovic and Glasicanin, these two, that the author is most concerned. Stikovic is
a budding nationalist and revolutionary, writes poems and political articles one of which is
just about to be published in Zora, the nationalist organ. However, he is “dissatisfied
with himself but even more with everyone around him” p. 235. He has that very
afternoon made love to the schoolmistress Zorka on a bench in the dusty schoolroom, an
experience that has left each feeling muddled and dissatisfied.

A political argument takes place with the socialist Herak over Stikovic’s newly published
writing on “The Balkans, Serbai and Bosnia-Herzegovina” and thereafter Stikovic and
Glasicanin are left alone - both rivals for Zorka's affections. Together they overhear the younger school students take up the cudgels in imitation of the earlier dispute. One boy (Galus) argues that oriental studies have no place in the changed modern world.

p. 242 “In that you Muslims, you begs’ sons, make a mistake. Disconcerted by the new times, you no longer know your exact and rightful place in the world....” P. 243 “The conditions which at one time made you what you were have changed long ago, but that does not mean that you can change with the same speed. This is not the first, nor will it be the last, instance of a social caste losing its reason for existence and yet remaining the same... and as such it will die.”

GO ON to READ p. 245 “Galus then described all the advantages and beauties of a new national state which was to rally all the Southern Slavs around Serbia as a sort of Piedmont on the basis of complete national unity, religious tolerance and civil equality. His speech mixed up bold words of uncertain meaning.... It mingled the great truths which had ripened through the generations but which only youth could perceive in advance and dare to express, with the eternal illusions which are never extinguished but never attain realisation, for one generation of youth hands them on to the next like that mythological torch.”

So young Galus is representative of the generation of young zealots and fighters that joined up to the Serbian “libertarian” campaign against the sclerotic Austrian Empire.

Turning our attentions back to Stikovic and Glasicanin, however, Andric effects a dramatic and at first quite disconcerting change of key. Their argument is no longer about politics and the state of the nation, but has become furiously personal. The normally reticent Glasicanin launches a vehement character assassination of his rival.

READ bottom of p. 251 “All your theories, all your many spiritual occupations, like your loves and your friendships, all these derive from your ambition, and that ambition is false and unhealthy for it derives from your vanity and exclusively from your vanity... Even the nationalist idea which you preach so ardently is only a special form of vanity. For you are incapable of loving your mother or your sister or your own blood brother, so how much less an idea.”

What is going on here, in this eloquently heated diatribe? Is Andic, erstwhile political activist and internee, digging himself a critical parti pris upon earlier events and experiences in these reflections thirty-five years on in life? Remember the earlier dismissals of the young men’s half-informed idealism and note that here, on p. 249, he has Glasicanin explain “But the more I listen to you, the more I am convinced that the greater part of these spoken and written discussions have no connection with life with life at all and its real demands and problems... I often think that technical progress and the relative peace there is now in the world have created a sort of lull, a special atmosphere, artificial and unreal, in which a single class of men, the so-called intellectuals, can freely devote themselves to idleness and to the interesting game of ideas and ‘views on life and the world’.”

Or is this an interior dialogue of the author with his own deeply laid private ambiguities, the artist in him at odds with the committed political agent?
In the progress of the narrative Glasicanin is proved right largely, at least in his diagnosis of his close friend and antagonist. Stikoic betrays Zorka by marginalising her from his central interests (which include his vain self-interest as much as his commitments to activity) and she falls back upon her second lover, ill and with a wretched heart.

Chapter 21 places the domestic experience of the townsfolk in the summer of 1914, the slow inexorable process towards world war. Andric invokes a riverine image to distil the effect of the collective movement: “that swirling current among men which passed from dumb animal fear to suicidal enthusiasm, from the lowest impulses of bloodlust and pillage to the greatest and most noble of sacrifices, wherein man touches the sphere of greater worlds…”

SEE p. 273 where a year has passed since the previous encounters. Zarka receives exquisitely well-written love letters from her absent paramour that fail to mask an inner coldness and preoccupation of mind. “(He) had spoken of his love, but as if the pair of them had already been a century in their grave, like persons famous and long ded.”

READ to p. 274, if possible.

In contrast Glasicanin’s more genuine emotion is “deep and sincere”. Alert to the encroaching catastrophe he urges Zarka to take flight with him into Serbia and thence to the USA. But she havers and is reluctant to give up finally n her dream lover.

They next meet (Glasicanin and Zarka) pp.281-2 for the last time. The assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand has taken place and the Austrian guards put a stop to the somewhat frenetic dancing of the kolo on the Drina bridge. Glascanin has decided to take his leave of the town where, as he has said, “there is no sort of life here. For a long time there will be neither peace nor order nor profitable work… everything will get worse.” But surprisingly it is not America that is his chosen destination, rather he is joining three other young men to cross into Serbia and enlist in the rebel militia. It is almost certain that they will lose their lives.

This and other incidents from the final pages of the novel are written in a spirit of pervading pessimism which the final paragraph of these young people’s story seems to typify. READ p. 282

“At first she wept quietly and then more and more unrestrainedly with a feeling of heavy, universal hopelessness… Never again would she see those lovely, happy days which she had passed only last year in the town. Not a single one of the Serbs would ever succeed in coming alive out of that dark circle of mountains, nor would see America, nor would create here a land where, so they said, a man could work hard and live freely. Never!”

Andric brings his novel to the end with an account of three or four inconspicuous members of his community who would have preferred always to be by-standers at moments of large public change than be compelled to participate. Pavle Rankovich and other leaders appeal to the sub-Prefect to restrain the schutzkorps from breaking into people’s homes,
but their experience - like the four men of prominence of Chapter 10 - is humiliating and "they filed out like condemned men".

In Chapter 23 the Austrian army and Serbian militia are bombarding each other from either side across the town. People take refuge in the closely sheltered Ristic house where the father of the family, Old Mihailo acts as a kindly and attentive host in spite of having lost his eldest son in the fighting two years before. In particular he offers comfort to a mother out-of-her mind with grief at having lost her destroyed house and also her husband who, Mihailo knows, has been taken hostage and "shot by mistake". Eventually he persuades the woman to take a sip of his best plum brandy - "a real balm and cure for all ills".

READ into the next paragraph p. 296, including

"Now she was calmer and only gazed pensively in front of her. Mihailo would not leave her side, but went on talking to her as to a child, telling her how all this too would pass and her Peter come back from Serajevo alive and well, and they would all go home again to their house at Okoliste."

As the narrative proceeds we are taken back to Lotte's sufferings, now a refugee from the hotel in flight to Serajevo with her family. She suffers terrifying hallucinations of falling into an endless abyss or running the distance between the two towns on long ostrich legs while crowds of violent people pursue her. When the cries out from her nightmares, the small brain-damaged child is with her/

p. 302 “The little cretin squatted there, leaning against the wall, and watched her with his black eyes in which was more curiosity than fear or sympathy...”.

And then we are with Pavle Rankovich again, taken hostage with others in case the rebels should blow up the mined bridge. He is held in a small shed where p. 302 “With hands on knees and bowed head he looked the perfect picture of a man who, exhausted after great effort, had sat down for a moment’s rest, but he had been sitting there motionless in the same position for several hours.”

p. 303 “He kept thinking what was to happen to him, to his house and his property.... The gendarmes had taken away his two sons, students, on the first day. His wife had remained at home, alone with her daughters. The great warehouse at Osojnica had been burnt down before his eyes. His serfs from the nearby village had probably been killed or dispersed. All his credits over the whole district -lost! His shop, the most beautiful shop in the whole town....” etc.

At his very late point we are given his life-story: a penniless Sanjak peasant-boy, apprenticed in Old Peter’s shop without salary until eighteen, trained to understand “the great idea of thrift”, married well at twenty-three and so finally enabled to get a shop of his own to build up. Prospering to become Vice-President of the Municipality, President of the Religious Community, President of the Serbian Choral Society ‘Concord’ and gain other various local points of dignity. P. 304 “He had tried his best, according to the rules of the market-place, to make his way wisely and honestly between the contrary influences which increased daily, without allowing his own interests to suffer, without being regarded by suspicion by the authorities or brought to shame before his own people...”
Now he sits huddled and seating under his starched shirt and collar and fez, a figure of ridicule to the Hungarian guards who watch over him.

p. 395 “Time crept by with mortal slowness. It seemed to him that the bridge over which he had crossed thousands of time but never really looked at, now lay with its weight on his shoulders like some inexplicable and fateful burden, like a nightmare but in a sleep from which there is no awakening.”

We have been well-prepared for Alihodja’s emotive and evocative ending.

With its termination at the outbreak of one global conflict and its composition during the final years of World War II, we are inclined to ask the question “Is ‘The Bridge’ an essentially pessimistic novel overall?” Not so, I think. Apart from its hostility to violence and a pessimistic ‘take’ on the prospects for nationalist enterprises gained through armed conflict, I have found the novel to be more elegiac than polemically critical. It is Andric’s grief for a lost history of uncomplicated and relatively insular lives, possessed of their own admirable qualities, that is the source of the novel’s melancholy rather than an indictment of the prospects of the future. The revival of interest in the novel that took place during the Bosnian troubles of the 1990s gave a temporary, rather distorted impression of this account as something that might explain the Šrebrenica massacre and the rending apart of the community at Mostar. I feel this book offers no such historical explanation for those unforgotten barbarities.

What it does achieve is still more inclusive and more humanitarian. This is an affectionate account of the life of Visegrad by a patriotic citizen whose own experience took him away from the place of his belonging and a tribute to the those who passed their lifetimes, at least in part heroically, there as “Village Hampdens” – knowing their own destinies all the while as victims of a relentless historical process.

My final quotation speaks of their persistence and resilience as the shells of other people’s warfare went bursting about their ears. p. 295 “But beneath this consternation everything was the same as it had been earlier, the same expectant waiting as before, more than a hundred years ago, when the insurgents’ fires blazed on Panos, the same hope, the same caution and the same resolution to bear everything if it could not be otherwise, the same faith in a good result somewhere at the end of all ends.”