Fictionalized Autobiography and the Idea of Central Europe
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Citation for published version (APA):

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Chapter 3

Imaginary-historical space: Pannonia

1. The oceanic feeling and the Pannonian backwater

A 1983 edition of the French magazine Actuel presented a questionnaire about the “magical place” and “the worst rathole I visited.” The answers were never published. A short prose with the improvised title “A i B” (A and B), found among Kiš’s legacy, was a response to this questionnaire. Text A leads to the landscape of the bay of Kotor, Montenegro. It does so in the form of a Baedeker, but the itinerary is poetic and not factographic: “It should be a beautiful day, but it is also necessary that there are some white clouds in the west, which look like a herd of white elephants” (299, my trans.). In this imaginary space, the traveler receives another indication, which identifies him as the son of a father who once went the same way: “And you have to know for sure that your father came along this way, by bus or by taxi which he took in Kotor, and you have to be certain that he watched the same view […]” (299). If these conditions are fulfilled, the traveler will experience “what Koestler called the oceanic feeling.” In a post scriptum the itinerary style is dropped and the narrator speaks in the first person: “My father watched this same view the year 1939 (five years before he disappeared in Auschwitz), and Mr. Sigmund Freud the year 1898, who afterwards dreamt his famous dream about the three Fates” (300). The reference to Koestler is to his novel Darkness at Noon (1940) where the main character, Rubashov, awaiting his execution in a Gulag death cell, watching the blue sky, remembers his childhood and undergoes the “oceanic feeling”. The oceanic feeling links Koestler to Freud, to the opening of Das Unbehagen in der Kultur (1930), in which the psychoanalyst responded to Romain Rolland, who had argued that the “oceanic feeling” was the basis of the religious emotion. The reference to Freud in A and B, however, leads to the traveler Freud, whose visit to the city of Kotor he recorded in his Traumdeutung (1900). There, discussing his dream of the three Fates, he recalls an encounter with a merchant in Split (Freud uses the Italian place name “Spalato”), through whom he remembers a negotiation with a Serbian merchant in Kotor (“Cattaro”). He recalls that he was aloof and that the transaction did not succeed: he failed to purchase the object he wanted. He sees the dream therefore as an “offenbarer Hungertraum” (240).

A thus brings together the historical-imaginary realm of Kiš’s A Tomb for Boris Davidović – which polemized with Koestler’s novel – and the autobiographical-fictional realm of Kiš’s family trilogy, in which the father is the main character. In fact, this is the first time Kiš would name directly the historical fate of his father. Throughout the whole trilogy, there is no direct mention of his father’s deportation. He comes closest to it in Garden, Ashes, when the father returns as a survivor from Auschwitz but then he denies his paternity. This space is quintessentially Central European: Kotor, as a historical meeting point, brings together various biographies: that of his father, which in Hourglass is set in “Central European time”, that of Sigmund Freud, and that of Arthur Koestler, whose career Kiš in his Central Europe essay called “the potential biography of every Central European intellectual […] its most radical realization.”

The somewhat overcrowded space of A contrast sharply with the deserted, dingy house described in B. This is a short but meticulous description of a space well known to the reader of the family trilogy: the room where the Sam-family ends up after their social decline and before they leave for Montenegro – without the father. This is also the space in which the opening of Hourglass is set, where the reader is presented in full with the father’s thoughts. Now it is empty, deserted. This description too is a journey; it is not an itinerary, however, but an accomplished visit narrated retrospectively in the first person:
“Her e shall be a monument,” says the man [who drove me here from Budapest] ironically when we have left the place. ‘On it shall be written: HERE LIVED THE YUGOSLAV WRITER D.K. FROM 1942 TO 1947.’ ‘Luckily, it shall be torn down’, I say.” (302, my trans.)

“A and B” thus brings together the two dominant spaces of Kiš’s imaginative work: Central Europe and Pannonia, the setting of his family trilogy. The short prose was written during the time Kiš lived in Paris. Central Europe, we recall, was to Kiš the place where “he had moved spiritually.” Now it appears that the figure of his father moved with the author Kiš, resorting from Pannonia to Central Europe where he joined the ranks of Kiš’s Central European icons of homelessness in the nineteen eighties, like the apatride, the man without fatherland Egon von Németh, modeled after the playwright and novelist Ödön von Horváth.

Like Central Europe, Pannonia too is a space of homelessness. In Kiš’s trilogy, it is the décor of the wandering father. The topography of the trilogy is carefully prepared: throughout the trilogy, there is no mention of names of countries, of national borders (which the family must have crossed during its wandering), not even of the provincial towns in the Danube basin between Belgrade and Budapest where the Kiš family lived. And it is in this anonymous space, only referred to as Pannonian, where Kiš situates the personal holocaust of his family. Throughout the trilogy, Pannonia is in fact the only stable name, whereas proper names and family names change or erode to the point of anonymity. Central Europe (as in “E.S. arrived at the station at … hours, Central European time”) occasionally appears on the margins of Hourglass.

Central Europe was for Kiš a cultural and political project. As a supranational cultural network, it emphasized common traits of various national cultures and had a strong utopian element. One could say that his Pannonia is a dystopian space, because it brings together the shared negative historical circumstances of the region: persecution on ethnic grounds and extreme nationalism, resulting in the exclusion of those individuals who, according to nationalists, belong nowhere. Central Europe affirms a shared experience of homelessness; Kiš’s Pannonia gives the dark side of this, the individual experience. It would go too far to speak of a full dichotomy utopia-dystopia: for that the Central Europeans, Kiš not excluded, were too well aware that their rewriting of history in terms of Central Europe centered on neghative experiences such as persecution, destruction and homelessness.

Much of Kiš’s Pannonia is intertextual: there is abundant reference to the Croatian writer Miroslav Krleža, in whose work Pannonia is a dominant toponym in between the two world wars. This chapter shall explore Krleža’s Pannonia before it shall discuss Kiš’s. By doing so I do not mean to suggest that Kiš simply extended Krleža’s Pannonia. The differences between the two are perhaps more significant than the similarities. The similarities are that both for Krleža and for Kiš, Pannonia was a borderland where various competing national cultures met. Both writers were, moreover, fluent in Hungarian and took a great interest in Hungarian letters. The difference is that whereas Krleža considered Hungarian literature basically from a national Croatian paradigm, Kiš grew up truly in between two nations and two languages. His Pannonia is a space of homelessness but focalized by homeless characters.

Thus both Pannonias are geographically more or less identical, and both share an interest for the same Hungarian writers. But their focus is fundamentally different; this difference, and the shift from a national to a supranational perspective, is the main theme of this chapter. The personal and imagined encounters of Krleža shall lead us to Endre Ady and to Dezső Kosztolányi, the poet and writer from Kiš’s place of birth Subotica/Szabadka on the Hungarian-Yugoslav border.
Finally, Kiš’s Pannonia is important for matters of genre. In Krleža’s work (both in non-fiction and fiction), Pannonia signals a critique of national identity: history as written in the Danube nation states has failed to record crucial historical experience. His Pannonia offers an alternative national history. Kiš’s Pannonia, as I will show, also brings back a repressed past: the Jewish past before assimilation. The father lives in Pannonian space, the son, who is also the narrator, doesn’t. Their conflict is not just about whose space is real and whose is imaginary. It is about Jewish identity and about assimilation as a response to being excluded from the nation. Rivalry between their spaces is decided on the generic level.

2. Historical Pannonia: overcoming the loss of a center

Nowadays, a search for Pannonia on the internet results in countless hits, all of which are more or less related to the tourist delights of the Danube basin in between Budapest, Belgrade and Zagreb – for obvious reasons most of them restricted to Hungary. Thus one comes across numerous restaurants and hotels, also on the Western side of the Austro-Hungarian border. The sole contribution from Kiš’s former country seems “Panonka”, (the Pannonian housewife) a reminder of Titoist workers’ self-rule in the Vojvodina, Yugoslavia.

Pannonia has previously been the focus of comparative research in two studies by Zoran Konstantinović, who suggests the usefulness of Pannonia as part of the so called “Europäischer Zwischenfeld” (European Interstice), as a cultural space that includes topographical aspects of Romanian, Serbian, Croatian and Hungarian literature. My concern here is not with Pannonia as another alternative concept that takes together several literary traditions from the Danube basin; nor with an alleged historical-geographical background which, among others, bore the name Pannonia, but with the toponym itself and the political, cultural, historical and literary mapping of the spaces it connotes. When György Konrád writes in The Melancholy of Rebirth about Central Europe that “no matter what we call it and whether or not we speak of it as such, Central Europe was, is, and probably will continue to be. Like the Danube, which existed long before it was called the Danube” (156), this may hold true from Konrád’s perspective. Pannonia is in geographical terms part of Danubian space. However, when one focuses on the intention of the speaker (as Konrád’s intention in applying Central Europe is political) in its interplay with other, previous uses of the toponym which are not just political but historical and literary, a wholly different kind of mapping emerges. That mapping is my concern here. Perhaps one of the historical distinguishing features of the East-Central European region is the frequent shift of proper names and toponyms – Milosz makes a similar point with respect to personal proper names. Pannonia is a different realm from Central Europe: it is a space on the margins and never evolved into a self-conscious discourse with a political agenda.

Like the notion of Danubian culture, Pannonia too selects elements from physical space and constructs a particular, one-sided image of the physical surroundings. There is a more or less fixed geographical map which covers the plain between the mountainous regions of the Balkans and the Julian Alps, veined by the Danube, Drava, Sava and Tisa (Tisza) rivers. The former Pannonian sea, a tide-land ever since some distant glacial epoch, is still apparent in swamps, in mud. The toponym, the etymology of which is uncertain, is first mentioned in the classical age. Up to the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, Pannonia was the name of the northern Roman Balkan province. The Enciklopedija Jugoslavije mentions “Panonci”, “Pannonians”, as a people ethnically close to the Illyrians (a people with whom modern Albanian nationalism claims ethnic kinship), but culturally different. Subsequent migrations of Slavs and Magyars, their christianization, the schism between the Roman and the Byzantine Church and the presence of the Ottomans, created an utterly
confusing cultural landscape in which the toponym Pannonia occurs and re-occurs through the ages, seemingly without a coherent meaning. It occurs in the age of humanism, during the rise of modern nationalism, and, finally, as a marginal though highly suggestive toponym in 20th century Serbian, Croatian, and Hungarian fiction.

As diverse as these instances are, they all share the notion of decentering which is present from the very first mention of Pannonia. The poetry of the Latinist and humanist Iannus Pannonius (Jan Panonije, Ivan Ćezmički, 1434-1472) displays strong nostalgia for ancient Rome and the poet’s longing for contemporary renaissance Italy seems inversely proportional to his aversion to Pannonian backwardness. After the Turkish seizure of Buda in 1541, at the time Pannonia’s political center, the anthology Pannoniae Luctus (The Light of Pannonia), celebrating Iannus Pannonius as the initiate of Pannonian culture, is published in Krakow in 1544. This time the decentering is a response to changes on the contemporary political scene. Already then, Pannonia existed as a cultural space next to a Danubian discourse community: the Sodalitas Litteraria Danubiae which Conrad Celtis (1459-1508) founded almost simultaneously in Vienna and Buda (see Birnbaum 52-53).

When Pannonia occurs again three centuries later, national consciousness has redecorated the cultural landscape under the influence of Herder’s ideas about language and literature as the nation’s fundament which in the Pannonian realm reverberate both in Hungarian, Serbian and Croat national awakening, giving rise to sometimes competing, sometimes cooperating cultural movements. From now on, Pannonia shall be politically on the margins. The Slovene linguist Jernej Kopitar (1780-1844) formulated his Pannonian-Slavonic theory during the rise of national consciousness among the South-Slavs. The theory had hardly anything to do with the Latinist heritage. It was embedded in a moderately pan-slavic, historical linguistic discourse that (wrongly) claimed Pannonia as the native soil of Church Slavonic, the archaic Slavic vernacular used in the Orthodox Churches. The theory was refuted later, but at the time it was embedded in a powerful discourse. Kopitar was the official censor of Slovene books in Vienna, as well as custos of the Vienna Court Library. He mediated between South-Slavic philologists and ethnologists such as Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1787-1864) and key-figures of German culture such as Wilhelm von Humboldt and Friedrich Schlegel. Conceived in a wider context of Austro-Slavism, his theory might very well have been the source, through mediation of Jacob Grimm, of the term “altpannonisch” used by Goethe to refer to Church Slavonic in his well-known review of Serbian folk poetry (415). Simultaneously to Kopitar’s theory, Pannonia occurs in a national Hungarian context. Gábor Kereké mentions a poem attributed to the ethnic German poet Karl Antun Gruber, “Pannonia’s Sprache” (Pest, 1806), which is an ode written in German to the Hungarian vernacular and its poets.

Pannonia occurs once more in early twentieth century poetry. The Hungarian poet Mihály Babits describes Pannonia as connected throughout the ages with Italian culture. The Croat poet Vladimir Vidrić returns in his poem “Ex Pannonia” to the classical age in his use of metaphors such as Charon and the Styx. Pannonia entered anthropological discourse with Jovan Cvijić’s La Péninsule Balkanique (French original 1918, Serbian edition 1922). Cvijić describes Pannonia as a particular “géographie psychique” that constitutes, together with the Dinaric, Central and Oriental Balkan types, an ethnic South-Slav (“Yugoslave”) identity. It becomes part of the Serbian-centered Yugoslav discourse that, at the time, attempted to unite the South-Slavs on ethnic grounds.

Cvijić was an honorary doctor at both Charles University in Prague and at the Sorbonne. He published his study during the final phase of the South-Slav political unification, which was accomplished in 1918 with the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Cvijić himself propagated the idea of a South-Slav nation as specialist-delegate in the territorial commission of the Yugoslav delegation at the Versailles peace
conference. Here, as in the case of Kopitar, a powerful discourse at the intersection of political and academic life is involved. However, whereas Kopitar's discourse was pre-national, Cvijić's is national and is an important contribution to the creation of a national identity in what was in fact a multicultural context, the Yugoslav one, whose various stages were to have a predominant influence on the topography of South-Eastern and East-Central Europe in our century. Pannonia, marginalized as a sub-category of the Yugoslav "géographie humaine," would probably have disappeared from the short memory of South-Eastern European culture, had Krleža not revived it.

Claudio Magris in his *Danubio* rightly discusses the work of Krleža under the heading "Pannonia". He discusses Kiš, however, in the context of Novi Sad, many pages downstream the Danube. Recent mention of Kiš's Pannonia occurs in Mirko Kovač's *Kristalne Rešetke* (Crystal Bars, 1995). Kovač situates his imaginary return to Belgrade and to his ex-friends from Medijala, a group of poets and painters to which Kiš also belonged, in Pannonian space. Here, Krleža is again entirely absent. This chapter wants to fill the gaps in the intertextual dialogue that Kiš conducted with Krleža.

### 3. Krleža's Pannonia and the crisis of the nation

In the work of Miroslav Krleža (1893-1981) Pannonia features, roughly, during the period in between the two world wars. Krleža lived successively in the Habsburg monarchy, the two Yugoslav Kingdoms in between the two world wars, and in the Federative Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia. Pannonia first appears in travelogues and essays and is then transposed to fiction, where it occurs on the margins of Krleža's imaginary Croatian bourgeois family, the Glembajs, portrayed in a number of plays and a collection of novellas. Pannonia is the dominant space in the novel *Povratak Filipa Latinovicza* (The Return of Filip Latinovicz 1932). Its occurrence seems, moreover, related to Krleža's attempts to define an individual aesthetic realm that was to present an alternative to Croatian national culture as well as to the Marxist dialectic interpretation of local culture. In Krleža's work, Pannonia has therefore strong political implications: it is a space where the individual collides with the collective and where the artist faces the moral need for engagement — or *Tendenz* as it was called in the interwar jargon. Like Marxist internationalism, his Pannonia transgressed national borders; like the national community it was preoccupied with the memory of local history and regional culture. Krleža's Pannonia is distinguished, however, by its emphasis on alienation and homelessness. Significantly the toponym (but not the related questions about culture in the European periphery) disappears almost entirely from Krleža's work after the establishment of the Socialist Federalist Republic of Yugoslavia. The founding of the republic after the second world war not only marked the institutional shift of Marxist ideology to the political center, but also, effectively, pushed Krleža to the center of Titoist cultural politics, and with him his individualist conception of Marxist aesthetics, at the expense of socialist realism.

Krleža's Pannonia, as it appears in his writings in the early nineteen twenties, is a dystopian space and is identified by a number of elements that form its physical reality. The Pannonian sea is transformed into the swamps of the monotonous plane between the Pannonian rivers, Sava, Drava and Danube. Water is present in the sound of raindrops marking moments of time, in non-mechanic, pre-modern clocks such as clepsydras and hourglasses, and in the fog and the birches. Descriptions of the seasons seem an inversion of the idyll: dirtiness of snow in winter, heaviness of sunlight in summer. A frequent passer-by is a blind man, a veteran from the Great War, playing the harmonica. Only dogs respond to the sound of church bells. Time always evolves towards dusk, never towards dawn. Pannonia is a rustic space filled with ruins from the Habsburg era, with the ruins of bulwarks against the
Turks, with monuments of the counter-reformation, and, hidden under the muddy surface, small sculptures, often only shards, dating back from ancient Roman times. This emphasis on almost exclusively physical spatial elements points to a gloomy experience of history. As a transition zone, Pannonia was often the locus of battles that defined Europe’s political borders. As such, it was always subjected to, and itself never the subject of history. Krleža’s Pannonia constructs a negative history, a history of ruins, anti-monuments, which are sometimes reminiscences of past cultures but mostly mere remnants of destruction.

4. Krleža as a traveler in Pannonia

The first boundary Krleža crossed by resorting to Pannonia was the one set by the so-called Illyrian movement, the nineteenth century Croatian national cultural revival which, among its virtues counted the construction of a national Croatian language. In “Pjesma iz hrvatske krčme” (Poem from the Croatian dive, 1921), Krleža first used the phrase “Pannonian mud” (237) in a programmatic poem which emphasizes the provinciality of Croatian letters.

Krleža’s main reproach is the gap between the Illyrians’ conception of Croatianhood and the actual historical reality. The ferociousness of his attack may be due to the polemical nature of his character; it is certainly also triggered by the Illyrians’ language policy which, by opting for the Stokavian, ignored the Kajkavian dialect, thereby excluding the vernacular literature of Krleža’s hometown Zagreb and its rustic surroundings. The phrase “Pannonian mud” occurs again in “Pismo iz Koprivnice” (Letter from Koprivnica, 1925), when Krleža reflects on Croatian-Hungarian relations, and on Croatia as antemurale christianitatis. Instead of emphasizing Croatia’s historical victimhood, he denies the local rural surroundings their historical uniqueness by comparing them, first, to Brueghel’s pictorial version of early sixteenth-century Brabant, and secondly to the former Habsburg province of Galicia. Defining Pannonia as a peripheral space, he even denies the town of Koprivnica its urban character: “A hospital, a district council, a town hall and a library are built around these stores, and this is then what is called, in our circumstances, restricted by our modest requirements, a Town” (249; my trans.).

At this stage, Pannonia is for Krleža mainly a space meant to contest the Illyrian conception of Croatian national identity. There seems for him no conflict between Pannonia and Marxist internationalist conceptions of political, historical, and cultural space. In Islet u Rusiju (An Excursion to Russia, 1926), Pannonian space is extended to span the eight states of East Central Europe established after World War I. Here, the narrator’s internationalist spirit is inclined to Marxist historical-materialism. It rejects what it calls “decadent capitalist culture” and sees the Komintern as alternative: “One returns out of the brothel of Europe into the ‘Pannonian’ zone, from the southern to the northern Balkans [...], using eight rolls of barbed wire, the League of Nations has separated the Balkans from Russia” (35; my trans).

Here, both the internationalist Komintern and Krleža’s use of Pannonia are a direct reply to nationalist cultural-territorial claims. The years following the journey to the Soviet Union revealed, however, a deeper tension. At a closer look, Krleža’s discontent becomes apparent already in An Excursion to Russia. His concrete experience of Soviet society seriously challenged his communist convictions. Like Walter Benjamin in his Moscow travelogue, Krleža devotes many passages to his own highly subjective impressions. The chapter “Ulazak u Moskvu” (Entering Moscow), for instance, does not glorify the revolutionary city but focuses on the narrator’s apparent unease, which he tries to overcome by reflecting on the decisive role of the senses in his childhood memories. Later on, Krleža does concentrate on the new Soviet society, but by then he has already spent a considerable time writing about his impressions of Berlin, and of Lithuania. Both the Lithuanian political state of affairs and the local countryside remind him of Croatia, and although he mentions
Pannonia in quotation marks his description of “Lithuanian Pannonia” contains several elements that we have identified as the physical landscape of his Pannonia. Still, the account of the journey to the Soviet utopia is permeated with discourse that reflects the official point of view of the Yugoslav communist party. The result is a strangely ambivalent text.

How different in this respect is the short travelogue prose “Ljudi putuju” (People Traveling), published in Evropa Danas (Europe Today, 1935). Europe Today is a typical example of pamphletist literature, a fusion of journalistic reportage and literary essay. Written nine years after the Soviet travelogue, “People Traveling” no longer displays official Marxist discourse. The traveler in “People Traveling”, like the traveler in An Excursion to Russia, travels by train through an amorphous zone. The amorphousness seems rooted in the indefinite culture of the East-Central European region, which, in the historical context of the twenties and the thirties, meant the patchwork of nation states created in 1918. The anonymous narrator travels in the presence of people whose disagreements, quarrels and anti-Semitism display a state of utter linguistic and ideological confusion. Krleža’s gaze is, however, no longer colored by the official view of the Party. “People Traveling,” in contrast to An Excursion to Russia, shifts to an imaginary space. The inside of the train, with the narrator and the passengers, is an actual setting: facts about the historical reality enter the narrative through the radio and newspapers. The outside space, referred to as “Pannonian,” is highly suggestive: it is dark and threatening and, more importantly, it is empty, a kind of void, looming at the border of Europe. The destination of the train is not revealed. Not only does the ideological confusion grow as the train moves eastwards, searching its way through Pannonia, it is also adrift and suggests historical disorientation instead of historical teleology.

The difference in focus and spatial orientation between the two travelogues indicates the shift in Krleža’s political affinities. First an admirer of Lenin, he dedicated to him his early play Kristofor Kolumbo (Cristobal Colon, 1918). He then became increasingly critical of the new Soviet society, and he engaged in the so-called sukob na ljevici, the conflict on the left in Yugoslav letters. This involved fierce polemics in the 1930s between the surrealist movement on the one hand and dogmatic advocates of socialist realism. Krleža took an active part in these polemics and wrote a large number of essays and articles in which he attempted to define aesthetic principles that were both engaged and based on his individual artistic talent. Krleža’s involvement in the polemic generated a stream of publications on Tendenz in the arts. In an essay on the painter Krsto Hegedušić, “Podravski Motivi Krste Hegedušića” (Introduction to Krsto Hegedušić’s Drava Motives, 1933), Krleža reflects explicitly on his own use of the toponym Pannonia through the years. He quotes two instances, right at the heart of a plea for the freedom of individual artistic expression. He quotes at length his own “Letter from Koprivnica” from 1925. The letter suggested that here, in this backward provincial town, he realized the resemblance of contemporary rural reality to Brueghel’s pictorial version of early sixteenth-century Brabant, and to Galicia. He concludes his essay by stating that the art of Hegedušić, as a synthesis of the pictorial language of the sixteenth century Brueghel, the twentieth century Georg Grosz and local motives, represents an authentic Pannonian style.

Krleža identifies in Hegedušić’s drawings “ljepote,” a key-concept of Krleža’s sensory aesthetics in general and Pannonia in particular. “Ljepote” (literally the grammatical plural of “beauty”) are defined in the same essay as imprints of “negativne istine” (lit. “negative truths”). The concept of “ljepote” is then said to be directly related to human fear of mortality. As an example Krleža brings up Fra Angelico. His paintings, Krleža writes, do not strike us because of their “elevated” Christian inspiration (which is ideological and, therefore, ephemeral), but because of “those typical banal characteristics of everyday profoundly earthly excitements” (300). Two aspects are important here: First, the individualism of the moment of both artistic conception and perception. Art depends on sensory perception, not on any
rational or idealistic perception. Secondly, the ambiguous suggestion of transcendence, of art speaking through the ages and resisting history. What speaks through the ages are these “profoundly earthly excitement expressions of fear of death and destruction. To Krleža, the work of painters like Brueghel and Bosch, as well as of Georg Grosz, evokes these “negative truths”: images which are both grotesque and an imprint of human mortality and suffering.

According to Krleža, Hegedušić has succeeded in his drawings to bridge “the gap between our Croatian reality and its artistic objectivization in our nineteenth-century literature” (328). His art is a synthesis of “negative truths” and local motives. Frustrated national pride is one of these motives, but Krleža carefully avoids to identify with radical Croat nationalism, like the thought of someone like Ante Starčević (a nationalist, anti-Magyar Croat politician from the second half of the nineteenth century). The latter’s political discourse, his outrage with “the poverty, corruption, grief and drunkenness of the Hungarian yoke” (329), is reflected in the work of Hegedušić. But the geographical range of Hegedušić’s motives is restricted to local culture “in between Karlovac and Koprivnica” (330). Opposing Hungarian nationalist politics, it does not resort to a Croatian nationalist antithesis. Krleža also manages to avoid the socialist alternative by emphasizing the painter’s individual talent as well as the impossibility of basing genuine art on political ideas.

As Pannonia loses its explicit Marxist, communist party-oriented character, its dominant rhetoric remains negative. Krleža’s Pannonia, with its lists of ruins where one expects cathedrals, and the praise of a sarcastic, self-carnivalizing poetry instead of perfect alexandrines, more and more became a locus for his alternative, negative, individual aesthetics. It now mounted up to a full history of discontinuity and destruction at the center of which was concern with the individual’s homelessness. Beside growing political discontent, the evolution of his Pannonia also lays bare Krleža’s sense of individual alienation, his aesthetic discontent as an artist in a marginal cultural space where aesthetic form evolved somehow differently than in Western-Europe. His search for an authentic form leads away not only from official communist party aesthetics and from nineteenth-century nationalism but also from copying Western models.

5. Pannonia as dominant space in Krleža’s fiction

Krleža’s discontent and his disoriented fictional characters, like the author-traveler, traveled almost exclusively by train. The train, and to a less extent the fiaker (traditional horse-drawn carriage), offers a particular perspective on geography and history. The perspective is dynamic: the traveler ardently wishes to leave Pannonia (for the West, for the cultural capital Paris) or comes back, disillusioned by the same cultural capital, like the painter Filip Latinovicz—but once returned, realizes the gap between actual cultural surroundings and the embellished image in his perception. This is a dramatic clash which causes the protagonist great agony, often leading him to contemplate suicide.

In 1926 Krleža published a novella under the title “In the fog”, which six years later re-appeared slightly altered as the novella “Ivan Križovec” in the Glembaj prose cycle. It is of special interest to the evolution of the Pannonian space, because the novella, which contains literal passages from “Letter from Koprivnica”, seems a direct transposition of the author’s impressions into fiction. The novella presents the lawyer Ivan Križovec. He is involved in a problematic amorous affair with Laura Warnöig-Glembajeva, also known as the baroness Lenbachova who, as the genealogical tree presented at the beginning of the Glembaj novellas informs us, “attempted her first suicide together with dr. Križovec”.

Križovec, in charge of some complicated financial transactions following the demise of the Habsburg double monarchy and the creation of the kingdom of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs, is a frequent traveler between Budapest, Belgrade, and Zagreb. The novella is situated
on a railway station, in a provincial town in northern-Croatia where Križovec is waiting for his delayed train to continue the journey. The railroad is the notorious MAV, "Magyar Állam Vasutak", the Hungarian State Railway, which from 1867 until 1918 held the connection Budapest-Rijeka and as such became for Croatian nationalism a symbol of Hungary's domination. The town is anonymous. In "Letter from Koprivnica", the description started with "When traveling in this province in winter, one always gets the impression that the railroad bores its way into a picture frame of sorts, one of Brueghel’s snowy compositions" (241). In the novella, the description of the town begins as follows: "When traveling in these parts of the Kingdom [of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs], one gets the impression that the railroad bores its way into a picture frame of sorts, one of Brueghel’s snowy compositions" ("Ivan Križovec" in Glembajevi Proza 187). Here, the fictional character Ivan Križovec focalizes Pannonia space. He is certainly not an alter ego of the author, if only because the opaque narrative situation places the observation in between the narrative instance and the character Križovec.

Križovec is one among many post-Habsburg characters in Krleža’s work who realize after the double deluge of the Great War and the end of the Double Monarchy, that their investments in a political career have been in vain. With Krleža’s typical mix of critical distance, political outrage and psychological analysis, the novella’s anonymous narrator presents Križovec as a drifter who neither politically nor culturally feels at home. Uprooted, as one “who better spoke Hungarian than his own mother tongue” (194), he has invested all his life into a Habsburg-Hungarian career, and now sees himself confronted with what he really is:

This typically Croatian mentality of ours, an unreliable peasant-Hochstapler mentality, an imitation of the Hungarian, regionalist, anti-Semite, Verböczy-gentry mentality, which has settled as Pannonian mud ever since the crescent blew above Buda’s fortress. (191)

Thus occurs Pannonia on the margins of the Glembaj cycle: as a negative memory that records individual disasters and the collective failure of a whole national conception. Here, the dominant space is historical: the biographies and careers of the Glembaj members and other protagonists are intimately related to the historical fate of the Croatian nation in the Habsburg monarchy. The characters’ sense of being homeless stems from the ruptures and sudden changes that have rumpled their lives; Pannonia is a background space, a gloomy, rustic reality which among these kingdoms, empires and civilizations which come and go, is the only stable factor. Their homelessness is first and foremost the result of a crisis of the Croatian nation: historically opaque, a linguistic hybrid and politically compromised, its foundations fail to provide them shelter.

Was Zagreb already in the Glembaj novella referred to as “a dive along the road from Buda to the sea” (192) (to be sure, in the perception of Ivan Križovec), when Filip Latinovicz in the 1932 novel arrives at Zagreb Central Station, the name of the Croatian city is not even mentioned. What is mentioned throughout the novel is the village where the protagonist’s mother lives and which is the true destination of his return from Paris: Kostanjevec, the imaginary village in northern Croatia, already mentioned in the last of the Glembaj novellas. Filip Latinovicz, the protagonist of this Künstlerroman is a painter who returns (by train and by fiaker) to his native soil which the anonymous narrative instance identifies as Pannonia. Pannonia is the dominant toponym in the novel, politically, historically and genealogically. Croatia is mentioned only a few times and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia - the political reality at the time and the setting of the Glembaj-cycle - is left out entirely. Filip is not only in search of his genealogy, trying to find out from his mother the identity of his father: as an artist who
spent twenty-five years abroad, in the “Western metropolis,” he feels estranged and fosters the illusion of refining his cultural roots in Pannonia. In the village of Kostanjevec, he gets entangled in social relations with two “brodolomci” (castaways) - Krleža’s favorite metaphor for characters who have lost their social position. Set on the margins of the Glembaj-cycle, some of the characters seem to have the tainted blood of this family, like the central female character, the self-destructive Bobočka with whom Filip starts an affair; so does her former, worn-out lover, the bankrupt lawyer Vladimir von Balоčanski. The ending is gloomy: Balоčanski kills Bobočka in an attack of jealousy. Filip’s mood fluctuates extremely, especially under the spell of dr. Kyriales, a “Caucasian Greek, whose mother came from Smyrna and whose father came from Kiev; a Georgian who had worked as a journalist in Riga and was now roaming through the Pannonian forests” (239, references are to the Croatian edition), a runaway revolutionary who in Filip’s confused perception takes on the shape of the devil. With his materialist expositions he undermines Filip’s ideas and convictions about his painting and about his national identity. But it is, unexpectedly, Kyriales who commits suicide. He jumps in front of a train, his body is found along the Pannonian railway.

Initially, Filip has high hopes of regaining his mental peace when he returns to Pannonia:

More and more often it had occurred to Filip lately that he might break away from all the soot and smells and go home to Pannonia, where he had not been for so long. To live down there with his mother in the vineyard at Kostanjevec for one autumn, rich, quiet, and with wine in abundance. [...] Pannonia would be sleeping and there would be no soot, no hurry, no nerves. (45)

But already while waiting for a fiaker at a café, to go from the capital to Kostanjevec, his hopes turn out to be an illusion: “This muddy Pannonian backwater, this wretched Kaptol street [...] This morning he had returned to an old picture he had never mastered, to old worries and cares, the source of the sorrow and depression that beset him, as if he had awakened in his own grave” (50). A dialogue with his coachman, the archetypal Pannonian, only deepens his sense of displacement. The difference between himself, a decadent, “neurasthenic” artist and the coachman is as extreme as the difference between the old rotten coach and the plane London-Bombay above their heads, “Two worlds in three days: London-Bagdad-Bombay, and the inn at Kravoder with the nuns and their basket of eggs! The Pannonian mire and civilization!” (71) The coachman, Joža Podravec, like the lawyer Ivan Križovec, “has forgotten his Croatian”, in his case because of his long detention as a military prisoner in Russia. His language is the local Kajkavian dialect.

Bobočka, the central female character, has forgotten her Croatian too. Like Ivan Križovec, she is magyarized, but more important, she is something in between, in the perception of Filip who, under the spell of Kyriales, realizes that “nationality is a petty-bourgeois prejudice” (240):

As for Bobočka, she was a Hungarian, a Pannonian, from Medjumurje, with a mixture of German, Italian and South Styrian aristocratic blood in her veins, so that she could hardly speak Croatian! And Filip, on his father’s side, was no one; the Valenti’s had come to Cracow from Ždala, and his mother was a Hungarian from Szekesfehérvár. Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Veronese, Pannonians, Hungarians; what distant parts of the world had they come from? Out of what distant mists had their bodies reached this Danubian mud, to crawl about here in these narrow surroundings, with that blood still flowing in their veins? (240)
It is under this tension that Filip is painting. No wonder that there is an enormous discrepancy between what he feels he should paint and what he actually realizes. When attending the popular feast of Saint Rock, Filip feels separated from the common people and thinks of them as still living in the Middle Ages. It is here, in Filip’s perception, that the pictorial world of Brueghel and Bosch is verbally represented. Shut off from the wild, carnivalesque feast, but touched by what is described as a barbaric, erotic force, Filip conceives of a painting of Christ as martyr and redeemer. He is convinced that this artistic image has the power to reconcile his alienated self with local reality. What is it exactly that “inspires” him?

This clash between the pagan, Pannonian, environment and that pale Man who was hanged like a thief, but who as such has remained a living symbol to this day - the visionary hatred of that higher Man who realizes from his cross, from that fantastic height from which all the hanged look down upon us, that the dirt under our feet can be dominated only by the clash of the granite - this should be put on canvas for once! (180)

The image evoked here is deeply ironical. The messianic figure Filip imagines is precisely what he himself is not: a revolutionary, a prophet, a subject very much capable of acting. The messianic figure recalls the particular subjectivity from the nineteenth century re-awakening of national consciousness, embodied by national poets like the Hungarian Sándor Petöfi, a key figure for the young Krleža as Croatian national icons failed to inspire him. It recalls also another type of subjectivity, that of the revolutionary from the early twentieth century Marxist revolution, as embodied in An Excursion to Russia by the figure of Lenin, whose iconic status reminded Krleža of a prophet, and even of Jesus. No wonder, then, that Filip does not succeed in materializing his image in a painting. What he does paint, towards the end of the novel, in a mood of almost complete alienation, when he has lost grip on his own life and on the life of the people around him, is the following image:

His mother, old Liepach, fat Karolina, Miško the cowherd, Bobočka, and Baločanski - he painted them all as they sat drinking tea in the full glare of the sun round a samovar in the summerhouse; old Regina with his Excellency, like two ridiculous parrots, fat Karolina in the center of the composition with her swollen stomach and red butcher’s hands; the deaf and dumb Miško, and the imbecile Baločanski: two epileptic, demoniac, grimacing masks; Bobočka pale, in black silk, was pouring tea for him, Filip, into a bright red cup. He painted himself in front of the circle with his palette and a cigarette in his hand, and on the summerhouse, on the green ivy-tod he set an old, secular raven; everything was oily with the heavy strokes of the brush, too wet and too rich in color, lapidary, ponderous: a shade, possibly, too Nordic, the motif a little too problematic, though not the execution: it had been put on canvas in a single sweep, almost modeled in a single stroke. (230)

Why is Filip capable of painting this self-portrait and incapable of painting his vision of Christ? One answer is revealed in the text: the image of Christ is based on an idea, whereas the image of the self is conceived through the senses. As a sublime idea, the Messiah transcends what is human; I suggest that at this point in the novel, as well as in the toponym Pannonia, any human transcendence is carnivalized – including afterlife as an immortal national icon. The second image portrays Filip in the presence of other characters in the novel. At the end of the quoted fragment, Filip expresses his satisfaction about the painting in free indirect speech. But does he have reason to be satisfied? There is an irony hidden in this
scene. The fragment has an anonymous narrator but is focalized by Filip. He thus focalizes his own painting, which portrays himself as a painter in the presence of the other characters in the novel. Some of these other characters are portrayed as caricatures. But who is really the caricature? The people that are portrayed by the painter, or the painter who portrays the people adding an image of himself as a painter? The irony of his self-satisfaction becomes more obvious when one realizes that these people include his mother who has never revealed to him who his real father was; the man who actually turns out to be his real father; his adulterous mistress Bobočka; and the castaway who will finally kill Bobočka. Thus a scene that seems to suggest reconciliation, in fact implies the irrevocability of alienation.

One character is absent from this group portrait: Kyriales. Taking into account the importance of the group portrait, this is a crucial void. This is a self-portrait of the artist among Pannonians. It implies that Kyriales is the sole character whose sense of displacement is not related to the Pannonian complex, and, therefore, not to the crisis of the nation. The Pannonians, these “morbid weaklings and confused decadents in Kostanjevec” (186) see Kyriales as a stranger and an outsider. In Filip’s free indirect speech he becomes “this stranger, this unknown traveler and chance passerby, this fugitive and emigrant” (195). To Kyriales, then, the nation and national identity are illusions. His suggestive reasoning undermines Filip’s sense of national identity:

That unpleasant Greek had been right the other night, in saying that “nationality was a petty-bourgeois prejudice.” On another occasion—against his own innermost convictions—Filip had argued that nationality was a subjective factor, a psychological phenomenon, a notion of metaphysical origin. Just lately, he had been too much under the influence of such vague metaphysics! (240)

And as to the Pannonians’ question who this Kyriales is, the answer reveals a nomadic background, only tied by blood relations:

His mother was supposed to have been a Greek Jewess from an island off Asia Minor; his father, Kiril Pavlovitch, a Russian staff lieutenant in a Guards regiment [...] From such a dull, bald, unhealthy, inert family there had suddenly surged up within the young Sergej Kyriales his Levantine Jewish blood. (187)

What is more, this outsider in the Pannonian realm remains also an outsider for the narrative instance. Kyriales gets to speak in direct and indirect speech, but his inner thoughts are rarely exposed. He is thus dominantly focalized from the outside, by the Pannonians. It seems that the narrative instance, although (mostly) impersonal, is situated within the Pannonian constellation, and therefore it too views Kyriales as an outsider. There is one leap into his thoughts, a symptom of the return to a more traditional narrative, away from stream of consciousness, toward the end of the novel. But at least from a thematic point of view, the novel is clear about the fact that Kyriales’s sense of homelessness is different in kind: he never had a home, he only has a nomadic past, whereas the Pannonians, even if they are catching at shadows, are faced with a post-national reality, the reality of the nineteenth-century nation in crisis, and therefore can look back at a (lost) sedentary identity.

So Krleža’s Pannonians are uprooted. But their sense of being homeless is still national: they are in agony because they cannot live up to the utopian standards of the linguistic, genealogical and moral purity of the nineteenth-century national ideal. Krleža’s Pannonia thus shows the nation in crisis. It is far from sure whether his Pannonians have an alternative. Can they go beyond the nation and explore some kind of supranational identity? Difficult. The sole possibility to engage in dialogue with other nations seems the shared sense
of crisis. For not just the Croatian nation is in crisis in Pannonia; so is the Hungarian - at least in Krleža’s paraphrase of the work of Endre Ady.

6. With Endre Ady into pre-national Pannonian space

Thus Krleža’s Pannonia is in more than one respect a response to the nation: it is a critique from the inside, an admonition that the nationalism of the philistines is reductionist, that its cultural memory has left out essential linguistic and historical traditions. It is also self-casting: it is sobered up by an internationalist critique of nationalism, and yet it has an emotional, highly individual perception of local identity. Its attitude toward the nineteenth-century conception of the nation is one of simultaneous revising and reprimanding. It conceives of the nation as a home, but with a roof that fails to provide shelter.

For Krleža, the toponym Pannonia had as yet no pre-determined meanings: the literary and historical meanings attached to it, were not powerful enough to withstand his negative vision. “Ex Pannonia” (1906), a poem by the Croatian poet Vladimir Vidrić (1875-1909) presents as its lyrical I a Roman, who “When we eight years ago/behind the black Pannonian grove/were building hamlets/plowing the land” faces a mourning barbarian. The poem hangs, as it were, in static, mythical space, without any attempt to link up the classical age with contemporary reality. In Hungarian letters, the toponym Pannonia may have been more in use than in Croatian letters. In 1940, when Krleža was about to abandon Pannonian space, it still proved vital to the Hungarian poet Mihály Babits (1883-1941). To him, writing in 1940, Pannonia is the vital substratum of classical Latin culture that connects his native soil to the Italian and Mediterranean culture:

My homeland is Pannonia; my “second” home—if I may use the old phrase—is Italy. Pannonia is an ancient Roman territory where one can find the traces of Roman culture so far. Workers often came across Roman coins while hoeing in the vineyard of my mother. My hometown is the ancient Alisca, the museum there proudly presents the mess of the Roman finds from the neighborhood. (Babits, “Itália és Pannónia”, II:707)

The Latin substratum is not absent from Krleža’s Pannonia, in fact one of the formative experiences of the fictional character Filip Latinovicz, as a boy, was when a classmate came across a small antique sculpture. However, in Krleža’s Pannonia the connection between the classical age and contemporary reality, be it mythical or historical, is lost. Instead, barbarians roam the Pannonian realm and have captured the speaking instance, the “we”, who is no longer the heir of Roman ancestors. “We” were waiting, to speak with Kavafy, for the barbarians, now “we” are the barbarians and when we look back we see the ruins of civilization piling up. In 1930 Krleza writes about contemporary “Eastern European” poetry: “All these lyricisms only reflect a certain state, a Danubian, Pannonian, Scythian, Hunnish, Balkan, Slavic state, a sad state decaying before the fortified walls of Europe” (161). Scyths, Huns, Slavs: reference is to the nomadic tribes that from the time of Herodotos have been an antithesis to sedentary civilizations and which, before nineteenth-century nationalism redrew the historical map, represented the conglomerate of peoples and tribes in the Danube basin. The quotation is from the introductory remarks to Krleža’s essay on the poetry and person of Endre Ady (1877-1919) “The Hungarian poet Endre Ady”. The essay is meant to introduce the Hungarian poet to the Croatian audience. Krleža’s knowledge of the Hungarian language stemmed from his formative years in the Habsburg military academy in Pécs/Pećuh; in his prose memoir Djetinjstvo u Agramu (A Childhood in Agram, 1942) he mentions family roots in Kaniža/Kaniza, Hungary. It appears from the essay that the Croatian public is not familiar with recent trends in Hungarian literary life. Krleža’s mention of the “poor knowledge of the
Hungarian language in our country” (152), only 12 years after the end of the Habsburg Double Monarchy, reveals a tendency of weakening interest for Hungarian matters that was only to increase in the course of time: Kíš in his 1959 “An Excursion to Paris” complains how he has been looking for a publisher for his Ady translations for years already (531).

It is not surprising that Ady, of all the Hungarian poets of his generation, should attract Krleža’s attention. Krleža must have known Ady’s work from early on. In 1919 he wrote a short obituary for Ady but he is somewhat ambivalent on Ady’s poetry. In his 1930 essay, a sense of futility and of tragic failure in the poet’s biography counters aesthetic qualifications like “his fresh images”, “the music of his rhyme and assonance”, “his audacious phrases”, “the dazzling, extravagant challenge of his language” (152). What fascinated Krleža about Ady seems to be the question how to be “a Westerner, an impressionist, a decadent, a poet who, like a Rimbaud, like a Verlaine, gets carried away by the divine nuances and colors of some Hungarian vowel” (159) in the midst of a literary province. Krleža’s answer is short and clear: such a character must be “in contradiction not only with the factual state of the matter, but also with oneself” (159).

Rhetorically, the essay is ingenious: while portraying Ady as a critic of the Hungarian nation, Krleža can venture a complete deconstruction of his neighboring nation and its ethnic and racial nationalism without lapsing into Croatian national common places about the Hungarian yoke. He almost presents Ady as a model of the East-Central European poet: if the reader still has doubts of the broader meaning of Ady for the whole “Eastern European” realm, than these are removed by Krleža’s survey of contemporary poetry, ranging from the Pole Tuwim to the Serb Crnjanski.

What all these poetries have in common, Krleža writes, is a sense of being excluded from European culture. He adds that “Eastern European” poetry is lagging behind the innovations in Western Europe. The diagnosis is well-known: one mirrors one’s own poetry to that of Western-Europe. Krleža goes a step further, however, by raising the problem to a regional, supranational level. He thus manages to refrain from discriminating, which occurs so often when a national culture is defined as European, excluding by the same token the neighbors from the European realm. Krleža, well aware of this mechanism of exclusion, addresses the otherness, or, in his words, the cultures on the border of Europe. In the case of Ady, he does so from his position within Pannonian space. He situates his imaginary meeting with Ady, this poet characterized by “the primeval nihilism of Asiatic tribes” (161) on common ground: in Ady’s mythical Hunya, a space which for Krleža flows seamlessly into Pannonian space:

There is this one concept in Ady’s poetry, more a specter than a concept, a ghost-like symbol: Hunya. Hunya is Hungaria, the Szent István amalgam of Danubian senselessness […] Hunya is the black veil which covers all of Ady’s poetry. The funeral mourning textile of this notion of Hunya conceals in his poems a Danubian chaos where Huns and Tatars, Mongols and Avars are butchering the Danubian Slavs already for ages, and vice versa. (157-58)

Whilst further elaborating the notion of Hunya, Krleža deepens his deconstruction of Hungarian nationalism. He claims a sense of national crisis in Ady’s work:

Descendants from medieval Gypsy and Persian adventurers and travelers, who today carry the coat of arms of a duke, Polish and Dutch Jews, newcomers who arrived on foot two decades ago and who now produce the literary and journalistic output of Hungary, Schwäbische and Rheinländische colonists, in the backwardness of their medieval dialect and their limited Landsknecht-world view as non-commissioned
officers in feudal Habsburg barracks, all this is hopeless, as hopeless as the political hatred of Graničari (Frontiermen), Bunjeveci (ethnic Croats), Croats, Serbs, Vlachs and Tzintzars against everything Hungarian. [...] to face in this mass of questions and problems one’s own individual, lyrical, personal weakness, means facing Ady’s Hunya. (158)

One cannot fail to see the parallel with the problematic Croatian national identity of the “Pannonians” in Krleža’s own The Return of Filip Latinovicz. Ady’s diagnosis, according to Krleža, is a national culture in a chaos that stems, it seems, mainly from its extreme ethnic diversity. The diversity is a threat to the nation’s political unity. As Krleža sees it, Ady’s final move, morally outraged when the first world war broke out and “the Paprika Jancsi’s listened to each nod by telephone from Vienna” (170) was “to watch his Hunya from the unbelievably remote abstraction of intellectual emigration” (170). Like in Krleža’s Pannonia, the metaphor of the home for the nation is still there, but it is, as Krleža quotes Ady’s words, “an old and damned home, a terrible home, haunted, sadly romantic” (168).

Krleža himself, caught between two opposing nationalisms, did not find a way out either. But unlike Ady, he lived to see the treaty of Trianon which deprived Hungary of the majority of its territory. And he also had the chance to see for himself the three Yugoslav states. The first two he observed and criticized from within Pannonia; by the time the third, Tito’s Yugoslavia, was established, Krleža had abandoned Pannonia and claimed a key position in Tito’s cultural politics.

The last instance of Pannonia, before the toponym definitively disappears from Krleža’s literary map, is in 1942. While his diaries of these years lament the fate of Croatian soldiers marching off under Hungarian banners toward the Soviet Union, he writes a short essay, called “a fragment”, on the humanist and Latinist poet Jan Panonije, Janus Pannonius. The fragment completely ignores the contemporary political situation, leaving out troubled Croatian-Hungarian relations. Instead, Krleža elaborates a materialistic and sensory aesthetics that he considers the essence of Iannus’ “inspiration.” In his exposition, there are strong echo’s, then, of the aesthetic program Krleža formulated in his essay on the painter Krsto Hegedušić and his authentic Pannonian style. He situates Janus Pannonius in what is essentially pre-national space. Although he applies the possessive “our” (nas) throughout the essay: “our poet” (167), “our people at the court of the Hungarian king Matthias Corvinus.” (170), Krleža uses the figure of Iannus to deconstruct the Croatian literary identity as defined by the Illyrian movement. He speaks in the first person plural and thus seems to define a cultural community to which Janus belongs, but this kinship is put consistently in negative terms, never affirmatively. Instead, Krleža interprets the Latin poetry of Iannus as Europe’s other, as “Scythian, Asian” (168). And his sketch of Janus’ position of a poet in off-center cultural space is strikingly similar to his view of Ady’s position:

Of course, in this area of continuous explosive dangers, where one lives according to the principle of who eats who and big fish devour small fish and vice versa [...], poetry cannot be but a bitter and solipsistic elegy, defiant and sublime towards the question of Europe, permeated with a barbarous, higher irony, sarcasm in fact, which is the main characteristic of folk poetry, of folk sayings and of folk stories, a Pre-Slavic leitmotiv which, as a source of moral and artistic inspiration, has been lasting already for centuries. (174)

Only two years earlier, Mihály Babits had listed Janus among heirs of the Latin spirit, ranging from Marcus Aurelius to Mihály Vörösmarty whose “spirit is Latin [...] and whose music and colors at times recall Vergilius, at times Dante” (II:708). Babits’ basic paradigm is that of a
world literature that claims the perspective of the civilized and observes the nomads, the barbarians standing outside the gates. Krleža on the other hand situates Janus in his pre-national, Pannonian, pandemonium of “bitter, solipsist” artists - outside the gates.

Thus Krleža staged his encounter with Ady in Pannonia. Their common ground seems a very thin varnish, though: Krleža discussed only Ady’s critique of Hungarian national identity. His Ady-essay is also a self-portrait, as it were: it could very well be read as Krleža’s own problematic relation toward Croatian national identity. But that doesn’t turn his Pannonia into a supranational space, merely into a zone of troubled nations that are, moreover, constantly in conflict with each other.

7. Krleža and Kosztolányi clash in Pannonia: my nation, your nation or no nation?

While writing on Janus, Krleža in his World War II diaries also writes about what he sees as Horthy’s Hungarian nationalism. His critique draws essentially on his earlier writings on Hungarian culture, notably the Ady-essay. For him, Horthy’s regime is basically identical to the old ghost of compulsory magyarization. Twenty years after the Trianon treaty detached the majority of Hungarian territory, Krleža’s critique of Horthy’s politics thus echoes the Croatian national paths with the Austro-Hungarian railroad Budapest-Rijeka. Krleža’s rhetorics have remained unchanged: in one and the same breath he laments the manifestations of Croatian extreme nationalism:

Together with Hungarian Angels, Croatian pilots have left for the Don, the Croatian Fliegereinsatz No 7, whereas my domobrans (honvéd), this time under their own Stockeraus-banner, no longer are HID 42 (Königliche Ungarische Honvéd Infanteriedivision 42) but Wiking SS No X. […] Who has the courage to diagnose the disease of these idiotic Danubian nations? To what sort of temptation belongs this type of mythomania? (260)

The reference to the political situation in Zagreb is unusually direct for Krleža. In his diaries, he most of the time merely alludes to the complicated situation he found himself in. During the war, he ignored summons from the Croatian Ustaša, the nazi puppet government under Ante Pavelić, to join public life. He was arrested twice, the first time by the Gestapo in 1941. His books were banned and he went into hiding several times. Apparently, the conflict on the left had stirred up feelings to such a degree that joining Tito’s partisans seemed no option. In a letter to Stanko Lasić, Krleža sketched his wartime dilemma as being caught between two fires, “In between Dido (Kvaternik) [minister in the Ustaša administration] and Dido [Milovan Đilas] I’d prefer Dido to liquidate me” (226).

Part of Krleža’s political reflections on Danubian nationalism is his acquaintance with Dezső Kosztolányi. Just before he discusses the Hungarian right wing press, he describes his encounter with the Hungarian writer:

I never wrote down my impressions of a journey to Pest (1915). Green lamps in the editorial office of Világ. Kosztolányi, many years later in Ljubljana. Complains about the pitiful state of Hungarian culture. “Nobody reads anything, nobody takes any interest in anything at all, except in operettas and vulgar comedies. Nothing! If we wouldn’t have Pest’s bel esprits (mostly of Israelite conviction), we wouldn’t have anything at all. The Hungarian Jews are the only guarantee for the survival of Hungarian literature. Who created the cult of Ady? Who reads Babits? Two or three prostitutes, that is what constitutes the Hungarian reading audience.”
Thus spoke Kosztolányi in the year 1915, and one year later, on my way back from Galicia, a conversation in the poet’s flat in Buda, during which I told him how a war was being waged against our own citizens, the Ruthenians, as if they had committed high treason, turned into an agitated dialogue. To my ad hoc commentary about Galicia’s avenue of gallows, Kosztolányi responded agitatedly: “Ha valakinek ebben a háborúban győzni kell, akkor inkább győzzön a saját hazám!” [If anyone should win this war, then it better be my own country!] He formulated this rudely. I responded in an equally rash manner that “not only he had a fatherland, but all of us, second-rate Hungarian citizens, yet that I could never become engaged in a national cause if it was not just.” He asked me what I meant by that. I tried to explain, but agitated he interrupted me, advising me not to enunciate my ideas too loudly. At our feet crawled his son Adam. (258-59)

This is the first time Krleža wrote about his acquaintance with Kosztolányi. Kosztolányi is at first sight invisible in Krleža’s oeuvre. However, how important he was to Krleža’s perception of Hungarian letters shows Krleža’s Ady-essay, which probably echoes Kosztolányi when saying that the Hungarian nation is, among others, made up of “Polish and Dutch Jews, newcomers who arrived on foot two decades ago and who now produce the literary and journalistic output of Hungary” (158). To the question “who is courageous enough to diagnose the disease of these silly Danubian nations?” Krleža gave the answer himself in a fictionalized version of his encounter with Kosztolányi. In 1962 part three of his novel Banquet u Blitvi (Banquet in Blitva) was published. Part one and two had appeared in 1938. Part three contains a whole chapter which describes the acquaintance of the novel’s protagonist, the publicist and politician Niels Nielsen, with Oktavian Kronberg, a poet modeled after Kosztolányi. The chapter “The Savoy Hotel” contains literal quotations from the 1942 diary. Kronberg even has a son called Adam, who “crawls at his father’s feet.”

Krleža’s and Kosztolányi’s encounters, both the historical ones and their fictional transpositions, can serve as the basis for reconstructing a dialogue between two writers who attempted to come to terms with the writer or poet’s position in a thoroughly politicized society, a position that Krleža, in his encounter with Ady in the Pannonian realm, described as “being in contradiction not only with the factual state of the matter, but also with oneself” (159).

This dialogue is not only important from a historical and thematic point of view. From a formal and generic point of view too, the dialogue is a fascinating event. Krleža fictionalizes in the manner of a roman à clef: proper names are transparent veils covering actual persons. Had the Croatian public not been so ignorant about Hungarian literary life, readers would have easily identified the person behind the literary character. Kosztolányi’s reply can be reconstructed on the basis of two of his novels that bring up the theme of literature and politics. The first is the Nero novel The Bloody Poet, where the relation Nero-Seneca and the latter’s involvement in imperial politics addresses at length the perils of writers and political engagement. However, since the story is set in the Roman empire, the setting is stripped of the specific Danubian-nationalist, post-Trianon context. Much sharper, and more ironical, is Kosztolányi’s strategy in Anna Édes (1926), a novel set in the years immediately following the war and the communist revolution. It opens with Béla Kun’s flight from Budapest, and closes with the appearance of Kosztolányi as a character in the novel.

Krleža’s Banquet in Blitva is an impressively ambitious blow-up of his Pannonian constellation. Whereas his Pannonia was a fusion of actual and imaginary space, Blitva is entirely imaginary. It has elements of dystopia, but it differs profoundly from pure dystopias such as Zamyatin’s We or, for that matter, Orwell’s 1984. It is set in the immediate past of the 1920s. Its dystopian vision is essentially national, in the sense that it reverses the nineteenth-
century national utopia: it presents it as a bloody reality. The toponyms are transparent enough to enable the reader to look for parallels with contemporary East-Central European reality. The imaginary state Blitva is situated on the “Karabaltic”, the “black Baltic”, “kara” being Turkish for “black”. The Baltic is of course Europe upside down: a reversal which Križa grounds in the similarities between the Baltic countries and his Pannonian, Croatian-Hungarian realm: Blitva, literally a Mediterranean vegetable, has the Latvian currency “lat” enclosed in its name whereas Blatva, Blitva’s rivaling neighbor state, contains “blato”, the mud or swamp that often occurs as a pars pro toto for the Pannonian realm. The inversion of the Balkans and the Baltics is anticipated in Križa’s travelogue An Excursion to Russia, where he failed to see major differences between the sorrow situation of the new state Latvia and his own Croatia.

Also relevant for the geography of the novel is the mention of existing cities (Paris, Taormina). The names of Western European states are again invented. This suggests that names of places and states are invented only where the novel’s action is really concerned with the unstable patchwork of nation states on the former territory of the Habsburg empire. Furthermore, and this brings us to the Kronberg/Kosztolányi figure in the novel, the East-Central Europe in which Blitva is situated, is not only an extension of Pannonia; it is nominally grounded in Križa’s paraphrase of Endre Ady’s geography: in “Hunya”. Blitva, independent since the end of World War I, suffered for centuries under the “Hungarian” yoke; until 1918, Hunya formed a monarchy with “Aragon.” The parallel with Croatia’s position within the Austro-Hungarian monarchy is obvious.

Niels Nielsen is a Blitvian publicist and oppositional politician who has fled from his country to neighboring Blatva. There they hail him as a hero. The Blitvian national poet, “author of the ‘Blatvian dythirambs’”, Oktavian Deziderije Kronberg invites him to pay him his respects. The narrator, focalizing Niels Nielsen, introduces the career of Kronberg, this “pale imitation of Verhaeren.” Kronberg is said to be a Blatvian, born in one of the northern provinces of Blitva, (as Niels Nielsen turns out to be a Blitvian born from a Blatvian mother, echoing Križa’s satire of Croatian and Hungarian national-ethnic purity) who studied in Hunya and initially made his literary career in the Hunyan language. In the capacity of Hunya’s national poet, who has just published his “nationalist Hunyan Accords”, he meets Niels Nielsen for the first time, “in the early spring of 1913” (III:16). On this occasion, Nielsen reproaches Kronberg for sympathizing with the Hunyans while the Hunyans oppress the Blatvians, Kronberg’s own people. Kronberg responds by saying that “national feelings are outmoded […] the fundamental task of the poet is to reconcile, not to separate the nations” (III:16).

They meet again in 1916, in the midst of the war. Niels Nielsen is on his way home from the front where (from Nielsen’s perspective) “every day thousands of Hunyan, Blitvian and Blatvian soldiers are dying for the greater glory of Aragon” (III:17). Kronberg is now the quintessential Hunyan bard, about to be accepted as a member of the Academy. Nielsen is outraged about the Hunyan language policy which suppresses the use of the Blitvian vernacular, as a result of which Blitvian soldiers end up at the gallows for insubordination. Again, the parallel historical reality is the position of Croatian domobran (Hungarian “honvéd”, German “Heimwehr”) in Habsburg service. From now on, the meeting reflects the historical meeting as recorded by Križa in his diary. Kronberg first takes an a-political stance, although the narrator mentions Kronberg’s reserves about “some clever fellow citizens of the Israelite conviction” (III:19). When Nielsen criticizes Hunyan nationalism and claims the right to (linguistic) independence for small nations like Blitva and Blatva, Kronberg responds:
We are at war, my dear doctor, unfortunately, as simple as that, and none of us is personally to blame, to be held responsible, we are at war and we wage war to our best ability, a vulgar and inhuman war, sure, often perhaps a stupid war too, and cruel, yes, unjust, perhaps even criminal as you say, "criminal", okay, I admit to that, but when it comes to for whom the bell tolls, then I rather have it that the bell tolls for our enemies who wish us evil and who plot against our lives… “Right or wrong, my country”. (III:22)

The appearance of Kronberg’s little son Adam interrupts the discussion. Krleža uses the figure of the son, Adam, to expose in full Kronberg’s alleged hypocrisy “ten years later”, in the contemporary reality of the novel, the second half of the 1920s. For Kronberg is now no longer a Hunyan but a Blatvian poet. And it is Kronberg who claims to have been right ten years before, about the perils of nationalism. Then his son Adam, now “in the fifth grade of the gymnasium”, tells his father that “I did not know you were in favor of the Aragon dynasty, father [...] our schoolbooks claim that you were among the first champions who freed Blatva from the Aragon yoke” (III:26). Upon which Kronberg: “These are all complicated and difficult matters, part of ancient history by now, you do not have the preconditions to understand what I mean, right?” (III:26).

The similarities between the historical Kosztolányi and the fictional Kronberg in Krleža’s rendering are obvious. The difference is not unimportant either. Kosztolányi is Hungarian and wrote only in Hungarian - in the distorted terms of the Blitva novel a full “Hunyan”, whereas Kronberg is a Blatvian, a representative of one of the small and oppressed nations. His hypocrisy in Krleža’s novel is that he denies his past on the side of the historical oppressor Hunya. Thus Krleža complicates Kosztolányi’s more or less direct national Hungarian stance from their meeting in World War I by giving his fictional equivalent an ethnically mixed background. Kronberg, more than Kosztolányi, is “in contradiction with himself.” What is more, Krleža has made him the mirror image of Niels Nielsen: whereas both are from a mixed Blitvo-Blatvian background, their responses to ethnic impurity are the opposite of one another.

Krleža’s allegation of hypocrisy dates from the late 1950s, when he wrote the third part of Banquet in Blitva, which contains the chapter about Kronberg. Kosztolányi’s novelistic response therefore antedates Krleža’s allegation. But it is so apt that it is tempting to think Kosztolányi wrote it with his discussion with Krleža in mind. More probable of course is that what Krleža wrote in the late 1950s related to Kosztolányi’s intention as a writer to stay away from politics and to be a homo aestheticus as opposed to a homo moralis. The distinction is from Kosztolányi himself and brought up by Péter Esterházy in his introduction to the recent English translation of Kosztolányi’s novel Skylark; in our context, it could very well serve to qualify the different stance of the two authors with respect to political reality. As we have seen, Krleža, in his novel, speculates about Kronberg’s motives. From Kosztolányi’s remarks to him, he builds the character Kronberg and then judges this character on moral grounds, through the prism of Niels Nielsen’s moralism.

In the last chapter of Kosztolányi’s novel Édes Anna (Anna Édes, 1926, quotations are my translation on the basis of the German edition), the story of a housemaid who murders her patrons, situated right after the end of Béla Kun’s republic, three men, among them Szilárd Druma, a lawyer involved in Anna’s process, stroll by Kosztolányi’s house. This is what they see – and how they watch:

Secretly curious and sincerely angry they observed the garden and thought what everybody thinks when watching a house from the outside: happiness and peace live here.
The master of the house appears, he spots the passers-by and their glances meet. The passers-by continue on their way. The following conversation unfolds:

“That’s Kosztoláiny,” Druma said after a while, “Dezső Kosztoláiny.”
“The journalist?”
“Yes.”
“He wrote a poem once,” stated the other electoral activist, “some poem of sorts, at least. About the death of a sick child or about an orphan, I am not sure. My daughter told me about it recently.”
Druma said loftily: “He was a big communist.”
“He?” the first electoral activist was surprised. “But now he is a big clericalist.”
“Yes,” the other electoral activist confirmed. “I read in a Viennese newspaper that he is a White terrorist.”
“He used to be a great Bolshevik,” Druma insisted.
[...]
“I don’t understand. What does he want? For whom is he?”
“Simple,” Druma concluded. “For everyone and for no-one. He swims with the tide. Earlier the Jews paid him, he used to be for them back then, nowadays the Christians pay him. He is a smart man,” he said winking at the others, “he knows what he is doing.”
The three friends agreed on this. (257)

The novel closes with the author’s white dog Swan, who watches over the house’s peace and whose barking drowns out the voices of the passers-by. In the novel, the figure of Kosztoláiny is not the sole subject for dispute. There is the main character, the maid Anna, about whom everyone has an opinion but who herself hardly gets to speak. And there is Béla Kun, whose flight from Budapest in an airplane “his pockets stuffed with Gerbeaud cakes, with adornments and jewelry stolen from countesses and baronesses and other good-hearted, mild ladies, with altarpieces and similar precious objects” – “Thus at least was the story in the city” (7).

The difference between Krleža and Kosztoláiny is not just homo moralis vs. homo aestheticus. It is also a distinction between a person as defined by his public statements, by his life in private family sphere and even as defined by his own thoughts, his self-image. Krleža points at the necessity to make political choices and to engage oneself for social causes, even, or, precisely when one is a writer. Hence Niels Nielsen fails to distinguish between Kronberg’s public life and his role as a father who justifies his conduct to his son: for him, Kronberg is a hypocrite in both cases. The novelist Kosztoláiny does, however, distinguish public and private life. He complicates the matter by pointing at the instability of the political moment, the discrepancy between thought and action and, for that matter, between word and thought, literature and life. One cannot on the other hand simplify Krleža’s call for political engagement. Nielsen is no one-dimensional hero. He has to pay a very high prize for his engagement: when he finally becomes president of Blitva, he is said to have a lot of blood on his hands.

This difference is also relevant with respect to narrative form. As a rule, fiction can provide insight into a character’s consciousness. Kosztoláiny, by refraining from reading the mind of his central character Anna, thematizes the impossibility to penetrate another person’s mind. The public speculates and the prosecutor tries in vain to establish a motive; meanwhile the narrator refrains from reading Anna’s mind. Her silence is a silence even within a private
atmosphere: consider the chapter "A Wild Night" where the son of her patrons, Jani, seduces her and where her experience of the event is left out entirely. Kosztoláinyi the character, referred to as "the journalist", is scorned for his alleged hypocrisy to which the novel responds by pointing at an essential distinction between the writer as a public and a private figure. The first one can condemn for his political stances, about the second one can only speculate: things are certainly more complicated than the simple minded Druma suggests. In this respect, Kosztoláinyi's Anna Édes can be said to explore novelistic form as a means to lay bare the ambiguities between the inner life of the characters and private social life, and between private and public life. The fact that the author presents himself viewed by passers-by, one of whom is a character in the novel, creates a paradox: on the one hand, there is the suggestion that the author's private life is relevant to public life and to the recent historical reality in which he situates his story of the housemaid Anna. But insight into his private life is limited to a mere glance. We learn nothing about the author Kosztoláinyi's political opinions, nor about his past.

Krleža's Blitva not only transposes the historical encounter between the two writers; it takes sides and accuses by means of a rather one-sided focalization, almost exclusively through Niels Nielsen. The only other figure whose thoughts are widely displayed through an inner monologue is Niels's adversary, colonel Barutanski, dictator of Blitva. As a follow up to Pannonia, the imaginary realm of Banquet in Blitva does not resolve the political status quo of Eastern European space where opposing nationalism confront one another. One could even argue that Niels's fate — he becomes the head of state of Blitva after a double revolution — accepts the political status quo of nations states in which one takes sides on the basis of one's own national background, however complicated or mixed it may be. And there is another reductive element in Krleža's fictionalizing of Kosztoláinyi. Kronberg is identified as a l'art pour l'artist; Krleža's narrator exposes his a-political, internationalist stance as enabled by his position as poet of a dominating nation state. The underlying critique is that Kronberg's literary output merely confirms his political hypocrisy: in a thoroughly politicized society, Niels suggests, publishing l'art pour l'art poetry is a thoroughly political act. Anna Édes, and also Kosztoláinyi's first novel, The Bloody Poet, about Nero and Seneca, deny this: they are indeed thoroughly political works, they only treat political issues differently from Krleža's fiction. In my opinion, they successfully establish what Krleža certainly denies the figure of Kronberg: a fictional realm where neither the narrator's nor the character's utterances can be read as authorial statements.

Let me illustrate this notion of an independent fictional realm with a third novel by Kosztoláinyi, which takes us back into Pannonia, Skylark (1924). Although the novel is solely engaged with family life in a provincial town, the atmosphere is thoroughly political. The story of an older couple whose unmarried daughter leaves town for a week, during which the parents realize how much their life has changed under the influence of their shame of their daughter's ugliness, is set in an imaginary provincial town, Sárszeg ("muddy corner"), modeled after Szabatka/Subotica. It is a dying place, presented from the viewpoint of an older couple. Set in 1899, three years after the millennial celebrations of the Hungarian nation) the narrator's stance is dispassionate. There is absolutely no nostalgia, no post-Trianon weeping for lost Hungarian ground. This is a quiet, moribund world where national colors are fading and where citizens take a stroll to watch the coffins in the undertaker's shop windows. So, once more this is a realm where politics permit communal life, but only backstage. The dispassionate narrator is at a distance.

The Krleža-Kosztoláinyi dialogue thus started off as a passionate argument about how a writer should respond to the rivaling nationalism of Pannonia, and, from Krleža's perspective, about the perils of Kosztoláinyi's a-political position. Pannonia in the work of Krleža is no longer the predominant toponym after World War II. Before the war, Krleža had
always been on the margins of political life: first as a Croat in the Habsburg army, afterwards as a socialist in the first Yugoslavia, then, during the 1930s, as a dissident in the Yugoslav communist party. This changed after Tito seized power in 1945, and especially in 1952, when Krleža gave his famous lecture at a writers’ congress in Ljubljana, which is commonly regarded as the beginning of the relatively relaxed cultural climate in Tito’s communist Yugoslavia. The use of the toponym Pannonia seems related to Krleža’s marginal position: it disappeared when he became a widely accepted writer in Tito’s Yugoslavia. The unexpected ending of the third part of Banquet in Blitva, when Niels Nielsen accepts the offer to become the head of state of Blitva, has thus its equivalent in Krleža’s career as a politically engaged writer. History can be ironical: by the time Krleža published the third and final part of Banquet in Blitva, in January and February 1962, he accompanied Tito on a visit to Egypt, for the movement of non-allied countries. To confront the morally outraged Niels Nielsen, a character situated in the interwar period, with the author of the 1960s, could have been a metafictional trick not unlike the appearance of the author in Kosztolányi’s Anna Édes.

This would not do justice, however, to the complexities of Krleža’s Banquet in Blitva. Whereas almost all characters, including Kronberg and Nielsen, ground their identity in their sense of nationality, whether they affirm or question it, there is one character in the novel who serves as a spokesman of those excluded from the national communities, the Jews. Egon Blithauer, born Egon Samujlovič Blitwitz, is a “socialist” and “internationalist” who attacks Nielsen for his naïve belief in national identity and thus echoes Kyrales’ critique of Filip Latinovicz’s national identity. Their long dialogue is rendered in direct speech with no interference of the narrator. The reader moves back and forth between Nielsen’s words and Blithauer’s replies. When Nielsen says that the fate of his nation makes him feel ashamed, Blithauer replies: “No, my dear doctor, there is a huge gap between me and you. You feel ashamed in theory, whereas I, I feel the shame on my skin, like itch or like bugs!” (III-142) And he then tells about his whereabouts, how he was always, whether in Blitva or in Blatva or in Hunya, sooner or later, in spite of his attempts to assimilate, identified as “Egon Samujlovič” [...] “stigmatized as a Gypsy” (III-142). We do not get Blithauer’s inner thoughts: after their dialogue, focalization again shifts to Niels Nielsen. The plot’s subsequent progress is crucial: Nielsen – unintentionally – leads the Blatavian secret police to Blithauer. The latter, socialist and revolutionary, is killed leaving Nielsen once again with more blood on his hands. Banquet in Blitva thus diagnoses national homelessness by distinguishing it from that other sense of homelessness, that of the Jews in the Danube-basin, who are made to feel outsiders within every nation. By sticking to Nielsen’s perspective, Krleža refrains from expressing their experience.

Feeling ashamed “in theory” or feeling the shame “on your skin”: thus Blithauer formulates the difference in experience between the national intellectual Nielsen and himself, the “international”. Krleža’s Pannonia was, essentially, a space of national homelessness. The experience of those whom the nation excluded, appears on the margins of his Pannonia.

8. Kiš’s Pannonia: inventory

When in the second half of the 1950s Kiš started his search for a narrative form for his family history, he worked, as it were, in a vacuum. Works of those who, like his father, had led lives of wandering in the Danube basin, excluded from the national realm, were either non-existent or inaccessible to Kiš, as the dominant language of the supranational Central European interwar world had been German. Eduard Sam, the self-appointed prophet and incarnation of Ahasveros, the Wandering Jew, is in the work of Danilo Kiš the first of a number of wandering characters who, as apatrides, “men without fatherland”, suffer from an a-national
homelessness. They are all Jews. It is not religion that inspires their sense of Jewishness, nor any other alleged subjective feeling that comes from within. Their Jewishness stems from a sense of menace. This is what haunts Eduard Sam.

Probably the only two models available to Kiš were Kafka and, especially, Bruno Schulz’s Street of Cinnamon Shops (1933), a Serbian translation of which was published in Belgrade in 1961. Kiš’s personal library, the contents of which are available on the internet (www.kis.org.yu), holds a copy of it. I am not sure whether Kiš had actually read Schulz before or during he wrote his trilogy. But the similarities are so strong that it is hard to imagine they are purely accidental. To list a few: time is measured by days of the weeks and seasons, no years and no geographical location; a world created out of books, rather than books created in the world; abundant use of metaphor; family life dominated by women among whom the adult first person narrator situates his former self; a father who remains at a distance and who is probably suffering great psychic stress, amounting to some sort of “anxiety neurosis” as Kiš called it, an “endemic disease of interwar Central European Jewish intelligentsia” (“Life, literature” 29); the father who initially succeeds in enchanting his son, putting himself at the heart of the boy’s universe only to gradually disappear. In general, Kiš must have felt literary kinship between the Hungarian-Yugoslav province and Schulz’s Galicia, much like Krleža could take the Baltics as analogy of the Danube basin.

By the time Kiš started contemplating how to write down the whereabouts of his father, he really had no access to homeless figures in literature; Schulz seems to have been the exception. The travelogue “An Excursion to Paris” makes no mention of other literary discoveries except for the French nouveau roman. For instance Ödön von Horváth, who later became an icon of Central European homelessness to Kiš, fictionalized in the character Egon von Nemeth, was unavailable to him at the time:

FIUME, BELGRAD, BUDAPEST, PRESSBURG, WIEN, MÜNCHEN


The first translations of Horváth’s prose into Serbo-Croat appeared in the nineteen nineties in Split, Croatia. The choice of the independent publishing house Feral Tribune, which began its publishing activities with short prose from Kiš’s legacy, was considered almost as an act of dissidence; later, the first line from the Horváth quotation became a slogan for the Belgrade independent publisher B92. A similar case is the recently re-discovered Rumanian author Mihailu Sebastianu, whose diaries from the years 1935-1944 show the increasing isolation of a Jewish intellectual and writer in Bucharest. Faced with growing nationalism he resorted to “Danubian Jew” as a designation of his supranational identity.

Kiš created Eduard Sam without these models, which came to his attention only later. What he did have was the double linguistic tradition of Serbo-Croat and Hungarian, which presented him with (at least) three national traditions and with a number of authors from these traditions who, all in their own way, sought for supranational models: for the young Babits English literature served as a model, and also a younger poet like György Petri. And there is also Kosztolányi (to whom Kiš referred as “one of his great examples” at the end of his life)
whom Kiš could read next to and in comparison with Krleža. Especially Krleža’s work must have guided him in the lost world of the double monarchy; there were, of course, many translations available to him from the German (Otto Weininger’s *Geschlecht und Karakter* for instance); Krleža’s erudition compensated for the rest. And even when it came to Hungarian literature, Kiš sometimes followed Krleža’s opinions. Thus in “An Excursion to Paris”, when he presents Ady, he simultaneously quotes from Krleža’s essay about him. So Kiš had access to more than one national tradition, but none of these furnished examples of the historical figure that occupied a central place in his narrative work: the homeless. Moreover, his father had disappeared in Auschwitz and so a final and fatal event had to be added to a family history of wandering. What finally became Kiš’s Pannonia thus differed from Krleža’s in two fundamental respects. First, Kiš’s family perspective was marked by the fate of the father, a victim of anti-Semitism. Writing in the former Yugoslavia about the commonality of the experience of Jewish victims was a hazardous affair. Collective suffering of all was one of the pillars of the Titoist myth about World War II. This applied to the holocaust too: next to equating all victims, the enemy was also reduced to one single abstract notion: fascism.

Kisle never wrote about the Jewish holocaust as a historical event separate from collective suffering in World War II: in that respect, he conformed himself to the Titoist version of history. Krleža’s difficulties with the dogmatic communists had continued after WWII when Milovan Dilas banned some of his plays from the Belgrade National Theatre. But Krleža’s 1952 Ljubljana speech confirmed Marxism as the founding ideology of Tito’s Yugoslavia. His 1945 essay “Književnost Danas” (Literature Today) (which Dilas initially seized) discusses the “indescribability of everything we have gone through” (76), but leaves the identity of the victims in the anonymous first person plural. To his own question “how everything that we have gone through should be expressed in literature” the essay suggests that Shakespeare is “still the predominant literary formula for our bloody contemporary era” (75). But whereas his official essayist and pamphletist output confirmed the Titoist myth simply by not denying it, many still remembered his role in the conflict on the left in the 1930s, when he had demanded that Tito should distance himself and the Yugoslav communist party from Stalin’s purges.

Thus was Krleža’s public and political position in the second half of the 1950s. In view of these differences one should ask why Kiš chose Pannonia as the dominant toponym of his family trilogy. Two answers seem probable. First, because as we have seen, Krleža’s work presents a number of uprooted fictional characters (Blithauer, Kyriales) and although these are, in a manner of speaking, negative portraits, their experience of homelessness may have served as a model for Kiš’s family history, even if Kiš corrected or altered it. To my knowledge, Krleža’s work was the first major attempt in the basically national Yugoslav literatures to consider the historical fate of fellow citizens who were excluded from these national traditions. Secondly, Krleža’s Pannonia offers an image of history that, although deeply rooted in a national identity, builds its cultural memory on the basis of negative continuity, of destructiveness, ruins. Part of this is Krleža’s tireless insisting on the reductionism of nineteenth-century nationalism, as well as his depiction of the painful and problematic encounter of the Hungarian and Croatian nation in the Pannonian realm.

Finally, beside the toponym, there is a strong resemblance of physical space, realized through metaphors and imagery. Kiš takes from Krleža the Pannonian sea and the omnipresence of water which transforms every vehicle on wheels into a boat or a ship, and eventually into a *lugubre gondola*, an image of death. In *Hourglass*, Eduard Sam expresses his fear that “the people of his generation (those who would survive) would be considered in the new world as fossils of a distant, antediluvian era” (96). From The Return of Filip Latinovicz there is the “velvet album” with old family photographs which in Kiš’s *Early Sorrows* serves as the title of the closing chapter. A comparison of Krleža’s and Kiš’s
Pannonian train shows the overlap and the difference. The factual I in Krleža’s travelogues and the actual father Eduard Kiš, as well as the fictional Filip Latinovicz and the (meta)fictional Eduard Sam, alias E.S., author of the historical “Timetable of Buses, Ships, Trains and Aeroplanes,” all traveled by train, somewhere and sometime in the 1930s in Pannonia. So the Pannonia of Kiš and Krleža is geographically identical: both spaces cover, approximately, the Danube, Sava and Drava plain. History, however, makes the difference between Kiš’s and Krleža’s Pannonia. Krleža’s Pannonia is preoccupied with contemporary reality, it is a constructed space, whereas Kiš’s Pannonia, preoccupied with historical space, is retrospective, and therefore reconstructed. E.S.’s train is, historically speaking, a different one from Krleža’s. The latter, as we saw, is afloat amidst contemporary reality, whereas Kiš’s is historically fixed: its final destination is Auschwitz, 1944. The retrospective gaze of the son watching the father points the train into one single direction and it transforms E.S.’s world into a closed universe, from which there is no escape.

Images of time (clepsydra and hourglass) are, like trains, indicative of the differences between Krleža’s and Kiš’s Pannonia. Krleža’s clock metaphors are found, so to speak, inductively: both in The Return of Filip Latinovicz and in “People Traveling” they are placed at the end of long descriptions, concluding exhaustive lists of the elements of the Pannonian space. Kiš’s clock metaphors imply a deductive method. The hourglass, as both title and opening image of the third part of Kiš’s trilogy, is a starting point from which the historical space of Pannonia is reconstructed.

9. Garden, Ashes: opening Pannonia, fictionalizing autobiography

Garden, Ashes (1965), the first part of Kiš’s family trilogy, is also the first text where Kiš would take Pannonia as the predominant space. Pannonia returns as dominant space in the collection of short stories Early Sorrows, in the novel Hourglass and also in the radio play Night and Fog. Garden, Ashes is the story of the Sam family right before, during and after World War II. The narrator of the story is the son Andreas Sam whose main concern seems his father. The alcoholic, neurasthenic Eduard Sam, a Jew, has to fear for his life under fascist rule. At some point in the novel he leaves, never to return again. Andreas, his mother and his sister resume their lives; Andreas undergoes a kind of epiphany, the creation of his first poem. This is in short the content of the novel. Let us first locate Pannonia in Garden, Ashes. Where is it situated, and what positions do the characters take? Who focalizes whom?

An actual historical setting, the Yugoslav-Hungarian Danube basin in World War II, identified by the Fruška Gora, the hills along the Danube near Novi Sad, precedes and also closes Pannonian space. Imaginary Pannonia is thus embedded in historical space. It unfolds only after a golden period, a time of idyll during which Andreas’ I was still part of the family, the “we” that also includes his mother and his sister. Pannonian space unfolds simultaneously as the narrator’s I emerges from the family collective. The sunlight is gone, the day is just an ordinary one. The father, Eduard Sam, makes his appearance for the first time when Pannonian space has already unfolded. He is tied to Pannonia, his space of homelessness where he “played his role of the Wandering Jew” (200; page references are to the Serbo-Croat edition).

Gradually the adult narrator Andreas Sam emerges from his own naïve childish voice. The reader is more and more aware that Andreas is not just a narrator, he is a literary narrator, a narrator who in retelling his childhood is first and foremost concerned with his own Bildung as a writer. He makes abundant use of metaphors, he points to his own use of simile, as it were, as to see whether they fit the reality he is re-creating:
The moisture on the ceiling has given form to a giant who has become our good spirit, the guardian of our house: full-bearded like the prophets of the Hebrews, he holds in his right hand the tablets, in his left our lamp with porcelain that resembles an upside down spittoon – a comparison taken literally by flies. (29)

As a narrator, Andreas Sam consequently uses a style in which an allegedly prior reality checks and sometimes corrects the language used to evoke it. Andreas Sam does not attempt to conceal his literary intentions to embellish his past reality. He shows his cards while writing. Pannonia as a setting is also part of his creations. He willfully constructs Pannonia and situates his father in this space, as a figure in a painting:

When we moved to the village, my father could no longer hide. One day in spring, at the time of one of his sprees, I caught sight of him in his true form: he was walking along the embankment of the swollen river, returning unexpectedly after a six-day trip. We thought that he might have lost his way in the Count’s forest or run away, guided by his star. As he walked along the embankment in his black frock coat, swinging his cane high in the air, swaying on his feet like a ship’s mast, his celluloid collar yellowed, staring into space through his steel-rimmed glasses, my father became a part of the landscape, as if he had climbed into a picture-frame, and he lost his air of mystery totally. (98)

Eduard Sam, the father, tries to evade his son’s gaze. He is more absent than present and he engages his own son like a stranger. Only on one occasion do they really talk: the father, as Andrea recalls it, made some kind of confession to him which he “didn’t really understand” (125). They are in the café at the railway station and his father begins after a long, painful silence:

My role as a victim, which I have been playing with greater or lesser success all my life – we all act our lives, our destinies, after all – that role, as I said, is gradually coming to an end. You must remember this once and for all, young fellow, you can’t play the role of a victim all your life without becoming one in the end. (124-5)

After this meeting they never really talk again: “This unique moment of sincerity and lucidity was broken by the arrival of the train. My father left a lordly tip on the table and took his secret with him to the grave” (126). The son’s view of the father escaping him is not over yet, however. The father returned a few times (from his detention, the reader grasps although Andreas Sam is reluctant to give precise information), sent a letter and disappeared again for a number of years: “He was ashamed, or else some important affairs prevented him from writing […] Sometimes he comes disguised as a traveling salesman or a West German tourist in riding breeches, pretending not to know a single word of our language” (139). The last time he appeared was “two years ago” – to be precisely twenty two years after the father packed his belongings and left his family behind.

This time the father is the head of a delegation of former concentration-camp inmates, survivors of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Andreas relates how he ran into him in the street, began to follow him and finally addressed him in a bar. There, according to Andreas, the father denies his paternity, claiming that his name is “Eduard Kohn, from Germany, and I have nothing to do with you, young fellow” (141). Andreas insists and Eduard replies:
“Even if what you say is true, young fellow, that is to say, that I am your father, I have a perfect right not to remember. Do you know, young fellow, how many years have passed since then? Twenty years, young fellow, twenty years.” (141)

And this is not the last of the father’s appearances. Andreas goes on to relate how his father “published books under a pseudonym [...] and in his memoirs he heavily retouched the images of my mother, my sister and myself and spoke of himself with caution, leaving his readers deprived of autobiographical details” (141).

Andreas tries to approach him, the father escapes. This at least is how Andreas presents their relation. But it is more complicated than that. Andreas as a narrator is for his part not just a writer-in-spe, he fabulates, he is an enchanter. His attempt to situate his father in an imaginary space, Pannonia, as if the father failed to become an actual person already during his lifetime, relates on a more general level to Andreas’ indirect way of narrating. Another symptom of this evasive style is Andreas’ meddling with the reading pact. As a narrator, he insists on his family name. His father, when he states that his actual identity is Kohn and not Sam, contests Andreas’ identity.

The name Kohn is not accidental. It occurred in the travelogue “An Excursion to Paris”, written in September 1959. Roaming the streets of Paris, Kiš writes after a long and lyrical list of names of streets and metrostations: “I now leave aside this intimate devotion of mine to names, although I still burn with desire to write instead of this travelogue an International Bus, Ship, Rail and Air Travel Guide (modeled after Eduard Kohn)” (549).

Much later, Kiš avowed in “Life, Literature” that Kohn was the father’s surname before he magyarized it into “Kiš”. The Travel Guide really existed, the author was not Eduard Kohn but Eduard Kiš, the father of the author, who wrote it in the capacity of official of the Yugoslav Railway. It was published in the 1930s in Novi Sad. It also appears in Garden, Ashes, the first part of Kiš’s trilogy: here, the author is Eduard Sam, Andreas’ father.

So when it comes to the conflicting proper names in Garden Ashes, it is Andreas’ word against that of his father. If we go along with Andreas, a fictional pact is established that distinguishes author from narrator. If we follow the father, his uncertain proper name enables (at least) an autobiographical pact: behind Eduard Sam emerges Eduard Kohn, who is a historical figure: Eduard Kiš before he assimilated by magyarizing his surname. Andreas is, then, not who he claims he is. He is an unreliable narrator. Moreover: it transforms Pannonia, the space of the father, into historical space and brings the holocaust, which Andreas has left mostly out of his version of the family history, to the fore as the predominant reality.

Pannonia in the novel unfolds as soon as Andreas realizes the meaning of his name and his surname. This is also the moment when he, as narrator, distinguishes between himself as a speaking person and the family collective (without the father, however). The opening of Pannonian space thus occurs when the fictional pact is established. When the father denies his paternity, he once more hides from his son but he does present himself openly as the person he was before he assimilated by magyarizing his name. We now see that space parallels the double, contradictory reading pact: behind imaginary Pannonia lurks a historical reality. This is not the reality of the time of writing (with which the time of the return of the father as Eduard Kohn coincides!), nor the reality of World War II, the remembered time of the narrator’s youth. This is pre-national reality before assimilation, which in the case of the father meant a reality of migration. Andreas not just conceals the holocaust, he denies the family history before assimilation.

First two more instances of Andreas’ evasive style. In addition to his particular use of metaphors that allegedly refer to an a priori reality, Andreas presents as metaphors what are actual, historical events. There is the star of David which the historical Eduard Kiš had to carry. “Life, Literature” mentions the crucial role of the yellow star during a pogrom. The
story Kiš tells is that by baptizing him in a Serbian orthodox church in Novi Sad, his father saved him from the obligation to carry a yellow star. Kiš adds that the theme never made it into the family trilogy because “it seemed too strong, too charged; like many other episodes I’ve been unable to neutralize with an ironic counterweight. There is something shameful about suffering” (237). Yet the yellow star is not entirely absent from Garden, Ashes. It is present in metaphors. Andreas presents the family’s social downfall as follows: “Soon after, guided by my father’s star, we moved to the suburbs, next to a railway siding” (54). The father’s star continues to guide them: “I am sitting in the sleigh, next to my mother, my eyes glistening, poisoned by my father’s messianism. His words imprinted on my mind like a brand. I am beginning to feel the curse that is pursuing us” (63). U čelo, “on my front” the original says. The phrase returns in the opening of Early Sorrows when wild chestnuts start falling off the tree “dizzying, like stars” (7). Here the text changes from chestnuts to human beings: “Therefore his mother [Andreas’ mother] will always be able to recognize him – by the star on his front” (7; my trans.).

When Andreas begins to realize what makes the father different from the others and what, therefore, makes the family liable to persecution, he stops following his father’s star. Instead he portrays his father in pursuit of his own star as floating, lost in Pannonian space:

[the father] would leave without a word, resuming his ingenious soliloquy, and return late at night without telling us where he had been. Peasants and shepherds told us later that they had seen him deep inside the Count’s forest, some ten kilometers away from our village, or even further away, in some other district. He would come home only to shave, change his collar and catch a nap, speaking to no end and refusing to eat for fear we might poison him. He subsisted on wild mushrooms, sorrel, wild apples, and birds’ eggs that he took from their nests with the hook of his cane. And in the summertime, we would come across him unexpectedly in the fields, his black derby emerging from the fiery wheat, his glasses flashing in the sun. He moved through the fields like a sleepwalker, lost in thought, waving his cane high in the air, following his star, which he would lose amid the sunflowers, only to find it again at the edge of the field – on his greasy black frock coat.

(104)

The star designates the father’s fate. Andreas allows the historical meaning of the image only after he has detached himself from his father. Thus switching between literal and metaphorical language is part of Andreas’ strategy to conceal the historical fate of his father. Metaphor he uses to bring to the surface the story – the version of his biography – that saved his life: his mother’s Christianity. The story of his Bildung will be entirely set in a discourse of sin, remorse and penance, a Christian discourse. The more he moves away from his father, the more painful the gap between himself and his father, the more the reader realizes that it is Andreas who is assimilating. The father’s return under his original Jewish name Kohn is a reminder of their common past. The reader in retrospect begins to doubt Andreas’ story. Doubt even infects the idyllic opening of the novel. What Andreas presented here as a golden age in the triangle mother-sister-himself, without the father, also turns out to be a distortion of facts. The father was present all the time, but he was confined to Pannonian space.

Let us now reconsider the opening in detail. It begins with the family’s morning rituals and moves on with a description of a walk through the street with the wild chestnuts, a central place in the trilogy, always the locus of Andreas’ search for his lost past. Follows a description of fräulein Weiss; the family encounters boy scouts who are Volksdeutscher; they then take a local train to the Fruška Gora hills and discover a castle with a garden which they will visit “throughout that summer”; they end up in a downpour; they hurry home through the forest where they witness a horrible scene, a herd of buffaloes drowning in a swamp; when
they return, the autumn offensive has started: the war has begun. This opening is framed by
the boy in bed, reluctant to open his eyes. The intertextual reference, part of Andreas’s pose as
a literary narrator, is the opening of Marcel Proust’s Combray and Albertine Disparue: Marcel
in bed with his eyes closed, describing his surroundings. In Kiš’s opening Andreas holds his
eyes closed whereas his mother enters; he can describe the scene because he knows it by
heart. He only opens his eyes after the idyll, when the opening scene continues with the
mother entering the room, this time announcing that “your uncle is dead” (15). The whole
opening then, is framed by the morning scene. Set between the moment when the boy still
dreams with his eyes closed and the moment he opens them, the idyll, the last golden summer
before the war, is merely a postponement of the news of his uncle’s dead.

In retrospect, the contents of the idyll take an entirely different shape. They become a
foreboding of the deluge which opens with the announcement of the death of a relative and
occurs in Pannonia. In the opening, space is still idyllic:

The branches of the wild chestnut trees on our street reached out to touch each other.
Vaults overgrown with ivy-like leafage thrust in between these tall arcades. On
ordinary windless days this whole architectural structure would stand motionless, solid
in its daring. From time to time the sun would hurtle its futile banderillas through the
defense leafage. (8)

But once the Pannonian space has unfolded and the boy knows about the death of his uncle,
the same street looks different. The boy has just heard the news about the uncle’s dead: “I
looked at the sky through the bare branches of the wild chestnut tree. The day was ordinary,
routine” (15). Follows the boy’s understanding of his own mortality. During the summer the
leafage protected him, now the branches are bare, and, we may add, the banderillas can hurt
him. Why banderillas? A mere metaphor, mere embellishment? Intended or not, the choice of
words reveals a delicate game with literal and figural language, direct and indirect narration.
The only beings close to bulls are the buffaloes that Andreas, his mother and his sister see
drowning in an instantaneous swamp caused by the downpour. The downpour is introduced
with a presentiment of the mother. Standing on the bridge they watch the Danube, whose
waters “were strangely altered, a muddy green, full of some dubious sediment that meant
showers somewhere in the Schwarzwald [Switzerland in the translation!]. Running through
the forest, they realized they were lost, “in vain did my mother attempt to hide the fact from
us” (14). The mother “crossed herself, stopping abruptly” as she saw the buffaloes appearing:

A herd of black buffalo charged out of the woods, thundering like a regiment of
cavalry, veiled in mist, suicidally resolved to resist the onslaught of the water, to
silence the ironic chorus of the frogs. In close formation, horns in attack position, the
buffalo were leaping out of the woods, marching fearlessly with a Prussian step toward
the swamps. At that very instant, the rain stopped, and we succeeded – at the last
moment – in reaching the main road. From where we stood we could see the buffalo
vanishing into the muddy quicksand, a cleverly prepared trap. [...] My mother,
affected by the gruesome sight and aware of the danger we had eluded, crossed herself
once more. (14)

The scene is in every respect the reverse image of the story of the father in Pannonia. The
mother crosses herself twice, a sign of her Christianity. What they watch alludes to the
Pannonian deluge that is to follow: barely escaped death, observed from the side; Danubian
mist, swamp and mud anticipating Pannonian space; even the region from which the threat is
coming, is alluded at: the sources of the Danube in the Schwarzwald – Germany. And yet
Andreas, who is the narrator of all this, gives no definitive clues. For instance: we can link up the banderillas with the buffalo who then would be the victim – and yet they march “with Prussian step.” A struggle is announced but it is unclear who shall play the aggressor and who shall play the victim. Furthermore: who shall remember which events and from which perspective? Perhaps it is meant to remain vague, in anticipation of the father’s lesson to his son about the role of victim he played: it is unclear up to the end whether Andreas will identify with the victims or not.

Thus in Garden, Ashes, Andreas merely suggests his father’s biography; he opts for his own Bildung as the more important version of his family story. Although he claims he needs the father, for instance when he complains that ever since his father vanished from the story, from the novel, “everything has come loose, fallen apart” (175), he concludes with his epiphany, the birth of his first poem. Although his father is obviously a lunatic, Andreas has by now become unreliable too, albeit for different reasons. He might be a different person than he claims to be (in this, it his word against his father’s). His evasive narration, his indirect rendering of facts as well as his choice for a style which on more than one occasion concealed rather than added to our understanding of his life story, reminds us of the grand eloquence of his father. Finally: Andreas gives countless hints that a different story may underlie his autobiography, which makes him either manipulative and unreliable or, like his father, unable to distinguish fact from fancy, reality from illusion. The novel thus ends in contradiction: we can either accept or reject Andreas’ account. The two family identities, the one before and the one after assimilation, exist next to each other.

After Garden, Ashes, the novel Hourglass presented only the reality of the father. Here, Pannonia dominates from the first to the last page. Krleža’s Pannonia, in Garden, Ashes still represented on the margins (for instance, Andreas’ fascination with Christianity), has in Hourglass entirely been replaced by intertextual allusions to Kafka and Schulz. Hourglass gives the full reality of those who are excluded from the national communities. There, Jewish identity is not a matter of choice: it is forced upon E.S. In Hourglass too, there is trouble with the reading pact: here, the father is directly linked up with the author’s father’s biography through the insertion of an authentic letter, a historical document. Central Europe appears on the margins of the novel’s geography, linking the father’s Pannonian biography to what Kiš subsequently rewrote into Central European biographies.

Thus Kiš’s Pannonia is both historical and imaginary: it depends on who focalizes whether it emerges as a historical reality or not. It is also a transitory space: it lies in between, connects and dissects, national and a-national homelessness. Through Pannonia, Kiš opened a corridor that allowed him to situate his family history outside national space. Later on, the idea of Central Europe affirmed the individual fate of his family as a tradition, a shared experience. This evolution of Pannonian into Central European space explains why Kiš’s traveler in “A and B”, quoted right at the beginning of this chapter, found Pannonian space deserted: its sole inhabitant, the father, had moved to Central Europe.