DRITERO AGOLLI

a novel



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# The Bronze Bust

The «8 Nëntori» Publishing House
Tirana, 1975

# The Albanian Original Title «Komisari Memo»

#### FOREWORD

As a representative of the generation that passed from boyhood to adolescence with the conclusion of the war, the writer, Dritëro Agolli, lived through the years of the Antifascist National-Liberation War (1939-1944), when the Albanian People, led by the Communist Party, had to make heroic efforts for their survival as a nation and to pave the way for real social progress.

The vivid impressions, the impetuous events of that time and their echo, the place which the epoch of the people's war and the revolution and its moral values took in the spiritual life of Albanian society, and the meaning of the profound change which the revolution marked in the history of the Albanian people, made this epoch a favourite theme and permanently inspiring reality for the creative work of Dritëro Agolli, just as it did for the older generation of writers, who lived through it.

D. Agolli started his career as a writer when he was at secondary school. He began as a poet. From the verses of his early youth, included in his first volume «I came Out In The Street» (1958) and in the later collections of poems «My Steps On The Asphalt» (1961), «Mountain Paths And Pavements» (1965), «Noon» (1969) up to the recent poem «Mother Albania» (1974), all poetry of D. Agolli evokes the heroic spirit of the war and its ideals. The motives of that time sound like an heroic symphony, realised sometimes in strong epich tones and sometimes with lyrical

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gentleness. One of the motives dearest to the writer is that of the grief for the commissar fallen in battle. There is no other figure to whom Dritëro Agolli has returned so often, whom he has potrayed so completely and with such intensity of feeling as that of the commissar. The revolution and the anti-fascist resistance of the Albanian people were the deed of the communists, of the «red commissars», who aroused the common people with the ideal of a new world without fascism, without oppression, and without exploitation, therefore in his poetry D. Agolli calls the period of the war «the time of the commissars», who are represented mainly on a lyrical plane.

Dritëro Agolli returned to presentation of this image and the war years more completely and thoroughly in the novel «The Bronze Bust» (1970), which is a synthesis of his creative research, resulting in a vivid picture of the people's war, with the commissar at its center. Through this figure and the main line of the subject describing the relations of the commissar with the commander of the partisan battalion, the writer brings out the idea of the great guiding force exerted by the communists, their role in awakening the political and ideological consciousness of the masses, the importance of the leadership of the Party for the transformation of individual bands of rebels into the organized detachments of the anti-fascist national-liberation movement.

The novel «The Bronze Bust» reflects the process of the transformation of the peasant masses into a conscious force, which passed from sporadic actions of spontaneous revolt to organised warfare guided by a clear aim. This was one of the spheres in which was displayed the historic role of the communists, who gave the spontaneous movement of the masses the character of a conscious liberation war with a definite political program. This idea is most completely expressed through the evolution undergone by the commander of the partisan battalion. The writer potrays him with affection in vivid colours and with rare plasticity as the prototype of a people's commander, with a dauntless

spirit at rebellion, undying hatred and incontainable revolt, and of love for his people and country.

Through this figure, the writer has successfully summed up the idea that, in the process of their transformation under the influence of the ideas of the communists, the masses of the people manifested with a new brilliance their lofty sentiments, their rich spiritual world, their

ardent patriotism and heroic fighting qualities.

Written in the form of a chain of memories brought out through the reminiscences of the close comrades-inarms of the commissar of a partisan battalion during a journey to the birth place of their commissar, these events reveal the figure of the latter in a manner new to Albanian prose. The silent dialogue with the bust of the commissar, who «comes» to the village of his birth-place after so many years cast in bronze, gives the novel an emotional colour, emphasizing the connection of the traditions and the ideas of the years of the people's revolution with the present time, bringing that epoch nearer to the reader.

This novel, which is being offered by the «8 Nëntori» Publishing House to the public abroad, is a fragment from the heroic epic of the past, viewed through the eyes of a contemporary writer, an epic which was written with the blood of a small, but brave people, who were one of the first victims of fascist aggression and who, under the leadership of the communists, were also among the first to take their

stand on the front of the anti-fascist resistance.

Jorgo Bulo

### CHAPTER ONE

The truck driver rounded the corner and pulled up where the hill sloped into the valley. He got out with a woman and her seven or eight year old boy. Six other men, still on the back of the truck, were busy talking loudly. A bronze bust rose among them and seemed to be listening to their conversation. The driver let down the tailboard; the six men lifted the bust and set it down by the roadside. The sunlight fell on the bust and gave it the same rosy hinge as the rocky mountains all around. One of the men bent over the bust, pulled out his hand-kerchief and wiped off the dust that had collected in a little scar on its right cheek. At his gesture the others standing by the roadside fell silent. Only when the man had straightened up and put away his handkerchief did one of them break the quiet:

"We'll carry it on our shoulders," and looked first at the bust, then at the rocky hillside covered with big

boulders and patches of juniper.

The man who had wiped the dust from the face of the bust shaded his eyes with his hand, and looked up at the hill.

True, the highway has not been built up to the village yet but we can still go some of the way with a cart.»

The sun's rays were intecepted by the crossed steel of a high tension pylon, which cast its shadow on the bronze bust. From below came the sound of a gurgling stream, and a nightingale was heard singing in a grove of hazelnut trees nearby. The six men and the woman with her son stood by the road while the driver climbed into the truck, started the engine, waved goodbye to them and turned back the way he had come. The truck drove off. The men raised their heads again and looked up at the hill with its black boulders which seemed to have been piled onto the saddle of the hill.

«A cart can manage the stretch of road to the mill.»

said the man who had wiped the bronze face.

«It certainly can, Rustem, but where will we find one?»

«I'll go down to the farm, teacher, and fetch one from there.».

Rustem ran down to the farm while they sat by the roadside to rest. From a distance the bronze bust, too, seemed to be a man at rest except that its head rose up above others, and was bigger. Against the orange sky, the smoke from their cigarets drew twisted lines like the Arabic characters of an ancient document. The bust was mute, but their thoughts were centered on it; even the child brooded over it in his own way. So they drew on their cigarets in silence. They had forgotten Rustem gone to fetch a cart and the uphill road they had to take.

One of them with a sallow face, like an old man,

broke the silence.

«When Rustem wiped the dust off that scar on the face of the bust, showing that old wound, he looked very much like Memo alive.»

The teacher rested his pointed chin on the palm of his hand glancing at the bust, and then at the woman holding her child on her lap, and said thoughtfully:

«Yes, Andrea Borova, they looked so much alike, twins almost; but Memo was five years older than Rustem..... brothers....»

«So they did!» said the woman looking at the bust. She spoke involuntarily; her mind had wandered, taking her back to one corner in the life of that man now turned to bronze. But her thoughts couldn't take shape all at once, and she absently repeated: «He does look like him.»

The sound of screeching wheels and horses' hooves was heard from the road. Rustem was coming.

«Andrea Borova, you're a sculptor, do you think the bust runs any risk of being broken on a horse-drawn cart?» asked the teacher.

«No! There's no danger.»

Rustem and the teacher lifted the bronze bust and placed it on the cart with as much care as if it had been a living being.

«Lay it down on its side,» said the carter, «in case it topples over!»

Rustem put his arm round the neck, as if were alive, and said:

«We had better not lay it down. If you don't mind, uncle, let me stay on the cart and hold it upright!»

The old man hesitated. He did not want to exhaust his horses over that rough uphill road. Another load as well as the bust would be too hard on them. He looked at Rustem and then, pointing to the bust, he asked:

«Brothers?»

«Borthers!» said one of the others, a man wearing an oilskin cap and jacket.

The carter heaved a deep sigh and then muttered something to himself.

«Get on the cart then! Let the woman and the child get on too!» He turned towards the other five men and shrugging his shoulders added: «You'll have to walk—it can't be helped...»

«We'll walk up slowly behind you,» said the man with the cap.

The carter was a gloomy man of few words. He cracked the whip and the cart bumped its way up the dusty track to the hilltop. The sound of screeching wheels and the clattering hooves, the bust on the cart and Rustem's sinewy arm round its neck, Alma and her little child by its side set the sculptor brooding. Now he was convinced that the face on the bust bore a striking resemblance to Rustem's. The same bushy eyebrows, the same high cheekbones, the same heavy-set jaw. The sculptor

was glad that his work had something of the living, something of the truth. He had searched for such truth for months at a stretch and had often gone sleepless, hard at work in his studio shaping the mould for the bronze.

With his arm round the neck of his brother in bronze Rustem sat smoking. Time and again he turned to look at the bronze face and his eyes rested on the scar. He was no longer on the cart, he was walking along the paths through the hills, sometimes barren, sometimes covered with hazelnut trees and juniper bushes.

«We must call a meeting of the people in charge of

village councils at Laithiza tonight.» said Memo.

«We'd better postpone the meeting until tomorrow,» suggested Rustem. Memo stopped. He put his right foot on a boulder and loosened the lace of his shoe. This shoe always hurt him. He used to laugh and say that his right foot was an inch longer than his left.

«We must call them together without fail at midnight. Some village councils are idling their time away, doing nothing. Salih Protopapa has almost paralyzed them. He's appointed new village elders and they are causing us

a lot of trouble.»

Fog had come down over the path and the air was damp. They walked along, slipping now and then on the wet stones. It was late October but the weather had worsened and it seemed like winter.

«You insist on having the meeting tonight?» Rustem

said doggedly.

«Yes, tonight!»

«And at Lajthiza, definitely?»

«Lajthiza is the best place for a meeting of this kind» said Memo.

«Salih Protopapa has many supporters at Lajthiza and they're a cunning lot. Once they find us out, they're bound to inform Salih Protopapa,» warned Rustem. He had no idea why the district committee had picked Lajthiza for the meeting. He was angry at Memo, too, for having failed to explain the situation at Lajthiza to the comrades of the district committee.

"It's good, Rustem, for the bomb to explode in the enemy's lair. The Lajthiza meeting will shock Salih Protopapa. And not just that — the people will begin to have second thoughts about who we are, and who Salih Protopapa is."

They felt thirsty, and stopped at a spring flowing out at the roots of a big beech tree. Memo took off his hat and knelt down to drink. It was midday, but the dense fog made it like late afternoon. Rustem watched his brother drink, but he felt oppressed, apprehensive. "How could this meeting come off right under Salih Protopapa's nose? A man with a leather satchel on his shoulder sets off from the district committee, and comes to these mountains where one of Salih Protopapa's scoundrels lies in ambush behind every bush! It's far too bold a move—no, the idea for this meeting didn't come from the district committee, but from Memo himself." he thought.

When Memo got up again it was Rustem's turn. He gulped the water which gurgled lightly in his throat.

"What about a smoke?" suggested Memo sitting down on a dark grey stone.

Rustem put his hand in his pocket.

«Damn! I've run out of tobacco.»

«I'm dying for a smoke. Why the devil didn't you fill up your pouch?» said Memo disappointed. He picked a wet leaf from the tree and rolled it nervously in his fingers. Just then they heard footsteps coming up the pathway. They looked at each other. Behind the bush they saw a man in a black oilskin. At first they did not recognize him, but as he approached they both rose.

«Here is the teacher!» said Memo.

The teacher stopped. Then he smiled and walked towards Memo, putting out his hand to his friend.

"There you are, Memo! You set out early. I thought you were at Gurrës — I was on my way to meet you," said the teacher as he hugged him.

«Well, how are things going? Here, sit down for a

while. What's the news? How are my people back home?\* asked Memo.

«They're all right. They're missing you. They are waiting and waiting for you......»

«Have you been informed about the meeting?»

«Yes, I 've been informed about it,» answered the teacher.

«What about the men in charge of the village councils?»

The teacher did not reply straight away. Memo didn't like this hesitation. He looked at the teacher then at Rustem.

«I asked about the men in charge» he repeated, breaking the silence.

The teacher broke a dry twig he was holding.

«Well, how shall I put it.... Some of them have been informed. I presume they will come. Two or three of them have gone over to the other side. Salih Protopapa has taken advantage of his old friendship with them and has either won them to his side or paralyzed them altogether. Even the man in charge of the Lajthiza village council is a turncoat. Lajthiza doesn't seem to me....»

Memo interrupted him.

«Well, to me it does...» with a sarcastic stress on the last word. «It seems to me that Salih Protopapa's set you all in a panic.»

Rustem smiled bitterly. The teacher kept silent. He

twisted the broken twig in his hand.

«It's too early to speak of panic as yet,» said Rustem his eyes on the ground. «We want the meeting to succeed. Lajthiza doesn't guarantee such success. On the other side of the hill runs the public highway. The German truck convoys use it every day. Salih Protopapa roams around...»

Having said this much, Rustem rose and went to have another drink at the spring. He wasn't so thirsty really but he found it hard to face his brother's scrutiny.

The teacher put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a folded letter which he handed to Memo.

«The district committee sent you this.»

Memo opened it and frowned. The letter said that after the meeting with the men in charge of the national-liberation councils of the region, Memo was not to return to the district committee but to go to Commander Rrapo of the «Lightning» Battalion to which Memo was appointed as commissar. He was to go as soon as possible.

«This Commander Rrapo», the letter continued, «must be brought to his senses instantly. So far he has sacked three commissars, apparently because commissars are not to his liking. The district committee charges you with the task of a commissar, and you must persuade Rrapo that the war cannot be waged without commissars, because without commissars the partisans turn into a rabble. Act like a communist, \* the letter continued, «we can't send another man to Rrapo. You come from that region and know the psychology and mentality there. Handle Commander Rrapo as you see fit, but we expect you to be sensible, and avoid conflicts between commander and commissar. Otherwise, the result will be incalculable damage. Rrapo is a brave commander and enjoys great influence throughout the region. Apart from this, he is dear to the partisans. We mustn't lose a man of that calibre. That's why we have overlooked some aspects of his rash temper and have forgiven him for them. But it is high time for Rrapo to be brought under our influence and become tamed.» Here the letter ended.

«Commander Rrapo!» Memo said to himself, and put the letter in his pocket. He had heard about this man but he had never met him. What he had heard had been told as good stories, sometimes sad, sometimes ridiculous. Even now, as he had read the letter, he could hardly help laughing out loud. He knew something else about him, too. Rrapo was said to get furious whenever Salih Protopapa's name was mentioned. But he wondered why Rrapo had never come to grips with him. He had neither attacked nor ambushed him. What was this Commander Rrapo waiting for?

«Commander Rrapo recently appeared at Gur-Kusar,» said the teacher.

"And plays the role of an onlooker from Gur-Kusar," remarked Memo ironically.

«He may be gathering forces there,» said Rustem.

«Keep on gathering forces, Commander Rrapo, keep on!» Memo exclaimed.

They got up. The fog had moved to the top of the hill and seemed to have wrapped the rocks in a white veil. Beyond the pass the Lajthiza cornfields began. The corn was ready to reap, and had become yellow. Here and there, a solitary reaper was scything and heaping up sheathes of harvested corn.

«Shall we stop at Lajthiza now or go on to Lumëz?» asked Rustem.

«Yes, yes. Right now!» said Memo.

The pathway led them to a half-harvested field. Two peasants were loading corn sheaves on two mules. When tney caught sight of the newcomers, they turned to look at them. One of them was small and thin, the other tall, with a black mustache.

«Good luck to you!» Memo said.

«Thank you!» replied the thin peasant, as he hitched the rope to the pack saddle and turned around. Memo recognized him as Adem, a close friend of his father.

«I hardly recognized you, Adem!» said Memo.

«Why, if it isn't Memo! Where have you been, son?» Adem turned to his companion: «Please, take care of the load, Qano, while I welcome Memo!»

And he threw his arms round Memo's neck.

"We've been longing to see you! Well, how are you? How have you been getting on?"

«Very well, Adem, very well.»

While Adem was embracing Memo, the other man tied on the load, wiped his hands on his felt jacket and turned to greet the newcomers. He was withdrawn, quieter than Adem. The teacher nudged Memo.

«This is the man in charge of the village council whom Salih Protopapa has weaned away from us.»

«Ah!» Memo cast a furtive glance at the man with a black mustache.

«The corn is ripened all right,» said Rustem.

The man looked at the fields, but said nothing.

«It's hardly ripe. Bad weather. We've never had such bad weather as this,» said Adem.

«Everything's turning againt us,» added Qano.

«No, everything's not, Qano!» cut in Adem. Then he took out his tobacco pouch and handed it to Memio. «By the way! We are having a bad time with these damned Hitlerites and rascals of the Balli Kombëtar¹).»

The peasants led their mules to the village path, whipped them off, and turned back to Memo. He noticed that the man with the black mustache tried to avoid any discussion about the Germans and the Ballists.

«How are you getting along with Salih Protopapa?» asked Memo.

«Some are on good terms with him, some on bad. But there's no doubt he's a mean fellow, likely to cut the throat of his own mother. He's giving us a lot of trouble. He roams round here.»

«Salih has friends in your village, too,» said the teacher.

The man with the black mustache lowered his head and looked at his feet. He seemed to dislike these remarks; they were getting at him. Memo followed the peasant's gestures curiously.

"What friends! Bamka Qylollari is a blood brother of his. The others do what he tells them out of fear or because of old ties...." explained Adem.

The man with the black mustache stopped and raised his hand.

«They only suck up to him out of fear — he hasn't any gang...»

Adem spat out the cigaret butt from his lower lip and fixed his small eyes on Qano's.

«Now, now, Qano! Let's be frank. I get angry at people who shilly-shally. There were some who had taken the right course, then along comes Salih Protopapa, sets

<sup>1)</sup> Balli Kombëtar — The National Front. A traitor organization.

on his gang and leads them astray. I can't stand a two-faced man's

Qano turned pale. He knew that Adem had stung him where it hurt most. Memo listened and was at a loss as to what to do, whether to intervene or to put it off, talk to Qano later on, and ask him to explain why he had shirked his responsibility as the man in charge of the village council. «It's better to speak openly now,» he said to himself: and cleared his throat.

«Really, Qano, you had taken the right course. Why

did you let Salih Protopapa hoodwink you?»

«I — I've got children. I couldn't do the job of running the council.» said Qano.

«Memo asked why you let Salih Protopapa deceive

you!» retorted Adem.

Qano stammered. He cast an angry glance and cursed the fact that he had happened to be working with him in the field. «Why did I help load this old fox's mule?» he thought to himself.

"No Salih deceived me. I said I've got children..."
"Children! What about the ox Bamka lent you to till your fields?" butted in Adem.

«I bought it from him!»

"Liar! He lent you it till you were through with your ploughing and sowing. But I forgot! You bought the ox when you sold the liberation council...." continued Adem, attacking him mercilessly.

«Shut up, Adem, or else.....» threatened the man with

the black mustache, in a burst of anger.

«Easy, easy!» intervened Memo, «Calm down!»

Only the sound of footsteps and the deep breathing of the man with the black mustache could be heard on the pathway. He had never expected such an insult. When he had got out of his task as head of the village council he had thought everything would be smoothed over.

Memo gave another cough and Qano realized he was getting ready to speak again.

«You know yourself, Qano, that you haven't behaved