A Reasonable Dictionary

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My work is of a different sort. To record the evil facts, that’s good. But something else is needed for a peace, something not less important than the facts.

Peter Handke A Journey to the Rivers or Justice for Serbia

Let this story begin, perhaps, in 1998 in Belgrade among the well-kept ruins of the Kalemegdan fortress that overlooks the confluence of the Sava and Danube rivers. A barrel-chested man walks along a path with his two little girls. They lag behind. He shouts at them. They catch up. They turn aside to play among wildflowers. He threatens them. The girls join him momentarily, then disappear among the tall flowers. He roars a command. They return. The youngest girl begins to cry. The older girl takes her hand. The big man steps off the path and rips a bunch of wildflowers from the high grass. He hands them to the crying girl. She stops crying. He shouts again. They walk away, all three of them, holding mismatched hands.

Or let the story begin just after the turn of the century with the younger brother of my friend Christian Gellinek’s grandfather. Otto Gellinek was an Austrian officer, Christian says, a ladies man -- he died of syphilis -- and a fencing instructor who liked to show off by walking on his hands. In 1907, disguised as a painter, Gellinek traveled in Bosnia-Herzegovina to sketch fortifications and make notes for a possible war. In 1908, despite Gellinek’s report arguing against a formal annexation, the Austrians invaded the country. Catholic Croats welcomed the invaders, but Muslims and Orthodox Serbs opposed them bitterly. The battle lasted three months and cost the Austrian Army 5,198 casualties. More importantly, it aroused virulent anti-Austrian sentiment among Serbs, manifest most pointedly in the person of the 19-year-old nationalist who assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo to set off the First World War.

Translating Peter Handke’s A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia from German into English, I called my old friend and long-time collaborator Žarko Radaković to ask about the phrase: “Do we need a new Gavrilo Princip?”

What kind of principle is this? I asked. Is it a term from business management? Gavrilo Princip? Žarko laughed. He was the young assassin.

It’s not easy to begin a new story about the old land of the southern Slavs (Yugo = south). After all, what do I know? A foreigner in the country for a few days. A self-styled translator with no command of this language. A potential verbal assassin.

... in Shefko’s translation the old man’s words seemed suspicious, smelled of politics and seditious intent. ... Shefko, who was obviously putting the worst possible construction on the old man’s exalted phrases and who loved to stick his nose into everything and
carry tales even when there was nothing in them, and was ever ready to give or to confirm an evil report. (Ivo Andrić, The Bridge Over the Drina)

Caveat lector.

May 20, 1998, Provo, Utah

Tomorrow, when I leave Utah for Yugoslavia, for Serbia, for the Republika Srbska along the Drina River, I’ll carry with me the bruise-enhanced memory of this afternoon’s mountain-bike ride up a section of the Great Western Trail on the southern flank of Mount Timpanogos. The ride began with a good omen, the first lazuli buntings of the year, those orange-and-white-chested, slash-winged, blue-headed and -backed beauties that nest here in the spring.

My friend Sam and I climbed the familiar twisting trail over an outcropping of quartzite and then pedaled along a ridge of blue limestone. Sam, a botanist, spoke the names of the wildflowers: evening primrose, hound’s tongue, sweet vetch, and death camas -- see the three petals characteristic of the lily family? Higher on the mountain he pointed out the delicate white petals of woodland star, mountain forget-me-nots, and upland larkspur. The larkspur, Sam explained, like death camas, contains a potent poison, a fine, selective sheepicide.

The trail rose more steeply now, switchbacking upward, stealing our breath and testing our will. An unexpected trickle of water down the trail and then, around the next curve, the massive toe of a months-old avalanche, a 10-meter-high wall of densely compacted snow, dislocated trees, and boulders.

Standing atop the snow mass, looking down on our bikes, I shuddered. Was it the sudden chill, I wondered, or awe at the snow’s blind and ponderous presence, or was it how the avalanche reminded me of my marriage?

What does that mean? Sam asked. You have seven beautiful children. You’ve been married for a quarter of a century.

You’re right, I answered. My marriage has been no avalanche. I love my children. I respect my wife. Still, it’s telling that that image sprang to mind, don’t you think?

Sure it’s telling, Sam responded, but what it’s telling is another story.

We gazed up at the evident history of the avalanche: that line in space -- from the distinct break under the mountain-top cornice to the constricting limestone gate halfway down to the botanical and geological destruction at the toe -- that in retrospect became a line in time.

In the untouched grove of maples to one side, Sam showed me the small purplish-pink flower of a spring beauty. It is also called Indian potato, he said, because of its tasty bulb. And here’s a violet, Nuttal’s violet. Look at the backs of the yellow petals.

I lifted a delicate petal. Underneath, hidden from passing glance, the petals displayed a bright crimson fuzz, splendor reserved for attentive pollinating insects.
I would like, I thought, to see Yugoslavia this closely. No, not that national abstraction “Yugoslavia.” I don’t want the blindness that comes from generalizing. I would like to see some specific thing in that specific place this closely.

On the way down, admiring a swale carpeted by blue forget-me-nots, I lost track of the trail and went over my handlebars, somersaulting down the steep slope. I lay there and wondered why my hip hurt so sharply when I had fallen into deep leaves. A scrub-oak stump had done the damage, it turned out, raising a knot I would still feel three weeks later on the plane ride home.

May 22, 1998, Düsseldorf Airport

Žarko, his eighteen-year-old daughter Milica, and I wait in an isolated and locked room to board the JAT (Yugoslavian Air Transport) plane for Belgrade. With medals flashing on bright uniforms, colorful scarves streaming in their wake, the plane’s crew strides in. One of them strikes me as especially haughty – as in high, erect. She has loose dark hair, a sharp nose, and beautiful legs; but it is her self-consciousness, her extreme defiant uprightness as she sweeps along that draws my attention. It is too bad, I think, there are so few of us to witness this triumphant crew.

Triumphant?

Defiant.

We are in Germany. The Germany that bombed Belgrade in April of 1941. The Germany that interred and murdered 200,000 Serbs, Roma, and Jews in the Croatian concentration camp at Jesenovac. The Germany that in 1992 so precipitously recognized the independence of its WWII puppet state Croatia. The Germany that was quick to impose sanctions on Serbia during the ensuing and perhaps consequent war, sanctions that included an air embargo grounding JAT planes.

Dobar dan, the flight attendant says when we enter the plane. Žarko beams.

In the plane, as always, Žarko and I speak German. We met in Germany, at the University of Tübingen. German is our only common language. Were it not for the German language, for translation from English and Serbo-Croatian, this American and that Yugoslav would not be friends.

22 May, Belgrade, Yugoslavia

Žarko’s mother, Ljubica, is 72 years old and not at all well. She refuses, however, to go to a doctor. At my age, she explains through her interpreter son, it’s better to steer clear of potential disaster.

Her hands turn and weigh and rub a cigarette lighter. She smokes “Partners,” a brand she says comes from Macedonia. With a cigarette holder between long fingers she reminds me of Greta Garbo.

She snuggles up to Žarko, smooths his hair, and asks what barbarian cut it?

She complains that she has but a single grandchild. Žarko tells her I have seven children. She nods her head approvingly. My son, she tells me, pointing her cigarette at Žarko, is lazy. Just one.
I picture Joe and Maren and Tom and Nate and Ben and Sam and Tim. What a brood! How would they deal with the breakup of a 25-year marriage?

The TV flickers interminably. For one half-hour stretch we watch an episode from an American series in which beautiful, piano-playing young people with bare midriffs and taut biceps try to figure out a murder.

A news report shows students demonstrating at the university against newly announced education reforms. The news is read by unblemished mannequins who, had they spoken English instead of Serbian, might have read their lines on American TV.

Late in the afternoon Yugoslav TV features a rebroadcast of the third playoff game between the Jazz and the Lakers.

Here in Belgrade -- in a third-floor apartment above a dentist’s office, on a TV that produces only occasional hints of color, in front of a table bearing cups of Turkish coffee, glasses of water, and shot glasses of Rakija (an amber Šljivovica or plum brandy produced by Ljubica’s 75-year-old brother who runs the family farm near Novi Sad) -- here in Belgrade the Utah Jazz beat the Los Angeles Lakers to take a 3-0 lead in the series.

I tell Žarko and his mother about TV interviews with Vladi Diva and Toni Kuko. To questions about the war and how Diva, a Serb, and Kuko, a Croatian, now view one another, Diva replied that he still respected Kuko and wanted to continue a friendship that had begun when they played together on the Yugoslavian national team. Kuko said the war had changed everything and that he hated Diva like he hated all Serbs.

You must learn some Serbian, Ljubica says: Srbi su dobri ljudi. She says it again: Srbi su dobri ljudi.

I repeat the phrase. She corrects my pronunciation. Srbi su dobri ljudi. What does it mean? I ask.

Serbs are good people! she laughs, pleased with herself.

That goes without saying, I respond. Teach me something else.

Muštikla, she says. Muštikla.

What’s that? I ask.

She points to her cigarette holder: Muštikla.

It’s not on the vocabulary frequency lists, I’ll bet. But I learn it. For her. And add, later: filteri.

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In downtown Belgrade, the windows of a large bookstore are hung with book-fair posters featuring the luscious headless body of a naked woman holding an open book. The text reads: LEPA, MUDRA, A UTI (Beautiful, Wise, and Silent), and then asks: Where Can You Find It?

It?

Headless advertisements for a book fair?
Misogyny. Where Can’t You Find It?
What images do I have in my American male brain that have colored my marriage over the years, that have inhibited intimate companionship?
A characterology of Scott Abbott? Not if it involves Professor Dr. Jovan Marić’s procrustean abstractions. But translating myself into new words, mobile and supple words, words flavored with Yugoslav accents, that’s one of the reasons I’m here.
Along the crowded pedestrian zone stand racks of glossy magazines: GUNS, HANDGUNNER, GUN WORLD, RIFLEMAN, GUNS AND AMMO. Yugoslavia is a country of killers, I think. My nostrils flare and I imagine a bloody headline in the Salt Lake Observer. This is a story I can sell.

There are other magazines on the racks, a more complete picture of the reading habits of English-speaking Belgrade Serbs: BIMMER, SPORTSCAR, YACHTING, SAILING, PLAYBOY, COSMOPOLITAN, LINGERIE, WET & WILD, BRIDES, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, FORBES.
Were I to highlight the gun magazines for the Observer, I’d present a characterological Serb obsession with guns. But where do the English-language gun magazines come from? And remember that of the 88,649 gun deaths reported by the world’s 36 richest countries in 1994, 45% occurred in the United States.

May 23, 1998, Zemun

Yesterday, when Žarko told his mother we were going to spend today in Zemun, she begged him to reconsider. Neo-fascist Vojislav Šešelj, head of the Serbian Radical Party, now Slobodan Milošević’s assistant, came to political prominence as mayor of Zemun and she thinks an American might run into trouble there among his radically nationalist constituency.

Zemun is our hometown, Žarko says.
Precisely, she answers.
But Zemun has a long history of openness to difference, Žarko argues. There is a synagogue in the park, a Jewish section in the cemetery.
That was before Šešelj, his mother says sadly. She marries a cigarette to her muštikla.

With a hundred fellow passengers, Žarko and I ride a creaking, tire-bulging bus across the Save River to Zemun.

This, Žarko says, pointing at an outdoor café fronting on the Danube, is where I used to come with a friend after school to drink sodas and smoke cigarettes. One day my father walked by. We ditched the cigarettes. He came in and asked if he could join us. He sat down and ordered coffee. He offered to buy us something. He took out some
cigarettes and started to light one. Do you want a cigarette? he asked, holding out the pack. We didn’t dare accept. Finally he went back to work. As far as I know, he never told my mother.

Not far from the café, a century-old barge rides at permanent and waterlogged anchor. A sign on the long plank gangway declares that “Bicycles and Dogs are Absolutely Forbidden!”

We find a table in the sun, welcome on this cool afternoon. At the next table two men play chess. A white-jacketed waiter stops regularly to see how the game is going. Most of the guests on the barge are drinking Jelen Pivo, “Stag Beer,” brewed in Yugoslavia since 1756. The shoulders of the stubby brown bottles are rubbed white with use and reuse.

A motorboat docks alongside the barge. The man who climbs the ladder and joins us at our table wears canvas boating shoes, jeans, a sweatshirt, and a canvas vest. His long hair has been raked over a balding crown. His name is Pera and he and Žarko have known each other since grade school.

In varying combinations of Serbian, English, and German, we talk until the sun sets and cold air begins to rise from the Danube.

Žarko introduces me as the co-author of *Ponavljanje / Repetitions*. Pera says he hasn’t heard of it. I tell him that’s a scandal, that everyone else has read it, that it was selling like crazy yesterday in the Plato bookstore near the university. I’m ashamed, he says, but at eight o’clock tomorrow morning I’ll be at the bookstore to buy a copy.

Pera asks if there is a film industry in Utah. I mention Trent Harris’s “Plan Ten From Outer Space,” with Karen Black as the alien feminist.

Karen Black! Pera says. I know Karen Black. She was here in Belgrade twenty years ago making a low-budget movie I did some photography for. I fucked Karen Black. More than once. She’s not as interesting personally, let me tell you, as she is on screen.

What have you been doing recently? Žarko asks.

Two years ago, Pera answers, short of money, I agreed to make a campaign film for Mira Marković’s political party. She’s Slobodan Milošević’s wife, he explains for my sake. It was kitsch, pure kitsch, and very effective. I had a whole sequence with neon lights that shot the word PROGRESS across the screen: PROGRESS . . . PROGRESS . . . PROGRESS. It was a brilliant piece of propaganda. Since then I’ve called myself Pera Riefenstahl. I learned everything from Leni. She was a genius at making the people so small and the great leader so large. I don’t worry about having done the job. I needed the money and the country is absolute chaos anyway. It doesn’t matter what you do or don’t do, it doesn’t change anything. Absolute chaos, and so I just made the film and now I can keep my boat running.

I have drunk a lot of pivo. Carefully I walk the length of the barge to the restroom where I piss into a hole opening onto the grey Danube.

The sun sets. Between us and the shore, frenzied frogs raise an orgasmic din.
Osloboditi reč i probuditi je iz sna, u initi da ona zna i sve ono što je sanjala da zna i... Za reč nema većeg užasa od razumnog rečnika.

To release a word means to wake it up and make it mean everything it dreamed of meaning... There is no greater horror for the word than a reasonable dictionary.

Branka Arsi

I am fond of my little dictionary, given to me by a friend the first time I traveled to Yugoslavia. Although it was published in Belgrade in 1973, the dog-eared book looks like it might have been printed in the nineteenth century. I like the subtle contrast between the blue of the one-quarter cloth spine and the black paper sides. The pages are Smythe-sewn with red-orange stuck-on endbands that add a fine touch of color to the book.

Rečnik, the book calls itself. Dictionary: English-Serbocroatian, Serbocroatian-English. On the spine, and only on the spine, the word “standardni.” A standard. A standard for Serbs and Croats married to one another for over forty years in Tito’s multi-ethnic Yugoslavia.

The book has 620 pages. Nearly half the green pages in the center (pages 281-314) are a dictionary of synonyms: Rečnik Sinonima. (“True -- right, sound, sterling, upright; real, actual, positive; certain, exact, accurate, precise; faithful, constant, loyal, staunch, strict, catholic, orthodox.” Synonyms in whose mind?) On the same green paper, pages 315-368 explain English grammar.

The rest of the book translates words from one language into another. This equals that. Walter Benjamin argued that translation, at its best, both uses and undercuts the identities posited by a dictionary:

Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own.

May 24, 1998, Trg Republike, Belgrade

It is a good-sized square, this Yugoslav Place de la Republic, a broad space that has retained its human dimensions. Bounded by a museum, a theater, and department stores, the square sits astride the city’s backbone ridge.

A fine place to sit in the late morning sun, to take notes, to watch passers-by. A teenaged boy sits down on the concrete planter behind Žarko. He lights a cigarette and looks at the notebook Žarko is writing in. Are you a poet? he asks. I’m a writer, Žarko says.
I’ve never seen a writer taking notes, the boy says. I’m skipping school. I’m a good student. My parents are teachers, but they aren’t getting paid. I feel like I ought to help them. They want me to go to Switzerland. I see no purpose to life. Maybe I’ll kill myself.

Žarko and the boy talk for some time. They stand and say “do vijenja.” Žarko and I walk to the market to buy flowers for his mother.

In her four-room apartment, Ljubica Radaković feeds us chicken soup, then new potatoes and carrots and chicken with gravy. While we eat she smokes. You remind me of Greta Garbo, I tell her. Žarko translates. She shakes her head and says: Greta Garbo with diabetes.

A parliamentary debate on the education-reform law flickers silently on the TV while we eat. If the reform passes, Žarko explains, university deans will be appointed by the minister of education, faculty appointments will require ministerial approval, and all faculty members will have to sign new contracts affirming their support for the new policies.

That’s how they do it where I work, I tell him, at the Mormons’ Brigham Young University. Not a healthy system, unless your main concern is preserving an established way of thinking.

Ljubica, who has begun to practice her native orthodoxy again, is surprised to learn that I work for a church university.

It’s an odd fit, I explain. I grew up Mormon. I served as a Mormon missionary. I have a Mormon marriage. I teach at a fundamentalist Mormon university. But over the years I’ve lost my faith. I disagree with the conservative politics of the Mormons. Now what should I do? Leave my job? Leave my marriage? Abandon my people?

No, no, Ljubica says. Be careful. Move slowly.

Do vijenja, I say as we leave. Ljubica beams and waves her momentarily empty muštkla.

Back in the square, Žarko finishes reading the Danas newspaper, an independent paper financed in part by the Hungarian-American who made his fortune buying and selling currencies, George Soros.

These are journalists talking with journalists, Žarko complains, journalists reporting on each other, writing for each other. Why can’t they be practical? Why can’t they deal with reality? What kind of opposition paper is this?

There is supposed to be a demonstration tonight, Žarko reports. Here in the square. Against school reform and for freedom of the media. Djindjić is going to speak.

Who is Djindjić? I ask.

He was elected mayor of Belgrade, Žarko explains. You remember the elections Milošević tried to steal? Djindjić had been a student of the philosopher Jürgen Habermas in Frankfurt. He’s an intelligent man. But he never figured out how to deal with reality. So Milošević, who isn’t all that bright academically but who has his fingers
on the pulse of things, could step in after the fact, divide the opposition, and take over again.

Not far from the square, we enter a bookstore owned by a poet Žarko knows. I’m not sure what I expected, but it wasn’t the following (all in translation — even the authors’ names! — or in the original Serbian): Raymond Carver’s Cathedral, a new edition of Shakespeare’s Collected Works, Richard Rorti’s Consequences of Pragmatism, Julian Barnes’s Flaubert’s Parrot, F. Nietzsche’s Thus Spake Zarathustra, a 1997 translation of Novalis’s Heinrich von Ofterdingen, Žarko’s Emigration and Knifer, and even our book: Repetitions. It’s the first time I’ve seen it in a bookstore. I buy copies of Emigration and Repetitions.

You already have those books, Žarko points out.

Yes, but I like the feel of buying our books in a bookstore.

Let me introduce you to Gojko Djogo, Žarko says as a small man approaches, dressed in a dark sweater, white shirt, precisely knotted tie, pressed brown slacks, and shiny black wingtip shoes. Žarko introduces him as the store’s owner and a poet of some renown.

We shake hands and sit on three chairs in a cramped space behind a counter piled with books. The two Serbs speak for some time in Serbian, catching up, I suppose. I look around the small store, then back at the poet, who wears a red-and-white watch with the Serbian national cross on its face. In the angles of the cross are the four Cyrillic S’s that stand for something like “Serbia Safe Only When United.”

Djogo became famous in 1981, Žarko explains, when he published a book of poetry called Vunena Vremena, translatable as something like “The Anxious Time.” The book featured a bear that some people took to be Tito. The poet was sentenced to two years in prison, time that was shortened to four months after he developed severe stomach problems. He subsequently received a prize in Hamburg at the 1985 Pen Congress, where he sat between Günter Grass and Susan Sontag. I was there, Žarko says, and he was a big hit.

Gojko Djogo is pleased to hear the story, and when I ask about his sense for the political future he is anxious to speak. We have turned a corner in world opinion, he says. Brigitte Bardot recently spoke out in favor of Serbs, and of course Peter Handke is our champion.

But you know Bianca Jagger wrote a piece against the Serbs, I tell him. And there the conversation ends.

Rain falls across the afternoon and onto the nighttime crowd that has gathered in the square, a thousand people perhaps, standing under umbrellas and yellow street lamps.

Students hand out color posters that feature a microphone lit brightly against a threatening black cloud, gripped by a hand with its middle finger extended. At the top are printed a question and a command:

KOLIKO RADIO STANICA UJETE?
I understand the photo perfectly, but to translate the words I bend over my re\, nik/dictionary: How much/how long the radio stopping place audible? Does it mean: How long will the radio station be audible? And then: Think about it.

Not likely.

At the bottom are the words: Radio Index. And then a brave and/or foolhardy “claimer”: Fotografija, Art Concept and Design: KAMENKO PAJI .

Twenty people, most of them men, stand on a stage built up against an equestrian statue between the museum and the theater, lit by inconsistent spotlights. Students wave the opposition party’s green and yellow flags and one red, blue, and white Serbian flag.

The steady rain soaks a huge sound system.

Speakers, one after the other, take the microphone and work the crowd. The words are incomprehensible to me, but I understand the rhetorical devices: the repetitions, the pauses, the crescendos, the climaxes.

The crowd is dripping wet. Hundreds of umbrellas block the view.

Žarko translates as much as he can. Every speaker, it seems, is denouncing as devils Milošević and Šešelj, who himself once called Milošević a devil.

Shrill whistles from the crowd.

Milošević is a fox, one speaker shouts, a fox scheming with Richard Holbrooke to sell out Kosovo.

Isn’t this the liberal opposition? I ask Žarko.

He nods.

Couples are embracing throughout the crowd.

Have you noticed that there is an erotic buzz in any demonstration? Žarko asks.

A speaker compares Milošević with Hitler.

On the periphery, young men tell loud jokes. People buy cigarettes and magazines at a kiosk. Ambulances stand by. A Red Cross worker in reflective clothing walks through the crowd with a radio.

Finally Djindjić takes the microphone. He led the street demonstrations just a year ago, hundreds of thousands of citizens marching and blowing whistles and demanding that the results of the democratic elections be honored. They achieved their goal. Djindjić and friends took office. But here they are again, out of power, outside in the rain, speaking to a scant thousand demonstrators, participants in a revolution that is running out of steam.

Still, Djindjić is a consumate orator. We’ll go to the people, he says. We don’t need the media. We’ll simply walk with the people. . . . We will not stop until the Milošević government is toppled. . . . We will not allow him to cripple the education system. . . . And we will never allow him to give away the birthplace of Serbia. Kosovo is sacred ground!

This is nuts, Žarko says.
What is nuts? I ask.
One way to explain Milošević’s drastic educational reform, he says, is as an attempt to maintain Serbian control of Kosovo by keeping the Albanians there out of the universities. So when Djindji demands that Milošević keep Kosovo Serbian, he works against his own demand for academic freedom.
Complicated.
We’ll continue the demonstration tomorrow morning at 10 o’clock, Djindji says. See you there.
And that’s it. The demonstration is adjourned.
After a minute the sound system blares some sort of heroic, overwrought film music. I think of Woody Allen’s line: “Listening to Wagner makes me want to invade Poland.” How do you move the masses without playing to the mass instincts that are part of the problem?
Before the lights dim, Djindji gives an interview to a man in a red rain jacket holding a tape recorder and then another to a TV journalist (so who doesn’t need the media?), and it’s over.
We walk back toward my hotel. Around the corner stand eight vans full of policemen. One of them shouts insults at us as we pass. I don’t need a translator.
Radio Index posters adorn every wall, every column, every door. Someone has been busy. And brave.
In the hotel, a couple of men shake the rain out of their hair and off their coats and explain to the desk clerks: We went out to overthrow the government, and it rained. They laugh uproariously.
Žarko says good night and walks on to his mother’s place.
I sit in my room and remember Djindji’s broad, handsome smile in the spotlight. His practiced wave. His rhythmic sentences. His forceful repetitions.
I think of the sentences I translated in Peter Handke’s A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia, of a very different rhetoric – Handke’s dialectical stammering, his pragmatic detours, his incessant questions.
How does a country move from “crowds and power” to a self-conscious and skeptical democracy? Education? Books that teach another kind of thinking? But then, in a crisis, as people look for answers, for comfort, right-wing rhetoric and left-wing clichés blossom. The leader promises purity, points to unambiguous solutions, incites to absolutes, and starts wars.
I’ve read the theory. Tonight I saw theory in action.
Don’t get me wrong. I admire Djindji. Leaders aren’t perfect. But I can wish for a different kind of people. And I’m not thinking of Yugoslavs.

25 May 1998, Belgrade
Walking through the city this morning I got lost. An hour later, I finally recognized the building where the parliament was voting on education reform. Demonstrators packed the sidewalks, hundreds of people shouting and blowing
whistles and pushing past white-coated policemen who were trying to keep them off the street.

Žarko appeared out of nowhere. He smiled nervously.

A flood of angry people swept into the street. The police stepped back. The crowd stormed past. A line of blue-coated policemen stepped in front of them. The crowd moved on, more slowly, filtering through holes in the line. A white-haired couple screamed at the policemen, blew their whistles, gestured wildly. Green-and-yellow flags waved.

Ten short-haired men, big men, in black leather jackets and jeans stepped between the police and the crowd. When the next person moved forward, a black-coated man pushed him back. An advancing woman got the same treatment. Skirmishes ensued. Quick exchanges of blows. Flashfights. Thugs against citizens. No match. The crowd fell back while cameras rolled, five or six TV cameras, a dozen or so still cameras, held high to record the fighting. Footage, in seconds, for the evening news.

The thugs stood in a line. The crowd chanted the ultimate insult: Ustasha! Ustasha! A young thug cupped his ear and asked: What? A little louder?

The crowd sat down on the street. Whistles. Shouts.

Blue-jacketed police reinforcements filed in from around the corner and formed two lines perpendicular to the line of thugs that stretched across the street. At some signal, the policemen hustled the thugs off the street and themselves formed a shoulder-to-shoulder dam.

Cries of rage from the seated crowd. Looks of concern on their faces.

Was there concern on the faces of the young policemen?

The line advanced on the crowd. The crowd began to chant. A tiny woman at the front blew her whistle and shouted and pointed at the policemen.

The police moved another step closer.

The crowd chanted: Go to Kosovo! Kill Albanians! Go to Kosovo! Kill Albanians!

The police advanced.

Red mob! The crowd shouted.

A policeman drew back his boot and swung it at a seated person. Then again. Other policemen kicked at crossed legs and bent knees.

The crowd jumped up and turned and drew back and began to run. The police moved rapidly with them, kicking and swinging nightsticks.

We trotted along the sidewalk, not quite sure what was going to happen, curious, nervous.

There was a shout behind us. What were the policemen doing? People panicked, running, pushing their way up the street, ducking into doors.

Žarko and I followed a crowd into a door, down a hall, and into a courtyard. A dead end.
We ran back up the hall and out the door. In fits and starts we retreated from the parliament building, running when the crowd surged behind us, walking when the pressure eased.

Minutes later we stood in a bookstore holding a new Serbo-Croatian translation of Thoreau’s *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, sweating, wondering what had just happened.

Fifteen minutes later, still clammy with sweat, having fled officers of one sort, we went looking for officials of another stamp. This was a scene I had translated in Peter’s book:

> Departure finally from the over-heated capital city . . . outfitted with a laconic permit from the Serbian Republic that we had obtained in . . . central Belgrade . . . At two quite empty desks . . . two women in summer attire, elegant in that characteristic Yugoslavian manner.

26 May 1988, Šabac

I sit alone at a table in front of the Šabac bus station. Žarko has gone to report the loss of my notebook, dropped, I suppose, on the floor of the crowded bus as we got out.

At the Belgrade bus station, men had climbed onto the bus to sell drinks and nuts and pulp fiction. From the bus’s rear-view mirror hung a silly German “WUNDERBAUM -- KOKUSNUSS” air freshener. Underway, I woke from a nap to see a geographically accurate but politically naïve freeway sign listing the number of kilometers to Zagreb and to Llubljana.

Žarko returns. I filled out a form, he says, but they weren’t hopeful. I lost a notebook two years ago, he tells me, filling the silence. When I tried to reproduce it from memory I still had all the general events, but the details had sifted away.

Here, he adds: For you.

My friend of 15 years hands me a schoolgirl’s notebook: lined paper between cardboard covers decorated with photos of two sexy young women lying on their stomachs writing in notebooks decorated with photos of two sexy young women writing in notebooks.

I’ll start over. The Düsseldorf airport. Žarko’s mother. The demonstration. Zemun.

Let’s go for a walk, Žarko suggests. Peter and Zlatko won’t be here for an hour or two.

Šabac is an unremarkable town located on flat and fertile land, its low buildings spread out in orderly blocks. Žarko and I photograph one another in front of a shoe store called BOROVO (“The Pines,” my little dictionary says) whose three stone stories exhibit a hint of vertical aspiration.

Peter Handke and Zlatko Bocoki arrive in Zlatko’s little red Peugeot. We shake hands. Peter and Zlatko tell of a brush with Croatian officials at the border. We pile into the car and head southwest.
Where the flatland meets the first hills rising up from the south we intersect the much-storied Drina River. Not far to the north the Drina flows into the Sava, which flows into the Danube between Zemun and Belgrade. Turning south, we follow a twisting, climbing river road, driving into the gathering darkness.

Let’s stop here, Peter suggests, and Zlatko pulls into a tiny parking lot. We unfold ourselves from the Pugeot and enter a one-room café. We sit around a chrome-rimmed table.

Peter asks the proprietor to sauté some mushrooms he pulls out of his pocket. We watch the darkness thicken. We exchange inanities. We drink a bottle of white wine – bello vino, as opposed to czrno vino, Žarko explains. We sit at the chrome-rimmed table and listen to the Drina flowing past just below us.

Time passes. We get up from the table and leave the café. Shortly before eleven we arrive at Olga’s apartment in Bajina Bašta. Olga was Žarko’s high-school sweetheart and is Milica’s mother. Again we sit. Olga serves plum brandy. Žarko shows me the James Dean poster in Milica’s room.

It’s after midnight when we walk to the cavernous hall of the hotel. I’m game only for a single round of bello vino. Then I turn in.

27 May 1998, Bajina Bašta, Hotel Drina

The telephone rang this morning at 6. Da? I mumbled. A woman’s voice said something that reminded me of “ustashe.” Croatian quislings, enemies of Serbs! I panicked. She hung up. Through blurry eyes I searched my dictionary and finally found “ustati -- to rise, to get up, to stand up.”

Who ordered this wake-up call?

Last night, well after midnight, I glanced up and saw my image in the mirror. No connection, I thought, to the person I think of while writing in the first person.

What I saw was a cadaver-white man with a bad haircut and reading glasses. A man with folds under his chin and a flabby chest. A man heavy with a marriage long since settled into the clichés of quiet desperation. A man settling into clichés about clichés.

Dead tired, I had left Peter, Zlatko, Žarko, and Olga in the hotel’s hall where a grand total of nine people sat at two of 100 well appointed tables listening to a seven-piece band armed with all the latest technology -- left them only to stare at my cadaver self in the mirror and then to fall into a troubled sleep in a room so clean and white that I dreamed of hospitals.

Thomas Deichmann, editor of Novo, joins us for breakfast. He is returning to his home in Frankfurt from a media conference in Greece, or if his sunburned face is any indication, from a fruitful tour of Greek beaches. For the rest of this trip we’ll be a quintet.

***
I’m pleased to meet you, says a bald man whose thin lips and large nose remind me of a Breugel peasant. I’ve spent the morning cutting grass, he explains, pointing at his work clothes and beard stubble. My name is Slobodan Rogić.

Žarko has told me about you, I say. It’s a pleasure.

I’ve read your book, he tells me.

So you’re the one, I reply.

He insists that the town’s librarian has also read the book. Two readers in a town of 10,000!

Slobodan hands Peter a recycled Johnny Walker bottle and kisses him on both cheeks. Serbian whiskey, he says, šljivovica, plum brandy.

I’ve been watching your Utah Jazz, Slobodan says, turning back to me. After their games against the Lakers, I think they’ll beat Chicago. Bajina Bašta has its own sports hero, he continues, Bora Milutinović — the former coach of the U.S. national soccer team and current coach of the Nigerian national team — is from Bajina Bašta. And Steve Tesich, the U.S. screenwriter, is from here as well. Do you know Tesich? he asks.

Didn’t he write the screenplay for “Breaking Away”?

That’s him. He’s from Bajina Bašta.

Before we leave, Žarko tells him about my lost notebook.

A catastrophe! Slobodan says.

Hearing the words from my reader, it seems a worse loss than ever.

***

Over the slow course of a quiet afternoon we sit under an apple tree in the village of Peručac, just up the Drina from Bajina Bašta. It’s the garden of Olga’s mother, the proud partisan Peter describes in A Journey to the Rivers: “The grandmother, the former partisan, who a half-year earlier had worn a peasant scarf and winter slippers inside the little house and who was now blithely bareheaded, her hair bronze-colored, very erect, with shoulders set at a commanding angle, like a chief, on her feet the finest leather shoes.” Set off by her black-velvet blouse, Dušanka Nikolić’s hennaed hair gleams red in the sun. Gold teeth, one on each side, light up her mouth.

Žarko and Milica, who has arrived from Belgrade, inspect her grandmother’s garden. They stop to watch a cat slink through high grass. They walk across a steep pasture. Chickens scurry out of their way. Olga sits with her mother and the rest of us at a garden table heavy with food. A couple of neighbors come by and the women talk about the refugees crowding Peručac, Serbs driven from their towns and villages on the Bosnian side of the Drina.

They’re a lazy bunch. They refuse to get jobs. . . . While we work they stand around town, all dressed up. . . .

Across the river the steep hills are thick with trees. Looted and burned houses, roofless, dot clearings. Muslim dwellings. Former dwellings.
. . . or get their hair done. . . . They get food and other things from humanitarian organizations, then sell them to us in the market.

A helicopter rises from behind the hills, hovers. I think of the fuel it is burning. Another helicopter arrives, swings around, hovers. Maneuvering precisely, the hunters zigzag their way up the river, toward the dam.

Hunters?

***

Back in Bajina Bašta. In the fading twilight the five of us make our uncertain way to Slobodan Rogić’s house. I know right where we are, Zlatko keeps telling us. Don’t worry, I know right where we are. And, it turns out, he eventually finds the house.

It’s just an average Serbian house, Slobodan says proudly of the large two-story house surrounded by an orchard and garden.

Scott, Slobodan says, I want you to meet a friend of mine. I shake hands with a slightly built man wearing a thin mustache. He bows and hands me a shiny white bus-company sack: Spremić Rade, Belegija Prevoz.

Inside is my lost notebook.

I hug Slobodan. I hug the man who handed me the bag. I repeat my thanks, hvala, again and again. I hug the bag. I smile like an idiot. I wish I knew more than ten words of Serbo-Croatian.

Slobodan explains that he called this man, a bus owner, who called the man who owns the bus company whose bus took us to Šabac, who located the book and shipped it by bus to Bajina Bašta.


Slobodan introduces us to a stately man in his sixties, the author, Slobodan says, of a book about monasteries on Mt. Athos in Greece. He has brought a copy of the book for Peter.

Slobodan’s wife lays out a beautiful platter of smoked trout, a platter of fried trout, a bowl of potatoes, a plate of bread, and a bottle of Macedonian white wine. Despite requests for her to stay, she retires for the night, leaving eight men around the table.

We attack the trout. I admire the fine bald heads of all three of the men from Bajina Bašta. Zlatko too is a member of this tribe.

A life-sized painting of a provocatively arranged nude woman hangs in the living room. On the adjoining wall hangs an equally large work of art, a highly stylized orthodox icon of a gold-leafed Jesus Christ.

For nearly an hour our conversation is light, a meandering exchange slowed and flavored by Žarko’s and Zlatko’s translations. We spend fifteen minutes, for example, trying to correctly translate an obscene and labyrinthine Serbian curse that moves from the law of gravity to one’s own mother.

Finally someone brings up the war.
Although I’m not religious, says the stately author, although I don’t believe in God, nor, however, am I an atheist, but having said that, I think God has given the Serbs more than they can bear.

Slobodan expounds on the impossibility of the Serbs ever expiating their perceived guilt in world consciousness: It’s like the rabbit, he says, that tries to prove it’s not a donkey by fucking until its balls wear out, at which point it can no longer prove it is no donkey.

We need better leaders, the bus owner ventures. Like who? Žarko asks. Like Václav Havel, the bus owner suggests. No! interjects the stately author. Havel is gay. Which means nothing, Slobodan says.

Slobodan leans toward me and asks if I know what “skot” means in Serbo-Croatian. No, I say. It means the runt of the litter, beast, or vermin.

What does Slobodan mean? I ask him.

Free, independent, free man. It’s a name given to many Serb babies during World War II, a defiant response to the Nazis.

Lucky you, I answer. My American parents simply didn’t pay attention. But your name isn’t faring so well these days either.

Serbs are weary of American moralizing, Slobodan opines. America has its own history. Putting Indians on reservations was a kind of ethnic cleansing, after all.

America as a moral authority is a bad joke, Peter says. A country with a death penalty that insists on its moral superiority! Please.

The expert on monasteries introduces a long and winding speech by means of a legitimating biography: I am not religious, but neither do I deny God. I was in Buchenwald for eight months. My father was a Partisan who died in the war. My brother was a Partisan who died in the war. I was a Partisan in the war.

The evening wears on. There are stories about refugees, about Muslims in a prison camp, about a camp guard who had been Slobodan’s pupil, about shelling from across the river, about Muslim aggression, about Serbian stupidity.

Why, Peter asks, did the Serbs lob artillery shells into Sarajevo, creating the damning images that turned world opinion against them?

Peter has a tiny yellow Langenscheid’s dictionary he pulls out of a jacket pocket now and then. It claims to be “Kroatisch-Deutsch/Deutsch-Kroatisch.” With a pen he has added “Serbisch-” to the mix.

May 28, 1998, Bajina Bašta

We’ve had a hearty breakfast in Dušanka’s garden and are packing for a two-day hike on the Tara Mountain.

Peter carries the sturdy canvas pack used by one of the characters in his film Absence. He wears an old pair of high-topped leather shoes I imagine to be the same shoes featured in his story “The Shoeshiner of Split”:

In the following weeks, however, he wore the shoes in the snow of Macedonia, in the leafy dust of the mountains of Peloponnesos, in the yellow and gray sand of the Libyan and
Arabic desert. And even months later, one day in Japan, it was enough to rub the leather with a cloth and the original shine from the promenade in Split reappeared, undamaged.

Žarko has a good nylon daypack and a pair of generic white athletic shoes. Zlatko, Thomas, and I carry our things in high-fashion vinyl shopping bags -- black-and-white, lemon-yellow, and pink bags supplied at the last minute by Olga. Zlatko and Thomas wear city shoes, black-leather low-topped shoes that are the antitheses of my heavy leather hiking boots.

What to note about the 35-kilometer hike? The wildflowers. The changing views of the Drina from ever-higher vantage points along the switchbacking road. The blind-worms copulating blindly on the roadside. The sunlit meadow where we lie in the grass to rest our weary feet and legs. The rare Serbian spruce Peter points out. The ski-resort inn where we re-hydrate. The serpentine logging roads. Peter’s ongoing search for mushrooms, which he stuffs into a compartment of Žarko’s pack. The desultory conversations. Our growing weariness. Žarko’s incipient and then pronounced limp.

While we eat a hearty dinner that includes the mushrooms Peter has picked, the restaurant owner tells us about the years he spent playing an accordion in Germany. After his back gave out, he says, he tried racing cars and finally came back to the Tara Mountain.

Sometime before midnight the racing restauranteur proves his prowess by speeding us up a winding road, leaving his slow headlights hanging in the trees at every tight corner, accelerating and braking, screeching and honking, torquing and turning to pull up abruptly at an A-frame cabin where we spend the night.

May 29, 1998, Kremna

Sleepy Kremna, maybe fifteen kilometers east of the Tara Mountain. After the morning’s march we sit relaxed in front of a bus-stop restaurant. Olga and Slobodan arrived early with Zlatko’s car and have a story to tell.

While waiting for us to arrive, Olga went to help a baby bird that had fallen from its nest. She bent to pick it up and was attacked by the mother bird. She points to a nasty scratch on her cheek.

We eat and drink and talk and order another bottle of wine. An occasional bus provides the only structure to our aimlessness.

Down the street stands a beefy blue truck, a muscular winch bolted to its front. Unmatched knobby tires give the truck clearance enough for a tree stump. Three burly uniformed men stand next to the truck. Forest rangers, probably, but they feel threatening to me, a foreigner, within 25 kilometers of a recent war zone.

Passengers return to a bus parked in front of the restaurant. The last passenger climbs on and the bus rolls down the street. From the side door of the restaurant
leading to the restrooms flies a middle-aged woman. She chases the bus down the street, arms flailing. The bus turns a corner. She follows, gesturing silently like an actor in an old movie.

Beside their truck, the uniformed men break into grins. They look at us. We are grinning too.

Višegrad, Republika Srpska

Was denkt in dir? Peter asks.

What? I ask, unable to hear him over the noise of Milka and her band.

What is thinking in you?

Sorrow, I answer.

For two months in 1992 there was intense fighting here. Marauding Muslims. Marauding Serbs.

And now the town is devoid of Muslims.

Since we crossed the border into the Republika Srpska, I have been imagining Muslims and Serbs lying in bed those 60 nights. Worrying, as they lay there, about possible futures. About a sudden end to possible futures.

Tonight we sit at a long linen-covered table in the dining room of a large resort hotel tucked back into the forested hills above the town. Guests of the Mayor of Višegrad.

Aleksandar Savić is an outgoing young man, a good mayor, I think. He’s dressed in a striped shirt, a bright tie, dark brown slacks, and a double-breasted black blazer crossed vertically and horizontally by white stripes. Occasionally he raises his right arm, cocks his hand, holds it momentarily behind his head, strokes his slick dark hair. The gesture of a beautiful woman.

Of the 20,000 inhabitants of Višegrad, he says, 2500 are refugees. 97% of them say they want to remain in Višegrad. 1% want to go home. 1% want to go to Serbia. And 1% want to leave Yugoslavia altogether.

Yes, there is high unemployment. The town’s factories have shut down.

There are, of course, no tourists. The hotel is a cavernous home to men convalescing from the war.

The mayor’s driver, a large and gentle man, is from Goražde, now a Muslim enclave. He left there in 1992, he says, and hasn’t been back, although it’s only 30 kilometers up the Drina. He admits to having left a girlfriend there. Peter asks if he wouldn’t like us to contact her for him when we drive through. No, he says, no thank you. It is impossible.

A young man limps painfully into the dining room, accompanied by two women, one his girlfriend perhaps, or sister, the other old enough to be his mother. They take a table. They talk. They drink a bottle of wine. They sit silently. The young man twirls his box of cigarettes between the table and his finger.

Milka, backed by an accordion, a keyboard, and drums (was there a drummer?), is a sultry lounge singer with a Serbian repertoire, traditional sad love songs sung in a
middle-eastern quaver. Her black-stockinged legs under a very brief skirt draw Žarko’s and my attention until Peter points out that our mouths are open and couldn’t we be more discreet? When she approaches our table and sings into Peter’s ear while stroking his neck we exact revenge by remarking on his adolescent smile. We all redeem ourselves by tipping her handsomely. And remark on how her long legs and double-sized head make her tiny body into an afterthought.

She has lost 50 kilos in the past six weeks, the mayor says.

The mayor describes the first local casualty in the war: A 24-year-old, fighting with a small group, hit by a “dumdum” that took off his shoulder. His father and a priest buried him there in the forest with some branches and leaves over his face. A monument now marks the grave. A holy place.

I was recently in Bulgaria, the Mayor says, to accept a literary prize for the Bosnian Serb leader and poet Radovan Karadžić. Karadžić couldn’t leave the Republika Srpska because he is currently under indictment for war crimes, so he asked me to represent him. In my acceptance speech I referred to him as President Karadžić. Later I was summoned before a Norwegian judge and asked about the reference, illegal now that Karadžić is banned from holding office. I had thought about it and had an answer ready: The Americans, I told the judge, refer to Richard Nixon as President Nixon, even after he is no longer president. That’s what I was doing.

And how did the judge react?
He let me go.

Someone asks about Višegrad during the war.

The town, the mayor explains, was 2/3 Muslim before the war. In 1992 the Muslims chased the Serbs out of the city. The Serbs retook the city through the grace of the Muslim Murad Šabanović who captured the hydroelectric dam above the city and threatened to blow it up. The Muslim population fled the threat of flooding. The Yugoslav army arrived and dislodged the crazy terrorist. And the Serbs moved back in.

While the Mayor talks, a small man with a dark beard pushes past a concerned waiter to crutch his way toward our table. He breaks into the conversation and with a sweaty palm shakes each of our hands. He pulls two photographs out of a coat pocket.

The waiter signals to Milka. She skips toward our table, cordless microphone in hand, armed with a vigorous Serbian song.

The small man holds out two worn photos. The first is a glossy celebrity shot of Radovan Karadžić. The second is a snapshot the small man identifies as his brother, killed in the war: My brother, killed in the war. My brother.

Milka belts out the song “Oh Višegrad!” The waiter takes a hesitant step toward our table. The convalescing soldier puts away his photos and retreats slowly on his crutches. Milka hits three quick high notes, kicks up a shapely heel, and dances away.

Well after midnight we disperse to the rooms the Mayor has reserved for us in this hall of echoes.

30 May 1998, Višegrad
The only other guests at breakfast this morning were well-dressed French speakers. Thomas spoke with them and found it was the entourage of French General Jean Cot, for a time the controversial commander of UN forces in Bosnia. He was collecting material for a book on the war. His translator, Thomas says, was the second wife of Danilo Kiš, one of Yugoslavia’s best contemporary writers.

Back in Višegrad, Žarko and I walk around town. Tomato and pepper seedlings are on sale in an outdoor market, the dark earth around their roots wrapped in damp paper. A wedding procession sweeps past, flowers clamped under windshield wipers. Horns blare. Serbian flags flutter from radio antennae.

I remember my modest wedding, remember the hope for the future we shared. What was the defining moment in the end of that hope? There were twenty-five years of defining moments, any of which might have tended in another direction.

Affixed high on the wall of a house, maybe 12 feet up, is a brass historical marker: Hochwasser vom 10. Nov 1896. This I can translate: High-water mark on November 10, 1896. The German-language sign marks a powerful flood, and a hundred years later it stands as a reminder of the Austrian occupation.

Last night I read a passage from Ivo Andrić’s Nobel-Prize winning novel in which a Muslim town leader refuses a Turkish request to fight against the approaching Austrians. The exasperated Turk has his fellow Muslim nailed by the ear to the Višegrad bridge. From his awkward and painful position he can read an Austrian proclamation posted on the bridge:

*People of Bosnia and Herzegovina!*

*The Army of the Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary has crossed the frontier of your country. It does not come as an enemy to take the land by force. It comes as a friend to put an end to the disorders which for years past have disturbed not only Bosnia and Herzegovina but also the frontier districts of Austria-Hungary.*

The Turks leave. The Austrians arrive. An Austrian Red Cross orderly pulls the nail out of the Muslim’s ear. The Muslim, as wounded in spirit as in body, walks through town:

> Beside him walked some soldiers. Amongst them he saw that fat, good-natured, mocking face of the man with a red cross on his arm who had taken out the nail. Still smiling, the soldier pointed to his bandage and asked him something in an incomprehensible language. Alihodja thought that he was offering to help him and at once stiffened and said sullenly:

> ‘I can myself. . . . I need no one’s help.’

> And with a livelier and more determined step he made his way home.

*(The Bridge Over the Drina)*

Žarko guides me down six steps into a half-dark room fronting directly on a busy street. You need to try a “burek,” he says. We order, and a woman cooks and serves us eggs and cheese in dough that is flaky and greasy at the same time. It’s not very good, Žarko says. A typical burek.

At the hotel we are met by the Mayor, none the worse, it seems, for the late night. He has some things he’d like us to see.
We drive to a construction site on a hill overlooking the Drina River. Three stories high, typical orange-brick construction. A line of women and men unload a truck, passing orange tiles from hand to hand in a long chain. On the high roof men are interlocking the tiles in undulating rows. A small evergreen tree, a ragged red, blue, and white Serbian flag, and an improvised rack from which hang three bottles of brandy and three new plastic-wrapped shirts adorn the rooftop. I’m not sure what the shirts represent, but from the boisterous singing it’s clear what the brandy is for.

These are refugees from Sarajevo, the Mayor says. They have formed an organization and with a government grant of land, tools, and materials are building 158 apartments here. He introduces us to the president of the refugee group, a thin man, maybe 70 years old, bright-eyed and erect, who speaks an eager English as he shows us around.

Mr. Handke, he says, you are a writer. And I too am a writer. I write children’s books. We are colleagues. You are big and I am small. But we are colleagues.

Peter introduces Žarko and me as his Serbian and American translators. The president has eyes only for Peter.

We meet the young architect. She and her husband, she says, have moved into an abandoned Muslim house. Through third parties they are trying to exchange their house in Sarajevo for the one in Višegrad.

TV cameras arrive and Peter joins the chain to pass a few roof tiles for Serbian television. Then it’s time for lunch.

Most of the workers sit on the floor of a large shaded room. The rest of us are seated at a long table in the glaring sun. We share cold cuts and tomatoes and plum brandy.

This is the Austrian writer Peter Handke, the President announces. He has come to visit our building. We will now hear words of wisdom from this great man. Mr. Handke, would you please honor us with words to remember on this proud occasion?

Peter stands and raises his cup of brandy. He looks at the President. He looks back into the shaded room where the workers are seated. He turns back to the President. He speaks words to remember: Jebi ga.
Fuck it.
The surprised workers raise a boisterous cheer. Peter grins and raises his cup again.

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The afternoon slips by like the Drina River, whose green waters we overlook from a vine-covered restaurant terrace – Žarko, Zlatko, Thomas, Peter, the Mayor, the Višegrad city planner, and the Mayor’s driver.
The table is loaded with baskets of bread, soft Kajmak cheese, tomato-and-onion salad (Srpska salat), platters of meat with spicy little civapcici, porkchops, veal, chunks of lamb on spits. Bottles of white and red wine. Shot glasses of rakija. Mineral water in bottles bearing the portrait of Karadjordje – the Serbian hero named Black George by the Turks.
Light rain spots the river.

Two white OSCE vehicles stand in front of the restaurant. Six representatives of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe are having lunch at the other large table on the terrace. Their common and loud language is English. The two women speak with French and Spanish accents. One of the men has an Hungarian, another a German accent. And the remaining two men, one sporting a ridiculously small red bow-tie, speak with high-pitched buzz-saw American accents. There’s something about these two Americans, an overbearing, know-it-all smugness, a brazen self-righteousness, an unreflective sense of entitlement, that makes me want to strangle them. To apply for a different passport. To learn a different language.
Peter’s face suggests something well beyond strangling.
Finally the English speaking functionaries leave their table and enter the small hotel adjacent to the terrace restaurant. The Mayor’s driver gestures to the Mayor and leaves the terrace. The city planner describes rebuilding efforts since the war.
Zlatko scans the menu and recommends that I order tufahia for dessert. When he says the Turkish word it sounds suspiciously like “to fuck you” in English. Zlatko assures me it’s not a joke. He describes tufahia as a baked apple with whipped cream. Tufahia, I tell the waiter, itching to add por favore or bitte or s’il vous plaît, anything that would make it more than an order. But I’m an idiot in this language. He makes a note and leaves.

We don’t call this dish by its Muslim name anymore, the city planner tells Zlatko and me, admonishing us with his index finger. We call it Srpska jabuka, a Serbian apple.

On the bank of the Drina a magpie swoops down from one tree and up into another. Native Americans called magpies black-and-white longtails. Or the bird that eats shit. European-Americans called them magpies.

The Mayor’s driver returns with the news that three Serb soldiers have just been killed in Kosovo. A drive-by shooting. The Kosovar Albanians are trying to provoke a war, the Mayor says. The city planner adds that Albanians have been waging a demographic war on the Serbs in Kosovo: They have eight or nine children, he says.

I go into the hotel to use the restroom and to escape the city planner. The OSCE people are sitting around a table in a room off the hall, a laptop computer open in front of each of them. Flipcharts and flowcharts and posters graph the RE-REGISTRATION PROCESS – VIŠEGRAD CITY ELECTION.

Outside I report on what I have seen.

We’ll go in one by one to use the toilet, Žarko tells the Mayor. We’ll leave bribes – baksheesh – to help with your re-election.

A long-legged man strolls by, his hips and legs preceding his upper body á la Charlie Chaplin. He carries a thick-handled hoe. Cotton drifts through the warm air. Not from the cottonwood trees I know at home (Populus fremontii, called alamo in Spanish), but from closely related poplars.

Most of what I have witnessed on this trip is somehow related to things I know at home. Still, two nights from now, when I hear the first nightingale song in my 49 years, I won’t need anyone to explain what I’m hearing.

Goražde

Up the Drina River, past the hydro-electric dam and the reservoir, Zlatko pilots his Peugeot, through a dozen tunnels. A railroad track with its own network of tunnels snakes along the opposite side of the river. In ten minutes we reach Muslim-held territory. There are, contrary to my expectation, no borders to cross. Since the Dayton Accord, explains Thomas, this is one country.
Border or no border, the tension in our little car rises as the familiar ruins begin to appear, Serb houses this time. We have been welcome in the Republika Srpska – two Serbs, the author of *Justice for Serbia*, two translators of that text, and the journalist who demonstrated that the ITN photos of the concentration camp at Trnopolje were a fiction. The welcome wouldn’t be as warm here.

“Here” is a town stretched along both banks of the river. Fierce fighting with machine guns and artillery has marked, has scarred the once prosperous face of Goražde. Between the highway and the river rises the brilliant white tower and five domes of a new mosque. Goražde was taken by the Serbs and retaken by the Muslims. It is connected now by a thin corridor to the Muslim-held area around Sarajevo.

In less than five minutes we have passed through the town. We’ll come back this way tomorrow.

31 May 1998, Foča

I’ve been reading about these towns along the Drina in Misha Glenny’s *The Fall of Yugoslavia*:

> The Serbs stormed the urban centres of eastern and then southern Bosnia.

. . . Bratunac, Srebrenica, Višegrad and Foča all followed suit quickly although in Višegrad the army’s path was stopped by the extraordinary Murad Šabanović, a desperate Moslem fighter, who took control of the hydro-electric dam on the Drina above Višegrad and threatened to blow the installation sky high, a move which would have had incalculable consequences for the entire region. Dramatic negotiations over the air waves of Radio Sarajevo included Šabanović *telling the chief of the JNA in Bosnia, General Milutin Kukanjac, to go fuck himself . . .*. Soon after Foča was taken by the Serbs, Andrej Gustin of Reuters succeeded in entering the town after a hair-raising journey through the barricades:

> Gangs of gun-toting Serbs rule Foča, turning the once quiet Bosnian town into a nightmare landscape of shattered streets and burning houses. . . .
Moslems, who made up half of the town’s population of 10,000 people, have fled or are in jail. Many of their houses have been destroyed or are in flames. . . . The Serbs say that despite the damage, only seven or eight of their own men and about twenty Moslems were killed in the fighting which began on 8 April. They say the Moslems began it. A feverish distrust of all that is not Serbian and a conviction that they have narrowly escaped genocide at the hand of Islamic fundamentalist has gripped Foča’s Serbs.

We spent the night in the Hotel Zelengora, a high-rise tourist hotel built by the Tito government, populated at the moment largely by refugees. Many of them are children.

A dark lobby, dark stairs and halls. There is permanent but not wholesale leaking into my toilet, and water drips but doesn’t flow from three sources in the sink and shower pipes. The mirror still has several places near the center that reflect an image. The room’s thin green unpadded nylon carpet sports a perfectly melted iron imprint near the window. The two chairs once had upholstered arms. Light fixtures have disappeared, leaving holes in the walls.

I’m glad to have a room.

Last night Zlatko and I waited in front of the hotel for the others to appear for dinner. On the steps of the hotel stood a pack of boys ranging from ten or eleven to maybe thirteen years old. Their attention was fixed on the girls and young women walking past. Hey sister, one of them called to an especially beautiful woman, how about an hour for me? His friends laughed at his bravado. She chortled at the absurdity.

Foča is an ugly town in a beautiful setting. What was it that inspired socialist architects to construct so many identically shoddy boxes? Twenty-six kilometers upstream, the Tara and Komarnica rivers flow out of the mountains of Montenegro to join and become the Drina River that flows swiftly between Foča’s steep hills.

In the morning sun we sit in front of a café for breakfast. Around us sit several dozen citizens of the town drinking Sunday-morning coffee. One table is occupied by four German soldiers. An SFOR jeep flying a French flag drives past. Two women in US uniforms stroll by. A couple of SFOR armored personnel carriers roll up the road.

After breakfast I climb steps to find the bricks of what was once a mosque, still topped by a copper-covered dome but with holes gaping where the large doors had hung. The ruin is choked with refuse and blackened by smoke.

I flee down a cobblestone street, past shops with clever wooden shelves that fold out from the outer walls for displays, past an open-air market doing a brisk business this morning. The sun is bright. I find a concrete bench. I sit.

A girl on rollerblades pushes her way to a bakery window and leaves with a loaf of freshly baked bread.

A small lizard hunts along the edge of a sunny concrete slab.

Two men walk past in nylon soccer shorts and jerseys and striped soccer boots.

Young parents follow a little boy pedaling a tiny tricycle and wearing an abbreviated baseball cap. His older brother clutches a soccer ball between fat arms.
Dressed in heels and a red dress, a woman carries roses wrapped in crinkly plastic.
A young mother pushes a stroller up the hill on one side of the square, leaning into the task, her bare calves beautifully muscled.
Fifteen men, silver-haired all, most in white shirts and suit coats, stand and converse in the shade of linden trees. They shake cigarettes out of packs labeled Lucky Strike, Lord, Marlboro, Partner.
Dressed in black, a young woman with brilliantly hennaed hair turns heads all around.
A young soldier wearing blue-grey fatigues ambles past with three friends who wear no particular uniform.
A grey-haired man, suit coat slung over his shoulders, steps off the street and greets the men under the lindens.
Carrying a newspaper and a denim jacket, a bearded young man saunters up the street alone.
Behind him a woman with a tray of several dozen eggs.
Across the square stands the café PALMA. Bright red canopy and red plastic chairs.
Two boys licking ice-cream bars.
A man in a sweat suit passes, leading a taut-skinned tan dog with cropped ears and a blunt nose. Its weight balances mostly over its front legs. Between the small back legs are packed a potent pair of shiny balls.
A soldier in green-brown fatigues strolls by with a pregnant woman in a red blouse, both of them eating ice cream.
Two soldiers in blue-grey uniforms, carrying radios and pistols. Their patches say MILICIJA.
A white-washed wall across the street is pocked with bullet holes.
A big blond woman strides up the hill with three bottles of cooking oil and a cabbage.
Across the way is a taxi stand. A driver works on the front door of his vehicle. He slams it. Opens it. Works the latch with a screwdriver. Slams the door. Opens it. Adjusts something. Slams it. Opens the door.

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We spend most of the afternoon in Brod, just outside Foča.
Cross the bridge, says the woman in high rubber boots. There will be a sawmill on the left and on the right a kiosk. They live right next to the kiosk.
“They” are the girlfriend of Novislav Djajic and her mother.
Novislav Djajic is a 34-year-old man from this area who fought briefly in 1992 with Bosnian Serb forces. He and several others were escorting fifteen Muslim prisoners to Foča when two militia soldiers drove up, furious because three Serbs had just been
killed by a mine. They opened fire on the prisoners. According to testimony by the single prisoner to survive, Mr. Djajic did nothing to stop the shooting.

In 1993, Djajic moved to Munich, where he had relatives. In 1996 he was arrested in Munich and was subsequently tried and convicted as an “accomplice to murder.” He is currently serving a five-year sentence.

We are here because of Mr. Djajic’s correspondence with Peter, most notably a letter written on the back of a copy of the police order to arrest him. After stating that Djajic has been notified, the order reads: “Nehmen Sie den Ausländer fest” – Arrest the foreigner.

Arrest the foreigner?
Justice from a bureaucracy that can produce such a sentence?
Misha Glenny (The Fall of Yugoslavia) and others have speculated that there would have been no war had Germany not rushed to recognize Slovenia and Croatia as independent states.

At breakfast we asked the waiter if he knew Mr. Djajic.
Of course, he said. I know him. He is a gentle man, a little strange. If you went up to him in the pub and hit him in the head he would just get up and leave.

In the kiosk, a tiny building with a window whose sill is the counter, sit two men in their late teens or early twenties and a woman of about the same age. Zlatko explains who we are looking for and they point to the apartment building across a dirt driveway. Zlatko buys them a round of brandy. One of the men shows Zlatko a revolver from behind the window and laughs: Here, this can be your calling card.

A woman in her early twenties greets us cautiously. Zlatko explains to her and then to her mother that Peter has a letter from Novislav Djajic. Peter shows them the letter and they invite us in. We sit in a combination kitchen and living room. An oven, sink and cupboards line one wall across from a couch and chair and coffee table.

The apartment is hot from bread just out of the oven. Thomas sits with a long silver coffee grinder between his legs and grinds coffee Peter has brought as a gift. He begins to sweat. I take my turn with the grinder. The mother boils Turkish coffee in a small metal container.

Do they still call it Turkish coffee?
The mother serves coffee in tiny cups. The daughter hands us small glasses of pear brandy.

Peter asks about Novislav Djajic. The women answer alternately.

He was an unwilling participant in the war. He was right here in this apartment just an hour before the incident on the bridge. His gun was there on the couch. He didn’t want to go. They came and made him go with them. He never wanted to hurt anyone.

What was it like when the NATO bombers came? Peter asks.
They tried to bomb the bridge. But they missed. The bombs were too close so we ran up onto the mountain. We grabbed a blanket and ran. For seven days and nights we crouched in the forest while the jets were bombing. It was October and it rained the
whole week. The bombs were made out of uranium. People here are dying of cancer. Two women just down the road.

Do you hate the Germans?
No.

What do you think of Muslims?
They were good neighbors.

The mother brings out a polaroid snapshot of a lanky young man sprawled back on the couch we are sitting on, a shy smile on his face.

People called him a traitor here because he didn’t want to keep fighting the war and left to go to Germany.

Peter teases the young woman about what will happen when her boyfriend returns. She turns her head and covers her smiling mouth with a hand, her teeth victims of the wartime breakdown in health services.

And then we are outside, saying good-bys. The mother kisses Peter three times and hands him a bottle of her pear brandy and a loaf of warm bread.

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In the late afternoon we sit on the terrace of a restaurant overlooking the Drina River, a hundred meters downstream from a modern bridge. What was once a modern bridge. It now juts out from the highway, plunges at an abrupt angle down to the river, and then crosses in a tangle of concrete and steel.

Heavy rain unsettles the surface of the river. A woman under an umbrella follows a little herd of sheep grazing on the steep slope between the highway and the river. A younger woman appears, swaps a rain cape for the umbrella, and departs.

A man walks along the highway, turns at the bridge and climbs athletically down the hanging structure, then picks his way across the wreckage and scrambles up the steep bank to enter the town of Foča.
Besides the five of us, the only other guests at the restaurant are four men at the next table. They are working on a second bottle of wine. Zlatko leans back and strikes up a conversation. He points at Thomas and I hear him say *nema ki*, German. He points at me and says *Amerikanski*.

A bald-headed man points at me, then at the ruined bridge. In the torrent of angry words that follow I recognize only *civilizacija* and *demokratija*.

A black-bearded man leaves the other table and joins us. Several Dinar coins drop from his lap onto the floor. I pick them up and hand them to him. He throws them back onto the floor.

Serbs, he says in Žarko’s translation, leave fallen money for the poor.

Read the revelations of John, he tells us. You can know the end from the beginning.

Did you go to church this morning? Peter asks him.

No, he answers, I am a medical doctor. I was on duty until five a.m. I don’t need a church to practice my religion.

It would do you good, Peter says, to spend an hour every week being bored in a formal church service.

I am the mayor of my town, he replies. I don’t have time to be bored. Who are you? What are you doing here?

Zlatko answers by explaining first that Thomas is the Thomas Deichmann who proved that the ITN footage of the purported Serbian “death camp” at Trnopolje was a deliberate fiction of the camera, that the cameraman, not the emaciated refugees, had been standing inside the barbed-wire enclosure.

The doctor stands up, pulls Thomas to his feet, and kisses him three times. Thank you, he says, thank you from all Serbs. He asks Zlatko to take a photo of the two of them together.

Peter is next, and this once, even the author of *Justice for Serbia* takes second billing. Thank you as well, Mr. Handke, the man says. You are an Austrian writer. I know that. But remember this: History will forget the Austrians. The Serbs will live in history forever.

Do you speak English, German, or French? Peter asks him, looking for a way to converse that doesn’t require Zlatko’s translation. No. I speak Serbian, the man asserts. I speak only Serbian. We will speak only Serbian and soon the entire world will speak Serbian.

I’m introduced as the American and as Peter’s translator. Like Thomas, I am pulled to my feet. But not for kisses.

You are not an American, he says. What are you?

An American, I say.

No, where did your people come from? From Germany?

England.

There we have it, he says. You are English. There are no Americans.
He grips my shoulder in a strong hand and points to the bridge. Who bombed this bridge? Look at that bridge and tell me who bombed it! We did, I say, slapping my chest. We did. The Americans did. We bombed that bridge. For democracy and civilization!

Driving out of town, clattering over a partially blocked smaller bridge, I gaze out the window and wish it were that easy.

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Goražde

Late afternoon. Where the bridge over the Drina meets the main highway, we sit in front of a café and drink “chai,” which Zlatko pronounces with a careful and delicate Muslim lilt.

No reason to attract attention, he says.

Across the street is an apartment complex. With laundry hanging to dry in every window and on every balcony, the building looks like a ratty overstuffed couch. A white truck stands in front of the building: UNHCR – United Nations High Commander for Refugees. Stacks of firewood rise high in the courtyard.

Three children run past the café. Two of the boys wear tennis shoes. The third runs with a practiced shuffle in the adult shoes he wears, their backs flattened like slippers. He looks up and smiles at us before following his friends down the riverbank.

A woman with a wheelbarrow full of kindling shoves pieces of wood into a basement window.

The main street of Goražde is called Marshal Tito Street.

Good for them, Žarko says. It’s a crime that most Serbian towns have renamed their streets. You can’t just wipe out forty years of your history.

***

Višegrad

We’ll spend the night in the Hotel Višegrad on the bank of the Drina River. From the second-floor landing, I can see a long roof covered by bright orange plastic. UNHCR is stenciled on it every few meters.

Up the hill from the hotel, among houses and gardens, stands a small white Serbian Orthodox church, its copper-clad onion dome reminiscent of Austrian architecture. (It is Austrian architecture.) Next to it is a “Serbian Soldiers’ Cemetery.” Polished black stones stand in rows. A half-circle of varnished beehives, numbered 1-9, stands in the adjoining pasture.

The sound of a whetstone on a scythe blade.

The gravestones, each marked “Serbian Soldier,” reveal a chronology of violence:

1959-1994
1969-1992
1968-1992
1967-1992
There are nearly 100 graves. One of every 200 citizens of Višegrad. One of every 100 Serbs of Višegrad. Where are the Muslims buried?

Each stone bears an image of the deceased. One young man stands in a suit and plays an accordion. Another, wearing dark glasses, sits spread-eagled on a stone. The man born in 1949, my birth year, wears a military sweater, a sheepskin hat, camo pants, a web belt holding a handgun and grenades, a vest with a dozen pockets, and boots. A heavy metal cross hangs from a chain around his neck.

Most of the graves have a glass of brandy and a cup of coffee next to the stone.

A young man wearing a sleeveless t-shirt enters the cemetery, walks to a grave, kisses the image on the stone, lights a candle, places it in a tin housing, crosses himself, and leaves the cemetery.

I walk back down to the river. Sorrowful for the dead men (and two women). Angry at the nationalist spectacle of the Serbian Soldier.

1:30 a.m., 1 June 1998, Višegrad

I’m sitting in my room in the Hotel Višegrad, looking out onto the Drina and its Turkish bridge, still lit by floodlamps. The bridge’s eleven arches are reflected in the silky black river. A nightingale calls from across the river. I’ve never heard a nightingale; but it can be nothing else. Unmistakable. It calls again, and then again. It’s indescribably romantic. I’m alone in my room.
From the terrace below there is an occasional burst of laughter from Peter, Zlatko, Thomas, and Žarko, who are still talking with the two women from the OSCE, the younger one from Spain, the older from France. We argued for hours about the role of organizations like theirs in Yugoslavia. At one point I hauled out *The Bridge on the Drina* and read the passage about the Muslim’s angry self-reliance after an Austrian pulled the nail holding his ear to the bridge.

So you don’t think the Austrian should have pulled out the nail? asked the soft-spoken woman from Spain.

I don’t think the Austrians should have been outside of Austria in the first place, I answered, happy to be conversing in my native tongue.

How long have you been in Yugoslavia? Peter asked the French woman.

For a year-and-a-half, she answered.

Do you speak Serbo-Croatian? Peter asked.

No, she answered. I’ve been too busy to learn. The first town I was in was under attack for nine months. I worked through an interpreter.

You are here to tell the people how to run their country and you don’t understand their language! Peter exclaimed. You can’t bother to learn their language?

Who are you? the woman asked. What are you doing here? What gives you the moral right to judge what I’m doing?

We’re here as tourists, Peter answered. We order food and stay in hotels and help the local economy. But mainly we don’t tell them what they ought to do.

You’re being silly, the woman said. Who are you really?

Just visitors, Peter said. You should go home.

I’m doing important work here, the woman countered.

Go home, Peter said.

Fuck you, the woman said.

Go home.
Fuck you.
The night air had chilled, and the French woman was shivering. Peter took his coat from the back of his chair and draped it around her shoulders. There, he said, that will help.
Fuck you, she said, and pulled the coat around herself.

3 June 1998, Belgrade
My brother John’s birthday. He would have been 47 today.
Peter and Zlatko and I sit at a table in front of the Hotel Moskva. Silence for the most part. A few desultory comments. The theater director Mladen Materić joins us. Peter and Zlatko rise. It’s time for Peter to get a cab to the airport, for Zlatko to return to his parents’ farm in Porodin for a few days. Hugs all around. And then they are gone.
Mladen and I sit and talk.
Basketball is our first topic. The Utah Jazz, naturally. Krešimir Osili the great Yugoslav star who played for Brigham Young University where I was a student and then returned to coach the Yugoslav national team. And Mladen’s son who is currently playing for the University of Alabama Birmingham.
He is interested in my views on Peter’s play, The Hour We Knew Nothing of One Another, which he’ll produce in Žarko’s translation. What about the war? I ask him.
The Serbs, Mladen says, are affected by a laziness that can be a moral force. The Croatians organized celebrities, artists, and sports heroes to support their new state. Tudjman had two basketball stars by his side when he planted the Croatian flag in Knin. But the Serbs, for whatever reason, organized nothing. That is good in principle, but wasn’t helpful in shaping world opinion.
Mladen pulls a couple of big books from a bag. He shows me photos of Bogomil gravestones and talks about that Bosnian place where religions, cultures, languages intersect, about the cultural fault lines that brought the Bogomils and then the Turks.
We exchange addresses. I promise to send articles about Peter’s play. And we say good-by.
The 13th day of student protests. Bright sunshine. Rock music blares from the square in front of the Plato bookstore. Students sit around tables, stand around talking. A couple of students unroll a banner. On corners all along the main pedestrian street stand groups of policemen. Or they buy ice cream. Or, as the day stretches on, they sit at restaurant tables under sunscreens.
Near the Hotel Moskva, Gypsy children play naked in a fountain.
In the newspaper Danas, part 16 of the series The Road to Dayton, Richard Holbruk’s book in translation.
Žarko and I sit under big plane trees, drink lemonade, and write.
A young man with a knitted cap approaches and offers vegetarian cookbooks for sale.
Is it possible to be a Serb and a vegetarian? I ask.
Yes, he says. We are opening a vegetarian restaurant near here in less than a week.

Who is we?
Members of the Hare Krishna community, he answers.

Did you know, he asks, that of all languages Serbian has the most Sanskrit words? One professor found 1500 of them. Another 3000. Which makes Serbian the closest to the pure original language.

Is that good? I ask. What do you think about the war in Kosovo?
It’s Mafia controlled, he says. The Albanian Mafia lives by selling drugs, and they are driving the Serbs out. The Freemasons are involved as well, continuing the work they began in Bosnia.

That’s bullshit, I counter. I wrote a book about Freemasonry. You’re parroting the old conspiracy theory. People explain their economic downturns, their civil wars, their shocking lack of control, by dusting off The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. In El Salvador it became a bestseller, as it is here. But it’s a patent fake.

No, he says, it’s true. The American dollar has a Masonic sign on the back.
Yes it does. The design is by Benjamin Franklin, who found Freemasonry a fine vehicle for enlightened international cooperation.

No! Many of the Freemasons are doctors. They arranged to get Tito into a hospital where they could kill him. There are hospitals all over Europe where doctors kill people. 45% of all the world leaders are connected to the Mafia.

I used to work as an industrial designer, he says in conclusion. But now I live a life devoted to spiritual pursuits like selling books. To give people the truth is a fine thing.

The afternoon heat builds. The policemen disperse.

English-language graffiti on a wall:
FUCK THE SISTEM/POLICE/SLOBODU.

4 June, Belgrade

I’ve been reading Andrić again. By means of the epic sweep of the novel, by evoking the timelessness of the bridge while narrating the individual tragedies and achievements of the people living in and around Višegrad, Andrić rises above the crushing events and gives a reassuring sense of continuation, of meaning.

For example: The two men beheaded by Turks made insecure by Serbian insurrection. These were simple men, almost fools. They had nothing to do with the events. But by accident they were the first to confront the guards in the new blockhouse constructed on the bridge.

As readers, we feel the injustice. But this is not Zola’s “J’accuse!”
Why not?
Because it is written long after the fact. The novelist will not, cannot change the events of the past.
Injustices are forgotten. War gives way to peace. Destruction fades into prosperity. The epic perspective reassures us.

A generation from now, Vižegrad, Goražde, and Foča will be populated by people who haven’t witnessed atrocities, who haven’t fled from killers, who haven’t killed.

Of course, there’s the other side of the epic vision. Inevitably, peace and prosperity are followed by war. It has been so in Bosnia (and where not?) for five-hundred years. Why should, how could the pattern change?

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I meet Žarko in front of the Hotel Moskva, and in the midday heat we make our way to the basement offices of Stubovi Kulture, formerly Vreme Knjige, the publishing house of our book: Ponavljanje – Repetitions.

Photos of all the authors published by Stubovi Kulture adorn the walls: Bruce Chatwin, Joseph Conrad, Anthony Burgess, Dragan Velikić, Danilo Kiš, Žarko, and myself.

Žarko introduces me to the publisher, Predrag Marković, a small man with a long, full beard and intense black eyes, and to Gojko Božović, editor for literature, a thin man who looks like he’s about 15.

Pleased to meet you, says the publisher. You look just like your photo.

What did you think I would look like? I ask.

All this time we’ve thought you were a fiction made up by Žarko for narrative purposes, the publisher explains.

There may be some truth to that, I say. Žarko tells me you are an author as well as a publisher.

Yes, he says. But I’ve run into a problem. Last year our house was named the best publisher in Yugoslavia, and now Gojko tells me we’re too good to publish my work.

Žarko describes our new project, a co-authored book with the title “Translation.” I’ll look forward to it, the publisher says.

***

We walk on through the sweltering city. Žarko wants to introduce me to the poet Srba Mitrović. He was the librarian at our gymnasium in Zemun, Žarko explains. He told us what books to read. We met with him weekly for discussions. Several of us from that class became writers. With our encouragement, he began to publish his poems. He has won several major prizes.

The retired librarian and active poet lives several floors up in an aged but once splendid apartment house. The elevator rises reluctantly through an open iron-work
cage and delivers us to a landing where a short, solid, bald man dressed in half-slippers, shorts and a purple cotton shirt greets us.

On the table in the front room, a game of solitaire is laid out next to a tabloid newspaper with a naked woman on the cover.

The poet introduces me to Milan Djordjević, a younger man, bearded, slight, with whom he has translated English and American poetry.

We sit, four translators, around the table. The poet brings out a bottle of amber-colored rakija. A black oak cross floats in the aged brandy. Žarko proclaims the smooth-biting liquid a wonder of the art.

The poet’s bald head glistens with sweat. Behind thick glasses his eyes shine brightly. It was at this table, he says, that Milan Djordjević and I translated John Berryman.

Djordjević remembers the table heaped with dictionaries and grows ecstatic as he describes the quantities of rakija imbibed in the process.

Žarko asks if we can’t see the poet’s study. It is a spacious room, or was once spacious. Lined with books floor to ceiling, a bed tucked into one corner, a big desk into another, the room is navigable only by means of a pathway snaking through piles of books and boxes. Here, the poet points out, is my unmade bed. There, my desk. There my literary prize. And hanging from the bookshelf, my pants.

Back at the front-room table, I ask about the other persons we have seen in the apartment, several of whom are watching TV in a closed-off end of the front room.

Refugees, the poet says, relatives, three families of them, Serb refugees from Bosnia.

Žarko mentions our trip along the Drina River. The poet says an acquaintance of his recently ran into trouble there, a Serb who had owned an inn in Goražda before the war. Emboldened by the agreements in Dayton, he drove back to see what was left. He parked his car and went in. Having a drink with several people he had known, he heard glass crashing outside. He went out and found his car being demolished. The crowd grabbed him and might have demolished him as well if SFOR soldiers hadn’t appeared on the scene.

He opens the newspaper with the naked woman and shows us a photo of the man.

I was in the United States last month, he says. I went to Minnesota to visit a family member at the Mayo Clinic. While I was at the clinic I had an examination. The doctor told me I had several physical problems, that I drink too much, that I eat too much, and that I don’t exercise enough. I told him that far from being physical problems, those were signs of a good life. The real reason I went to Minnesota, however, was to find the bridge John Berryman jumped from. I asked several people which bridge it was, but none of them had heard of Berryman.

We exchange books. The poet receives Žarko’s and my Ponavljanja, which I inscribe “from one translator to another.” I receive Snapshots for a Panorama (From the Abyss), published in 1996 in the Cyrillic alphabet.
In my hotel room, I turn to Mitrovic’s shortest poem, open my dictionary, and without benefit of grammar, “translate” each word:

Village Near Bratunac, Bosnia, 1992
   Destroyed [celac -- ?]
   hill/mountain trunk/chest receive:
   whole/safe village.

The botched attempt reminds me of my inadequacy as a translator of experience into the English language, of the impossibility of this book.

I’m sitting in a tiny patch of shade on the wall of the Kalemegdan. A small hawk, light brown with black and white speckling and a grey band near its rump hunts along the hill till it sweeps out of sight behind a stone tower. Seconds later it’s back, chased by a black-and-grey raven. The raven seems quicker, but the hawk is adept at swerving out of the way at the last second. Suddenly the hawk turns on the raven. A second raven sweeps into the fight and the hawk gives up the battlefield.

A lizard flits across the sunny stone wall. Below me, in the newly mown grass, a pheasant hen and two chicks. The hawk floats along the hill again, just below the pheasants. From behind the tower, a furious raven rejoins the skirmish. The brown-grey pheasant moves warily, pecking now and then at the ground. Her chicks bob in and out of the long grass at the side of the field.

10 June 1998, Cologne, Germany
The German word for misery, “Elend,” means, in its root sense, “in a foreign country.”

Žarko and I walk through a park in Cologne. We see a handsome young couple standing in an embrace. A young man and a boy kick a soccer ball back and forth. Just past them, facing the street but nicely tucked back into the park, stands an apartment house with a discrete sign on the front: Halfway House for Asylum Seekers. At the moment, Germany is home for somewhere near 350,000 refugees from Bosnia, more than the number who have take refuge in all other countries combined.

I was walking past here one day, Žarko says, and a little boy asked me, in German, for a Mark. Why do you want a Mark? I asked him. To buy ice cream, he said. I thought he might be a Bosnian refugee, so I asked him in Serbo-Croatian where he was from. He was surprised, but then answered with the name of a Bosnian town. Where are you from? he asked in our language. From Serbia, I said. Then I don’t want your Mark, he said.
14 June 1998, Provo, Utah

Dear Žarko,

I taught Primary, or Sunday School today, the class you visited when you were here four years ago. Do you remember? This is the class I must teach or lose my professorship at the church university. The assigned lesson was about Joshua and the battle of Jericho. I remembered the story vaguely from my own childhood Sunday School, the part about the circling army and the shouts and the city’s wall that falls down. What I didn’t remember was God’s command Joshua and his army fulfilled as “they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword.” Joshua went on to the city of Ai, all of whose inhabitants he killed, men and women, and then he burned it “and made it an heap for ever, even a desolation unto this day.” Next was the city of Hazor: “There was not any left to breathe: and he burnt Hazor with fire. . . . So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the Lord said unto Moses; and Joshua gave it for an inheritance unto Israel according to their divisions by their tribes. And the land rested from war.”

The lesson manual suggested that I emphasize how the Lord blesses those who follow his orders exactly.

After our trip, I could not teach that lesson. After our trip, many things will be different.

Activity in the Mormon Church? Working at a Mormon university? Continuing a Mormon marriage?

Time will tell.

22 June 1998, Provo

Dear Žarko,

Last night I bought a novel by Steve Tesich, the Serbian-American screenwriter Slobodan said was from Bajina Bašta (although Tesich’s sister Nadja writes that her brother “Steve (Stojan) . . . was born and raised in Užice.” The book has just been published, although Tesich died of a heart attack in 1996.

Karoo is a hilarious tragedy set in New York and Los Angeles in 1991. The book has nothing whatsoever to do with Yugoslavia or the war there except, perhaps, indirectly:

The kids continued their game of siege and resiege, but shortly after Leila’s departure I could tell that things were beginning to wind down. Battle fatigue was spreading through the ranks. The bloodcurdling cries of the invaders and the defiant screams of the defenders were losing some of their earlier conviction. And then it was over. They all knew it. They wandered away in little groups, in various directions, much like a disbande army of adults might have done after a war: a little weary, a little bored, but not at all eager for the rigors of peace that they knew awaited them at home.
Žarko, this novel is a masterpiece of personal despair. While burning with the sharply focused political anger he reveals elsewhere, Tesich has written a moving personal account of love and talent and alcoholism and failed humanity.

“Elsewhere” is a series of essays aimed at the media, in particular The New York Times. Look for the essays on the Internet – [http://www.srpska-mreza.com/tesich](http://www.srpska-mreza.com/tesich) – and you’ll find the following quotations:

Genocide is a natural phenomenon, in harmony with the societal and mythologically divine nature. Genocide is not only permitted, it is recommended, even commanded by the word of the Almighty, whenever it is useful for the survival or the restoration of the kingdom of the chosen nation, or for the preservation or spreading of its one and only correct faith.

There can be no peace or co-existence between Islamic faith and non-Islamic faith and institutions. . . . The Islamic movement must and can take power as soon as it is morally and numerically strong enough, not only to destroy the non-Islamic power, but to build up a new Islamic one. . . .

The first quotation is from Croatian President Franjo Tudjman’s Wastelands of Historical Reality (had he been reading about Joshua?), the second from Muslim Bosnian President Alija Izetbegović’s “Islamic Declaration.” Why, Tesich asks, have these two men been “embraced by the western media as victims and martyrs for the cause of freedom”?

25 June 1998 3 p.m., Provo

And now, Dear Žarko, “your” Yugoslavia has beaten “my” United States 1:0. “Your” Mijatović came out of the game only 31 minutes from the beginning. “My” Radosavljević, born in “your” country, entered the game at 58 minutes. “Your” team was dressed in red socks, white shorts, and blue jerseys. “My” team was in white with red and blue trim.

Sam, I said to my eleven-year-old son, Žarko’s team is playing the U.S. team. Who are you going for? he asked me. For Žarko’s team, I said. Traitor, he said.

I am a worse traitor than he knows.

I don’t like the American team. Their coach is a little dictator with bad judgment. There is bad blood among the players. And there is my nagging distaste for the economic power and moral self-righteousness “my” country “projects” around the globe.

But as I sat there watching “your” team play “my” team, in spite of two weeks in Belgrade and in the Republika Srpska, contrary to what I know rationally, I tried to pick out which of “your” players were killers. When the game got rough, I thought: They have the advantage, their training on the battlefield, their work for Arkan, has made the violence of this game nothing for them.

Where, Žarko, do these racist impulses come from? After all I’ve done to combat them? After everyone I’ve met? Everything I’ve seen?
Yesterday morning, before discovering that racist black hole in my moral character, I read the following from a 1996 decision by the Russian Judicial Chamber for "Information Disputes": "In the pamphlet 'Hand Grenade at Croats,' Limonov (Savenko) writes that the Croats are 'an exceptionally savage people.' His wish is that 'their children be born without fingers.'"

This Russian poet turned fascist politician, this resident of "my" country for five years, this "bad boy" of Russian literature, his fame based in part on his daring obscenities (which I don't mind, by the way -- this is not a puritanical tirade on my part), this man of hatred writes the reprehensible thoughts my subconscious nurtures.

Is there a difference between us?

29 June 1998, Provo

Žarko. Yesterday Bora Milutinović’s Nigerian team fell 4:1 to the Danish team: "The biggest upset of the 1998 World Cup." I listened as he spoke with reporters after the game in a combination of Spanish, English, and Serbian and who knows what other languages. A walking abbreviated multilingual dictionary.

At this moment, one p.m. "my" time, "your" team is playing the team from the Netherlands.

But I'm not in the mood for sports this afternoon.

First, the news this morning that Slavko Dokmanović, awaiting the verdict in his war crimes trial at the Hague, hanged himself on the hinge of the door to his cell last night.

Second, I read this morning the 27 June 1996 indictment of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia against eight men from Foča charging gang rape, torture, and enslavement of Muslim women. Here some excerpts:

The city and municipality of Foča are located south-east of Sarajevo. . . . According to the 1991 census, the population of Foča consisting of 40,513 persons was 51.6% Muslim, 45.3% Serbian and 3.1% others. . . .

Muslim women, children and the elderly were detained in houses, apartments and motels in the town of Foča or in surrounding villages, or at short and long-term detention centers such as Buk Bijela, Foča High School, and Partizan Sports Hall, respectively. Many of the detained women were subjected to humiliating and degrading conditions of life, to brutal beatings and to sexual assaults, including rapes. . . .

Dragan Gagović, in his capacity as chief of police, was the person in charge of the detention and the release of female Muslim detainees in Foča. . . . On or around 17 July 1992, Dragan Gagović personally raped one of the women who, on the previous day, had complained about the incidences of sexual assaults. . . .

The same night, after Janko Janjić returned the women to Partizan, Dragoljib Kunara (?) took the same three women to the Hotel Zelengora. [One woman] refused to go with him and he kicked her and dragged her out. At Hotel Zelengora, [this latter woman] was placed in a separate room and both Dragoljib Kunara and Zoran Vuković raped her. Both perpetrators told her that she would now give birth to Serb babies.
This 24-page document describes dozens of such incidents, several of them taking place in the very Hotel Zelengora where we spent the night.

I see only black.

30 June 1998, Provo
Dear Žarko,
Bad news from the World Cup: Holland over Yugoslavia. We’ve seen the last of Predrag Mijatović, although his teammates for Real Madrid, Clarence Seedorf of Holland and Davor Šuker of Croatia, will continue.

July 4, 1998, Provo
Dear Žarko,

It’s our independence day. My neighbors display American flags in their front yards. There was a big parade this morning in Provo. And tonight there will be fireworks.

Independence.

This afternoon, when the American TV announcers introduced the Croatian team for its game against Germany, they talked about a proud nation, independent for seven years. This game is enormously important for Croatia, the announcers explained. Just being in the quarterfinals means they have advanced beyond their enemy Yugoslavia. Croatia is a poor nation, they explained. The Croatian president, Tudjman, they added, is present today at the game. This would be a remarkable victory for a country of 4 million people. To put that in perspective, the announcers pointed out that in Germany there are 6 million athletes registered as soccer players. But there is no bad blood between these nations, the announcers continued. When Croatia declared its independence seven years ago, Germany immediately recognized the new country.

And thus, duly informed, we Americans cheered on the poor, newly and courageously independent tiny country against its powerhouse friend Germany.

As you know, Croatia won the game 3:0.

2 July 1998, Provo
Dear Žarko,

I’m embarrassed to report that the U.S. Senate passed a resolution on Friday recommending that the International War Crimes Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the Hague bring Slobodan Milošević to trial. The resolution accuses Milošević of “the deaths of hundreds of thousands, the torture and rape of tens of thousands and the forced displacement of nearly 300,000” in Bosnia. Žarko, you know how much I despise your President. You know I would like to see him made responsible for his actions. But the resolution is false. False in its one-sidedness, its incompleteness.

And Tudjman? And Izetbegović?

What’s wrong with these idiots? “My” idiots, I mean.
In the same issue of the *New York Times* that reported the Senate story, there was a piece on Kosovo Albanians who killed 20 Serb soldiers yesterday as they took over the town of Orahovac. Arresting Milošević, patriotic Senators, isn’t going to make this problem go away.

I am rereading your Nobel Prize winner, Žarko. You gave me a German translation of this book during our student days in Tübingen, but I never dreamed how much I would come to rely on it to interpret my world.

The notice . . . announced that Her Majesty the Empress Elizabeth had died in Geneva, the victim of a dastardly assassination by an Italian anarchist, Lucchieni. . . . When, returning home from work grey with stone-dust and streaked with paint, Maistro-Pero read the announcement, he pulled his hat down over his eyes and feverishly bit on the thin pipe which was always between his teeth. He explained to the more serious and respected citizens whom he met that he, although an Italian, had nothing in common with this Lucchieni and his dastardly crime. (The Bridge Over the Drina)

Žarko, my serious and respected friend, although I am an American, I have nothing in common with these Senators and their dastardly crime.

15 October 1998, Provo
Dear Žarko,

Newspaper reports today say that police officers have closed down the offices of two of Belgrade’s major newspapers: *Danas* and *Dnevni Telegraph*. What caught my eye was the justification spoken in phrases Mormon university officials have been using to denounce our fight for academic freedom: “Reports have spread fear, panic and defeatism while undermining the people’s readiness to safeguard the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the country.”

Why, my friend, do authoritarian regimes, yours and mine, think they can control thinking? Don’t they read history? Don’t they question their own motives? Don’t they blush?

Here’s the answer to the latter question, again in the exact words my self-righteous academic officers have used in the press, spoken in the Yugoslav version by the Minister of Information, Alexander Vučić: “I am proud of what I’ve done. I wish there were more condemnations. They show that we were right.”

I must find a new job!

January 9, 1999, Provo
Dear Žarko,

Today French Stabilization Force (SFOR) troops killed Dragan Gagović, former police chief of Foča. He had five children in his car. The soldiers shot him when he drove the car at them.

“This event was significant,” the BBC’s Jim Fish declared, “because of the area. . . . Foča is a notoriously secretive and sinister place . . . where very few people, certainly no Muslims, dare to go.”
Žarko, I wish there were a hell so the rapist Gagović could rot there alongside the verbal rapist Jim Fish. The latter is wielding the language of war, justifying any and every action against those furtive and left-handed Serbs. Just when I need a hell, however, I find that I’ve lost my faith.

13 January 1999, Provo
Žarko,

Proof today, again, of how Jim Fish and colleagues pollute our minds. I have read and translated Peter’s meticulously dialectical work. I have read your fanciful and subversive texts in translation. I’m a professional literary critic. I have traveled in Yugoslavia. I know a few Serbs. And yet, over the last few days, while Slobodan Milošević has continued his “provocations” and “games,” while he refuses to listen to “reason and truth,” while he won’t heel to NATO ultimatums, while NATO leaders make these points and threaten to bomb Yugoslavia, I have found myself drifting into thought patterns shared by most of my fellow Americans and Europeans, I have been swayed, sentence by sentence, story by story, by NATO press agents and by U.S. government officials, and suddenly, after days and weeks of tension in the HEADLINES, I shouted: Bomb the son-of-a-bitch! “The son-of-a-bitch,” of course, translates into Yugoslavian civilians. Into friends in Bajina Bašta. Into your mother.

What are we doing with our writing, my friend? What is Peter doing? What is Thomas doing? What are a few words, a few little books, in the face of THE PRESS?

19 March 1999, Provo

Here comes the war, Žarko, like a freight train — timetable published in the New York Times:

President Clinton prepared congressional leaders today for what one senator called a "robust and serious" bombing campaign against the Serbs that would soon put American military lives in danger. The U.S. Embassy in Belgrade was being evacuated.

22 March 1999, Provo

Headline in yesterday’s Salt Lake Tribune: “MURDEROUS SERBS DEFY U.S. ULTIMATUM.” The language of war, the language that causes war, the war that is language. Halfway through the piece, unconsciously calling the headline’s murderous stupidity into question, the author noted that “In Priština on Sunday, four Serb police officers were gunned down as their four patrol cars were ambushed.”

March 24, 1999, Provo
Dear Žarko,

At 3 a.m. this morning in Belgrade the radio station B92 was shut down by state “security forces.”
B-52’s have taken off from their bases in England and are approaching Yugoslavia, to start bombing as night falls.

The justification? Here are portions of Bill Clinton’s speech to the nation, his version of the history underlying and justifying NATO bombing:

By acting now, we are upholding our values, protecting our interests, and advancing the cause of peace. Tonight I want to speak with you about the tragedy in Kosovo and why it matters to America that we work with our allies to end it.

First, let me explain what it is that we are responding to. Kosovo is a province of Serbia, in the middle of south eastern Europe and about 160 miles east of Italy. That’s less than the distance between Washington and New York, and only about 70 miles north of Greece.

Its people are mostly ethnic Albanian and mostly Muslim.

In 1989 Serbia’s leader Slobodan Milosevic, the same leader who started the wars in Bosnia and Croatia, and moved against Slovenia in the last decade, stripped Kosovo of the constitutional autonomy its people enjoyed, thus denying them their right to speak their language, run their schools, shape their daily lives. For years, Kosovars struggled peacefully to get their rights back. When President Milosevic sent his troops and police to crush them, the struggle grew violent.

I’m beyond words, Žarko, I can’t catch my breath. Let me have Andrić speak for me, as so often before:

Only then began the real persecution of the Serbs and all those connected with them. The people were divided into the persecuted and those who persecuted them. That wild beast, which lives in man and does not dare to show itself until the barriers of law and custom have been removed, was now set free. The signal was given, the barriers were down. As has so often happened in the history of man, permission was tacitly granted for acts of violence and plunder, even for murder, if they were carried out in the name of higher interests, according to established rules, and against a limited number of men of a particular type and belief. (The Bridge Over the Drina)

March 26, 1999, Provo
Dear Žarko,

No mention in the papers of last week’s report by the International War Crimes Tribunal indictment Croatian generals for war crimes committed when they “ethnically cleansed” 100,000 Serbs from the Krajine using weapons supplied by the U.S. and employing tactics taught them by U.S. generals.

“Murderous Serbs” my ass!

March 28, 1999, Provo
Dear Žarko,

Sunday morning. Sunny and quiet. In Utah.

NATO planes bombed a “military target” in Zemun yesterday. Ten months after we sat on the barge on the Danube and talked with Pera about his propaganda film.
I’m listening to a live broadcast from Radio B92. The station’s broadcasting facilities have been shut down, but over the Internet they are still a presence. I click on an image of the Trg Republika and call up a video clip of the square shot two days ago with a hand-held camera: celebrators streaming around the equestrian statue, the museum, the theater; some pedestrians, a few cars, a bus. I strain to catch sight of you and me and the boy who thought you were a poet. I look for Djinji. I search for your mother. Is that the woman who issued our visas? There’s the poet carrying a volume of Berryman. Pera motors past in his boat. Slobodan has driven to Belgrade from Bajina Baša. He waves at Olga and Milica. Peter sits by the fountain sketching. The sunlight reflects off his boots.

We’re all wearing targets. We’re all smiling.

Yesterday my son Ben came up from where he was watching TV to tell me that a stealth fighter had been shot down near Belgrade. “Good,” I said.

March 29, 1999, Provo
Dear Žarko,

On U.S. TV today, when asked whether NATO could win a ground offensive against Yugoslavia, a former U.S. general said it would be easy: “We would simply attack across the northern plains with our tanks like the Nazis did.”

March 30, 1999, Provo
Dear Žarko,

I could have listened to the English version of the B92 news, but today I was in no mood to hear English. Here are my notes (the spelling is obviously my own):

Television
Priština
Yugoslavia
International
Dobro jutro
NATO
DANAS
Slobodan Milošević … Primakov
Situation
Slobodan Milošević
Organization
Information
Aggression
Ljudi
Central Beograd
Katastrofe
Informatia
National
Not much of a story. But catastrophe, intervention, police, NATO, aggression, and Belgrade, shoulder to shoulder in the same report can’t be good.

March 31, 1999, Provo
Word from Žarko that his mother’s apartment is 400 meters from a new NATO target.
Peter went to Belgrade yesterday. Solidarity.

5 April 1999, Provo
Zemun hit again last night. More bridges bombed.
The bridge on the Drina?

6 April 1999, Provo
Graffiti on a Serbian wall: "Columbus – damn your curiosity!" Billboard in a city as yet untouched by NATO bombs: “What’s wrong with us?”
Žarko, I like your fellow Serbs more and more. They remind me of you, of your wit, of your imagination, of your indomitable opposition to authority.

12 April 1999, Provo
"The bastards attacked the train,’ he said through an interpreter. ‘Now go away. I don't want to hear English anymore.'"
How will I ever travel in Yugoslavia again?

15 April 1999, Provo
Dear Žarko,

Tax day. Before midnight I’ll mail the $2000 I still owe in federal income taxes. It’s never a pleasant task, but tonight I’ll send the check with a bitter heart. My money will buy, however indirectly, part of an anti-personnel bomb that will parachute down into a column of Serb or Albanian refugees, a section of a rocket that will destroy a passenger train on a bridge, or the tail fin of a cruise missile that will strike the center of Belgrade.

“Who bombed our bridge?” the doctor/mayor asked. “I did,” I’ll have to say.

Sat, 01 May 1999, Cologne
Dear Scott,

I am lucky to still be alive.

Last night the “NATO criminals” bombed the long-since empty Yugoslav Army Command Center. It is just 400 meters from my mother’s apartment. Poor woman. It was horrible. Several dead and many wounded. Rubble and dust (with uranium) everywhere. By the way, that’s the street where you and I were doused by a car running through a puddle. According to a friend of mine, the street is impassible, even by pedestrians.

Bill Klinton is coming to Cologne. I would like to assassinate him. (By the way, that’s exactly how it was in Sarajevo 1914 when Gavrillo Prinzip killed Ferdinand.)

That’s how one becomes a terrorist.

I’m ashamed to live in a democracy.

I still didn’t get the jazz cassettes featuring your son Tom. I haven’t listened to music for 39 days.

Žarko

***

Goddamit, Žarko, you frighten me. When my mind starts whirling like this, when I panic, when I’m sinking into blackness, my impulse is to throw bombs – or to tell jokes.

A Serb meets an American and as they talk the Serb cuts the American short with the observation that while the Serbs have a history that goes back for thousands of years, the Americans have no history to speak of. That may be, the American replies, but unlike us, you Serbs now have no geography.

A Serb is fishing and catches a golden fish. I will grant you three wishes, the fish says. For my first wish, the Serb says, I would like to have Bill Clinton as my father. Done, says the fish. For my second wish, the Serb continues, I’d like Madeline Albright as my mother. Done, the fish says. And for my third wish, the Serb says, I wish I were an orphan.
4 June 1999, Salt Lake City Airport
Dear Žarko,

My brother John’s birthday yesterday. Had he not contracted AIDS, he would have been 48. As you know, John’s death loosed some of my moorings, undermined some of my certainties, stimulated new certainties. Our trip along the Drina River was a similar experience for me. I’m not the same person I was before traveling in your country.

Yesterday I signed papers resigning from Brigham Young University. For eleven years I worked for an increasingly coercive church, for a church that hated my brother and his kind. As the regulations tightened, I found ways to subvert requirements I had complied with for years. Forced to pay tithing, ten percent of my earnings, I quit paying all but a token. Forced to comply with dietary laws I had obeyed all my life, I began to imbibe. Forced to state my allegiance, I decided I had no allegiance.

Imagine requiring an annual “ecclesiastical endorsement” for all professors at a university. A churchman deciding my academic fate on the basis of perceived orthodoxy! But you know this pattern. I walked with you among demonstrating students from the University of Belgrade.

This fall I’ll be a professor of philosophy and humanities at Utah Valley State College. A step toward a life I can construct on my own terms.

5 June 1999, Vienna
Žarko,

I have checked into the Pension Falstaff, just around the corner from Sigmund Freud’s rooms in the Berggaße.

From the train into town I saw a hawk hanging over a hops field lined with brilliant red poppies and blue flax. Like a sleek NATO jet over a fruitful Yugoslav landscape.

While waiting for you and Anne to arrive, I’ll work on my translation of Peter’s Voyage by Dugout, The Play of the Film of the War, whose premiere in the Burgtheater we are gathering to witness.

6 June 1999, Vienna
Žarko,

This afternoon I walked down to the Danube. The bridges here have not been bombed. The Danube still flows toward Belgrade. And the Serbs I meet in Vienna are dealing with their stress the same way I do: by telling jokes.
Madeline Albright gives the Serbs an ultimatum: love or war! They take one look at her and decide on war.

Ducks fly overhead, sharp-winged and heavy-bodied. A white swan flies toward the bridge, skimming the water, its neck impossibly long. The big bird swoops up over the bridge and then dives to continue downstream. Large raven-like birds with grey-brown heads, backs, and chests and black wings and tails, birds I first saw in Belgrade, beg for crumbs from picknicking families. Lime trees are blossoming, as are wild roses.

Later, in the city center, I stumble onto a Sunday-evening demonstration against NATO and for Yugoslavia. "NATO – fascistik, NATO – fascistik!" the crowd of maybe 3000 chants. I donate 200 Schillings to a humanitarian group and they give me a blue, white, and red Serbian flag in return. A Vienna policeman, pistol in his belt, leans against a post studying a book with the title: Learn Greek.

Back in my room, unable to sleep, I turn to my translation. I wish you were here Žarko, to compare notes. Peter’s prose is not easy to reproduce, nor are the word-images. How, for instance, did you translate “Fertigsatzpisse”? Pissing your finished, your modular sentences? Sentential piss?

At 10:30 I watch a pre-premiere report on Peter done for Austrian TV (ÖRF2). Peter’s crime, the reporter and his commentators agree, is that he is a “Serbenfreund,” a friend of the Serbs. Not good to be a friend of the enemy. Peter should have known better. It’s an old story: Jap lover, Kraut lover, Jew lover, Nigger lover, Serb lover.

I turn off the sentential piss and turn back to Peter’s play. Before midnight I’m out of paper. I write across the face of my travel itinerary. I fill margins. By one a.m., having exhausted all possibilities, I look through the cupboards and drawers in my room. The drawer of the night table opens to a Gideon Bible, in the back of which are ten blank pages. I decide the hand of God has provided and rip them out and continue translating till first light.

7 June 1999, Vienna

Elections this week for the European Parliament. Posters for the FPÖ, Freedom Party of Austria, advertise its clean-cut, right-wing, xenophobic leader Jörg Haider, and proclaim that EUROPE NEEDS CONTROL. It doesn’t say control over what, but the subtext is law and order, control over the foreigners who represent chaos, control over those who are different, control over people like my brother John.

How is it that I, who would like to see those controlled who exploit the planet and pollute the earth but who wants less control over individuals, how is it that I ended up working for a repressive religious institution whose Republican leaders and guiding principles require more control over individuals and less over exploitative corporations, more control of those who are different and less control over those who devastate the environment?
9 June 1999, before midnight, Žarko’s birthday

I ought to go to bed, but I’m still reeling from the events of the day. Several hours ago NATO and the Yugoslav Parliament came to some kind of agreement ending the bombing after 78 days.

And, I’m just back from the world premiere of Peter’s "The Play of the Film of the War," directed by Claus Peymann. I’ve never attended the world premiere of a play of this magnitude; and I’ve seldom been this moved, this challenged, by a work of art.

Peter has filmmakers John Ford and Luis Buñuel in a Serbian town ten years after the war trying to decide how to make a film of the war. Characters who appear before the directors tell conflicting and complex stories as the play feels its way to questions about war and its aftermath. The really bad guys of the play, three "Internationals" who know all the answers, who dictate all the terms, who can think only in absolutes, appear on the stage as follows: "Three mountainbike riders, preceded by the sound of squealing brakes, burst through the swinging door, covered with mud clear up to their helmets. They race through the hall, between tables and chairs, perilously close to the people sitting there. 'Where are we?' the First International asks. 'Don't know,' the second answers. 'Not a clue,' the third says."

American and European moralists, functionaries with no hint of self-irony or humor, absolutists who run the world because of their economic power – these sorry excuses for human beings were depicted this evening as mountainbike riders.

Žarko, I said, Don’t you ever tell Peter I ride a mountainbike.

No, he whispered, I’d never do that.

The play drew on several incidents from our trip, including when Peter put his coat around the shoulders of the OSCE woman in Višegrad. After the performance, flushed with enthusiasm and insight, I told Peter how well he had integrated that real event into an imaginative play.

"Dr. Scott," he chided. "Always the professor."

11 June 1999, Cologne

Driving through the night from Vienna to Cologne, through heavy rain, slowed repeatedly by construction for the ultra-fast train, Anne sleeping in the back, I risked a question I had been thinking since our Drina trip: Žarko, you know how I feel about Yugoslavia. You know where my heart is. Please don’t take this question wrong. What do you think about the killings and rapes and ethnic cleansing done by your fellow Serbs?

Žarko pointed out that the Albanians didn’t flee Kosovo until NATO began bombing.

This was what I feared.

Žarko began to develop a half-baked theory about American financial interests in Yugoslavia and the need to bomb the country into a new economic dependency.
The muscles tightened behind my ears. Žarko, Žarko, I said. What about Serb atrocities? What do you think about Serb atrocities?
Žarko began a disjointed story about Milošević being in power for so long and the hundreds of thousands of Serb refugees from the Krajine.
In the rainy darkness, traveling swiftly along the Autobahn, I slipped toward despair.
And, Žarko said, the paramilitary killers and rapists and arsonists who are Serbs ought to be raped and burned and killed.
My scalp muscles relaxed. I remembered Žarko’s response when Slobodon Milošević spoke at the Kosovo Polje a decade ago. In contrast to the politician’s nationalist ranting, Žarko wrote an account of mundane Serbs and Albanians, of human beings in troubled times. I remembered the gentle rationality and determined cosmopolitanism of that text. How could I have doubted my friend?

16 June 1999, Cologne
I’m walking from Žarko’s and Anne’s apartment into the city center this morning, a pleasant stroll along the Rhine River. Long narrow barges ease their loads of coal up the river. A woman riding a rickety bike along the bank is followed by a frantically galloping short-legged dachshund cursing the invention of the wheel.
There are police everywhere: police on horses, police tending surly rotweilers, police sitting on the tops of buildings with sniper rifles, police in marked and unmarked cars, police on mountainbikes. It’s the G-8 economic summit in Cologne this weekend, and the presidents need protection.
From Žarko? No, he’s a verbal assassin. They’ll have to ban his books.
It looks like the newspapers have exacted revenge for my friend. When Bill Clinton arrived here last night, the first thing he did was go to dinner in Cologne’s old town, washing the sausage down with a local light beer, a Kölsch. Leaving the restaurant, hoping to make a good impression on the locals á la John Kennedy in Berlin, he stopped and didn’t tell the crowd of gawkers “Ich bin ein Kölner,” but “Ich bin ein Kölsch.” The headlines are three inches high: “Ich bin ein Kölsch!”

In the evening we stroll back into town. What does the word „nazdravie” mean? I ask Žarko. It’s at the end of the article on the Duško Goykovich in the Penguin Guide to Jazz on CD, after a review of the 1995 “Bebop City” that ends with the comment that “these must have been difficult years for Goykovich as his old country tore itself apart.”
It means something like “take care” or “Gesundheit,” Žarko answers.
We listened to Goykovich’s two-disc set called “Balkan Blue,” the first disc called "A Night in Skopje," recorded in 1994, and the second one a composition Goykovich originally called "Sketches of Yugoslavia," but that was renamed "Balkan Blues," the liner notes say, "because in the course of political changes Yugoslavia had ceased to exist."
Goykovich was a national hero, Žarko says. When I was growing up in Belgrade in the 1960’s and 1970’s, there was an annual Belgrade version of the Newport Jazz Festival, and when Goykovich came one year with Woody Herman, we were in seventh heaven. I also heard Louis Armstrong, the Oscar Peterson trio with Ella Fitzgerald, Art Farmer, Charles Mingus, the MJQ, Gary Burton, Bill Evans, Gil Evans, and Miles Davis with his 'Bitches Brew' band. I heard Dave Brubeck and Paul Desmond, and there must have been others as well. The concerts were held in a 5000-seat hall, always sold out. We loved the music; and we also loved the influence from the West. Since the Second World War we had felt close to our allies Great Britain and the United States, and the jazz reminded us of that. So when those two countries started bombing Belgrade this March, fifty-eight years after the Germans bombed Belgrade in 1941, it was confusing to most of us.

But now the bombing has stopped, and Cologne's "Balkan Forum," headed by Dušan Milosavljević (a formerly innocuous name), is sponsoring a jazz night in the Litho Restaurant. It's a noisy, smoke-filled place, seating a hundred people at most. Black-and-white photos decorate the walls, and a short-haired dog begs for scraps. Featured tonight is the Nicolas Simion Quintet, with Simion, a broad-chested, black-bearded Romanian, on tenor sax, a young and talented flugelhorn player whose name I didn’t catch, and a rhythm section of stubble-faced, slack-jawed Mihal Farcas (Romanian) on drums, Macedonian Martin Gjakonovski (who appears with Dusko Goykovich on "A Night in Skopje") on bass, and the quick-fingered German Norbert Scholly on guitar.

I sit with Dušan and Anne and Žarko at a tiny table tucked into the armpit of the bandstand. By the time the evening is over the table is buried under a dozen beer and wine glasses, two bags of tobacco, three packs of cigarette paper, a pack of cigarettes, two overflowing ashtrays, a tape recorder, a pack of batteries, a sketch pad for the snakey-haired house artist, assorted pens and
pencils, Simion’s soprano case, a candle, a dozen CD’s for sale, and loose cash for
the CD’s that have sold.

The crowd of Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, Bulgarians, Romanians, Hungarians, Germans, and at least one American warm quickly to the quintet. In his freely ranging solos Simion leaves no doubt about his debt to Ornette Coleman. Simion’s tunes also hint at the oriental scales and rhythms of Balkan folk music, songs like ”Geamparale,” based on a Romanian wedding dance in 9/8 time (reminiscent of Dave Brubeck’s ”Blue Rondo a la Turk” – or better said, Brubeck’s tune, as its title suggests, is reminiscent of music from the Balkans).

Back home, Žarko calls his mother. Scott Abbott is here, he tells her. Tell him, she replies, that we still like him.

22 November 1999, Provo
Dear Žarko,

James Lyon, Director of the Crisis Intervention Center in Sarajevo, spoke today at Utah Valley State College. He emphasized the point in the Dayton Peace Accord requiring that all refugees be allowed to return home. I told him about the Serb refugees from Sarajevo who were building an apartment building in Višegrad on a hill overlooking the Drina River. It was a hopeful sight, I said, people moving on with their lives.

I know that building, he said. It is built on the site of a razed 17th-century mosque.

Goddamit, Žarko, why can’t anything be what it seems?

15 February 2000, Provo
Dear Žarko,

It’s done. The divorce. I’ve cut my moorings. I’m adrift and nervous as hell. I think I’ll be okay, unless the International Monetary Fund or the U.N.’s International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia or the Federation of Concerned Mountainbikers decides to take a hand in molding my character.

Will I find love? Can I love?