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An Old Tourist in the New Bosnia

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Once, before the war, we heard a great deal about how beautiful and wealthy our country was. We listened to stories about how nice it was to spend springtime at the sea, summer at Lake Bled, and winter on the ski slopes of the Slovene and Bosnian mountains. Working people listened coolly to stories of this natural beauty that was inaccessible to them, in the same way that they heard about the wealth of the country where they lived in poverty. Of this natural beauty, a worker in Belgrade could only see photographs on the advertising materials in travel agencies, and the talk of wealth was of no benefit to him: none of it was his. The overlords of the old Yugoslavia sold everything: the wealth of raw materials and the beauty of our land. They marketed it all: our mines, piecemeal and wholesale, as well as our wheat, and our labor force, and the natural beauty, and, they even, quite shamelessly, dealt in the backwardness of their "subjects." [1]

In the pre-war tourist brochures, Bosnia and Herzegovina were advertised as "the Orient in Yugoslavia." And to leave no room for doubt with anyone who might be fed up with the world's chief tourist attractions and the casinos of Monte Carlo, or sitting in wicker lounge chairs on the terraces of trendy summer resorts, one asks: where in a European country, on the southernmost periphery of the mature capitalist states, has been preserved primitivism in human nature like this, when it is known to German, English, Belgian and other banks that modern instruments–the check and the share–function in a completely modern way in this country? To avoid having such an experience with Yugoslavia, with its prosperous mines and markets, where foreign capital has already hung out its shingle, to avoid filling foreign tourists with skepticism–the brochures assure them in every possible way, by means of pictures and text, that when they come here to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia by direct train, they are hurtling straight back into the Middle Ages. The photos, therefore, present: backwardness on the streets, illiterate women and men, hijab, curvy little lanes with no sewage systems, minarets, old fountains, copper pots and pans, and medieval artisans, who sit all day long on crossed legs in front of the facades of their wood-shuttered shops, and *beys* and other "Oriental gentlemen" outside cafes, while behind the black grills on the projecting windows sigh the hidden beauties of the harem…All of that has stuck around; this much is true, and it is emphasized between the lines of the old tourist brochures. There's illiteracy and lack of culture, no sewage systems or running water, and this does, admittedly, fly in the face of sanitation in these cramped communities that we're suggesting you go see. And yet: we cultivate this

underdevelopment as a “rare quality” on account of which Bosnia and Herzegovina are called the “Yugoslav Orient.”

“Bosnia? This is—and feel free to jot this down in your travel notebook under the year 1938—this is the patriarchal Orient and I, in my role as an official guide, am showing you only the fragments of Bosnian exoticism, as characteristics by which this mountainous region, and we made this point also in our prospectus, proves to be a first-rate attraction for international guests. The Orient, so to speak, in the middle of Europe! Provincial exoticism and the local color of a colony right here, within easy reach of the hypermodern capitalist lands. Why are there so many illiterate people? Excuse me, but that’s not part of the brochure! A wooden plow? Aha! Now that’s an exotic feature!”

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Fanning themselves with this old-timey brochure form the distant year 1938, travelers arrived in Slavonski Brod, boarded little train cars, and set off on the narrow-gauge rail line across Bosnia. The two of them—the old tourist and the old guide–wedged their chests into the window frames of the cars and started inspecting the domesticated landscapes of plowed fields. The old guide, squinting with his very short-sighted eyes, taking up a whole line of old connections, and feeling his way back into his old capacity, says continually:

“Do you hear, sir, the way the train cars crunch and hiss? Hark! That is the old Bosnia. And I guarantee you: Bosnia is wonderful. It’s very special. Its beauty is simply—virginal. It has never succumbed to civilization. There are rail lines, of course, but only the most indispensable ones. Only so much can be exported. We have a sense for the preservation of our patrimony.”

He stuck his thin, puny arm out the window and shouted:

“Look! A shepherdess!!”

The old tourist, an admirer of wild beauties, stared knowingly at the girl with her sheep as if she were in the middle of a painting of some verdant landscape that was moving in the opposite direction of the train, and he frowned:

“But she has a book in her hand!”

“Never mind that. Never mind,” the guide reassured him. “That’s just a dream-book with pictures. The shepherdess is staring at the colorful pictures!”

The old tourist pulled his head back in a bit and blinked… After hearing so many random things, here he was, personally and on location, to check how things actually stand with this suddenly famous land. Here he was, traveling for a second day through the country of Yugoslavia and, letting a self-satisfied smile form on his thin lips, so far he had confirmed that the trains were working like before the war, all of the bridges were there, and in the train the passengers had seats, and some ate, some dozed, some sang or smoked or read newspapers; the conductor called out the stations in a deep, calm voice, and people sort of calmly and purposefully dispersed from the

platform…which means: the stories about everything in this country being destroyed are lies. For how else would these provincials of Europe be able to so quickly establish the transportation system and give such a bustling appearance to the place in no more than two years? Everyone, for instance, had heard from some fanatic or other that the train station in Slavonski Brod had been completely wrecked and that travelers, while waiting for their trains, were sitting on piles of bricks.

Well, yes, primitive-minded people always exaggerate, but he had just been able to see with his own eyes that this wasn't true. The station at Slavonski Brod was still here and, one could say, very much in order. Everything is as it was. See here, in these Bosnian fields, like earlier, sway the robust stalks of corn with their broad leaves. Over there—an Oriental scene: a covered woman leads a barefoot little boy along a dusty road into a hamlet located far from the tracks.

That did the trick, and the traveler, the old tourist, ascertained to his satisfaction that Bosnia had remained as it was in the old tourist brochures—a museum of Oriental primitivism. Beyond Doboj, though, the images of peaceful landscapes were shaken up. Following the Bosna River, now from one side and now from the other, at regular intervals, young people pressed forward—boys and girls, carrying pick-axes, shovels, and spades. They picked, shoveled, dug, rolled away rocks, chopped, hauled things off, laughed, ran, sang: on the rocks, on the dikes, and at their designated campsites they had written their slogans; and you could see them nicely from the train, sitting on the earth as if they were in rows of benches at a school listening to lectures…

"Who are these people who are spoiling the stark beauty of nature?"

"Oh, those are the youth…" the old guide stammered like a culprit caught.

"So that's how it is! That celebrated Yugoslav youth that so menacingly rattles its books and hand tools!"

The admiring traveler was now standing on the left bank of the river, and he felt like he was in a busy anthill. But then he tried to decide: what is this odd, unusual, and unfamiliar thing that has attracted him to this place and left him confused? Before now, he had already seen railway lines under construction, both in colonies and in metropolitan countries, but in those cases it was simply the building of a transportation facility. So what is this? This is not simply about travel or communications. What is it then? What has happened here? This is Bosnia, and yet it's not Bosnia!

You see, the mountains are still the same old mountains, with their dark conifers on the upper reaches, and down below are the forests of beech trees, joyously green. And the Bosna River—also the same. Here it flows quite rapidly along its course, which it had found long ago, rippling over obstacles between the high mountains. The river skirts the mountains themselves, curves around the foot of their slopes, and moves on, business-like and merry, to the Sava. On a narrow strip of flat land left along its entire course, the narrow-gauge railway had been created, a long time ago! On it traveled small rail cars–little for people who were used to bigger ones–and transported coal and people.

For decades these little cars screeched along the Bosna River, extracting assets from the earth but not bringing anything back in exchange. Up above, in the gorge, sat a shepherd. He was carving a fife for himself from a willow sapling; as he ate a chunk of cold turkey, he scratched himself with his black fingernails and rubbed melted tallow in his heels, which were rough and cracked from going barefoot. Down below, on the bottomland, his father plowed slowly and laboriously with an ancient plow. He had spent a long time, his entire childhood, guarding the flocks, and now that he had grown into a young man, he took the handles of the ancient implement. In autumn, when the corn comes in, he carried his basic food up, along the goat-paths, to his dwelling place high on the mountain; he fled from his oppressors.

Today, these houses that whiten the green of the mountains, might make people think that they were built up high, simply because folks wanted to have more sunshine and air, and so that wide expanses could burst forth before their eyes when they stood on their thresholds. His vistas were mountains and vales, forests and the distant plain. Nature—harsh, hard-hearted, hard-fisted. This was their land, the land of shepherds and plowmen, the land of families of unfree commoners called *raja*, of peons and hired hands and rabble, in whose eyes was reflected the image of this raw and cruel beauty, and there smoldered a deep desire for freedom.

Down below, along the road, for five hundred years Turkish conquerors passed by: beys, pashas, aghas, master of serfs and lords of the *raja*; then Austrian gendarmes went past, with colorful feathers on their black busbies, and later there were more like them, but without the cockerel feathers on their caps.

The Bosnian people listened to tales of a wealthy country, their homeland, containing hidden treasures; they watched as their wealth was arbitrarily removed from the rich land on that narrow gauge railroad so that now they had to search for bread. Harvest hands left Bosnia for Slavonia, to create stacks of what they reaped upon foreign fields. And they traveled farther: to the Rhine, to America, to France and Belgium, so that in foreign factories people could process the raw materials wrested from their land.

For a long time, the traveler stood looking out at Zenica, where smoke was rising up from the stacks of the numerous factories. He stood for a long time, watching the workers' shift change and, in one of the yards of the rail line, next to the industrial zone, he observed again for a long while workers the likes of which he had not seen before.

"And all of these are volunteer laborers?" the man from the old world asked in wonder.

"We are not a labor force, but rather we are the power of the working people," said a well-built young man wearing a miner's lamp on his chest. He explained things obligingly to the foreigner.

"We young people are building this line. In ten months—two hundred and thirty kilometers. Yes, you are right, distances of this kind are remarkable compared to the past. For instance, the portion of this line on which we have ridden into Zenica, that is,

eighty-seven kilometers, was built by the Austro-Hungarian Empire in three years flat. And then, all told, Royal Yugoslavia built in Bosnia and Herzegovina over twenty-two years a total of 210 kilometers…We will, in five years, in accordance with our plan, build several other lines, and then: hydroelectric plants and factories and new mines will open up. In short, Bosnia will be an industrialized land in five years.

“So where are you from, young fellow?”

“Me? From here. But that fellow there, also a blaster, is from Croatia. The guy walking up to him just now is from Macedonia.”

The foreigner began to look about: And where is Bosnia? That old, illiterate Bosnia, whose lack of education was so convenient for the exploiters of coal mines and forests; the Bosnia whose backwardness was advertised as a tourist attraction for foreigners, and whose inhabitants in their fezzes and headscarves, with their sleeveless fur-lined vests and bast peasant slippers called *opanci* were presented as docile dwellers in regions second to none in terms of natural beauty. These are not those same people who figured in the tourist brochures, who used to sit all day long on crossed legs, with their arms folded, conversing and taking coffee, and in the evening, “when lanterns are lit through the *mahale* (old quarters of a town)” they courted all night at windows and garden gates. That young man, who was dashing off but paused for a moment to tell him all the things that were called for by the plan and that were going to be carried out in his republic—that young man is no longer an indifferent worker, of the kind that is forced to be a hireling in capitalist countries. This is a new personality at work, a political subject, a stakeholder.

Therefore the Oriental romance of this place is no more. The young people, whom he had been seeing up to now along the railway line and in Zenica, were civilizing the wild splendor of the land of Bosnia and working to make it economically independent.

At the feet of these colossal mountains, through the canyons of which flows a cheerful river the color of the forests of beech and conifer, winds the narrow-gauge railroad, and parallel to it will, by the end of this year, also run a normal European set of tracks. Then these enchantingly pretty areas will be even more beautiful and accessible.

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Of the Bosnia of yore some beautiful aspects of this exceptionally mountainous district have remained, such as the rich rivers that, struggling to make room for their currents, shrewdly skirt the mountains and adroitly wriggle through gorges, creating the loveliest natural scenes. There have remained the walls and cities of the early and late Middle Ages. Over there, you see, next to the new tunnel named “Vranduk,” which the new young people have punched through the age-old massif, rises the old and most defiant human settlement imaginable: the old city of Vranduk.

It climbs, with its houses, one squeezed up against the other, to the top of the gorge of the Bosna, and from there, prancing cockily on the very edge of the highest ridge, it has been listening since 1410 to the river flowing past, far below. From this vantage point, front and center above the main road through Bosnia, it has watched over

various passers-by for centuries: Turkish soldiers, beys, and impoverished *raja*, and then, in 1878, Austro-Hungarian occupiers, who entered Bosnia as conquerors of backward Balkan countries; they had a mandate to "pacify" Bosnia, under the slogan "Illiteracy and backwardness are always the allies of reaction." But since these wild "*Bosniaken*" had a rebellious nature and were always grumbling about Bosnia being neither Turkish nor Austrian but theirs, the resourceful Imperial and Royal Apostolic commander of Bosnia, von Kallay, said: "*Also gut*, don't go chomping at the bit expecting help from the East. You are something unique. Your language is neither Serbian nor Croatian, and God forbid it should be Serbo-Croatian—but it is Bosnian! In this native language you all bicker perfectly well amongst yourselves. This is because you have, *um Gottes Willen*, three faiths and, good Lord, how you quarrel amongst yourselves! But this way you will worry less about the civilizer-occupier." By a similar enlightened method, the bosses of the Yugoslav monarchy then continued to rule. While under Turkish bondage "the domestic bourgeoisie participated in the exploitation of its own people for mere crumbs from the table" (so Veselin Masleša), but the domestic bourgeoisie of Royal Yugoslavia was to exploit its fellow citizens in an even bigger way. The exploiters changed, but the people kept on suffering until they rose up from the "exotic" land of Yugoslavia and expelled all those who were occupying and fleecing them.

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"Listen" the old tourist said to the old guide. "Something really big must have happened here. What was it?"

"Well…" the old guide tried to say, in the end, admitting: "I don't know what happened. I haven't been here for several years. You know, during the occupation there was a lot of fighting in Bosnia."

"No, the old Bosnia is gone. But maybe it's just due to the rail line. It's well known that railroads bring great changes with them."

Our travelers journeyed onward to Sarajevo. But new construction followed them everywhere. The sulking old guide cheered up a bit when they found themselves on the mountain above Sarajevo. He cried out:

"Look at this beauty!"

The panoramic view of Sarajevo was the same as before: the city with its white buildings, towers, and minarets, which had settled from somewhere in the dark mountains down into the verdant basin, through which flowed the little Miljacka River. The tourist stood there for a long time, enchanted, above the stunning prospect of the city, and he tried to guess what it was that made this view magical. Why is this city so picturesque? And he remembered: the mountains in the background, both close and distant, give it great depth. These are the mountains known as Trebević, Igman, Treskavica, and Bjelašnica. Then he set off downhill, into Sarajevo, to see this fantastic image of beauty up close. But, as he drew nearer to the city, the image dissolved into the ordinary European streets of the center, from which, suddenly, small little crowded lanes abruptly branched off.

“Here we go—-Baščaršija! Old Bosnia in the midst of Sarajevo! This is the center of that “Yugoslav Orient”! Here were the small, winding streets and–the tourist from the old world stopped there, pleasantly surprised. In front of his eyes was an image from the distant past. Sitting motionless on a little chair was a small, elderly man, with a wizened, elongated face the color of old sepia documents. His elderly eyes gazed out from yesteryear, past the pedestrians; his long, lightly yellowed fingers rested on his knees; this *efendi* has been sitting motionless like this for give hundred years, and behind him–the era of beys and serfs, peons and paupers; in his fenced-in garden, the hyacinth is redolent, and in the shade of the jasmine shrubs stands Emina, holding a ewer in her hand. To the foreigner it seemed that this figure on the chair had to be there in the Baščaršija, lost in philosophical resignation, just as a representative of the old ways. So there it is after all: exotic Bosnia. And now, if those relaxed lips were to move, words would flow out in the traditional genteel style of those idle Orientals.The stranger went respectfully over to the old man and laid his hand lightly on his shoulder. The little old man shied away from this touch–and the whole image disappeared. It crumbled away and was gone.

“Cherries, ten dinars! Sweet cherries!”

The fruit-seller in the Baščaršija unexpectedly stretched out his hand, and, holding a piece of paper with his bony fingers, which were gnarled with age, began briskly grabbing at the dark-red cherries. Behind him gaped a set of black half-doors covered in mildew.

“All of that is full of dankness and mold, and we’re going to get rid of it,” a young engineer explained. This was the new urban planning. “That over there, you see, is going to be a new local train station, with a broad platform, and around it new buildings will go up. At the foot of Mt. Trebević, several hundred houses are being built, each one for a family of workers from the industrial plants being erected nearby…The new city plan will preserve the architectural monuments and local color that are specific to Sarajevo. Streets and old quarters that are typically Bosnian will remain, as will individual buildings containing elements of Bosnian architecture. But in all of that, of course, the final word will be hygiene and sanitation. The tourist will find in Sarajevo architectural monuments and all the objects of domestic craftsmanship: copper and wood carvings, needlework, and carpets, but Sarajevo will not be a city that, because of some kind of exoticism, has to put up with unhealthy neighborhoods. It will contain professionally preserved antiquities, but only of objects and not of people.”

After strolling through and around the city, and along the heights above it, they again marveled at the scenes that the city presented, and after they got an earful of various numbers and metrics—kilometers, tons, exchange rates, and cubic meters—that flock together above old Bosnia like birds, and, with their wings spread, alight onto new roads, coal, dikes, livestock, and people in literacy programs, the old tourist at that point wished strongly to speak with someone living in the mountains, far from these infected town centers, where in a mind-numbingly rapid way the things that had made Bosnia special were disappearing. He made his way up Mt. Romanija, along wonderful alpine walkways, between walls bedecked with green bushes. Up on the summit, the old guide called out: “Aha! Fantastic!”

This is the scene that brought forth his cry.

On a broad plateau, next to a flock of sheep, a bare-headed boy sat by himself, humming a tune while carving a piece of wood with a little knife. “Wonderful!” exclaimed the old guide, who was happy finally to be able to show the old tourist this landscape with its exotic element of a shepherd.

“In the consciousness of this shepherd,” explained the old guide, who had suddenly livened up, “only the most primitive conceptions of life and the world exist.”

“So, what’s going on, little man?” They posed this question to the boy not so that they would hear his answer but in order to engage the figure out on the terrain.

The boy raised his head, shot them a sharp look, and looked the new arrivals briefly up and down. Then he said in a drawl:

“Good day.”

“So, how are things?”

“Now things are fine,” the boy responded, observing the new arrivals and getting slowly to his feet.

“What do you mean now? What happened earlier?”

The boy broke into a smile.

“Earlier this was all bunkers, there were you’re standing. And before the bunkers, a beautiful vineyard cottage stood there. You can see the pile behind your backs, and over there to the right, burned out, was the forester’s house. This is the new forest service camp.”

The new arrivals gave him an odd look, and since he could see immediately that they were visiting from somewhere else, the boy took it upon himself to explain his birthplace.

“Yes, yes, this got built just now. Can’t you tell it’s new? Everything in this area was destroyed.…This place here, where we’re standing, was where Čiča, our ‘uncle,’ called a gathering of people from the area, sometime in January of ’42. There were a lot of them. Don’t you know who Čiča is? He’s the one who led the army units here. You’ve seen him, right? Oh, I saw him so many times! Tall, thin, with the straps of his *opanci* coiled all the way up to here! He’s our people’s hero!” the boy said proudly. Then he added, with even greater pride: “My father served in Čiča’s unit.”

“Can you read and write?” they inquired, pointing to the little notebook that was poking out of the boy’s pocket.

“Me? I’m taking a course. And later I’ll take up a trade.”

The boy continued whittling on the already skinned piece of wood, and, in a quiet voice, expressed his amazement again:

“How is it that you didn’t know that?”

But they hadn’t known that shepherds customarily carry their primers with them while following their sheep around, nor did they understand why it was that on the drive to Mostar they very frequently encountered signs reading: “Careful! Road work in progress!”

From Sarajevo in the direction of Mostar, nature gradually began to bristle with beauty: splendid green valleys and steep slopes rose up higher and higher, growing in restlessness. The green disappeared and everything grew rockier. In the valley of the Neretva the water of the river was more and more like the color of the sky, as opposed to the forests, and it grew deeper and deeper. Above it, the cliffs were gray and grim. There was no more green at all: the Neretva flowed through naked stone. These rocky mountains, across which seemed to spread a distant echo of the poem: “…over the stones of Herzegovina, hey-hey-hey!” and which are magnificently implacable, called forth the question: How do people fight against this degree of severity? Everything is stone, clean, uncluttered, devoid of mud, without mud, without the usual luxuriant hedgerows, and the people are clean, too, in their white shirts. And the houses are made of stone, as were the roofs, and the fences around the little yards and little fields, representing a few square meters wrested from the karst. The Herzegovinians take from the karst everything they can; they make cubes to use as cobblestones, they prepare crushed stone for roads, and they hew pieces for the construction of new houses. There’s work going on everywhere. New bridges over the Neretva, and big new worksites at Jablanice.

“What a shame!” said the old guide. “To spoil the wild harmony of the place with work projects. I’ve heard that they are going to alter eleven kilometers of the natural setting along the Neretva because of a hydroelectric project.”

“A hydroelectric project on the Neretva?” the old touruist asked, recalling: “Once there was a French company interested in doing that.”

They made inquiries right then and there of the next person they met:

“Who’s building it? We are building it!”

“I know, but who owns the shares?”

“They’re ours,” answered the Herzegovinian man. “There’s a lot of sharing. You can see it in Jablanica–the workers’ settlement there is growing constantly. It’s a laborer’s city now. There are modern apartments for workers, and a house of culture.”

“What I’m asking is: who owns the capital behind it? Do you understand?”

“Well, yes, I understand. Why wouldn’t I? The capital is ours. Our money, of course.”

“Fine, but what’s the name of the outfit that’s building it? Are you a company?”

The Herzegovinian laughed.

“Ah, so that’s it. Well, we are the FNRJ. That’s the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia.”

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It looks like all the stone of this world has been plunked down into Mostar, the capital city of Herzegovina. The gray hues of this unusual city, of stone and in stone, are brightened by the light-blue color of the Neretva, whose waterfalls roar jubilantly alongside the old Turkish bridge. From above, out of the blue sky, heat infuses everything, and warmth also beats down from the rocks.

“It’s true; our summers are particularly hot,” a local man explained to the travelers. “The winters are so bitter, and the icy north winds howl. But in spring, when the ‘time of the white blossoms’ comes, everything in all the old quarters of Mostar is aromatic. The cherry trees bloom, and the salvia grows blue. In the spring, Mostar is the most beautiful city in the world!”

Standing on the old-fashioned bridge, the travelers looked down along the dignified river, which is clean blue in color and restless and defiant in its flow, as it edges between mountains of karst with their menacing, brutal color.

“How did there come to be so many fruits and vegetables in Mostar?”

“They come from the surrounding area,” a local man explained. “Maybe this will be of interest to you: cotton was planted in our area this year for the first time. According to the plan, in five years, as concerns electrification—”

“Oh, please!” the old guide interrupted him. He didn’t want to hear anything about electrification, or about cotton, or about how passive regions were economically passive because of the rapacious activities of the old rulers, and he didn’t want to hear that “when life force bursts forth, people will be different and even the steppe is altered,” because that means making methodical and systematic use of the climate and the soil…

“Please,” interrupted the old guide. He was squinting at the sun and pointing out to his traveling companion a shriveled old woman wearing a folk costume from the old brochures. She was walking slowly past a cave-tavern by the old bridge where the writers Santić and Ćorović used to sit. And the old tourist, with a nervous motion, pulled out his copy of the official Yugoslav prospectus published in French “en Yougoslavie” as part of the Fund 555 program in the year 1939. Then he read this text passage aloud: “Yugoslavia, in its Muslim provinces, is more Turkish than Turkey. Women who are covered, dervishes, fezzes and turbans, everything that has vanished from the land of the Ottomans, has remained untouched in Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

Watching the young people, male and female, moving busily through the streets of old Mostar, the aggrieved tourist asked sadly:

“So where is it?”

Clearing his throat, the guide pulled his nose out of the old brochure and grunted:

“I guess around here all of them were razed, except one of Ibrahim-beg’s covered balconies.”

“Where is something intact?” the old tourist asked insistently. He felt deceived.

“It has to be here somewhere,” the guide replied soothingly. “Perhaps we’ll find it.”

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With that, they fell silent and continued on their way.

And then there they were: after roaming around for a long time, they were seated calmly in a bus, which was chock full of new tourists traveling through Bosanska Dubica. These new tourists were using their annual vacation time to visit Bosnia.

“You enjoy the natural beauty of these areas, and you learn the history!”

The interpreter of this history was neither the guide nor anyone official: it was the men and women they were meeting along the way who were explaining it to them. They had arrived, you see, at a meadow bounded by two or three houses. This was the hamlet known as Kruškovac, five kilometers outside Bosanska Dubica. On this meadow were located the first combat positions from April 27, 1941. Leaning against the new fence around her yard, a middle-aged peasant woman told the visitors about the military operation:

“So then, this is where the people gathered, over a thousand of them. All of them were fruit growers. They swarmed all over the place. They had grabbed and brought anything and everything–one person a pitchfork, one a pole, there were axes, and slings too. They even had two rifles. The people had risen up to defend themselves. From here they launched the first attack on Dubica…”

Her husband and brother-in-law had died in the fighting, and she went on the run with her cow and her five children. Now the old spotted cow stood in the shade of her new house, and her little girl of twelve, after a lot of convincing, agreed that she too would say something about the war that was now in the past. She recited a few lines of verse, which she had composed herself:

“I’m a little Pioneer

long-suffering because of this war,

leading her little brother

across Mount Kozara.”

A raw-boned villager, pointing his finger at the tall grass at the end of a small access road, explained:

“This one peasant with an ax lay down in the ferns and waited for the Ustaša. ‘Hand over your weapon!’ he shouted and jumped up and he took the man’s gun for himself!”

A bit farther on, at the settlement known as Knežice, the travelers stopped again. From here, early in the morning on the 27th of July, 1941, the first rifles in Krajina opened fire at the barracks of the Ustaša gendarmerie.

The dust rose slowly on their route through the fertile fields. At the end of the road, in burnt and demolished villages, the peasants hewed timber for their houses. In the shade, sheep lazed about calmly. Beneath Kozara the bus made another stop. Here, under the leadership of the hero, Mladen Stojanović, the district office was attacked and peasant hostages were freed. Then the bus climbed on up the curvy road, up the flanks of Mt. Kozara itself, which is full of war memorials.

“Look at that peak, Kozarački Kamen! One of my friends, Drago, climbed to the top. He’s a worker from Prijedor, and he used to cut the hay down there.”.

What was down below was a green vale, now peaceful, out of which, twisting and turning, the road ascended.

“A grand sight, and that road is as delightful as a parkway,” the old tourist whispered to the old guide.

“Yes, only I don’t know how all of the people and the carts with logs managed to make their way up on that road,” whispered the old guide to the old tourist.

Up above, on the summit of Kozara, at Mrakovica, 820 meters above sea level, the buildings for a summer vacation resort were under construction. “They’re building them for grown-ups, too,” said the little shepherd. “When it’s clear, you can see Slavonia from here. That mountain, the blue one way over there, that’s Grmeč, and the one to the right, that is Plješevica, which is above Bihać.”

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Scarcely had the bus rolled on a few miles from Banja Luka, and started speeding along the Vrbas towards Jajce, when a man in worker’s clothes appeared in the middle of the road. He held up his hand: “Stop!” From above, from the mountain where there was an open-pit quarry, boulders were tumbling down as they were broken off with a pneumatic hammer. Below, in front of the entrance to the quarry, there was a long line of trucks that were transporting away the stone for use as building material and road metal.

“Hmm,” said the old tourist. “That is certainly the same company that’s also building the hydroelectric plant. That’s one powerful concern, to initiate works all over the place like that.”

Along the way, along the Vrbas River, which flows between karst walls, burning pits flamed up, making quicklime; stone was being cut off and cut up for construction needs; and the walls of new houses were going up.The old guide held his tongue resentfully, and a new tourist, a restless young man, recited a poem about a girl named Nevena who washed her white linen in the green river, in that Vrbas that was at war with the boulders and cliffs.

Nowadays the Vrbas is still fighting against the mountains; it flows through canyons, absorbing the green of the rocks that press in on its channel. There where the girl Nevena sang about the gray falcon that perished with the band of soldiers in the mountains, a little girl now sits. She has a red scarf on her head, and as her sheep graze peacefully, she mischievously throws small rocks into the clear water of the river. And the Vrbas burbles, swift and nervous, between the stone walls; when a wall draws too close, the river breaks into an angry lather and leaps furiously over the rocks. The cliffs above it consist of strata, like gigantic books arranged on top of each other, allowing geologists to read natural history. When the mountains pull back a little, and, for a moment fields of corn begin to murmur benevolently, then the Vrbas also quiets down somewhat and flows more slowly. Here, people have approached the angry river to put up a water-mill. The haughty Vrbas, pretending not to notice, makes it move with only a small fraction of its power. Then the mountains approach once more, scowling suddenlly with their naked karst. The river's color darkens, and the high walls are reflected in it; they gather around the river bed, and the water flows swiftly and gurgles in the recesses of a narrow passage. This is the Vrbas passing through a deep canyon. Where the road forks, to go to Mrkonjić Grad, a boy named Zijad is explaining:

"The Partisans were constantly firing down from the cliffs at the fascists on the road. They never let up. In the village up top, the women cooked food and we kids took it to them. Me? I'm headed to my class now. Soon I'll be able to read and write…"

"Listen here," the old tourist whispered to the old guide. "It all seems to me like that girl who was watching her sheep at Doboj was reading a proper book, not a dream-book!"

And then Jajce appeared. It was full of dwellings scattered over the little hills. The old tourist was tired and crabby, but the new ones were now in a great mood: the historical city of Jajce! Over there, in that white building on the banks of the Pliva, the peoples of Yugoslavia agreed on how to organize their state. Farther on in that direction, beside the Vrbas, was the HQ, and next to that, in a pretty little house at the top of a set of stairs, was where the commander-in-chief lived. With what respect did the young visitors take in these places, these monuments of recent history! But the old tourist, however, was more interested in older things. He climbed up onto the walls of King Tvrtko's citadel, examined the altar from pagan times, as well as the catacombs of the Bogomils. From that point on the walls, the city presented an unforgettable sight. And the Pliva River, flowing along calmly, plunges all at once from a height of thirty meters into the Vrbas, all foamy and white. The foreigners beheld it for quite a while, that roaring leap, and then, with their guide, rode along the Pliva for twelve kilometers from Jajce to the river-fed lakes. Surrounded by green mountains, these lakes resembled a small version of Boka Kotorska. Here more vacation structures for summer visits will be erected.

Then the travelers found themselves at a construction site. Totally unexpectedly. Men, women, children–everyone was in motion; remnants of old walls were being hauled away, and new ones were rising. People were mixing mortar and hewing timber for building material.

“What is this?”

“It’s a village called Jezero. It was completely destroyed in the war. Now all of the inhabitants are building new houses for themselves in place of the old ones. The houses will be like they were before, only bigger and with more windows.” The foreigner observed the young girls wearing wide, traditional trousers known as *dimije*. Without putting down their tools, the girls elaborated on what their new village was going to look like. When asked, they told the foreigner their names: Avdija, Nurka, Safija…

“And you are all Muslims?”

“Yes. So what?”

“Well, the old Bosnia’s gone from here, too.”

The girls smiled. They were young and elated, with open, joyful faces.

The old Bosnia no longer exists. It is being changed by new people who carried out the military struggle and whom the struggle rendered new.

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THE END

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Notes

1. Milka Žicina (1902-1984) was a Yugoslav political activist, novelist, memoirist, and journalist. This is only the second piece of writing by her to appear in English. The first, another non-fiction essay from the same book of reports from around Yugoslavia during its rebuilding campaign after the conclusion of World War II, is called “The Girls from Končarev Kraj.” It can be accessed in the Serbian journal *Književnstvo* at the following URL: https://journal.knjizenstvo.rs/index.php/knjizenstvo/article/view/190/189.

   A suitable epigram for this translation comes from Albert Camus’ essay “The Minotaur,” written in 1939: “Clinging to vast slopes, rails, dump-cars, cranes,

tiny trains…Under a broiling sun, toy-like locomotives round huge blocks of stone aamid whistles, dust, and smoke…Man, in this vast construction field, makes a frontal attack on stone…Of course, destroying stone is not possible. It is merely moved from one place to another. In any case, it will last longer than the men who use it. For the moment it satisfies their will to action. But moving things about is the work of men; one must choose doing that or nothing." The Sisyphean task of economic development is certainly evident in Žicina's take on 20th-century history in Bosnia and Herzegovina, just as the eventual collapse of the Yugoslav regime is, more or less, foreshadowed in Camus' text. It is the references to the depredations of local elites, though, that make this text relevant today in places like Bosnia and Serbia.

The source of the original for this translation is: Milka Žicina, *Reportaže* (Beograd: Rad, 1950), pp. 53-75.

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