

Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal
Me?unarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezi?ni, online ?asopis

A Walk to Visegrad

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Already I had planned to tramp out into unknown eastern Bosnia in the short New Year holiday. I copied from my school-map the features of the mountains, sparse townlets and villages, a devious thread of road, between Sarajevo and Višegrad on the upper Drina. All else was temporarily displaced by excitement at starting at last an inland exploration.

On the last day of the nineteen-fifties, I ascended the Miljacka canyon and crossed the hills to Mokro, exactly a year since I had first and last been there. The road was narrow, of beaten stones and earth, worn smooth either side of the rubbly crown with tracks of tyres. I intended to keep to it all the way to Višegrad: I felt this was no time of year for cutting straight across country I did not know. I saw no traffic. Small snow-flakes were brushing against my face, and Romanija was a blur under iron-hard sky, when I reached Mokro. Four hours for twenty kilometers—timing myself by the kilometer-stones at the roadside, I now knew my constant rate of walking. In the cottage ‘kafana’ I drank strong ‘ljuta’ plum-brandy and coffee, smoked my mid-morning cigarette, and listened to the talk of peasants who were warming their weathered faces and hands at the fire. They were Serbs, identifiable by the tall black-fur ‘šubaras’ they wore on their heads. These were they who gave themselves a wild oriental air by winding dark red scarves like turbans around their hats and faces. Each wore a tunic and trousers of rough black cloth, crudely cut but stoutly made, and leather sandals over many thicknesses of coarse white stocking. They were friendly, but not inquisitive. When I finished my drink one of them bought me another, double glass of ‘ljuta.’ “You need that if you’re walking over Romanija,” he said.

A peasant accompanied me on a short-cut up the face of the mountain. From the top of the escarpment we looked back over the green vale to the wild dark forests of Ozren and the mountain cluster about Trebevi?. We were standing on a thin crisp carpet of snow between the massive pines, tall and spreading as cedars, of the Romanija forest. He pointed through the trees. “There you’ll find the road, comrade.” Beyond, the land rolled shapelessly, all under snow, enclosed on all sides by the dark forest rim. I ate my lunch in a ‘kafana’ amongst a wide scattering of wooden cottages and fences. Outside, big-shouldered oxen were dragging long pine-trunks by rusty chains attached to yokes thick as beams. Late in the afternoon I dropped in many winding zig-zags off Romanija into a wide greener saucer of land, and came to Sokolac as night was falling. It was a small, poor place, but the little hotel was new. It and a few other concrete buildings contrasted with the surrounding wooden or plastered cottages. The porter took my passport, and showed me to a small bare room with bed, table, chair and one coat-hanger. “You can’t come into our restaurant tonight. It’s New Year. All the tables are taken. I’ll bring you your supper.” I sat on the bed and shivered miserably. This was inefficient rural Bosnia. There were central-heating pipes but they

were cold, and a rusty iron stove in a corner, full of grey ash. Then the porter came with an armful of pine-logs, and lit the stove so that the room filled with blazing warmth; and immediately after brought a plate of roast pork and potatoes, and woolen slippers—an article I had forgotten to pack... . Bed was luxurious. I had walked forty-five kilometres. A marvelous fatigue flowed from my legs through my whole body... . Distant sounds of revelry, of music and dancing, floated up, at moments of aching waking during the night, from the restaurant somewhere below—crowded with the people of Sokolac and peasants from the surrounding villages.

I set out in darkness next morning for Rogatica, exchanging New Year's greetings with a man working prone under a lorry outside the hotel. My way lay eastward along a straight unfenced road over a wide green plain. There were occasional lonely cottages, and distant bunches of cattle grazing. The cliff-line of Romanija turned pink behind me, and the sun rose in yellow splendour from behind the low ridge of Vitanj which I was approaching. I paused at midmorning at a 'kafana' in a village near the summit. Southwards across rough country the entire length of Jahorina gleamed with the iced solidity of a fantastic cake under blue as deep as space. At noon I descended off moorland, saving many hours by leaving the road and following the telegraph wire through young woods of birch and oak all brittle brown with unstripped leaves. Billowing small clouds packed the valleys before me, and shapeless dark mountains, patched with snow, rose beyond—my next day's journey. But in Rogatica the mist was only a dilution of the velvet hills, a softening at the sky's brim. The little town must have been destroyed in the war. Almost all was concrete and new, though mud-bespattered now and reverting to rural shabbiness. White fingers of four or five minarets touched it with Bosnian charm. The dark green Ottoman flag with its silver crescent and star hung from the highest. I entered the mosque and climbed to the crow's nest balcony accompanied by a gaggle of small boys who insisted on my photographing them afterwards, sitting for me in a smiling row along the top of a fence. I put up in the big rambling hotel, a dirty place in a sea of churned mud. The only guest in a large room of many beds, I piled the thick covers of half a dozen on to mine, and opened the windows wide to the frosty air before I slept.

Next day I crossed the mountains to Višegrad. It was wilder, lonelier country, and in the endless silent forest I had a constant apprehension of wolves lurking through the trees along the slopes above me. In a bitter snowy openness a howling from the forest –edge froze me with fear at the temerity of my journey. There I found a road-mender's cottage—the only building I saw on the road that day. I was invited in by a man and wife, she made me coffee and he plied me with 'rakija'. "Yes, it's possible you heard wolves. Don't worry. Keep to the road. They are great cowards." They wished me well on my way and called, "Visit us again!" In the early afternoon, as the sky darkened sombrely, the whole landscape tilted steeply, and when I emerged from the trees I saw the mountains opposite also tilting into the long deep cleft between that was the canyon of the Drina. Beyond lay the frontier with Serbia and, lost in grey vapour to the south, the wild mountains of Montenegro. Above broken cloud in the valley dwarf villages with, here and there, the rare white hair-line of a minaret, dotted the laps and knees of huge foothills soaring above into forest and snow. I swung down knobbly paths under great pines gnarled and sparkling-foliaged like Mediterranean trees; and passed cottages with Muslim verandas and festoons of tobacco leaves drying against walls. Muslim peasants called me in to eat with them—greasy soup and sour black bread washed down with weak 'šljivovica'. A young girl in the harem-trousers called 'dimije,' clattering about the room on wooden clogs, veiled her face from me with the trailing end of her headscarf. Children poured into the room from the houses round about to stare across the table at me in dull, openmouthed curiosity.

Below the village I crossed the famous 'bridge on the Drina'—handsomely restored after the

destruction in 1914 which Ivo Andrić describes—into Višegrad. I paused in the centre of the bridge to observe the great tablet which I knew recorded, in Turkish carved in convolutions of Arabic lettering, its construction four centuries before by Mehmed Paša Sokolović; and looked down at the heavy boat-shaped piers cleaving the wide green onward thrust of water out of narrows of shadowing cliffs.

The hotel porter was taking his siesta. The youth behind the desk, intently at work upon his fingernails, would not take responsibility for the shelf of keys behind him. I passed two hours in the tiny town. Little beside the bridge remained from Mehmed Paša's day. The hotel was slovenly, the food heavy and greasy, the service unhurried and indifferent. I retreated as soon as I could from the intense yet lifeless stares of two young soldiers at my table. Next morning was cold with a clammy mist over the river. I had hours to wait for the train at the unheated small station. But my thoughts traveled the empty road I could see climbing eastward into the cloud towards Serbia. Behind me were a hundred kilometres of tramping, and the revelation of a mode of exploration I would use to discover Yugoslavia. Roads of earth, made of the landscapes they passed through, tenuous threadings of the wilderness and as remote and hazardous save for the rare passage, less perhaps than once a day, of a vehicle: in walking them there would be no diminution of the excitement of wildness, loneliness, primitiveness.

The train was packed with people returning from a Beograd New Year: on this narrow-gauge line the journey of twenty-four hours was twice as long but twice as cheap as by the main-line expresses. I stood in the corridor beside a young peasant-boy who proudly puffed cigarettes and practised the manful hawkings and spittings of his elders—out of the window or, in the many tunnels, onto the floor. The wheels squealed as the line wound up the long defile of the Prača canyon—there was barely room, between the walls, for the rails beside the turbulent stream. A well-dressed townsman called me into his compartment to share portions of sucking-pig spread over newspaper on his knees; and questioned me about my nationality, where I had been in my big boots, how much I earned. Peasants shook their heads—“Malo, malo—that's not enough for a professor in a faculty!”—and returned the plum-brandy bottle to me a second time in each round. Skirting the forests below Jahorina, we reached Pale and familiar country and descended to a grey, cold Sarajevo.

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Note: *William Tribe, who died in 2003, had lived in Sarajevo for many years and worked as a lecturer in English at the Faculty of Philosophy. We are publishing, for the first time, an excerpt from Bill's manuscript recording his travels in Bosnia. We thank Tamara and Timothy Tribe for the permission to publish this text.*

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