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An American in Bosnia

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Oct. 6, 1969, Monday. Across Serbia southwest of Beograd. From this flat country we got into hillier & hillier terrain, and by the time we crossed the beautiful Drina at Zvornik we were definitely in Bosnia: mosques with their minarets, and the women in their flowery bloomers and some even with their headscarves covering nose & mouth. The more rugged terrain means a harder life, a possible measure of which being the virtual absence of flowers around the houses. We noted the fences (some just crude interweaving of branches) the farmers put around the big haystacks to keep the livestock away. Characteristic steep long roofs of gray tile on barns. It was probably the most flattering time of day & year to be traversing the Bosnian mountains–late afternoon sun across the autumn reds & golds. At any rate it was beautiful but B & I decided we'd never choose the area to start a farm in. At Olovo B. saw a little field of modest-sized Bogomil monuments & stopped for a closer look, all excited.

Arrived in Sarajevo at dusk. Hotels full because of a convention, so a lady at the Stari Grad Hotel sent a young man with us across the river to a private room, the spare room of a family's apartment. A real winner, especially the Turkish john which is just a hole with two places to put your feet. The building was ancient, and the room none too clean, but the landlord offered to warm up food for Dan if we wished. Dinner at the Stari Grad: one man was singing sad, moaning songs with his tablemates joining in (who knows what they had been drinking) and the maitre-d' came in and said, "Now please stop, that is not nice," but he went on anyhow & the maitre d' didn't come back. I had pljeskavica & B had Bosanski lonac, then B. led me to stand in Princip's footprints at that famous corner.

Oct. 7, Tuesday. Up and out onto the misty Bas carsija at 7:15, even before the stalls got set up on that ancient cobblestone square, but not before the hundreds of pigeons, and the pathetic souls who sell corn for you to give to the birds. A wild assortment of people passing by there–prosperous, well-dressed city types, dark-scarved peasant women and moustachioed men in knickers and black boots, ragged gypsies, the women & girls always with gold earrings. After dorucak at the Stari Grad ("complet" with bela kafa) we walked around the narrow cobblestone streets with their dozens of shops–jewelry, pastry, newspapers, shoe repair etc. etc., all owned by Mustafas, Muhameds, Alis & Hadzis, then into the courtyard of the beautiful main mosque, then to a big Bosnafolklor store where we drooled over the rugs and finally made our big purchase, helped by a pretty and sweet girl who was pleased to unroll any number of

them for Danny to crawl on & us to dream about. Then to the Gavrilo Princip Museum where the kind old curator & B. told the story of what happened & made it come very much to life right there. … In the afternoon we took a big walk up one of the hills (farmers with lambs and horses passed us coming down into town—it could make you a vegetarian), winding up narrow back streets with pastel houses all along, and children & Danny watching each other in fascination. 2nd floor overhanging the street in Turkish style. Lots of cats. Housewives in their bloomers. A decrepit mosque with a sign "spomenik kulture pod zastitom drzave." Came out by the old citadel, now a military base, & sat down for a magnificent view out over the still misty city, when a young soldier came up & asked us what we wanted. It turned out we weren't supposed to be up there, so we strolled down to the next bend in the road, which still had a superb view. … Then we went way out to quite a different area of town, a more W. European-looking street where thousands of people were out for a stroll, esp. young fellows ogling the girls–& finally found a bookstore where we got a Sarajevo map & Na Drini Cuprija (the young salesman was obviously pleased i loved the book, Andric being "nas"), then cevapcice, coke & pastry at a place called "Restaurant Grill" where they didn't have half the things on the menu, & a little boy hit himself on the table & then hit the table back. Most of the people were just having pastry, with a glass of kefir. We were pooped & went to bed with Lolita blaring on the landlord's TV in the next room… .

Then we headed south for Dubrovnik. We were amazed at the extensive new apartment buildings in Novo Sarajevo–this is the environment the great majority of Sarajevans live in, far removed from the oriental carsija with its peasant women selling knitted socks & gypsies selling corn. The contrasts overwhelm: on the outskirts of the city a peasant woman was tending a cow and winding thread onto a spindle from a hunk of white wool, in the field in front of an enormous modern plant labelled ENERGOINVEST. We saw many women making thread this way, others knitting or sewing, while tending livestock, particularly this day. The road again winds up and around the Bosnian hills, & around each bend you never knew what you'd find the road being used for–everywhere were bunches of schoolkids with their satchels–never yet saw a schoolbus in this country; plenty of grownups walking down the road, too, including gypsies (esp. on the way back through here we saw several gypsy camps along the road–these were little more than a couple of crummy little tents, some gaudy pillows, rags for clothes, a pot over an open fire, kids running around; one gypsy woman was walking along the road nursing her baby, the baby completely underneath her pink sweater); one place a group of schoolkids (the little girls in the Bosnian bloomers, too) and an older person were gathered around a big snake at the side of the road; horses & wagons abound–seven in one tunnel no longer than 1/2 mile long; cows, geese, sheep–what next? …

Oct. 10, Friday. Bade farewell to the sea & headed inland for…Pocitelj. What we thought was just a bunch of scattered if intriguing remains of walls became (1) a village inhabited currently, and by people we enjoyed the ability to communicate with, and (2) more surprising yet, a historically significant settlement now being renovated in the most sensitive good taste we have ever met. Our stay there was an enormous pleasure in many many ways. First we decided just to stroll around, & headed up the cobblestone steps past nameless stone structures & into the tree-shaded courtyard of the dzamija, following two bloomer-clad women. We sat on the wall there, commenting

on the number of shoes at the door. Just then the door opened & out came 75-100 worshippers, the men mostly in fezzes and women in billowing bloomers & scarves. We had managed to arrive at the conclusion of the big Friday noon service! They put their shoes on, then stood around chatting. The older women lit up homemade crude-looking cigarettes, with shiny lighters, the younger women–no. One toothless but upright old man came up, drawn by Danny, & told us there were 150 families living in Pocitelj. He was hard to understand, more so than the sweet young women sitting on the wall next to us, who shyly started a conversation with us about children. All the women looked adoringly at Danny. The one (about my age) had a baby boy Jan. 1 at a lying-in hospital in Capljina nearby. She asked me if I nurse Danny, & if he crawled. In answer to the comment that the young women didn't seem to smoke but the older ones did, she said that was true, & that "it's bad for the organism." Her husband was at work in another town. Gradually the people dispersed, & we looked in the windows of the mosque–inside walls have awfully peeling paint & unkempt look but the floors were thick with colorful, fresh-looking oriental rugs. After this we climbed up & around stone paths past stone buildings in various states of repair, marveling constantly at the views of the village with minaret, Mediterranean clock tower, & domes on tops of buildings, all of this ranged around a natural amphitheater with remains of fortifications along top, & looking out over the green Neretva. There was a heavy sweetness in the air we never could find the source of. Everywhere flourished the shiny-leaved pomegranate (sipak) bush with its fruit not quite ripe yet. Big black birds cawed constantly & soared over the gray ruins. Down on the water were big gray and big white water birds. It was sunny and except for the cawing, the occasional voices of villagers & some trucks passing, far down on the road, the atmosphere was still. We climbed clear up, absorbed views the builders once had, then intended to go across the top & down the left-hand side, but overshot our mark on the dirt trail behind the crest of the hill. There were dividends, however. We had a chat with a sun-baked, withered little old man who with his 2 horses had been traveling for 5 days from his home in the village of Milice. His brother lives in Chicago & they write. He said, "America–rich there." We replied, "You are rich in the beauty here." He replied, "Stony here." Then he stumped off on his way, a real product of the terrain, & we stood watching as he went. Another dividend–in retrospect, anyhow–we got the feel of the Herzegovinian karst as we clambered down the hill with rounded white rocks, pomegranate bushes, crickets, sparse dried mossy growths, B. carrying the sleeping Dan, & finally made it back to the inhabited place.

What a shock to go into the building marked restaurant & find it sumptuously decorated (as we gradually came to realize, in the style of the old han on this spot) with low tables around fireplaces along the wall, with delicious food at small cost (total about $2.50). The building is in the ponderous style which must be Turkish for such structures–heavy, thick walls, with no windows & the feel when you go in the door that you're entering a cave. B. enquired as to the whereabouts of the Hotel Stari Grad advertised tastefully along the road, & lo & behold, what it is is a number of old homes being renovated, each with just a few rooms. They are so in keeping with the rest of the village we never suspected that's what they are. An incredible place for a "hotel room"–up the stone path past a house being lived in right now & into the simply furnished but quite adequate dwelling, with whitewashed walls & wood floor. Danny loved crawling all over. You look out the window down through a gracefully branched

tree onto the lower level of the village with former medresa & han, and across to the delightful Neretva & the stark but misty hills beyond. You go out your front door & there at her front door not 15 feet away squats a Moslem woman in bloomers, wrinkled & in scarf knotted up, & smoking a homemade cigarette. A very friendly neighbor, and quite taken with Danny.

It was late afternoon by now, so we went down to the river, gathered a few rock specimens, then strolled around a bit. Talked with pretty Desa, a local girl who works at the Turist biro there. She was at least as fascinated by us as we were by her. She has a little boy named–of all things!–Harry (as she told us this, little neighbor kids named Hamid and Hassan listed in). We saw him the next morning & he's precious. His baka takes care of him. Desa nursed him for 13 months & she said "skoro sve" nurse, there. She wondered if we swaddle Danny–she says it's good because the child is "miran" then. She disapproved of "konserve" for babies & said beginning with one drop of OJ at the very beginning & increasing it gradually, the child should be given what the grownups eat. After this we went up to our "hotel room" & gave Danny his "konserve" & he fell asleep; then we went down to the han through the dark for tomato soup & compote. Later a 4-piece band played jazz & 30 people, guys & couples, came for the evening–the old han is alive again!

Oct. 12, Sunday. Sarajevo hotel room. Our final day & another incredible one. Awake to the misty minarets out our hotel window, then an interesting conversation with the chambermaid, who said "malo upotrebimo konserve" here & thought Danny didn't look healthy. Then breakfast downstairs & with warning from the lady at the hotel desk that the road was grozan, we bought bread & pears and set out for Visegrad… . About one minute from downtown Sarajevo you're out of town & onto the never-ending stretch of stony, chuckholed, narrow & winding surface which our map calls "medjunarodni put" or "thruway," but which no driver or passenger should be subjected to. But B. got us to Višegrad in 3 1/2 hours at an average speed of 20 mph… . And [in Višegrad], in its white beauty against the Bosnian countryside beyond, stood The Bridge. Seeing it for real was like being in the presence of a world figure–AWE. An unforgettable thrill, intensified by the awareness that it was so hard to get to. We were there from 12:30 to 2:45 and I loved every minute. We parked by the road a short distance before the bridge, and marveled at the beauty of the original whitish stones & the graceful, strong arches at the ends, which the Nazis had not destroyed, & the quiet autumn day with the whole bridge reflected in the broad & shallow Drina through the tiny-leaved trees in a row along the bank. We walked underneath & to the other side (town teenagers on the bridge above us calling happily to Danny) & decided the bridge was more beautiful from the first side, with the sun on it. Then up & across it, noting that young people still stroll on it & sit on the sofa. A modern (undoubtedly post-Nobel) Hotel Visegrad is adjacent; we walked through its urine-smelling lobby to the outdoor cafe on the bank and had a sok, with that structure before our eyes all the while, big gray water birds soaring over the river & townsfolk crossing the bridge, some fast & some slowly. The town is small but has a modern samoposluga, department store & apartment buildings along with a Christian church up on the E. bank & a mosque not far from the hotel. Crossed back over, pausing at that famous kapija where so much has happened but where at that moment there was only a young couple & a drunk in rough old work clothes with his head in his hands. B. was surprised how shallow the water was but we could see that mud extended up the bank

several feet, & a mark on the side of the kapija waist-high was labeled Vodostaj 1896, so that we needed no more convincing–there are times of the year when the Drina requires a mighty bridge to span it.

Ilidža, Aug 2, 1970. Hotel Nacional again. Bigelow–ah, yes, you've been here before. Takes the pasos, gives the kljuc (after having said there were no places).

This evening for 3 1/2 dinars I took tramvaj 3 out to Ilidza. A superb outing limited only by my self-protective behavior–walking fast, avoiding looking at people much, on guard. The place is meant for slow strolls. It's a 19th century setting, a Saratoga or Chautauqua. Grand allees of the handsomest old poplar trees, two side paths, and a road lined & arched as far as you can see. Carriages & horses for rent to ride through them. Old-fashioned parks with geometrical flower beds & a fountain, and 100-year-old stucco hotels looking tacky, set a genteel distance apart.

When is someone going to write an exploratory essay about the uses of the korzo? Everyone's preoccupation is unconcealed looking and realizing one is being looked at. That is why I step up my speed & avert my glance… For a certain part of the day (6 to 8 p.m.?) young people are openly scouting & inviting being scouted. The pace is relaxed, deliberate. No one is going about private business then; at the most they will pause to window-shop or get some ice cream… Ways to exclude yourself: don't put fresh, attractive clothes on; walk at a businesslike pace; carry big purchases; walk alone; avoid letting your eyes meet anyone else's.

Sarajevo, Aug, 4-7, 1976. Aug. 4–What a happy day! O. came and we went to the Vijecnica. He gave me background on the library's uredba about 3-day limit for unregistered foreigners to read (xenophobia, he said). On the steps we met Prof. Ekmecic. O. took me to the unlighted catalog room where an (overly, he said) mila lady librarian helped with the great red tape of filling out revers forms & applications for membership (30 dinars). Back tomorrow a.m. when my requested volumes will be awaiting me in the periodical reading room, also unlit. Then to get happy puff-cheeked little B. and take her from one baka to another, then to Filosofski fakultet where there were many introductions to secretaries & librarians. His kancelarija looks out over "SW Sarajevo," including the Spanish-Jewish graveyard, up the hill…. Thanks to him I got a stack of Zborniks and a desk in the library there. 2 1/2 hours of good reading, while 20 feet away the librarian & several other staffers spent the whole time chatting. Anyone who wanted to work would have felt odd; thank goodness I was not visible to them, and thus could really dig in.

Aug. 5. Another satisfying day. I am getting attached to Sarajevo… I agree with O. that the setting of this city is very special. But I have a hard time drawing a fresh breath, the exhaust fumes are so thick. I like restaurants in courtyards, e.g. the Daire. The Moslem flavor is special, and not at all familiar or understandable to me, yet here it is–part of Yugoslavia. The funeral processions yesterday & today were very different from those Orthodox ones in Macedonia: nine old people getting buried at once, with men in black coats & white turbans getting into cars by the Begova Dzamija and driving off with much exhaust and loud acceleration. Yesterday an old bearded Moslem man sat cross-legged guarding three caskets draped with Arabic-inscribed cloths, in front of the Dzamija. Where was the feeling? Not being expressed there, in

any case… .

Aug. 6. Another good day spiked with lively conversations, one early this afternoon over kafa at the Fil Fak with the short-haired, reflective, womanly, warm librarian and T., a dark grad student from Trebinje who is preoccupied with mythical concerns as I am. Why do Americans strive so? For money? No, I said. Protestant background? Oh, how easy it is for you to explain & boil down my idiosyncrasies. T. said what he wants is to be close to a few choice friends and to have a lasting relationship with wife & family. Professionally, that's vec another plane. Tonight a referent, Ratomir, for Agro-something in Novi Sad joined me downstairs in the restaurant, then his kolega Stanisa. We had a good time talking, here and at the Evropa, about life. Fun to walk arm in arm with them both, laughing & joking.

Aug. 7. I read while two bookshelves away a group of Fil Fak people mused aloud over kafa–a leisurely conversation… The reality they were living was the stretch of shared time, not measured on a watch nor accounted for to anyone. Then cevapcici at one of those special cevabdzinicas–superb, with luk & somun soaked in the juices. All the men got served first, by the waitress, although all the women had been waiting longer.

In the air between Sarajevo and Dubrovnik. I got into a happy conversation with the portly, twinkly-eyed gentleman next to me, as we peered out onto the naked Bosnian mountains we tried to identify. When we had determined that he was a musliman from Sarajevo I told him I had just parted from my favorite moslem-Sarajlija, O. H. He said, "Oh, so and so H's son–I've known that family since Donji Vakuf days. His mother used to be a real beauty in her day. He was on his way to Cairo on business for Sipad. Charming guy–Jusuf Mujicic.

Višegrad, July 15-16, 1978. Seeing O. et al. is like old home week. We had a sok when they got here, then we had supper later at the sportski centar. Delicious Drina trout (pastrmka)…

This morning they drove me up to the Visegradska banja in the forested hills. Cool, humble little spa. E. said its water is good for treating sterility and rheumatism, & the crew of old rheumatic Moslem women in flowered scarves & balloon trousers, sitting in the open-air cafe with green latticework overhanging the stream & woods, would have been a memorable but somehow inappropriate picture [photo].

Then I went up to Hotel Bikavac for midday meal, with a sound coming from the next hill, before and after a downpour, almost certainly from a house getting its roof frame put on, for a row of cloths (O. says gifts) was hanging from the roof beam there. The veal & mushrooms was very nice but now I have the Visegrad trots…

O. told what he said was an old joke tonight as we ate up at the Bikavac. "Have you read Bridge on the Drina?" an old peasant was asked. "Why should I read it? I've walked (hodao) on it!"

Fun time at dinner laughing at story of them (E. at the wheel) going off the road on an old bridge at Medjedje. A peasant with two oxen pulled them back onto the road. Then a different time they were passing the same place, and the same peasant & oxen were stuck the same way, and O. helped them back on the road. The man never recognized

O.

Just went to E.'s grandmother's. Dear old gal. Warm reception–lemonade, chocolate candy, coffee. When I left she said, "Tell your mother to come & see me and we can smoke together." O. said E.'s grandmother's family once owned the predecessor to the hotel I'm in here, but they lost everything after the war. The little place she lives in is very modest, the former summer kitchen to the house next door where her son the barber lives. Couches on three sides of wall, with oriental rugs covering them & floor. Two big jars of rose petals soaking in water, for sok. She has rheumatism—O. called it the Yugoslav bolest. She went to the doctor complaining of pain and his answer: in effect, "You're old. What do you expect?"

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Editor's Note: With her husband Bruce and 9-month-old Danny, Ann C. Bigelow lived in Belgrade in 1969-70. During that time they traveled to Bosnia in their new VW bug; in later years, she revisited Bosnia and wrote down her impressions of these subsequent trips as well.

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