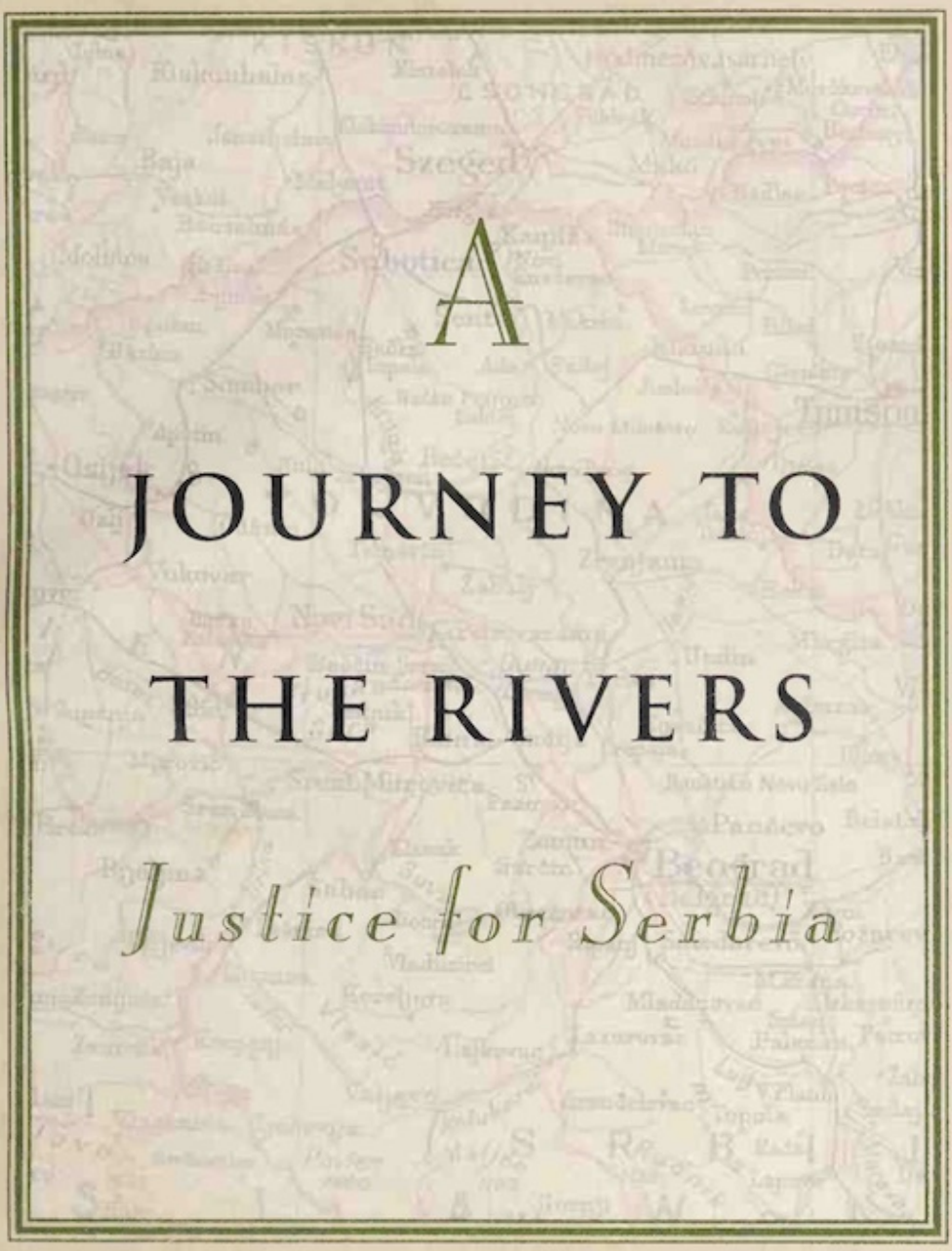

A JOURNEY TO THE RIVERS

Justice for Serbia

PETER HANDKE

"It was principally because of the war that I wanted to go to Serbia, into the country of the so-called aggressors . . . I felt the need to travel into the Serbia that had become, with every article, every commentary, every analysis, less recognizable and more worthy of study, more worthy, simply, of being seen. And whoever is thinking now: Aha! pro-Serbia! or Aha! Yugophile — need read no further."

—from *A Journey to the Rivers*

Published in Germany in 1996, *A Journey to the Rivers* created a firestorm of controversy, being likened, by some, to revisionist writings mitigating Nazi guilt for World War II. But that is a grave misreading of the book, for Peter Handke proffers no justification or explanations for Serbian atrocities in the Balkan conflict. *A Journey to the Rivers* is, rather, both a scathing criticism of Western war reporting, which Peter Handke describes as lazy and mendacious, and a wonderfully sensitive and nuanced travelogue through Serbia. The moving observations, the acerbic reflections deepen even as Handke continu-

(Continued on back flap)

(Continued from front flap)

ally, insistently asks, "What does a stranger know?" The result is rich, rewarding, and provocative.

PETER HANDKE, one of the most popular post-war German language writers, is the author of numerous novels and memoirs including *Repetition*, *Slow Homecoming*, and *The Weight of the World*. He lives in Paris.

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Justice for Serbia

TRANSLATED BY
SCOTT ABBOTT

VIKING

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Ah, I remember: Back then I signed letters Poor Yorick, *and my mother went around the neighborhood all day long and asked who this Yorick was. Well, that was life before the war. . . .*

What difference does it make to us to kill three million people. The sky is the same everywhere and blue, so blue. Death has returned, but peace will follow. We will be free and strange. . . .

When the first snow fell, we got better acquainted.

MILOŠ CRNJANSKI,
Diary About Čarnojević, 1921

PREFACE TO THE AMERICAN EDITION

Dear Reader,

This text, appearing on two weekends at the onset of 1996 in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, caused some commotion in the European press.

Immediately after publication of the first part, I was designated a terrorist in the *Corriere della Sera*, and *Libération* revealed that I was, first of all, amused that there were so few victims in the Slovenian war of 1991, and that I was exhibiting, second, "doubtful taste" in discussing the various ways of presenting this or that victim of the Yugoslavian wars in the western media. In *Le Monde* I was then called a "pro-Serbian advocate," and in the *Journal du Dimanche* there was talk of "pro-Serbian agitation." And so it continued until *El Pais* even read into my text a sanction of the Srebrenica massacre.

Now the text is translated, and I trust that you will read it as it is; I need not defend or take back a single word. I wrote about my journey through the country of Serbia exactly as I have always written my books, my literature: a slow, inquiring narration; every paragraph dealing with and narrating a problem, of repre-

sentation, of form, of grammar—of aesthetic veracity; that has always been the case in what I have written, from the beginning to the final period. Dear reader: that, and that alone, I offer here for your perusal.

—Peter Handke, April 1996

CONTENTS


GERMANY
Salzburg
AUSTRIA
Innsbruck
Graz
SLOVENIA
Udine
Ljubljana
Novo Mesto
Zagreb
Save R.
ITALY
Kočevje
Karlovac
Venice
CROATIA
Krk Is.
Bihać
Pula
Gospić
Bologna
Ravenna
Rimini
San Marino
Pesaro
Zadar
Adriatic Sea
Florence
Rome
SCALE:
0
50
100
20
40
in miles


Budapest
HUNGARY
N
W
E
S
Danube R.
ROMANIA
Subotica
Timişoara
Vojvodina
Petroşani
Reşiţa
Novi Sad
Danube R. (Dunav)
Save R.
Pančevo
(Dunav)
Brčko
Belgrade
(Beograd)
Bijeljina
Sabac
Smederevo
Danube R.
Craiov
Tuzla
Loznica
Valjevo
Smederevska Palanka
Srebrenica
Vlasenica
Bajina Bašta
Kragujevac
BULGARIA
Višegrad
Užice
Kraljevo
Morava R.
Niš
Drina R.
SERBIA &
MONTENEGRO
Sofia
Kosovo
Kotor
Podgorica
Skopje
MACEDONIA
Tiranë
ALBANIA
GREECE

BEFORE THE TRIP

FOR A LONG TIME, for almost four years—after the end of the war in East Slavonia, after the destruction of Vukovar, after the outbreak of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina—I had planned to travel to Serbia. I knew only Belgrade, to which I had been invited almost three decades earlier as the author of a silent play, for a theater festival. I recall, of those perhaps one and a half days, only my youthful or authorial indignation at the response to the wordless performance, an incessant unrest among the Serbian audience, which, as I thought at the time, being southern European or Balkan, naturally could not be mature enough for such a long silence on the stage. Of Belgrade itself, nothing from that time remains in my memory except a rather gentle slope on both sides down to where the Save and Danube rivers flowed together on the plain. There is no image in my mind, however, of the two bodies of water, as the horizons were blocked off by the "typically Communist" apartment complexes. Only recently, during my second stay in the Serbian, formerly Yugoslavian, capital, did I recall, on a side street lined by linden trees strewing fall leaves, during an accidental walk past a House of

Writers, that I was once there, hosted and at the same time gently ridiculed for my juvenile authorial airs by Miodrag Bulatović, who wrote "The Red Cock Flies to Heaven." He was not that much older than I and was famous at that time throughout Europe, and I too had read him with some enthusiasm. (He died a couple of years ago, during the Yugoslavian war, and remained until the end, as I was told in Belgrade, full of mockery toward everyone and at the same time unremittingly charitable. Were there, outside his country, reports of his death?)

It was principally because of the war that I wanted to go to Serbia, into the country of the so-called aggressors. But I was also drawn simply to see the country that of all the countries of Yugoslavia was least known to me and, perhaps because of the news reports and opinions about it, had come to attract me most strongly (not least because of the alienating rumors). Nearly all the photographs and reports of the last four years came from one side of the fronts or borders. When they occasionally came from the other side they seemed to me increasingly to be simple mirrorings of the usual coordinated perspectives—distorted reflections in the very cells of our eyes and not eyewitness accounts. I felt the need to go behind the mirror; I felt the need to travel into the Serbia that became, with every article, every commentary, every analysis, less recognizable and more worthy of study, more worthy, simply, of being seen. And whoever is

thinking now: Aha, pro-Serbian! or Aha, Yugophile!—the latter a *Spiegel* [the German newsmagazine; *Spiegel*=mirror] word—need read no further.

In recent years there had in fact been the occasional invitation into the shrunken Yugoslavia, to Serbia or Crna Gora, Montenegro. But I wanted to avoid being a public person there, or even a semipublic one. I wished to travel as a normal passerby, unrecognizable as a foreigner or a traveler, not only in the metropolises of Belgrade and Titograd (now Podgorica) but above all in the small cities and villages and even, where possible, far from any settlement. But of course I needed someone, a knowledgeable pilot, companion, and perhaps translator; my rough Slovenian and the few Serbo-Croatian memory traces from a summer on the Adriatic island of Krk, more than thirty years ago, were insufficient if it was to be more than an ordinary trip. (No problem, on the other hand, the strange Cyrillic alphabet: that I would have to decipher it haltingly seemed exactly right for the endeavor.)

Conveniently, I have two longtime friends from Serbia, both of whom left their country when rather young and now, even during the war, return home at more or less lengthy intervals: visiting parents, or the widowed mother, and/or the legitimate or illegitimate children, along with the former Serbian lover. There is Žarko Radaković, translator of several of my things into Serbian and *à ses heures,* as it is put so well in French, "in his hours," himself a writer; though pro-

fessionally, after studying in Belgrade and then for a long time in Tübingen, he became a translator and reader of German-language newspaper articles for the Balkan-directed division of Deutsche Welle radio—where, in a not infrequent conflict between being Serbian and having to speak against Serbia (as in the tendentious, never even faintly "pro-Serbian" fusillades of the *FAZ* [*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*]), he is a faithful translator, although he reads sometimes with a faltering voice. It may be that such an existence contributed to the silence that had overcome my friend since the war's beginning, vis-à-vis not only the world of enemies but even that of friends, and thus also toward me. He did continue to translate the odd piece, which appeared then as a book, in spite of the war, in Belgrade, Niš, or Novi Sad; but I no longer heard about it from him—Žarko R. lived, translated, and wrote as if in voluntary obscurity. To track him down, I had to turn to his last remaining confidant, a Mormon, far away in the American state of Utah. And, befitting such a Mormon detour, the Serb and I, the Austrian, found each other immediately. A phone call from Cologne: Yes, meet in Belgrade the beginning of November—"I'll be visiting my mother anyway"—and the following week a joint trip to the Bosnian border, where, again "anyway," he had arranged to meet his onetime girlfriend and their now almost eighteen-year-old daughter in a border town on the river Drina.

The other Serbian friend who I hoped would bring me closer to his country and his people I knew from the near decade of my life in Salzburg. Zlatko B. was a regular in a tavern on the Schallmooser Hauptstrasse, which led out of the city, a place I frequented over the years, in part because of the old-fashioned and always loud jukebox with its ever reliable Creedence Clearwater Revival songs—"Have You Ever Seen the Rain?" and "Lookin' Out My Back Door" and "Lodi." Zlatko used to play cards there, always for high stakes. After a rustic childhood in the east, a business machine apprenticeship in Belgrade, and extended army service in several corners of Yugoslavia, he had left Serbia for Austria to get rich, as he claimed. He did not achieve that as a laundry employee in a Salzburg suburb. And so, between stints as a messenger-assistant for a travel agency, he tried his luck as a professional gambler in Mirjam's Pub; working alone, however, he had no chance in the long run against the European-class gambling syndicates that replaced one another there. (What I chiefly remember of him from that time is his appeal to an invisible heaven after every lost game.) Afterward he became, so to speak, resolutely honest, an occasional employee, always prompt, competent, and incidental, and sometimes, almost exclusively by commission, also a painter of curious genre scenes, only remotely related to the colorful and somewhat derivative fantasies of the once highly prized Serbian naive painters—recalling, for example, nineteenth-century

Slovenian beehive paintings (on display in the sweet little museum in Radovljica, on Bled Lake) or the inn signs of the Georgian muralist Pirosmani. Since the outbreak of the Yugoslavian wars, Zlatko B., like Žarko R., had withdrawn from the city of Salzburg into the country, and then he had officially dropped his Serbian name in favor of a German-sounding one—a faithful evocation of the seventeenth-century Netherlandish miniaturist he valued so highly, Adrian Brouwer.

And Zlatko B., alias Adrian Br., likewise agreed on the spot to my proposal for a joint trip through his Serbia. We would visit his parents, vintners in the village of Porodin, near the central Serbian river Morava—if possible before late November, so as not to miss the last of the beautiful autumn and the grapes in the vineyards. He hesitated, however, to drive his own car, because he had heard it would be stolen in no time in his Serbian homeland.

At the end of October 1995, from our three various locations, we made our way to Belgrade: one from near Salzburg, straight through Austria and Hungary (finally, in fact, with his car), another in a Lufthansa plane from Cologne, the third, after an automobile journey from a Parisian suburb, by way of Lorraine to Switzerland, with Swissair from Zurich, accompanied by S. It thus became one of the few trips in my life that I didn't take alone and the first during which I remained almost exclusively in the company of others.

I had not otherwise especially prepared myself for Serbia. S. and I had almost neglected to acquire visas, my memory dominated by an image of the vast Yugoslavia I had known from 1970 to 1990, everywhere accessible and without war. And now, at the appropriate place in Paris, no longer an *ambassade* but simply an emergency office, I had to give a reason for the trip. "Tourist," which applied, was considered unbelievable (was I the first since the war began?) and insufficient. Fortunately, in a back room, a cosmopolitan representative of Serbia appeared who required no more explanation; and she assured us that we need not fear, anywhere in her country, even a moment of publicity. (But what was her country? She came from the Krajina, which has since, apparently, permanently fallen to the state of Croatia.)

On the evening before departing, I saw Emir Kusturica's film *Underground* in a theater in Versailles. I had, on the one hand, admired the earlier films of the Bosnian from Sarajevo, like *Time of the Gypsies* and *Arizona Dream,* for their more than merely free-floating—their free-flying fantasy, with images and sequences so densely and evenly intertwined that they frequently metamorphosed into Oriental ornaments (what could be the antithesis of constriction); on the other hand, I had missed anything like a connection to earth or country or even world in these image flights, so that in each case the entire fantasy soon exploded into an eye-stuffing fantastification; and rather

than being forced to admire, I have always preferred being moved, or being *almost* moved, an effect that works in me most strongly, persists, lasts.

With *Underground,* I was, for the first time, (almost) moved by one of Kusturica's films. The narrative facility had finally become a narrative force, as a talent for dreaming, a powerful one, had joined with a concrete piece of world and history—the former Yugoslavia, the home of the young Kusturica. For wasn't it a force—a Shakespearean force, repeatedly shot through with the power of the Marx Brothers—when in a major scene near the end, deep in the civil war, one of the film's heroes, searching desperately, interminably for his son, who had disappeared in the Belgrade Danube, runs on and on through the battle smoke and switches repeatedly between screaming for the lost child and bellowing the order: "Fire!"? In that moment, so much of what had been written against *Underground* seemed foolish or malicious. Not only did Alain Finkielkraut, one of the new French philosophers and, since the beginning of the war, an incomprehensible chatterer for a Croatian state, accuse Kusturica's film in *Le Monde,* after the showing in Cannes, without having seen it, of terrorism, pro-Serbian propaganda, etc., but just a few days ago, in *Libération,* André Glucksmann, another new philosopher, grotesquely reversed the point when he congratulated Kusturica on his film—which he *had* seen—as a coming to terms with a terroristic Serbian

Communism that, as opposed to the Germans, had learned nothing from its historical misdeeds: a person who reads that into *Underground,* what has he seen? What does he see at all? And a critic of the film in the German *Zeit,* otherwise insightful, found Kusturica full of rage, resentment, even "vindictiveness." Not at all. *Underground* comes, is made, consists, and has an effect—I saw it—solely out of sorrow and pain and a powerful love; and even its brutalities and noise are part of that . . . all of which together finally produces the clear-sightedness, sometimes almost clairvoyance, of this other Yugoslavian history, or the naturalness of a fairy tale: see the festive ending on the island that drifts away from the continent, in which the idiot of the film, suddenly not at all so disturbed, let alone idiotic, turns to the audience, and clearly and with the gentle authority only the narrator of a fairy tale can assume, says: "Once there was a country . . ." (For me, there in the theater, his fairy tale was unfortunately all too short.)

But the very worst that has yet been written against Kusturica's film was again in *Le Monde,* once one of my favorite newspapers. Disguised in its familiar solemn and distinguished form—scarcely a photo, densely set text, quasi-official columns—it now has become, aside from its often still hyperconscientious main section, a demagogic snoop sheet, and not only in cases like the illness of President Mitterrand, which was spread over the pages a year ago under the pretext

of providing information, with a lust for death that is perhaps in keeping with the times but certainly is not contemporary. The newspaper does not describe its *sujets* any longer; still less does it evoke them, which would be better, nobler; but instead it gropes them—makes them into objects. Typical of the new perspective is the way that—once unthinkable in *Le Monde*—persons are initially characterized in terms of their exteriors, as was, just recently in a front-page column, an American art photographer: "a scheming, disinviting forty-year-old" (or something like that), as if the seeming image abstinence of the newspaper were producing other images altogether, word images, and certainly none to be taken seriously.

Since the editorial corps of *Le Monde* had agreed (see Finkielkraut's infamy) that Emir Kusturica and his pro-Serbian or Yugophile craziness should be swept aside, on the same culture pages as the threadbare, seemingly remote-controlled review by the main film critic—an occasionally intelligent and finely differentiating writer—who reproached the film for its baroque or self-referential forms, meaning that they only play with themselves, an article appeared about *Underground* from the hand of a woman formerly familiar to me, as a newspaper reader, only as the Yugoslavian war correspondent for *Le Monde,* and in fact as one who not only was biased—and why not, in this case?—but over and above that, in report after report, let loose a sturdy and even enviably self-conscious hate

for everything Serbian. She wanted to prove that Kusturica's film, filmed on Serbian soil (and waters), was undoubtedly produced with the support of local firms and was thus in violation of the trade prohibition or embargo imposed by the United Nations on Serbia and Montenegro. With a laborious and simultaneously highly judgmental thoroughness that only appeared to be objective, she cited against *Underground,* for approximately a quarter column, all of the even vaguely applicable UN resolutions, numbered paragraph after numbered paragraph, subregulation after subregulation, all of it pedantically ordered, totaled up, interlinked in a litany of guilt, comparable only to an indisputable, final, irrevocable justification of a legal opinion—and thereby suggesting that Kusturica's film, even simply as a product or ware, was in its essence something unlawful, its non-Serbian (French and German) "coproducers" were breakers of the law, the film, at least in the countries obliged to uphold the embargo, should be withdrawn from the screen, pulled from circulation (I'm translating the recommendation of the war correspondent rather mildly); *Underground* had no right to exist, and the producers and the filmmaker Emir´ Kusturica were war profiteers, at least. (In fairness, it should be mentioned that in the meantime, approximately a month after this article appeared, the newspaper printed a short letter from a reader in which *Le Monde* was politely requested finally to bring an end to the "unsavory inci-

dent"; but in the next issue there was a report written by another woman at the front, this time about the circumstances of the Red Star Belgrade soccer club, in truth, at least for a close reader, a closed chain of denunciations, with this stinger at the end: the club, long allied—according to the international press—with the "notorious bandit and war killer Arkan," had not in fact distanced itself from Arkan, although the club leaders claimed to have done so; why otherwise would there still be in the Red Star souvenir shop, next to the uniforms, ashtrays, and the like, a videocassette of the "sulfurous" wedding of the war criminal with the "chauvinist Serbian rock singer Ceca"?)

I have had to spend so much time with these (perhaps) peripheral scenes and rotten language games, less worthy of Philip Marlowe than of the vice squad, because the above-cited strain of rhetoric, dictated almost purely by a suspicious, predetermined, inquisitorial agenda, seems to exemplify a predominant strand of publications about the Yugoslavian wars since they began. "What, are you trying to help minimize the Serbian crimes in Bosnia, in the Krajina, in Slavonia, by means of a media critique that sidesteps the basic facts?" "Steady. Patience. Justice." The problem—only mine?—is more complicated, complicated by several levels or stages of reality; and I am aiming, in my desire to clarify it, at something thoroughly real through which something like a meaningful whole can be surmised in all the mixed-up kinds of reality. For what

does one know when participation is almost always only a (tele)visual participation? What does one know when overwhelming on-line networking produces only information and not the knowledge that can come into being solely through learning, observing and learning? What does one know who, in place of the thing, sees only its picture, or, as in TV news, an abbreviation of a picture, or, as in the on-line world, an abbreviation of an abbreviation?

There are two things, worse than puzzles, that I have not been able to rid myself of for four and a half years, since June 1991, the beginning of the so-called ten-day war in Slovenia, the starter's gun for the breaking apart of Yugoslavia. Two things—a number and an image, a photograph. The number: approximately seventy people died during that initial war, relatively few in comparison to the many tens of thousands in the subsequent wars. Still, how did it happen that almost all of the seventy victims were from the Yugoslavian People's Army, which even then was considered the great aggressor? Much more powerful in every sense, that army should have toyed (toy?) with the few Slovenian freedom fighters. (The relative numbers are known, curiously without having penetrated into world consciousness.) Who banged away at whom? And wasn't there perhaps even an explicit order from the army not to strike back, for one imagined that one was still, in spite of everything, among southern Slav brothers and wanted to act on that be-

lief or illusion, at least on the one side? And the accompanying photograph, which I then saw in *Time* magazine: a rather sparse group of Slovenes in slightly romantic battle dress, with a banner and a flag, representing the newly created republic. And if memory serves me, there were not really any young people among them, or in any case the crowd or troop exhibited no youthfulness: foremost in my memory are potbellied freedom fighters in their mid-thirties, a bunch of lady-killers, the flags as the scenery of an outdoor theater; and even now my first thought on seeing that picture won't leave my head: it was those semicheerful outdoor types, *not* freedom fighters, who cold-bloodedly shot down the seventy young soldiers, who, despite their weapons superiority, were between a rock and a hard place. Naturally, that may be nonsense—which shows, nonetheless, how such broadcast reports and pictures transform or misform themselves in the receptor.

Increasingly, the war reports affected me in a similar way. Where was the parasite that was displacing the realities or moving them like backdrops: in the news itself or in the consciousness of the addressee? How was it possible, for example, that I could immediately empathize, at the end of November 1991, on the evening of the day of the report of the fall of the city of Vukovar, when the sign of the Parisian Métro station *Stalingrad* was altered to *Vukovar* by the hand of a passerby, both indignant and moved. I viewed that as

an appropriate as well as a biblical deed, or as the ideal combination of artistic and political action—and that still, as early as the next morning, like a film that is momentarily gripping but that immediately following the words "The End" seems less plausible and later, when thought through, even less so (as a rule, these are from Hollywood), my doubts arose about how "Stalingrad" and "Vukovar" could be said in the same breath. How, for example, was I ever supposed to separate the statement of a hatemongering hack in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* from what had just happened in East Slavonia? The Serbs living in Croatia (thus also in and around Vukovar), heretofore Yugoslavian citizens on equal footing with their Croatian fellow citizens, were suddenly designated a second-class ethnic group in the constitution of the new state of Croatia, adopted over their heads. And now these approximately six hundred thousand Serbian people, no longer simply answerable to Croatian management but annexed, unasked, into a Croatian state, were, according to the decree of the German journalist, most properly, most obligingly, most obediently "to consider themselves"—so there!—"a minority"!? "Good, yes sir! As of today, we agrée to consider ourselves a minority in our own country and are accordingly also willing to be classified by your Croatian constitution as such": that is supposed to have been the alternative to the war in the Krajina and for the city of Vukovar? Who was the first aggressor? What does it mean to

found a state that ranks its peoples relative to one another in a region where, since history began, an immense number of people have lived for whom such a state would be as welcome as a slap in the face, or in other words would be an atrocity comparable to the unforgettable persecutions at the hands of the Hitlerian-Croatian Ustacha regime. Who, then, was the aggressor? Was the one who provoked a war the same as the one who began it? And what does "begin" mean? Could such a provoking also be a beginning? ("You started it!" "No, you started it!") And how would I, as a Serb in Croatia, have related to such a state, established as an enemy to me and my people? Would I have emigrated "home" over the Danube to Serbia, although perhaps deeply bound to the place, in part by generations of ancestors? Perhaps. Would I, even if suddenly a second-class citizen, even if a coerced citizen of Croatia, have remained in the country, reluctantly to be sure, sad, full of gallows humor, but in the service of precious peace? Perhaps. Or, had it been in my power, would I have taken up arms—naturally, only with many others of my peers and, in an emergency, even with the help of a disintegrating, aimless Yugoslavian army? Probably, or, if I were, as such a Serb, halfway young and without a family of my own, almost certainly. And wasn't that how the war began, as is well known, with the marching of the first Croatian state militia into the Serbian villages around Vukovar? About the war itself, however, some-

one like myself may say nothing; for that horrible "War is war" is still in force, and the even more horrible "Civil war is civil war." And whoever understands that not as retching, but as indifference, likewise need read no further. (Isn't the almost ostentatious "heartlessness" of the Serbian Jewish author Aleksandar Tišma, with his "War is war," exposed so often in German newspapers, more, much more thought-provoking than all the indignant, extortionate lip service, extortionate and far from a primal scream?)

Later, from the spring of 1992 on, when the first photographs, soon photo sequences or serial photos, were shown from the Bosnian war, there was a part of myself (repeatedly standing for "my whole") which felt that the armed Bosnian Serbs, whether the army or individual killers, especially those on the hills and mountains around Sarajevo, were "enemies of humanity," to slightly vary Hans Magnus Enzensberger's phrase in reference to the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein; and as things continued, in response to the reports and photographs from the Serbian-Bosnian internment camps, I could have, to some extent, approved of the statement of a Serbian patriot, the poet and opposition leader Vuk ("Wolf") Drašković, according to whom now, with the massacre in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Serbian people too, throughout history hardly ever the perpetrators, or first perpetrators, had become a kind of people of Cain. And not

just once, not only momentarily, when confronted by another murdered child in a Sarajevo morgue, alone in an empty universe—photographs, by the way, that Spanish newspapers like *El País* are world champions in enlarging and publishing, in their own minds perhaps following in the footsteps of Francisco Goya—I asked myself, Why doesn't one of us here, or, even better, someone from there, one of the Serbian people personally, take the life of the one responsible for such a thing, the Bosnian Serb chieftain Radovan Karadžić, reportedly the author of children's poems before the war! Another Stauffenberg or Georg Elsner!?

And in spite of that, almost coincidentally with the impotent impulses to violence of someone visually involved from afar, another part of me (which in fact never stood for my whole) did not want to trust this war and this war reporting. Didn't want to? No, couldn't. Because the roles of attacker and attacked, of the pure victims and the naked scoundrels, were all too rapidly determined and set down for the so-called world public. How, my immediate thought had been, is that *ever* supposed to end well, the high-handed establishment of a state by a single people—if the Serbo-Croatian-speaking Muslim descendants of Serbs in Bosnia are in fact a people—in a region to which two other peoples have a right, and the same right!, and further, all three peoples are mixed up among one another, not only in the multicultural capital city but from village to village and from house to

house in the villages themselves? And again, how would I have acted as a Serb there in Bosnia in response, to put it mildly, to the aggressive founding of a state not suitable to me in my, our, own territory? Who now was the aggressor? (See above.)

And in the course of events, weren't, for a time, many of the distant observers so disposed that if occasionally, as a single exception, one of the pictures of the war victims bore the caption "Serb," we saw that as a mistake, a typographical error, in any case as the exception to be ignored? For if there were in fact such innocent Serbian victims, then they were in a ratio of one to a thousand—one Serbian corpse to a thousand Muslim ones, corresponding to their rare appearance in world consciousness. Which side of the war was, in terms of the dead and martyred, the most attractive for reporting and photography? And why, for the first time, were these sides changed somewhat in the summer of 1995, with the expulsion of the Serbs from the Krajina?—although still it was not the faces of the murdered people that were seen but "only" those of the homeless, with the accompanying suggestion that "these same people" had earlier driven out another people. And doesn't the number just published by the International Court of Justice of those suspected of war crimes in the Yugoslavian war fit that pattern? Forty-seven (47) Serbs, eight (8) Croats, and one (1) Muslim are said to be sought, perhaps, by those in The Hague—as if for this side too, for form's sake,

one is needed, a token war criminal, as otherwise a token good person.

But didn't the odd observer, even before the pictures of the refugee trek out of the Krajina, notice how the Serbian victims, almost invisible up to that point, as a rule appeared radically different in picture, sound, and print than the hecatombs of the others? Yes, in the photos, etc., of the couple of exceptionally newsworthy Serbs, they seemed to me in fact to be "vanishing" and thus stood in the most conspicuous contrast to their comrades in grief and sorrow from the other remaining peoples of the war. The latter, it was not uncommon to see, didn't exactly "pose," but they clearly had been shifted into a pose as a result of the visual or reported perspective: doubtlessly really suffering, they were shown in a pose of suffering. And during the years of war reporting, while continuously and really suffering, and no doubt more and more, they compliantly and visibly adopted the requested martyr faces and postures for the lenses and microphones of the international photographers and reporters, as instructed, directed, signaled ("Hey, partner!"). Who can tell me I am mistaken or even malicious when, looking at the picture of the unrestrainedly crying face of a woman in close-up behind the bars of a prison camp, I see *also* the obedient following of directions given by the photographer of the international press agency outside the camp fence; and even in the way the woman clings to the wire I see

something suggested by the picture merchant? Yes, it may be that I am mistaken, the parasite is in *my* eye (the child, large in one photo, screaming in the arms of a woman, its mother?, and in the subsequent photo far away in a group, very peaceful in the arms of another woman, its real mother?), but why haven't I ever seen such meticulously framed, cleverly devised, and seemingly set-up photographs—at least not here, in the "West"—of a Serbian war victim? Why were Serbs hardly ever shown in close-ups, and hardly ever alone, but almost always only as groups, and almost always only in the middle distance or background, just vanishing, and also, as opposed to their Croatian or Muslim cosufferers, hardly ever with their gaze directly and passionately into the camera, but rather in profile or gazing at the ground as if conscious of their guilt? Like a foreign tribe? Or as if too proud to pose? Or as if too sad for that?

Thus a part of me could not take sides, much less judge. And that led, and not only me, to such grotesque and at the same time perhaps not entirely incomprehensible mechanisms (?) as those described a couple of months ago by the still young French writer (with a Croatian mother) Patrick Besson, in a defense of or, rather, a lampoon for the Serbs (a lampoon *for?*). The lampoon, insightful throughout, ranging from sense to nonsense, begins with Besson's assertion that initially he had seen the beasts of war on the same

side as all the other Western observers, but then one day—cunningly he plays the news consumer, the moody, chic Parisian—he was sick of such monotony. What follows, to be sure, has to do not at all with moods but solely with the author's sensitivity to language and images. First, he very explicitly reminds us of Yugoslavia's history of suffering and resistance during the Second World War—what the rest of us hardly remember and that we now require those affected, and their children and children's children, finally to forget. Then, in a furious sweep, Besson strings together all the worn-out media clichés about contemporary Yugoslavian events, a kind of continuation of Flaubert's *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*, now, to be sure, less for laughter than for crying and screaming at once. As an example here, his citation of the usual sketch of Radovan Karadžić: how it has happened that his profession as psychiatrist is automatically mentioned, for obviously, *vide* Flaubert, all of those who care for the mentally ill cast a shadow themselves; and how, in addition, in publications from Vienna to Paris, he regularly is given the title "Doctor," an obvious parallel to that "Dr. Strangelove" who, in the film by Stanley Kubrick, wants to blow up our world, etc., etc. And, as it happened, while reading Besson's lampoon, I came across a kind of portrait of the Serb leader in *Le Monde,* which featured popular image after popular image, cliché after cliché, exactly that linguistic practice just mentioned. This was a quasi-serious account

of a reality that included additional accepted ideas: for example, the poems that psychiatrist Dr. K. writes—naturally, "in his spare time"—were read by nobody and were, naturally, "mediocre," etc. And in one of those grotesque response mechanisms to such things, at least in my case, I wanted to read a poem of Karadžić's—just as the phrases about the murderer's bride and chauvinist singer Ceca awakened a desire to hear her songs. And in a perhaps similar mechanism in Patrick Besson: how, after all the prefabricated reports, he actually sees Radovan Karadžić once in Pale and describes him as an aging, tired, almost absent, rather sad woman—an almost loving description: — an inadmissible countermechanism?

In any case, such mechanisms or, better, defenses or, better, countermotions seem worth mentioning in part because they run the risk of falling out of balance and losing a sense of justice—like the perhaps only popular image to slip from Besson's hand in his defense of Serbs, a turbid stereotype not unlike the ones he aims at in his pamphlet: he tells of a meeting of warriors in that same Pale, and the Bosnian Serb soldiers appear quite different from our usual conceptions of them, which would perhaps be a good thing if the young men didn't rise so delicately out of the short depiction, sentence after sentence, approaching the motto "Lively, Cheerful, Free" [*Frisch, Fröhlich, Frei,* the motto of the physical education movement around 1800]. And I thought then the danger of such

countermotions could be that something might express itself in them comparable to the glorifications of the Soviet system by some travelers in the West during the thirties. Still, is it a misdirected mechanism when, in response to every new journalistic report of yet another horde of *Slivovica*-drinking Serbian nationalists, rural illuminati, and paranoiacs, one sees a not so dissimilar horde of foreign reporters every evening at a hotel bar, holding, instead of the plum brandy, one distilled from grapes or something else? Or when one desires for many a journalist, on the occasion of his hundredth identical Yugoslavia article, not exactly a glowing coal on the lips, as in the prophet Isaiah, but certainly a small poultice of stinging nettle around his writing hand?

What follows here, however, does not stem entirely from my perhaps mechanistic mistrust of those (often seemingly practiced) heraldic reports but consists of questions about the thing itself: Has it been proved that the two attacks on Markale, the market of Sarajevo, were really Bosnian Serb atrocities, as claimed, for example, by Bernard Henri-Lévy—he too a new philosopher, one of the increasing number of contemporary philosophers who are everywhere and nowhere—who trumpeted immediately after the attack, in an absurd grammar: "It will doubtless be the Serbs who prove the guilty ones!"? And another parasite question: What really happened in Dubrovnik? Was

the small, old, wonderful city bowl or bowl city on the Dalmatian coast actually bombed and shot up early in the winter of 1991? Or only—bad enough—episodically shelled? Or did the targets lie outside the thick city walls and there were stray shells, ricochets? Malicious or accidental, shells that were put up with (that, too, bad enough)?

And finally, I have even come so far that I ask, and not only myself: What is the truth about that violent dream of "Greater Serbia"? Didn't the powers that be in Serbia, if they in fact dreamed it, have it in their power—child's play—to bring it to pass? Or isn't it also possible that a few of the innumerable sand grains of legend that fly around wildly in disintegrating kingdoms, not only those in the Balkans, have been magnified in our foreign darkrooms into stumbling blocks? (Not long ago, a purported chronicle of the four war years in Yugoslavia in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* began as early as the subtitle to assign guilt for the disintegration of the country to the anonymous memorandum writers of the Serbian Academy of 1986: "The war in the former Yugoslavia began in the study / Scientists provide the ideological justification for the great conflict.") Didn't, finally, a "Greater Croatia" prove to be something incomparably more real, or more effective, or more massive, more determined and resolved, than the legend-nourished Serbian dream seed, which never and nowhere gathered into a unified sense of power and power politics? And

won't the history of the wars of disintegration now be written differently perhaps than in the contemporary assignments of guilt in advance? But hasn't this history, as a result, already been written in stone for all the future? Written in stone? Not rather rigidified, as after 1914, as after 1941—rigidified and consolidated in the consciousness of Yugoslavia's neighboring peoples as well, of Austria above all, and of Germany, and thus ready for the next explosion, for the next 1991? Who will someday write this history differently, even if only the nuances—which could do much to liberate the peoples from their mutual inflexible images?

2

PART ONE
OF THE TRIP

THE THINGS I HAVE TO RELATE about our trip through Serbia are not intentional counterimages to the multiple prepunched peepholes into the country. For what impressed me, without intent and without effort on my part, were almost exclusively third things—that third that according to the German epic writer Hermann Lenz is to be seen or caught sight of "alongside outside" and that for the old philosopher (nothing against new philosophers; now and then I would need one) Edmund Husserl is called "the life-world." And naturally I was always conscious while traveling that I was in the state of Serbia, constituent state of the shrunken Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. This third, this life-world, did not lie inside or away from the signs of reality or of the times.

Before departing from Zurich, I bought a small Langenscheidt's dictionary (1992 edition). Where it once said "Serbo-Croatian" on the familiar yellow cover, only "Croatian" now stood. I asked myself, while thumbing through, whether I would have found "DIN, Deutsche Industrienorm" in the back under "Common Abbreviations" even during the time when Serbian too played a role. It was newly revised by

"Prof. Dr. Reinhard Lauer," who, more or less that same year, hired by the *FAZ,* there repeatedly accused the entire Serbian people, along with its poets (by-passed by the Enlightenment from, shall we say, the Romantic Njegoš to Vaško Popa—see identification with the wolf!; see Popa's wolf poems!), of the most dangerous myth complexes.

In contrast to the other gates at the Zurich airport, hardly any of the passengers to Belgrade opened their mouths, and even during the flight we remained quite silent, as if the Serbs, even as a large majority in the belly of the plane (foreign workers? visiting parents?), felt they were on the way to an uncertain destination.

While landing in the flat, long since harvested countryside, nothing visible far or near of the city of Belgrade, with over a million inhabitants the "only cosmopolitan city in the Balkans" (Dragan Velikić; more about him later), S. made me aware of a group of people, or silhouettes, next to the runway, roasting a piglet there at the edge of a field. Other late-autumn smoke plumes rose up, simultaneously, everywhere. Previously, in a book by the contemporary Serbian novelist Milorad Pavić, I had read of a woman who, kissing her lover, counted his teeth one by one with her tongue; and that the meat of fish from rivers which, like the Morava, flow from south to north is no good; and that it is barbaric, while mixing wine, to pour in the *water,* rather than the other way around.

And then my friend and translator Žarko was

standing at the airport exit, having flown ahead of us from Cologne. I hadn't seen him for several years, and yet I was now almost disappointed to be picked up. I would rather have negotiated this first threshold to the foreign country, found my way in, alone. As if I had spoken it aloud, he said that he too had become something of a stranger in Belgrade and Serbia (as was borne out by the awkwardness of his movements, including his opening of the hotel door).

On the drive through the new parts of town, "Novi Beograd," intermittently, in the almost steppe-like emptiness, there occurred at regular intervals something like mass gatherings close to the edges of the broad access roads, and at the same time widely separated from one another: the entire population in the middle of what seemed an otherwise leisurely afternoon—all the buildings under construction as if long since abandoned—waiting ostensibly for buses and streetcars, interminably, though no longer with the appearance of waiting people. And again it was S. who made me aware of the even more frequent groups of black market gasoline sellers with their plastic containers. In the first moments, as so often, and not only particularly there, I had a clear view of all the anticipated emblems of reality.

In the Moskwa Hotel—an elegant and, as time passed, even noble-seeming street-corner structure from the turn of the century, in the center of the city on the terrace above the Save and the Danube (Dunav

in Serbian)—almost all the rooms were empty, while downstairs at the reception desk an entire brigade of employees (including their friends?) lazed around, and initially it seemed to us in our room that we were the first guests in a long time and the last for even longer. From S.'s view, from the high balcony door down to the leaf-blown boulevard—no, *bulevar;* no, БУЛЕВАР—I felt her French *dépaysement* come over me, her alienation, her being foreign here, or, translated literally, her "having fallen out, being out of the country" (like being out of oneself), and I wished then and there to conjure up my other Serbian friend for us, the former laundry employee and gambler, who would have been immediately and contagiously at home everywhere, whether in Salzburg or here in his capital city, or who at least would have contagiously scorned all need for being home. (He was two days late on his drive through Eastern Europe.)

For my part, the "*re*paysement," the "repatriation," took place immediately afterward, on that very boulevard, while buying something in a shop, in fact while depressing the ancient iron door handle and pushing open the shop door almost laboriously, and it became final, valid for all the subsequent days, with the speaking of the name of the article, learned out on the street and understood immediately by the saleswoman. And S. too seemed to become somewhat secure during the evening walk through the unexpectedly bright center of Belgrade in the direction of the Kalemegdan, the old Turkish

fortress high above the confluence of the Save and the Danube. Only Žarko, the native, our pilot, stumbled, got mixed up, lost his way, confused directions, and could not cease talking about his having become a stranger in his own capital, where he had in fact been living again for several days, cared for by his mother, which made me think he had probably always been a stranger in Belgrade—and then his answer again: actually he was at home only out in the suburb of Zemun, on the Danube, where it begins to flow into the Pannonian plain, his birthplace, childhood locale, and lookout.

The first Belgrade evening was mild, and the half-moon shone not only over the Turkish fortress. There were many people out, as is customary in a large southern European center. But they impressed me as not only more silent than, let's say, in Naples or Athens but also more conscious of themselves and of the other passersby, more alert as well, in the sense of a very special courteousness that did not display itself but simply suggested itself through a manner of walking that excluded jostling, even when hurried, or through a similarly harmonious way of speaking, which seemed to leave room for others, without the yelling out, whistling; and showing off common in comparable pedestrian zones. And the numerous street vendors were quietly ready for their customers, addressing no one (there was one who contradicted my image). I caught sight of no Serbian slivovitz drinkers but rather, around a street fountain, people

who drank water from their hands; and nowhere was there any sign of or reference to the war, and hardly a policeman, at least perceptibly fewer than elsewhere in urban areas. S. thought later that these citizens of Belgrade were serious and depressed. The inhabitants seemed to me, however, at least at first sight, singularly animated (as opposed to the theater audience thirty years earlier) and at the same time, yes, civilized. Out of a general consciousness of guilt? No, stemming from something like a great thoughtfulness, an overdeveloped consciousness, and—I felt there and now think here—an almost dignified collective isolation; and perhaps also out of pride: one, to be sure, that did not boast. "The Serbs have become modest," I read later in *Die Zeit*. Have become? Who knows? Or, in my favorite saying (Austrian), along with "For that you would have had to get up earlier!": "What does a stranger know?"

Who were the many old men the next day on the grounds of the Kalemegdan ruins, most of them alone, whiling away time so silently in the prewinter fog rising from both rivers? Often in tie and hat, comparatively smooth-shaven for the Balkans, they did not exhibit characteristics of retired workers, nor could masses of that size be former officials or freelance workers; they did exude, all of them, a class consciousness, but one that was, even in the case of the possible doctor, lawyer, or former merchant among

them, visibly different from, say, the German and especially the Austrian bourgeois consciousness I was acquainted with. And further, these old but never aged men did not give the impression of Europeans or even Orientals; they most closely resembled strollers on a misty promenade in Basque country, though lacking the appropriate caps. Powerful appearances, they were under way there among the fortress ruins, clear forms in the fog, their faces almost grim, though over time they came to express for me a kind of presence, or determination. Nor were they confirmed bachelors; they had rather something about them of long and even somewhat happily married and now recently widowed men: widowed and, peculiar in the case of such old men, at the same time orphaned. No, in my eyes they could not be Serbian patriots or chauvinists, ultra-orthodox churchgoers, royalists, or old Chetniks, and surely not former Nazi collaborators, but it was also difficult to imagine them as partisans with Tito and then Yugoslavian functionaries, politicians, and industrialists; it was clear only that they had all suffered approximately the same loss and that it was still quite fresh in their clouded minds as they strolled about. What was the loss? Loss? Wasn't it more like they had been brutally defrauded of something?

Among the few questions I actually asked during the Serbian trip, the most common—so common that it irritated those traveling with me—was whether the

person I questioned believed that Yugoslavia could ever reconstitute itself. Almost none responded positively, "Not even in a hundred years." At best was the one answer "We, at least, will not experience it." Milorad Pavić, the writer, thought that if the former parts of the republic were ever to draw together, it would happen solely through trade, and he explained how treasured, for example, products from Slovenia once were in Serbia. Which? "Cosmetics. Slovenian skin creams, oh!" Only Zlatko's almost eighty-year-old father said, in his village, Porodin, on the Morava plain: "Not perhaps with the Croatians, but certainly with the Slovenes, and that quite soon. We Serbs have always produced the big things and the Slovenes the small, delicate parts for them, and that was a good trade-off. And I have never been so hospitably entertained as in Slovenia!" (That was the only time his wife nodded, vigorously, in response to one of his remarks.)

After the fog, there followed a couple of days that were still sunny and again warm. Once, still before Zlatko ("the golden one") arrived, we traveled with Žarko ("the fiery one") out to his Belgrade suburb, Zemun, his childhood locale and now perhaps his dream home—out of the city over the Save Bridge, which the residents of the capital city call "Gazelle." Difficult, at first, to participate emotionally as he showed us the two windows of the family's former apartment (his father was a minor local politician, who died early on), up in a not especially high apartment building in need

of plaster work, the ubiquitous poplars around the corner; and his route to school, which, I thought or said, was much too short for anything noteworthy to have happened—to which his answer was: "But on the way home, detours!" The Zemun fruit and vegetable market, neatly separated into two large sections, spacious for a suburb, with an atmosphere that evoked the river, gave the first indication of something special (I bought a couple of apples because I didn't want to roam through a foreign market like a curiosity seeker).

And then, for once well guided by our friend, who had us go ahead at the end, we came out, unsuspecting, between small, stretched-out bourgeois houses to the Danube, so powerfully broad here, in contrast to the river of the same name I knew in Austria, that an additional zone stretched back behind on the water, still far from the other shore, which made this Dunav a real *Strom* [flowing river]—a word from the Austrian national anthem that, measured by my experience, had always seemed exaggerated to me. A river world opened for us in this Belgrade or Zemun Danube, an inland waterway, not only on the restaurant-lined promenade, which led back into the city, but also in the hundreds of boats drawn up in deep, vanishing rows, anchored and only recently covered for the winter, and skiffs like dugouts. Now and then, one of the things eased free—the soft puttering of its motor, with sporadic human voices, the only sound far and near—slanting over to the seemingly transcontinental oppo-

site shore, where, on the edge of the woods, stilt houses stood. But most of the watercraft simply rocked in the current or swung back and forth; here and there, smoke from a cooking fire; and otherwise the river's center remained empty for the entire afternoon: the embargo. This river world was perhaps a sunken one, decaying, old, but it represented also a world landscape the likes of which have never emerged for me from the Dutch paintings of the seventeenth century: a primeval world that appeared as an undiscovered civilization, a very appealing one. And then we dined on carp in a river inn of the same name, Šaran. In the dusk we climbed to the Zemun Castle, asked, on the way, for directions to the castle by an older woman, speaking in unaccented English, who then apologized that although a Serb, she didn't know the language. Up in the cemetery, the faces of the dead were graven in the monuments, probably from photos, only much enlarged, many of them married couples, as a rule represented as very young couples, however old they had become together—perhaps because no subsequent picture had been taken of them?

Back in Belgrade ("White City"), under a nearly full moon, we finally met Zlatko, who had had to spend a night in Hungary for driving too fast (his car was already safely parked in a garage near the hotel), and the four of us listened to music from various regions of Yugoslavia until long after midnight in a pub called Ima Dana ("There Are Days," the title of a Serbian song),

while at the same time in Tel Aviv, Yitzhak Rabin was being murdered—the following morning, his blurred image appeared on the low-tech front page of the opposition newspaper *Naša Borba.* During the late-night walk home, the fog had returned, so thick that the bodies of the passersby seemed cropped and lessened by it. And, unexpectedly, there were masses of passersby on all the streets of Belgrade, appearing out of the gray and whitish clouds that barked up into the city as if from below, from the two rivers, running and then again motionlessly pressed together in certain places: passengers for the last streetcars. And then from the hotel window nothing outside discernible anymore in the now total fog other than a single bright piece of paper fluttering back and forth far down the boulevard, joined momentarily by the outline of a broom and by the hand of the post-midnight Belgrade street sweeper. And on Serbian state television that farewell scene of President Milošević, immediately prior to his departure for the peace talks in Dayton, Ohio: walking down a long line of military and civilian people on the runway and hugging each one long and hard, the whole time visible only from the back—the departing man for long minutes only as a picture from the back.

While listening to the Ima Dana music, Zlatko had told about a legendary section of the Danube near the city of Smederevo, where—he hadn't experienced it himself, knew it only secondhand from a teacher at

his village school—the great river was supposed to flow by silently, absolutely without sound. The next day, we set off for there in his car (neither stolen nor scratched) and for the first time entered deeper into the Serbian countryside. And here, toward the southeast, we found what Zlatko said was typical for Serbia: broad horizons with a gentle, even hilliness (Avala Mountain, an hour in the car from Belgrade, a bit much for a local mountain, rose up there like an event, although it was not at all high—as if every ordinary landscape had its Sainte-Victoire massif). Closely dovetailed villages were each made up of farmsteads that themselves consisted of multiple parts, small villages, as it were, within the large village. The cemeteries too, out among the fields, seemed to be not cities of the dead but *villages* of the dead, animated ones, to be sure, especially now at the time of All Souls' Day, celebrated in Serbia a few days after "us," when nourishment was brought for the dead, and people ate and drank with them at their graves. And topsoil that seemed rich even at a glance stretched to the farthest folds of the land, where everything grew that was needed for daily life: corn, sunflowers, and grain, long since harvested, of course; here and there the remaining darkly shining bunches of grapes up on the hillsides. And again everywhere the gasoline and diesel sellers with their containers or even just bottles and flasks—Romania was a close supplier—and the seemingly infinite if thin stream of those walking the

length and breadth of the country, not only the refugees from Bosnia and the Krajina, but above all the natives, common not so long ago among "us" in Central Europe, village people on the way to the distant hospital or to the weekly market, walking beyond the secondary streets out even to the scarcely used freeway (a high toll, especially for foreigners).

In Smederevo, by foot to the Danube, behind the medieval river fortress partially blown up by the occupying Germans in the Second World War: and in truth, no sound came from the entire open and broad and yet obviously fast-flowing body of water, the whole hour there, on the bank, not the least splashing, bubbling, gurgling, no sound and no stirring. Back in the city, then, an old passerby was asked for directions: he didn't know the way, was a refugee from Knin.

That was the day on which, for the first time in Serbia, it became rather cold even before dusk, with a hint of snow. But the next day, for a last time, the warmth of late autumn, sun without wind. Before we left a Belgrade deeply preoccupied by the peace talks to visit Zlatko's village, his parents supposedly having been preparing a feast for us for days, we took a detour via the main city market, there on the terraced embankment that slopes gently down from the city center to the Save.

Not a few reports have made fun, more or less mildly, of the indeed ridiculous things with which the Serbian

people, if they don't belong to the local mafia, try to make a profit, from badly bent nails to painfully thin plastic sacks and, let's say, empty matchboxes. But there was also, it now turned out, much to buy that was beautiful, pleasing, and—why not?—charming. It is difficult for someone who doesn't smoke to tell whether, for example, the heaps of thin-cut tobacco, airy and grassy, changing from market table to market table, taste as good in hand-rolled cigarettes as they look. I do know the taste of the Yugoslavian breads, uniform or monotonous only at first glance, of the massive forest-dark honey pots, of the soup chickens as big as turkeys, of the oddly yellow noodle nests or crowns of the often predator-mouthed, often storybook-fat river fish. But what I remember most vividly of such market life, noticeably affected by a time of shortage—and this applied not only to delicacies but equally to all the perhaps really almost useless stuff (who knows?)—was a liveliness, something happy, light, vivacious about the process of buying and selling (that elsewhere has become pompous and grave, mistrustful and half scornful)—a graceful finger dance back and forth over the market grounds, a dance of alternating hands. From the messiness, mold, and forced nature of mere business deals there arose there, in miniature, but in myriad variety, something like an original and, yes, traditional pleasure in commerce. *Pari passu* business dealings: the meaning of such a term was renewed here in this isolated country, as was,

for example, the word "notions." Business be praised: would you ever have expected something like that from yourself (and it wasn't even commissioned)? And I caught myself then even wishing that the country's isolation—no, not the war—might continue; that the Western (or whatever other) world of goods and monopoly might continue to be inaccessible.

On the drive to the village of Porodin, we finally crossed the much, probably too much, sung Morava River, pressed into a symbolic role and forced into a symbolic bed by the Turkish and Balkan wars. It was now, simply, autumnally dry and stone-pocked; next to the automobile bridge, the earlier foot and cart bridge, half collapsed. Porodin then stretched out along the road, perhaps one of the longest villages in Europe, with its several small centers constituting a kind of village state, as were said to exist in the area, at a considerable distance from one another. We stopped for a short time at a general store in one of the village centers. In front of it, for lunch, a couple of villagers were drinking beer; during the years of restrictions, the cafés had become too expensive for most of the population, and so the business had been converted into a tavern. On the house across the way a black cloth was stretched out; the little child from there had recently been run over and killed by a car driving fast, as usual, in the village built along the road. When a young man dressed in a farmer's work clothes, with red eyes and lips that seemed to be swollen, came into

the store, each of us knew immediately that he must be the child's father.

The house, the farmstead, the estate of Zlatko's parents—in actuality long since signed over to their only child, the Serb abroad—lay at the farthest end of Porodin, not beyond seven fabled mountains, but beyond seven long curves. It is flanked first by the still partly blooming flower garden of the mother and immediately thereafter, without transition, by the powerful muddy yard in front of the barns and stalls; the accompanying fields and vineyards were scattered about, generally far apart. The rooms of the house were in different structural sections, their coherence difficult to grasp, everywhere new rooms built on or over or even in the old structure, little of it finished, however, as is customary, perhaps, for workers abroad who acquire money and return home by fits and starts. One of these additions, with a score of shiny new chairs of a Salzburgian elegance around an equally bright long oval table, presented itself as an otherwise empty, totally unprovincial conference room, and on that same floor, around three corners, a bathroom tiled in Baroque blue awaited the guest, obviously never entered by the timid mother or father; and perhaps most astonishing of all was to come upon a small kitchen couch here and there in this new-old interconnected living section—meant for whom?—but nowhere anything like a master bedroom or a double bed. "Where do your parents sleep, Zlatko?"

"Wherever they end up, here, there; my father sometimes down in the basement, my mother usually upstairs with the television."

To eat there was the chicken soup, a roast pig, and the "Serbian" cabbage salad, along with an extremely cloudy and yet clear-tasting homegrown wine from the hillsides across the road, where the last visible objects in the dusk were the sheep grazing up the hill. The conversation between the returned son and his father and mother had ceased to make sense to me—was it even still Serbian? No, the family had unconsciously slipped into Romanian, the conversational or intimate language of most of the village inhabitants; Porodin was well known as a linguistic island. But did they identify themselves as Serbs? Naturally—what else? On the way back to Belgrade, we carried with us a basket of fruit, overflowing with grapes, on each one of which, as we entered the city, there flashed a point of light.

The single somewhat official day in Serbia began during the drive into the southern mountains, to the medieval church and monastery complex of Studenica, a national shrine; a trip within—or external to?—the trip. We traveled in the company of the famous writer Milorad Pavić, a gently dignified older man who had always written, he told us, but until his first successes, past the age of fifty, was known rather as a professor of literature, a specialist in the Serbian Baroque, with vis-

iting professorships at the Sorbonne and, I think, Princeton.

It was also the day of the first snow, starting that morning during our departure from Belgrade, a November snow that brought down from the trees numerous leaves, whipped by gusts of wind that sprung the not exactly stable Yugoslavian umbrellas. The driving snow increased, and at the instigation of Milorad Pavić we stopped at a freeway rest area to drink . . . , thinned, to be sure, by hot water and served by a solitary rest-stop attendant, who, like most of the population along the five-hour journey that followed, knew Gospodin Pavić (and not only from television; the Serbs are said to be a people of readers).

Kragujevac, Kraljevo—quite large mid-Serbian cities, after which we turned southwest into another Serbia, mountainous, full of canyons, nearly deserted, with here and there a castle ruin round about a treeless mountain, similar to a deserted *castillo* in the Spanish *meseta*. And gradually, in advance of every even recognizable locality or landscape form, I figured out that my neighbor in the backseat of the car had already written something about it, whether it was prose about this village church or a poem about that mountain river.

Up the mountain to the monastery, along the wild brook named Studenica (in effect, "ice-cold water"), the weather became deep, bitter-cold winter weather, which stayed with us for all the remaining days.

Above the old Byzantine church settlement on the floor of a high valley, nearly a thousand meters above the sea that in Serbia is so perceptibly distant, the flakes swirled as they have for eternities. In the frescoes I recognized the roundish table of the Last Supper from the Byzantine churches in Ohrid, in Skopje, in Thessalonica, Jesus and the apostles gathered around it as if around the Ptolemaic earth disk, and one John the Baptist resembled Che Guevara in a way, his nipple, surrounded by sparse hair, like a tiny bullet wound. And in the guest room of the monastery, across the frosty courtyard, in front of an open fire that seemed rather to be burning in a white oven, the abbot, of course orthodoxly bearded, after the hospitable confection offered by the spoonful, served water-thinned plum brandy (again!) and himself did ample justice to the ruffians' rotgut. And then snow cloud after snow cloud brushing the windows of the hotel restaurant below the monastery, the cliffs behind already invisible in the early-winter darkness, the otherwise unheated dining room weakly fanned by a shoebox-size heater. Clamminess, exposure, forced marginality. And at the same time I wanted to spend a pitch-dark night in this *unworldly* place and then was almost disappointed that the snow did not prevent our return trip.

Much later, when I asked S. for an extremely ordinary and peripheral detail of that day—a day that continued to have, in spite of everything, a slightly of-

ficial tint—she offered the moment of the crêpes, or *palačinke,* there in the cold inn: they were served cold and thick as a thumb, and Monsieur Pavić said it was hopeless, the Serbs would never learn to make crêpes. Yes, and then I remembered how the poet, breaking the rule in his book, poured water into the wine (rather than the other way around) and explained that it was mineral water and didn't count for him as water. And how, during the long drive, he had mentioned the Serbian king in exile, who had become much more conversant in the language of his forebears since the disintegration of Yugoslavia and that he, a member of the Privy Council, was invited to London by the king with increasing frequency, and they also met in Greece. And then it was I who told the story of my Slovenian grandfather in Carinthia, how he voted, in the plebiscite of 1920, for unification with the newly established Yugoslavia and had always considered it his affirmation of the Slavic and a vote against the Austria that had shrunk, *kleindeutsch,* in 1918—and how I had since asked myself whether his decision, after the end of the Hapsburg Empire, with the declaration of the republic, hadn't perhaps arisen more out of a longing or a need, not for a Kaiser, to be sure, but at least for a king like the one at the head of the young southern Slavic nation!?

On that same semi-official day, I still had an evening appointment in Belgrade with the forty-two-year-old writer Dragan Velikić (two writers in one

day), whom I had met once, in the years before the wars, in Lipica in the Slovenian karst. I know two of his short novels, *Via Pula*, in which the childhood of a Serb in Croatian Pula is described quite freely, with repeated crossings or views into possible second or third lives, and then *Zeichner des Meridian* (Draftsman of the Meridian), read after my return (both published by Wieser Verlag). The latter is a grotesquely mirrored, shattered, shardlike story about a decimated Yugoslavia—the narrative and the told events work together and produce, finally, alongside "book" and "country," a third thing. Velikić writes against the grain, a contrary writer born of the collision of the geographic-historical with the corresponding fragmented self that is, at the same time, no less "I!": this is the substance of the book or the minor premise that holds together the splintered things and passages. And of course examples are in order. "Life as a grave. It cannot, perhaps, be otherwise in a land where, at the turning point of the winds over centuries, the cunning eunuch with the silk cording, the snake-eyed wearer of a habit, and the bearded schismatic faced one another. They can be forged together only through deception." Or: "In European cities (1995) enclaves of Belgrade youths vegetate, fled in the early nineties, during the war in Croatia and Bosnia. It was their fate to be forgotten. For the fighting parties, the war dogs, are from the same tribe, whatever their names and with however many fingers they cross themselves. If they cross

themselves." And: "Just like a hibernating scorpion that spends its years in a green wall, he (the hero) dreams the life that hasn't been realized. It is impossible to still the vein that pulses."

On that late evening in Belgrade, Dragan Velikić, whom I remembered as strong and passionate, as attentive and full of trust, seemed to me at first glance rather depressed and disheartened, almost despondent. The place of our meeting was not a good one, perhaps: the supposedly private address turned out to be a small publishing house, where a couple of other "literary" people were already waiting with Velikić, emanating the surely unintended air of conspirators. And because at that late hour there was no longer a way to escape into one of the neighborhood pubs, the official character of this day, as if preestablished, continued, curiously, deep into the night. A kind of panel discussion was now supposed to take place about general conditions, about the Bosnian war, about the Bosnian Serb, Serbian Serb role in the war. For a long time we sat in near silence, edgy, at a loss, with a huge bottle of Frascati, and an ancient one at that, although the young domestic white wine was so much more palatable; Dragan had a bottle of the famous Riesling from Palić, but in the general silence it didn't last long, and it was, in any case, past its prime; strange to see the vintage 1990 on the label, after the small Slovenian war and before the other, big ones.

The worst or most awkward moment came when

someone passed around a memento from the war in Bosnia, said to be the guidance capsule of a Tomahawk rocket fired from there at the Serb Republic just this past autumn. The approximate size of a rugby ball, it was an extremely heavy steel thing, between hemisphere, rounded cone, and miniature pyramid, which supposedly, shortly before reaching the target, detached itself from the missile, and the souvenir (in fact, with an obviously genuine plaque declaring it to be the property of the U.S. Air Force) was purportedly acquired in Banja Luka, the center for Bosnian Serbs. Still, instead of feeling closer to the events as a result, I sensed that we were all suddenly nowhere, and felt there was now nothing more to say; and I think I was not the only one to respond that way. Fortunately, I then thought to ask Velikić about his Pula and about Istria, and just as relieved as the others, he said that his rented house there was occupied by the Croatian military; an officer lived in it, while he, from Belgrade, continued to pay the rent—powerful short laughter—and why not? And then things livened up, with general conversation about small and large places, about Feldafing in Bavaria, for example, or about Vienna, where his young son, during a stay the previous summer, had memorized the transfer possibilities of all the subway stations.

And then gradually, as a matter of course, the subject changed to contemporary Yugoslavia. One man in the room finally literally screamed at how guilty the

Serb leaders were for the present suffering of their people, from the oppression of the Albanians in Kosovo to the thoughtless recognition of the Krajina Republic. It was an outcry, not an expression of opinion, not simply an oppositional voice from a cultural gathering in a back room. And this Serb spoke only about his own leaders; the war dogs elsewhere were spared, as if their deeds themselves screamed to heaven, or to somewhere else.

Strange, however: although in this man's presence I finally lost my sense that anything was official or calculated about the situation—rather than making statements, he suffered, angrily and transparently—I did not want to hear his damnation of his leaders; not here, in this space, nor in the city or the country; and not now, when a peace was perhaps in the works, after a war that had been started and finally probably decided with the help of foreign, utterly different powers. (That he then hugged me as we parted was, I thought there, because he felt understood, and I ask myself now whether his motivation wasn't rather that in fact he hadn't.)

3

PART TWO
OF THE TRIP

THEN BEGAN THE LAST PART of our trip, and in stretches (no, throughout) it became adventurous.

We departed from Belgrade during a late-November snowfall shot through with leaves. Leaving the city and the Moskwa Hotel, we headed for the border, to Bosnia. S. had set out that morning for France, because the children had to return to school after the All Souls holiday, and now we—Zlatko, Žarko, and I—in Zlatko's car, sought the way to Bajina Bašta, on the Drina, where Žarko's former wife lived with their daughter. "Sought" because although the father had traveled the route repeatedly in the course of the eighteen years of his child's life, this time none of the roads were familiar to him, for he had always taken the bus (and there were, at the moment, no road maps of Serbia available).

Before leaving the city, however, we gassed up for the first time in what was commonly said to be the "land with the most gas stations in the world"—which meant the people crowding the edges of the streets leading out of the city, canisters and bottles in hand. Each subsequent refueling did nothing to change my first impression, that the thick greenredgreen fluid,

poured openly into the tank each time in a slow, broad stream by exceedingly careful hands, let itself be seen as never before as what it in fact was: something quite rare, precious, a *treasure of the earth*—and again I could not argue against my wishful thought that this kind of refueling might long continue, and perhaps even catch on in other countries of the world. (After filling up we were, it's true, examined by a police patrol, as if they had smelled something; and because "Zlatko Bo."—according to his Serbian driver's license—was driving the car of someone else, "Adrian Br."—according to the Austrian registration—there was a not too exorbitant fine to pay; if the police had figured out that the two names stood for one and the same person, the whole thing would have ended less leniently.)

Our trip to the Drina led approximately southwest, through a broad, fielded plain, hill-less for a long time, "finally typically Serbian," according to Žarko. In the open countryside, it was soon snowing harder, and after we had taken a wrong turn for, say, the third time—the few Sunday-afternoon people on the country road, when asked for directions, proved to be, and properly so, drunk out of their minds—it was already starting to get dark in an uncertain, nameless transitional area far from what our guide, otherwise ever more silent, called the "great, wild mountains," which we would have to cross before reaching our goal. Resigned to not arriving there, we turned in at a solitary rural roadside pub, where, in place of the former Tito

portrait, now hung the picture of a Serbian hero and general from the First World War, on the table was a newspaper from the day before, *Večerni Novosti*, whose front page a good week later would be dominated by the giant word МИР—*Mir*, Peace (I wondered in which German newspaper that could have appeared so monumentally in 1945).

As is always said in stories about getting lost, "somehow" we reached the city of Valjevo, where the road over the mountain begins. The mountain was called Debelo Brdo, the Fat Mountain; and the pass for Bajina Bašta, which our guide translated for me in the increasing snowstorm—it was long since night—as "Garden of Baja" (Baja was a Serbian hero against the Turks), was supposed to be well over a thousand meters high. The road up the mountain rapidly grew white, the wheels skidded at the least braking, and the sky grew just as rapidly black. Very soon there were no more lights, neither from a house nor from another car, and the next day we learned that the evening bus from Belgrade had turned in at Valjevo and the passengers had spent the night there in the city at the foot of the mountain.

On a long unpaved stretch, our driver slalomed like a rally driver between cráter-size potholes and we immediately felt better, for the snow had hardly stuck to the bare earth. Our pilot remarked then that on the television weather map that morning there had been no more snowstorms indicated beyond Valjevo. And

now, with each of the long curves, it snowed more heavily, and approximately halfway up, the wind joined in, and soon a mountain storm quickly blew the flakes into dunes, low ones, marching along, halting, solidifying, back and forth across the narrow road. The cardplayer and painter of inn signs steered up through it with the equanimity of a European champion, even when he had to change gears on the steeper sections; no more question of turning back (wasn't that too an expression from adventure stories?).

Now and then, someone, while continuing to stare straight ahead, made a diverting comment, receiving, however, no response. And for perhaps an hour none of the three of us spoke another word as we crossed the Fat Mountain; and even Ceca quit singing, as did the Serbian folksinger Tozovac. When anything at all besides the snowdrifts, hurdle after hurdle, shone in the slowly curving headlights, it was the cliffs, which grew increasingly bare. And my mental game was: Suppose the car got stuck now . . . or now. In which direction should I walk? And how far would I get without a hat and good shoes? Tense! And too bad, almost, that lightning didn't finally shoot through the billowing flakes; such a blizzard would have perfected the stormy night high in the Balkan mountains and transformed, as well, my unease into something else. Into panic? Or perhaps exactly into its opposite?

Somehow, almost at a walking pace, we found our way over the pass and then down to levels where it

snowed more gently; after everything we had experienced we were as if in a peaceful field, and the snow even left the road surface bare in places—whereupon our guide pointed somewhere into the dark valley and, excitedly, spoke the first sentence within what seemed like human memory: "Down there is the Drina, down there must be Bajina Bašta, and then, just beyond, Bosnia."

Then the strange sound of a bell at the door of an apartment house on the brightly lit main street of what seemed to be a quiet Sunday-evening provincial Yugoslavian city, which, in all its strangeness, still seemed somehow familiar (and I now remember that similarly, well over thirty years before, deep in Croatia, I had arrived at the door of a childhood girlfriend). Then three well-lit and even—a rarity in all of Serbia—warm rooms. The welcoming sweets again, with the water glasses into which the teaspoons were then placed; the woman of the house, once an archaeology student in Belgrade, now a secretary at the nearby Drina power plant; the daughter's walls covered with posters of the eternally young James Dean; *sarma* (a kind of stuffed cabbage), *kajmak* (cream cheese), bread and wine from Smederevo (where the Danube flows without a sound). Now and then, I glanced out of the tightly drawn curtains into a Balkan courtyard bordered by similar multiple-dwelling buildings: snow, snow, and continued snow.

And Olga, the native, the woman from Bajina

Bašta who, even so, knew almost every film ever made, explained that the people had experienced little of the war taking place a kilometer away. Corpses in great numbers had supposedly floated repeatedly down the Drina, but she knew no one who had witnessed that. Still, there was no more swimming in the river, which had been full of swimmers in the summers before the war, on the Serbian and the Bosnian banks, back and forth, back and forth, and naturally the boat excursions had been canceled. She and her daughter missed greatly their trips through Bosnia to Split and above all to Dubrovnik, on the Adriatic, and she herself bitterly missed seeing her Muslim friends, whether from Višegrad, her favorite Bosnian city (Ivo Andrić's *Bridge on the Drina* takes place there), or from Srebrenica, which was even a little closer. And she was convinced it was true that near Srebrenica in the summer of this year, 1995, thousands were murdered. In smaller ways, much smaller, that was how the whole Bosnian war had gone: one night a Muslim village was destroyed, the following night a Serbian one, etc. But here in the border city, the Serbs were among Serbs, and there was nothing to say to one another. The brand-new, semi-elegant businesses and bars on the main street belonged to Bosnian Serb war profiteers, and she would never set foot inside. She made it through the month, modestly, only with the support in German marks from her former husband. And the others? They were dependent on neighbors like her, who were halfway

able to share—and in spite of the material deprivation, the distress was primarily an inner one: cut off from the previously wide world, among people who were like herself, she often supposed she was dead. Did love affairs still take place, were children still conceived? "Only, if at all, among the refugees." (And here, for once, even the still young and youthful woman laughed.) Journalists had shown up now and then from the West—which meant, in this case, Bosnia too—but they had known everything in advance and had asked questions accordingly; none of them had proved to be even slightly open to or even just curious about the life of the people here in the border city; and the UN observers had soon moved out of their hotel, because they themselves had felt observed there.

Zlatko, alias Adrian, and I then slept in the Drina Hotel, in unheated rooms. There were no real curtains, and every time I opened my eyes during that first night, in the window, in the bright-yellow illumination from outside, the snow was still falling, and it continued in the morning and during all the days and nights in Bajina Bašta. The city became snowbound. The return route over the Fat Mountain was long since closed; there remained only the road to the north through the Drina Valley, so Zlatko learned, his face and hands swollen with cold, from a couple of militia soldiers who sat next to us at breakfast, their machine guns within reach; but was there a snowplow working?

And almost cheerfully we decided to remain as long as necessary. We bought shoes and caps for the snow, and confronted with the salespersons' diffidence each time we entered, obviously foreigners, I imagined that the "customers" during the war years had all turned out to be foreign reporters who, rather than buying something, asked about prices as part of their research.

Then weatherproofed, half-uniformed figures of men appeared everywhere on the border roads, in the border pubs, and we, including Žarko—who had joined us again after the night with his episodic family—naturally (?) and involuntarily saw in them paramilitary killers: notice the telltale eyes, "experienced in killing"; were then enlightened by the local librarian, who had come with us, a reader (of Nathalie Sarraute and Fernando Pessoa, for example): they were the timber workers and forest rangers of the Fat Mountain, which was something like a national park or at least a kind of recreational area, with a spruce tree found nowhere else in the world, a survivor from the last interglacial period; and nonetheless suspected these people again of being members of a troop of soldiers, in disguise as forest rangers and game wardens.

We walked out of the city to the Drina, to the border bridge. Perhaps, unexpectedly, we would be allowed to go over to Bosnia, which, behind the snow clouds, its hills and meadows clearly silhouetted at times, at others absent, seemed far and near. Quite a

few people were out in the deep snow, mainly old people and children—the latter, probably after having crossed the bridge, on their way to school—wearing a wide variety of head coverings from around the world, among them an old man, his head wrapped in a frayed handkerchief. From their groups the children invariably said, in English, "How do you do?" and then laughed themselves silly. Most of those coming in our direction, whether young or old, were missing several teeth, as was the border guard on the Serbian side of the bridge, who finally let us continue, of course at our own risk; it was well known that the Bosnian Serbs on the other side were long since sensitive about the subject of their homeland.

And now the Drina, broad, wintry black-green, steadily flowing mountain water that appeared still darker, even somber through the snow haze over both banks. A slow walk over the bridge, the librarian, the native, ready, it seemed, to turn back with each step, with an anxiety in his eyes close to naked fear. At the center, between the two countries, then, a kind of lantern was fastened to the rail, improvised and yet like a shrine at a Buddhist river, in my imagination a receptacle for candles, to hold a watch candle for the night. But when opened, the supposed lantern contained nothing but ashes, was prickly with cigarette butts.

Finally, the opposite border house, where we took a couple of steps, memorial steps, into Bosnia. The broken window in the hut, and behind the hut two

turnoffs from the path, more or less straight up the mountain. The border guard with the eyes of a sniper—or wasn't it rather a kind of incurable, inaccessible sadness? Only a god could have relieved him of it, and in my eyes the empty, dark Drina flowed past as such a god, if a completely powerless one. No, we could not enter his country. Still, he let us stand, look, listen for a while on its threshold—not curious, any of us, only shy. Above this Bosnian cliff stretched a scattered farm settlement, the farmsteads at some distance from one another, each one flanked by orchards and the Balkan hay cones or pyramids, high as a house. Even, here and there, a chimney that gave off smoke. (I thought at first they were smoking ruins, or *were* they in fact smoking ruins?) From most of the farms, however, there was no smoke, and often not only the chimney was missing but the entire roof and the doors and windows below. But curiously, few signs of arson, so that these farms too resembled the typical guest-worker houses eternally under construction throughout Yugoslavia, and that not only at the second glance but also at the third. Were they under construction or destroyed? And if destroyed, then, more exactly, carefully dismantled, carried off, the parts dragged away.

And unexpectedly the border-city librarian said: "In this marsh, where once every bird sang its song, European spirits have moved. I don't know how to explain that increasingly I am becoming a Yugoslav. For

them these are now the most difficult times. And when I think about it, it has always been most difficult for such people. I cannot be a Serb, a Croat, a Hungarian, a German, because I no longer feel at home anywhere."

And then too, from my friend Žarko, the Serbian eater of German bread, a song that contradicted his own situation: "Is life in Germany, for me, a Serb, now murderous? The fact is that Germany has made of itself a beautiful, rich, paradisaical country. It is the world as a machine. The houses too are machines. The barking of the dogs in the streets resembles the screeching of the machines in the factory halls. In the self-service stores, it feels as if you were buying screws and not milk. In the butcher shops, as if you were buying nails and not ham. In the drugstores, as if you were buying hammers and not aspirin."

For my part, I can now say that I have hardly ever in my life found myself so constantly and permanently drawn?—inserted?—incorporated? into the world or world events as during what followed in the eventful snow and fog days there in the Bajina Bašta region on the Bosnian-Serbian border river. That nothing bad happened to me in this in fact distressed location—not the least bad thing—meant only good. And the events?

Instead of visiting, for example, an old monastery in the neighborhood, inaccessible anyway because of the incessant snowstorm, we drove up the Drina,

along the border, to visit Olga's mother, a nurse with Tito's partisans during the Second World War. A difficult illness and, even more, heartache at the end of his Yugoslavia, caused her husband, a few years earlier, to shoot himself with his partisan rifle, and she lived alone now in a tiny house (something like a tollhouse) at the base of the Fat Mountain, between precipices that allowed just room for her garden and a strip of land for potatoes. Although the old woman kept her kerchief on all afternoon, in her room she shared some of the traits of an officer, or of the only female among a hundred soldiers, equal in rank with them, gracefully proud in her bearing and simultaneously ready to spring to action. Until the end of her life she would be an enthusiastic Communist—not a Serbian but a Yugoslavian Communist, and not only in the years after the Second World War: today too it was for her the only reasonable possibility for the south Slavic peoples. Before the German invasion in 1941, there were in the kingdom a very few who owned almost everything; otherwise nothing but wretched poverty; and now, in this special Serbian state—whose rulers, as in the other new states, were "traitors"—it was repeating itself with the few war profiteers, who were snatching up everything, and the freezing paupers. (And that at least was correct, for what Zlatko, the foreign Serb from Austria, used to other circumstances, once expressed was obvious: "The whole people is freezing.")

All afternoon we sat in the border hut, and then,

as the village lights went on on one side of the Drina, on the other side it remained completely dark—or darkened. Before the war, light had streamed from the windows there, the one side of the river a mirror of the other; and she missed, the old woman said, the Bosnians, whether Serbs or Muslims, primarily because of the fruit the Muslims, whose orchards were favored by the less steep slopes, brought every autumn over the Drina. (On the return trip from that village on the river road, the headlights sliced figures out of the darkness, refugees quartered here in masses, waiting for hours for a ride into the city, with hardly a car on the street.)

Or we simply crouched, wrapped in coats and parkas, the two of us, as the only regular guests, until far past midnight in the long-since-lightless lobby of the Drina Hotel, and recovered from the singing and blaring of a *guslar*, one of the singers of Serbian heroic legends, supposedly in the tradition of Homer, who had filled our ears the entire evening in a narrow private apartment, his blaring heightened by the accompaniment of his gusla, a stringed instrument with a single, cunningly braided string—recovered there in the dark by telling each other less heroic, even nonsensical stories, or simply by looking out on the unending play of flakes far up the main street (and was the car still there?).

Departure then one early afternoon in snow that was finally letting up, again only two of us, because

Žarko (supposedly the "fiery" or "glowing" one) wanted to stay longer with his daughter and in Frau Olga's heated room (the Deutsche Welle gave him an additional week). And so we drove downriver, to the north, through the darkening and soon and for long pitch-dark Serbia, past more and more slushy piles of snow, which raised themselves one last time to icy drifts during the crossing of Fruška Gora, the long-backed mountain outside Novi Sad (after the First World War, more a foreign than a local mountain for the great Serbian poet Miloš Crnjanski). And after yet another cold night, in the Turist Hotel in the capital of Vojvodina, early-morning shopping for a couple of packs of cigarettes, Morava and Drina brands, in the Novi Sad market, and for a Serbian-Cyrillic mushroom guide in a Novi Sad bookstore, both meant for the Paris suburb. And there too the only meeting of my entire time in Serbia with other travelers, two young men from New York State, who asked if I knew of a cheap hotel and said they were going to make a film in Novi Sad, "only a short one." And then on the way to the Hungarian border, outside Subotica, still in the bitter cold, the almost *puszta*-like plain sporadically hammered by hailstones; dogs straying as always through the countryside, or already dead and stretched stone cold on the street (Zlatko: "In Romania there are even more!"); the sparrow that crashed into the windshield; and the occasional hordes of ravens on the mostly empty asphalt, about which my driving companion then once said

how strange that a magpie, always a single one, was among each flock of ravens—just as I meant to point out the same thing to him.

In the years of the wars of Yugoslavian secession, I had traveled repeatedly through the newly founded Republic of Slovenia, once "my hiking home." That consciousness of connection, however, was impossible to re-create, even for a moment (which would not have been fleeting). Maybe it was my fault, a consequence of my childish disappointment while looking, for example, at the glorious Triglav Mountain (once the highest in all of Yugoslavia), there north of Wochein Lake in the Julian Alps, and knowing its triple head was newly profiled on the Slovenian license plates and the national flag; and perhaps I took the wrong hikes, should have, on my own, taken new routes and not the same old ones.

And in spite of that, such a precipitous turning away, such a sudden isolation and inaccessibility of a country, wasn't simply imaginary. Scarcely a month before our Serbian trip, alone as usual, I hiked through the Wochein Valley and from there to the south down the Isonzo Valley and up to the karst above Trieste. The Wochein area, with its lake, so animated yet so still, at the extreme end, from which the only way further into the mountains is on foot, was once a mythical place, for the Serbs as well: at least, there have been not a few initiation texts (or testimo-

nials, calls to a less pedestrian, more poetic life), called forth in their poets by this region of "Slovenian brothers."

Now, however, back at the valley's end, I found the familiar Hotel Zlatorog (named for a fabulous rock goat), a huge Alpine hut, completely oriented to speakers of German, and in the entrance the framed photos of Tito's onetime visit had been removed—not a big loss—and replaced by the Willy Brandt equivalents, which made me wonder whether Brandt's visit hadn't been made in the company of the Marshal. And on state television—otherwise predominantly German and Austrian channels—a trade or business delegation from abroad is feted at length with strictly native folklore, and finally the Slovenian president joins in, a once able and proud functionary?, who now, however, with the gestures of a waiter, almost of a lackey, tenders his country for sale to the foreigners, as if trying to conform precisely to that assertion of a German entrepreneur and buyer: the Slovenes are not this or that but are rather "an industrious and work-loving Alpine people." And then, early in the morning, the not otherwise unpleasant supermarket, set back in the mountain woods behind the hotel, has the German *Bild* ready, even before the native *Delo*, the daily newspaper from Ljubljana, right next to the stacks of Nivea tubes and cans, their bits of Slovenian text pasted in a narrow strip over the predominant German text. (Sentence of the first customer: "Is *Bild*

here yet?") And in the still beautifully rustic train station of Bohinjska Bistrica, the almost painterly depictions of Serbian monasteries, of the Montenegrin Bay of Kotor, and of the Macedonian-Albanian Lake of Ohrid, true to nature or history, have been replaced—not even by purely Slovenian landscapes, but by prints of children's drawings.

A childish state, then? I just can't get it out of my mind how, as on all the previous trips through the new state, the approaches to similar train stations on the reliably gentle broad karst plateau, even if they lay far out in the wilderness, were posted with a plethora of government exhortations to cleanliness in the landscape (worthy of Europe) and to a common watchfulness over it—and each time, fittingly, the radio music heard—and impossible to miss—throughout the country, when not trivial-folksy, blared forth exclusively as refined European classical, a behavior through which even the brightest pieces of a Mozart or Haydn darkened the mind of the traveler.

Once, I had been thus under way to the grayish-white limestone train station far outside the karst village of Dutovlje. And turning off there from the highway, I missed the screeching, howling, and teeth gnashing of the inmates in the asylum and hospital for incurable illnesses on the otherwise empty corner, sounds I was used to hearing from the windows in all my years hiking through. There was instead a discreet silence behind one window, muffled piano concerts

from a radio behind another; and I walked on to the station, where every picture from the former Yugoslavia had been removed from the old, black-waxed waiting room, in their place in the station entrance another public proclamation against dirt; and saw then, at the end of the path, against the karst savanna, a truck parked, with a license plate from Skopje/Macedonia, no rarity on Slovenian roads in the past but now absolutely unique, and the driver resting out in the steppe grass, vastly deserted, as if left over from the years before the war; and he was listening to a cassette in his transistor, the volume turned down, an Oriental, almost Arabic music that had once played here with a thousand other tunes and was since banned, so to speak, from the air. The man's gaze and mine met for a moment, long enough so that what happened between us was more than merely a common thought but something deeper: a common recollection. Although the sound made the surrounding land seem to open and to stretch anew now, as far as the farthest, nearly Greek south, that continental feeling (as opposed to the "oceanic," hearty feeling) fizzled out almost immediately, and only a phantom pain quivered through the air, a powerful one, and surely not exclusively mine.

Later, in contrast, traveling through Serbia, I had no homeland to lose. Not that the country was foreign to me in the way that the Basque city of Bilbao once felt so alienating, primarily because of its written

language, so that once on entering a public pissoir I expected that even the urinals there would exhibit unheard-of, never seen forms, or would be fixed high up on the walls rather than down on the ground. No, I neither was at home in Serbia nor experienced myself as a foreigner in the sense of one who didn't belong or who had even been offended. I remained constantly a traveler, yes, a tourist, if of that new type recently recommended to the "vacationer" as "durable travel" by travel researchers or scientists. For travel ought—see the travel section of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 23 November 1995—"finally to be understood as valuable property," which is difficult "as long as the choice of a destination is dependent on its prestige"; travel "oriented not to services offered but to those requested"—only thus will the vacationer experience "what effect his trip has on him": in short, "durable tourism."

In the case of Serbia, durable in what sense? For example, there remains with me from there the image, in contrast to our own, of a sharpened and almost crystalline everyday reality. As a result of the war? No, much more the consequence of an entire, great people, *Volk*, that knows itself to be scorned apparently throughout Europe, and experiences that as insanely unjust, and now wants to show the world, even if the world doesn't want to hear anything about it, that it is quite different, not only on the streets but also away from them.

There remains for me, precisely in the crystal-sharp isolation of almost everyone there, for the first time a sense of something like a *Volk*, otherwise rightly long since declared dead: conceivable because this people so visibly dwells in the diaspora in its own country, each in an intensely personal disjunction (as, when I returned, the birds in their sleeping tree near the suburban train station, ruffled up in the night against the cold, were each at a distance from the others, and between their bodies the snow fell). And there remains, durable, to put it most plainly, simply the traveling in a pure inland, almost without natural lakes, with only rivers, but what rivers!—for an experience of such a proper inland, exclusively rivers, no sea far or near: off to Serbia.

And finally, most important, this durable impression: No one knows Serbia—freely adapted from the story by Thomas Wolfe, "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn."

And while I often imagined or wished, on other durable trips, under way alone, to repeat them in select company, I wished this time, almost constantly in such company, to move around in the country by myself, not by car, but in a bus and, most of all, on foot.

EPILOGUE

BUT WASN'T I, in fact, alone once in Serbia? It was on one of the snowy days in the border city Bajina Bašta. In the early-morning darkness, I set out with two goals (remembering my favorite saying, "For that you would have had to get up earlier!"): bus station and Drina, not near the bridge crossing over to Bosnia but somewhere outside, as far beyond the houses and gardens as possible, where it might flow between the fields and pastures on this side and on the other.

It was and remained a dark day, with the mountains on all sides in snow clouds. I had to look hard to find the bus station; there were no signs, and I didn't want to ask. It lay then—as expected, a low building—in a valley created by a tributary of the Drina, across from the first house I had seen in Bajina Bašta with a cross on top, which was otherwise not at all churchlike.

In the main hall of the bus station, the destination board, as large as a monumental painting. Here the Cyrillic letters I had grown accustomed to felt like calligraphy: БЕОГРАД (Beograd), and under it, at the end, СРЕБРЕНИЦА and ТУЗЛА, Srebrenica and Tuzla. This tremendous and seemingly ancient board,

however, was no longer valid. The current timetable had been pasted over a corner, a tiny, formlessly lettered piece of paper, and there were, for the two last-named places as well as others, no more departures. The adjoining coffeehouse, a kind of barracks hall, was empty—except for an old woman at a very large table, who then acted as innkeeper or waitress, two chess players, who played approximately twenty games of lightning chess in the following half hour, and the solitary local elder, far back in a corner, from which he spoke loudly into the room the whole time, not to himself but searching urgently for a listener (who didn't appear).

The hike, straight through the fields, far from the last houses on the city's edge, I soon wanted to abandon: high, wet snow that slid into my shoes, and no footprints ahead of me, as if in warning. And hadn't I already seen enough of the Drina? Nonetheless I continued, my legs continued—and not, by the way, for the first time in such a situation—steadily on, in the direction of the dark strips of pasture that marked border and river. (In that purely Croatian dictionary, there was listed for *luka*, pasture, only the meaning corresponding to the Croatian seascape, "harbor," while in another, a prewar dictionary, I also found "prairie.") Was I being observed from the opposite bank? Nothing moved there in the ruins, or was it an unfinished building? No, ruins, and on both sides again the blackish, seemingly ancient hay cones, high

as a house. And finally, after negotiating a hollow in which there seemed to be gathered all the songbirds I had so missed earlier on the trip through Serbia—the sparrows, the titmice, the robins, the wrens, the hoopoes, the hummingbirds (no, none of these)—finally, now viewed from the top of a bare dike, again the Drina, flowing swiftly, broad, shining deep green, and I almost felt more secure then, sliding down the embankment, past unharvested acres of corn flapping in the wind, than I just had up on the dike.

"But no farther!"—and farther I went, my legs taking me out of the bushes and straight to the bank, past a still fresh excavation in the earth in which masses of shell casings lay (no, not true). And I squatted down there, which made the river stretch a little wider, nothing now from the tips of my Serbian winter shoes to the Bosnian bank except the water of the Drina, smoky cold, into which the big wet flakes fell. I caught myself wondering whether I could have squatted next to such a border river during a German-German war. Downriver, perhaps fewer than thirty kilometers, began, apparently, the region of the Srebrenica enclave. A child's sandal broke the surface at my feet. "You aren't going to question the massacre at Srebrenica too, are you?" S. commented, in response, after my return. "No," I said. "But I want to ask how such a massacre is to be explained, carried out, it seems, under the eyes of the world, after more than three years of war during which, people say, all parties,

even the dogs of this war, had become tired of killing, and further, it is supposed to have been an organized, systematic, long-planned execution." *Why* such a thousandfold slaughtering? What was the *motivation? For what purpose?* And why, instead of an investigation into the causes ("psychopaths" doesn't suffice), again nothing but the sale of the naked, lascivious, market-driven facts and supposed facts?

And I continued to squat that way next to the Drina and thought, or it thought in me, about the Višegrad of Ivo Andrić, perhaps fifty kilometers downriver—and specifically about the figure of the city chronicler so incisively delineated in *The Bridge on the Drina* (actually "On the Drina a Bridge"), written during the Second World War in German-occupied Belgrade, a man who records almost none of the local events over the years, not out of laziness or carelessness, but rather out of vanity and, above all, pride: the events, whatever they are, are simply not, in his opinion, worth recording.

And I thought further (or it thought) there, and I think it expressly, formally, literally here, that all too many of the reporters on Bosnia and on the war there are similar people, as I see it, and are not only proud chroniclers but false ones.

Nothing against those—more than uncovering—*dis*covering reporters on the scene (or better yet: involved in the scene and with the people there), praise for these other researchers in the field! But something

against the packs of long-distance dispatchers who confuse their profession as writers with that of a judge or even with the role of a demagogue and, working year after year in the same word and picture ruts, are, from their foreign thrones, in their way just as terrible dogs of war as those on the battleground.

What kind of journalism was that, for example, practiced interminably in the German *Spiegel*, in which Karadžić "first roared" and then "gave in," and in which, during a dinner at the ongoing peace talks at the military base in Dayton—the negotiators from the Federal Republic of Germany are there, the omniscient weekly whispers, naturally with the final say—one of the participants is described (?) as follows: "More than any of the others, Serb President Slobodan Milošević seemed to relish the surrounding bombers and a dummy of the Nagasaki atom bomb"? (If Croat President Tudjman is a known, all too well known, or, as one might have said earlier, "sufficiently known" evil, Milošević appears, in contrast, if he is an evil, as a largely unrecognized one up to now, which ought to be researched by a journalist, in lieu of cursing and denouncing.) And what kind of journalism is it in which, a week later, the Serbs of Sarajevo, whom the treaty had brought under the control of the Muslim state (and here the *Spiegel* rhetoric suddenly switches from its customary baseness to a biblical phrase), saw themselves "cheated of their thirty pieces of silver"? (To which the inevitable "Balkan expert" in

Le Monde inimitably opined that down there, "nowadays, very few wanted to live in regions where the lawgivers are not the representatives of their own people." Only nowadays? And only there in the Balkans?) *Der Spiegel* is a very special mirror of Germans.

Note well: This is absolutely not a case of "I accuse." I feel compelled only to justice. Or perhaps even only to questioning?, to raising doubts.

So I can, for example, understand very well that the regular special correspondent for Bosnia from *Libération*—anything but a Yugoslavia expert before the war, rather a lively, sporadically amusing sports-writer (most brilliant at the Tour de France)—focuses on such and such a hero and then on the formless, uninteresting, hard-up pack of losers or also-rans; but why must he then make public fun of the "absurdity" and the "paranoia" there in the Serbian districts of Sarajevo when he sees banners with the question: "Do we need a new Gavrilo Princip?" And I can also understand—to be sure, less well—that so many international magazines, from *Time* to the *Nouvel Observateur*, in order to bring the war to their customers, set up "the Serbs," far and near, large and small, as the evildoers, and "the Muslims" in general as the good ones.

And in the meantime, it even interests me how in the Central European Serb-swallowing rag, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, whose primary hatemonger,

their taproot of hate, an editorialist writing almost daily against everything Yugoslavian and Serbian in the style (?) of an executioner ("to be eradicated," "to be cut off," "to be removed"), a Reisswolf and Geifermüller [slashing wolf and vicious-tongued miller—a play on the last name of Johann Georg Reissmüller, an editor of the *FAZ*]—it interests me how this journalist might have arrived, from his German throne, at his word-slinging tenacity. I was never able to understand this man and his rabidity, but lately I feel some compulsion to do so: can it be that he, that his family, comes from Yugoslavia? Like the German-speaking people from Gottschee [a Slovenian city, now Kočevje], for example, was he, or his family, perhaps, hunted out of the totalitarian Communist Tito state, innocent, suffering, a victim, dispossessed, only because he or his family was German? Instead of drawing his hatchet articles from the same worn-out holster, will this hack finally tell the world what is the cause of his untiring destructive rage at Yugoslavia and Serbia? But naturally he is not acting (yes, acting) alone; the entire newspaper knows what it is doing—in contrast, it seems to me, to this and that politician of the Federal Republic during the decimation of Yugoslavia: characterized now and then on the surface by bright and pleasing rationality, the newspaper is at heart the organ of a pitch-black sect, a sect of power, and a German one at that. And it excretes the poison that is never, ever beneficial: word poison.

And I continued to think there next to the November Drina, and now think here next to a similarly wintry, but quiet, forest pond over which at the moment dozens of helicopters thunder past with diplomats from all over the globe, on their way from the Villacoublay military airport to the signing of the peace treaty in Paris, on 14 December 1995: Is such a mechanical word-slinging between peoples, even if then unspoken between generations, perhaps heritable, as I have experienced among my fellow Austrians concerning the Serbs—the old *"Serbien muss sterbien"* [Serbia must die], aimed on the one hand at the annihilators of the empire, on the other hand aimed with friendly condescension at the Alpine Slovenes, in the form of that ostensibly new "Join us!"? Would a peace ever be created and maintained from generation to generation by such reactionary people, blind with rage? No, peace has happened only in this way: let the dead bury the dead. Let the Yugoslavian dead bury their dead, and the living thus find their way back to their living.

And I thought and think: Where then was that "paranoia," the most common of all rebukes against the Serbian people? And, in contrast, how conscious was the German (and Austrian) people of what it did and caused to be done repeatedly in the Balkans during the Second World War? Was it simply "known," or also really present, in the common memory, as was what happened with the Jews, or even only half so

present, as it still is, from generation to generation, for the affected Yugoslavs? The latter, however, must consequently see palmed off on them by global media syndicates a persecution complex, an "artificial cold remembering," an "infantile unwillingness to forget"—unless the suddenly hot, blazingly topical, media-expedient Balkan entanglements of an Austrian presidential candidate occasionally become an issue. Wasn't this German-Austrian knowing what happened but having nothing whatsoever present a spiritual or psychological illness very different from the so-called paranoia? A complex peculiar to itself?

And on my trip I, at least, hadn't seen Serbia as a land of paranoiacs: rather it seemed the huge room of an orphaned, yes, of an orphaned, abandoned child, something that I never saw in Slovenia over the years (but perhaps—see above—I just walked the wrong paths: didn't someone else from the organ of the power sect recently yap again against the small country that it was making eyes "with tradition" and holding fast "to the insecure Balkans"?) and was not able to imagine of Croatia, although the great Yugoslavian idea once proceeded from there. But who knows? What does a stranger know?

And I put my hands into the wintry water of the Drina and thought, and think it now: Is it perhaps my illness not to be able to have as somber a view as Ivo Andrić in his continuously instructive Drina epic, to be unable to match his absolute image of necessary

catastrophic war that breaks out every century between the Bosnian peoples? Wasn't Andrić such an incisive judge of people that sometimes, as a result, human images paled for him? Will hopelessness flow with the Drina here till the end of time? And now one of the rafts from before swept by in front of me, on it the famous figure of a *splavar,* a Drina rafter—but no, nothing there. And on the Bosnian bank the Gypsy trumpets, from Kusturica's film?, now blared the famous "Drina March"—but no, nothing at all.

And in the Drina's presence I thought, and I think it now here at my desk: Didn't my generation fail to grow up during the wars in Yugoslavia? Not grow up like the innumerable self-satisfied, complete, boxlike, opinion-forging, somehow worldly, and yet so small-minded members of the generation of our fathers and uncles, but grow up. In what way? Perhaps thus: firm and yet open, or permeable, or with that one word of Goethe's: *Bildsam* [educable], and as a motto perhaps the rhymed couplet by the same world champion from Germany: *"Kindlich / Unüberwindlich"* [childlike / invincible], with the variant *Kindlich Überwindlich* [childlike / vincible]. And with this kind of maturity, I thought—as the son of a German—pull out of this history that repeats every century, out of this disastrous chain, pull out into another story.

But what was my generation's response to Yugoslavia, in the case that was for us—and here the new philoso-

pher Glucksmann was right—of earth-shattering importance but also essentially different from the earlier Spanish civil war: a case of the real Europe, parallel to which the other Europe might have been constructed? In that context, from those of my approximate age, I know only the uncharitable, cold vilification of the Serbs by Joseph Brodsky in the *New York Times*, lacking both insight and nuance, written with a rusty knife; and a just as mechanical scribbling, infatuated with images of enemies and war, collaborating instead of wall jumping, by the author Peter Schneider, arguing for the intervention of NATO against the criminal Bosno-Serbs, available before its German publication, moreover, in French in *Libération* and also in Italian and Spanish. To grow up, to do justice to, to not only embody a reaction to the century's night and thus add to the darkening, but to break out of this night. A missed opportunity? Those who follow us?

But isn't it, finally, irresponsible, I thought there at the Drina and continue to think here, to offer the small sufferings in Serbia—the bit of freezing there, the bit of loneliness, the trivialities like snowflakes, caps, cream cheese—while over the border a great suffering prevails, that of Sarajevo, of Tuzla, of Srebrenica, of Bihać, compared to which the Serbian boo-boos are nothing? Yes, with each sentence I too have asked myself whether such a writing isn't obscene, ought even to be tabooed, forbidden—which made the writing journey adventurous in a different

way, dangerous, often very depressing (believe me), and I learned what "between Scylla and Charybdis" means. Didn't the one who described the small deprivations (gaps between teeth) help to water down, to suppress, to conceal the great ones?

Finally, I thought each time: But that's not the point. 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.

So now it's time for the poetic? Yes, if it is understood as exactly the opposite of the nebulous. Or say, rather than "the poetic," that which binds, that encompasses—the impulse to a common remembering, as the possibility for reconciliation of individuals, for the second, the common childhood.

How, then? What I have written here was meant for various German-speaking readers, and just as much for various readers in Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia, for experience tells me that that common recalling, that second, common childhood, will arise exactly through the detour of recording certain trivialities, at least far more lastingly than by hammering in the main facts. "At one place on the bridge there was, for years, a loose board." "Yes, did you notice that too?" "At one place under the church choir the steps began to echo." "Yes, did you notice that too?" Or simply to divert from the shared—shared by us all—captivity in the rhetoric of history and topicality into a much more productive present: "Look, now it is

snowing. Look, children are playing there" (the art of diversion; art as the essential diversion). And thus I felt, there on the Drina, the need to dance a rock across the water toward the Bosnian shore (but then couldn't find one).

The only thing I wrote down during the Serbian trip, along with *"Jebi ga!"*—Fuck him! the common curse—was a section from the farewell letter of that man, a former partisan, as was his wife, who took his life after the outbreak of the Bosnian war. And here I put it down again, in the joint translation of Žarko Radaković and Zlatko Bocokić, alias Adrian Brouwer:

"The betrayal, the disintegration, and the chaos of our country, the difficult situation into which our people is thrown, the war [Serbo-Croatian *rat*] in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the extermination of the Serbian people, and my own illness have made my further life meaningless, and therefore I have decided to free myself from the illness, and especially from the suffering induced by the decline of the country, to allow my exhausted organism, unable to bear it any longer, to recuperate." (Slobodan Nikolić, from the village of Peručač near Bajina Bašta on the Drina, 8 October 1992.)

27 November–19 December 1995