

## An Anti-Story from Croatia · *Josip Novakovich*

NOW AND THEN as a writer I am afraid that I have lost touch with my strongest source of writing—my people, their ways and their stories—and I get the desire to visit Croatia, to plug back into my roots. But, as soon as I got to Croatia in December of 1994, with the notion of gathering materials for stories—fiction and nonfiction—I wanted to leave. I stood in Rijeka in the rain among glum people and waited for the bus. I waited in Zagreb among glum people at tram stops. I could not get used to the slow and depressing rhythm of the new country, and I would have probably left right away if it hadn't been for my desire to visit my mother and my brother in Daruvar, seventy miles east of Zagreb. I had not seen them in two years; I immigrated to the States eighteen years before. My family was glad to see me but soon they ran out of things to say, as did almost anybody I saw in Daruvar. In whatever I heard, I did not catch the faintest glimmer of excitement, a story. After three days of boredom, I went to the train station to take the first train out of the country. Forget roots. But the rail workers too—not only the storytellers—were on strike. I felt stuck.

So when a friend of mine drove to Eastern Croatia, I went along, under the pretext that I'd see my sister, brother-in-law, and several other relatives (seeing nearly a dozen relatives in three days had sufficed); I simply wanted to feel the road shaken into my bones through any kind of wheel. And I hoped that on the new Serb-Croat border, outside of Vinkovci, the tension would present me with story material.

South of Vinkovci I visited Blatce, a camp of displaced persons. In late 1991, Serb forces had destroyed Vukovar, a town of 50,000, and slaughtered in several days more than 3,000 people. Mass graves were scattered in the Vukovar vicinity. In Blatce now lived 3,300 survivors from the Vukovar region; they could not go back because Serbs occupied the area. (Under United Nations' "protection" since 1991 hundreds more Croats have been driven out of their homes in the Vukovar area.) I was sure there would be stories here.

The camp director eyeballed me suspiciously when I told him I wanted to write an article about the camp. He wanted press papers from the Croatian Ministry of Information, which I did not have. His secretary, who lost several members of her family in Vukovar, said, derisively, "He wants stories."

And later, when she seemed friendly, I asked her whether I could interview her. She ran out of the room. "God forbid!" she said.

The camp director talked, drily offering statistics about the camp, before recounting how when he was wounded and stayed at the demolished Vukovar hospital, his former best friends, Serbs who'd joined the Yugoslav army, came to jeer and to spit at him. Most of the people on his ward disappeared. He wondered how he managed to survive, and even more, how he would react if he one day saw one of these former friends, let's say, on a trip to Budapest. Now this potential encounter could become a story. I imagined a variation that the camp director clearly did not: that one of those jeering old friends may have saved his life, but had to jeer and spit in front of his band of murderers. Yet I was sure I would not feel like writing the story.

I walked out on the grid-lock paths of the camp. Pink and light blue houses gave me a sensation of *déjà vu*. This resembled Santee Sioux Indian Reservation in Nebraska (where I had worked for two years as a community college teacher), except the houses here were smaller, lower, thinner, but the colors were the same and so was the no-exit mood. Beyond the settlement lay dark brown and moist soil, recently turned in big furrows and chunks. Most houses had little gardens next to them. Several old men and women turned the soil with spades, although it seemed to have been turned before. They dug simply for the sensation of work. Others, resigned to no work, strolled slowly, and I chatted up several of them. Most sighed and complained that it was sad beyond words not to be able to go home, and not to have a home anymore. One man, who had recently discovered that he was Jewish, played with his grandson. "He's my doctor," he said of the child. "You just can't believe how joyful and good I feel around him. Whatever happened to me no longer grieves me when I see him. Of course, I worry about his future." It did not seem right to me to ask him about what had happened to him.

One man said, "What can I tell you? Those who'd have stories are in a cemetery, or in mass graves. Anyway, I can't tell my stories again. They would bore me." He was pale and pink, as though his upper skin layer had been scalded and peeled. Large black spots on his face and hands indicated skin cancer. He wheezed.

I visited my brother-in-law, Kornel, in Vinkovci, two hundred yards away from the new Serb border. He showed me how he had bricked the hole—from a Serb howitzer hit—in the base of his house, and how far he'd pro-

gressed with building a red-brick chapel in his yard. During the siege of the town of 40,000 he was among the 4,000 who stayed in the city and among several who stayed on his block. Perhaps his faith had given him courage, but the war had exhausted him. He had stomach cancer. He was diagnosed too late, and the cancer had spread to his peritoneum. He'd grown thin, his hair white, but he appeared all the nobler for it, spiritual, beautiful. As we sat down, he ate bacon, slicing it with a Swiss knife.

I said, "I thought your stomach was taken out, how can you eat this?"

"It agrees with me. I know that I can't digest it, but what's the difference now? My tongue likes it."

Then, with my nephew Ben I went to Vagonsko Naselje (the Train Village)—where 133 refugees lived—at the Vinkovci train station. This used to be one of the largest train stations in the Balkans, with lines from Munich and Athens, Budapest, Sarajevo. But now the station was desolate. On one side track sat coaches of an East German train that did not meet the reunited Germany's standards. Each coach, divided into three apartments, was equipped with little oil stoves and chimneys that stuck out the windows. When it was hot outside, they were hot inside; when it was cold outside, they were cold inside. A thin young man invited us inside and prepared us Turkish coffee—unfiltered muddy coffee with spoonfuls of sugar and no milk. He used to work for a restaurant in Opatija as a cook. "I'd do that now too. But there are no tourists. I'd like to cook for the village, but. . . ." He shrugged his shoulders.

"So what do you do?"

"I've written a book in verse."

He showed me his green notebook filled with handwritten blue capital letters, and closed it, then recited for half an hour about his region, Slavonia (not to be confused with Slovenia). He hardly ever mentioned Croatia. (There's little unity in Croatia. Croats from Herzegovina have seized most of the power and others have withdrawn into their regional identities. Serbs on the other hand have the motto, *Samo Sloga Srbina Spasava*, Only Unity Saves Serbs. Inability to get along is probably the usual plight of the smaller and the weaker.) I don't remember much of the poem because I was mesmerized by the rhythm and rhyme. "Here, after an air raid, we stand in the wind—our plastic sacks flapping along our knees—and wait for foreign aid." After every stanza a slow groan came from beneath a white blanket on the

bed. There was a ruffle in the bed, and beyond the sheet a gaunt gray head with sunken lips.

“That’s my dad,” said the poet. “He’s dying of cancer. His stomach was taken out.” Many people with latent cancer would have never developed cancer if it hadn’t been for the war. The war anxiety broke people’s defenses, and cancer took over, like weeds which swallowed train tracks outside the station.

“And the rest is about my personal war experiences,” the poet said, as though that should be less interesting. “A publisher in Zagreb said they’d give me money for this. Other people have visited, they talk about deals, but nothing has panned out. A German TV crew came here and filmed me to death. They made money off me. Everybody’s here to make money,” he said, and stared with his large hazel eyes at my lips, obviously suspecting that I was trying to turn his words into green paper.

Perhaps concluding that no matter what, it was still good for him to speak out, he continued to recite, quickly, nodding his head. He mentioned rivers of blood many times, and other clichéd figures of speech. I wanted stories of survival, passion, love, and not patriotic clichés.

But, it fascinated me that the man wanted to know the poem by heart, and believed in performing it in a rhythm; though he did not measure the lines on page, the way he recited them created a meter. He displayed the Balkan oral tradition mentality—according to which you are supposed to be able to tell long stories from memory in meter. (It did not matter that he wrote the poem first. He wrote it to speak it.) Most of the oral tradition evolved out of wars, as epic narrative poetry, dividing people into good and evil, friend and foe, mostly foe. The meter set a tempo to which you could march. Oral tradition must be one of the causes of the Balkan wars. Serbs relentlessly recounted the Kosovo Battle—where Serbia was defeated by the Ottoman invaders—as well as other heroic defeats, in a teary, nostalgic, and intoxicated tone. Serb oral tales (one prominent story in the 1980s was about Muslim Albanians impaling a Serb man on a broken bottle) raised Serbian feelings of outrage against Muslims and Croats. And now this man in front of me was lamenting in the same Alexandrine tone about Croatia’s loss of territory. Each war spawns its laments, which seek revenge.

While listening to the poet, I was impressed by the poetic component of the Balkan macho mentality. In the States, poetry suffers the image of being effete, over-refined, and male poets try to restore their self-image of man-

hood by heavy drinking bouts and by organizing men's movements. In the Balkans, no such problem. Radovan Karadzic, the war-hawk leader of the Bosnian Serbs, has published two collections of poetry. The father of the current drive for Greater Serbia is Dobrica Cosic, a novelist and poet who was nominated for the Nobel Prize—a much better writer than Vaclav Havel, and an outright fascist. Cosic was president of Yugoslavia in 1992. His narratives educated Milosevic and contributed to the Serb war campaigns. In response to Serbia's aggression, President Tudjman, a nationalist writer of history books, rose to power in Croatia, and in Bosnia, Izetbegovic, a writer of a book about the Muslim vision of society, became the president. Writers lead the Balkan wars. I think this is instructive: since most literary enterprise is limited to a language, usually a national language, writers are liable to become national, and frequently nationalist. This simple thesis is worth examining in the era of ethnicity and multiculturalism. Writers become ethnic heroes, which is great as long as we talk about emancipation and liberation. But how about when liberation turns into oppression of other groups? The world is being Balkanized, partly through how the world handles its storytellers, and how the storytellers handle the world. (Of course, I could equally argue that many people's silence is the root of all evil, and it probably is, combined with the few people's story-making.)

Now the problem with making epic poetry is that exaggerations occur, to fit the metered pathos. So while reciting, the train coach poet showed me his ear. He said, "See, Chetniks beat me with rifles, and knifed my ear off. It hung by its skin and bled a creek of blood, but I got to the hospital soon enough so it was stitched together." He flapped his ear forward so I could look at it, and I did not see a scar. I know enough about my tendencies toward skepticism, to doubt my doubts.

Perhaps the poet's ear has healed marvelously well. I admired the poet, after all. He spoke in an uneducated peasant fashion, as many people do in Slavonia, and I found this authentic. Clearly he did suffer the war, and still suffered in the limbo between war and peace, in poverty, with cancer of all sorts around him. That he could fight his circumstance, his post traumatic stress, etc., by creating a long poem, that's absolutely terrific. He handled the Balkan creeks of blood very well. But he partook of the mentality, the disturbing mentality of the Balkans, the kind that makes us all who come from there unreliable—very few journalists entrusted with the coverage of the war in the Balkans are Croats and Serbs. It's better to send somebody

there who knows nothing about the region, and who'll give you an impartial account. Or is it? So far the reporting from the former Yugoslavia has been, on the whole, superficial and repetitive. The journalists seem to take several simplified and unverified historical "facts" that they pick up from Yugoslav and U.N. diplomats and other journalists, and they repeat these tidbits in their scriptural tradition.

I decided I would not write a story about my trip. (I forgot the poet's name. I lost his pictures. I forgot the Blatce director's name. Though I taped the director, I gave away my cassette recorder to a friend in my hometown.) But you can judge for yourself how good my word is. Two months later, one snowy afternoon, I've sat down here, and I could not resist participating in the digital tradition of writing stories. I'm tempted to imagine that this is an anti-story, a kind of post-modern minimalism. But, after all, my accounting of the places where I could have found stories but did not find them may only be a form of Slavic nihilism and spitefulness, and a poor excuse for my reluctance to participate in the region's no-exit sorrows.

#### POSTSCRIPT

1. In 1995, because nearby Serbs occasionally shelled Vinkovci, Blatce and Vagonsko Naselje have been taken apart and their residents resettled to other camps farther west.
2. My brother-in-law, Kornel, died of stomach cancer in March of 1995.