The New York Review of Books

The Renegade

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December 20, 2007 issue

As the curtain goes up, I'm sitting naked on the potty in my grandfather's backyard in a little village in Serbia. The year is 1940. I look happy. It's a nice summer day full of sunlight, although Hitler has already occupied most of Europe. I have no idea, of course, that he and Stalin are hatching an elaborate plot to make me an American poet. I love the neighbor's dog, whose name is Toza. I run after him carrying my potty in my hand, wanting to pull his tail, but he won't let me.

What would I not give today to have a photograph of Toza! He was a country mutt full of burrs and fleas, and in his wise and sad eyes, if we had known how to read them, we would have found the story of mine and my parents' lives.

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I had a great-uncle of whom nothing is known. I don't even know his name, if I ever did. He came to America in the 1920s and never wrote home. Got rich, my relatives said. How do you know that? I asked. Nobody knew how they knew. They had heard rumors. Then the people who'd heard the rumors died. Today there's no one left to ask. My great-uncle was like one of those ants who, coming upon a line of marching ants, turns and goes in the opposite direction for reasons of his own.

Ants being ants, this is not supposed to happen, but it sometimes does, and no one knows why.

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This mythical great uncle interests me because I resemble him a bit. I, too, came to America and, for long stretches of time, forgot where I came from or had no contact with my compatriots. I never understood the big deal they make about being born in one place rather than another when there are so many nice places in the world to call home. As it is, I was born in Belgrade in 1938 and spent fifteen eventful years there before leaving forever. I never missed it. When I try to tell that to my American friends, they don't believe me. They suspect me of concealing my homesickness because I cannot bear the pain. Allegedly, my nightmarish wartime memories have made me repress how much dear old Belgrade meant to me. My wartime memories may have been terrifying, but I had a happy childhood despite droning planes, deafening explosions, and people hung from lampposts. I

mean, it's not like I knew better and dreamed of a life of quiet strolls with my parents along tree-lined boulevards or playing with other children in the park. No. I was three years old when the first bombs fell and old enough to be miserable when the war ended and I had to go to school.

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The first person who told me about the evil in the world was my grandmother. She died in 1948, but I recall her vividly because she took care of me and my brother while my mother went to work. The poor woman had more sense than most people. She listened to Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, and other lunatics on the radio and since she knew several languages, she understood the imbecilities they were saying. What upset her even more than their vile words was their cheering followers. I didn't realize it then, but she taught me a lesson that has stuck. Beware of the so-called great leaders and the collective euphorias they excite. Many years later I wrote this poem about her:

EMPIRES

My grandmother prophesied the end

Of your empires, O Fools!

She was ironing. The radio was on.

The earth trembled beneath our feet.

One of their heroes was giving a speech.

"Monster," she called him.

There were cheers and gun salutes for the monster.

"I could kill him with my bare hands,"

She announced to me.

There was no need to. They were all

Going to the devil any day now.

"Don't go blabbering about this to anyone,"

She warned me.

And pulled my ear to make sure I understood.

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When people speak of the dark years after the war, they usually have in mind political oppression and hunger, but what I see are poorly lit streets with black windows and doorways as dark as the inside of a coffin. If the lone light bulb one used to read by in bed late into the night died suddenly, it was not likely to be replaced soon. Every year, we had less and less light in our house and not much heat in winter. In the evening, we sat in our overcoats listening to the rumblings of each other's empty stomachs. When guests came, they didn't even bother to remove their hats and gloves. We would huddle close whispering about arrests, a neighbor being shot, another one disappearing. I wasn't supposed to hear any of this, in case I forgot myself in school and got everyone at home in trouble.

This was the first time I heard people say that we Serbs are numskulls. There was no disagreement. Who else among the nations in Europe was stupid enough to have a civil war while the Nazis were occupying them? We had the Communists, the royalists, and at least a couple of factions of domestic fascists. Some collaborated with Germans and Italians and some did not, but they all fought one another and executed their political opponents. I didn't understand much of it at the time, but I recall the exasperation and anger of the grownups.

Of course, the mood was most likely different in other homes where they welcomed the Communists. We were, after all, members of a mummified, impoverished, middle-class family that would have preferred that everything had remained the same. My mother and grandmother hated wars, distrusted national demagogues, and wanted the kind of government that left everybody alone.

In other words, they were the kind of people, as we were lectured in school, destined to be thrown on the garbage dump of history.

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Occasionally, one of our visitors would start defending the Serbs. Our history is one of honor, heroic sacrifice, and endless suffering in defense of Europe against the Ottoman Empire, for which we never got any thanks. We are gullible innocents who always think better of our neighbors than they deserve. We sided with England and America when the rest of Europe was already occupied by the Nazis and it was suicidal to go against them.

Yes, my grandmother would say, we did that because we are conceited fools with exaggerated notions of our historical importance. A rabble of thieving and dimwitted yokels who were happiest under the Turks when they had no freedom, no education, and no ambition, except to roast a suckling pig on some holiday.

“Mrs. Matijevic, how can you talk like that?” our visitors would object. My grandmother would just shrug her shoulders. Her husband had been a military hero in World War I, a much-decorated colonel who had lost his enthusiasm for war. I recall being shocked when I first heard him say that Serbs should not have kicked out the government that signed the nonaggression pact with Hitler in 1941. Look what the war had brought us, he would say.

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I wonder what my unknown great-uncle in America thought about all that. I bet he had his own ideas on the subject as he sat in some outhouse in Kansas or Texas reading in last month’s papers how on March 27, 1941, the heroic Serbs walked the streets of Belgrade shouting “better death than a pact” while Hitler threw a fit. I reckon he must have tried to explain to his wife now and then about Serbs.

If she was an Apache, or a member of some other Native American tribe, she may have understood more quickly. Serbs are a large, quarrelsome tribe, he would have said, never as happy as when they are cutting each other’s throats. A Serb from Bosnia has as much in common with a Serb from Belgrade as a Hopi Indian does with a Comanche. All together, they often act as if they have less sense than God gave a duck.

On second thought, he probably never brought up the subject. The Balkans, with its many nationalities and three different religions, is too complicated a place for anyone to explain, or begin to make sense of, especially since each ethnic group writes its history only remembering the wrongs done to them while conveniently passing over all the nasty things they’ve done to their neighbors over the centuries.

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When I came to the United States in 1954, I discovered that the conversation among the immigrant Serbs my parents saw now and then was identical to the one I had heard in Belgrade. The cry was still, how did we who are so brave, so honorable, so innocent end up like this? Because of traitors, of course. Serbs stabbing each other in the back. A nation of double-crossers, turncoats, Judases, snakes in the grass. Even worse were our big allies. England, America, and France screwed us royally. Didn’t Churchill say to Eden at Yalta that he didn’t give a fuck what happened to Yugoslavia after the Communists took over?

Much of this was true. A few sleazy political deals by world leaders did contribute to our fate. We, displaced persons, were living proof that the world is a cruel place if you happen to find yourself on the wrong

side of history. Still, I didn't care for all that obsessive talk about betrayals and internal enemies. It reminded me too much of how the Communists back home talked.

"It's exhausting to be a Serb," my father would say after an evening like that. He was a cheerful pessimist. He loved life, but had no faith in the idea that the human condition was meliorable. He had had sympathies for the chetniks, pro-monarchy Serbian nationalists, at the beginning of the war, but no more. Nationalist claptrap left him cold. He was like his father, who used to shock family and friends by ridiculing Serbian national heroes. Both he and my father went to church and had genuine religious feelings, but they could not resist making fun of priests.

"There is nothing sacred for them," my mother would say when she got angry with the Simic family. Of course, she really wasn't any better. It's just that she preferred that appearances be kept up. Her philosophy was, let the world think we believe in all that nonsense, and we'll keep our real views to ourselves.

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After my parents separated in 1956, I left home. I attended university at night and worked during the day, first in Chicago and then in New York City. If someone asked me about my accent, I would say that I was born in Yugoslavia, and that would be the end of it. I saw my father frequently, but though he liked to reminisce about his youth in the old country he had an equal and even greater interest in America, and so did I.

It was only when we went to visit his brother Boris that the eternal subject of Serbian national destiny came up. Boris was a successful trucking company executive who lived in a posh Westchester suburb, where he had a house, a wife, and three German shepherds. He loved to organize large dinner parties to which he'd invite his many Serbian friends, serve them fabulous food and wine, and then argue with them about politics till the next day.

Boris was a lefty in Yugoslavia, an admirer of the partisans, but as he grew older, he became more and more conservative, suspecting even Nixon of having liberal tendencies. He had a quality of mind that I have often found in Serbian men. He could be intellectually brilliant one moment and unbelievably stupid the next. When someone pointed this out to him, he got mad. Never in my life had I heard so many original and idiotic things come out of the same mouth. He was never happier than when arguing. Even if one agreed with everything he said and admitted that black was white, he would find reasons to fight you. He needed opponents, endless drama with eruptions of anger, absurd accusations, near fistfights. Boris, everyone who knew him said, would have made Mahatma Gandhi reach for a stick. Compromise for him

was a sign of weakness rather than of good sense. He was not a bad man, just a hothead when it came to politics. He died before Milosevic came to power, and I have wondered ever since what he would have made of him and his wars.

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Listening to Boris and his pals endlessly rehash our national history, I assumed this was just immigrant talk, old water under the bridge. Like many others, I was under the impression that Yugoslavia was a thriving country not likely to fall apart even after Tito's death. I made two brief trips to Belgrade, one in 1972 and another in 1982, had heard about ethnic incidents, but continued to believe, even when the rhetoric got more and more heated in the late 1980s after the emergence of the first nationalist leaders, that reason would prevail in the end. I had no problem with cultural nationalism, but the kind that demands unquestioning solidarity with prejudices, self-deceptions, paranoias of the collective, I loathed. I couldn't stand it in America, and even less so in Serbia.

The few friends and relatives I had in Belgrade were telling me about the rise of a new leader, a national savior, called Slobodan Milosevic, whom they all seemed to approve of. I started reading Belgrade papers and weeklies and having a huge monthly telephone bill trying to understand what was taking place. After more than forty years in America, I became a Serb again, except, as many would say, a bad Serb.

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"We don't want to live with them any more," friends would tell me. They wanted a complete separation from Croats and Bosnians and at the same time a Serbia that would include all the areas where Serbs had lived for centuries. When I pointed out that this could not be done without bloodshed, they got very upset with me since they were decent people who didn't approve of violence. They simply would not accept that the leaders and the policies they were so thrilled about were bound to lead to slaughter.

"How can you separate yourselves when you are all mixed together?" I would ask and not get a straight answer. I could recall the ethnic mixture we had in our neighborhood in Belgrade and could not imagine that someone would actually attempt to do something so wicked. Plus, I liked the mix. I spent most of my life translating poetry from every region of Yugoslavia, had some idea what their cultures were like, so I could not see any advantage for anyone living in a ghetto with just their own kind.

Of course, I was naive. I didn't realize the immense prestige that inhumanity and brutality have among nationalists. I also didn't grasp to what degree they are impervious to reason. To point out the inevitable consequences of their actions didn't make the slightest impression on them, since they refused to believe in cause and effect.

The infuriating aspect of every nationalism is that it doesn't understand that it is a mirror image of some other nationalism, and that most of its pronouncements have been heard in other places and at other times. Smug in their ethnocentricity, certain of their own superiority, indifferent to the cultural, religious, and political concerns of their neighbors, all they needed in 1990 was a leader to lead them into disaster.

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How did I see what many others didn't? Or as the Serbs would say, what made me an *odrod* (renegade)?

The years of the Vietnam War focused my mind. It took me a while to appreciate the full extent of the prevarication and sheer madness in our press and television and our political opinion, and to see what our frothing patriots with their calls for indiscriminate slaughter were getting us into. The war deepened for me what was already a lifelong suspicion of all causes that turn a blind eye to the slaughter of the innocent.

"Go back to Russia," I recall someone shouting to the antiwar demonstrators in New York. So, it's like that, I recall thinking then. You opt for the sanctity of the individual and your fellow citizens immediately want to string you up. Even today our conservatives argue that we lost the war in Vietnam because the protesters undercut the military, who were forced to fight with one hand tied behind their backs. In other words, if we had gone ahead and killed four million Vietnamese instead of two million, we would have won that war.

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Milosevic struck me from the beginning, in the late 1980s, as bad news. I said as much in an interview with a Serbian paper. This provoked a reaction. I was called a traitor in the pay of Serbia's enemies, and many other things. This only spurred me on.

After the siege of the Croatian town of Vukovar in 1991, one didn't have to be Nostradamus to prophesy how badly it would all end for the Serbs. I wrote numerous pieces in Serbian and German newspapers arguing with the nationalists. Many others did the same in Serbia, and far more forcefully and eloquently than I did. We were in the minority. As is usually the case everywhere, a craven, corrupt intellectual class

was unwilling to sound the alarm that war crimes were being committed, accustomed as they were under communism to being servants to power.

The belief in the independence of intellectuals, as so much of the twentieth century proves, is nothing but a fairy tale. The most repellent crimes in the former Yugoslavia had the enthusiastic support of people whose education and past accomplishments would lead one to believe that they would know better. Even poets of large talent and reputation found something to praise in the destruction of cities. If they wept, it was only for their own kind. Not once did they bother to stop and imagine the cost of these wars, which their leaders had instigated, for everybody else.

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Many of my compatriots were upset with me. Serbs always imagine elaborate conspiracies. For them every event is a sham behind which some hidden interest operates. The idea that my views were my own, the product of my sleepless nights and torments of my conscience, was unthinkable. There were innuendoes about my family, hints that for years there had been suspicions about us, that we were foreigners who had managed for centuries to pass themselves off as Serbs.

My favorite one was that the CIA had paid me huge amounts of money to write poems against Serbia, so that I now live a life of leisure in a mansion in New Hampshire attended by numerous black servants.

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Incapable of either statecraft or a formulation of legitimate national interest, all Milosevic and his followers were good at was fanning hatred and setting neighbor against neighbor. We now know that all the supposedly spontaneous, patriotic military outfits that went to defend Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia were organized, armed, and controlled by his secret services.

There is nothing more disheartening than to watch, year after year, cities and villages destroyed, people killed or sent into exile, knowing that their suffering did not have to happen. Once newspapers and weekly magazines became available on the Internet, I'd rise early every morning to read them and inevitably fall into the darkest despair by eight o'clock.

Serbs often say in their defense that they were not the only ones committing war crimes. Of course not. If everyone else were an angel, there would not be several hundred thousand refugees in Serbia today. Nonetheless, it is with the murderers in one's own family that one has the moral obligation to deal first.

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This, as I discovered, was not how a patriot was supposed to feel. The role of the intellectual was to make excuses for the killers of women and children. As for journalists and political commentators, their function was to spread lies and then prove that these lies were true. What instantly became clear to me is that I was being asked by my own people to become an accomplice in a crime by pretending to understand and forgive acts that I knew were unforgivable.

It's not just Serbs who make such demands, of course. It is not much better in America today, but that, too, is not an excuse. The unwillingness to confront the past has made Serbia a backpedaling society, unable to look at the present, much less deal with difficult contemporary problems. It's like a family that sits around the dinner table each evening pretending that granny had not stabbed the mailman with scissors and Dad had not tried to rape one of his little girls in the bathroom just this afternoon.

The worst thing is to be right about one's own kind. For that you are never forgiven. Better to be wrong a hundred times! They'll explain it later by saying that you loved your people so much. Among the nationalists, we are more likely to be admired if we had been photographed slashing the throat of a child than marching against some war they had fought and lost.

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When I went back to Belgrade in 1972, after an absence of almost twenty years, I discovered that the window above the entrance of our apartment building, through which I had kicked a ball after the war, was still broken. In 1982, it was still not repaired. Last fall, when I returned, I discovered it had been fixed after the NATO bombing, which hit the TV studio close by and broke lots of windows in the neighborhood.

The reason it was not repaired earlier is that all the tenants in the building had quarreled and were not on speaking terms. My late aunt did not acknowledge the existence of some of her neighbors for forty years, so it was unthinkable that she would knock on their doors for the sake of a window or many other things that needed to be done. That, to my mind, is pretty much the story of Serbs and Serbia—or so I intend to tell my great-uncle, whom I still hope to run into one of these days.

He'll be more than hundred years old, sitting in a rocking chair at a nursing home in rural Alabama, deaf and nearly blind, wearing a straw hat and a string tie over a Hawaiian shirt, but still looking like a Serb despite all the guises he devised in his long life to not look like one.

From time to time, he mutters some words in that strange language which his nurses take to be just old man's private gibberish. "All you ever need is a roof, a bowl of bean soup, and some pussy."

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Charles Simic has been Poet Laureate of the United States. *Come Closer and Listen,* his latest book of poems, will be out next year. (August 2018)