

Balkan Anecdotes: Voices from Post Conflict Croatia

The monumental tasks inherent in the post-war re-settling of a variety of displaced populations are illustrated by the author through her personal letters.

by
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Introduction:

The war in Croatia started in 1991, with fighting between separatist Croatian Serbs and newly independent Croatian forces. The result was hundreds of thousands of displaced persons (both Croats and Serbs), widespread destruction of property, and a cease fire policed by the UN. In 1995, Croatia undertook two large-scale military operations that enabled it to take back some of the areas that had been occupied by rebel Serb forces, and drove out over 200,000 Croatian Serbs who had been living in these areas for generations. In January 1998, via a UN-brokered agreement, Croatia regained the last remaining Serb-held sector in Eastern Slovenia (including Vukovar).

I have been working with war-affected displaced populations in Croatia for the past three years. In March 1997, I took a job with the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Office in Split, interviewing Bosnian refugees who had applied to go to the U.S. In September 1997, I was hired by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which was expanding its operations in Croatia. The OSCE is mandated to monitor and assist the Croatian Government in fulfilling its international commitments related to hu-

man rights, with a view to eventually enabling Croatia to enter Euro-Atlantic institutions such as the EU and NATO. I worked for the OSCE in Vukovar for 1-1/2 years, then took a position at the Mission Headquarters in Zagreb. During my time in Croatia, I heard the stories of numerous displaced persons, refugees and returnees. The pieces below are taken from letters I sent to friends when I was in Vukovar and Zagreb.

Vukovar Wildlife 9 May 1998

It's a beautiful sunny Saturday, but unfortunately I'm on duty in the Field Office in Vukovar. That's okay, because I'm sitting out here on the balcony, listening to the birds and looking out over the rooftops (some of which are traditional Balkan red roofs, and some of which are destroyed, which I suppose is also now traditionally Balkan). In addition to birds there are also a lot of flying bugs, and somewhere I can hear a sheep baa-ing. Then there are the landlord's ragtag group of dogs and cats running around. The landlord is from one of Vukovar's oldest families, but he lost almost everything in the war. Anyway, things have been interesting here. May 6 was St. George's Day, a holiday celebrated

by Serb families who have St. George as their patron saint. Since this is the case for a lot of Serb families, the day is a big deal here. The food is, of course, heavy on the meat, but there's also delicious soup and good rich pastries. Unfortunately, by the time the pastries arrive you're usually too sated with everything else to enjoy them. My favorite dish is spicy cabbage rolls, called sarma.

I was invited to the Markusica Mayor's celebration during the day, then to a friend's house at night. (Markusica is a small farming village not far from Vukovar. It's about 98% Serb and suffered some damage during the war.) In both places I had conversations that made me realize the pain that is lurking just under the surface for most people here. In both cases, I innocently asked a woman, "Where are you from?" The first woman, who is well respected as the only doctor in Markusica, said that she was a refugee from the nearby Croat town of Vinkovci. She said that in 1991, she had first fled to Bosnia, then to Serbia after the war started in Bosnia, then she came to Markusica. I asked her whether she ever went back to Vinkovci, which is only a 15-minute drive from Markusica. She said she went but she didn't feel comfortable there. I was curious about that, because it's usually just military-age men who feel uncomfortable in areas dominated by the other side. When I tried to press her about it further, a friend of hers told me that the doctor didn't like to go back to Vinkovci because her brother was killed there in 1991, and it reminded her of that. So, although I tried to ask an innocent

question and avoid politics there was no getting away from the events of the past 7 years.

The second woman I asked the question to was also a displaced person. She's young (26), pretty, smart and trying to put together a life for herself after fleeing her home elsewhere in Croatia. Her home is destroyed, she has no job, and she is trying to organize an NGO (Non-government organization) to work with children. She feels like a second-class citizen because she is a Serb in Croatia, but when she goes to Yugoslavia she says that people there treat her as pro-Croat. She also told me that the Croat police seem to be singling her out, and even accused her of calling the UN Civilian Police to a recent incident.

One problem in this area is that there aren't many places for young Croatian Serbs to go out. The one disco closed last week, and many of the Serb-owned bars are closing because they are having trouble registering. Young people are driving across the border to Serbia when they feel like going out. It's too bad, because I think this is another small example of how Serbs here are giving up on Croatia and finding what they need in Serbia (like universities, cultural events, many aspects of security). Other young people continue to leave for Denmark and Norway to ask for asylum. My landlady's daughter, son and daughter's fiancé left a couple of weeks ago. So...the situation here is stable, but I think many Serbs are going to make a reasoned decision to leave after the end of the school year. The statistics about school registration for next year are telling: compared to 642 students

taking the first-grade Serbian language program this year, only 280 have signed up for next year. People have to get on with their lives, and they're not going to stay in a place where they see little efforts from their government to include them as part of what is supposed to be their own country.

Some new developments: First, we're being approached by more and more frustrated Croat displaced persons, who want to return to their homes but find them occupied by Serbs. Some of the Serb occupants are not displaced persons, but are occupying the houses illegally. The Croats tell us they have gone to various Croatian Government offices (like the Office for Displaced Persons and Refugees), but have not gotten any response. I can sympathize with these people, because the Croatian government bureaucracy and the lack of responsiveness of their bureaucrats angers me at times. I think it's a cultural thing. As an American I'm used to getting all of the information I demand, and service with a smile. In my opinion, Croatia needs some help with its administrative practices. The other new development is that we're seeing more Serb displaced persons "deciding" to leave the Croat villages where they're occupying houses, then moving to empty houses in Serb villages. It's unclear what their rights will be in the new houses they move into. Will they be protected until they return home, like they have been in their former accommodation? The situation is becoming more complicated.... The international community talks about two-way return (Croats to Vukovar, Serbs from Vukovar to the rest of

Croatia), but there are also Bosnian Croats in Croatia, Croatian Serbs in Bosnia and Yugoslavia, Kosovo Croats in Croatia.... The Croatian Serbs in Bosnia are occupying Bosnian Croat houses, and the Bosnian Croats in Croatia are occupying the houses of Croatian Serbs...What a mess...And I'm sure there's a Bosnian Muslim connection as well...like Bosnian Muslims occupying the houses of Bosnian Serbs, who are occupying Croat houses in Vukovar...and maybe there are Croatian Serbs occupying Bosnian Muslim houses in Eastern Bosnia.



On a humorous note, we had a threatened case of PIG eviction on Thursday. Our monitor who went out to investigate reported that a Serb family were keeping their pigs in an empty pig sty, but the Croat owners of the pig sty returned and wanted to evict the pigs. Actually, the Croat owner

said that if the Serb owner of the "occupant" pigs did not tell her where her husband was buried, she would kill all of the pigs. The woman's husband was killed (apparently by Serbs) during the fighting here. The local Police and UN Civilian Police were called in as well, so you can see that it was a serious incident. The Serb pig owner is going to try to find another home for her two large pigs. I think that this situation, at least, will be resolved peacefully. Strange things in Zagreb and elsewhere...

21 March 1999

Another weekend gone. I'm sitting here and watching the romantic lights of Zagreb, which actually are lights from the un-romantic apartment blocks of ugly new Zagreb. I've finally learned what the mysterious smokestacks that I see from my windows are. It turns out that they're part of a power plant that supplies this whole section of the city with central heating. This explains why my apartment is so hot. I was relieved to find out what they are, because I was thinking it could be some sort of nuclear reactor complex. I know that's a ridiculous thought, but when the whole plant starts humming loudly you start to worry.... The city authority decides when to turn on the heating for the whole city, and when to turn it off. It sounds very post-communist. My bill is the same amount each month, regardless of how much heat I use. I actually use very little, since the heating from the hall makes it so hot in here. I have a meter that gives exact readings, but the government doesn't seem to have made it to that stage

yet.

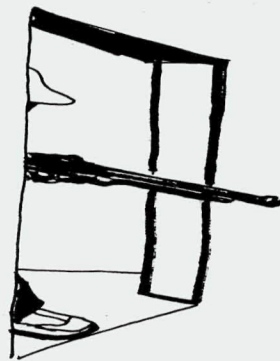
One thing I've noticed here is that the costs seem wildly out of proportion to people's income, or lack thereof. I often wonder how people can survive here, given the high unemployment rates. In the Vukovar region it's as high as 85%, although the official numbers are lower. You see a lot of people at the central market here in Zagreb, selling old clothes and left-over humanitarian aid. At the same time, there are glitzy stores selling (for example) women's suits for over \$300 each. Some sample prices: A DKNY skirt, 50% off, is \$150. A ticket to an opera with an international singer is 150 Kuna (about \$25). The amount a displaced person can get each month if they don't have any other income, is 250 Kuna (about \$40).

I wanted to write something about a field trip I took to central Croatia, to a town called Lipik in Western Slovenia. This area was on the frontlines until it was "liberated" by the Croats during Operation Flash in May 1995. There's a lot of destruction, although not as much as in Vukovar. I went around with the Democratization Officer from our field office there. Our first stop was the Topolik collective center, which is a set of around 15 barracks by the train tracks in Lipik. The residents of this collective center are all Serbs who fled in 1995 and now have returned to get their houses back. Unfortunately, some of them have been there for months, since it's not a priority to the Croatian government that these people reclaim their homes. As we pulled up in our car, we saw a group of men just hanging around. One of them, an elderly bald man with a neat

beard, caught my eye. He recognized me too, and I realized he was a Serb displaced person I had known in Vukovar. His name was Konstantin, and he had come to our office because he was being harassed by the owner of the house he was occupying. Konstantin had fled in 1995, and had subsequently lost his tenancy rights to his apartment near Lipik. We knew it would be extremely difficult for him to get the apartment back, and we told him that he had a right to stay where he was until the Croatian government offered him acceptable alternative accommodation. We told him he could call the police if the owner kept giving him problems, but the place where Konstantin was staying — a summer resort near Osijek — was so remote that there were no phones nearby. Konstantin came in a couple of times, and I felt bad that I couldn't give him any more help than that. The tenancy rights issue is such a mess, and nobody in the international community is really doing anything about it. I guess that eventually Konstantin was tired of being threatened, and applied to live in a collective center closer to his former apartment. I asked him how he was, and he shook his head. But at least he wasn't being threatened anymore. It seemed like it would be really boring for these people in the collective center, since there was little for them to do. We went in and saw a couple of "apartments." It didn't look too bad, but Konstantin showed us some damp mold spots on the ceilings and places where the stairs were rotting away. It didn't seem like a good place to spend the last years of your life. I felt bad leaving Konstantin there,

since I knew it would be a long time before his situation would be resolved (if ever). Still, I'm glad that he's no longer in the insecure situation he had been in before.

After driving around a bit, our next stop was Kusonje, a mainly Serb village that was being reconstructed with funds from the European Union. Every time the international community reconstructs a Serb village or Serb houses, the Croats complain about how one-sided the international efforts are. However, I have yet to see the Croats reconstruct anything other than Croat villages or



houses. It's sort of a vicious circle. The best efforts are those programs that try to rebuild mixed communities. But it's a long process. In Kusonje, I decided to track down one displaced person, a woman I had known in Vukovar. The woman (named Helena), her children and her parents had been occupying a Croat house in the village of Sotin, just outside of Vukovar. Last year when I was working in Vukovar she called us in a panic when the owner of the house came and threatened them. Luckily, she called the Croatian

police and the UN police as well. We got there after the Croatian and UN police, so we didn't have to deal with the owner. Apparently, he had come with a gun and had kicked in the bedroom door in the house. The situation in Sotin was (and still is) quite tense. Probably there are few domiciles or displaced Serbs left there. As we arrived, we could see the owner hanging around across the street with a couple of tough-looking guys. We spoke to Helena, who said she was waiting for her house in Kusonje to be reconstructed. After that, she would go home. I told her that she was lucky, because very few people in her situation could say that their houses were being reconstructed. She said she was particularly scared for her daughters, who were going to high school in Vukovar. I heard from Helena once after that. She said that she was almost ready to go back, but that her daughter wanted to stay one more month to finish high school. Helena had arranged for her daughter to stay with a friend, but the woman at the government Office for Displaced Persons and Refugees said that she couldn't register Helena's daughter at that address and that she had to go straight home to Kusonje. I told Helena just to pretend her daughter was going home, and to have her finish high school in Vukovar anyway. We didn't hear from Helena after that, so I wanted to make sure that she had made it home safely to Kusonje. We finally managed to find her mother and father, living in their newly reconstructed house. They said that Helena was now working as a maid in Italy, but that she would be home for

Easter. They invited me to spend Easter with them, but unfortunately I don't think I will be able to.

Reading back over these two paragraphs, I feel frustrated and angry. Things are going so slowly for all of these people, as well as for the Croat displaced persons I know. If they're very lucky, they can get their houses back in the near future. Most people are waiting and waiting and waiting.... In my current job I feel like I'm doing very little to speed up the process. I don't really want to get into higher-level policy stuff, and my other work is basically to support the field monitors who do what I used to do. And when I talk to people in Vukovar, I feel like it's the same story over and over.... Some places you have to write off for a generation. They say that resettlement to places like the US is another form of ethnic cleansing, since it enables people to leave territories where they would be in the minority. Still, I totally understand people taking their families and starting their lives over where they have some hope of having a life. I think most Serbs in war-affected areas of Croatia would agree that they can't have normal lives here.

Orthodox Easter, 11 April 1999

Today is Orthodox Easter, although you would barely know it in Zagreb, the heart of Catholic Croatia. Work goes on as usual. My colleagues and I have been instructed by the OSCE Head of Mission here that we're not supposed to talk about the airstrikes and the events in Kosovo, since we're from many different coun-

tries and — after all — we're the OSCE Mission to Croatia, not to anywhere else. Still, it's difficult for those of us who have worked with Serbs here to not feel conflicted about what is going on. This is highlighted for me when I talk to my former colleagues in Vukovar, and when I made a field visit to Petrinja, a town about an hour southwest of Zagreb.

One of the perks of being the "liaison" to the field on return issues is that I actually get to get out of the office from time to time. On Tuesday I drove to Petrinja to visit our field office there. Petrinja was taken over by Croatian Serbs in 1991, and was part of the "Republika Srpska Krajina" (RSK) until the Croatian military operations in 1995 drove the Serb-run government and most of the Serb civilians out. Most of these people had lived in the area for generations, but when the Croats attacked they had no choice but to flee to Yugoslavia and the Serb-held areas of Bosnia. The Croats insisted that the Serbs were leaving voluntarily, and even "invited" them to stay (sound familiar?), but I suppose that actions speak louder than words. Anyway, last year the international community finally got the Croatian government to agree that these Serbs could come back. Starting in the fall of last year, they began to return, both on their own and on UNHCR convoys. The average age of returnees is over 65, indicating that most young Croatian Serb refugees don't see a future for themselves in Croatia.

Our first stop was the OSCE sub-office in a small town called Glina. There, the national legal advisor was holding office

hours. Basically, he was sitting around a desk listening to complaints from a group of elderly men. Most of the men had returned recently, but still couldn't get into their houses, which were occupied by Bosnian Croats or even domiciles who had moved in illegally. The men seemed resigned, as if they had gone over their problems many times before. The legal advisor was interesting. At first I thought he was one of the clients, because his hair was messed up and his eyes were sort of wild. However, it turned out that he had been a judge in the Petrinja area, back when Yugoslavia was whole. After the Croatian military operations in 1995, the legal advisor and his family fled to Belgrade. He returned to work for the OSCE, but he goes back to Belgrade to visit his family almost every weekend. He told us that when he tried to return this time, the Yugoslav border guards held him for six hours, and almost wouldn't let him leave. The Yugoslav government is refusing to let men of military age (18-60) leave the country, because they want to be able to mobilize people for the army. Another national legal advisor, who works in Eastern Slavonia, is now stuck in Yugoslavia for this reason. But this legal advisor managed to convince them to let him cross — probably because he has a Croatian passport.

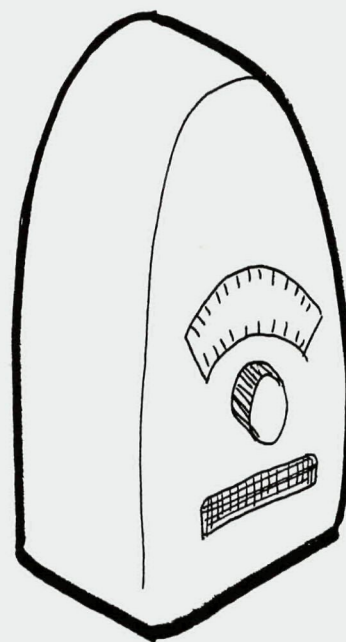
We didn't stay in Glina long, because we had an invitation to attend an Orthodox mass in a small village nearby. We drove to a small church on top of a deserted hill, where a few run-down Yugos and similar cars were parked. We were late for the mass, but Ortho-

dox masses are long and so it was still in progress when we arrived. The church hadn't been damaged much during the war, but you could see that the building was suffering from neglect. Inside were the typical icons and painted wooden screens. There weren't any seats, so we stood at the back. Most of the attendees were older country people. It made me feel sad. The Head of Field Office told me that these old Serbs basically come back here to die. The young people have left, which means that in 10-20 years the area really will be ethnically "clean." The old people in the church quietly lit candles and listened to the priest as he said things about peace and hope (at least that's what I managed to figure out). After the service, an old lady offered us homemade cherry liquor, and the priest talked with us about the numbers of people returning. The priest told me that the church had been badly damaged in World War II, but that in this war the Croats had left it alone. The priest was quite overworked, because he was the only Orthodox priest in the area. He was busy running from church to church, overseeing christenings and funerals, as well as leading holiday services.

We left to go visit a returnee in a remote village near the Bosnian border. To get there, we drove along a long dirt road past deserted houses, with broken windows. They were different from the typical painted brick Balkan houses you see everywhere. These houses were made of dark wood, and you could see faded carvings along the roofs. It must have been a nice, albeit quiet, place to live. The Head of Field Office told me

that these had been Serb villages, but that these people had been driven out by Croats in 1995. He said that most of the roads had been closed off by the army, so the people were forced to flee in a long, agonising traffic jam along this narrow dirt road. Some of the people had been sent out on buses, and there were incidents where the Croatian army ordered people off and then burned the buses. We could see some of the burned out buses along the road. It was interesting that the houses were vandalized, but not looted. I've seen plenty of looted houses in Eastern Slovenia, with almost nothing left but the frame. These houses had broken windows and lots of trash inside, but the Croats apparently hadn't wanted to salvage the shutters or window frames. The Head of Field Office told me that as far as he knew, nobody from these villages had expressed a desire to return. The whole area was creepily silent and sad.

We finally reached a little village where several people had returned. Stanko, a returnee who had been living as a refugee in Yugoslavia, was waiting for us in his yard. You could see the Bosnian border from his house. The Head of Field Office told me that when Stanko first returned in 1997, people had stolen his livestock and shot at his house. The local police at first said they couldn't do anything, because the thieves were probably from Bosnia. Eventually, the OSCE managed to convince the police to send more patrols. Since then there hasn't been trouble, but that might also be because most of Stanko's livestock was already gone. Another effect of the crime



was that Stanko sent his wife and grandson back to Yugoslavia, because he didn't feel it was safe for them to stay there. He hasn't heard from them (or from his two sisters) since the airstrikes started. Although Stanko came back two years ago, the local authorities still haven't hooked up his electricity or water. We asked him how he followed events in Kosovo, and he produced a wind-up radio. He served us rakija (plum brandy), and coyly asked my age. He did it by wondering aloud whether I had been alive when he visited the US in 1967. I told him that I had been alive for one year at that point. Stanko said that his grandfather had worked in Pennsylvania, but then his father returned to Yugoslavia in the 1920s. At some point his father died, and

Stanko's mother was left with 7 children. During World War II, when the family fled to Bosnia, four of his brothers and sisters died, leaving just Stanko and the two sisters who are now somewhere in Yugoslavia. Stanko told us that he started smoking after his son was killed during this war. Apparently his son was walking near the border, and was shot by a Bosnian Muslim soldier. Stanko said that he also drank more now, so he could sleep at night. It was very sad. What made it sadder was that Stanko asked if we could talk in the house, so nobody would overhear us. He said that sometimes the police came around and asked him why the OSCE came by so often. He said he told the police that the OSCE just came around because it was their job. As we were leaving, Stanko gave us a bottle of rakija and asked us — "Do you know why I came back here? Do you know why I'm here? Because this is my home." That's the whole idea of refugee return, but it's rarely easy or painless.

I left Petrinja feeling sad, but also glad that this field visit put me in touch with reality again. One reason I feel sad in general about the situation in Yugoslavia is because I can see that it means that the people I work with — both clients and local colleagues — have fewer and fewer options. When I was in Eastern Slovenia, most of our local staff went to visit family members in Serbia every weekend. Belgrade was the local metropolis, not Zagreb. People could go there and not be afraid if they had the wrong (Serbian) name and not be afraid to speak with their own regional accent. Displaced persons who couldn't

return to their homes in Croatia could always view Serbia as a last option. Now it's as if this exit, this breathing space is being shut off for the Croatian Serbs. It's not even a matter of choice, although the borders are still open. Any military-age Serb man who goes to Yugoslavia might not be allowed to leave. It's as if the roof has suddenly been lowered, trapping people in a dark, dim place where they can't express themselves or live full lives. And the uncertainty about what's happening to their families must be terrible. One interpreter who is originally from northern Croatia (but whose family fled to near Novi Sad when their house was blown up) managed to bring her mother and her sister back to Vukovar before the bombing started. Her father stayed behind to guard their house in Yugoslavia, and now he's stuck there because men can't leave the country. One legal advisor, who fled from Karlovac, can't visit his family in Belgrade because he wouldn't be allowed to return to Croatia. One woman, whose husband didn't get Croatian documents, is visiting him in Novi Sad right now. She's also worried because her son is 17 and might be taken by the army. Another interpreter at our coordination center told me that two of her male friends in Yugoslavia have been drafted and she has no idea where they are. She said that while driving to work one morning, she heard a new Croatian song called "Bombs are falling on Belgrade." I saw the same cassette featured in the nearby market in Zagreb. To me it shows an ugliness lurking under the surface of this calm town. It's obvious that I have a dif-

ferent view on the events going on in Yugoslavia than I would if I were working in the US. There are no easy answers, but I do want to get across — in a personal way — that it's not just one side that's suffering. You see the same things over and over, done in different places and by different people. The really sad thing is that even when the physical fighting finally ends, people still suffer materially and emotionally for years.

On the Edge of War 20 April 1999

I managed to get out of Zagreb last weekend and travel east to my old AOR (area of responsibility) of Vukovar, in Eastern Slovenia on the very edge of Croatia. I was looking forward to going, because I felt kind of like I was on another planet in Zagreb. I would speak to my former Vukovar colleagues on the phone, and if they were Croatian Serbs I would try to express my sorrow and frustration about the NATO strikes on their country just across the border. But talking on the phone wasn't enough. Also, I felt like I needed to see the wide, flat countryside again.

So, I drove out of the city, going east down the smooth, speedy Highway of Brotherhood and Unity. I felt a sense of relief as the buildings gave way to new green fields, and then a sense of familiarity as I passed bombed out gas stations and shells of unrecognizably burned buildings. About an hour into the trip, I finally managed to pick up a Bosnian Serb radio station. I could tell it wasn't a Croatian radio station because they were using certain words specific to both Bosnian and Serbian.

It was a news broadcast, and I tried to listen to understand what the newscaster was saying. I expected to hear blunt propaganda, but to my surprise I heard them quoting American news sources and citizens. At one point they even replayed something Clinton said about how a loss of life was regrettable, but that sometimes that unfortunately happened as you tried to meet your goals. It seemed to me that they were playing this sarcastically, and I was impressed by the sophistication of their propaganda. Then they announced the radio's website: www.voa.gov. So, I had been listening to the Voice of America Serbian language program and assuming it was Serb propaganda. Oops. I've got to keep studying the language. But at least that explained why they were speaking Serbian and not Bosnian language, which they should have been speaking since I was driving along the northern edge of Bosnia.

A couple of hours later, as I neared Eastern Slovenia, I tried to find my favorite Serbian radio stations. The first one, Kosseva (named after a wind — no relation to Kosovo) is owned by Milosevic's wife and plays really trashy techno/disco music. It's a favorite among interpreters who have a lot to learn about music. I managed to find it, but was shocked by what they were playing. Instead of the techno version of "Macarena," they were playing something that sounded like a cross between a U.S. state tourism song ("You've got a friend in Yugoslavia") and the worst of syrupy "old-new" Croatian music. It was terrible. I thought that if my country played pseudo-nostalgic music

like this during a war, after two days I would be running to NATO with a white flag. And the second station, which had really been my favorite, had also undergone an unfortunate metamorphosis. Instead of eclectic rock and blues, they were playing strange electronic music (some of which sounded like modern jazz muzak) and — according to my Lithuanian former boss — many Russian songs! The news was the same on both stations. After two years of hearing about "the Serbian aggressor" from the Croats, it was interesting to hear newscasters mention "the NATO aggressor" and "American aggression." Different enemy, same script. They said things like, "The morale of our army is good" and "Despite the NATO aggression there was a soccer game yesterday." It would have been funny, except that there is basically no independent news in Yugoslavia. On the other hand, our own CNN and BBC aren't much better. The propaganda is more sophisticated, but I think we're a less sophisticated audience than the Yugoslavs because we don't expect to hear propaganda.

When I got to my former boss's house, a party was in full swing. I spoke to a couple of ethnic Serb colleagues and realized that their bravado on the phone was only superficial. They were really pretty upset, even if they didn't have family in Serbia. My former boss told me that two of the female interpreters had been joking about their futures, because they didn't have one in Croatia for ethnic reasons and now it seemed they wouldn't have one in Serbia either, given the economic destruc-

tion the airstrikes are probably causing. The bombing of just the Zastava plant — certainly a military target — put thousands and thousands of people out of work. The two interpreters decided their best future for them was to be waitresses at a fast food restaurant: "You can work at McDonald's, and I'll work at Pizza Hut." Sadly, once the international community leaves and interpreter jobs disappear, they'll be hard-pressed even to find something like that in a region of over 85 percent unemployment. One of the interpreters, a normally cheerful blond woman, said to me in an upset voice, "I hate Milosevic. Why do they have to bomb us? Why can't they just kill him?" My former boss put on gypsy music to cheer everyone up. She began dancing, and convinced other people to join her. One of the other people dancing was an interpreter whose Croat mother had been injured by flying glass in Belgrade when the bombing first started. She told me her mother was doing better, and kept dancing.

Novi Sad television, which of course is run by the state, showed the same type of resolved gaiety. It was interesting to watch Serbian television and actually see the people standing on the bridges and dancing at concerts in the middle of Belgrade. There were people of all ages, and singers of many genres. I thought about how people in Belgrade had marched for democracy for several months during a cold winter. It didn't seem like they would give up their bridge concerts too easily, especially since they believed they were defending their homes. One interpreter from Vukovar who had

gone through the war here felt differently. She said, "They're feeling the euphoria now, but after a month it will be different. You'll see." In other words, the people will be depressed when reality hits them, when they realize that their lives will for years be worse than they were before the war. This interpreter, who has many friends in Novi Sad, said she was just trying to stay calm and concentrate on her work. She said that having gone through a war here and having had many international friends, she could see how both sides were really one-sided.

This evening on CNN, one of the Pentagon briefers said straight out that the bombing might hurt the people of Yugoslavia, and that it was up to Milosevic whether his people had to be hurt or not. Does this Pentagon guy really think Milosevic will act out of pity for his own people? People are used to looking for "good guys" and "bad guys." However, from what I've seen in the Balkans, none of the leaders have problems with capitalizing on the suffering of their own people to influence world opinion. It's scary to think about the massive Kosovo Albanian refugee exodus in terms of this pattern. Because of the refugee exodus — caused by Milosevic, probably triggered by NATO, and (in my opinion) provoked in part by the KLA — we will have some sort of Kosovar protectorate, policed by our armies.

On Saturday night, my former boss and I sat on her porch while she had a cigarette. The night was quiet and was lit sporadically by a sliver of moon. From time to time we could hear a muted rumbling sound. My boss

told me it was the NATO planes flying over to bomb Vojvodina. It was a strange feeling. It made me wish Clinton and Blair could be under the same clouds. It reminded me of a scene from *Lawrence of Arabia*, when Lawrence and Sharif Ali are riding to Damascus. They can hear the heavy booms of British guns pounding the Turks, not far away. Sharif Ali says, "God bless the men who are under that." Lawrence protests, "But they're Turks." Sharif Ali says emphatically, "God bless them." Something about the darkness of that moment in the movie connected with how I felt sitting on my friend's quiet porch, listening to the distant thunder of my NATO planes above the clouds.

Having met and spoken with hundreds and hundreds of refugees by now, I know a lot about what these planes and other instruments of war mean. They don't just mean damaged buildings or night-time fear. They mean the destruction of normal lives, the sad, painful climb back to some semblance of routine, and the ongoing ache of dreams that can never be realized. Sorry if this sounds sappy, but most of us really don't know how lucky we are. I think anyone who is tempted to use military force as a quick answer should know what it's like to exist in a post-war society. It's not romantic, and it has nothing to do with the strutting and posturing we've been seeing on TV. My former landlady, who also went through the war in Vukovar, expressed it best, "Better one year of negotiations than one day of war." The Hippocratic Oath — "First of all, do no harm," would

also be appropriate. Radical surgery isn't always the best solution. The Kosovo Albanians were certainly oppressed before all this started, but I truly believe they're worse off now. You can't go back, and hindsight is always 20-20. Still, this is a principle to keep in mind when considering what to do next.

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