

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

AS-12
The Locksmith's Tears

Birčaninova 28b
Belgrade, Yugoslavia
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue, New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

I cannot resist the temptation of passing on one of those infrequent stories in the Yugoslav press which reveal more about real life in this country than the mountains of newsprint, resolutions, speeches and "analyses" with which the resident here is normally deluged. Such revealing and realistic accounts are quite rare; the last one I recall appeared last autumn; Under the title "A Bad Day for Jovan Jovanović," it described the all-too-normal day of an average urban employee, starting with a malfunctioning alarm clock and breakfast food-shortages, through overcrowded, behind-schedule trolleybusses, to a host of office confusions. Is it any wonder, the piece concluded, that Jovan Jovanović is a bit grumpy, and does not work with quite the enthusiasm one might expect?

That story, as I say, appeared last fall. The current one, perhaps even more revealing, was published a few days ago (May 28) in Ilustrovana Politika, which is roughly equivalent to the New York Times Sunday Magazine, although it is sold separately from the daily Politika. The latter is, of course, Yugoslavia's most popular and respected newspaper and somewhat of an anomaly: It is the only important publication to survive from pre-war days, when it was the Balkan equivalent of Le Monde; the most serious and objective reporter of world affairs, and a focus also of left-liberal opposition to the royal dictatorship domestically and the Nazi Axis internationally. The paper survived because the Ribnikar family, which founded and owned it, had on several important occasions personally sheltered such rebellious young men as Josip Broz, Milovan Djilas and Vladimir Dedijer; it was in the Ribnikar villa in occupied Belgrade in July 1941 that the Yugoslav Politburo worked out detailed plans for the conduct of the Partisan War. After the war, Politika was placed under firm Communist party guidance but continued to appear, and its staff today still includes a few (though not many) of the pre-war contributors. The paper has persistently outsold the officially-promoted Borba, both because of a tradition of professionalism and because buying it is in a way an act of affirming one's non-Communism. Its success is all the more remarkable when one considers that, unlike Borba, Politika is printed only in the Cyrillic alphabet and thus not overly accessible in Croatia and Slovenia. There are those who say that if Politika were permitted to publish an edition in the Latin script, it would not only put a lot of other papers out of business but would exercise a greater and more genuine influence for "integration" of the Yugoslav nationalities than any dozen Communist resolutions or agit-prop campaigns.

The current story offers an example of what Politika might be

able to do for Yugoslavia could it regain some of its pre-war independence. The article is headlined "Why Did Locksmith Risotije Shed Tears?" and it deals with the current situation of private artisans, craftsmen and repairmen -- now being wooed by the top Yugoslav leadership after a disastrous campaign of punitive taxation and harassment last fall (see AS-8). Marshal Tito, himself a former locksmith and universal repairman, called an end to the campaign last January; various Federal officials have called for an end to tax and other forms of discrimination against the artisans; economists have begun to stress the importance of the "tertiary" or service sector in reducing unemployment; yet somehow the artisans' situation has remained uneasy. The Ilustrovana Politika article, an interview with eight artisans, largely explains why.

Vojislav Andrejević, a mechanic, leads off with pertinent statistics: "In our country, there are some 116,000 private artisans' workshops.... They are very busy, yet still cannot take on all the work they are asked to do. Nevertheless, last year 13,670 artisans cancelled their licenses to run a workshop. The main reason was high taxes. Some of them left the country and took jobs abroad.

"... The time has come when artisans should no longer be regarded with disdain. Officially, for example, we are no longer called private but independent artisans. But people who were once in trouble are very careful not to get involved in something similar all over again. There is a lot of misunderstanding about us: People think that the main thing for us is to make money. They don't realize that we like our work, that we are good workers, and that... our work is needed in the economy.

"Take my example. I work in my own flat, on my own, without any help. I repair typewriters, adding machines, and other office machines.... In our country... there are more machines than people who can maintain and repair them. In ten years' time we imported 26 billion dinars (\$35 million) worth of office machines, including 9 billion dinars worth of machines in use in Belgrade alone. And where are the expert artisans to do this job? As far as I know, there are only 150 mechanics of this type -- 90 in the social sector, and 50 independent artisans."

Haralampije Počković, an electrician, adds that most artisans must be able to accept "any kind of work," be expert at all sorts of repairs. "A little while ago," he recounts, a very expensive and complicated electric adding machine was out of order. They brought it to me to have a look, and when I discovered the trouble -- one of the spare parts was completely ruined -- I made the necessary design, repaired the part and put the machine in working order. Everybody was astonished to see that I did not charge them more than a thousand dinars (\$1.33). Later, I learned that they had been trying to find someone all over Belgrade for nine days.... Then, when they could not find anyone else, they thought of asking me, a private artisan."

Ljubomir Sušaković, a shoemaker, has also been a local committee-man for eleven years. "I have had a chance to see how irresponsibly many people, including my fellow committeemen, condemned private

artisans. At one of our meetings, one committeeman, hearing that I was a private artisan, said angrily: 'You private artisans should be liquidated!'"

Despite all sorts of pressures, Sušaković relates, the artisans did their best to hold on. "Unfortunately, some of them did not manage to survive. The taxes as well as other obligations were too high; and when they increased continuously from one year to the next, they were compelled to close down. I shall never forget one of my colleagues, a 72-year-old locksmith. His name is Risotije Jovanović, and his shop is on the Boulevard of the Revolution. He shed tears when he told me that because of the high taxes he would have to sell his workshop. Who can benefit when a good old artisan will have to be supported by social security?"

Milan Jelovac, who makes handbags, explains why artisans' products are not quite as good as they might be. "It does not pay to try to find new models, or create them myself. No one can pay me for my designs. On the contrary, I have to bear the cost of the time, designing and material needed to create a new model. The tax assessors simply come, look at two or three new models, and write their reports. I have to pay 3,800 dinars a day against taxes... I work at night to pay the taxes."

Djuro Zunac, a barber, describes the methods of some tax assessors. On a Saturday (when, as Zunac points out, he has more work than any other time), a tax official came and "numbered the customers to find out how many wanted a shave and how many a haircut. On the basis of such statistics they assessed my taxes.... Another time an official came and asked me to open my cashbox, even though there were people waiting to be served.... Then he asked me to show him my wallet. I was searched like a thief. I didn't dare protest. If they begin to be keen on someone, then his life is bitter indeed.... Because of such things the barber Zoran Jonov was forced to close his shop. He is 62 and not feeling very well. No one wants to hire him. Does anyone ask how this man lives?"

Shoemaker Susaković interrupts with another tale of tax assessors who "turned the whole shop upside down looking for the leather for new shoes" and even "searched the cupboard on the staircase." "Imagine," he says, "I cannot make a pair of shoes for my daughter or myself, and must buy readymade shoes. Do you think the tax collector would believe I had made those shoes for myself?"

Branko Tomic, a saddler, declares: "We are not tax evaders, but we do not want to pay unreasonable taxes, to become poor, to close down our shops because of taxes. What was the point of the pressure exerted on the artisans in Split and Subotica where there are no more artisans?"

Zunac points to the lack of apprentices, and Miloš Kubat, another shoemaker, notes the difficulties private artisans encounter in finding workshop premises. Andrejević is pleased that certain machines will now be available to the artisans, but notes that the prices are not exactly favorable.

"Following Marshal Tito's speech," recounts barber Zunac, "we have a feeling that the climate is beginning to change. Except when we go to the People's Committees (supreme organs of local authority). There we're often told: 'What is in the paper is not an order for us. We have received no instructions as yet.' In my view, even the Artisans' Chamber has taken an attitude opposing the artisans. In Belgrade, there are over 6,000 independent artisans, but not one of those who goes to the Chamber can feel at home there. The leading officials in the Chamber all work in the socialist sector, while independent artisans have been removed from all positions...."

Sušaković sums up with a fable: "The fox and the wolf were on the best of terms until hunger struck in the forest. The wolf, very hungry, then said to the fox: 'Forgive me, but I must eat you!'

"Don't, my wolf: What good would it do to eat me? I'm as skinny as you are. But look -- there are fat sheep in the pen at the edge of the forest. You should rather eat them.'

"And what about the dogs and shepherds?'

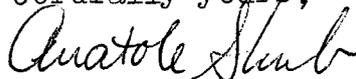
"Don't worry: An order has been received that you can freely eat sheep.'

"The wolf started moving toward the pen, but the dogs sensed the danger, alarmed the shepherds, and the wolf hardly managed to escape to the forest after a bad beating. He came to the opening of the fox's lair and asked: 'Why did you lie?'

"I wasn't lying,' the fox replied from inside his lair. 'The order has been received, but the shepherds do not observe it!'"

One might add, as a sort of footnote to this tale, that the press has begun now to show the beginnings of some concern about the status of lawyers (in a worse position than artisans, and for a longer time); and there are even glints of concern about doctors. Yet one wonders whether, even if those at the top have second thoughts about some of their self-defeating policies, the "shepherds" will permit any significant change. The difference between a free press of the sort cherished by Jefferson and that permitted here is that none of the artisans interviewed, nor the quite knowledgeable editors of Politika, could make the necessary connection between the tears of Locksmith Risotije and the ideology which former locksmith Broz has fastened on the country and especially on the "shepherd" class.

Cordially yours,



Anatole Shub

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