INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

In Transit,
Belgrade,
October 22, 1962

AS-3
A Place to Live

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

Some three weeks ago, I began writing a newsletter about some of the special events I had been witnessing: the quadrennial European Athletic Championships, the Zagreb trade fair, the presentation to the National Assembly of the new draft Constitution, the visit of a Soviet delegation headed by President Leonid Brezhnev. To my mind, none of these events had produced anything very novel or significant, and in any case their essence had been reported in the daily press. However, I did think that some of the smaller details might be of interest: At the track meet -- more foreign reporters than covered last year's neutralist summit meeting... a press room equipped by Olivetti with keyboards in five languages but nary a wastebasket or spare pencil... Foreign Office aides mustered into service at the telegraph desk... the new eighteen-story Hotel Slavija rushed to completion -- glass walls, no airconditioning, hot. At the Zagreb fair -- Tito's revelation that restaurant waiters weren't getting the 10-20% service charge which has been mandatory the past few years... the Italian pavillion, smart and stylish, and the U.S. entry, keyed (rather inappropriately, I thought) to "leisure"... the pagoda-styled hall still engraved "People's Republic of China" but used now by miscellaneous other exhibitors... a Zagreb student's annoyance at the preponderance of heavy-industry equipment. At the National Assembly -- the absence of even a plaque to mark the hall's (and Yugoslavia's) most decisive event, the murder of the Croatian Peasant leader Stjepan Radić in 1928... the look of the "new class" in solemn parliament assembled, as varied in cultural level as their multinational country... the surprisingly deferent, almost modest manner of Tito as chairman, so different from his bearing before the masses... Rankovich's doodling as Kardelj formally presented the new Constitution. And the Brezhnev visit -- the lateness of the Yugoslav revelation that the delegation would include Izvestia editor Alexei Adzhubei and spouse, Rada Khrushchev Adzhubei... the disingenuousness with which another member of the delegation, Yuri Andropov, was identified merely as a "member of the Supreme Soviet" when he is also, and primarily, head of the C.P.S.U. Central Committee section for relations with foreign Communist parties.... the artillery salute at the airport and the royal tone of the official reception in the new Palace of the Federal Executive Council, used for the first time on this occasion... the hard bargaining obviously in progress --

around a coffee table, Brezhnev voluble, all smiles, jokes and shoulder-shrugs; Rankovich keeping out, making small talk with Petar Stambolich (National Assembly President); Kardelj, animated, doing most of the talking for the home side; Tito leaning back, frowning, interjecting only now and then to make a point with imperious index finger....

I had, as I say, every intention of describing in leisurely fashion countless such details and impressions; but despite copious resolutions and attempts I never progressed beyond page 3 of a rough first draft. This was not the result of any lack of interest, or of any special writers' block. Rather, the paralysis stemmed from our domestic conditions here. Not only during those past three weeks of futile attempts, but for a month before, we have been physically and emotionally consumed by a single activity: finding a place to live in Belgrade.

Let me say from the outset that we are not strangers to apartment-hunting and its often bizarre corollaries We were the only couple of my acquaintance to have lived in three separate one-bedroom apartments in the same city in less than five years. We have invested, I would estimate, nearly a thousand hours over the years in studying the Sunday Times real-estate section. We have stripped and bracketed our own bookshelves, as well as had ready-mades installed five minutes before the painters were due to prime them. We have hosted a wedding breakfast in one room with the others full of packing crates and guests none the wiser. We have sublet, and been sublet to, and have even sub-sublet half of a summer sublet with all the logistic problems that involved. In fact, such proficiency has been acquired, notably on the distaff side, that I have often dreamed of lolling half the year on Mediterranean beaches while somewhere off Park Avenue a million-dollar enterprise proceeds (all on the telephone) under the discreet gilt-on-teak rubric: "Joyce Shub, Apartmentship Associate."

I must now ruefully report, however, that little of this experience has been at all relevant to the task which has had us in its grip these last two months. For Belgrade is not New York, the Na-Ma (People's Store) is not Bloomingdale's, and a Serbian gazda is not William A. White or even William Levitt. To the extent that we were better positioned than Yugoslav home-seekers -- who normally work six days a week at two jobs for a net of perhaps $10-20, and thus lack both time and money -- I shudder....

I cannot, in truth, say we were not warned. Weeks before we got here, Paul Underwood of the Times wrote us that our hope of obtaining "minimum Levittown" accomodations was "utopian." He himself had just had a house sold out under him; its owner had dealt it to the Protocol Section of the Yugoslav Foreign Ministry, which turned it over to the Venezuelan Ambassador. Rents had been sharply rising ever since the "winds of change" began sending African embassies and legations into Belgrade by the score. And now the intensified demand had been met by contracting supply: Ever since Tito's speech at Split last May, all sorts of "speculators" (read: private owners or operators) had been fearful of government investigations, audits, expropriations. There was a new regulation that individuals

who had taken public loans to build their homes could no longer rent space to help pay the mortgage; a still-mortgaged house which was even partly rented out would "revert to the community." House after house, flat after flat, were simply taken off the market. And what of the home-builder with a house half-finished, the loan all spent, and only the hope of a prospective tenant's "investment" to see him through? We shall shortly see.

It should be noted at this point that our own position in the market was hardly formidable. As non-Yugoslavs, we were not entitled to any consideration from the "socialist sector," which controls about half the country's dwelling units. As non-employees of the U.S. mission, we were ineligible either for the handsomely-outfitted apartments (hi-fi by Garrard and Fisher) in the Embassy compound proper or for any of the other U.S. properties scattered about town. As non-diplomats, we had no claim on the Protocol Section of the Foreign Ministry, which has been quietly achieving a neat corner on available "luxury" (read: Western-standard) housing in this city. This left only the private landlords -- a sporting proposition in Teaneck or Trieste, but distinctly less so in a peasant country used to minimal facilities, under a regime on whose scale of values housing rates relatively low and private enterprise rates next-to-last. (Last, of course, is loss of power.)

In our hotel, we met Paul Underwood, who'd had a cot moved into his office while his family moved West; a Greek diplomat who'd spent five months house-hunting and didn't dare yet send to Athens for his family; and an Egyptian correspondent who was gleefully transferring to Rome after fourteen months here -- twelve in hotels, two in a flat which he'd had to quit because of a title-dispute. In Government offices, we were referred to a tourist agency, whose leading official, swearing he understood our requirements, promptly produced -- one small room in someone else's three-room flat, which they weren't renting anyway. At a restaurant, we met a brisk, gracious lady of the Esterhazy style who had a twelve-room villa, was asking two years' advance rent, and who rose sharply, insulted, from the table at our opening (in fact, maximum) bid -- although the bid was, of course, higher than the monthly salary of 99.8% of Yugoslavs. Our Greek friend was not surprised: He had already been offered the same house; two years' advance rent was not too uncommon; he might even be able to scare up the $6,000-or-so advance; but--he said, with diplomatic vagueness--there were suspicious circumstances....

We made all the standard moves. We consulted the apartment listing maintained by the receptionist of the U.S. Embassy. Nearly all those flats were either taken (a good dozen, we were led to believe, by "Ghana") or had been withdrawn from the market because of Tito's Split speech. The others reminded us of the kind advertised for days on end in the Times ("W. 90s, 2½, ht water, rsnbl") until they ultimately find their place among the Used Car $pecial$ in the Daily Mirror.

We didn't even try other Embassies. Another (or, rather, the other) anomalous American family in town had already made those rounds, and found the U.S. list a Michelin Guide by comparison.

We began cruising around construction sites, but found owners reluctant to identify themselves, workmen professing to know nothing, and no real prospects before January. We read the ads in the local papers, but most of them were for apartments wanted, for sale or for exchange. Those for rent were predominantly one or two rooms.

And so we advertised ourselves (Politika, September 5 & 7):

АМЕРИЧКА ПОРОДИЦА тражи приватну кућу или трособан комфоран стан — намештен. Пожељно Топчидерско брдо или Дедиње. Јавити у „Мажестик", соба 62. 8155

((AMERICAN FAMILY seeks private house or three-room apartment -- furnished. Topcider or Dedinje preferred. Inquire at Majestic Hotel, room 62.))

We got about a dozen responses in the days that followed. Four merited some consideration.

First came Mrs. A, a cheerful little Croatian woman, wounded in the war, the wife of a Serbian worker. In the midst of peasant shacks on the road to Kraguejevac, she had built a neat two-storey stone house. The upstairs had been rented to East Germans; half the downstairs was vacant. She wanted to rent it all to a single family. ("We have to," her husband added dourly.) If the price was too high, and it was, would we take just the downstairs? Too small, we thought-- and we were also rather leery, despite reassurances, of "Djoni" (Johnny), a muzzled mastiff chained in the yard, whose leaps and barks had already scared our children witless.

The second lead came from a Western executive leaving Belgrade. His clean, modern three-bedroom flat had been temporarily sublet to a diplomat awaiting a villa. The furniture belonged to the Western firm, which was asking some $1,200; Mrs. B, the Serbian landlady, wanted six months' advance rent in addition. Since no villa had yet materialized for the diplomat, Mrs. B took our name and promised to keep in touch.

Mr. C, our third prospect, was an agronomist of about 60, one of those big, weather-beaten men who prove surprisingly gentle. He had borrowed to build the house, but it had cost more than he'd planned, and he couldn't now manage mortgage, taxes and final improvements without help. He could expect none from his countrymen. Aware of the risks he might court by renting, he had no alternative. A sizeable advance would pay off the loan; he and his wife would live in the basement, his two daughters' families would double up next door, and after a couple of years -- God willing -- they might be in the clear.

The house was way out -- half a mile from the closest bus or market, nearly that far from the end of the pavement -- and we couldn't really consider it. Mr. C nevertheless insisted that we sample his black grapes, while his wife and handsome daughter served Turkish coffee. The old Serbian hospitality, indeed, but the traditional gaiety was missing. It was clear that, in having been forced to rent the house, the family had lost a dream.

The last response came to us as a scribbled address (no name) left with the hotel porter. The address was a small shop; Mr. D was a "privatnik." He had been rich before the war, but his business and most of his property had been seized and his family had fled abroad. Only the house remained.

It was a summer place before the war -- actually two structures set in a hilly garden with a lovely view of the city. The smaller cottage, which had contained all the plumbing, had been ruined -- "the only house in Dedinje to be bombed by both the Germans and the Americans." Its shell might ultimately serve, however, as a garage.

The "big" house contained four rooms, all modest in size. Scattered through the first three were odd pieces of furniture (Middle-European bourgeois, circa 1936) and assorted tools. The last and smallest room was empty save for a newly installed, single-faucet lavabo.

"But where," we asked, "are the kitchen and bath?"

"Ah," said Mr. D with a knowing smile, "wherever you want them!"

In this deft shifting of responsibility, I now suspect, lay the root of all our subsequent difficulties. Had we been asked to take the place as it was, we would doubtless have turned it down. Instead, we were tempted by the illusion of free will, the apparent power to remake the house as we wanted it. "Whatever we don't have, we'll buy," said Mr. D in Serbian, and repeated it in German to be sure gnadige frau understood. In English, it developed, this meant that whatever he didn't have (and that was almost everything) we would buy. Nevertheless, it would all come out of the rent, he was ready to invest "half a million and more," and we could buy "whatever you need, whatever you want." We were lured, thus, by the siren vision of imposing on this rude Serbian dwelling the sheen and order of the West -- major appliances and all.

Before committing ourselves, we took our bearings one last time. Depressing on all counts -- the Greek was still in the hotel; the Egyptian's successor had arrived and was as resigned as his Rome-bound predecessor had been cheerful; Underwood had worked up a travel schedule that would keep him out of Belgrade until New Year's. We took two more ads, this time in Vecherni Novosti, the evening tabloid. That was the final shock: not a single response, worthy or otherwise. We went back to Mr. D's little shop, and the round of bargaining and buying began.

Who will believe the hours and hours spent in indecisive haggling? Denizens of Oriental markets, perhaps, or readers of Ivo Andrić, who has described similar scenes in his native Bosnia. Our bargaining was not even over money, and half the talk was not bargaining at all but socio-political monologue. I would come between appointments to communicate what I imagined was a small point, and be greeted, before I could get to it, with a disquisition on Cuba, the price of bread, American aid, the Croats, the police, the value of the dinar. These monologues were unstoppable, particularly when

customers entering the shop could be drawn in. When we finally forced our point, we met, often as not, with a blank stare; or else with a hurt cry of "Luxus!" That was Mr. D's word for any facility or amenity he thought frivolous (such as shade for a naked bulb). I do not know in what language "luxus" occurs. Our negotiations were conducted in so many that I must struggle to remember, for example, that orman is Serbian, schrank German, garde-robe French, and that the English word is "wardrobe." (The word is crucial because Yugoslav builders have not yet discovered the clothes-closet.)

In this manner, it took four hours to establish the idea that the newly created kitchen and bathroom should be separated by a wall. (Despite the initial promise of free will, both areas had to be carved out of the one small room -- the others lacked the plumbing outlets.) It took several such sessions to sell the virtues of hot running water. "What do you think this is, America?" was Mr. D's first reaction. This was followed by a demonstration, in best TV pitchman fashion, of how a simple immersion coil could boil a glass of cold water in less than a minute. He had a stop-watch to prove it.

In some ways, however, Mr. D was quite a help. He told us, for example, that Yugoslavia's best refrigerator (Kelvinator motor) was made in Montenegro, but that the production was sold out two years in advance. "Did you know any Montenegrins in New York?" Mr. D asked. "Then tell the company they sent you." The refrigerator was seen, sold and delivered by bicycle-truck in two hours.

That was by far the briskest service we obtained in our manifold dealings with the Yugoslav distribution network. Once the buying started, in fact, we began to feel that Mr. D was no longer an exasperating adversary, but rather an invaluable ally against an unspeakable system. How could one feel otherwise when the two of us struggled, in a deserted warehouse by the Danube, to lift onto the car-top the sink which the great department store on Marx-Engels Square had promised to deliver five days running -- only to confess it had no truck? Or when, after hours of groping through a similar warehouse in search of (imitation) wall tile, we were literally forced to accept a warped sheet if we wanted to take the good ones? ("Dictator!" Mr. D screamed at the "salesman." "Better watch your talk," was the reply; "we have no dictators in our country.")

I would be doing Mr. D an injustice, however, if I left the impression that our relationship was simply an alliance for progress. It was, rather, a mariage de convenance, and when convenance suited he barred few holds. He originally promised, for example, all the dishes we needed, displaying an elegant set of German china; but when the moment came he mused that one broken piece would halve the value of the "komplet," so why didn't we buy it now? He persuaded us, too, to get a gas range rather than an electric one, and it was in the house before we learned that Belgrade has no city gas. The bottled butane was fairly easy to obtain, but connecting tube and regulator could not be had anywhere in the city. According to a gas-company director, sales of the tubes and regulators (though

not, of course, of the stoves) had been "temporarily" prohibited in Belgrade (though nowhere else) because of a "safety inspection." According to other Yugoslavs, maneuvers of this sort are the usual prelude to a rise in prices.

At last, after a month of wearying effort, and with a six-month equity in the D establishment, we moved in. The disillusion took barely twenty-four hours. It was clear the first afternoon that, with all of us and our gear inside, the house was far, far smaller than Mr. D's liberal metric measurements had seemed to indicate. We soon learned, too, that the gas -- which did not shut off automatically with the range or hot water -- leaked furiously even when closed with a mechanic's wrench. As night fell, we discovered that the porcelain, lignite-burning stove which allegedly could heat the whole house in mid-winter couldn't do the job for one room in sunny October. Calling on Mr. D for the electric heaters he'd promised, we learned why he had talked us out of an electric stove: The house lacked current for a single additional appliance. Indeed, the smell of burning fuses was already in the air (although difficult to distinguish from the butane and the lignite). Boosting the current would cost another $150; alternately, we could buy another lignite stove or two and pray for the gas to seep slowly.

And so it went: The first shower of the morning, unchecked by curtain or floor drain, flooded not only the bathroom but also the kitchen, which was, unhappily, downhill. Other plumbing difficulties, less amusing, were manifest later, as was the customary wild life. Mr. D, ever obliging, promised to call in another of the numerous "majstors" who had been tinkering about the place, but by this time we had learned our lessons: Roughing it in Yugoslavia is a stimulating experience, but it tends to exclude all others; and the old saw about making a silk purse out of a sow's ear applies even to perfectible Americans.

When I received an invitation a few days later to join in a press tour of Istria and the Slovenian littoral, I accepted with relief; and as the press bus caught sight of the glittering lights of Trieste, I began mustering the intellectual arguments for a permanent shift north. I stayed on a day in Zagreb after the main press party had gone home. Belgrade, I thought, was a great place to visit, but....

If that were the end of the story, I could not have written about it. Fortunately, in my absence, Apartmentship Associate had refused to surrender. She had gone to see Mrs. B and brought glad tidings to the airport: The diplomat was getting his villa, and the Western firm that owned the furnishings had come down from a stratospheric sale price to a modest rental fee. We saw the place for the first time that night. It was a strong, well-built stone house, no more than six years old, and the company had done it up with Western thoroughness. We would be glad to have such an apartment anywhere.

Now it remains only to liquidate our six-month investment in Mr. D. Assessing the objects around us, from the Montenegrin re-

frigerator to Na-Ma's best (wool-stuffed) pillows, we figure that we shall leave about a month's worth with Mr. D, and shall have to take another month's worth with us. The rest we are trying to sell. We have made all the standard moves. We have advertised in Politika, and left our name on the Embassy lists. Already we are meeting the most interesting people....

Cordially,

Anatole Shub

Anatole Shub