

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DR-111
Slava

Jevremova 32 A
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:

We waited for little Zorica, age ten, to come home from school before beginning the feast, which normally would have commenced around noon. The necessity was a mild reminder that the Yugoslav Regime does not officially recognize traditional, religious holidays. Later, when the head of the household broke the sacred slava bread, which had been blessed by the priest, he pointed to the postman and said jokingly: "He's a Communist, so he won't cross himself, but he'll eat well enough." Everyone laughed, and the postman dug in.

These were the only occasions on which the politics of an anti-clerical, Marxist regime intruded upon a ritual as old as Serbia. The presiding figure at our feast was St. George, busily slaying a small dragon in a cheap lithograph hung in a position of honor on the wall and draped with an elaborately embroidered, hand woven towel. It was Djurdjerdan, St. George's Day, and throughout Yugoslavia the numerous Serb clans who honor the dragon-killing saint as their family patron were celebrating their slava, the most important household festival in the Orthodox calendar.

According to tradition, the chosen day with its presiding saint is the anniversary of the day on which each family's first Christian ancestor abandoned paganism and was baptised. It is therefore assumed that all clans who slava on the same day are descended from a common ancestor, and until recently it was considered improper for such people to intermarry, even though there was no other evidence of relationship. This is a plausible myth as far as the genesis of the custom is concerned, but somewhat impractical if interpreted that literally. Over the centuries a certain few saints' days have come to enjoy special popularity - in the Sumadija region of Serbia this appears to be particularly true of St. George, the Archangel Michael and St. Luke - and the concentration tends to be by villages. In Zuce, where I was attending my first slava, thirty households out of a total population of 300 souls celebrate on Djurdjerdan, so that it is almost a community holiday.

The village of Zuce is situated some twenty miles south of Belgrade in the shadow of Avala, the northernmost of the low mountains of Sumadija, which is the heartland of Serbia. A hundred and fifty years ago this rolling piedmont was an almost unpopulated region of thick oak forests - commemorated in the name, for suma means woods - and few of the villages can trace their origins back beyond the end of the eighteenth century. Oddly, those closer to Belgrade tend to be more primitive than those farther away, and the peasants here, despite frequent visits to the nearby capital, cling to traditions and techniques that have been abandoned by their countrymen in areas that one would expect to be more backward. To visit them, especially for a slava, is to explore the slow impact of the Yugoslav revolution (in all senses of the term) on a conservative rural community which is only grudgingly willing to exchange old ways for higher living standards.

Zuce is typical of its kind, cleaner, neater and noticeably more prosperous than it was even six or eight years ago, and richer than some of its neighbors. Most households have their own well and some even have outside toilets (in a district in which plain outside is usually considered sufficient). An impressive number of newly constructed brick and concrete houses - materials almost universally used since the First World War in place of traditional daub and wattle - testify to rising standards and to a new use found for cash income, which before the coming of Communism was normally hoarded toward the purchase of additional land.

There is also a new schoolhouse, the pride of the villagers; it was badly needed, for the old school is an appalling structure, sometimes used by the local cooperative, but looking more like a rundown cowshed. Its replacement is a full eight-year institution, very much an innovation of the last few years in rural hamlets like Zuce. Impressive efforts are made to offer a complete curriculum. The French teacher, for example, travels out from Belgrade every day to hold his class, even in winter. But the children who want to go beyond the eight years prescribed as a minimum by Yugoslav law must make this trip in reverse, for the nearest gymnasium is in the capital.

The settlement pattern at Zuce is also typical of the region. The village covers a large area because the homesteads are scattered irregularly across the rolling terrain. Each consists of a house and several outbuildings, with a flower and vegetable garden, a small orchard of plum, apple, quince and pear trees, and often a hectare or two of farmland, planted in uneconomic little plots. The homesteads are connected by a maze of mud roads, usually of surprising width - twenty feet or more - but definitely not yet ready for motor traffic. This does not matter; there is not a car in the village, and the arrival of my Simca created a minor sensation - only twenty miles from Belgrade and three miles from the main highway to Greece and Bulgaria.



Post Office - Zuce



Village Kafana (Cafe)

The real sensation, however, was generated by my license plates, (British) and the rapidly spread word that two of the three occupants of the car were foreigners (American). We later learned that the village was convinced that the younger son of the domaćin (head of household) had returned after eighteen years' absence. It seemed that the boy had fought with the Cetniks of Colonel Draža Mihailović during the war and had fled the country ahead of the arriving Yugoslav Partisans and Soviet Red Army in 1944. The old man says

that his son then went to America, but no word was ever received from him there.

(The rumor was understandable. Strangers are rare at a slava, which is an intimate festival to which, normally, only relatives and closest friends are invited. I know foreigners who have lived in Belgrade for many years without ever having the opportunity to attend one. My own invitation was a stroke of luck, especially since I had never met any of my host's family, the Trifunoviés of Zuce. But Serbian friends of mine in Belgrade had taken refuge with the Trifunović clan during the war and have maintained close relations with them since then, and these friends were kind enough to ask if they might include two itinerant Americans in the party.)

Old Živan Trifunović and his wife have continued to tend the farm since the war, with the help of the remaining son, Slavko, and the latter's wife, Kika.



Kika and mother-in-law offering slatko (p.5)

The son also works a full day (Serbian hours of seven to two) at a nearby kennel and training-ground, where police dogs are bred and where such distinguished figures of the Regime as Vice President Aleksandar Ranković board their hunting dogs. This, too, is a sign of the times. An increasing number of Serbian peasant families, slowly learning the usefulness of a cash income, are sending at least one of their members to work in industry or some other local non-agricultural enterprise.

The Trifunović farm consists of six hectares, four less than the maximum which the law of Socialist Yugoslavia allows one household to own. One hectare immediately adjoins the homestead and the rest are scattered throughout the village. The family also owns a cow, a dozen of the shaggy black pigs that are the hallmark of Sumadija, two of the chestnut horses that the more prosperous peasants of the region keep for ploughing, transport and prestige, and an indeterminate number of chickens. The six hectares produce, from a series of narrow swaths, enough wheat, corn, potatoes, grapes, cabbages, polebeans and

other vegetables for the family's own consumption and for the market in Belgrade, to which Kika carries milk, cheese and eggs once a week. They could, of course, dispose of these surpluses through the local cooperative, on the basis of a contract which would offer assured minimum prices and eliminate the time-consuming bus trips to Belgrade. But they prefer private enterprise in one of the open-air markets of the capital (or at the kitchen door of one of their city friends), because it is traditional, because they usually get higher prices there, and because the inconveniences involved go unnoticed in a society that has not yet learned the meaning of the term "labor productivity."

The cash income from this small commerce and Slavko's job at the kennel permitted the Trifunović family to build a new house two years ago. It is of the "Zidana" type popular in rural Sumadija since the First World War: brick and concrete, with a large kitchen and storage on the ground floor and two living rooms on the upper level, reached by an outside stair. For the time being, to help defray the expenses of construction, one of the upstairs rooms is rented to the village policeman and his wife. The other, the "good room" of the house, is used only for festival days or for an overnight guest. This

too, is in accordance with local tradition. Old Živan and his wife and their two grand-children - a boy of thirteen named Zoran and his ten-year-old sister Zorica - sleep in the kitchen. Kika and her husband sleep in a room that is part of the clean, whitewashed stall where the cow and the chestnut horses live.

There is also a pigsty and a storehouse for grain that may once have been a vayat, a Turkish type of subsidiary log house in which grown children and their families used to sleep in unheated discomfort - a tradition in fact perpetuated by the middle generation's room in the stall. There is a well, the inevitable bright flower and herb garden on which the old lady lavishes loving care, plum and apple trees, and electricity - this last until recently a luxury but now commonplace in rural areas. Sanitary facilities are provided by the surrounding garden.



Vayat



Zoran and Zorica



Well

For the slava the new house had had its annual springcleaning and the walls were bright with fresh whitewash. Upon arrival we were escorted upstairs to the "good room", where the feast was to take place later. Except for two beds, built

against the wall on either side of the window opposite the door, all furniture normally in this room had been removed to make space for a long table placed between the beds and extending from the window almost to the door, and surrounded by wooden benches. The part of the table nearer the window, where the guests of higher social rank would be seated, was covered with oilcloth, the lower half with a plain linen tablecloth. Places were laid for about fifteen people. The beds were covered with bright-patterned, rough handwoven woolen blankets, the patterns and colors similar to those found on Navajo blankets in the American Southwest, and pillows covered with elaborately embroidered cases of homemade linen. These are all family treasures which normally live in a chest and emerge only for the slava or an honored overnight guest.¹

Back outside, in the shade of a chestnut tree in full bloom, we were offered slatko, another tradition still scrupulously observed by the most sophisticated Belgrade Serb family: a guest, on his first or any subsequent ceremonial visit, is brought something sweet (this is the meaning of the word slatko) and a glass of water, and he takes a spoonful of the former and a sip of the latter. Normally, even in the city, the sweet will consist of a homemade fruit preserve, but in Zuce, oddly enough, we were offered a bowl of ordinary commercial sugar cubes. Was this an up-to-date household, eager to be modern? Then the domaćin appeared with glasses and a bottle of his best homemade plum brandy and the serious drinking of the day began.

We talked of their way of life and of recent changes in it. Their work clothes, now, are generally store-bought, but Kika said that of course she made every part of her nosnja, or folk costume, which is only worn on very special occasions. She has two versions of this costume, which were duly produced and modeled for us. The basic garments in each case consisted of a white blouse

and white muslin underskirt, both embroidered in bright patterns and both handwoven from homespun thread. Over these are worn a Turkish-type vest of dark material heavily trimmed with gold braid and bright colors; an outer skirt which is either a complete wrap-around, tying in front, or a sort of back apron gathered up at the sides to expose the underskirt; and an elaborate front apron of velvet - Kika has two of these, one dark and the other light - richly embroidered in the brightest colors.



Would little Zorica also learn to spin, weave and embroider her own nosnja? "Of course," was Kika's prompt reply, "she will learn to do everything I know how to do." If the vow is kept, folk costumes in the shadow of Belgrade, booming capital of progressive Yugoslavia, have an assured life of at least one more generation.

1. The arrangement of the room and of the feast we ate there correspond precisely to the description of a slava of ten years ago in Orosec, another Sumadijan village some twenty miles southwest of Zuce, found in Joel Halpern's A Serbian Village (Columbia University Press, 1958). Only the elaborate religious ritual described by Halpern was missing at Zuce - perhaps a matter of individual taste rather than of a difference of a decade.

Other guests continued to arrive. Except for ourselves and three others, one of them the postman, all were relatives of our hosts: two nephews of the domaćin, two sisters of his wife, a sister of daughter-in-law Kika, etc. The glasses of plain plum brandy were replaced by a jug of what everyone else in Yugoslavia calls "Sumadijan tea": heated plum brandy sweetened with sugar and herbs. At four o'clock, barely in time in view of the strength of this brew, the feast began.

In former times a slava lasted for three days. Now, although the feast itself is confined to one day and perhaps part of the next, preparations are still of necessity begun a week in advance. Two special, sacred dishes are prepared and are the first to be served. One of these is called zito and is prepared in either of two ways. A special grade of large-grained wheat is soaked overnight and then carefully boiled so that none of the grains burst. After that it is hung in a clean linen bag to drain thoroughly. For the better of the two recipes it is then finely ground and mixed with equal parts of sugar and minced walnuts - or a mixture of walnuts and almonds - and formed into a large, round cake about two inches thick at the center. The whole is thickly dusted with confectioners sugar. It is then taken to the church (or the priest is asked to come to the house) to be blessed in an elaborate ritual in which both the domaćin and the priest participate.

Zito is in fact associated with death and is also eaten at the graveside when someone is buried and at graveyard memorial ceremonies a week, a month, six months and a year after death. At the slava it is eaten in honor of the patron saint, and if the family slava is on the day of a patron who is not dead - for example the popular Archangel Michael - zito must be omitted. This is not true of the sacred loaf, the Kolac, which is prepared only for a slava.

This is a fine white bread made with milk and eggs, like the Viennese Milchbrot. It is round and is decorated with a fine, hard dough of flour and water, in formal patterns: twisted, thin strands circle the loaf and form a cross over its top, while flat bits are cut in the shape of the greek letters signifying "Jesus Christ is Triumphant," placed at the center, and in the shape of grapes and cherries (fertility symbols) placed around the outer edge. The whole is adorned with a sprig of sweet basil, another pagan intrusion.

The slava kolac is also blessed by the priest, and the feast itself begins when it is cut by the domaćin along the lines of the Christian cross and broken into four pieces, with a little red wine poured on each of the cut surfaces. Everyone, in order of social rank, is given a slice.

The rest of the meal is a feast of traditional peasant proportions. The menu at my first slava is memorable. After zito and the kolac, we were served a beef soup with homemade noodles. Then huge platters of boiled chicken with horseradish and a few young carrots and parsnips (the only vegetables of the day) were brought on. This was followed by sarma, another traditional Serbian dish made of cabbage leaves marinated in brine (or, at this season, tender grape leaves) and stuffed with a minced meat and rice mixture and cooked, preferably, for several days. Then came a spicy lamb paprikaš, by which time we were more than ready for the piece de resistance, platters of roast suckling pig. Except for the sarma, everything is eaten with one's hands, and the pork is carved with a guest's pocket knife, passed around the table.

When everyone is done, the roast pork is left on the table to be nibbled at the rest of the night, and four more platters of assorted, sugar-coated cookies are brought on. As to their quality I cannot testify; there was just no room for

even a sample. With the cookies appeared a sour pale red wine. Until then we had continued to drink Sumadijan tea from glasses kept eternally full by a domaćin whose duty it is to stand, beaming at the head of the table, drinking but not eating, supervising the journeys of his wife and daughter-in-law from kitchen to banquet hall. The feast continues into the night, with singing, drinking, stories and cold roast pork.

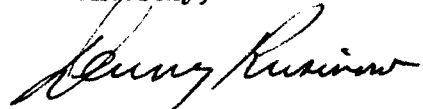
There was one moment when the conversation was serious for a time. My friend from Belgrade, herself a member of the pre-war Serbian bourgeoisie, had engaged Zoran's father in a discussion of the boy's future. He is entering his last year at the village school, and Slavko is eager that he should go on to secondary or technical training in Belgrade, and worried that his marks may not be high enough for it. My Belgrade friend disagreed.

"He is the sole inheritor of this farm," she said firmly, "and will not need anything else. He who owns land will always have his place on it. If my daughter only had land, I would not worry about her further education."

The father shook his head. "I do not want him to spend his life as my father and I have done, slaving all day for enough to eat and a little for the market. The future will be different and will belong to those who prepare for it. Zoran should have the training that will enable him to go into a factory or to a job in Belgrade. That is what we must do for our children."

The postman, who is a Communist, nodded in agreement.

Sincerely,



Dennison Rusinow

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