

Jugoslawien

Abschied, Winterliche Reise, Sommerlicher Nachtrag

P.Handke

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I remember a scene at the Südbahnhof in Vienna. It must have been during my travels back in the summer of 1977. An elderly American wanted to travel across the border to Yugoslavia, just in order to see a Communist country. The woman behind the counter could not understand his excitement, it would look exactly the same across the border as it did on the Austrian side. That remark jolted me a little. It made me realise how far south Austria was situated, and how close were its ties to the Balkans. Austria, almost like Scandinavia, a modern Western country, while Yugoslavia was definitely of the south, the unruly Balkan.

The other side was of course Slovenia, and in bordering Austrian a non-insignificant Slovenian minority. Austria itself being nothing but a predominantly German residue of a once multi-national empire, whose demise, like that of the Ottoman, is only to be retroactively regretted, however old-fashioned they may have seen at the time of their disolutions. Slovenia clearly thought of itself as belonging not to the Balkans, but to modern northern Europe, and hence it was the first to secede. This secession, so welcomed and applauded by most Europeans, saddened Handke, whose idea of a united Yugoslavia still very much made sense to him. After all had not Yugoslavia defined itself twice, first after the First World War, when the idea of a panslavic country took root (maybe Bulgaria too should have logically belonged?), and secondly after the Second World War, when it under the tutelage of Tito fought for its territorial integrity. The first part of this trilogy concerns a critical assessment of the new independent state of Slovenia, which in its posturing only makes itself look ridiculous. Slovenia was once part of something bigger, a gateway to a common Slavic national identity. Now it makes its best to cut those former ties, ignoring history, turning itself into one of those Lilliputian states entirely dependant upon the goodwill of its more powerful neighbours.

Serbia was pariah during the ethnic Balkan wars of the early 90's. Everybody took sides against it, and thus had to side with the Croations and the Bosnian Muslims. Croatia, if ever, was a most ambiguous moral entity if any, and with a murky historical past of German collaboration, through Ustasja to boot. Now, when Muslims are considered to be the new bad boys, it is rather touching to think of the sentimental regard for their Balkan representatives held fifteen years ago. Now taking sides in armed conflicts is almost a necessity, otherwise they do not make sense. Only by taking sides do you allow indignation to develop, and without indignation wars are incomprehensible. Myself I was not immune to such sentiments, although I have to admit to a rather chilling indifference to the horrors of the conflict. It was as if I had decided not to get engaged. The reason for this indifference was not hard to understand, it was relief. The Cold War did not end in mutual annihilation under mushroom clouds, but anti-climactically, the feared holocaust

being transmuted into a petty civil war of sordid atrocities conducted safely tucked away, producing footage for the evening news. However, the horrors of the war, occasionally expressed itself in vivid nightmares. I woke up from those with another sense of relief, this time from the fear of being emotionally callous.

Handke has been criticised for his support for Serbia. Such criticism seems puzzling, because after all what does he support, what does he champion? Does he really champion the idea of an expanding Serbia? Does he approve of ethnic cleansing? Is he a hero worshipper of Mladic? When one side of a conflict is being demonized it is a sound reaction to question the assessment and to delve deeper into the issues. Was the Yugoslavian wars entirely unprovoked? Did the Serbian minorities in states that declared themselves free have no grounds for their grievances? It is commonly understood that the side that starts a war is responsible for it, and can be identified as the culprit. This makes it sound easy and clearcut. On the other hand what constitute the starting of a war? Such criteria only redefine the issues instead of resolving and removing them. It is true that the Serbian side was the most violent, but also the one which had most firepower. The Serbian forces may have prevailed on the ground, but of course they lost the peace, being an international outcast.

Handke travels twice to Serbia. Once in the winter of 1995, then the following summer. What he offers is not so much an analysis but impressions. He travels with some Serbian companions, both of them residing abroad. His ambition is to get the feel of Serbia. You touch briefly in the metropol of Belgrad - the White City. What is striking are all those people selling gas in canisters, due to the embargo. The embargo is of course not watertight, after all, and this is not really appreciated in the West, Serbia has sympathetic friends, not only Bulgaria but also, perhaps more surprisingly Greece. The author is made to understand what a precious gift from underground gasoline really is when the liquid is carefully poured into the tank of the car. Distances in Yugoslavia are not great, at least when measured by the flight of crows, but mountain chains throw obstacles in the way, and roads are narrow and winding. The author and his companion leave for the river of Drina, and the snow falls heavily. The Drina itself provides the new border between Serbia and Bosnia. They are allowed to get down to its shore, but not to cross it. The river is rumored to carry floating corpses. On the other side they see gutted buildings. One of his companions have a family in the border town of Banja B. Estranged from his wife, yet of course connected by a common progeny. His former mother-in-law lives up in the mountains. An old communist and an old partisan. She believed in the idea of Yugoslavia. So did her husband, who committed suicide at the beginning of the war, finding life meaningless by the rapid disintegration of the country and the persecution of the Serbs.

Handke returns in the summer to the same place, but now ready to make incursions into Bosnia. Visegrad, famously written on by Ivo Andric, is an obvious destination. This famous bridge spanning the river, uniting Muslims with Orthodox Christians. The visit turns out to be anti-climactic. There is not much sense of a center and focus of the town. A visit to a Serbian cemetery. Lots of young grieving widows and distraught mothers. Suffering is something that ultimately reduces to that of the individual. Collectives cannot suffer, they can do many things, but never feel. Later on they travel to Sebernica, the site

of such atrocities. Handke remarks that the wars have been so tightly localized, haunting some valleys with a vengeance, sparing others. Could it be true, that most of the territory was spared violence?

The American Indians were once depicted as ruthless scum to be exterminated, now with far more understanding. Handke wonders whether the time will come when the world will look upon the Bosnian Serbs in the same sympathetic way. As Indians fighting for their existence.

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