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December 12, 1991

YUGOSLAVIA REMEMBERED

I write to you with some sense of urgency about the situation in war-torn Yugoslavia. Our family visited many parts of Yugoslavia for more than six months in 1964 and have maintained contacts with friends there since then. 1964 was a halcyon time for Yugoslavia, then a united country building a new society. There was an atmosphere of ferment, rebirth and renewal after the terrible years of war. The joy of building was in the air, and we learned how the Zagreb-to-Belgrade Highway was rebuilt after war's destruction by volunteer labor, white collar and blue collar workers shoulder to shoulder, each donating a day of work each week to the effort. As one person put it, "We were glad to do this because we felt it was our country now at last."

We visited most of the major cities, covering large areas of the country, and we also became acquainted with village life in the mountains in the snows of winter. On the Dalmatian Coast an evening's conversation with a former partisan general in Dubrovnik was one of the highlights of our coastal experience.

The many intellectuals we met in the universities in Sarajevo, Zagreb, and Belgrade seemed highly sophisticated politically, having doubtless unavoidably learned much from WW II, Nazi occupation, and numerous grim forms of fascist oppression. Ideas were freely discussed when ^{we} were there; it was not until a later time that Tito became quite iron-handed, a number of people suffered grievous loss of civil liberties, and the eight University of Belgrade professors (known as the Praxis group) were fired from their teaching posts. Their valiant struggle was for a more democratic form of socialism, but they continued to be socialists.

Two cities provided special experiences worthy of note. In Zagreb we visited the WW II anti-fascist museum which portrayed in marvelous, nearly life-size pictures the heroic partisan defense of Yugoslavia from the Nazis. That museum was a heartbreaking yet exhilarating and inspiring testament to the strength of the human spirit in standing against the cruelties and oppression of the war. I hope the Tudjman government has allowed that wonderful little museum to continue to exist. However, with the present rising influences of fascism in Croatia once again, I would not be surprised if it were now closed down. In Belgrade, we saw the May Day Parade, escorted by a friend who had foregone the opportunity to march with the partisan contingent as he had been invited to do, so he could play host to us. There was no military display whatsoever --- just smiling citizens carrying armloads of flowers, bright banners and flags, and signs with often humorous and witty comments about their society. It was truly a people's parade, composed of all the union groups, professions, etc.

Everywhere we heard people's stories of the war --- stories of heroism, cruel tortures, and terrible hardships. Through it ran a thread of deep commitment to the cause of liberation and an unselfish sense of community. One woman said, "In those days any of us would have shared a last crust of bread with a perfect stranger even though

we were hungry ourselves." They spoke of the terrible losses of their comrades who had died. A whole school full of children in one village was massacred by the Nazis. A University of Belgrade professor recalled: "On the day that the Yugoslav government declared itself at war with Germany there was joy in the streets. We knew the Nazi tanks would ^{be} rolling into our streets the next morning, but we also knew that ^{it} was right that we oppose them and we believed in the justice of our decision and our cause." Those were the words of Professor Mihailo Markovic, a courageous partisan in WW II who withstood enemy torture, a philosopher known and respected internationally as well as in his own country, and later to become one of the Belgrade 8 professors (the Praxis group) fired from their teaching posts at the University of Belgrade for daring to oppose Tito on issues threatening civil liberties, waging a valiant struggle for democratic socialism.

We heard many stories of the brutal atrocities of the Croatian Ustashe against the Serbs, Jews, and gypsies. The Ustashe set up a quisling regime in Croatia under Ante Pavlic from 1941 to 1945. This group, to be distinguished from the many decent and innocent Croatian people, collaborated with German Nazis and was responsible for the murder of 500,000 Serbs, ^{and thousands of} Jews and gypsies. It was a veritable reign of terror which many people in Yugoslavia can never forget.

The American news media have been, by and large, highly critical of the Serbian government and remarkably uncritical of the government of President Franjo Tudjman in Croatia. However, there was a break-through of truth and good sense in a recent fine Op.ed. article by David Martin (author of a book about Yugoslavia) in the New York Times (Nov. 22, 1991). I quote the following from Martin's article:

Franjo Tudjman, Croatia's President and a former Tito general, has done little to alleviate Serblans' fear of an independent Croatia. He said last year that the Ustashe regime, which ruled occupied Croatia from 1941 to 1945, "reflected the centuries-old aspirations of the Croat people." A recent article in The Guardian of London quoted Mr. Tudjman as saying he was thankful that his own wife did not have any Jewish or Serblan blood, and that for the Jews "genocidal violence is a natural phenomenon, in keeping with the human-social and

mythological-divine nature. It is not only allowed, but even recommended."

Mr. Tudjman's treatment of the Serbs has gone beyond his unfortunate rhetoric. Since Croatia declared independence in June, the Serbs in Croatia have been the victims of a campaign of harassment. Serbs working for the Croatian Government were dismissed. Serbian schools were banned. The Victims of Fascism Square in Zagreb was renamed the Square of the Sovereigns of Croatia. Mr. Tudjman's decision to adopt a flag modeled on the Ustashe flag has only made matters worse.

Martin further points out that the root of many of the problems lies in the borderlines drawn between Serbia and Croatia by Tito, who was a Croat, after the war. These lines left large Serbian populations within Croatian borders. Martin says there is no good reason why the U.S. and the European Community (even though well-intentioned in their peacemaking efforts) should insist that the borders established by Tito had to be considered legally valid for all time, that there was no historical basis for the way Tito drew the lines and that he simply drew the lines according to his own whim. The placement of these borders has caused monstrous problems for several reasons: The Serbs clearly have every reason to be afraid of Croatian repression because of memories of Ustashe horrors during the war in complicity with Nazi Germany, serious current provocations by the present Tudjman government in Croatia, the fact Serbs in Croatia no longer have a federal government in a united country to protect them, and

the current wooing of Croatia by a powerful Germany. Martin believes the mediating forces should try to solve some of these border problems by plebiscites and arbitration that could lead to some re-drawing of boundary lines, a process that could take into account all of these historical and present facts and consequent human feelings.

All humane people abhor the violence and destruction of war and the suffering of innocent and decent people on both sides of a conflict. One can be only greatly pained in viewing the miserable conditions of the citizens of Vukovar and the bombardment of the beautiful and historic city of Dubrovnik. Yet intense fears fuel the drive to keep fighting. In addition, civil war always seems to carry with it an extra measure of ferocity and bitterness. Certainly our own Civil War in the last century was drenched with blood. Doubtless Confederates in those days considered Lincoln a "hardliner" for continuing the war and trying to preserve the union although Lincoln is deservedly revered today. At any rate, despite my natural revulsion at war as a means of settling disputes and many years of working for a more peaceful world, I can well understand why Serbs in Croatia want to fight strenuously against the present Croatian government. How can they who suffered so much at collaborationist Croatian hands in WW II now meekly bear a repetition of that nightmare when they strongly fear it may be threatened? I do not suggest that Tudjman is another Ante Pavlic, but it cannot be denied that he panders unendingly to the extreme right wing forces in Croatia, many of which are fascist; and with all of his provocations as president of Croatia, how can the Serbs help feeling that they are fighting for their very existence all over again?

I believe that even though great fears drive people to keep fighting even when they are hungry for peace, this dreadful blood-letting desperately needs to come to an end. President Tudjman's recent scrambling to get the Croatian Parliament to adopt a Bill of Rights for minorities and promise of more autonomy for Serbs within Croatia will probably not be trusted by Serbs as anything more than an exercise in public relations and a surface cosmetic attempt to make his governance look better than it really is or can be. Serb memories of past hurts, and deep fears of possible future hurts based on the Tudjman record as President, are too severe and go too deep. If President Tudjman continues to insist on Croatian independence so that Serbs in Croatia no longer have protection from a federal Yugoslav government, and if the budding alliance between Croatia and Germany continues to grow (which it shows every sign of doing) and Germany breaks ranks with the European Community by early recognition of an independent Croatia and then starts furnishing arms to Croatia --- if all that happens there can be no stability and peace in Yugoslavia unless there are plebiscites, arbitration, and negotiations leading to a re-drawing of some boundary lines and relinquishing of Tito's ill-judged drawing of the map of Yugoslavia. Those who once fought so bravely against Hitlerism, in both German and Croatian form, deserve at least that.

My hope is that you are a reasonable person who can be appealed to on these grounds of human rights, and that you will carefully consider these issues I have raised. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Helen B. Donner
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