

Myrna Kostash / from BALKAN ARTISTS IN McWORLD, Part Three: Serbs You Never Hear About¹

*On December 13, 1999, a group of independent Serbian writers decided to form their own association as an opposition to the Official Association of Serbian Writers. The main idea behind the association, **Writer's Forum**, besides the protection and respect of the basic professional rights, was a formation of an independent body which will oppose the current political violence, repression, censorship and fight for a free, democratic and open society, liberated from all nationalistic and ideological dogmas and prejudices. [from their pamphlet]*

A year later, the Serbian political scene had changed so utterly — the man most responsible for the violence, repression, and censorship, Slobodan Milosevic, had been ousted from power — that the Writer's Forum seemed not to know what to do with itself. At least that was my impression after several hours in their company in Belgrade one winter evening. They were meeting in a room in a dilapidated theatre space just a couple of doors down from a McDonald's (and across the square from the renowned Hotel Moskva, now named simply "Hotel", while the changing political order decided how it felt about Moscow, I suppose).

There was a meeting chairman, the drama professor and writer Filip David, who made a stab at presenting an agenda, but it was clear from the mood around the table that people had assembled only to drink, smoke, and gossip, as if they were in a club. There was a sizable hubbub about the recent attacks in the papers on the young and comely playwright, Biljana Srbljanovic, who was in attendance, by an older feminist writer who accused her of exploiting her youth and beauty to get ahead in the theatre without having very much to say, to judge from her produced works. Ms. Srbljanovic's colleagues in the room were all heatedly in sympathy with her and against the bitter old crone of yesteryear. This seemed to be the gist of the

¹ An earlier version of this piece, in its entirety, is published at www.dooneyscave.com.

scandal, which occupied the members of the Writer's Forum for some considerable length of time.

A couple of returnees from political exile drifted into the meeting, flourishing bottles of duty free whiskey. And a woman from Amsterdam, formerly of Belgrade, arrived with her Dutch companion, and told us something of her work with an investigative team looking for the truth about the appalling events in Srebrenica, Bosnia, in the latter phase of the war in Bosnia, when Serb forces overran a Moslem town under "protection" of UN troops and massacred the men and boys. Listening to her, it occurred to me this was one of the very few moments of public reference to Serb complicity in war crimes that I had experienced in my travels to Belgrade over the decade.

I had arranged to meet one of the Forum's "Initiating Board" to talk to him about Serbian artists and the menace of globalization. He failed to show up but I did track him down in his studio a few days later and there, subsiding into a broken-sprung armchair and staring back at vividly-coloured if lugubrious Byzantinesque religious paintings, sipping Turkish coffee, I heard Mileta Prodanovic's explanation for the frailty of the anti-globalization movement in Serbia, namely that "Milosevic used the language of the movement." For example, during the NATO bombing of Kosovo and Serbia, Milosevic rallied his people with the declaration that Serbia now stood alone amongst the civilized nations, all others having succumbed to the poisoned embrace of Americanization. Serbia, alone and battered but unbowed, still stood for the old cultural values of freedom and love-of-country and heroism that shaped Europeans before the "west" exported consumerism, individualism, and pornography to eager decadents.

"Two Dutch playwrights came to Belgrade," Mileta continued, "wanting to do some theatre against globalization. We told them we could only sign up after the departure of Milosevic. 'Colonization' was part of his vocabulary and it has to be recuperated. What does it mean to be 'proud' of being Serbian? We have to start from point zero."

From the perspective of a friend in her fifties, veteran of the student movement and uprising of 1968 in Belgrade, tireless human rights agitator ever since, the most shocking identity crisis the Serbs have had to endure, under the Milosevic nationalists, is demonization of Communism and Yugoslavia. "We went from an identity as Yugoslav socialists who were proud of what we had achieved and what we represented in and to the world, to an identity that was told to look at that past as entirely rotten. The Yugo-Communism of the past failed the test of nationalism: it had 'betrayed' the nations in the name of a spurious higher value, socialism."

In nationalist Serbia not a trace remains of the legendary Marshall Josip Broz Tito who had masterminded Partisan resistance to Nazi occupation, stood up to Comrade Stalin — who blinked — then went on to shape and control Yugo-Socialism until his death in 1980. Not a street, not an avenue, not a shop, not a factory, still bears his name. Instead Belgrade sports the names of kings, princes, and bishops, as though the collective experience of building Yugoslavia over fifty years is "false," whereas tsars and princesses and monasteries are somehow more authentic and meaningful as collective sites of identity. Even I feel affronted by what is happening to some of the name plates on street corners which still bear the Yugoslav-era names, how vandals have been at work in anticipation of their unnamings, scratching and gouging and painting over the offending names, just like Turks at work on the eyes of Byzantine saints.

Serbs are anti-American, in the sense that they blame the Americans for the bombing, even those who positioned themselves in the opposition to Milosevic. Mileta referred to an anecdote from one of his own short stories featuring a talking dog. Dog wants to know why "they" are bombing Serbia. Answer: "They're introducing a new chapter in world history. From now on, no one will be buying bananas where they feel like it but only where the Americans want them to buy them."

And there was even a brief, flaring moment of cultural protest when protesters threw rocks at the McDonald's in the city centre (provoking its local management to put up posters begging protesters not to trash them: "Stop! We're not Americans! This restaurant is 'ours,' Serbs'.") But even that act of outrage was ambiguous. I was told that mere days later the same protesters were lined up a few blocks away, waiting for Belgrade's newest McDonald's to open. For female friends of mine in Belgrade, McDonald's means that, after the cinema, there is somewhere to go for tea. It's smoke-free, brightly-lit, very clean, and has cheerful staff and public washrooms to die for. I saw for myself, too, how enterprising fast food operators renamed burek, the traditional Serbian cheese pie, McBurek.

I am being forced to accept that, even for Serbs, who felt the wrath of the western powers raining bombs down on their heads, our world of branded consumerism represents a cultural alternative to Serbian cultural space. Logofied commodification and "the globalization of cultural deprivation" (to quote the Greek actor and head of the Panhellenic Cultural Movement, Kostas Kazakos), is a "free zone" precisely because it is not about Serbianness. Official culture has been irretrievably corrupted by its occupation by post-Communist nationalists of the ilk of those who drove Yugoslavia into war with itself. As one friend, a theatre activist, put it: "You start with talk about 'identity,' proceed to 'roots,' and you know what comes next — ethnic cleansing."