

Swarthmore College

Works

Russian Faculty Works

Russian

2-1-2007

An Austro-Hungarian Guidebook

M. M. Dimovska

Sibelan E.S. Forrester , translator

Swarthmore College, sforres1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-russian>



Part of the [Slavic Languages and Societies Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to these works benefits you](#)

Recommended Citation

M. M. Dimovska and Sibelan E.S. Forrester , translator. (2007). "An Austro-Hungarian Guidebook". *Words Without Borders*.

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-russian/209>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Russian Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

An Austro-Hungarian Guidebook

 wordswithoutborders.org/article/an-austro-hungarian-guidebook



Magazine

from the January 2007 issue

Fiction by Milica Mičić Dimovska

Translated from Serbian by Sibelan Forrester

Novi Sad, Thursday afternoon, April 9, 1987

Energy and resourcefulness. These virtues have excited me lately, sending me into a pathological rapture, duping me into rashness and loss of self-respect.

I'm sitting on a smugglers' bus, overcome with the contagious cheerfulness of the other travelers, their impatience as they face an adventure. They are in a realm of chattiness, of conspiratorial mirth. The Vegeta seasoning powder is in our baggage, heavy as cement but promising a cheap trip and commerce.

My fellow travelers are teachers at a high school in Novi Sad. I hear them saying, "If they take it away, they take it, we won't go bankrupt!" It seems to them that the possibility of risk gives the enterprise at least a little bit of dignity; they feel a bit like gamblers who allow for a loss, making light of it, generously. It's my acquaintance Vera who introduced me to their company. "You'll see, it's a cultured crowd, they aren't real black-marketers," she excuses them.

There are kilograms and kilograms of Vegeta in the baggage. Our driver, a retired officer and school teacher, informs us in aphoristic style, "Vegeta is foreign currency, and cash means goods. That's how things are." He wears a badge on the lapel of his worn jacket that says "Tourist Guide." "If anything happens, I'm just a guide. I don't know anything about the Vegeta," he adds, as a warning to us.

He takes his official duties seriously from the very beginning. In Veternik he calls our attention to the house of the Kačar brothers, the boxers. "It's huge, a real palace." I see a big house of yellow bricks, and I think, "What delusions of grandeur, what waste!" But it turns out that this isn't their house, theirs is on the left side of the street. I can't correct my

misjudgment about the Kačar house; it's already far behind us. It remains for me just like all the others we've seen along the way, large, full of gaping windows and balconies without railings, balconies that look like diving boards.

Still, I feel respect for those people who build a house, who have a garden, an orchard. The awe and envy of a lumpen proletariat.

We pass through Gloean, past granaries full of corn. In one yard I see three barns chock-full of corn, and a thick wall of piled bricks. The household color is yellow. Yellow bricks and yellow ears! The voice of the grasshopper speaks up in me, humbly amazed by the ants.

It's already six o'clock, and people are at work in the gardens, raking.

They bend over, they turn over and break lumps of soil with their hands. They drop seeds, full of patience for that eternal flow of things, that blooming, growth and ripening. They don't want to skip or hurry anything.

They give themselves over to blessed certainty. To constancy. In a sunny twilight.

Whereas we drive past, leave them behind, forget them...

Well, even if it's all about the black market, a trip is a trip. We slide through the twilight, then darkness, between houses that stay behind us. I'm seized by the feeling of wistful superiority of a person, a traveler, who has broken away, if only for a brief time, who leaves his own people, his family, his residence, and plunges into alien places, into a space that is not his own, which he conquers and deserts at the same moment.

The besetting sin of travel. To take pleasure in desertion, to feel as if you are above time and space. To be conscious of the infinity of points in space which you leave behind you, which you pass through, and which move towards you. Now, this moment, you see a house with lit windows and the dark silhouettes of people who don't sense how isolated they are. You're already abandoning them, another house is already coming to meet you, you see it, but you know that it too is only a point along your passage. In front of you opens a space like a funnel, and you tumble headfirst down its throat, thoughtlessly and arrogantly, with the false impression that you are constantly shifting your boundaries.

Vienna, Friday, April 10 Early Morning

We stop in front of the West Bannhof at four-thirty A.M. The station's glass facade gleams in the twilight, the streets all around are empty, like paths that disappear into thick forest. A light rain is passing over, otherwise it's warm, almost sultry. We're like real homeless people: the guide gives us one hour to wash and freshen up in the station restroom before a lightning tour of the sights of Vienna. We could change our Yugoslav dinars for Austrian schillings here, though Mexicoplatz is more advantageous for that, he adds knowingly.

Vera horrifies me by suggesting that we run over to see a relative of hers who lives somewhere near here, in a janitor's apartment, because his wife is a housekeeper. He works in some factory. I agree to go with her, out of curiosity. We cross the famous Mariahilfstrasse, which is all dug up in the middle, then we turn left, then into a street to the right. They're all the same, cold as a corpse, spick and span. But still, I like the brownish rows of four-story buildings, evenly spaced, with severe facades, with a multitude of windows but not a single balcony. I like that asceticism and the metropolitan grayness where only the display windows of the cafés and the fruit-sellers communicate confidence. I value that reserve, the severity, the distrustful attitude.

But here we are at a building whose ground-floor windows are veiled with cheap curtains. Here we are, at the apartment of someone from our country, whose nocturnal privacy we are able-or rather we allow ourselves-to interrupt just as if we were family, without sensitivity or restraint, in fact without any respect for him. Vera sees this differently. For her it's not disrespect but rather the right of a person who is ready to return the favor at any time. "Just as I can drop in on them when I want to, they can come to my place." It's an excuse that would probably make any real Viennese person cringe.

When we ring the doors open by themselves, letting us into the vaulted, marble foyer, which is immaculately clean, of course. At the door of the housekeeper's apartment a female form appears wrapped in a housecoat, fairly upset, but without any exclamations or gestures. She recognizes Vera at once and quickly ushers us through her door. I smell the chilly, slightly sour odor of an apartment where the rooms are not all heated, or are heated only for brief periods. Everything, from the household furniture to the decorations, gives away the impoverished, petty bourgeois taste of the people in our villages. Artificial flowers on the table, on the wall a picture of a girl with a pearly tear shining on her face, from the famous crystal display in Novi Sad, or any of our other towns. A gas stove and refrigerator, various appliances lined up on the shelves-those things betray something of the German, or rather Austrian, standard. Vera's relative comes out of the bedroom. Hugging and kissing, a torrent of questions about relatives and mutual friends. I feel pretty stupid standing at one side and watching this family ritual. I go into the bathroom while they are talking. Then Vera makes use of the same room. In exchange for the favor, she pulls out of her bag a bottle of Caesar liqueur, some cookies and candies. Ashamed, I add some cookies that, in all honesty, I had bought for myself, and some juice in a tetrapack.

Oh, that gift-giving of ours, just so we won't wind up, God forbid, in debt to anyone! The couple tries to refuse the presents, Vera and I announce, "But it's nothing." They don't want to accept the gifts, since we aren't staying as guests; they won't take gifts for one ordinary visit to the bathroom, they don't want to be paid for that. They slip some schillings into Vera's hands, to make things even. A scene so typical for us, with our paupers' customs, indecent and humiliating in the pathos that leaves hurt feelings, but we accept it as something inevitable.

After this we hurry back to the West Bannhof. A few early birds are already moving through the streets. It seems to me that they are also people from Yugoslavia, they look like it-who would be hurrying to work so early if not *Gastarbeiters*¹?

The bus takes us to a parking lot near the Kunsthistorische museum. We have the time from six to nine at our disposal, the hours until the shops open in Mexico-platz.

And so once again we move off into the morning grayness, so we can rush past the Viennese sights, merely registering them with a rapid glance. It's humiliating. Exactly ten years ago my husband and I were in Vienna as real tourists; we changed our dinars at the bank. Is it really possible, I wonder, that I could have sat then in the Mozart Café, eating Mozart Kugel and drinking coffee with whipped cream?

The guide shows us the monument to Maria Theresa. She looks so maternal, with broad skirts, like a hen above her chicks. "She was a nymphomaniac," one of our group adds. "Our men from Lika took care of her, if you know what I mean." Laughter, pathetically superior.

The guide doesn't tell us anything about the museum. Why bother, when we can only imagine entering it. We turn our backs on Maria Theresa and cross the street. The Hoffburg is on the other side. "See the flag on the parliament building. That means the President is in the city," the guide tells us. We pass through the Hoffburg courtyard, beside the church where the holy Roman emperors were crowned. The guide ticks off their names with the relish of a man who has a good memory and knows his job, even though his knowledge seems absurd in these circumstances. Unfortunately, he turns out to be a really good guide and a connoisseur, even an admirer, of Vienna. But what good does that zeal do in this case, in these miserable conditions, as we walk through Vienna like ghosts, like lepers or some kind of excommunicants being escorted through the city when there are as few people about as possible, when we are the least noticeable. But still, the people with me are schoolteachers, with a university education, thankful to the guide for at least the illusion that they have seen something here.

We examine the gilded arms of the monument to the plague in Graben. A monument to the plague in the middle of an empty street. For a moment I can smell lime, the odor of Lysol. Not a single living soul around us.

A little farther along, the enormous church of Saint Stephen appears before us like a ghost. Its walls are black with soot, left there on purpose, not scrubbed off, to remind people of the horrors of war. Our guide shows us the measures for bread, canvas, and cloth cut into the wall beside the church entrance, and then, a little farther on, the pillar of shame for those who didn't respect the measures (at one time, in the Middle Ages, there was a market square in front of the church). A young man with a dog follows at our heels, muttering something. We realize that he is mentally ill. With a shudder I think that maybe he isn't really Viennese, but the child of some Yugoslav worker. Why should I bow to the prejudice that degenerates must be the children of rich families?

Finally, we reach Kertner Street, with the opera building at the other end. The bus is waiting for us somewhere around here. Kertner Street elicits sighs from the women in our group. Fabulous shop windows, the luxury of the Arabian Nights. This isn't for us. We're headed for the displays of Mexicoplatz.

We pause beside the opera. Then, while he informs us that merely looking inside the empty opera building costs thirty schillings, the guide turns amusingly on his heel, like an elderly seal, and points out the building across the street. It's the famous Sacher Hotel. "You've all heard of Sacher torte. It was invented by Sacher, the owner of this hotel." An attractive, harmonious building, without external splendor, without leafy decorations. It is noble, unobtrusive.

So it's here Thomas Bernhard drops in, the author of the novel *Wittgenstein's Nephew*, which is dear to me. He stops in here with a friend, unhappy that his dear Sacher has been profaned, that it is no longer so noble. But it still always offers him the charms of observing society, the pleasure of that same observation, penetrating into characters he chooses at random from among the various guests. Don't I belong to the caste of observers who look at the world penetratingly, from above, but without condescension? Bernhard's hermetic elitism, his repugnance toward the masses, and yet the very same repugnance toward the society he himself came from, how can that be close to me? To me, who will in a minute or two be searching for cheap goods at Mexicoplatz. Isn't it immodest for me even to mention myself in the same breath as Bernhardt? As if someone so sweaty and dusty can have aristocratic emotions!

We're done with our "sightseeing," as the English would say. The circle has closed, we've reached the bus, half an hour later than we agreed to. The driver is angry, likewise the two inveterate black-marketers who stayed behind to doze on the bus. They don't suffer from thirst for observation like the poor teachers, who would rather cover up their black-marketing with tourism.

The drizzle that started around nine has turned into a cold rain. We stop within reach of the Prater, the great Ferris wheel hangs over everything in the vicinity. I think of Orson Welles's *Third Man*. "It is unforgettably exciting to ride on this, the greatest carousel in the world," announces our guide pompously. I ask him how it is that he knows Vienna so well. From when he was a POW, he says-he vowed then that when the war ended he would return to Vienna, the Vienna he loved and hated while he was a prisoner. Even now he feels the same mixture of love and hatred. It seems to me that I catch glimpses of something fanatical in the expression of his eyes. He is seventy years old, before retirement he taught geography in a military school. And he cares so little about his appearance! He wears a shapeless little beret on his head, enormous squeaky shoes on his feet.

"The guide's a real encyclopedia," Vera says to me. She is pleased with his performance.

But here the lengthy gray Engertstrasse begins ahead of us. I can't see a single tree. Some of the buildings look deserted to me, like empty stores, but still, this is where many new arrivals to Vienna live, our *Gastarbeiter*s, a sort of demimonde. A puffy, exhausted woman comes out of those buildings. Who knows who or what she is. The guide tells us that Mexicoplatz has some beautiful apartments, but people in Vienna who care about prestige don't want to live in that neighborhood, not even if the state offers them an apartment for almost nothing. As soon as things improve for them, they leave Mexicoplatz and move into a more fashionable *bezirk*. As far as I'm concerned, all this might as well be the élite section; everything is clean and neat, though it looks abandoned. Cast off. I sense that this neighborhood's misfortune is the misfortune of a ghetto, the misfortune of the isolated.

But the vendors have started to set up, and our group scatters, each following his or her own interests. I leave Vera and go into the first shop. I'm staggered by its bareness, its reduction to pure functionality. It's not a shop, but a warehouse. There is no concealment. You get third-class goods in third-class stores. The thrift shop in Novi Sad looks better. All kinds of things are packed in here in no particular order, jeans in one pile, computer games, watches and lighters in another. Only the sound systems are on shelves, mostly boom boxes. All "Made in Macao," Singapore. In the best case, Japan.

You can hear Yugoslav speech in the shops. The voice of the pop singer Lepa Brena echoes from a boom box. The swarthy salespeople, with prominent noses and large eyes, look sort of Asiatic. I read the names of the stores, Armenian, Jewish, Prussian, and a few ending in -tsch, like Zelmanovitsch. I recognize the Slavic surnames, written of course in German spelling. Either you adapt, or nothing. I suppose that there's no question of any equality of language, though there's probably not a single genuine Austrian in the whole area. For oral communication, yes, but not in writing. All the salespeople can manage some Serbian, but there's not a single notice or warning written in any language other than German, and the names on the shops too.

I run from shop to shop in the downpour. I'm in too much of a hurry to open and close my umbrella. In one shop run by a Georgian with almond eyes, I buy a computer game and a joystick for ten schillings, and a kilo of coffee. I don't even try to bargain, and afterward I feel bad when I hear that some of us knocked the price down by as much as ten or fifteen schillings. I didn't even remember that you could bargain.

The Georgian sells me the coffee for dinars. Four hundred thousand dinars for a kilogram of roast coffee beans. About half the price you'd pay in Yugoslavia. I also buy an Easter present, as a curiosity, three chocolate bunnies in bright foil and a marzipan egg in gold and silver. Not just as a curiosity. Perhaps it's my subconscious need for something I never had, for Christian or pagan rituals, whatever. I was brought up on a Christian basis, but I wasn't permitted to have relics. Not that I was forbidden-as a communist, my father wasn't a fanatic, but he inculcated in me a certain shame at hypocrisy. If you're a communist, you can't dye eggs, that's hypocritical, scandalous-it means disrespect toward both of them, both the

atheist and the believer. All the same, he carried his Orthodoxy deep in himself, an Orthodoxy without outward signs, without rituals, absolutely pure and ascetic. Penitence, hidden at the bottom of his soul.

I wrap the bunnies and eggs in a scarf, so they won't get squashed.

I no longer have a single schilling in my pocket. And at that very moment I feel a terrible thirst for sparkling water! I just have to bear it. I go back to the bus with a dry mouth.

We pass again through the fashionable ring of Vienna, but no one looks at it any more. The plastic bags are rustling with the goods we've purchased. The guide's comment, "We have a beautiful view of the Belvedere to the left," remains absolutely unnoticed, as well as the wordplay.

Bratislava is about sixty kilometers from Vienna. At the border the Austrian customs lets us through with a wave, but on the Czechoslovak side they shake us down, really and truly shake us down.

Two different worlds. It's a strange experience. Perhaps I was offended in some way at being no one and nothing in Austria, but no one noticed me there, or they noticed us only as *jugoslavische Turisten*, something deserving of scorn but essentially harmless. But when they took us aside here, on the Czechoslovak side, and left us to wait for no reason, that woke in us the helpless fury of people who feel they're being abused by a power no greater than they are, the same power they themselves belong to, but one they can't oppose, because you just can't go against the authorities. "Why on earth do they want to shake us down?" someone on the bus asks. And what will they get from messing with our business? Hardly anything.

They stroll pompously, in uniforms with five-pointed stars on the caps, between the ramps. Then they walk around the bus, looking serious, go into some building, come out, have a discussion about something. They act out the rituals of importance, while down below, a bit beneath the level of the road, there's a little house and yard full of fussing chicken houses and leaning sheds. They look so familiar, so intimate, so much like the ones at home.

"It could happen that they'll take away the Vegeta," the driver informs us. "If they want to. It depends. Perhaps they won't."

Relativity: it could be and doesn't have to. That reasoning sounds familiar to me too.

We finally go into a room with a long counter that we put our bags on. A woman customs officer looks us over. Some of us wrinkle our brows at that fact, as if it's an additional ill omen. "See what she's like, the snake," I hear them comment. I open up my luggage in front of her. A pretty girl, but there's something of a capo in her appearance: a cold smile. Careful,

I tell myself, I'm carrying eight kilos of Vegeta and you're only allowed five. I take a risk and tell her that I have five kilos of Vegeta. She looks at me, I pull my lips into a clownish smile; then she turns a few things over in my bag-and lets me through.

Afterward, on the bus, I hear impossible, comical stories. One young man (he wound up in the group along with his girlfriend, the black market is his occupation), tells us the customs woman put her hand in his pocket. "Who would ever put her hand in a man's pocket!" We all laugh. In that pocket he'd had fifty or so silver rings on a key ring, carefully wrapped in a handkerchief. She unwrapped the handkerchief and found the rings. She took away twenty, but let him carry the rest through. She didn't even look at his Vegeta. But some of us were told that they would have to bring ten or fifteen kilos of Vegeta back into Yugoslavia. They'd be checked at the border between Czechoslovakia and Hungary.

We behave like poorly-brought-up children, we are full of swagger, bragging and street smarts, but it's easy to see through those traits, easy to unmask and embarrass us. Then we console ourselves with the sweet illusion that we've put one over on someone, that we put one over on them *all the same*, that we worked them over *even so*. We restrained ourselves in front of the customs officials, but as soon as we get away from them we start making faces. Uncivilized, crude. It's comical, the way we humiliate ourselves. Our pride comes back to us only when a tragic outcome is unavoidable.

Skyscrapers in the distance give away the proximity of Bratislava. Luckily, it still isn't a city of tall buildings. It just seemed to me for a moment that it would be one of those cities like ours in Yugoslavia, where new buildings rudely destroy the old ones, sneak in like parasites. We cross the bridge over the Danube. The guide shows us the fortress on high ground, then a church at its base, but I quickly forget them. Bratislava, Pozun, Presburg. I wonder: did these names have equal status, were they all valid at the same time in the past, or only one after the other?

I sense the stamp of the Austro-Hungarian provinces which I also feel, more or less, in Maribor, and in Ljubljana, in Zagreb, Osijek, and in Novi Sad. The stamp of the Austro-Hungarian provinces and of Slavic subjection. There are no edifices like the ones in Vienna, all equally grandiose. Here, one is richer, the next more humble, one taller, one shorter. The partly-filled display windows of the stores, the milk bars...

Vera and I walk into one of these restaurants on the bank of the Danube, dragging our bags with the Vegeta, hoping we'll be able to sell it here right away. The horrible dairy restaurant, that type of health-nut stuff you see in our cities too. High tables where no one can sit, you just stand there and eat from bowls scattered on large, greasy plastic trays.

We head for the kitchen door. Basins of slops reek beside the door. The cook beckons to us conspiratorially. But she isn't looking for Vegeta, she wants Caesar brandy, or Napoleon. Vera has a bottle of Napoleon and sells it for 130 krunas. One of the waitresses offers us

eighty krunas for a kilo of Vegeta. Vera won't agree to that price. I maintain solidarity with her—we can't give in at the first try. I pick up my bag, but the Vegeta is so repulsively heavy that I'm dangerously tempted to unload it on someone for a song.

At the restaurant exit an elderly gentleman with a briefcase under his arm approaches us. He offers us his services, says he'll take us to a hotel in his suburban neighborhood. There, he says, we'll sell it all; the market is glutted in the center.

We reach the bus station. My palms are throbbing, red, blistered. I start to think differently about how a black-marketer earns his bread. You need endurance for this. I feel as if I'm carrying rocks, not Vegeta. In a moment of cowardice I imagine leaving my bag in the middle of the street and sitting down in some pleasant corner, some café, or setting off to stroll through the city. All these possibilities look more appealing than the one that I've forced myself to follow. Oh, and not without good reason! Common sense tells me it's better to get a hundred krunas for a kilo of Vegeta than to exchange six thousand dinars or so for those same krunas at the bank.

Surprisingly, I feel no shame, only the desire to unload the burden as quickly as possible. Still, I patiently play the role of porter and waddle along after this citizen of Bratislava. He wants to help us, I don't know why, just as I don't know why the two of us trust him and agree to let him take us who knows where.

While we're waiting for the bus, like a true huckster I try to unload at least a kilo of Vegeta on one of the plump middle-aged women with string bags, who look like housewives, but no one is interested. Their repugnance brings back my feeling of shame, humiliation. Is it really possible for me to fall so low and repeat, "Yes, we are from Yugoslavia," like a guilty person? Evidently it is possible, not only for me, but also for my fellow travelers, the teachers, who are going through the same experience in other parts of Bratislava. We turn into smugglers who don't care about our dignity and, by the same token, about the dignity of our country. It's as if we've lost so much of our faith in common values, in our nation, our homeland, that we focus only on ourselves. We're occupied only with our own interests, in the narrowest sense. Our behavior may resemble cynical masochism and the cowardice of suffering, the struggle for existence, or else it's all just a flaw of our culture, the primitivism expressed in that folk, poor man and villager's motto: "Something to eat, something to wear, and something to sleep on."

Suddenly, out of wounded pride, I feel a rush of generosity. I'd be so happy to make a gift of all my Vegeta to these people around me, showing them by so doing that I am above them. An insincere and futile thought.

And so I get on the bus without getting rid of the compromising burden, that corpus delicti of my degradation. Our new guide, this citizen of Bratislava, buys our tickets. We understand each other well, though I couldn't have repeated a single word of his. I ask him, "*to vi robili?*" He answers that he used to be an army officer. Now he's retired. He loves Yugoslavia. Then

he asks us whether we are Serbs or Croats. I act as if I don't understand and say that we're from Novi Sad. He nods his head, he's heard of Novi Sad. He doesn't insist on a precise answer. To please him a little, we tell him that lots of Slovaks live in Novi Sad, and we mention some Slovak surnames. Then all at once we fall silent, a lot of people are around us, lots of ears, and our conversation has blundered into something that resembles politics.

Finally, we step down into the street, perhaps a major boulevard, with newly erected, monotonous buildings. Right at the bus stop the street widens into a square, with quadrants of grass and flowers, benches, and some kind of modernistic sculpture, incomprehensible and superfluous. As a background to the square a hotel rises, provincially humble and colorless, but it instills confidence. It reminds me of a resort hotel at one of our spas. The guide leads us in the other direction, away from the hotel.

Only when he brings us into a gloomy multistory building and stops at the first set of doors in the ground floor, when we've set our bags down on the concrete, does all the levity and stupidity of our behavior rushes back to me. I pause indecisively, and so does Vera. We mention the hotel he had promised us. We barely, somehow, understand that the residents of this building will surely buy our Vegeta. He must notice our reluctance and says at once that his wife is here in the apartment. "I am a good person," he adds. We have to laugh, out of misery.

It occurs to me that this could turn out to be a story with a different ending, some kind of horror story. The naïve women and the apparently good-natured little old man who would overpower them in his apartment and murder them. To be so trusting toward an old man we didn't know at all, and in a strange country at that—this doesn't at all match my warnings to the children: don't talk to strangers, don't accept invitations from people you don't know, etc. Could we feel danger or safety instinctively? That's not exactly reliable.

His wife opens the door to us. She drags her feet awkwardly as she leads us into the apartment, listening to her husband's explanation. Neglected, overweight, she welcomes us with a stream of complaint. She's recently had an eye operation, she can hardly see anything at all. And her feet hurt. But she still takes a look into our bags. She would like a smaller package of Vegeta, not a whole kilogram. She asks about some kind of Swedish twigs, have we brought any of that. It's the first time we've heard of this twig, which is supposedly an elixir of life. I answer that I have only Vegeta. She fusses about the price. I give her a half-kilogram package as a present, but I won't budge on the price. Shaking her head submissively, she buys one package from Vera and one from me. It turns out that none of the residents will come to do business with us. We stand there, embarrassed, beside the table covered with bright oilskin. A little farther on is the sink, ordinary, enamel, with plastic edges, no cupboard underneath it. The faucet is covered by a little curtain. The apartment smells of gas. Artificial flowers in a vase on the shelf. The petals are dull with dust. The host offers us an address to try, but we politely refuse.

The episode ends with a painful impression. We don't understand why he dragged us to his apartment. Why the deception?

Saying good-bye to us, he warns us confidentially that we should be careful, since the police don't allow selling things on the street, and Gorbachev is coming tomorrow.

We have completely forgotten about that. The thought that I could be arrested, oddly, doesn't discourage me. Besides, I don't have time to spare for suppositions. We somehow drag our bags over to a vegetable store. Actually, it's a colonial shop, some crates carried outside and stacked with a sparse selection of fruits and vegetables. And here fortune smiles on us. In less than half an hour we've freed ourselves from our entire load.

I feel infinite relief. Like a bird on a branch, weightless. The krunas are in our pockets. We go into the shop to see how well it is stocked. It turns out that they have wonderful smoked meats. We buy three rolls of salami like our Gavrilović winter sausage, but of much better quality and much cheaper.

We're seized by a passion to buy things. We go back downtown on the same bus and enter the Prior department store. There is an indescribable mob. In the sports and camping sections you can hear a lot of our language. The same thing in the section with underwear, bedding, towels. And here, not sure whether a package contains one bed sheet or two, I hear a very solid-looking lady speaking our language, though in a different regional variant, but still Serbo-Croatian or Croato-Serbian. I ask her, perhaps too familiarly, whether she would help me, but her icy look sobers me instantly. She doesn't want to have anything to do with me, the fact that we're from Yugoslavia isn't something that connects us, but rather something that causes suspicion and repulsion. I met her again in the dish section and hear another woman say to her, "This costs three times as much in Osijek."

Unfortunately, the fever of consumption quickly exhausts me. I feel my eyes starting to ache, it's as if everything is suddenly unusual, unreal, threatening. I seem to myself like a sleepwalker on the edge of an abyss. I can't bear the fidgeting-that touching of goods, that pulling of material on the shelves, that unrolling of bolts of cloth and silk, that nervousness of the saleswomen, that ringing of the cash register, that racketing arrogance of people from Yugoslavia who are buying everything like maniacs, as if they foresee some misfortune, some cataclysmic shortage. Infected, drunk. Oh, this will pay off, this costs nothing: the words ring in my ears.

I sit down in the restaurant, putting my purchases and Vera's on two chairs. Vera leaves me alone at the table without waiting for coffee. When she's shopping she feels neither thirst, nor hunger, nor tiredness. She can't lose a moment of the precious time remaining until the store closes.

The coffee is pure chicory, and the cola smells of sugar beets. There are no Yugoslavs around me, only Slovaks. I hear one of the Slovak women say that I am from Finland. That probably means that I'm a foreigner; I don't ask to make sure. I understand when she asks whether the other seat is free. I put my package on the floor and she calls her friend over to sit. I can understand something of their conversation. They're complaining about their colleagues at work, laughing maliciously. It seems to me that I catch a phrase like our saying, "I never herded goats with her," something like that.

Half an hour later Vera comes back. We shoulder our packages and head for the bus. Rushing through the unfamiliar streets, we come out in a square with two symmetrical, imposing buildings that stand across from each other. I suppose the building with the arcades is some kind of theater, and it says on the other that it is the Philharmonic. Elegantly dressed people are hurrying up to the entrance of the Philharmonic, young people, very dignified.

It's an unreal picture. We stop a passerby and ask him where the port is. He points at a little street and says, "*Pravo, pravo.*" We recall that this means "right" and, indeed, a little further a street on the right widens and turns into the quay. We can see the port building and our bus.

It's already getting dark. While we're waiting for the other passengers, I walk up to the railing on the quay. Below, a Russian boat is anchored on the Danube, it looks like a summer house with a multitude of lit windows with dark silhouettes of people moving in them. You can still make out opened deck chairs on the deck. Russians, I think. They're traveling without any rush. They have an itinerary for the trip, a schedule that doesn't involve any smuggling. Or perhaps it does, in a different form? Who knows. I take a look, a man is leaning against the boat's railing and looking over here, at us, who are making noise, overloaded with packages and bundles. The glow of his cigarette wanders back and forth.

We're finally on the bus, in our little home. We're going to Seredz, where we're supposed to spend the night. Along the way we're greeted by red flags fluttering from the windows of the buildings. Everything is ready for Gorbachev's arrival tomorrow. Instead of advertisements on the walls, I read slogans: "Proletarians of all nations unite" and "Long live Czechoslovak and Soviet friendship."

Saturday, April 11 Morning in Seredz Morning in Seredz. How distant and long ago yesterday morning in Vienna seems to me! We have breakfast with a woman from our group who drew this trip, unbelievable as it sounds, as the grand prize in a lottery at a journalists' ball in Temerin. That puts me in such a good mood that I can't stop laughing. As if she senses that my laughter signifies some lack of respect, she gets offended and measures me with an unfriendly look. She's Hungarian and runs a café in Temerin.

Since the tables we're sitting at are connected, two Slovaks who want to talk with the Yugoslavs join in our conversation. You can see they've already had a bit to drink, especially the one who says that his wife is a Yugoslav and that he has a Mercedes. He waves his

hands around as he's talking about her, his movements say unambiguously that his wife is a troublemaker. Perhaps a professional black-marketer. Then he starts to talk about himself. He's a former person, he's ruined, he explains in a mixture of German and Slovak. "*Fershten zee, ich bin Arbeiter.*" At first I think he means that he is a *Gastarbeiter*, but he shakes his head, "*Ich-Arbeiter, main Fater-doktor, Arzt.*" "Your father was a doctor?" I ask him in surprise. "*Ja, ja, lekar, doktor, Arzt, fershten zee, aber ich Arbeiter.*" As we're explaining this to each other-I myself don't know how-he starts to kiss my hand.

Vera whispers to me that in Czechoslovakia it was standard practice for doctors' children to have a hard time registering to study medicine. Or, rather, for the children of any kind of intellectuals to have trouble getting into university. And I had thought, for them, that this sort of thing was long in the past.

Seredz is a little town, almost a village. It seems to me that the center has some kind of monument, a warrior waving his hand high, all gray and unattractive, the kind you see in our villages too, in front of the Houses of Culture.

We set off, heading for Njitra. A downpour keeps us company the whole way. Soaked, ashen meadows pass by, village houses with gardens where transparent plastic greenhouse roofs flicker in a ghostly way.

We stop downtown, in a parking lot in front of a department store. Our guide tells us in a dignified way that he'll wait for us in a café across the road as we carry out our transactions. "That's the best solution for me and for you." Transactions, solutions: these are his favorite expressions. There's nothing for this tourist guide genius to do here. Njitra doesn't interest anyone.

The wind breaks my umbrella as I run to the department store. We find ourselves in a market square. The department store was built on a plateau, water pours down its great staircase.

From the plateau I can take in the old part of Njitra with one glance, the elegant council building, that's probably what it was, which looks like a fortified castle.

Our mad dash through the store's departments has begun again. A horrified fear of missing something that's cheap here and expensive in Yugoslavia. I notice in my thinking, and in Vera's, an absurd tendency to inflate the price of some articles in Yugoslavia, so that buying them here seems like even more of a bargain to us.

Grabbing as much as possible, as if this is our last chance.

The logic of a crisis.

When the departments close, our agony comes to an end. We return to the bus.

Farewell, Njitra! Through the rain, and through the wind, and through the rush I notice that it is a lovely old village. May my greeting be some consolation to you for this disrespect for your streets, buildings and monuments.

Before us lie more borders and customs officials. Humiliation and fear before we cross, triumph or lamentation after we cross.

How can you outwit the custom officials, how can you gain their sympathy? This would make a good topic in a manual for black marketers. How to make "you can't" become "you can." Good old bribery!

Near the town of Komarno we cross into Hungary. Perhaps thirty kilometers from the border, we stop in front of a tavern. A few of the travelers still have some Vegeta. We plan to go with them into the tavern to drink some coffee and use the toilet, while they take care of their business. Everything in the tavern is in folk style. Wooden tables, pottery, exposed beams in the ceiling, wreaths of onion and dried red peppers.

We tumble inside, disheveled, exhausted, anxious for refreshment. But there's not a single free seat in the tavern. Like fools, in amazement, as if we've met a ghost, we stare at the young men and women, blond and attractive, who are sitting at the tables and singing in German. They are dressed in folk costumes, with little green hunting hats on their heads. The girls are all fair, clean, tender. The waiter flies around them, bringing them beer in beer steins.

I think we are all defeated by that picture. We simply go back outside, we slip away.

Without rest or refreshment, we continue our trip. I was hoping that we would at least pass through the center of Budapest, so I could at least get a look from the bus at the luxurious buildings I know, those witnesses of the dignity and richness of another city in the long-ago empire.

But none of that, we're doomed once more to the periphery. We cross the Danube on a bridge that has no beauty at all, a brownish, concrete continuation of the street. I can only guess at the others in the distance, those famous bridges. Then we drive for a long time along the train tracks, along some fences and loading docks, through the suburbs with smaller and smaller lights, until we pass into the darkness of the field and meadow, a boundless tunnel from which we occasionally emerge into the empty, phantom streets of cities, twitching awake from our drowsing, remembering, reluctantly, full of dread, that there's one more customs check ahead of us.

¹ *Guest workers, usually those from Eastern Europe or Turkey, who have settled in Germany and Austria and work as menial or low-paid laborers.*

[Read more from the January 2007 issue](#)

Donate

Milica Mičić Dimovska

Milica Mičić Dimovska was born in Novi Sad in 1947. She received a degree in Literature and Literary Theory from the University of Belgrade and worked for many years at Matica srpska and as an editor of Letopis Matice srpske. She has published collections of short stories (*Priče oženi* [Stories about a Woman], 1972; *Poznanici* [Acquaintances], 1980; *Odmrzavanje* [Defrosting], 1991; *U Procepu* [In the Cleft], 1999), the travelogues in Putopisi (1999), and four novels (*Utvare* [Phantoms], 1987; *Poslednji zanos MSS* [The Last Ecstasies of MSS], 1996; *Mrena* [The Cataract], 2002; *Utoči...te* [Refuge], 2005). Her works have won numerous literary prizes and are translated into English, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Slovak and Swedish. She lives and writes in Novi Sad.

[» More about Milica Mičić Dimovska](#)

Translated from [Serbian](#) by [Sibelan Forrester](#)

Sibelan Forrester is Professor of Russian at Swarthmore College and currently chair of the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures there. She has published numerous translations from Croatian, Russian and Serbian, including stories by Milica Mičić Dimovska, and she is now working on a translation of her novel, *Mrena* (The Cataract).

[» More about Sibelan Forrester](#)