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Snippets from the Balkans

Part 5 (The End)

By **George Kun**

35) When I finally returned home to Canada, on my flight back to Toronto, I indulged in day dreaming about my trip to the Balkans. I was overwhelmed by the richness, depth and intensity of my memories and instead of reading or watching a movie on the flight, I closed my eyes for maybe half a minute at a time, and made a note of the images that popped-up in my brain. There were coming in waves and in a certain sequence and I wish they would have been projected on a screen for people to see and enjoy.

One of these bursts of images was about people. Genuine, simple, modest, honest and dignified people, mostly poor. I always bought something from them because I enjoyed the positive change in their expressions.





This woman from Rijeka, a beautiful Croatian big city was waiting for the bus. Earlier, on the market, I overheard her talking to the potato vendor about having those potatoes for dinner, for the next few days, and not much else.



I also got flashbacks about some other interesting characters, in an unexpected setting such as this lonely nun, sipping a coffee in a totally empty cafe. Maybe she did not want to sit outside.



In contrast with her, this young, pretty woman with a shaven head, wanted to sit outside. She was smoking and looked mildly wasted but when she saw me taking a picture, asked me what I was seeing worth taking a picture of. I said "I have never seen a sign *No Peeing for Dogs* and I was wondering if dogs could read and understand that sign". She turned her head slowly and lazily towards her red bicycle and saw the sign. Then, with a broad smile she said: "You know, I live here and never noticed or paid attention to that sign; very strange". I tried to help her by saying "Maybe because you obstruct the sign with your bicycle". She gave me another friendly but unfocused look and inhaled more smoke deeply from her cigarette which I realized was not ordinary tobacco.



Then I got another flashback about "The Lady in White". On that picturesque cobblestoned street, everybody in the café sat with their backs to the *Lady in White*.

For me this was a metaphor of people's indifference. The old lady was walking very slowly and visibly with excruciating pain, yet her upright body posture and all white clothing gave her a lot of dignity. These are those moments when we realize the frailty of human health and hope that the ravages of time will be generously delayed for us.

After I took the picture, I felt somewhat embarrassed at the thought that the woman may turn her head and see me. I approached her gently and asked if I can help carry her bag. She looked at me with sad eyes and said "No, thank you, unless you can do it every day"



A fairly common scene in the Balkans is seeing people sitting on a chair next to a table, in front of their house, relaxing and indulging in Rakija, (a local hard liquor), kobasica (spicy sausage) kruh (bread) and luk or kapula (onions).

If you stop, or look and talk, there is no way of getting out of sharing. The people of the Balkans are very hospitable, and depending on where it is and who is "relaxing" the meals can be quite rich and plentiful or very simple and basic, like the one in the picture.

As I was walking by, I saw this picture perfect cliché-fitting scene, and since I was facing the man, I had to ask him for permission to take his picture.

I was quite curious to see what his reaction would be, because in other parts of the world such as Mexico, Cuba, Dominican Republic or North Africa I was always asked to pay for such favours.

That Balkan man had no intentions to ask for money, and possibly it did not even cross his mind to do so. Instead, he insisted to drink Rakija with him, which I gladly did.



36) As powerful as the visual memories are, the "sound memories" are not far behind, particularly from the Balkans where music is everywhere, and people's emotions, souls and hearts often connect through songs.

The diversity of the Balkan music is quite impressive. It is quite common for ordinary people even the ones with little or no musical education to belong to a "Klapa" band, a unique and very melodious choral group singing folk music.

Klapas perform anywhere from streets to formal concert halls. Classical music is equally popular and Croats are enthusiast concert goers. Pop, rock and jazz is extremely popular as well, and one would find an abundance of world class bands in each category.



37) During my flight back to Canada, as my memories were unfolding I fell asleep and dreamt about my most spectacular but also the scariest time of my trip. That was the night driving, through the dramatic mountains of Montenegro, downhill to the Bay of Kotor.



Skyline of Split, Croatia, where it all started.



The Balkans remain unique in many ways. Historically, their people are hardened survivors of very tough times and extremely resourceful in beating unfavorable odds and sheer bad luck. Most of the people I met, are very proud of who they are and are deeply patriotic. It also happens that the Croats, for example, relative to the size of the population, are disproportionately talented and successful in many sports and are fierce and enthusiastic fans of their athletic heroes.



Acknowledgement

In many parts of my discovery trips through the Balkans, I was accompanied by a good friend, Ivan K. a retired navy captain and a "walking encyclopedia" from the former Yugoslavia, who decided to switch to being a "driving encyclopedia" in his old reliable Volvo. He opened my eyes and led me to places not known to or encountered by the ordinary tourists. His vast knowledge of history, geography and politics, greatly enhanced my traveling experience and my enjoyment of the trips. Thank you "Kapetan".