

CONTRASTS

Following the trail of Lawrence Durrell's three novels *Nunquam*, *Constance* and *Sebastian* we flew to Geneva for a short stay in Switzerland en route to Belgrade. We had no car in Geneva as all the locations were in the town and we walked almost everywhere trying to find the buildings that Durrell describes. He gave good descriptions of houses but was rather vague as to where they were, or even if they might be found. Sometimes other buildings had to be substituted for those in the novels because they had long since gone, or they had changed so much as to be unrecognisable. In my search for a rather grand Austro-Hungarian restaurant called 'Old Bavaria', I actually walked right past it the first time because it had changed so much. All that remained was a window with a motif on it which I thought might be paintable, and which Paul made into a small drawing. Altogether we walked so much that I got blisters, and I think Paul did too, although he didn't complain about them!

In Zurich we hired a car. I was by this time getting used to unreliable Mediterranean cars, but here the car was so up-to-date and sophisticated that I had to go and practice driving it on my own, before going on exploratory excursions together.

Paul said he would have to draw Pilatus, a mountain used by skiers. We drove to the base in order to catch the cable-car. Half-way up, Paul said he would have to get out, he couldn't face going to the top because of his vertigo. I stayed on until the top, and got out to what must be one of the most spectacular views in Switzerland. On my return I caught up with Paul half way down. Having brought a picnic, and as we were ravenously hungry we devoured it, but were still so hungry that we bought bread and soup from a convenient cafe. I can only suppose the fresh mountain air had something to do with our hunger. At the end of the day, after more drawing, we descended. In the cable-car Paul could not look down on the (to him) frightening scenes of snowy ravines and treetops which we were hurtling towards, so to divert his attention, we took stupid photographs of each other, behaving like badly-behaved schoolkids. Fortunately we were the only people in the cable-car.

While in Zurich I went to a Travel Agent to arrange some accommodation in Serbia which was our next destination, being the subject matter in Durrell's *White Eagles over Serbia*. One place I booked was a 'Spa Hotel', which in the clean environs of a Swiss office sounded perfect, but more of that later.

We flew to Belgrade over the Alps on the most spectacular flight I've ever made. The sun was catching the snowy peaks, making the razor-sharp ridges stand out, ready to slice through the blue sky. The contrast of black shadow and dazzling white was awesome. As we came down at Zagreb, Paul said he wished we were getting out there, which did not seem to augur well for Belgrade. He told me something of his earlier visits to Yugoslavia. The first had been in 1947, when, as a member of the communist party, he had gone to eastern Bosnia to record the building of a Youth Railway with other artists including Ronald Searle with whom he spent five days in Belgrade. The second was in 1966 when, no longer a member of the communist party and commissioned by the US magazine *Fortune*, he depicted the return of that country to a free market economy. On that visit he could find no trace of anyone who knew anything about the Youth Railway. It always puzzled him.

As we entered Belgrade airport there was an awesome hush, partly due to the fact that there were very few people around. We collected our rented car, which turned out to be a dirty blue Yugo. Remembering our earlier experiences of run-down cars we were not sure whether to accept it, but Paul decided that we should, having no idea what the alternative might be. Also he felt we would not be so conspicuous in the Yugo. With difficulty we found our large old-fashioned Hotel, The Metropole, which was not too far from the centre of the town. Here there was a porter who took our bags up. He was a fit, middle-aged man who spoke good English and who told us he had lived in London, New York and Chicago. He seemed very sophisticated for a porter. Paul didn't tip him which I thought was a bit odd. He explained to me after, that he was sure he was a policeman, and by not tipping him he had let him know that Paul knew that. As he had spent long periods of time in eastern Europe when a member of the communist party, I knew how experienced he was in these

matters, and how much better prepared he was than I was for this part of the journey.

The next thing to do was to venture out into the town looking for the locations for *White Eagles over Serbia*. Distances were too great to go out on foot, Paul's usual way of doing his first exploration, and it was obvious we would not have got far with public transport for the buses were belching out black fumes and overflowing with unhappy-looking passengers. Indeed everyone looked extremely miserable in this drab and depressing town. The Yugo car suddenly became welcome, and Paul guided me along the dusty, potholed roads to where he wanted to go. He was most apologetic for landing me in such a dismal, dingy place.

Over the course of the next few days several watercolours were done, and I saw the downside of Paul's working situation. The Military Museum was drawn. It was full of guns and tanks so I hoped he wouldn't get into trouble. He didn't. Then he started drawing the Fort. He was approached by the Park Keeper who asked him if he had permission to draw it, which he had not got. So he was told to move on. Which he did, but only to find a more secluded spot where he sat down and (he said) did a much better drawing. Needless to say I was not with him on that occasion for I would have drawn attention to him. I was walking round Belgrade taking in the sights and sounds and thinking of the history its buildings could tell. Here, unlike some places, as a woman on my own, I could go into a bar and have a coffee or a lager. Shops had little to sell. On my way to Revolution Square I walked down a street where Lux soap was being sold on the black market.

There were no comforts here and everything was a struggle and I could not get away from the feeling that we were being watched. Each day when we arrived back at the hotel covered in dust and grime, the eagle-eyed staff were very inquisitive about where we had been. Eating was not very exciting. It didn't take me long to realise that the restaurants were state-controlled, for wherever we chose to eat there were similar menus. After an early start and a tiring day sometimes we would eat at our hotel. There, we would find the only other customers were prostitutes sitting at the bar waiting for the evening to begin and with entertainment provided by an old-fashioned band playing string instruments accompanied by a pianist, redolent of the bands that played in Lyons Corner Houses in my youth. Paul would talk of his first visit to Belgrade when he was a member of the communist party. He now thought Socialism didn't work. He talked of when he left the communist party, his sense of relief at being able to think for himself but also his desolation at no longer belonging to it. 'Like leaving the Church' he said, remembering a conversation he had had with Graham Greene on the subject.

On leaving Belgrade and after a four-hour drive south to Kraljevo, we arrived at The Termal Hotel which had been booked by me in the clean sparkling tourist office in Zurich, where it had been described as a 'Spa Hotel'. Nothing could have been further from the truth. The lift did not work, so we had to haul our luggage up the stairs (no porters here) and we were given a torch to assist us, as the light in the central stairway did not work. Paul got stuck in the bathroom because the door handle came off, the shower was unattached to the wall, there was no plug for the basin and the taps were high enough to get a pail under (at least that was Paul's explanation). None of the drawers had handles and the beds were really just narrow, sagging camp beds with equally narrow blankets which had no chance of staying on the bed if one turned over. It turned out it was really a hostel for the elderly, and a convalescent home for the ailing workers who were sitting around the public rooms, some with bandages, or plasters or walking sticks. The first evening, on being summoned to our 'Pensione' meal, we were shown to a table with a dirty tablecloth on it. We were then joined by two bandaged females. We both smiled and chatted as best we could with the language difficulty, but when a plate of greasy food was put down in front of me, Paul detected my horror. At a convenient moment, he asked if we could have another table, whereupon we were taken to a further corner of the room where there was still no menu, but we were served fresh trout, new potatoes and tomatoes on a table with a clean cloth and flowers on it. Presumably, we paid extra for this, and I hoped we had not offended people too much, but no explanation was ever forthcoming, and Paul could not explain it either.

The next day we drove to Studenitsa where Paul settled down to a drawing of the imposing monastery. I took the opportunity of going into the monastery where I found a monk selling postcards who spoke very good English and had a long talk with him. He had not been to the UK

but had two friends who lived there. One had stopped writing to him which was sad on two counts, one, he didn't know why, and two, as a stamp collector he depended on such correspondence for his collection, and his salary of £14 a month did not allow him to buy any stamps. He asked many questions. What was England like? Were the English a people who had confidence? I tried to answer his questions as best I could and in return he told me something of his life in the monastery. He seemed glad he had chosen his way of life, although sometimes he found it trying. There was a lot of arguing in the monastery. 'Serbians' he said 'are a difficult people to get on with. It is not easy living with people who have their own ideas about everything. It can be very tiring'. He thought that the Church had probably been at its best at its inception with Christ and twelve disciples. As it got bigger, so its problems increased.

As I was leaving, I complimented him on his English and asked if he spoke any other languages. 'Only a few' he said. 'What languages?' I asked. 'Russian, Greek, French, Italian, German' he replied. 'However did you learn all those?' 'I am very talented' he said with a smile. If he was as fluent in those other languages as he was in English, then he was a truly remarkable man. In later years and especially during the Serbian war, I used to wonder what had happened to him and to think 'what a waste'!

I joined Paul who by this time had finished his picture and we had lunch in the nearby hotel. It was a far cry from The Termal Hotel and we decided we should move there if they had a vacancy, which they had. Our baggage of course was still at The Termal, and Paul had more pictures to do, so it was up to me to go back and collect it. Driving was not easy because of the military presence on the road, where I was repeatedly sandwiched by heavy army trucks on my 80 mile round trip. On arrival at The Termal, the receptionist could not understand why I had come to check out and collect our bags. 'You stay three nights' she repeated over and over. My Serbian was nil and her English very basic. I was not going to be allowed to collect our luggage and leave. Eventually, a phone call was made to the manager of our new hotel near the monastery and only after that was I allowed to collect our bags and pay the bill. The receptionist was in tears by this time. Obviously I felt bad about it, and hoped so much that she was not going to be blamed, but of course I never heard the end of her story. On my return to the new hotel there was a policeman checking guests names. Were we under surveillance? Probably, thought Paul.

While staying there, we drove further south. After driving through a concrete wilderness on the outskirts, we came upon a busy town full of character, with Turkish architecture and women wearing colourful Turkish dresses. We were in Muslim country and not far from Albania. Leaving Paul to draw a mosque, I wandered around, not daring to have even a cup of coffee in any of the many cafes, for women were not to be seen in them. When I caught up with Paul we sat down outside a cafe as he didn't want to go inside with me for the same reason. He was totally fed up. The group of about a dozen kids which I had seen gathering round him earlier, had mocked, jeered and laughed at him so much when he sat on his stool and got his pencils out, that he had been unable to draw the mosque or anything else in that town. In his professional life, I knew he had been in many difficult situations, but this was one of the worst. He very rarely gave up, but this was one such occasion.

It was not all as bleak as this. Some of the more remote countryside was quite magnificent. On a day when the sun was sparkling, we came across a group of happy farming people returning from a nearby fair. The horses were trotting along with carts piled high with pimentos and other vegetables. They laughed, smiled, waved at us and I am sure would have invited us into their homes had we been in need of refreshment. We relaxed and laughed as we watched these friendly faces passing us by as they moved along the road flanked with hedges of elderberries, and in the background, fields of ripe corn blowing in the wind, making a sound as if of falling rain.

Then back to reality. Onto the busy motorway bound for Belgrade. One lane was closed. There was a minor tornado with torrential rain as darkness fell. I was terrified. Trying to tell Paul this, no sound came out of my mouth. Fortunately he realised my predicament and as soon as I could I pulled in and we swapped seats so that he could drive.

We returned to The Metropole Hotel in Belgrade with relief. Suddenly it seemed like a most

civilised place. We were actually greeted with smiles of recognition and taken to a part of the hotel we didn't know existed. The rooms were large, airy and almost luxurious. Our meal was excellent, with good wine, and staff and waiters couldn't do enough for us. We must have passed the test, whatever that was. However, on leaving, when I was collecting our passports at the desk and leant over to point to them, I saw a gun lying there. I was glad we were going.

Diana Hogarth.