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A Guide to the
Serbian Mentality

Illustrated by the Author

Eighth edition

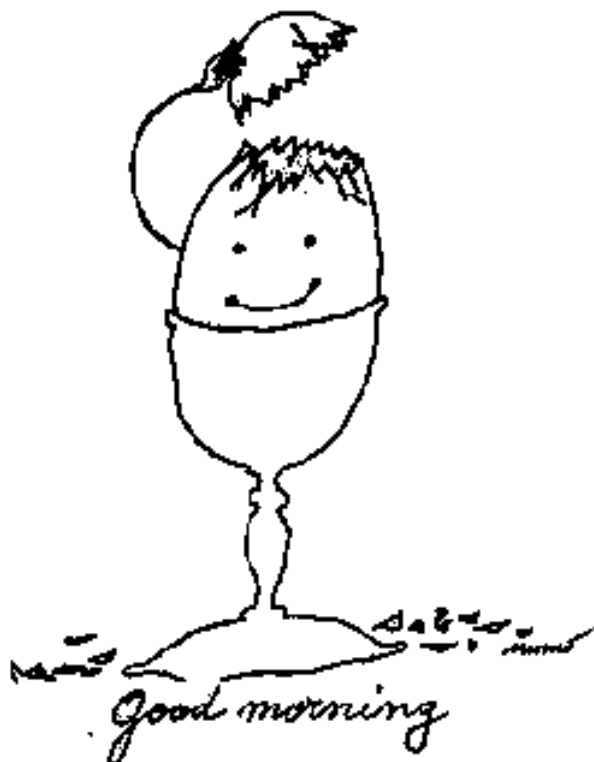
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Belgrade, 2017

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To Travel, to Travel

Ours is a small country, but our desire for what lies beyond our borders is just as great as that of larger countries – and even continents. The outside world has always come to us more often than we have ventured into the world. In fact, we were conquered from the outside some five hundred years ago

– and as recently as seven years ago. Some have come with weapons, some by way of influence, and some were just passing through. Nevertheless, our desire for this outside world is continually on the rise.

For my generation, the first encounter with the outside world occurred in Italy, because that was the first foreign country we visited. More precisely, Italy – and its Villa Opicina – was the first place one arrived after crossing the border of what was then Yugoslavia. In lovely Italy, no one snoozed in sleeping bags or laid on suitcases on deserted rail station platforms, as was the case in our socialist country. No one ran from the train to fill his empty bottle at the station’s fountain – there was only a dark-complexioned man in an impeccable white jacket and black bowtie who pushed his cart filled with western assortments. There were all sorts of things in it: pralines, ham sandwiches with cheese, a pile of tangerines, and a dozen bottles of San Pelegrino mineral water. We stared at this consumers’ paradise through the grimy windowpane of our Yugoslav State Railroad coach without daring to ask the vendor how much any of the items might cost. The first Italian words we learned were *troppo caro* (too expensive).

Year in and year out, we poured abroad, both to the East and to the West, which were forever wrangling. We became so used to their quarrels that we virtually forgot all about the South and the North, and this division of the world was so commonplace that it became devoid of all meaning.

Having traveled to the West, I discovered there was something even more Western than the West. I



went to the East – there were always more Eastern countries and nations...

But where is the East? Where is the West?

I found the answer in an old essay by Tin Ujević, from 1923. “Neither East nor West exist at all in a geographical sense, because the Earth is round...” wrote the good old, drunken, wise Tin. “The East and the West, two colossal fictions and phantasmagorias, and the impenetrable gap of the future that will, so we believe, belong to all of us...”

And because we live between the East and the West, we believe that truth and human measure are somewhere in the middle.

We have come to know both sides of the world.

When the Germans occupied Serbia in 1941, we could not travel anywhere – except to concentration camps.

Then, in 1944, the Russians “liberated” us – that is, occupied Serbia – with the result that the most loyal could travel to an Athletes’ Jamboree in Prague or to attend a military school in Moscow.

In 1948, when we fell out with the Russians and the West had not yet taken us under its wing, we essentially locked ourselves in. We lived this way until the early 1960s, when the first of us left to work abroad.

Until that time, the bravest fled to the West across mountain ranges or by hiding between the wheels of a railroad coach heading west. Some chose to remain in the West following an appearance with a touring symphony orchestra or ballet troupe. Some fled across the sea... People would flee in the most imaginative ways until the regime finally became so fed up that it began

issuing passports to anyone who asked. The borders were opened and our entire little country rushed to buy clothes, footwear, and to see the world.

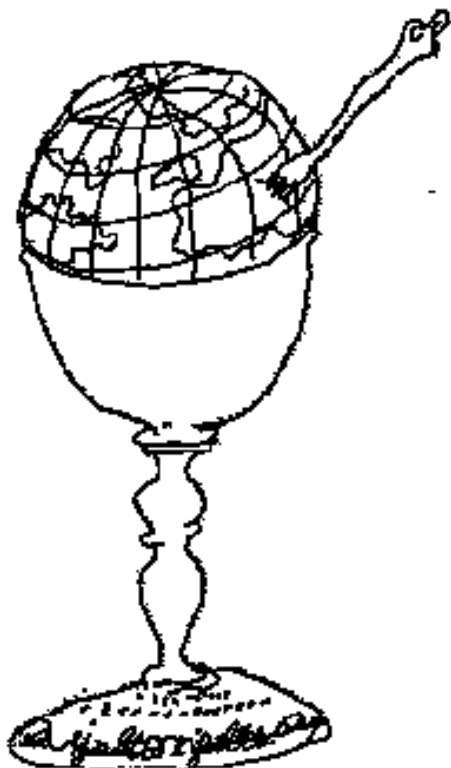
Only then did our country become even smaller than before. The outside world became weary of watching us travel to far-off lands like drunken millionaires, especially at a time when the only Americans who toured Europe were old and retired and when people on the West Coast rarely got a chance to tour the East Coast.

Be that as it may, due to wars, rows, and a general breakdown of the system, today's twenty-five-year olds have not only missed the world, they haven't even seen Dubrovnik, Sarajevo, Zagreb or Ljubljana... True, today they can see Toronto or Wellington, New Zealand – but this ticket is one-way: to reach their work post as a computer programmer or babysitter. And when they reach that coveted paradise, they find themselves more shut-off than ever, because the average Westerner finally travels, as I said before, just before they die. Only then do they see the planet on which they have spent their life working from morning to nightfall.

Serbs have recently begun to travel again. Traveling in groups has become popular, as the tourist package sidesteps the difficulties of obtaining foreign visas for individuals. When I travel with them, I watch their eyes full of inquisitive radiance. Most touching are the older ladies from the provinces, retired doctors or teachers whose sons paid travel agencies so their parents could see Greek temples, the Pyramids, or stand before the Wailing

Wall in Jerusalem. I have met newly-weds on their honeymoons, chewing gum and appearing bored – they’ve already seen this on TV. Nowadays, for the most part, no one remains behind in a foreign country – as was the case many years ago. Perhaps this is because it is easy enough to find work washing café glasses or sweeping the streets here at home; there is no need to go abroad for that.

After each trip we grow more aware of our precious little garden, our own neighborhood, and the streets where we grew up. But we will never comprehend this fully until we have traveled the world.



“Belgrade is Belgrade”

Nothing describes Belgrade like the three words “Belgrade is Belgrade” that we utter at the airport after coming home from abroad. Belgrade abounds in love, warmth and wonderment; we feel safe here and we’re happy to live in this city. If we haven’t made much of our lives, it is enough to say that we have managed to live in such a fine place as Belgrade – the unfulfilled dream of many provincials. Belgrade does not like having its picture taken. It hates to pose. It will not keep still. It does not do well in photographs – it always looks like some place else.

It is not Paris, which likes to cuddle with artists.

It is not London, which ingratiates itself to photographers.

It is not Rome, which bedecks itself with souvenirs.

It is not Vienna, the perfect place for an engraving on an ashtray.

It is not Moscow, which looks nice in a glass globe with drifting snowflakes.

It is not Berlin, the golden bear, which can be turned into a beautiful key ring.

It is not Budapest, which likes to have itself painted on the bottom of bowls of hot fish stew.

It is not Istanbul with its gold teeth.

It is not Athens, a stone paperweight for old manuscripts...

There are few things in Belgrade that I have not seen elsewhere. Perhaps only three: its rivers, its sky and its people. Of these three ancient elements the unique spirit of Belgrade is born.

Clouds scud across the sky where the Sava gives itself to the Danube, combining mists with eastern and western winds – that dramatic Belgrade sky that resembles a huge celestial battleground. The spiritual state of its inhabitants is portrayed in this sky at any moment of the day.

People who grew up on a stone hill beneath such an exciting panorama cannot be but broad of gesture, stormy of temperament and of changing mood. These people, who stay in their city despite everything, even as history destroys and crumbles it, covering the land with layers of leaves and remnants of previous settlements and past civilizations, such people are capable of building their city anew, in a relaxed and unpretentious way; they are capable of building a city of human proportions. It is as comfortable as a friendly pub; the town does not put fear in the hearts of visitors with its enormity, but binds its visitors forever with a hundred invisible threads.

An aerial picture of Belgrade shows – as clear as the palm of your hand – its past, present and future. Belgrade's palm has calluses and scars: it gives a firm, friendly handshake; it has the strength of a dangerous fist, the softness of a caress.



Its fingers are roads leading into the wider world – ancient roads, imperial roads, rural paths and tracks, highways – and long white streams that cut across the sky.

Lines of character: the contours of ravaged Kalemegdan fortress.

Mounts of Venus: Banovo, Pašino, Julino, Labudovo, Petlovo, Topèidersko...

Life-line: long and frequently intersected with the scars of wars...

The line of the heart: the banks of the river islands Ada Huja, Ratno Ostrvo, Ada Ciganlija and Mala Ada...

Line of exceptional fortune: the course of its rivers.

Where is the heart of Belgrade?

It is everywhere and nowhere.

It hides in the refined nonchalance of shoe cleaners on the streets, who say “Give me as much as you want!”, in the philosophically balanced relaxation of old men who have lived through so many wars; in the morning joke that breaks the gloomy mood of office-bound workers in trolley bus 11; in the friendship of waiters who happily sit down for a glass of beer with their guests at the “Èubura” restaurant; in the hustle and bustle of streets in which you rarely feel like a stranger, regardless of where you come from; in the beauty of the graffiti on walls that no one ever paints, graffiti that resembles a touching fresco of street destinies, loves, swear words, insults, witticisms, football results, names...

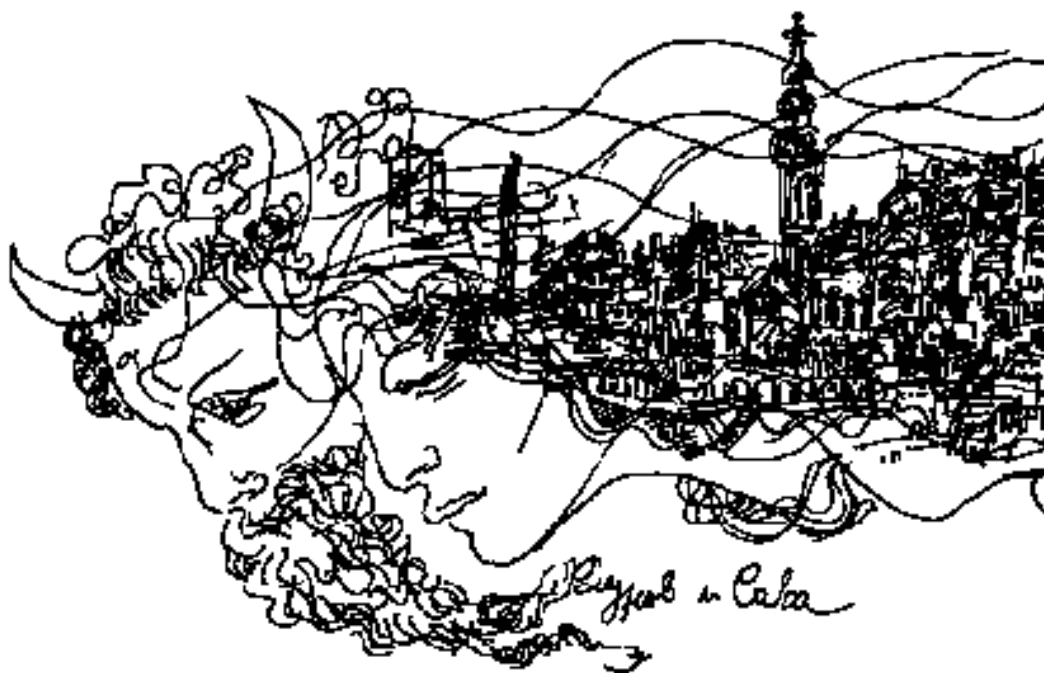
The spirit of Belgrade lies concealed in the unique chaos of its fruit and vegetable markets, and, above

all, in the supple walk of Belgrade women. Watching these women on the city streets is like seeing a fantastic modern ballet with no other sound than striking heels! Pale city girls who grow up suddenly, accustomed to city life and the yearning looks of passers-by; independent, cynical, audacious and polite at the same time, with the innate elegance of millionaires behind cunningly concealed poverty – it is upon them that newcomers feast their eyes until they disappear from sight, as if upon some secret signal, leaving the streets inconsolably barren and bare.

The spirit of Belgrade gives birth to daring vertical lines, out of which spring new city quarters and old quarters fall into ruin; it bridges rivers and clears away the rusted tangle of railway lines overgrown with grass to secure a better view of the rivers and the sky. It toys with architecture and the laws of town planning.

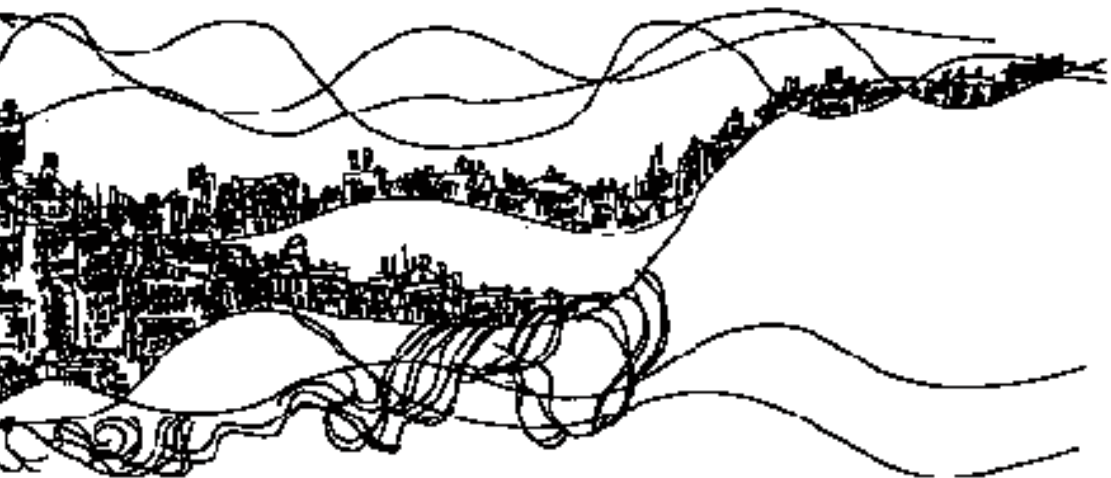
This city will never attract the inquisitive collector of beauty, but it will do something completely different: it will arouse an almost physical pain of longing in those who have spent any time on its streets, even a few days, just as a photograph of a long lost love can inflict mortal pain.

The plan of its streets becomes something akin to a topographical map of our hearts. This city of ours will bewitch us with its charm, but it will never reveal the secret of that strange love, a love that is beyond comprehension. We shall remain its willing prisoners forever, having chosen Belgrade for this one life from among the innumerable magnificent cities of the world.



The Mouth at the Crossroads of Winds and History

Viewed from the water, from where the Sava enters the Danube, Belgrade resembles a ship that has embarked on a long cruise across the vanished Pannonian Sea. Its stony prow – Kalemegdan Fortress – cuts the waves of these two rivers. Water, fog, time and history crash against the city. Rare are



the cities with the fortune of having two large and mighty rivers into which nature has cast green river islets, like bridal bouquets.

Whenever I sail across the mouth of the Sava it reminds me of a passionate embrace seething with the deep excitement of meeting. The Sava is feminine. Like a great seductress she nestles to the sides of boats and rolls in the shadows of willow groves. She is a true feminine river. Her twilights seem to hide the gaze of a young woman yearning for love. She cuddles, coddles and giggles, whispering tenderly into a swimmer's ears... Yet, the gloomy cloud-covered days she wraps herself in for weeks and

months at a time are an expression of her innate melancholy. She can be sickly pale and shine with an unhealthy sulfuric light. On such days boredom is mirrored on her surface, her trees' coiffures are sloppy, her banks muddy and broken branches flow down her stream like betrayed expectations.

The Danube, on the other hand, is masculine. Compared to the Sava he is serious and resembles the Great Master of Waters. It is as though he never learnt to correctly pronounce the Serbian language; as though he maintained, all the way to the Black Sea, the hard German accent of his homeland source, beneath the Schwarzwald. The Danube foams like Swabian beer. He drinks like a Russian, "bottoms up!", and with pangs of conscience; amidst merriment he is capable of secretly drawing a knife like a Bulgarian; he can utter a curse in Hungarian. His waves are nostalgic like Romanian shepherds' songs and his treacherous sand isles insidiously await their prey: incautious boatmen and their barges that, once stranded, have to wait for months for the water to rise and for the river to set them free. During this time the Danube lolls about in a ragged housedress of clouds, smoking smuggled tobacco, drinking smuggled "Stolichnaya" vodka from Russian barges, along with Kadovo's caviar from Romanian barges.

The Sava and the Danube live differently, each for itself, but when they meet, hey foam with the joy of meeting, and from a height, with a philosophical peace, the White Town observes them...

The witnesses to the rivers' meeting, beneath the Belgrade Fortress, are the witnesses of history. In

Nebojsa's Tower, built in 1460, the famous Greek poet Rigas of Ferre was imprisoned and killed. At the top of this stone tower, the last Turkish *dahias*, staring in earthenware jugs, deciphered the reflection of stars that predicted doom and death.

Not far from the tower, the Karl VI Triumphal Gate, built in 1736, stands pompously, under which children ride their bikes. Not far from there is a monumental Turkish *hamam* (bath) from the 18thth century, from which hot steam and softened Ottoman bathers disappeared long ago. Above the *hamam*, on the hill, at the foothill of the Fortress ramparts, there is a church dedicated to St. Petka, the patron of unfortunate women, where even today, it is said, miracles occur.

History has chosen the confluence of Belgrade's rivers as a perfect place to shuffle its tarot cards and mix fates, races, civilisations and cultures. This is a great book for those able to read it. It contains chapters on Roman foundations and wells, remnants of Hun and Avar walls, Turkish fortifications, Austro-Hungarian loopholes and sentry-boxes, and finally the chapter on the leafy tree tops of Slav linden trees that have with great pains managed to calm the storms under the city walls. Today, on the top of Kalemegdan Fortress, on the grass and in the alleys of the most beautiful city park, young Belgraders laugh, love and nibble at seeds. Indeed, Belgrade youth have always outlived evil times, including the last one: they giggle in the face of history, not caring a hoot for the bones of long dead conquerors.

Momo Kapor
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