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Lifting the Curtain: A Serbian-American Memoir · *Catherine Rankovic*

IF YOU'VE NEVER READ AN ESSAY by a Serbian-American about being Serbian-American, that might be because there aren't many of us, and we tend not to say much, or rather, write much. If my experience growing up among them is any indication, that's because Serbs tend not to reflect much, especially on themselves. Those I knew discouraged in their children anything resembling self-preoccupation, warning of its threats to one's spirit or sanity. My father told the story of the Serbian scientist who thought to calculate how many times in his life he'd change his clothes. The total so horrified him he killed himself. This was less a story than a parable.

We—for I am as Serbian as I am American, a cultural hybrid, a true hyphenate—are traditionally a fatalistic people. My father's circle of immigrant Serbs, made up mostly of displaced persons and political refugees almost all of peasant background, voiced this fatalism as acceptance of God's will. My father, born in the village of Krnjevo, in Serbia, in 1919, spent 1941 to 1945 as a slave laborer in a German prisoner of war camp. Over the twenty-five years his lifespan matched mine he said within my hearing perhaps five sentences about it. The past was past. Trained as a blacksmith after an eighth-grade education, his youth lost to war, displaced to the U.S. in 1950 and employed thereafter in a foundry and factories to support four American-born daughters, he had a hard enough time trying to manage the present. He also hoped, I think, to spare us nightmares and what he may have considered a crippling sense of victimization—I think he was somehow actually ashamed of his enslavement—and for so graciously sparing us, at an unknown cost to himself, I thank him. In all this he was typical of the men in his circle, which centered on the Serbian Orthodox church they founded in our city; in fact he was often voted their leader.

I was, as it happened, among the first of the American children born into that circle, and so thoroughly socialized in its ways that I was all of twenty-five years old before I first thought to look back on life, and felt stupendously enlightened to see there, instead of fate and chaos, patterns and cycles forming a narrative, a drama. This came courtesy of psychotherapy, product of another, an enemy, culture. So overpowering had been the unspoken

family proscription against personal reflection, expressed as a deep suspicion and terror of reading and writing beyond what schooling required, that a college education and even life itself had failed to so enlighten me. Serbs did their best to avoid looking back at a past filled, as it was, with ugly and inexplicable things. We could not, for the sake of hope, believe the past determined the future. In a very American way breaking these taboos marked the point at which I became a genuine American rather than a Serb, and it felt liberating at the time. But it now seems to me that the gifts of hindsight are not identical with those of insight, and that the folks off the boat may have shown a superior wisdom in keeping their selective silences.

The Serbs I grew up among—and I stress that our community was unusually homogenous, founded and sustained by men like my father—followed tradition in letter and spirit, preserving religious rituals 900 years old without apparent interest in their antiquity or sources, but with enormous and vocal interest in keeping them intact. They made enthusiastic if vague reference to the more glorious moments of Serbian history, which in the early 1970s were codified for their culturally endangered, half-American young in the form of a dual language textbook filled with pious, muddy illustrations and shipped in hopeful bulk from its author in Toronto. I never read it; by then I had quit our raucous Serbian “Sunday” school, having sat from age four to fourteen in the church hall from nine to noon on school year Saturdays, in all that time learning nothing except Serbian folk songs and hymns, because our priest refused to teach us in the English language we preferred and could shut us up only when we sang. (I did stay with the church’s all-girl folk dancing team until I went to college.) The adults often talked politics, and even the priest did so, vehemently, on Serbian patriotic holidays, giving to the crowd wildly amplified speeches featuring the word “Kommunistika”—used with contempt, for Tito’s policies had been at the root of his and his congregants’ displacement, and, perhaps worse, were atheistic besides. So these were not people of few words; on the contrary. But of war and exile, the central facts of their lives, they did not speak personally; they were too proud, too polite, too fragile a community and just too busy living to fetishize their personal pain.

Yet, very early in life I sensed that something the size of a continent shadowed us, breathed shadow upon us, and impoverished us, even at worship or feasts. In our church hall, two commanding portrait photographs,

of a boyish ex-monarch in a uniform blistered with medals and an aging, bearded, fire-eyed soldier, oversaw us from exile and beyond the grave. Photographs, as clues to what troubled us, began to intrigue me; I think it was photographs that taught me that the way to live in both my worlds was to live in each as an observer, at one remove. In Serbian homes in America, including my own, I found caches of dog-eared, deckle-edged, black and white snapshots posed and taken in sunlight of a positively foreign intensity. They showed couples, family groups or assorted adults arm in arm; often there were studio portraits of young soldiers, their faces as composed and inaccessibly beautiful as saints'. Inscriptions of any kind were rare. These small collections might be kept in a cigar box, tacked up near the radio, or mounted in cumbrous albums with black pages. Badly damaged or very precious photographs were sometimes restored so that the human figures were shorn of context and set forth on blank white fields; these were the pictures most likely to be framed and displayed. They weren't like American photographs, which had dates automatically emblazoned in their margins, marking them as supplements to memory; rather, they seemed, like the ikons in our church, to function as windows into the hereafter. I do not remember ever asking who the people in the photos were, but now and then, caught studying them, I was gently told: "My brother," "My godparents," "Friends from my village." If there was no more to say, it wasn't said; for different reasons, neither children nor the adults who might be present needed to hear explanations. This was delicacy, not denial; it was a graceful, because well-taught and practiced, bow to God's will, however costly and enigmatical appeared His reasoning. But I intuited the meaning of the many abrupt and conspicuous silences, and being half-American and a seeker of ulterior motives, grew to believe they were kept against me: I thought they asked me to forget what I could not remember, an impossibility. And for a long time I thought that the phrase "Iron Curtain," used so freely and darkly on TV and radio then, had something to do with containing the awful thing that we found unspeakable.

All this lay banked, while, like coats of thick, obliterating paint, I acquired layer upon layer of blissfully uncomplicated white American-ness. I spent the American half of my hyphenated life—in school, socializing, and starting to work (as a photographer, typesetter, stockroom clerk, office temporary: anything at one remove)—trying to forget I was Serbian, and largely succeeding. In that world, where the melting-pot ideal as yet went unchal-

lenged, someone's comment on my surname or my decidedly Slavic face, my father's face, might cloud my mind with at most a passing thought or two. First, that being Serbian was an accident, and an unfortunate one; I deserved better. Were I French I would have a real culture to point to. Were I Irish I could have that people's pride. I felt I had neither. "Syrian? Siberian?" puzzled people said to me, "Serbian" being completely beyond their ken. And I couldn't blame them, call them ignorant, because for over seventy years, for most of the 20th century, there was no nation called Serbia. There was a Yugoslavia, but it did not pay to say proudly that Serbia was part of Yugoslavia, since if Yugoslavia as a whole had produced anything to be proud of no one educated in America, myself included, had any idea what it might be. Eastern Europe in general was a blank, a void, unstudied, unknowable, obscured as it was by the Iron Curtain and not really a part of Europe at all. At school I came to understand that the real Europe is Western Europe, the closer to England the realer and better, and that all white Americans were "Anglos" by fiat, just a little less so if they had names like mine.

If Serbia itself had been known to produce anything, it was trouble. The one fact Americans seem to know about Serbia is that in 1914 a Serb shot and killed the Archduke of Austria-Hungary, igniting World War I. Because the established narrative of European history doesn't mention that the Archduke planned soon to annex independent Serbia, and that with or without the assassination the war was spoiling to happen, Serbs are thereby entitled only to a sort of permanent embarrassment.

I also found it difficult to take pride in the Serbian peasant culture my father and his peers transplanted almost whole to urban industrial America: the folk dances; the cabbagey, buttery food meant to fuel hard labor in the fields; the Eastern Orthodox Christian faith which never appeared among the choices on questionnaires. I always checked "Other," fearing that in case of emergency I'd be taken for an atheist. One of my childhood's most humiliating moments occurred when I was twelve, the most horribly self-conscious of ages, when my mother shepherded the four of us, all dressed in our colorful, sequin-bedecked Serbian folk dancing costumes of velvet and wool, to a suburban Sears store to have our portrait taken as a crowd of curious, enviably normal Americans hovered round. Among the lesser embarrassments were my father's thick accent, the "broke English," as he called it, of which he was also ashamed; our celebration of Christmas by the Julian

calendar, on January 7; the countless Serbian “aunties” who seized us, crushed us to their terrifying bosoms, suffocated us with kisses and food and produced fantastical needlework they began to donate for my hope chest when I turned sixteen, and their vigilant and unwanted matchmaking in hopes I’d marry a Serbian boy; that when Serbs talked, it always sounded like—I soon refused to understand or say more than polite phrases in the language—violent arguing. In short, an inelegant, unsubtle crowd. And early on, certainly by age four, I had decided I was not of the tribe. My father, half-playfully, would drill me:

“What you nationality?”

“American.” (Said loudly, and often accompanied by a joyful interpretive dance.)

“Serbian.”

“American!”

“*Ti Serbianska!*”

“*Ja Amerikanka! Ja Amerikanka!*”

If he was hurt or disappointed, he never let on. The full force of American culture, applied to a tiny and late-arriving American minority—after a century of immigration, there are still fewer than a million Serbian-Americans—was irresistible, although my father attempted to resist by prohibiting the playing of rock or jazz records in the house and, for a long time, the wearing of blue jeans. On the other hand, America offered certain advantages. He never saw me go hungry or barefoot, suffer through an air raid, or loaded into a boxcar for transportation to parts unknown—though he did one day advise me that should I ever find myself in that situation, the way to get breathing room was to scratch and pluck at imaginary head lice. “You gottet everything,” he’d respond when we’d complain. My three sisters and I, who defined the word “everything” by American standards, did not of course think so.

Whenever faced with proof that I was half Serbian, the task always seemed to be to get out from under the cloud of it, since to Americans it meant nothing or worse. Serbs assured me we had a proud and brave history, a rich and worthy culture, but I saw it reflected nowhere except among Serbs, and they, I felt, were grossly if naturally prejudiced in their own favor.

Later came the insight that if Slavic cultures were anything to Americans, they were funny. Ha-ha as much as strange. I suppose all foreign cultures and peoples are at first perceived by the natives as comical, but upon

achieving a certain degree of assimilation most American ethnics or sub-groups are granted, sometimes under pressure, their dignities and accomplishments and tragedies: in short, their right to respect and, incidentally or not, to the dissemination of information that counters the stereotypes. Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, Croats, Russians, Slovenes, Serbs and many more are still lumped together as "Slavs," except when they fight, and the average American has been fed, and has swallowed, certain images of Eastern Europe and its inhabitants that do not quite amount to an idea: fur hats, potato dumplings, wooden Maruschka dolls, barbaric dances, Siberia, the KGB. We speak languages nobody studies in school. We have backwards alphabets. Okay, so our embroidery and Easter eggs are nice, but we smell of onions and have unpronounceable names. I mean, who could take us seriously?

Where Slavs are known, they are known for their oddities. Catherine the Great had sex with horses (untrue). Nikola Tesla, Edison's friend and peer, couldn't eat fruit salad without compulsively calculating the volume of each cube of fruit (true). Famous Slavic-Americans tend to be joke figures: Bela Lugosi, the Gabor sisters, polka king Frankie Yankovic and his son Weird Al, Boris and Natasha. Or they're traitors: Private Eddie Slovik, and Vietnam veteran and pioneering antiwar activist Ron Kovic, considered by some a traitor in his way. In films and fiction, dim-bulb or devious characters are frequently given Slavic names: Igor, Joe Palooka, Gertrude Slescynski (a.k.a. Eve Harrington, the conniving young actress in *All About Eve*), Stanley Kowalski, Sergeant Bilko, Dave Kovic (the dim-bulb elevated to the United States presidency in the 1993 film *Dave*). And of course there are the ubiquitous Polack jokes which do not spare the Polish pope. Some, such as comedian Ernie Kovacs and film director Jim Jarmusch, both Hungarian-Americans, have used the Slav stereotype to brilliant advantage; others, such as actors Karl Malden (né Mladen Sekulovich) and Charles Bronson (né Buchinsky) have ducked it, almost, by changing their names; still others, by not changing their names, sacrifice superstardom, like John Malkovich who remains a cult actor, and television journalist Maury Povich who would perhaps not be as much of a joke had he changed his name. I very much doubt that Teodor Josip Konrad Korzeniowski would hold the same place in English literature as does the Anglicized Joseph Conrad. In fact, Slavic-surnamed American authors are few, and besides Nabokov who's known primarily for the *Lolita* scandal, and William Jovanovich, known primarily

as a publisher, I can't think right now of a single Slavic-surnamed modern novelist who wrote or writes in English. As a writer, I too have been tempted to change or eviscerate or Anglicize my name, which has proven to be a fertile source of taunts and puns ("Rankobitch") and misspellings ("Rankowitz," "Wrancovic," "Rankovian," "Ron Kovic"). Unspellable, unpronounceable authors don't sell a lot of books. Yet despite our strangeness, we're not considered "ethnic" in the currently fashionable way. One can read contemporary memoirs and novels about growing up African-American, Hispanic-American, a hyphenated Chinese, Italian, Jew or Filipino, but though American Slavs together comprise a vast and well-established population, I haven't found any specifically about growing up as any sort of Slavic-American. Consider, finally, that the fictional Count Dracula is the most famous Slav of all time, and the fascinating fact that mirrors will not reflect his image.

The essentially comic Slav stereotype became entrenched and ran its course unopposed during the long Cold War, when it seemed essential to populate an evil communist empire with inhabitants who, though Caucasian, were not quite civilized, banging their shoes on tables and such, and being physically rather too squat, swarthy, hairy, squinty-eyed and shabby to be quite human. Not unlike the stereotype of American Blacks, stereotypical Slavs—or shall I say "Lower Slobovians" or "Vulgarians"?—like bright colors, hard drink and unhealthy food. We are undisciplined, not too smart, and given to spontaneous and indiscriminate violence and anarchy. If strictly trained, we might become good athletes. If we have a culture, it is crude and elemental, primitive, like Zorba the Greek's. And, as with American Blacks, if we aren't being amusing, we're a threat. At one important point, though it's merely philological, African-Americans and Slavs do have a genuine connection. The word "slave" derives from the word "Slav," with good reason: 500 years, for Serbs, of bondage to the Ottoman Turks. You can read in *The Joy of Sex* about lovemaking "South Slav style": "mock rape." "A misunderstood people," says an ad for an old, remaindered book, *The Serbs*, written by an Englishman. I ordered it. It might be selling better now.

It is just such a notion of Slavdom that permitted *Rolling Stone* to send humorist P.J. O'Rourke—now, that's a funny name—to Bosnia to report on the current civil war, and O'Rourke's opening observation that "The unspellables were shooting the unpronounceables." One cannot imagine such an observation being publicly made, and printed in an ostensibly liberal

magazine, about warring Palestinians and Israelis or Tutsis and Hutus, not to mention English and Irish. Yet it is even more unimaginable that Serbs and Croats, the famously troublemaking Serbs in particular, would be worthy of anything less than contempt—bordering on demonization—of the kind that permitted *Vanity Fair*, among other publications, to portray Serbs as a tribe of congenitally bloodthirsty lunatics and conclude that they must confront what they've done to themselves. It was just such an ignorant idea of Serbs that made early reports of Serbian responsibility for the World Trade Center bombing quite logically believable; that feeds the myth of Serbian-run “death camps,” a myth publicly discredited by *The New York Times* and the U.S. State Department; and that makes American bombing of Serbia seem to some like a neat solution to a messy problem. I am not saying that Serbs aren't responsible for their share or more of the sickening atrocities reported from Bosnia: emphatically, they are, and this shames me, as it should all Serbs. But I am saying that reportage of the war has been heavily weighted against Serbs until recently, when reports emerged saying that Croats and Bosnian Muslims were engaging in atrocities also. Though this hardly comes as a relief, it does begin to add shades of gray to an enormously complicated conflict too often reduced to simple black and white.

The Serbs I knew didn't teach me to hate Croats, Muslims or anybody else. I thought if we were going to hate anybody it would be Germans, but that wasn't so; married to Serbs, some of our community's many German-born women, some of them Jews, became prominent members of the church auxiliary called the Circle of Serbian Sisters. And except for stray references to the local Croatian-American soccer team which seemed to indicate a garden-variety type of ethnic rivalry, I never heard any Serbs mention Croats at all. They sharply corrected me if I called their language “Serbo-Croatian” instead of “Serbian,” but never told me that we didn't speak of Croats because the best and worst we could do to them now was to banish them from speech and memory. I was over thirty before I sought books—mainly passages in books, since the usual histories of World War II barely mention Yugoslavia—that would tell me why.

But, too, it was not until I was over thirty that being Serbian had any sort of meaning beyond the meanings I or others of Serbian descent applied to it. A long time ago Dale Carnegie, in a book on public speaking, mentioned an audience left thoroughly puzzled by a speech on Serbia: “Why,” he wrote, “half of them did not know whether Serbia was a town or a dis-

ease.” Beginning in 1991, instead of saying “What?” acquaintances who heard for the first time that I was Serbian sometimes jokingly retreated, covering their throats; and many people since appear to have been persuaded that Serbia is less a place than a disease.

My being Serbian was no longer a purely personal concern; my ethnic identity, formerly obscure, had been politicized, and opened to speculation largely negative in character. After the current civil war began, I was often asked how it came about and what I thought about it, or how Serbs could be so terrible, or why. I didn’t know. But I did know that the Serbs I knew seemed incapable of simply waking up one morning in the mood for massacre; that there must be facts, or a narrative, that would explain.

There never should have been a Yugoslavia. Uniting the Southern Slav groups—Serbs, Croats and Slovenes—in 1918 was largely a Serbian idea, meant at least in part to tie their small nations together against attack and partitioning—“balkanizing”—by larger nations and empires. Serbs, Yugoslavia’s majority, set the new country up under the reigning Serbian king. Croats, whose crucial difference from Serbs is their traditional Roman Catholicism and related cultural ties with Central and Western Europe, saw a Serbian power grab, and initiated a separatist movement. In 1934, some nationalist extremists called Ustashi assassinated the Serbian king while he visited France, and mutual enmity became entrenched. World War II gave Croatia the opportunity to break from Yugoslavia and expand its territory hugely. Extremist leaders then ordered the territory purged of non-Catholics, whether Jewish, Gypsy or Eastern Orthodox. Some were forcibly converted; others were driven out, and others systematically killed. Estimates of Serbian Orthodox dead range from 200,000 to 800,000; Nazi-occupied Serbia was able to engage only in scattered retaliatory acts.

This has not been easy for either Serbs or Croats to forget. Tito, a Croat, took steps after the war to suppress ethnic animosity, including jailing or otherwise punishing those still loyal to the exiled Serbian king. My father, a veteran of the Yugoslav Royal Army, could not return home and became one of 150,000 displaced Europeans relocated to the United States; he once said he had been given the choice of the U.S., Australia or Canada. Tito managed to hold Yugoslavia together for thirty-five years, until his death in 1980, and for ten years after that a collective presidency, rotated among representatives of all ethnic groups, appeared to be working. But then, under Serbian nationalist leader Slobodan Milosevic, it began to break down.

When in 1991, inspired by other formerly Communist breakaway republics, Croatia again seceded from Yugoslavia, ugly memories on both sides resurfaced, were fanned into flame, and they fuel the civil war there today.

It is doubtful that there is any ethnic or religious or other kind of tribe which has never in its history fallen victim to enslavement or genocide or oppression just as cruel as either. Probably, such persecutions themselves create the initial tribal bonds. As a Serbian-American, half Old World and half New, I have learned this: that it is not necessary, even if it may be desirable, to forget one's history or forgive it. It is, however, necessary not to dwell on it, have it as one's meat and drink, exalt it as the core of one's identity. A sense of victimization, at first- or second-hand, is, as my father seemed to know, ultimately crippling. My father could well have explained to me that Germans or Croats were unfit to live, that they ought to reparate our kind with everything they owned, up to and including their lives, and that a proper Serb should hate them and their descendants unto eternity. Possibly he did not do so because he lived in America where any threat to us, as Serbs, was remote, as was the possibility of thoroughly satisfactory revenge. But if he did have such feelings he did not vent them even in the moments of his most furious anger, such as when, playing soldier, aged about eight, I shouted "Heil Hitler!" a phrase I'd learned from watching "Hogan's Heroes." I now see clearly that my father did not really forget or wholly forgive, but he and his fellow Serbs would not—because this alone was not beyond their power—pass on the poison. I cannot say the same for the Serbs in Bosnia now. But if Americans want to play an effective part in making peace there, every example in history including the present one proves that we cannot do it by demonizing an entire ethnic group. The key is to realize we have been well and to a great extent systematically prepared to discount these people's claim to humanity, which is why that's been so easy for many of us who are otherwise thoughtful—and doing so is doing exactly what we decry.

You might be wondering about my mother. She was Polish-American, the daughter of turn-of-the-century Polish immigrants who ran an unprofitable farm in far northern Wisconsin. But upon marrying my father she converted from Catholicism to Orthodoxy, learned the Serbian language and Serbian cooking, became an honorary Serb and raised her children as the same. There was no question about its being otherwise, although unlike most wives of immigrant Serbs, she worked as much as possible outside the

home, giving us a number of material advantages not typically available to first generation Americans, particularly girls. For social and economic reasons, the first American generation of any ethnic group does not generally produce scholars or writers; a few spectacular exceptions prove the rule. Had my mother been an immigrant Serb—there were few single Serbian women among the displaced persons and postwar refugees, and marriage to German, Jewish, Russian or American-born women was common—I might have been encouraged to marry early and discouraged from pursuing higher education, which leads to occupations sufficiently restful and well paid as to enable the acts of reflection and writing. Without my American-born mother's influence, I might have hoped only that my own children would be so privileged. Despite her different background—the link may be that they were both of peasant stock—my mother was like my father in that she did not indulge the past. Still, they differed: my father remembered but did not say so; my mother openly claimed amnesia of almost all events occurring before 1963, blaming anesthesia administered before an operation early that year. I am inclined to think she deliberately chose to deny her first thirty years because she found most of her memories unbearably painful. Even so, her amnesia did not save her a consuming bitterness which never revealed its source or object. I would be disingenuous did I not admit that some of this bitterness transferred itself to me, expressing itself as the rebellious urge to record, if not remember, everything: to lifting at any cost the curtain so firmly drawn, in our house, over the past and the not-nice. I did not see that for my parents, because of when and where and into what they had been born, these were in truth one and the same, and their choice not to speak of it deserved not the label of “repression,” but respect. It was furtively that my mother presented me with my inheritance, my father's slave-labor camp dog tag, following his death in 1982. I had never seen it before, did not know he even had it: a one-by-five centimeter scrap of bruised steel stamped “Kr. Gef. Lag. (*Krieg Gefangener Lager*, prisoner of war camp) XB, No. 105445.” It embodies tragedy. But because he did not see his life as a tragedy—he reveled in America's abundance, and appreciated freedom, and danced and sang—I can't either.

Only one Serb, among the hundreds I've known, ever seemed to me to embody tragedy, and that was my father's mother, my grandmother Kadivka. In 1964, when I was seven, my family left behind the small house in what was then called the “colored” neighborhood, and moved to the white sec-

tion of town, into a tract house where there was room to keep Kadivka. My father had mailed money to his mother regularly since first coming to the United States, but he hoped to support her in the traditional way by taking her into his home. In 1965 he sent to Yugoslavia for her. Grandma still lived, alone now, in the whitewashed, dirt-floored cottage in Krnjevo in which my father had been born and reared. She had not seen her son since he joined the disastrously fated Yugoslav Royal Army—crushed in two weeks by the Axis powers—in 1941. I did not witness the initial reunion at the airport, but as soon as Grandma arrived at our house it was clear our plan to keep her was somehow doomed to failure. She had thrown up in the car as she would throw up in all moving cars on all occasions. Her gift bottles of Serbian plum brandy—the powerful *slivovitz*, as far as I know the only widely celebrated product of Serbian culture—had broken in transit, ruining her belongings and raising an alcoholic reek throughout the house as we tried for weeks to scrub and air her luggage. Upon seeing our backyard innocent of all but grass, she asked my father where we kept our pigs and chickens.

We took her to church and among the immigrant Serbs, on family trips to the zoo and botanical gardens, yet America seemed ever more deeply to baffle and depress her. Too frail to babysit or cook or bathe alone, most of the time she slept or sat in the living room crocheting, meanwhile dribbling urine on the satin-covered chairs. Television, like car trips, made her vomit. She spoke no English and her grandchildren spoke no Serbian. My mother taught me, phonetically, a phrase that called her to meals. Grandma rarely spoke. During her first few weeks in America, she amazed and amused my sisters and me by standing—a tiny, silent, grim-faced woman, wholly wrinkled like a dried pear, dressed all in black except for the magenta cabbage roses edging her babushka—at the entrances of rooms and switching the electric lights on and off. I do not remember ever touching her.

She was given my bed. I, her Anglicized namesake, slept on a cot in the room—or rather, I lay awake in the dark and listened to her harsh breathing, fascinated by and fearing her strangeness and inscrutability. She seemed even to breathe in Serbian, and I prayed I would not be the lone witness to the moment I always believed imminent—when her breathing would cease. Besides our names we had, I thought, nothing in common. Even my father was not the son she had known. Typically, I had been told nothing about her, and as she was she inspired in me neither love nor sympathy. Though I

did not know this then, she had a living daughter, my Serbian aunt, whose existence my father never mentioned until after she had died, because my aunt most shamelessly drank. I had to press him for her name. Between that daughter, my grandmother's eldest child, and my father, her youngest, Grandma had had three more children who had died in the influenza epidemic of 1918. Grandma was illiterate. A 1958 document, translated from Serbian, reveals all the rest that the world can ever know about her:

. . . Kadivka Rankovic, widow of Petar Rankovic from Krnjevo, was born in Veliko Orasja on October date unknown in 1888 from the marriage of Milan Lekic and Stanojka, his wife, both of Veliko Orasja.

This paper is given in lieu of the original certificate of birth because the original was destroyed during World War I.

Of her husband, my grandfather Petar who died in the mid 1950s, one photograph exists, or perhaps was ever taken. He wears a broad-brimmed white hat, glares out from beneath it, and under his snowy handlebar mustache his mouth is open and drawn downward in an angry, disaffected curve, as if he were cursing the photographer. All I know of him is that he drank. Though I could not then and still today cannot imagine it, he and my grandmother had lived at the epicenter of two world wars, and here is what makes them, and me, Serbian indeed: All further family records were destroyed in the wars, so it is impossible ever to know, beyond the range of living memory, who we were and therefore—by the American measure—who we are.

Possibly as a corrective or antidote to our ancestral void, which also affected the Polish side of the family, my mother often arranged to have family portraits taken. Despite their harmlessness, these were always somehow agonizing occasions. We had a portrait taken with Grandma. In the photograph, Grandma, lost in one of my mother's swirl-printed dresses, looks like a sad human fact. She sits with her head sunk between her bowed shoulders; she looks old and beaten down and helpless and as if she knows it. Minus the babushka for the photograph, she appears to be nearly bald. Though she does not smile, her lack of teeth is more than apparent. The rest of us, my baby sister excepted, are bearing the discomfiting moment in our individual ways: smirking, shrinking, pouting, staring, forcing a cheery smile. The most alarming thing about the photograph, in my parents' view,

was that my nose—my father’s nose, possibly Turkish or Gypsy in origin—had already grown to its full adult length and with my head, as in the picture, inclined slightly downward it was indeed not far between myself and the cartoon accompaniment to the popular graffito “Kilroy Was Here.” My mother talked of plastic surgery. My parents discussed getting Grandma some teeth. Grandma and I resisted these improvements. And, inevitably, as we had intuited she would, Grandma Kadivka soon became an episode. After six months she gladly returned to her familiar home in Yugoslavia, dying there ten years later. We received an airmailed letter. My father spent that afternoon with his head in his hands. I did not mourn; I felt I had not known her. I felt about her as I would about a passing figure dimly recorded on a length of silent film. “She thought you would be friendlier,” my mother said to me. I remember evilly thinking that if Grandma had wanted to be friends she should have met me halfway.

Alone among the Serbs I knew, Grandma seemed to me a pawn of fate and vessel of tragedy, bulldozed by history, stunned into silence. She was the only Serb I knew who ever went back to stay. In America she could only reflect on her life and compare it with the life we felt obliged to offer her; maybe upon reflection she found American comforts and gaieties, and the grandchildren who shied from her, the more shallow and embittering. I felt her dark, hooded presence, and then her absence, as a reproach. My father told the story of the Serbian king who during wartime built a wall around his kingdom to protect it from enemies. God however informed him that his kingdom could be saved only if the king buried his beloved wife alive within the wall. (In Serbian fables, God frequently makes cruel demands.) With awful sorrow the king reluctantly did God’s will and saved Serbia, but to this day the queen’s unearthly wailing is still heard among the ruins of the wall. So I long felt about Grandma: haunted by the sense that I was blessed at her expense. This feeling, guilt, which I did not deserve, proved incurable until I realized that the Serbs, by example, had shown me a cure: a shift in focus to the present, a dwelling on life—where if my fate was better than Grandma’s my only sin would be in not being deliriously glad.

Most Serbs I knew delighted in America’s liberty and in its luxuries, available to them during the 1950s and ’60s at the relatively inexpensive price of eight hours a day in the factories, foundries, quarries and breweries of the industrial Midwest, where most of them settled and we mostly

still are. Except for the priests, a tailor or two, and my clerk-typist mother, there were in our circle no professionals. A few women worked as domestics, rarely, one might be employed as a fry cook or a stitcher at a coat factory. They were always warmly and ritually hospitable, especially to the half of me that was one of them. When my American traits became unmistakable, they chided me in fun, but chided nonetheless. I couldn't speak Serbian? Didn't I know that those who don't know Serbian know nothing? Why didn't I eat? Was I on a "diet"? (For "diets" and other American exercises in obsessive self-denial they correctly had incomparable contempt.) They were, like most immigrants, defensively clannish, distinguishing between the Serbian-born Serbs and the American-born Serbs, who were pitied, a little. As a group they avoided genuine Americans, especially the generic sports-watching, beer-drinking, curlers-in-public sort, because, I think, they understood and feared American ignorance, which belittles, threatens or laughs at the unfamiliar. My father's first name, Dragomir—"Dragie" for short; it means "dearest"—inspired an American neighbor persistently to call him "Dragon-Wagon"; Americans so often bluntly asked my father to repeat what he had said, rolling their eyes heavenward and the like, that he grew to rely on his wife or children to do something as simple as order meals at McDonald's (meals he loved). Serbian churches and meeting halls established by my father's generation only welcomed the public to Serb Fests and such beginning in the 1980s, when my generation of hyphenates settled down and took over. We now doubt whether we can expect many Americans to come to our annual Serb Fest this year.

If being a Serb means anything now, it means a growing loneliness, a sense of isolation, the worse for not being sure we do not deserve it. War news makes me uneasy; I feel incriminated and threatened; I cannot believe the articles, editorials and candlelight vigils urging further sanctions or mass death on my kin. I fear for Serbia, which it is now unlikely I will ever see, which I will know, as I know America, through a hyphenate's lens, in translation, at one remove. I fear for fellow Serbian-Americans, who are now and most assiduously dredging the past to find excuses for the actions of their brothers, and developing a victim-consciousness as treacherous as it is fashionable—this is not our way. At times I wish I were anything but Serbian. But if being a Serb is my fate, I could do worse than to accept it.