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Our Rural Metamorphoses in the Eyes of the Ethnologist Joel M. Halpern

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THE SINGER NARRATES

An American in Orasac

Our rural metamorphoses in the eyes of the ethnologist Joel M. Halpern

[Written by:] Lidija Bošković

Our multiethnic community is one of the most mosaicked ethnic and cultural areas in the world. It is therefore natural for foreign ethnologists, anthropologists, folklorists, and culturologists to display a great interest for the facts, phenomena and trends of development and affirmation, endurance and intermingling of different cultures in our country. Among the foreign humanists who are studying our society and culture, one of the most prominent places is undoubtedly occupied by American ethnologist Joel M. Halpern, University Professor from Massachusetts (State University in Amherst), who has visited our country on several occasions (for longer or shorter stays) in the period stretching over three decades and wrote about that -- apart from his doctor's thesis -- a couple of books and studies along with numerous articles and scientific papers. We begin our conversation with Dr. Halpern right on the occasion of his current stay in our country:

"I came to work with Yugoslav colleagues on the script for a documentary ethnofilm about my work, that is my wife's and my own work about a Serbian village. We have been working on it since 1953, when we first came to Yugoslavia. We did research work in the village Orasac near Arandjelovac in Šumadija. There are only a few ethnological research studies which had continuously recorded the entire follow-up within a time-range encompassing at least two generations. You see, those who were not even born or were just born at the time when my wife and myself came to Orasac for the first time are now mature people with children of their own. During the past three decades we have just been watching this development, the change and transformations, both social and cultural as well as material ones."

The Changes of Values

Q: What are the global themes that come apparent to you?

A: These are, first of all, the change in the family structure and in the roles of woman and man, together with the changes in the system of values. Thirty two years ago, when
we first came to Orašac, with the help of the Principal Associated Union [sic: should probably be Council of Cooperatives] and your Commission for Cultural Ties with Foreign Countries, I saw a village which was entirely agricultural, with a typically patriarchal way of life. At that time we stayed in a village household which didn't have any electricity and the nearest well was 500 meters away. I remember well the eating utensils [we then used], made of aluminium, poor in quality and awkward to use, though the knife was of an excellent brand, a German one, a soldier's pocketknife of stainless steal. At that time I wondered how the people of this industrially underdeveloped country could have beaten the army behind which the best war technology stood.

Q: The script would be based on your books then?

A: These aspects are included in my book on Orasac (A Serbian Village) and are more broadly exposed in the book A Serbian Village in Historical Village [sic] written by my wife Barbara Rerevsky-Halpern and myself, as well as in our books of essays Selected papers on a Serbian Village [sic]. But the film would obligatorily include a historical component, the more so because this part of your country has played the most visible historical role in all events and developments in the past 150 years.

Q: What are the impressions that will remain particularly in your memories?

A: When we first came to the village in order to work on the preparation of my doctor's thesis I was 24, and my wife 22. Our oldest daughter was small in 1961-72 [sic]. We didn't understand this scientific research work as something happening from the outside, but rather as being its active participants. For instance, in the beginning when we went to the village, right after my graduation, they addressed me "You [plural] boy." It was then that we were learning your language. On one occasion, when we went to a dancing party and a guy asked my wife what village she came from. This was the greatest compliment, namely the proof that we fit right into the village's life. Last time we stayed in the village something similar happened to our eldest, now grown-up daughter.

Turkish Coffeepots Made of Cans

Q: What are the most visible changes?

A: What caught my eye is this: When I first stayed here, in the 1950's, when people lived poorly, nothing was thrown away. I remember, for instance, skilled tinsmiths who
transformed cans into Turkish coffeepots, while in the village grocery store there were only two brands of soap. Some ten years later, on the trash dump by the road you could see industrial waste, plastics, while in the shops you could find scouring powder and other "modern" cleaning chemicals. During my short stay in Orasac last year I noticed big changes in comparison to 1978. Visible are big investments in new houses, weekend cottages, tombstones and chapels in the graveyards. I would only add that that which makes Sumadija exceptionally beautiful are its natural resources: they should be preserved for generations to come.

Q: What are the other regions you would like to see?

A: I would like to visit Novi Pazar and Sjenica. In the 1930's, Albert B. Lord was gathering your epic poems in that region, and he published them in the book entitled The Singer Narrates. The other reason lies in the famous cultural monuments located there, which, unfortunately, I didn't have the time to see.

Q: Your wife Barbara Karevsky-Halpern [sic: when his wife's name appears for the first time in this text it is spelled Kerevsky] also wrote quite a lot about our country.

A: In 1979 she finished her doctor's thesis based on the material from Orasac [sic: should read Orašac] and surroundings. Her interests differ from mine which are more connected to the social structure and demographic changes, because she is preoccupied with the oral tradition, traditional medicine, and sorcerer's verses, and, viewed from a broader perspective, with the role of woman in the rural society.

Q: Last fall, at the World Congress of Balkanologists in Belgrade you had a noted paper on the structure of the population of Serbia over the period of two centuries, 1775-1975. Do you intend to prepare another report as well, for the World Congress of Anthropologists and Ethnologists to be held in our country in 1988?

A: I already talked to Prof. Pavle Rudan, the head organizer of the Congress, about my intention to present the results of my research about Orašac, including the documentary ethnofilm which should be shown at the Congress.