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Our Serbian Village

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A feature on contemporary Yugoslav painting begins on page 21. Cover picture: Janez Bemnik. Letter
Photo by BRANKO TURIN

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A village market is always a good place to make the acquaintance of the local people.

Barbara Halpern during her stay in Orašac.

Taking a breather from the hard work of bargaining during a livestock fair.

OUR SERBIAN VILLAGE

By BARBARA and JOEL HALPERN

Anthropologists are very possessive. Whether they study life ways in villages in India or Mexico they return home to talk and write about "my village". Our village happens to be in Serbia, in the gently rolling hill country of Šumadija, and our proprietary interest and on-going affection for it has developed over a fifteen-year period.

We arrived there by cart one July day in 1953, swaying with the motion of the yoked cows as they lumbered slowly over a hill from the market town of Arandje-lovac. Lining the road were the characteristic acacias of the Serbian countryside, their lower branches masked in chalky dust. The cart strained to the crest, and we saw the village spread out below, a panorama of green and gold — wide strips of waving wheat, tall corn, patches of oak woods, with Mt. Kosmaj purple on the far horizon. We creaked downslope. The patchwork landscape opened to reveal scattered household clusters, each white-washed, tile-roofed cottage surrounded
Whether in the media or in books, write about it to be Banadja, a man for who

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by its several sheds and outbuildings and by small plum orchards heavy with fruit.

"Evo smo. Orašac! Here we are." The villager who had given us the ride from town swung down and looked us over. "Excuse me", he said. "Why did you come here?"

Tired, grimy, excited and at the same time a bit apprehensive about the field work ahead, we may fleetingly have asked ourselves the same question. Our intention was to reside for a year in a village, in the tradition of anthropological community study, in order to observe and record a way of life undergoing change. This endeavor was to lead to a doctoral dissertation at Columbia University. Yugoslavia appealed to us as an important and interesting country rapidly experiencing many kinds of social change, and our research proposal had been accepted by Yugoslav officials and scholars. After intensive reading and some preparatory Serbo-Croat language study, and in consultation with host ethnologists, we decided to work in an area of relatively great homogeneity within the ethnic, linguistic and geographic mosaic that is Yugoslavia. In this way, what we learned about one particular village would apply as well to the larger region in which it was located. We tried to select a village that was big enough for a meaningful sample but small enough for the two of us to handle, near enough to a market so that villagers made a weekly trip but far enough away from excessive town influence and, finally, off the main line of communication to the capital but accessible to it if necessary. A United Nations official had suggested Orašac, at that time a projected demonstration site for government programs of rural improvement.

We replied, swallowing not yet perfected case-endings, "We would like to get to know you and to learn about your life and customs."

To a proud and self-conscious people this was reason enough, in the beginning. Later we learned of the brief but immortal moment of glory Orašac enjoys in Serbian history. It was here, in 1804, that Karageorge, leader of the first Serbian revolt against the Turks, met with his followers in a shaded glen out behind the present village schoolhouse, to plan an uprising which eventually resulted in freedom from Ottoman control. Often villagers asked us how we happened to make the long journey all the way from New York precisely to Orašac, and an explanation of our interest in national history made the trip seem logical. As the research progressed many began to grasp what we were doing. Their exceptional recall of family genealogies, tracing the male line back six or seven generations to the clan's founder, was a boon to investigations of changing social structure. In addition to profound awareness of their cultural heritage people were open and hospitable, and despite our persistent inquisitiveness we were welcomed warmly in most homes. An unanticipated occupational hazard came to be the frequency with which small glasses of plum brandy were downed in toasts of mutual friendship.

Because of our youth — we were in our early twenties — we were obviously not to be taken too seriously, and yet the fact that we were there at all did lend a degree of importance. Some village elders at first addressed Joel as Vi, dečko (You [formal form], boy) until an easy acquaintance was established. At the same
time, it was frowned upon when Barbara went about with bare legs, a manner not befitting a married woman. Soon she was wearing thigh-high scratchy black stockings, of home-prepared wool spun and knit by a neighboring matron.

A family of three generations invited us to live with them. Many households have a so-called guest room, in which the in-marrying bride's dowry items are stored and kept for show, and such a room was given us. It contained a small bed and corn-husk mattress covered with a hand-loomed striped blanket, a stout table and a bulky wardrobe on legs, on top of which were swirls of newly carded grey wool in fat kerchief bundles and a few jars of preserves sealed with paper and string. On the white-washed walls were family photos, dominated by a large photograph of a deceased elder, a length of finely woven linen draped around the frame, and by a bright lithograph of Archangel Michael, the family's patron saint, embellished with sprays of dried sweet basil. Our rough field clothes and heavy boots soon went into the wardrobe, not to be worn again by us. Villagers expected us to conform to their idea of how Americans, foreigners, should look, particularly when they took us to fairs and weddings in nearby communities. Possession works two ways: now we were their Amerikanci, and they saw to it that we lived up to the image.

Village life, regulated by the changing seasons and the cycle of agricultural work, is punctuated by special occasions, to each individual some events more important than others — the joyful slava, feast day of the patron saint; the autumn wedding season, after the harvest is in and the wine barrels full; the dewy pre-dawn gathering along pasture streams early on St. George's Day, to collect dogwood, willow and other boughs as omens of health and strength. All of this was new for us. We participated, observed and learned.

But it was the day to day living out of lives that had most meaning. We began to understand people's attitudes and values, interactions between generations, factors affecting the harmony of a household, arguments for and against all kinds of change, both directed and evolving. We learned to know people as people, not as "these peasants" or as mechanical characters acting out a textbook example of the classic patriloclal, patrilineal Balkan extended family.

In the course of that first year's residence in Orašac the 150th Anniversary of the First Revolt was marked. In Belgrade as well, special exhibits were set up for the occasion. These included models of house types and interiors from the early nineteenth century and gave depth to our knowledge of the extent of material change. At that time houses in Sumadija, which means Woodland, were made of logs. The main source of local income was from the export of acorn-fattened pigs, grazed in the then-abundant oak woods. Karageorge himself was a pig trader. By the twentieth century much of the land was cut over and cultivated. The wood houses were replaced by those of wattle-and-daub construction, and the earlier hearth, a simple sand-pit on the packed earth floor, above which suspended an iron pot on a chain, was supplanted by a wood-burning sheet metal stove fashioned in town by special craftsmen.

When mid-summer came around again it was time to leave the village. We promised our new friends and ourselves that we would come back.

And we did, seven years later. During that period Orašac had changed considerably and so, in fact, had we. We returned with two small daughters and an enriched Serbo-Croat vocabulary which now included terms like diapers and measles.

In our absence a fire-brick factory in Arandjelovac had been expanded and a large new plant for the production of electro-porcelain products established. The prime raw material for both is the local clay which, during rains, turns every village lane into an unbelievable morass of sticky mud. Many more village men now hiked in to town to factory jobs, returning in late afternoon to work their land until sundown. Earlier economic change in Sumadija had been reflected in villagers switching from corn flour to wheat flour for bread, their staple food. Now increasing participation in a money economy was evidenced in a declining subsistence pattern and a gradually growing consumption of manufactured goods. Transistor radios,
for example, and flashlights, packaged soup mixes and machine-made sweaters began to appear in the village by the time we were preparing again to depart.

In 1966 we returned to Orašac once more, this time driving in our Swedish car. This created little stir. From an area where a decade before there had been only carts and bicycles, now there were youths going to Sweden and Germany as workers. This time it was we who gave a ride over the hill to the village. Our passenger was a young school-teacher going home to visit her parents.

"I know you", she smiled. "One evening — I must have been about fourteen then — you came with Baba Milojka and Tetka Zlatiđa to a spinning bee in our neighborhood. We girls watched and giggled as you tried to spin wool from a distaff. But surely you don't remember."

Don't we? We remember the circle of girls' faces, flushed from the bonfire and the flirting and courtship songs of the boys in the flickering light behind them. We remember Radovan, who played the flute as he tended the sheep and who, our passenger informed us, is now a mechanic at the Fiat assembly plant in Kragujevac. And did we remember Ćika Bogdan, who knew all the old heroic epic poems by heart? His son has just returned from eighteen months' work in Germany, where he bought a microbus and plans to use it to transport watermelons and grapes up to the Vojvodina.

Now there was daily bus service, she told us, bringing Orašac workers to the factories and other villagers to market (provided they did not carry live animals on board). Electric lines installed along the road in the late fifties now extended to most village homes. Domestically produced electric radio consoles were now common in the village, and some people were beginning to think about television sets. (When back in Orašac for a brief visit in 1967 the village clerk confided that he had trouble getting to work at seven in the morning, what with all the good late shows on TV — this from a man who until then had passed his life getting up with the roosters and retiring when it got dark.)

We might question the merits of rapid industrialization and modernization, but there is no doubt how the villagers feel. A new high tension line from town mars our view of the bucolic countryside, but for the people of Orašac it means light in their homes and jobs in Aranđelovac. Mineral water from a small spring, around which a modest spa developed at the far end of Aranđelovac, constitutes a suitable carltonated base for Pepsi Cola. Now there is a franchised bottling plant there, and the spa's buildings and grounds reflect new prosperity.

But most villagers, and we, too, prefer going to the spring to fill a wicker-covered demijohn with refreshing and unadultered kisela voda. With so many young men leaving the village there is now a labor problem in Orašac, especially at threshing and harvest times. The older people have a difficult time managing the major farm tasks themselves, and relatives who are students or workers on vacation come to help when they can.

We consider ourselves fortunate to have had the privilege of living in Orašac and of returning from time to time to record important transformations in the life of her people. Some of our writings have become standard sources on the folk life of a part of Yugoslavia, and certain materials are being incorporated into teaching programs on other societies in American elementary schools. We note with greatest satisfaction, however, that the most enjoyed and widely cited parts of our books are the autobiographies written by the people of Orašac themselves.

The village of Orašac is not without historical significance. It was here, in 1804, that it was decided to launch the First Serbian Uprising against the Turks, under the leadership of Karadjordje (Black George) Petrović.

Photos by DIMITRIJE MANOLEV