



Found in Translation 2024

Soul on a Journey

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When 19-year-old Giorgos jumped off the train in the eastern Serbian mountains in early 1942, a train meant to take him from Bulgarian to German captivity, he had no idea that he would spend the rest of his life in these Serbian hills. The reason why my grandfather never felt drawn back to Northern Greece remains unclear. He even adapted his name to the Yugoslavian naming conventions.

My life started in Vienna in 1973, and after extremely unstable years, my roots were definitively transplanted to Serbia after 7 years, where they were frequently replanted during my school years. During this time, not only did my place of residence change, but even the state itself transformed: the SFRY (Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) became the FRY (Federal Republic of Yugoslavia), then the symbiosis of Serbia and Montenegro, until finally, this geopolitical odyssey left us with just Serbia, minus Kosovo, which was amputated under the anesthesia of bombs. The Balkans became a tough challenge for me, a cultural shock. Nevertheless, or perhaps because of it, the Balkans are an unmistakable part of my identity: full of contradictions, a mixture of improvisation, creativity, mysticism, curses, and all sorts of ghosts.

I too left Yugoslavia at the age of 19. The collapse of Yugoslavia was the earthquake that generated refugee waves, which also swept me back to the West, this time to Switzerland—where no one was waiting for me. I had to learn German for the third time in my life because my Viennese German was gone, and my high school German was only theoretical. Learning German in a country where almost every village has its own dialect is a challenge in itself. It also took me a long time to realize that the Swiss didn't deliberately want to exclude me when they stubbornly spoke in dialect; it was simply part of their identity. For most of them, literary German was something foreign. Just as our grandfather's foreign origin was audible his whole life, my Slavic origin is revealed as soon as I open my mouth. Despite solid German language skills, I can only truly feel and express emotions in my mother tongue. I think in German, but my heart is steeped in the Balkans. German is the official language in my left brain, and Serbian in my right. But at some point, I realized that communication between people is more about the wavelengths on which we connect rather than the language itself. In reality, even the most refined language skills achieve little if one isn't truly interested in the content and genuine communication. I've come to understand that cultural codes must be compatible or that the motivation to connect must be very strong if one truly wants to communicate well.

At that time, getting a permanent residence permit in Switzerland meant the opportunity to leave behind the hopeless chaos of a collapsing socialist project, the relentless corruption, and the war. It gave me the sense of security I so desperately needed. Instead of studying, I was grateful to be able to earn anything at all. Proving myself as a cleaning lady or a part-time vegetable seller. Switzerland was like a magical seek-and-find book, where one had to find their way without any instructions. Communication between the locals and the migrants resembled the dialogue between the hard of hearing and the mute rather than an exchange on equal terms. Misunderstandings and conflicts were inevitable, and the collapse of Yugoslavia only intensified the cultural dissonance. In a society whose value system one doesn't know, and under the weight of one's origins and other limitations, standing on one's



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own feet can be a tedious and challenging task. Precious youthful years are wasted going around in circles instead of being used to build a foundation for life. Still, I've embraced what Switzerland offers, and it means a lot to me: the diversity of Swiss nature, cultural landscapes, and political systems. And so I believe that a person can truly belong to two cultures. Southeastern and Western Europe touch and complement each other within me. In a way, I'm proud to live and cherish Europe's cultural diversity. But it's anything but easy, especially trying to reconcile the different priorities of these two influences within me.

I always faithfully visited my homeland, even back in the days of ruthless sanctions when simply applying for and paying for a Schengen visa to pass through Austria and Hungary was necessary. Back then, that meant a tedious, humiliating "camping" in front of the Austrian embassy in Bern. To apply for a trip through these countries, one had to come in the middle of the night, stand in line... or buy a plane ticket, which was pure luxury. Once, this perverse pilgrimage ended tragically for a young man. A line full of people with second-class passports wavered, causing the young man to stumble onto the road and be run over.

The infamous "-ić" suffix in my last name was something I dropped after my divorce by adopting my grandfather's original surname. To feel freer, but also to save my grandfather's original name. The originally Greek name had since disappeared from the family. The "-ić" suffix blocked job or housing prospects during the 1990s; it was a stigma. A crushing injustice: to blame all people of Serbian origin for the Yugoslav tragedy. My cousin, then nine years old, changed his family name from Milošević because he was constantly bullied at school. His spontaneous wish was to have Coca-Cola as his last name—his new nickname.

Grandpa never returned to his homeland. A day before or after his 80th birthday and after over 60 years in Yugoslavia or Serbia, he departed for the airy realms. His earthly remains were entrusted to Serbian soil. Where should my remains go one day? I can't help but grin when I think of what was anything but funny back then: my aunt, who worked in an elderly home in Switzerland, emptied an urn in a resident's room into the trash out of sheer diligence and ignorance of Swiss cultural customs. There was ash in it. She was just doing her job as thoroughly as possible... Which caused the old lady to raise the alarm throughout the floor, shouting, "My husband! My husband!" Incidentally, from my ashes, perhaps a useful decorative object could be made—a flower pot or something similar... To at least give life the impression of being "aesthetic" and "meaningful" in the end.