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THE POST-YUGOSLAV EXILE:
AN INTERIM ACCOUNT

It was not too difficult becoming an émigré, probably because the condition runs in my family. Ever since childhood I have been aware that several generations of my ancestors embarked on an émigré life, and that those who did not manage to leave on time usually lost their lives. So when the moment came for me to leave I was able to recognize it, and since I well knew the dangers of procrastination, I left at once. And I have never regretted it since. The exile experience is quite an ambivalent one, it grows and develops on its own, and as I carry it along and attempt to articulate it and come to terms with it I also feel how it changes me.

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My childhood experience of emigration was twofold. In the endless flow of family stories my grandmother kept telling me, my great-grandparents, great-uncles and aunts and cousins were forever moving from one corner of Eastern and Central Europe to another and on to Western Europe, North and South America, to Israel and even to South Africa and Australia. In my mind they were not much different from the ancient ancestors displaced to Egypt, Babylon or other Middle Eastern places in the Old Testament stories my grandmother would also tell. In most of these stories emigration was not a curse nor a form of suffering, certainly not a tragedy, but rather a way of escaping from a great and imminent danger. The ability of the individuals and of whole families to cut their roots, as it were, and start a new life in new surroundings has been rewarded again and again. Emigration does work, was the message from all these stories, it was an undertaking that could successfully be pulled off. So much for my family "script", as some psychologists would call it.

I also had a practical experience of emigration in my childhood, quite contradictory to the narrative pattern my grandmother presented in her stories, more problematic and unsettling: in the mid nineteen fifties, the last generation of the aged Russian émigrés was still lingering in my home town on Danube, in the plains of Vojvodina.

They had come to Yugoslavia after the October Revolution and created a large community there, were generously received and offered considerable assistance. Then some of them moved on further to Western Europe, and among those who stayed some unfortunately displayed less than exemplary conduct during the Nazi occupation and had to pay a price for it after the war. Others became the marginal victims of the Tito-

Stalin dispute of 1948. When I was a small boy, most of them had already been assimilated and those who were still recognizable as Russians were mainly old, poor and sad, tired of the twists and turns of émigré existence and visibly disillusioned. This attitude was remarkably anomic amidst a young socialist society, then still so confident about its own future. I was fascinated by the way the old Russians spoke Serbo-Croat, with a softened pronunciation and with Russian words thrown in. I recognized them as people from elsewhere, not fitting their present surroundings, personalizing the uncomfortable, anxious other. Most vividly I remember a woman from our neighborhood, who would today be called a bag lady although she in fact collected cardboard boxes and carried them around tied together with a rope. What she did with them, I don't know. She always wore some sort of exotic turban on her head. The rumor was that she kept many cats at home to a great discomfort of her neighbors and that she once used to be very rich because a few times a year she would go to the local bank to ask for her money and engage in furious argument when asked for some proof of possessions, before ultimately being turned away. Through the observation of these old Russians, emigration came to mean something painful, degrading and difficult to bear.

Later, in my adolescent years and afterwards, I continued to study the Russian emigration, reading its authors, their literary works and memoirs, the studies and historical sketches of émigrés' intellectual lives and accounts of their artistic production. Berlin and Paris, as hubs of Russian émigré life, with their cafés, cabarets, magazines, book publishers, offering the potential to re-establish an intellectual and artistic constellation after being uprooted, these cities fascinated me. Emigration again appeared as a generational challenge. Those who took it as such were able to survive and even prosper (Nabokov), those who succumbed to nostalgia and returned made a serious mistake (Mirsky, Tsvetayeva).

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While a student in Belgrade around 1970 I started reading intensively about the German anti-fascist emigration of the 1930s, an exodus more recent and seemingly executed in more dramatic circumstances. To Brecht's anabasis from France to Scandinavia and to California through the Soviet Union, and then back to Berlin via Switzerland, Reinhardt's inability to understand the mechanics of American showbiz, Toller's despair ending in a suicide in a cheap New York hotel, Horvath's absurd death in a summer storm on the Champs Elysées, the German ghetto in Hollywood, to all these and many other stories of isolation, disappointment, humiliation and suffering I could counterpoise Zyckmayer's unique choice to become a farmer in New England, growing potatoes and keeping chickens rather than hanging around Hollywood swimming pools looking for a script-writing job. As a farmer he was able to make it through the emigration in a decent and dignified manner and maintain his own creativity so that he could return to Germany in 1945 with the first new play to be produced after "year zero", *Der Teufels General*.

There are few such uplifting stories among the stampede of anti-fascists from Germany. The émigrés who reached the safety of Austria, Holland and France, only to be endangered once again as they were followed by Hitler's advancing armies, are an especially tragic part of the story. As German émigrés, whether Jewish or not, they were more vulnerable than the local Jewish population. And they were exhausted, run down, devoid of hope - witness Benjamin's suicide at the Spanish border. Theater artists fared badly. Prisoners of their language, they initially found a favorable environment in Austria but after Anschluss there were many fewer opportunities. Theatrical exile in Zurich was one, Piscator's ability to create a teaching job for himself in New York another. Attempts to create émigré groups in the Soviet Union or Paris did not get very far. Only the academics who succeeded in reaching America found a grateful shelter at the American universities and had the opportunity to reshape these institutions of higher learning.

When I went to Yale in 1973 to pursue my post-graduate studies, only the ghosts of German émigré professors such as Broch who once taught there remained. But my professor of theater history was A.M. Nagler, himself a former student of Max Hermann in Berlin and later a Viennese critic who emigrated after Anschluss with his Jewish wife and got appointed at Yale when another expatriate, Allardyce Nicoll, decided to return to England at the beginning of the Second World War. In the following thirty years and more Nagler established theater history as an autonomous academic discipline in the USA, with his former students teaching at many colleges and universities, perpetuating his material and his approach. Nagler yearned for Europe, for Vienna and for the rich repertoires of the German theaters and returned there every summer. He once confided to me that he probably made the mistake of his life by not taking a professorship offered to him at one of the major German universities in the nineteen sixties.

We recognized that we shared a common background, we were Central Europeans of a common Austro-Hungarian pedigree among Americans whose notion of theater was constructed by or even against the Broadway model. Broadway was not our problem, we had a different history and a different idea of theater, and that created a special bond between us, Nagler's old-world formality notwithstanding.

In the Slavic department at Yale, where I was teaching part-time, the professors were mainly Jewish survivors of the concentration camps who never went back to Poland but instead came to the United States, only to encounter in US academia Poles, Russians and Ukrainians, some of whom, it turned out, had collaborated with the Nazis during the occupation. The former inmates of concentration camps taught literature, literary history and theory or linguistics, their former persecutors were kept busy in the basement with language drills.

The two worlds kept apart as much as possible. There was also Rene Wellek, a Czech

expatriate and famed literary scholar, already in retirement, who would carry a heavy bag of books to and from the Sterling library every day; an Italian scholar who could effortlessly switch from Russian to Slovene, to Serbo-Croat, to Bulgarian and so on; a Polish specialist in South Slavic accentology, a Czech comparative literature professor. Plus a growing number of graduate students from Czechoslovakia, Poland and especially the Soviet Union, mainly Jewish émigrés, with whom I argued about the virtues of capitalism and socialism, at pains to draw a sharp distinction between the Soviet-style socialism of their experience and my Yugoslav self-managing socialism in whose emancipatory potential I then still believed. They felt like new émigrés and they always wanted to talk about the bad things in their former country, as if feeling guilty for leaving and having to justify their departure.

I was not an émigré then, just a graduate student, temporarily abroad, sure that I would be going back home after I finished my studies, a bit anxious because I knew that immediately after I return I would be required to do my military service in Yugoslavia which could be postponed only until the age of 27. Nevertheless, I was confident about the country and the society I was going back to, I was quite nostalgic at that time and the idea of not going back but staying in the USA instead, as naively suggested by so many American acquaintances at the time, was completely alien to me.

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So I went back, first to military service and afterwards to university teaching, and almost fourteen years later I became an émigré myself, arriving at Vienna airport on 9 November 1991. The anniversary of the Berlin Wall's demolition, and also of the Kristallnacht pogroms. Until then I was a Yugoslav and I was comfortable with this identity, eclectic and concocted for sure, but reassuring and enriching in the diversity it came to convey. It meant an ability to fuse the divergent traditions of my ancestors who had come from Poland, the Ukraine, Transylvania and Hungary with the traditions of the different peoples of Balkans. Further, it implied an attitude of openness, curiosity, mobility and a willingness to share with others this diversity and explore it as an asset, not as a threat or a barrier. For my generation, born after the slaughter of the Second World War, this understanding of the Yugoslav identity was quite normal, common, something that until 1990 it was hardly possible to question at all. Moreover, those who insisted on national specifics and attempted to stress the importance of boundaries or endangered national values were perceived by us as pathetic, sentimental characters, some kind of anachronistic leftover of the pre-Yugoslav era of nationalist selfishness.

The times changed, and national specifics became a more important issue, along with the decentralization of the one-party system which turned different regions into the fiefdoms of a bureaucracy. A bureaucracy which sought to legitimize its weakened power monopoly by flirting with the local nationalists, whilst attacking them in pub-

lic. National values and specific features, national history, language, culture and literature became a privileged, almost sacred domain. The position of a Yugoslav as a mobile, curious spirit, detached from any particular national agenda, history and historic markers of identity (nation, religion, language) slowly became less and less sustainable, ultimately impossible. The manipulation by communist bureaucrats clinging onto power and their partial defeat (except in Serbia and Montenegro where they remained in power by robbing the nationalists of their agenda) in the first multiparty elections in 1990 brought to power the new nationalist elites. The mutual escalation of irreconcilable claims and the revanchism of old and new elites alike, equally authoritarian and rigid, the stubborn insistence on their own rights and grievances set the stage for the war that started a year later.

When the war started in Slovenia in June 1991 (or was it actually in the preceding months, with the rapidly escalating skirmishes between Serbs and Croats in Croatia?), Yugoslavia was quickly finished as a federal state. The Yugoslav historic project created in the 19th century was terminated, its ideology exhausted, but with it went the lifestyle and mental attitude, and the Yugoslav identity become impossible. That was the moment when I felt I had to become an *émigré*. Not being able to remain a Yugoslav and incapable of reinventing myself as a Serb, Croat or anything else, I deliberately joined the mass of the European and non-European exiles with insecure, patched-up identities. Today I refuse to call myself an ex-Yugoslav since this could imply that it is still somehow possible to be a Yugoslav when I am instead choosing not to be one. When asked what I am, I usually say that I am a post-Yugoslav, a more fitting label, I think, since we live in the post-cold war period of the modern history and shape our reflections in the post-modern mode, re-examine our values in these shifting post-ideological times. The *post factum* label implies the uncertainty, openness and transiency of my present status, while at the same time invoking a certain sensation of pain due to the definite loss of a world flushed away by the bloody mess that covered my original country.

(4)

Being an *émigré*, or an exile or an expatriate (if I think of the state of mind rather than the status, these terms mean more or less the same), implies a rift, a permanent duality between here and there, peace and war, the present and the past, adjustment to the new circumstances and the mourning of what has been lost.

Physically, I am "here", without any desire to be physically "there", but of course with ears pricked to hear about everything that goes on "there", living as it were a double life, between the new experiences of my chosen milieu and the steady flow of mediated information about developments in my former country. I live in peace while people there live on the edge of war or have been caught up in its turmoil. Everyone could understand the daily dynamics of peace. This is what we assume, take for granted, what we call normalcy. The dynamics of the war, the unleashing of bestiality, its un-

controllable escalation, respites false and real, quickly replaced by new flare-ups, how it all happened, how it is still happening (even if the worst might be over by now, people not being killed daily in a systematic manner as they were only a year ago), that is something much more difficult to grasp and the unsuccessful attempts to grasp it are part of the émigré's daily life.

I can analyze endlessly the factors that influenced developments before the war and set the war up as a seemingly inevitable consequence of long-standing conflicts and contradictions. But how the war progressed in the way it did I cannot comprehend fully and probably would not even if I had stayed there and remained near or amidst the war. But then my interpretation would be colored and probably biased by the very experience of being a participant. Being here (outside, elsewhere) I have a distance and can see the bigger picture. There is no lack of information for sure, I have a more multifaceted image than I would have there, but none of it helps, it doesn't add up. The war remains quite incomprehensible in its brutal aspects, in its mass terror, in the avalanche of hatred and the paranoid backlash. Impossible to accept as a necessity, an inevitability, and impossible to comprehend as a logic of events, as a ratio between interests and results. And yet to write it off as historic folly or just as an expression of men's depravity would be too facile, to resign oneself in the face of this incomprehension certainly impossible. I know I will spend the rest of my life, like so many other people probably, wondering why and how it happened. Searching for these answers will mean examining the core cause of my exile.

What I already know for sure, however, is that this debilitating and destructive hatred tearing the country apart is no ancient emotion revived and strengthened by circumstances, but a fresh, new hatred, systematically built up over the years, with the negative aspects of the historic record deliberately deployed as an argument, an excuse or evidence. A complex psychological construct has been created over most of ex-Yugoslavia, engulfing huge masses of people in the absurd belief that they are predominantly identifiable by their ethnicity while in fact Serbs and Croats and Muslims are absolutely indistinguishable, either physically or in their manners, customs, behavior and language. Ethnicity has been promulgated to become their destiny which means that all choices have been made for them in advance, that they have been pre-empted as human beings with all their rich scale of features and possibilities. So many people have become convinced that all others who are not of the same ethnic background are their enemies and that only a total immersion in the ethnic collectivity can guarantee their survival. Educated people, intellectuals, academics gradually started to believe in this construct or at least behave and reason as if they believed in it. The message has been internalized, it has become a matter of elementary assumptions, an axis grounding their whole world view and controlling all their thoughts and deeds.

By becoming an émigré I have maintained my freedom of choice, the privilege of manifold identities, the right of permanent self-definitions, as painful as they may be.

By getting out, by being here and not there, I have escaped this reductionist pressure. Very few of my friends and colleagues still living in the countries of former Yugoslavia have been so lucky. They have become an endangered minority there, a sect, a scared, persecuted dissident community, pejoratively labeled by the national hysterics as Yugo-nostalgics or Yugo-zombies. We of the emigration would simply be post-Yugoslavs, nostalgic or not. Being here, outside, we could see how futile any nostalgia is. "Would you ever consider going back?", I am often asked by the well meaning ignoramuses. "Go back to what?", I usually answer. What I came from no longer exists. Not only as a state, a government, a territory, but chiefly as a social and cultural climate, a state of mind, a lifestyle, a mentality. So I don't have anything to go back to, I can only go on, elsewhere, not back. Yugoslavia is no more and won't come back in our lifetimes for sure. It collapsed as a dream, as an ideology, then as a state and a political system, finally as an economy and now it is being torn to pieces as a society. After more than five years of war and a year of a kind of peace there is hardly anything recognizable left and national homogenization, the chauvinist mixture of arrogance and self-pity, remains the most crippling long-term damage.

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The post-Yugoslav diaspora is a large, fragmented and dispersed community. Those who left of their own free will long before the war, on political or economic or just professional grounds, are in an envious position in comparison with later émigrés since they had some time to establish themselves, legally, socially and professionally, and to relax their ties with the old country a little before they lost them altogether. Quite a large number of my friends and colleagues, academics, intellectuals and artists in their thirties and forties sooner or later left by choice, seeking in emigration the multicultural context that we all once enjoyed in Yugoslavia and of which we were deprived in 1991. We could count on our skills and international reputations and networks. Most of us had tested our ability to live abroad before and making it a permanent condition was a less threatening prospect than remaining enclosed within one of the newly-formed national states with their hysterical chauvinism and *Blut und Boden* culture.

Then there is the wave of students, many of my own students among them, who fled to escape the draft at the beginning of the war and had to find a way to survive abroad without resources or contacts and even before they had a chance to get their diplomas and establish their reputations and build up an international network. They and their partners are an especially vulnerable part of the post-Yugoslav émigré community but a very vital, resourceful and energetic part as well. There are also children from mixed marriages (which often fell apart) and people of the "wrong" domicile (Serbs from Croatia, Croats from Serbia), minorities who felt discriminated against or threatened (Hungarians from Vojvodina, Muslims from Sandzak, and especially Albanians from Kosovo).

Finally, there are the refugees from the war zones, from Croatia initially, then from Bosnia and Herzegovina, people who went through hell, who lost and suffered much and in the first instance seek basic safety, a firm ground to put their trauma behind them, to invest emotional energy into mourning and then attempt to rethink their lives.

Altogether, this accounts several million people, dispersed among a great many countries on all continents. I personally know a few dozen, perhaps a hundred people from this group. And I am still amazed by the speed and ease with which contacts are established within this invisible web, how promptly and frequently we hear about each other, receive news, even create and find opportunities to meet or communicate. There is this virtual emigration (corresponding to the virtual reality) of a pulsing body of people, who still manage to travel on the old Yugoslav passport, a most dubious document, quickly arousing suspicion, on passports of some successor state or some other improvised temporary travel documents; who communicate by mail, phone, fax and electronic mail, exchange news about each other and the developments in ex-Yugoslavia. Moreover, they write articles, plays, essays and poetry, whole novels, publish them in different languages, attend conferences, play music, even create theater productions and expositions.

What all these people have in common comes mainly from their past, a smaller bit from the present, and they share the need to rethink and reconstruct their future. Re-invoking the past is necessary and inevitable in the process of mourning and separation from what no longer exists. But like all émigrés before us we too run the risk of remaining the prisoners of the past, of idealizing it, twisting it, embellishing it because it is something definitively gone or of starting pointless arguments among ourselves about different interpretations of this past. Dealing with the pragmatic aspects of the present, mastering the technique of survival on all its levels, from the very banal to the metaphysical, is also necessary and takes a good deal of energy. But the most important task for us is to address the future and to imagine plausible futures, individual and collective ones, for us in exile and for those who still live on the territory of former Yugoslavia. This is the framework and the precondition for our true emancipation.

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Pessimistic assessments and anxious expectations colored my ideas of the future even before, so that now they exercise a stronger pull since they have, as it were, been confirmed. Becoming an émigré I discovered new proportions to my own vulnerability, recounted the risks of being caught again, but this time much more directly by a catastrophe such as I had already experienced and managed to escape from by the skin of my teeth. The real experience of leaving all I had behind and being deprived of most of my intellectual, social and professional markers, of a social web of relations, possessions, things that could be taken for granted because they used to occur daily (or at least frequently) this is the feeling of depravation, of impoverishment, of loss

that is deplored but ultimately to be overcome and at least partially compensated for until in time it becomes a less vivid and emotionally a more controllable memory.

The idea that all that is personally lost has to be regained and rebuilt is sometimes too overwhelming. One must ask whether one has sufficient energy or time, whether there is still a point to in the whole endeavor? And even if there is, the outcome won't be the same. So the endeavor to continue, to extend oneself is also an effort to remake oneself. There is a feeling of loneliness, or rather of distance. The émigré is by definition an outsider, an observer more than a player, someone who carries along a surplus of experience that cannot be shared by those in his surrounding, except if they are émigrés themselves. Of course, they often are. Not necessarily from the same country, but that does not matter. Émigrés from different countries and different situations understand each other, need only some kind of rhetorical shorthand, things do not have to be fully uttered in order to reach an understanding of each other.

On the other hand, becoming an émigré could also be a liberating experience, at least in my case it was to some extent, due to some fortunate circumstances. The opportunity to start a new life in a new country and a new city, to learn about a new culture, to attempt to master another language and turn it into a working tool, to plunge professionally into a different type of job than my old university position, to explore the specific features of another theater system and of the theater aesthetics prevailing in the Netherlands, all these have been stimulating, reinvigorating, uplifting elements of my émigré life. The simple experience of moving with my wife and daughter into a completely empty apartment, carrying a few suitcases and nothing else, starting a household from scratch after 15 years of living together was even liberating. True, a good many of my books were afterwards sent on from Belgrade, together with a few items of artistic or sentimental value, and that helped the domestication a bit. The imposed loss of material things was also a beneficial liberation.

While my view of the future remains somber it is nevertheless more flexible and broader. Before leaving Belgrade, I assumed that my future would be tied to my teaching at the university, something I enjoyed very much, and that all other activities and professional involvements would be some kind of supplement to the teaching and research associated with the university job. As much as I am missing my students and my work with students, and complain about the lack of time to do research and write (especially to write, I used to write much more than I do nowadays), I have to realize that having once been extracted from this professional framework I look at the future as a set of much broader professional opportunities and possibilities, including a return to some university position, here or elsewhere, one day perhaps.

The émigré has no shortage of illustrious predecessors, of impressive role models and that is encouraging and consoling, it dispels the loneliness a little and makes the pain less unique, even if it does remain quite personal. Each person's experience is unique,

however, while being at the same time emblematic. Each émigré, wherever he or she is, has ample company in other émigrés, from other countries and different situations, a population group to explore, learn from, share with. As the number of émigrés, expatriates, exiles, refugees, asylum-seekers and displaced persons continues to grow, each of our personal stories reconnects with the others in this rich panoply of collective experience that is the very image of our time and that covers all the isolated historic incidents which prompted each individual's departure. Our present condition re-invokes a historic phenomenon and at the same time radiates the future of Europe and of the world. I wonder what will our children make of it.