



Slavenka Drakulic

Why I have not returned to Belgrade

Is it to spare her emotions that Slavenka Drakulic has not returned to Belgrade since the wars? She does not think so. Instead, her reasons have to do with the silence and denial of so much of Serbian society, and with a Serbian youth that is failing to ask the right questions.

It was the first day of spring with gusts of a cold wind blowing strongly as I walked down Mariahilfer Strasse in Vienna. It so happened that I overheard the conversation of three youngsters walking along. They spoke in Serbian about an event where also some Bosniaks and Croats were present. What drew my attention was not their language *per se*, you hear plenty of it in the subway and the streets of Vienna nowadays. It was an expression one of them used. "*I did not expect there to be so many people who speak our language*," he said. It was apparent to me that by "our language" he did not mean one particular language such as Serbian, Bosnian or Croatian. On the contrary, the point was that the young man said "our language" on purpose, i.e. *instead* of naming that language by its proper name which would have been the politically correct thing to do. This is because "our language" is usually the expression refugees and immigrants — or, for that matter, a mixed group of people from former Yugoslavia meeting abroad — use as *the name* for their different languages of communication.

The truth is that their language of common understanding has no common name any longer. It is not the Serbo-Croatian of before. So when one of the youngsters said *our language*, it was to name the minimum common denominator that established itself as a kind of norm after all the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Indeed, it serves as a code name indicating good intentions; we are not enemies, we can still understand each other in spite of everything that happened.

To my own surprise, I felt a kind of physical reaction to these words, a wave of warmth washing over me. These youngsters are communicating in whatever-the-name language, and that is what is most important I thought, looking at them walking along briskly, all three of them dressed in black urban outfits. They were so young, mere teenagers really. Probably just visiting Vienna from Serbia.

But suddenly, the realization that they were so very young, that they belong to a generation that grew up after the outbreak of the wars in Yugoslavia, hit me like a punch in the stomach. Maybe they were even born after I visited Belgrade the last time, seventeen years ago?

That first day of spring their conversation made it clear to me that an entire new generation had grown up since I was last there.

As they passed me, the old mixture of guilt and anxiety that used to haunt me from time to time surfaced again. How many times during the past seventeen years had I been invited to visit Belgrade? By my friends, by my publisher, by organizers of various international conferences and institutes of different kinds? And every single time I found a plausible way to refuse, to politely turn the invitation down. I never ran out of excuses.

As if exhausted, the wind subsided and I slowed down. I could not but ask myself the same old question again: why did I not visit Belgrade once in all those years? When my friends asked me the same question, I would habitually answer that I didn't know. I knew that I felt anxiety at the thought of going there again and that I certainly avoided visiting Belgrade after the war started, as if the city itself had become a metaphor for the war.

What was I anxious about? About "them"? About what "they" did to "us"? Or about what Serbs did to themselves? Maybe of being confronted with issues I didn't want to be confronted with? I was aware that I would have to travel there carrying with me the burden of those seventeen years like a heavy suitcase. If I were to open it, faces, memories, pictures, words — they would all spill out. Who would collect them and put them all back into the suitcase? Still, to postpone the trip until the whole new generation in Serbia had grown up suddenly looked extraordinary to me. As if I wasn't fully aware of the fact until I overheard the conversation on Mariahilfer Strasse that triggered the familiar feeling of anxiety.

I remember when I last visited Belgrade, in June 1991, just before Croatia proclaimed its independence. One of those three young people could have been born then, perhaps that very month. Perhaps the girl? She could have been born to parents living in the centre, near the train station, where I stayed with my friend Mirjana. Her mother probably bought bread in the same bakery nearby and visited the flea market on Kalenica pijaca on Saturday mornings.

Then my friend Mirjana died from a severe illness. Another friend, Boris, the one I had a coffee with the last day of my visit, got married. When I saw him ten years later at Frankfurt airport, his son had already started school. And Ana, another friend, left Belgrade and moved first to Paris, then on to Sarajevo. Ljubica went to Slovenia then to Sweden, later to Belgium and came back only recently, tired from wandering around. One colleague, a journalist who used to visit Zagreb very often, became a minister of information in the government of Slobodan Milosevic. Another colleague became a chief executive officer with Serbian national television — the main nationalist propaganda machine. And a third one accompanied general Ratko Mladic in Srebrenica and documented his deadly triumph there.

In the meantime, bits and pieces of information arrived as proof of how we had changed, how this or that friend had become... yes, what? An enemy? Or a person so different as not to be recognized any more, as a minister, a writer of nationalist prose, a loudspeaker of hatred? Did I ever really know them? Can one really know people, trust them? Depression was setting in with such questions, showing human nature as something ugly. Looking at myself in the mirror, I looked for signs of change, too. Fear of others is also fear of oneself.

I knew my visit to Belgrade would bring back half-forgotten images and feelings. Like the words of a Muslim woman from Srebrenica whose son was slaughtered in her arms by a Serbian soldier: *I was forced to drink the blood of my own son*, she said. Her words have been buried in my memory for thirteen years now.

Like the photo on the cover of Sarajevo's *Dani* magazine, showing a young man dressed in jeans, sneakers and a white t-shirt bending forward over a railing. There would be nothing special about that photo, except a huge hole in the place where his chest should have been. How strange, I thought when I saw it, that hole in his body through which you could see the iron bar. I deliberately focused my eyes on the iron bar because it made the whole scene seem less real...

Do I, like everyone else, want to spare myself from the confrontation with my emotions about former friends in Belgrade, thinking that it is better to stay away, better not to go there? On the other hand, why would a trip to Belgrade be different to going back to Zagreb, say? On the contrary, I'd had to face the same kind of people there — old friends and colleagues who became nationalists and those who were just opportunists. I had to face the fact that so many people dear to me had left the country. From that point of view, going to Belgrade should be the same experience. But it is not. I live and work in Zagreb, it is my city and there is no way for me *not* to confront its post-war reality. That is, unless I want to leave it and never come back.

Belgrade I can avoid, I thought. "But Belgrade is a part of your past too," Boris said to me when I recently met him. He returned home to Belgrade from the United States years ago. As usual we did not meet in my city, Zagreb, or his city, Belgrade, but in Vienna. At yet another conference, of course. We spoke about the uneasy feeling of returning to the old places that used to be ours but are not any longer. He described his first trip to Dubrovnik after the war to me. It was painful, he said, but not only because of his nostalgic memories of summers spent on the stone streets there. Or because he saw what bombs had done to this beautiful medieval town. It was sorrowful to be there, aware of the fact that the Yugoslav soldateska did it *in his name, too*. "You must come and see Belgrade and people there for yourself. After all, cities are people." — he said.

Then Boris showed me a photo of his now grown up son, a tall, handsome young man dressed in a suit. It was hard to believe that the little boy I met at Frankfurt airport and then later on in their home in the United States is now a law student. This was just after I had overheard the conversation on Mariahilfer Strasse, and again I was reminded of the fact that there is a whole new generation that will soon be eligible to vote in elections. The photo of Boris' son reminded me once more of not having faced up to the reality of these youngsters. I failed to notice something important, to see them growing up. What do I know about them? The fact that they can't travel abroad without a visa, can't see London or Paris, not even Trieste. They can't even travel to Bucharest or Sofia any more.

How sad and absurd, and how humiliating their situation, I thought as I remembered how, with the old red Yugoslav passport, my generation used to travel through Europe without visas. This was a source of pride, a *differentia specifica*, compared with the other countries belonging to the Soviet block. They envied us as we, in the 1970s, travelled to Italy and France, to Great Britain and Sweden, to pick strawberries and make money over the summer.

As a student I worked in Sweden in a warehouse for three months and came back with money for a whole year. Most of all, we were envied because we could buy a pair of blue jeans, fine Italian shoes, foreign books and records. The other side of that freedom to travel, however, was that it became one of the reasons for accepting the political system, functioning as a bribe of a kind. We were bribed into believing that "socialism with a human face" made sense and could work. We did not question it.

At the conference in Vienna, it occurred to me that these kids speaking Serbian on Mariahilfer Strasse were most likely not young Serbs from Serbia; if they were indeed from there, then they were among the few lucky ones who had managed to get visas. Recently I have been listening to discussions about the visa problem for young Europeans outside the EU. Visas are hard to obtain, especially for Serbians, and in this way young people are isolated and prevented from seeing the world — so the argument goes. Why punish youngsters for something they haven't done? They were not even born when the Yugoslav wars broke out. They are not responsible for what their fathers did, one speaker said during the conference, with anger in his voice.

While his speech clearly aimed at evoking sympathy from the audience, I must confess that I did not feel any sympathy at all. I was *angry at his anger*. Speaking on their behalf he somehow suggested that the new generation *does not deserve* such a treatment from "Europe". The implication of his argument was that because they are young they must also be innocent. It was exactly this *presumed* innocence of the Serbian youth that irritated me.

I know something about this. I myself, together with my generation, assumed our innocence because we were born after the Second World War. What could we possibly have to do with crimes committed at a time when we were not even born? The Serbian youth is not the exact parallel to our situation because our fathers fought a just, defensive and anti-fascist war (although I suspect that their fathers in Serbia would claim the very same thing too). But during the Second World War our fathers committed many war crimes that they never spoke about. I do not blame them, however, for their silence — the same kind of silence that I witness today after the last wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo. But I do blame us for not asking the right questions like, for example, the simplest and most difficult of all: what did you do in the war, father? It was my/our responsibility to question their justifications and their ideological interpretation of history. We failed because we did not do that. It was my/our responsibility, the responsibility of the next generation, to find out the truth about their war that was not only an anti-fascist war and a communist revolution — but also a civil war. However, we believed in official history and school textbooks because it was easier to live like that. Our attitude to the past was one of the reasons why the new nationalist wars in the 1990s were so easy to start.

If I do not know much about the new generation in Serbia, I ponder a more important question: how much do they know about their *own* past? Listening to the angry young Serbian man speaking about visas at the conference, I thought he was wrong. Like us, his generation back home is responsible too: for its silence, for not asking what happened before they were born, for not caring about what their fathers did during the wars, for believing that they have the right to visas just because they are young and their hands are clean and their arrogance just. Most of all, for not asking *their* parents why they are deprived of visas. True, the young generation of Serbs can not be held responsible for the past. *But all of them are responsible for their present attitude to the past*

because it is important for their future. That was the lesson that we, their parents' generation, should have learned. As we did not learn it in time, we had to learn it the hard way.

Thanks to Boris' wise words, I understood that I am not afraid to see my friends in Belgrade again. After all, we met for all those years at conferences and festivals abroad, and we know exactly what each of us did or said or wrote during and after the wars. We also know about our mistakes and misunderstandings. For example about the mistake I made and am still ashamed of: it was in 1999 or 2000, I think, after the terrible exodus of Kosovo Albanians when my young colleague from Serbia, Vladimir Arsenijevic, wrote a text entitled "We are all Albanians". There was one sentence, I remember, that bothered me terribly. Arsenijevic wrote that he went into his kitchen, opened the fridge and took out a cold beer. As I vividly imagined that scene, I realized that a "cold beer" was simply too much. He was describing the suffering of Kosovars and their exodus to Albania and Macedonia, long lines of refugees marching under merciless sun with all their possessions in a few plastic bags. And he went to fetch a "cold beer" to drink a sip before he continued to lament over their condition! Even if he did drink that cold beer, he should not have put it in that story. He should not have mixed it with refugees, not even in the form of his sympathetic essay. And no, we could not possibly all be Albanians, certainly not when one can drink a cold beer while the other is trying to escape terror. There was something wrong about this description, something hypocritical. And still, Arsenijevic was one of the very few Serbian writers opposing nationalism and the war in Kosovo. His text, just because I knew he was not like so many others, angered me more than the story of any nationalist writer would have done. Nevertheless, I was wrong to criticize him publicly for that. I was wrong in demanding moral perfection from him.

A few years later I met the young writer for the first time. It was in Croatia. He was a tall, slender man with long hair in a ponytail and gentle eyes. I introduced myself and apologized to him for my criticism. He accepted my apology with a smile.

Both Boris and I know what other friends and ex-friends did during the war. We can account for each acquaintance — *just like other people can for their relatives, friends and neighbours too*, about what they did in Bosnia or Kosovo. The difference is that the majority of people do not want to admit that they took part in wars. Not all of them are war criminals and murderers, so this is not a matter of guilt. But they ought to face their responsibility for voting for a murderous regime, for thinking that only they were victims of both Milosevic and the superpowers (after all, wasn't Belgrade bombed by the American superpower?), for believing that there was no other way but to succumb to nationalist pressure. Unfortunately, Serbs live in denial of their recent past. However, the problem is that there seems to be *no desire in society to find out the truth*.

We can not be silent. We can not repeat our own mistakes or those of our parents. We all have to confront the past. This is the task of all people who witnessed the war. But the young post-war generation has its own responsibility in finding out the truth as well. It is not the EU but their own parents who are punishing them: they are not deprived of visas because of *who* they are, but because of *what* their parents did or did not do. The young generation of today's Serbia is suffering isolation because of the only thing it should do and is not doing — asking questions.

This, I believe, is why I have not visited Belgrade for so long. I could not bear their silence and denial, as I could not accept it in my own country.

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