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DOWN THE DANUBE: A REGION'S DARK PAST

Down the River to the Sullen Balkans

By RICHARD BERNSTEIN

NOVI SAD, Serbia and Montenegro — Petar Lapu gunned the engine of his aluminum skiff, backing it from the shore and into the Danube, greenish and murky in this season's heat and drought. He checked a fishing net, then settled the boat where the current would lazily carry it back to shore.

Fishing and the legendary fish soup he makes at his riverside restaurant are Mr. Lapu's passions, but in the middle of the river, where nobody but his visitors could hear, he talked of the time in 1991 when police officers ordered him to pull the dead bodies that were floating in his fishing area out of the water.

"Personally I got eight bodies out, and they were buried in Novi Sad," he said, referring to this age-old fortress city on the Danube, the capital of the border area known as Vojvodina. The dead were victims of the vicious fighting that took place when Yugoslavia tried to prevent the republic of Croatia from breaking away.

"No one knows who they were, Croats or Serbs," Mr. Lapu said of the bodies. "They were all people who were shot and thrown into the river." They were not the only ones, he said.

The Danube comes down from Budapest, cutting across the vast Hungarian plain, with its sweeping vistas of corn and sunflower fields, and as it does it enters the Balkans, a region known for political upheaval, unstable borders and violence.

A few miles above here, the Danube forms the border between two successor states to the old Yugoslav federation, Croatia to the west and Serbia and Montenegro to the east. It passes the city of Vukovar, a once gracious town largely destroyed by the Serbs in a ferocious onslaught during the Serbian-Croatian war that erupted in 1991.

This is where Europe's most recent bloodshed occurred during the wars of Yugoslavia's breakup. Those ended only with the Western bombing campaign in 1999 that forced Yugoslavia's president, Slobodan Milosevic, to withdraw his forces from Kosovo, a province of Serbia populated mainly by Albanians, and eventually to step down.

Novi Sad bears one of the chief scars of the Kosovo war; it was here that NATO bombing destroyed three bridges across the Danube.

Those wars are over, maybe for good. Mr. Milosevic is on trial, and Yugoslavia has been largely divided into its main ethnic components. The situation may be getting better on the eastern stretches of the Danube, and even across the Balkans, a word often synonymous with a kind of convoluted, impossible-to-solve ethnic hatred.

Yet talking to people in Novi Sad, a stained, timeworn, bruised but lively place full of outdoor cafes, one senses little expectation that improvements will be quick or permanent. Perhaps it is the weight of experience, the memory of dragging bodies out of the river, that leaves them not daring to hope too much. Or perhaps it is that they know something about Vojvodina that outsiders cannot know.

That border area around Novi Sad has always been on the margin between large rivals, the Romans and Germanic "barbarian tribes," the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires and, more recently, the Serbs and Hungarians.

On a hill overlooking one of the wrecked Danube bridges is the immense and sprawling Petrovaradin Fortress. The Austrians built it in the late 17th and early 18th centuries as a bulwark against the Turks, who were expelled after ruling Vojvodina for a century and a half.

Below the fortress on the other side of the river is a monument of a more recent disaster. From Jan. 21 to 23, 1942, Hungarian troops allied to Nazi Germany dragged Jews and prominent Serbs from their houses and shot them on the banks of the Danube.

The riverside monument to those who died, with inscriptions in Serbian and Hebrew, displays the Star of David and a cross side by side to commemorate common victimhood, a most unusual testimonial to the ethnic variety that has been Vojvodina's chief characteristic.

Then there are the destroyed bridges.

One has been rebuilt, one replaced by a pontoon structure. The third, near a popular summer beach, is still wrecked. A single white tower festooned with dangling suspension cables is all that stands on the south side of the river, on a stretch that only recently reopened for shipping.

"This is the border between the Balkans and Central Europe," said Laszlo Vegel, an essayist and prize-winning novelist whose family is Hungarian but who was born in Novi Sad and has lived here all his 57 years.

He meant that this side of the river, with its monument to the 1942 victims, was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and therefore, in his opinion, a part of the culture of the western portions of the Danube, epitomized by the empire's capital, Vienna.

On the other side, where the fortress looms high, is the incessant, brutal ethnic warfare of the Balkans.

"Novi Sad should have been a city in Central Europe, but we were Balkanized," he said sadly.

Mr. Vegel, though not well known in Western Europe or America, is a living emblem of a certain Vojvodinian history. His family stayed even after the Trianon Treaty signed in Paris by the Great Powers in 1920 stripped the territory from Hungary and turned it over to the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, which later became Yugoslavia.

Mr. Vegel's novels, written in Hungarian, have been translated into Serbian but, he says, are little read by people in this country. Yet he stays, because it is where his ties are, even as he sees the historic tragedy of the place with the startling clarity of an outsider.

"Wherever you go in Vojvodina, you see mass graves," he said. "There's no town that does not have a mass grave."

His latest book, which translates as "The Man Without a Country," is based on a historic episode that he said no one in Serbia had talked about for half a century. It was the large-scale killing of Hungarians by Serbs after the Nazi defeat, revenge for killings of Serbs by invading Hungarian fascists who were unleashed in 1941, when Hitler ordered the obliteration of Yugoslavia.

"For the first killings there is a memorial," Mr. Vegel said, referring to the killings of Jews and Serbs. "But nobody is allowed to talk about the second."

During the war over Kosovo in 1999, he said, Hungarian men in the town of Temerim not far from here were ordered by the Yugoslav Army to dig trenches. "They were afraid, because the Serbian officers were laughing about how useless trenches would be against airstrikes," Mr. Vegel said.

The story, very Balkan in its depiction of terror, seems in its way similar to Mr. Lapu's experience of fishing for bodies in the Danube in 1991 — another story that, as Mr. Lapu put it, "it is not popular to talk about." The two men share some views.

Neither is confident that the relative state of peace will last or that prosperity will come. Mr. Lapu is thinking about accepting a business proposition from a relative to run a hotel in Canada, leaving his sons to manage his restaurant here.

"I don't have patience for better times to come," he said. "I've been waiting for 20 years for things to get better."

But rather than talk about bad times, Mr. Lapu turns the conversation to the river, and to food and the fish soup for which he is famous. He was asked if he would reveal the secret of making the soup, tender fish saturated in a rich aromatic broth.

"I tell everyone everything," he replied, glad for a change of subject. "But it's like telling someone how to score goals in football."

He discussed spices and the need to avoid an excess of paprika. But, he said, "The fish itself has to predominate — you have to smell the fish."

Is the Danube a sad river, he was asked.

"People cause trouble," he said, refusing to be sentimental about the river or to anthropomorphize it. "The river causes problems only sometimes — floods, for example — but we can live with those problems. The essence of our lives is the Danube, and we enjoy the air here, which is always 5 degrees cooler than on the land."

Then, expressing a wish that he had expressed before, Mr. Lapu said he dreamed of a Danube that had never existed in his lifetime.

"We want this to be a place where everybody would want to come," he said.

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