

Crows

Kim Simpson

19 JANUARY: Belgrade must be the smoggiest of all cities. If you look closely, you can see farmers through the haze plowing fields between runways. President told us in Vienna that if it ever does happen, it will happen now.

Actually, my most vivid memory of Belgrade must be the flock of crows that darted out of the smoggy sky upon my arrival. It was a scene neither sinister nor ecstatic, as I was both enthusiastic and clueless, completely unprepared for the tangible melancholy of the Serbian winter. The farmers reminded me of Arabian men on camels working under the Moroccan sun at the Fez airport. Their country, however, seemed somewhat less enchanted.

Elder Packard and I had served in the world-in-general mission for seven months—Provo to Chicago to Budapest to Frankfurt—until we finally received legal permission to work in Yugoslavia. My companion, Elder Bradshaw, and I were the only two missionaries in a city of two million. Packard was on his way to Bačka Palanka, a village of black skirts and scarves, accordions and bicycles—straight from those naive paintings of Kovačić.

25 January: Crows cut through the Serbian fog and perch on the steeple across the street. All is the glory of God.

The next thing to adjust to (aside from the relentlessly smoggy days and absence of sun) was the dirt—caked and crusted on every automobile, smudged across trolley bus floors. I remember feeling anxious that I was finally in the land to which I was called and was now expected to do real missionary work. No more mission hopping.

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Elder Bradshaw and I stood on the balcony of the church building that first night and looked out at the city with its overcast sky. Could God see us through such a thick haze? The Rakisits, a missionary couple who had complained of the smog and gone to work in Austria, said you could feel a burden lift once you crossed the border. Maybe it was just leaving behind that caustic smell of burning coal, or the liquid air so dirty and thick you could choke if you swallowed too fast, or the heavy brandy-drenched atmosphere in the bus that took us from the airport home. I tried to interpret the profanity someone had fingered in on my steamy bus window that night, forgetting, then remembering that I was expected to start teaching about God . . .

1 February: We'll do it. We'll have to do it. We'll take blows, we'll take our cheap shots. Satan's had it too easy too long over here.

If serving in Yugoslavia seemed a formidable task upon arrival, it seemed impossible later. The mission goal was to build the kingdom in a hurry. To do otherwise would be to fail. The Belgrade Branch had three strong members with memorable stories: one was baptized drunk, one worked in a Jewish synagogue, the third was hopelessly America-sick. They would do.

Since tracting was off-limits in Belgrade, we were instructed to walk the streets, strike up conversations with passers-by, and draw commitments from them—ignoring the nude, pin-up women taped to street windows, looking on, deaf and dumb, leering at the sides of our heads, so undeniably present, yet so inappropriate to talk about . . .

I remember gazing out over the city from the top floor of Robna Kuća Beograd, the city's highest skyscraper, and seeing the city at once from a heavenly perspective, even though smog still oozed through the streets, and crows still circled the spires of Sveti Marko. "It almost seems do-able," said Elder Bradshaw.

16 February: Šemo, the nine-year-old gypsy boy, will remember the Church forever, no matter where life takes him. He'll always remember what Jesus means to him.

Šemo's father, droopy-eyed and transient, traded junk at the marketplace. If Šemo stayed at the church too late, his father never called. "Isus je sve," Šemo would tell his uncles, the missionaries. "Jesus is everything." Why, of all the needy children in Belgrade, was he fortunate enough to be adopted by the rich *americanci*? Because, he'd tell us, in a dirty-faced and abominably smelly representation of his mother city, Jesus was everything. He'd come over every afternoon to watch our church video in which a bewigged and made-up Joseph Smith scared the boots off an entire mob. Šemo filled us with hope.

And we eventually brought other people to church. We had some euphoric Sundays, even though the fruit-selling lady rang the buzzer

for the umpteenth time in the middle of the sacrament. The chapel, at least, was never completely empty.

20 February: The crows know ecstasy just below the ceiling of smog. Government or science has no say in their travels.

How did we find some of them? Ljiljana, a troll-like, schizophrenic woman, was first impressed with our dedication, for boys so young. But the plum brandy she started drinking in the middle of the third discussion made her crazy. Even after she kicked that habit, she still seemed a bit overly concerned that we might baptize her naked against her will. When she finally agreed to be baptized, who could forget the swishing water and the sight of her, almost reformed, dressed in white, pacing nervously through the waist-high waters of the portable baptismal font, ringing her hands, repeating, "I don't know . . . I don't know" as Elder Bradshaw stood by patiently. We could find only the Ljiljanas, it seemed. Or the Gordanas, who smoked their last cigarettes between baptism and confirmation. Where was God hiding? What did he want us to do with these people once we'd found them?

28 February: Mission policy confines us to our apartments whenever demonstrators hit the streets. Today was particularly turbulent, but when things quieted down, we went for a walk. We arrived home late, about eleven o'clock. Vlado, the five-foot Macedonian, was waiting at our door, urging us to baptize him, but he just wasn't ready. You join the Church, the Church doesn't join you.

There's something about Yugoslavia that causes them to mistrust foreign intervention of any sort. In the Iron Curtain era, they deliberately separated themselves from the Communist block, doing Communism their own way. Today they're shattering ceasefires, saying one thing, doing another, breaking promises to the European community. I think most of us prefer doing things our own way, but when Yugoslavs say they're peculiar, they mean it. They are who they are.

A Mormon missionary is a foreign intruder. The missionary formula for success doesn't take into consideration the basic nature of the Yugoslav. But what about when the precepts you're telling them come from God? Well, God lives a good long distance away. If the Yugoslavs want to kill each other in a civil war, no outsider can prevent them. No one, after all, understands the deep roots of their ethnic hatreds the way they do.

A recent cartoon neatly sums up the American view of the Yugoslav situation. The caption reads, "Updated map of Yugoslavia." Each new republic has been relabeled: Insania, Suicidinia, Moronia, Bozona, Crankistan, Maniakistan, Crazia, Lunacia. Maybe that's all there is to it. I remember sitting in Sister Ivanović's living room, barely understanding the specifics of current events, yet assuring her that Yugoslavia had a bright future. I believed it. Hadn't President Monson said so

in his dedication? She laughed. Old Štefania Horvat used to just sigh and whisper, “Just as long as there won’t be any war.” We took refuge in such peoples’ needs, ministering peace, pleasance, and agreement. Could the situation in Yugoslavia possibly get any worse? Insania.

17 April: I dreamed that I died last night. I sat in the lobby of the spirit world waiting, wondering if I could ever go back. I would most likely end up here in Belgrade.

Why is it that when I think back, I see the crows most clearly? Will I ever forget the frustration and disappointment? I do remember the hope, the perfect brightness of it still glimmering. *If it ever does happen, it will happen now.* That was then. I don’t know if it ever happened for us. All missionaries are confused or frustrated at one point, but we wanted to see the branch explode. At least we wanted to see a more firm foundation. Sometimes it’s just too obvious that being tested is the nature of existence.

20 May: Steady rain is soaking the wicked city. So shall thy word be that goeth out of thy mouth: it shall not return unto thee void, Father, but it shall accomplish that which thou pleasest, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto thou hast sent it.

Elder Bradshaw and I cringed at the complaints of any new missionaries. We could complain about the people, but we’d be damned if anyone else did. Gradually we became hardened, cynical. When new missionaries arrived with their baptismal goals, we wanted to run them ragged. We’d acquaint them with ten-hour extroversion, canned conversation, and street contacting till bedtime. Sometimes tracting illegally, we were chased by men with pitchforks. Or, we’d trip over drunken men with noses split open and minister to them. Somehow we couldn’t wait to see the new missionaries develop the same cynicism we had. But we’d jump on them if they said anything negative about these people even we hadn’t had sufficient time to fully understand.

11 December: Just a minute ago, while I was waiting for my companion to get ready, I stood looking out the window at the same old park, the same old people from the same old block, and felt myself asking that old missionary cliché question so seriously it scared me—“Is it really worth it?” Then immediately I rediscovered the Comforter, was purged, and sat down to write about it. Of course it’s worth it.

At the marketplace I watched the crows dash overhead as the noon-day cannon fired into the haze, scaring and ruffling the pigeons that pecked at scattered *burek* crumbs. How we used to scour that marketplace for people.

In the main square of Zagreb, where I spent my last ten months, two men, young and energetic, played Croatian national songs on a fiddle and guitar every morning, wearing Santa Claus hats. One was

short and stocky with a big nose, the other tall and thug-like. They always nodded, recognizing us in our trenchcoats and nametags. Since then I've associated Croatian nationalism almost exclusively with those songs, and whenever I think of the Croatian rebels, I imagine those two in their Santa Claus hats, strolling the battlefields, defiantly playing "Ustani Bane" in the face of the federal army.

Maybe I don't understand the complexities of war and its questions of commitment and patriotism. But I do understand enough about war to know that I hate it. Missionaries baptized a man named Ivo Babin, the future of Yugoslavia, just after I left. He apparently filled that priesthood gap that seems to always reopen in the Zagreb Branch. This month he stepped on a land mine, opening the gap once again. I wondered if he had a Latter-day Saint wife. If so, did she utter the same curses any other wife would?

3 February: If it weren't so true, I would have quit long ago.

Yugoslavia is a footnote, an exception. Does God deliberately treat it this way? Does anyone there know the meaning of happiness? Who can define ecstasy better than crows swooping under orange barriers of sky? Could ecstasy be, in the case of Yugoslavia, a defiantly troubled lifestyle? Perhaps some people actually learn to feed on the opposition in their lives.

27 March: A General Authority finally came to Yugoslavia. He had that look—pure white hair brushed forward in a Joseph Smith manner, bald on top, clean and angelic, his eyes gem-blue. He could look right into you, and you could look right into him. He said that through our diligence the Lord would bless us and our investigators.

We were working with the pot lady at the time. She smelled like weed, coughed up a storm, wore dark lipstick, black frills, and Keds. And there was Predrag, a fifty-year-old friend of a member, who had hair like Robin Hood, listened to Chuck Berry or Barry White when the missionaries came over, doused his whiskey breath with mints and the tobacco on his coat with cheap cologne. After one of our discussions, he said no one had talked to him so sternly since before his father died.

There was Darko, who creaked the door open in a nervous sweat. He introduced us to Jasna, his girlfriend. Their palms seemed a bit too hot upon handshaking. . . . Ivan stood on the street corners, where we found him, bearded and barefoot, pirouetting like a dancing Moses. . . . Zvonko locked himself in his room, alternately strumming his guitar and painting forests with ghostly faces in the foliage. On the surface his strange lifestyle looked like imprisonment, or at least seclusion. To me it almost looked like freedom. . . . Branka, the old bread lady listened to us on the same park bench, cackling

under a warm coat of pigeons. “*Grubi smo*,” she’d tell us. “We’re all so coarse.” Jordan and Rade, gypsies, sat cross-legged under the trees before we came to teach them, singing Arabesque odes to women and God.

And Žarko Kumičić, the hard-line mayor of Trnje, unshaven and in his undershirt, whittled at onions, chain-smoked, and listened to us between outbursts of history and tirades of nationalistic propaganda. In a fit of nostalgia, I recently told my Croatian friend Mladen that Žarko was a good man. “And he could even be better” was his mild reply.

4 June: A hundred-year-old lady let us in after a sorry stretch of illegal tracting. She was a widow, typically dressed in black, but tonight she was all toothless smiles and laughter. Said the only book she could read was her Catholic prayer book with its enormous print, wouldn’t take a Book of Mormon, and wouldn’t let us leave without giving us 100,000 dinars.

We had our methods of escape, though. Sometimes we’d just go up on the old city wall, crack chestnuts, and talk about the NBA. Sometimes we’d walk along the Sava River, following the barges with our eyes as we imagined the ecstasy of sailing away. Even now when I long for escape, I still remember a single light atop a high tower on Tkalčićeva street in Zagreb. What was this thing about refuge? Escape? It must have had something to do with the formidability of our task. Sometimes all we could do was look at the sky and search for some kind of connection with the rest of the world.

5 June: This is the kingdom, the Yugoslav sector of Zion. Someday this country will be converted. Zion will fill the earth.

One of our most blatant assertions of Mormonism was conducting a funeral service in a land where funeral traditions were of grave seriousness. The deceased was Stanko Vuković, a man who had converted in Paris, then spent the rest of his days dying in Zagreb. Three traditions made this funeral particularly Mormon: our branch president’s speech on eternal life just before Stanko was lowered, our dedication of the grave, and our smiling faces.

Still present, however, were the pale, sallow Catholics; the comically sad, lumbering music of the death march; and Stanko’s grieving wife, Jagoda, dressed all in crow-black. I thought of Cousin Carl’s funeral way back when and shook my head over the sheer Mormonness of it all. Uncle Ted would give out candy to the children at the graveside while Cousin Robert laughed boisterously over anything but the jaws of death, always in the distance.

20 June: I already miss the place. . . . I miss the crows. . . .

At least I miss that particular image of whatever the crows symbolized. Where did they come from, and what brings them back? Out-

side on the balcony at night, you could lose yourself in the Milky Way when summer came. You could find genuine inspiration in the simple sky. What happened? Sometimes I read my journal with its bold and naive statements: *Milan* (a man we drank Coke with at a cafe) *will recognize truth someday*; *Aleksander* (where is he now?) *beamed when he read the promise*; *Svetlana* (one of our members – AWOL again) *says she'll speak on Sunday*. . . . and I draw no conclusions.