

# Street Scene, Belgrade Version

Politics and the business of living absorb slivovic-drinkers and strollers in Tito's city.

By HELEN HANDLER

BELGRADE.

**I**T is spring in Belgrade, which is good news in a city where coal, wood and electricity are outrageously expensive (one ton of coal costs about \$23, which is more than the minimum monthly wage of a skilled worker), and the streets are filled with strollers fleeing their overcrowded apartments at the first signs of clement weather.

The eager, busy strength of a new country is felt as one walks among the crowds: the soldiers, the Government office-workers carrying briefcases, the many peasants in Serbian costumes come to sell cattle or produce, other peasants from far away—like the Siptars in their ragged, once-white leggings, jackets and skullcaps. These last—Moslems from Macedonia and south Serbia—carry rough, hand-made saws and axes, and look for jobs cutting firewood. They find plenty of work, because the wood is delivered in an unceremonious heap of large blocks before one's door and must be split up and piled in the cellar. Each year Siptar males remain in the city until they have accumulated enough money to return to their impoverished villages and buy a wife—or, if they are married, to provide their families with a few months' food.

Belgrade (which means "White City," although the reality is a shabby gray) is a far from prepossessing city. This is surprising for a place of its antiquity. Architecturally, it represents a combination of Turkish-style adobe dwellings, nineteenth-century central European apartments and offices and pretentious villas in a style that could be called "Balkan Modern."

**A**LMOST the only lovely thing to be seen are the intricately worked, brightly colored costumes of the peasants, who would never dream of adopting modern dress. The feeling one has immediately on arrival here—that one is really out of the West and in the Balkans—is inspired largely by this bizarre mingling of modes of dress: the drab sameness of Western business suits broken by the beautiful reds and purples and oranges of peasant costumes, which one sees everywhere. Yugoslavia is a peasant country, and Belgrade itself almost a "peasant city": the presence and influence of these people of the country are felt everywhere, even on the main shopping street. Sometimes they may be seen driving, on foot, a herd of cattle or a flock of sheep through the city to the abattoirs; sometimes creaking along in horse or oxen drawn carts loaded with produce, or headed for home after a shopping trip; and at night, perhaps,

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sleeping on the ground around the marketplaces.

In a city which even the Belgraders refer to as an "overgrown village," there isn't much for the present spring-time crowds to do or see. Shopping isn't much fun—the goods on sale are limited to the most utilitarian items, are of poor quality and are too expensive for most of the population.

Going to the theatre is difficult—tickets must be bought well in advance for drama, opera or ballet performances, and there are only two theatres and one opera house in the Yugoslav capital and the repertoire at all of them is limited.

**I**T is even difficult to relieve the tedium of life with sports activity. A nine-hole golf course which was built on a pleasant hill just outside of town was bombed during the war and is now used as a military training field; the greens, which still sporadically sprout a fine grass, have been cut into trenches and foxholes. There are a few tennis courts, but they are open only to diplomats and to local members of state-controlled clubs who can afford the club fees and can get racquets and balls from abroad. Finally, there is a seedy race track and of course soccer, on which—here as in all Communist countries—great stress is placed and for which a stadium seating 60,000 persons has been built, with no stinting of such rare materials as concrete and steel. The teams are supposed to be amateur but, in reality, the sport is downright professional and the teams are among the best in Europe.

For the most part, the Belgrade citizen strolls in the streets and parks, and sits in cafes drinking one cup of strong Turkish coffee or one glass of slivovic, which is the Yugoslav vodka, made of plums and of a strength and pungency perfectly suited to the hardy people who drink it. And he talks.

Conversation is concerned with the basic essentials of living—food, clothing and shelter—and with politics.

**B**EELGRADE is, like all European capitals, bursting at the seams. In 1931 its population numbered about 239,000, in 1948 it was about 389,000 and today it is probably over half a million. Very little new housing has been constructed and the result is great overcrowding. That mythological creature, the average man, in Belgrade would have two children, live in one or two rooms and never have money to buy quite enough of the essential things for his family. Food is more plentiful now than since before the war, but prices are so high that most of the Belgrader's income is spent on his table.

It is not surprising that people living in such straitened circumstances should talk mostly (Continued on Page 61)



**BELGRADE SPRING**  
—Above: Belgraders fill the streets as warm weather returns to the Yugoslav capital. Right: Passers-by study one of the high-priced, and limited, displays in Belgrade's shopping center. Below: A peasant woman passes—a sight that one may encounter throughout the city.





Women shoppers at a Belgrade fruit and vegetable market.

## Street Scene, Belgrade Version

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about the cost of living and where to find better and cheaper things. This all-pervasive interest is immediately apparent whenever two or more women meet, even though they may be strangers passing each other in the street. If one is carrying a fresh cabbage, for example—and nothing is ever wrapped in the shops because of a shortage of paper—one is inevitably stopped by several women who ask where it was bought and how much it cost.

While Belgrade's women talk of prices, the men talk endlessly about politics. Rumors spread throughout the city in the course of one afternoon, and are frequently well founded because the spreaders have considerable political sense. Even when Yugoslavia was contained within the Soviet orbit and Soviet police practices were employed here, Serbs talked politics openly, offering perhaps a nod in the direction of the authorities by beginning the conversation with such a phrase as "We shouldn't say this, but —" followed by a full airing of their views on internal and international politics from the time of the Battle of Kossovo on.

**T**HIS historic encounter between the Serbs and the then expansionist Turks occurred in 1389 and is still real to these highly nationalistic people. A series of lectures recently presented by the Peoples Front in one of the neighborhood "Houses of Culture" featured talks on the following subjects: "Religion in a Communist Society," "The Proper Function of the Communist" and "The Battle of Kossovo." The loss of Serbian independence in that battle still rankles, and most of the moral and political lessons which the Serbs have learned have been drawn from Kossovo, which showed them that heroes are men who will not be controlled by foreign rule.

In the best of times, the Serb is not a gay and sprightly person, and the position in which he finds himself and his country today adds to his dourness. His life is hard and state-controlled, and his coun-

try is under constant foreign threat. It is said that Serbia has rarely been governed wisely or well, and there is a strong popular feeling that most Governments that have sat or will sit in Belgrade are essentially the same. The Serbs feel, not without historical reason, that Governments are more concerned with maintaining power than with the welfare of the people. As a result, there is a great deal of intricate scheming about ways of circumventing rules and regulations. "Balkan intrigue" is no myth—it is a way of life, and a Government even more strict than Tito's would be hard put to stop it.

**T**HE peasants show their traditional disregard for government by all sorts of wily tricks—hiding some of their crops, falsifying crop returns or delaying planting and harvesting operations. One local Communist party boss recently gave a blow-by-blow description of one phase of this constant struggle between the peasants and the Government. He said that the first step taken in his district toward bringing the independent peasant into line was to draft all the local farm laborers into service on the collective farms, leaving the land-owning peasant with only himself and his family to work his land. Next, a quota of produce was required from each farm, the quota being based solely on the amount of land owned by the peasant. The peasant's reply to the requirement of compulsory deliveries was that he couldn't possibly meet the quotas because he had no seed.

The local authorities provided the seed, to which the peasants then responded by planting half of it and grinding the rest into flour and eating it. This move was countered by the authorities by mixing stones with the allotted seed in order to render it ungrindable but still plantable; and so the struggle went on, with check and countercheck. The peasant regards all this with a stolid good humor, confident that his enormous preponderance in the country's population and the importance of his role as food producer in a straitened economy, will in the

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end, insure his victory over the Government.

Within the city of Belgrade, *Konspiracia* evidences itself in other ways. The word "*Konspiracia*" is an old one in Yugoslavia and has a somewhat different meaning from the English equivalent, conspiracy. It implies the cooking-up of any sort of plot or scheme to get around any sort of regulation, and doesn't carry the opprobrious weight of the English.

**T**HERE are many Belgraders who live by *Konspiracia*—a surprising fact in a Communist country. They don't work at any ostensible job but are well-dressed and affluent. They go to the races, football games and theatre, and frequent the better cafes. It isn't clear where their money comes from, but there exists concurrently with them a flourishing black market in such items as nylon stockings, razor blades and silk and woolen cloth.

These idlers are for the most part, members of the dispossessed middle class and are violently anti-Communist. Most of the former bourgeoisie in Belgrade, whether they are working in a Government office or not, share this antipathy, and were, therefore, delighted when their Government opened the door to the West. More even than the peasants, many of whom have relatives living in the United States, Serb city dwellers welcomed this reorientation of the Yugoslav Government for the opportunity to renew contact with Westerners and with the reading rooms and information services of the Western embassies.

**T**HE age-old political caution of the Serb was not thrown to the winds, however. As one Belgrader put it, "We feel we can visit you and talk with you more freely now, but who knows when there might be another zig followed by yet another zag! We've had to change our friends too often in the last ten years not to fear its happening again."

The fact that the United States and its citizens are popular in Yugoslavia makes itself felt throughout the country, though this general approbation has been tempered of late by criticism among Belgrade's former middle class who think that we have been short-sighted in our policy of aid to Yugoslavia and are amazed that we would support a Communist Government. Re-

cent expressions in Washington and New York that the United States might be re-examining the feasibility of keeping Tito going caused a great stir among the reactionaries in Belgrade, who greeted the possibility of our limiting aid to the present Government or of our insisting on certain reforms in its internal policy with a mixture of joy and fear—joy at the prospect of some lessening of the strict control over their lives and fear that less aid would portend a long, cold winter.

An odd feature of all the grumbling against the Government in general and socialism in particular is that Tito himself is rarely attacked. Even the most unrelenting reactionary feels a grudging admiration for the man who fulfilled so dramatically the traditional role of the Serbian hero—that of insisting upon national independence against great odds. Much as the non-party Belgrader may dislike his domestic policies, a speech by Tito on such an international issue as Trieste or the threat from the Russian satellites brings forth a warm and whole-hearted response.

**R**EGARDING Tito's attitude toward Russia and the possibility of invasion from that quarter, the Belgrader again concurs with his leader. This feeling in many cases was not so easily arrived at, because among many of them there has been a long-standing affinity for Russian culture, and complete separation from their great Slavic neighbor was painful. Two factors outweighed this emotional attachment: their realization that Russian communism could hardly be more palatable than their own brand, and the deep national drive toward independence from foreign rule.

But while the future of Yugoslavia remains in balance, making itself a subject of debate not only among Yugoslavs but in foreign ministries and chancelleries over the world, the Belgrader goes on being chiefly concerned with the problems that preoccupy people everywhere: food and shelter, and how on earth to pay for them. In this respect, spring means much the same to the Government worker in a respectable bracket as it does to the peasant. Both lie down at night—the one in his flat, the other on the ground near the markets—with basically the same thought for the morrow: another day, another dinar.