



Artist interpretation of New Year's Eve, 1969. Illustration by Claire Gilmore.

Tito's moon: A Belgrade memoir

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Layered with a thick coat of black soot, the Federal Institute for Public Health in Belgrade, Yugoslavia in 1969 was a foreboding structure. The institute was located across from the marshaling yards of the railroad station, and the decades of coal-powered locomotives moving cars around the tracks had taken their toll. Standing at the entrance of this sooty and unimposing building, I struggled to communicate with a guard in an effort to explain why I was there. Ultimately, I just repeated over and over the name of the doctor who was my sponsor. Finally someone came and took me to the fourth floor where I was told by a staffer with knowledge of English that the doctor, “has suffered a heart attack. Come back in six weeks.” I was then promptly escorted out of the building.

I was among a group of six Johns Hopkins medical students being sent to different destinations for “an experience in international health” sponsored by The School of Hygiene and Public Health and the Milbank Memorial Fund. Potential sites included one each in Chile, Scotland, Sweden and Yugoslavia, and two in The Netherlands. When asked by the Hopkins faculty to make a choice I

blurted out, “Belgrade,” without a moment’s hesitation, much to the relief (I believe) of the other five students. Why I chose Belgrade remains a mystery, but I’m glad I did because it changed my life.

An exercise in nation-building

Yugoslavia was a country created out of whole cloth, an exercise in nation-building that reached its zenith at the end of the First World War. Because the various ethnicities involved were deemed to have a common Slavic heritage, the wisdom of that long-ago age determined that it would be just and proper to create a “Land of the Slavs” (i.e., Yugoslavia). It didn’t seem to matter that the inhabitants, who had been living for hundreds of years in separate communities and countries, belonged to different religions and cultures, or that peace among them was an infrequent companion.

As part of the geographic area known as the Balkans, the country had been occupied by many different powers at one time or another, the most far-reaching being the Hapsburgs in the north and west and the Turks in the south and east. As a result, over the centuries what might have started out as a relatively homogeneous people became a great ethnological mixture, an immense stratification of nations and cultures. More than half of the population looked to Constantinople as the center of their world, while much of the rest gravitated toward Vienna.

In the early 1800s, as Turkish power began to weaken, a revolt in Serbia created the backdrop of continual conflict

between Serbia and Turkey. In 1878, following the successful victory of Serbia and Russia against Turkey, the Congress of Berlin awarded the Austro-Hungarians occupation rights to the province of Bosnia and Hercegovina. In response to the growing strength of Serbia, Austro-Hungary formally annexed the province. When in June 1914 the heir to the Hapsburg throne Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife were assassinated in Sarajevo, the spark was ignited that unraveled the complex alliances leading to WWI.

Belgrade 1969

I landed at the airport in Belgrade on May 14, 1969 and was met by two gentlemen who drove me to a hotel across the Danube River from the main city. They handed me an address written in Cyrillic and told me to go there the next morning. This was my first trip outside of the United States except for a brief car trip to Mexico a few years earlier. After a jet-lagged and sleepless first night, I showed a taxi driver the piece of paper with the address and crossed my fingers that I would be arriving at the Federal Institute for Public Health.

I began medical school with the goal of becoming a physician neuroscientist. I wrote a long paper on the mind-body conundrum for physiology class. The professor, neuroscientist Vernon Mountcastle (AΩA, The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, 1942), who had pioneered the structure of the cerebellum by showing its neurons worked in layers (similar to what today's most advanced computers are doing), arranged for me to spend a summer at the UCLA Brain Research Institute. It was a productive experience that led to the publication of a paper demonstrating how the secretion of melatonin by the pineal gland was dependent on environmental lighting.¹

Upon my return to Baltimore in the fall of 1968, I set about clearing out the accumulated junk in my mailbox at the medical school when I noticed a flyer with the caption, "International Experience in Healthcare." Acting purely on impulse, I called the number on the flyer and spoke to a rather avuncular sounding gentleman named Kerr White (AΩA, The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, 1942), a cardiologist and pioneer in health services research. He suggested I come talk to him, and thus found myself nine months later in Belgrade.

Standing outside the Federal Institute that May morning after learning I was not needed for the next six weeks, I got into a taxi and gave the driver a piece of paper on which I had written the name of my hotel. On the ride through Belgrade and back across the river the seriousness of my situation began to sink in. It was the height of the

cold war (the Czech Spring had been brutally suppressed by the Soviets only a year before,) and I was in a nearby socialist country where I didn't know anyone and couldn't speak, or read, the language.

In those days, there was no internet, cell phone, computer or any easy means of communication, and the only person with whom I was supposed to make contact was unavailable for the next six weeks. I felt abandoned and unsure what to do next.

It was in the back seat of that taxi that I made up my mind: I would approach this as a kind of moral test. I would not try to contact my faculty sponsor at Hopkins but rather make the best of the circumstances on my own. By the time the taxi dropped me off at the hotel I had the beginnings of a plan: go to a tourist bureau and see if I could be placed with a family.

Places to live

A tourist bureau was just down the block from the hotel. After explaining my situation as best I could, the proprietor, a plump woman with a basic command of English, consulted her file folder and placed a call. After a lengthy unintelligible conversation, she said she found a placement for me and wrote an address on a slip of paper. They would be expecting me this afternoon. No further information was provided: no name; no mention of costs or term; no idea where the place was located. I checked out of the hotel, hailed a cab, and gave the taxi driver the address.

We crossed the river into Belgrade proper and wound through unfamiliar streets. After 20 minutes or so we pulled up to a rather Stalinesque-era heavy block building housing a large number of apartments. I noticed what appeared to be a bakery adjacent to the open entrance.

Inside the complex was a large courtyard that abutted tiered rows of apartments. After many minutes of searching, I found the apartment and knocked gently on the door. It was answered by a middle-aged couple and their young son. They welcomed me in and it quickly became clear that they spoke no English. I was shown to a room that was the son's (he was about 10-years-old and would be moving into his parent's bedroom). There was a kitchen, combination dining room/living room, and a small bathroom. Communication was mainly by sign language and gestures.

They were very nice and solicitous, and I gradually became accustomed to their routines. As I started to pick up the language, they regularly encouraged me with the phrase "*svaki dan bolji*," that I was "getting better every day."

I soon fell into a routine consisting of long walks around Belgrade (with a map and tourist guidebook), returning for

lunch and then going out again. The evenings were spent trying to have conversation and reading the books I had brought with me.

One day, feeling inappropriately confident, I decided to have lunch on my own at a restaurant. Unfortunately, the menu was entirely in Cyrillic, so I pointed at one of the items. A plate of boiled brains soon presented itself and I realized that I was not yet ready for prime time.

Nearing the end of my six week waiting period, I decided to take advantage of a roundtrip plane ticket between Belgrade and Dubrovnik. The ticket, written in the Pan Am office in Baltimore, came at no extra cost to my overall travel.

I had been reading about this amazing city on the Adriatic Coast and decided it would be a good time for a visit. Dubrovnik in the 1960s was not overwhelmed with tourists. There were few upscale hotels but plenty of student hostels.

On the second day of my visit, I was relaxing by the hostel's small pool enjoying the sun when suddenly things got dark. Opening my eyes I saw a halo of blond hair belonging to a beautiful blond Swedish woman who wanted to know if I spoke English. Ingrid and her friend, Gunilla, asked if I could suggest a place to have lunch.

I spent most of the remainder of my stay in Dubrovnik with them, exploring the area and going to night clubs in the evening. They urged me to join them on a trip to Albania but Americans at that time were unable to get visas, so they gave me a parting gift of swim trunks with the Swedish colors, promised to keep in touch, and asked me to visit them in Gothenburg where they were students.

My conversations with Ingrid and Gunilla, once we became comfortable with each other, quickly turned political: why were the Americans in Vietnam; why was there so much turmoil in the U.S.; why were so many leaders being assassinated? What, they asked, were my political beliefs?

Gradually, it dawned on me that I had really not thought things through, and that my positions on these issues were superficial. With their instigation, I found myself starting to come to terms with things other than those involving my education and career plans.

When I arrived in Belgrade, Yugoslavia was the ninth largest country in Europe with a population of around 20 million divided into six Socialist Republics and two autonomous provinces. The six Republics were Bosnia and Hercegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia, plus the two autonomous provinces (technically part of Serbia) of Voivodina and Kosovo. The neighboring countries—Italy, Austria, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, and Albania—reflected the diversity

within Yugoslavia. Three religious groups predominated: Serbian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Muslim.

In the late 1960s, Yugoslavia could be characterized as an unevenly developed country with profound geographic differences in economics, language, religion, geography, and culture. The fragility of this creation was held in check for a considerable period of time by the country's leader, Tito, who had won enough respect fighting with the resistance in WWII to keep the country together.

Shortly before I was due to leave the ancient city of Ragusa (as Dubrovnik was formerly known), I met a student from Belgrade. Vojkan's English was poor to non-existent but we were able somehow to communicate. We hit it off and he suggested that I move in with him and his parents when we returned to Belgrade. I felt this was a good idea, so when I returned I bade a fond farewell to my first family and moved into a small but comfortable fourth floor apartment on Palmetićeva Street. The apartment building was located in a central area of Belgrade a short walk from the main post office and not too far from the Kalemegdan, an ancient fort and park located at the junction of the Danube and Sava rivers.

Vojkan was the only child of Cica and Buda, who became my second parents and enjoyed doting on me. Cica would wake me early most mornings with a small glass of plum brandy, known as Slivovitz. I then joined the family for a delicious breakfast of fresh bread, butter, cheese, meats, and jam.

Even with the distance of so many years I am still amazed at how readily they accepted me as a member of their family. They encouraged me every day to improve my language skills (they spoke no English) and were genuine in their feelings for me. While I often missed the main meal of the day (early afternoon) due to my work or travel schedule, we occasionally went out together in the evenings for conversation and snacks of grilled meats. I felt adopted and accepted.

A question about infant mortality

After my sponsor's return I began to consider potential research projects. During the course of my review of the country's health data, I learned that a new health care system was being developed. The new system's approach was largely based on the writings of a Croatian public health pioneer, Andrija Štampar, who had founded the School of Public Health in Zagreb in 1927, and played many other important national and international roles.

Štampar's philosophy was based on the premise that the health of the people is a country's main social resource. He

argued that health care should be equally divided between clinical medicine and public health, and gave a high priority to preventive medicine.

In this socialist country, medical care was viewed as something to which all citizens were entitled. While the roles of the federal and republic governments were to set overarching requirements, it was up to the individual localities to set their specific priorities as well as generate necessary additional resources. The challenge in this kind of system is to achieve a proper balance between centralized planning and decentralized implementation. The health care planners decided to initially emphasize the care of women and children.

In my review of the available health data it was evident that infant mortality rates varied widely in different parts of the country. Given the evolving health system's priority on women and children, I proposed and carried out a research project that would attempt to explain these differences in infant mortality.

Four cities, each roughly the same size, were selected for the study: Kranj in Slovenia; Djakovo in Croatia; Nikšić in Montenegro; and Prizren in Kosovo. My plan was to visit the main health center in each town, administer a standard questionnaire, interview physicians and other health staff according to a protocol, and conclude with a series of structured visits to the homes of newborns accompanied by a nursing team. The Institute assigned a young physician, Slobodan, to accompany me on the visits and to help with the language.

Slobodan, a native of Belgrade, was unlike any travel companion I have had before, or since. Although he was a physician, he was unable to get a medical practice position in Belgrade so was working in some official capacity at the Institute. He told me that he "would rather drive a taxi in Belgrade than work as a physician anywhere else."

This was my first on-the-ground introduction to the issue of the distribution of physicians throughout a country, a theme that would influence my later teaching and research.

Slobodan also did not hesitate to discuss how strong the ethnic animosities still were in Yugoslavia. An opinionated, but relatively mild-mannered person, Slobodan told me that he slept with a gun under his bed at home. "The first bullet is for a Russian; the second for a Croat," he explained. Those strong ethnic sentiments were also reflected by my Belgrade family. Whenever I traveled throughout the country—which was often—Cica prepared a list of Serbian hotels and restaurants where I should stay and dine. Although I often ignored her recommendations as I wished to explore all facets of this country, the message was clear.

When I wrote my final report to my Johns Hopkins' sponsors, I noted that it was an open question "whether this patchwork nation of differing nationalities, cultures, religions, and traditions will solidify, or tear itself apart." I concluded that, "The success or failure of the Yugoslav political and health systems ultimately depends on the continuing unification of the country's people."

Following the death of Tito in 1980, the country fell apart in a stew of ethnic animosity.

Newborn home visits

The most productive parts of my project were the visits to the homes of newborn babies. It was an important opportunity to gain insight beyond opinions and aggregate data by seeing conditions first-hand. The home visits were intimate affairs, a chance to observe conditions and relationships up close. I could evaluate a broad range of critically important health-related factors including cleanliness, adherence to medical protocols, health knowledge, and the overall family situation.

Upon completion of my site visits, I reported that the differences in infant mortality among the four cities were largely due to what we now call the social determinants of health, those non-medical factors such as education, food, housing, income, employment, race, and ethnic status. Today, there is a consensus among health researchers that the social determinants of health have a greater impact on health and well-being than medical care per se. While this may seem evident, dealing with the social determinants remains an intractable problem for many countries, including the U.S.

At the end of my 1969 report, I listed the five most important lessons I learned from my project:

1. The meaning and importance of the right to health care;
2. That certain kinds of basic health care should be compulsory;
3. That healthcare consumers benefit from having direct feedback into the organization and financing of their own health care;
4. The importance of non-physician health professionals; and
5. The inherent value of unifying the preventive and curative approaches to health care.

More than 50 years later these lessons are still relevant for the U.S. When I returned to medical school a few months later, I arrived with a more worldly perspective and a new career objective.

Time for a love affair

I earned a modest monthly stipend, but there was a major problem: what was the best way to get the money to me? Sending money directly to Belgrade presented both exchange and security problems. The most straight-forward but tedious solution involved wiring the money to the American Express Office in Vienna (the closest AMEX office at the time). So, I regularly took the lengthy train ride from Belgrade to Vienna and picked up my Traveler's Checks.

After a couple of trips, I decided to opt for a change of scenery and return to Belgrade via Budapest. I obtained a two-day Hungarian tourist visa in Vienna which required prepayment in non-refundable dollars.

After an overnight stay and some sightseeing in Budapest, I needed to book a ticket to Belgrade before my visa ran out at midnight. I got in a long line that afternoon at a busy downtown tourist bureau and eventually found myself face-to-face with a stunningly beautiful woman who spoke excellent English.

After purchasing a ticket leaving late that night, I learned that Ildikó was a student at a nearby university. Smitten, I brazenly asked her if she could show me the university after work. To my delight she agreed, and I hung around the area until she got off work around 5 p.m. Instead of going to the university I impulsively suggested we go out to dinner. She was amenable and we walked to a nearby Italian restaurant where we sat outside and spent several hours getting acquainted, enjoying a meal, and listening to gypsy music.

It was getting dark when we finished, and I was acutely aware that my visa was expiring at midnight and that I had a train to catch. We went for a walk along the Danube, and Ildikó told me she was planning a vacation to Romania which had just recently been opened to Hungarian visitors. This was a politically sensitive issue as large areas of Romania had previously belonged to Hungary. Ildikó was especially interested in visiting some of those areas as they held meaning for her family. Throwing off what little restraint I had left, I shamelessly asked if I could join her. To my amazement she agreed. I gave her my address in Belgrade so she could contact me when her plans became firm. We kissed, and I headed to the train station.

The next several weeks passed as I frantically kept checking for her letter, making daily trips to the post office. Just as I was about to give up, I returned empty-handed from the post office and found a note on the kitchen table. Written in very clear Serbo-Croatian, Cica informed me that they were off to visit relatives in Sarajevo and would I please water the plants on the balcony. And, she noted that a telegram had come for me which she left in my room.

I tore it open and read the following from Ildikó: Eforie Nord and the next day's date. That was it. I had no idea what it meant. I consulted a map of Eastern Europe and there was a town called Eforie Nord in Romania, on the Black Sea, just south of Constanța.

I immediately went to the office of JAT, the Yugoslav airline, to book a flight. My options were limited: there was a late flight to Bucharest and an early morning flight to Constanța. From there I could take a train to Eforie Nord.

I arrived late in the evening in Bucharest and struggled to find an overnight accommodation. A tourist bureau secured a room in a home in a suburb where I shared a bed with a British engineer who was off to work in the Romanian oil fields. After a terribly restless night, I made it out to the airport for the flight to Constanța on TAROM, the Romanian airline.

The flight was dicey. We flew into a storm and my seat belt wasn't working. When I brought this malfunction to the attention of the flight attendant, she either shrugged or made the sign of the cross.

Once at the airport in Constanța I couldn't locate the train station. Since I couldn't speak Romanian all I could do was repeat over and over, "Eforie Nord." Eventually, I was guided to a bus and the driver affirmed that Eforie Nord was one of the destinations.

The bus was filled mostly with farmers holding chickens and a variety of other animals. At each stop I asked the driver if it was Eforie Nord and he kept saying no. Finally, he opened the door and told me the stop was Eforie Nord. I exited the bus in what looked like the middle of a field. I saw some railroad tracks in the distance and thought it would be a good idea to follow them. Around a bend I came to a train station. There, calmly sitting on a bench and reading a book, was Ildikó.

The next few days were wonderful. We strolled along the seafront, enjoyed getting to know each other, and finally made love. We then left by train to visit the area around the Carpathian Mountains. We explored much history and folklore including the myth of Dracula. After a week, I needed to get back to Belgrade so we parted with a plan for me to visit Budapest in a few weeks.

I did indeed make several trips to Budapest, and on my last trip before leaving to return to the U.S. she invited me to come back in a few months to spend New Year's. I left for Baltimore a few weeks later.

On December 23, 1969, I flew to Brussels, somehow managed to get a Hungarian visa, book train tickets to Vienna and Budapest, and send Ildikó a telegram.

It was very cold, and at the Austrian-Hungarian border, as was usual, the Austrian train engine was switched to

a Hungarian one which was unable to supply heat to the cars. I arrived at the train station in Budapest and again Ildikó was patiently waiting.

We had a wonderful reunion and enjoyed a New Year's party in the company of artists. I returned home on January 2, 1970, with plans to keep in touch.

Over the next two years our correspondence faded and it wasn't until June 1972 that I received what appeared to be a final letter from Ildikó. She told me that she wasn't able to write more frequently, despite several attempts, because she couldn't "hit the voice of friendship." She had entered into an unhappy marriage but didn't want to burden me with her problems. She explained that she simply "couldn't be my friend" because she still loved me and ended the letter with, "God be with you Steve."

Tito's Moon

The Apollo moon landing in July 1969 was a worldwide momentous event. In Belgrade the excitement was palpable and my Serbian family made plans, since they did not have a television set, to join others at another apartment. We gathered around a small black and white set with rabbit ears and followed the feed for a long time. Light snacks and drinks were provided. I struggled to hear the broadcast in English as the Serbian announcers loudly translated and commented on the evolving event.

In 1969, the U.S. was ending a rather turbulent decade. But as a foreigner in Yugoslavia I was always the recipient of respect and admiration for being an American. As the landing and its sequelae continued, a parade of individuals, whom I did not know and had never seen before, came up and patted me on the back as if this feat was somehow my own doing. It was both a proud and humble moment as I began to realize the enormous political capital the U.S. had accumulated in the 20th century.

It was also a moment for the country of Yugoslavia. Led by the Croatian freedom fighter, Josef Broz, known as Tito, those Belgradians watching the moon landing with me also took pride in being part of this important event. The moon did not belong to just the U.S., it belonged to everyone, as much Tito's moon as Richard Nixon's.

A new perspective

It took a first trip to Europe, a stay with a wonderful family, a country-wide medical project, and a love affair to provide me with a new sense of self as well as fresh insight about health care and my own country. My perspective had widened from a narrow view of the world to one that reflected the inherent value of other cultures and the

importance of history in the creation of those cultures.

I learned that, despite deep-seated tribalism, there were humanistic commonalities that had the potential to outweigh ethnic, political, and economic differences, but that these commonalities were quite fragile. Because I now understood there was often more than one right answer to a question or problem, I was able to more readily accept uncertainty as a fact of life. These lessons of cultural sensitivity made me less rigid and more tolerant.

Professionally, I realized that societal differences in language, economics, and political systems did not change the overarching goal of medicine to improve health and that this goal could not be fully obtained without addressing the social determinants of health.

When I returned to medical school, neuroscience no longer was my passion; social science became my north star. The lessons learned from my stay in Eastern Europe had changed me personally, guided each step of my subsequent career, and provided me with a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the importance of friendship and community.

As I write this memoir, I fear that much of the U.S.' international political capital has been eroded. Many of my friends from around the world are worried about me and my country, something that was inconceivable to me in Belgrade in 1969. Granted, perceptions in those days about America were undoubtedly based on a combination of myth and reality, but there was true admiration for the idea of America as an aspiration, even in a socialist county in southeastern Europe.

Perhaps those days of youthful engagement in a foreign culture sans internet, cell phone, or social media can be viewed as the typical once-in-a-lifetime *bildungsroman* experience. I remember vividly one hot August afternoon in Belgrade the month after the moon landing. Vojkan asked me to join him for coffee at a nearby outdoor café. I ordered Turkish coffee—that hot dark mysterious mixture served on an elaborate tray. To my surprise, Vojkan ordered a Coke. Our drinks arrived and Vojkan took obvious pleasure in pouring the Coke from the bottle into his glass. The drink sparkled and bubbled noisily. He took a long sip, sighed, and then looked up at me and asked, "Steve, do you have Coke in America?"

References

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