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# ENTERING YUGOSLAVIA, LEAVING SLOVENIA, SUMMER 1991

## Karl W. Ryavec (Rijavec)

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### Travel and arrival

It was Monday, 24 June 1991. After arriving in Munich by air I had a long wait at the train station. In the station restaurant people (Germans, I assumed) were having huge beers or huge desserts–or both. But at 1:25 P.M. I was on a train to Ljubljana, Slovenia, where I was to be a student in a beginner's course on Slovenian and then, later, the twenty-fourth Seminar on Slovene Language and Culture from 1 July to 13 July. (This latter event never took place.) It was my second time studying the language in Slovenia. The first was in 1974. Even then I heard and felt intimations of national consciousness, e.g., the usage "the Slovenian government."

Passing through Austria I noticed a man with a St. Bernard dog picking elderberry blossoms, something my father did every spring in order to make a tea for alleviating the effects of colds. Despite the spectacular scenery in Austria I was not in a good mood. It was clear there was going to be a war of some kind in Yugoslavia once Slovenia and Croatia declared sovereignty for themselves and tried to make Yugoslavia into a confederation.

The atmosphere in the train didn't help. There were only a very few glum-looking passengers on board once we were in Slovenia. It looked like a "last train to nowhere." And when we arrived, the taciturn border control officers, working hurriedly, probably under tension, did not relieve my feelings of having made some sort of mistake. If war came, what would it be like? I had served in the U.S. military (Navy) but never in a war. I consoled myself with my theory that Croatia, Serbia's immediate neighbor, would be attacked first and that Slovenia might avoid the conflict.

### Being there

I was living in Dom Ivana Cankarja on Poljanska, which I think was a dormitory of the medical school. In my room I made a great find, a pile of Donald Duck comics in Slovenian, probably left by a previous foreign student. I still have them. Sovereignty was declared on Tuesday, 25 June. This was a declaration only, not an attainment of independence. If I remember correctly, sovereignty was a taking on of self-government to a greater degree, not independence, and would have made Yugoslavia into a confederation. I think

independence was arrived at because of the central government's attack on Slovenia. Yugoslav troops were still based in Slovenia, with at least one large *caserne* (barracks) in Ljubljana. A big celebration was held in downtown that evening, but I missed it because I felt I had to study. (I had been placed in the "advanced beginners" group; eleven people, mostly young and mostly Slovenians from abroad. I was the only one from the USA.)

Wednesday, 26 June was very warm. The temperature may have gone over thirty degrees Centigrade.

On the way to class at the Philosophy Faculty downtown I got a "rush" upon seeing the Slovenian flag while passing the bishop's palace, which was flying the Slovenian flag. I had never seen one before but I knew what it had to be. And I mused on the historical role of the Catholic Church in politics while I walked to class. (I was not in the emotional position of the Ukrainian peasant who said, upon seeing the Ukrainian flag for the first time, that it did not give him any feeling at all; it was all too new for him. Slovenia had been on the way to independence for some time. )

We were into it now. Jet planes could often be heard over Ljubljana. They certainly were not "ours." During a morning break I was in the coffee lounge and noticed, with some concern, a Yugoslav military helicopter hovering low in the near distance. "They're just buzzing," said one of the faculty members with contempt. When I was returning to the dorm at the end of the day I noticed Slovenian defense forces armed with machine pistols standing in pairs at intervals along the way. (The HQ of the Slovenian territorial defense force, the Teritorijalna Obramba or TO, was nearby.) Each day I noticed the increasingly serious look of one of these sentries, a man in his thirties, I thought. Listening to the local radio I heard a discussion of previous diplomatic recognitions of breakaway territories and mentions of clashes between the TO and the Yugoslav Army, the JNA. I noticed that staff people in the dorm were "glued" to the TV, which was broadcasting press conferences for foreign journalists being given by the Slovenian foreign minster, Dimitrij Rupel, and footage of the destruction caused by air attacks. It was evident that these attacks caused real shock in TV viewers, a shock that was probably driving Slovenes and the central government even further apart and making Slovenes even more determined in their position. Everyone understood that Slovenia was being attacked with weapons that had been paid for by Slovenians.

At 7:46 A.M. on Thursday, 27 June a Yugoslav copter passed very low over the house next door. The radio reported an air attack on the airport at Brnik . This attack really angered some Slovenians. It destroyed some brand new, and expensive, American passenger planes that had been bought by Slovenia. The aerial intimidation of Ljubljana was tried—but soon ended. The "buzzing" of Ljubljana was light now; only two planes during the morning and one plane and one copter by 7 P.M. My teacher cheerfully referred to one of

these flights as an "exercise." Government planes were being shot down. It was very calm in town, though people were talking about what was happening. Barricades had been set up around Ljubljana. I did not see any at that time because I had not yet been to the outskirts of the city. A Slovenian friend told me that it was very difficult to drive anywhere because of these barricades, but that "We will survive" and that the Yugoslav Army cannot change anything. And nor can the U.S. prevent Slovenia gaining its independence, he added. (Note that James Baker, the U.S. Secretary of State, had been in Yugoslavia earlier and called for its continued existence. And President Bush had done the same thing for the USSR in his "chicken Kiev" speech. I think the dissolution of these two regimes was seen by the Administration as complicating things.) My friend emphasized that the United States cannot stop the process of change in the world. The U.S. cannot have what it has and expect the rest of the world to accept whatever it has, he said. He also noted that "It's a bad time to die." He was trying to arrange a burial for a relative and found it rather difficult and problematic. Getting to the cemetery was not a routine matter. What if you ran into a Yugoslav tank column on the way? A bridge barricade at Ormoz was fired upon by tanks with some property loss, the radio reported. There were articles in the newspapers by retired officers commenting on the conflict. One pointed out that the air force had no big bombs; only anti-personnel munitions, and accordingly it could not do serious structural damage. Another article said, correctly, that the Yugoslav assaults on border posts were too limited in conception and power to undo the Slovenian drive for independence. These attacks surprised me. I had assumed that the JNA would mount one big assault and try to "decapitate" the rebellion by taking Ljubljana (on the model of the Russian taking of Prague in 1968. But my view was, of course, that of a Soviet specialist). So, when the radio announced that an "armada" was approaching Slovenia I thought, "this is it"; the "big attack" was now on. But not yet, it turned out. The JNA had dispersed its forces along a wooded and often mountainous border. Accordingly, Slovenian forces never encountered a large opposing force, but only many small and psychologically unprepared units, several of which were defeated early on. (See *Deset Dni Vojne na Slovenijo* [Ljubljana: Mladina Monoliti, 1991]. This collection of photos, some quite graphic, are from the period 26 June to 5 July 1991 and was given to me at the Slovenian Ministry of Defense in 1992.) And cutting off TV and radio broadcasts was not attempted until the second week of the struggle. (Note that the Yugoslav garrisons in Slovenia could not get into the fight because it would have been suicidal for them to try to leave their barracks which were surrounded by Slovenian forces and by other armed Slovenians. Yugoslavia had allowed people to own hunting firearms.) I bought four "Ida Red" apples at the market and wondered how these "American" apples had come to Slovenia.

My notebook is full of comments for Friday, 28 June. The radio reports that a Yugoslav tank was destroyed and that fifty-nine officers and men

of the JNA, not only Slovenians, have gone over to the Slovenian side. (At that time the Yugoslav military was simply not psychologically prepared to fight other Yugoslavs.) A friend tells me that 18 JNA tanks and several copters have been destroyed. Sounds plausible; overflights are no longer occurring. I notice small anti-aircraft guns at a few intersections and columns of Obramba on the move. There was a barricade of big vehicles, fire and tanker trucks, near the Philosophical Faculty and at the end of Cankarjeva, beyond the American Center. I learn that the seminar will no longer meet at the Faculty but in a dorm. I begin to feel left behind. The Slovenians from Italy have left. Apparently, their government suggested it. A few of the Austrians leave by car. When told most border crossings were closed they replied that they would hike over the Alps if necessary. I noticed a lot of serious-looking people with full shopping bags. They were stocking up for a "siege." I went to the American Center for some news about the U.S. Government response to events but learned nothing much. At 2:15 P.M. I am told to go to the shelter in the dorm basement if I heard sirens. "Very dangerous," now, I'm told. In mid-afternoon I try to read *Delo* with the aid of a dictionary. A bird is eating cherries from a nearby tree. It's not the bird's war. The radio is presenting measures to take in advance of bombing—e.g., taping windows, etc. But life has not been totally disrupted; a man next door is calmly doing masonry work on his house. The radio announces that at 6:30 P.M., a mass for those who have been killed will be held at the cathedral. I go and am rather impressed. The cathedral is packed and the mood is serious. The mass is said by the (arch-?) Bishop of Ljubljana, Metropolitit Alojzij Sustar, I believe, who announces whom he has telephoned or written about the situation, including a cardinal "who is from our people," I thought he said. He calls on Slovenians to be strong. His statement is nationalistic in the best sense; always realistic and responsible. I return to the dorm and turn on the radio. It was quoting Hemingway on war. At 9:25 P.M., a friend calls and we arrange to meet tomorrow for lunch. As I turn from the telephone call I see on the TV a person I know, Anton Bebler. I muse on Slovenia being a small country with a feeling of community.

On Saturday, 29 June church bells were ringing at 8:47 A.M., What does it mean? At 10:47 A.M. the radio announces in English that though a cease fire has been announced the JNA "continues to violate it." My friend arrives and on the way to his parents' place we give a ride to a woman who had been waiting for a bus that had not arrived. She gave us a bag of peaches in thanks. At my friend's parents' home we tried to call my wife in the U.S. but we couldn't get through. After lunch we "toured" the barricades in his car. Huge privately owned construction vehicles had been placed in groups. There were anti-aircraft guns in the park around the castle. Officers of the Obramba tended to be bearded while the enlisted people were clean-shaven. By the time I was dropped off the Obramba was getting pretty serious. I saw two drivers stopped and checked out with their hands up. (I had been told that the Obramba had

been fired on.) I talked to a friendly member of the Obramba who was directing traffic. He was very well-equipped, with a hand-held missile as well as a rifle. While talking to him I tried to read the stenciling on the missile without being obvious about it.. Was it in Latin or Cyrillic letters? In Cyrillic, I decided. At 7:40 P.M., while back at the dorm, I noticed two members of the Obramba with light machine guns pushing out the perimeter. Unreal, I felt; academic activity on one side of a window and military preparations on the other. At 9 PM the radio said a police vehicle had been fired on.

No one in Belgrade has publicly justified the operation in Slovenia, an indicator that the military is the instigator. Is this part of the establishment of a military dictatorship, I wondered? I thought it ironic that a Stalinist-Brezhnevite mentality no longer ruling in the USSR is active and powerful in a state aided for so long by the United States.

**Departure**

Now I write from memory instead of notes. At some point the director of the seminar had called all us to a meeting where she announced that it would have to end. No passenger planes were landing or departing from Slovenia. Public transportation was no longer running. It was not possible to visit relatives in western Slovenia (Primorsko). Dropping into a store I realized that everyone was grimly shopping for a siege. We were in a new, "bounded" situation, despite Slovenian victories. I began to listen to my little radio very attentively. War does focus the mind and even aids in translating a foreign language. The radio announced that an "armada" was on its way to Slovenia. I was puzzled by the term but then realized it was a general term for a large military force. I decide I will leave on foot, traveling northward and only at night. It should take only two days, I hoped. But then I learn from the radio that the Austrian government was putting together a train to Austria for its citizens. I decide to try for that.

On this last day several of us walked about downtown Ljubljana, in effect saying goodbye to Slovenia. At one point, right in front of us a man, guarded by four or so soldiers with automatic rifles, was carrying a computer from one building to another,. I wondered if it held the new country's main database. A little further on, near the Tromostovje bridge, some Slovenian troops marching in single file had just been halted. It looked very professional, I thought. (Of course, many men had served in the JNA and were familiar with the military life.)

Back at the dorm a fellow student, a Slovenian from Austria, told me he had to report to his unit. His mother had telephoned to tell him he had been called up. He had a car and offered to drop me at the train station on his way out. So I scrambled and got my things together quickly. I looked around the room and saw that I had everything and felt a bit proud I was "packing out" all

that I had "packed in." Downstairs I told the woman at the desk I was leaving. She was glued to the TV and took minimal notice.

At the station I met a USIS man who took my name for his records and an American graduate student, also leaving, who was in Ljubljana studying the architect Jože Plečnik. After a short wait the Austrian train rolled in, bedecked with Austrian flags on its top and sides. I had the feeling this was a movie scene I had seen earlier. Most of the passengers seemed to be women and children. The trip was standing room only for me, but it was short. We were soon in Austria, where I got off at the first stop and took a train to Munich and a plane home the next day. A sad note, a Bulgarian student from the seminar was not allowed entry into Austria. He had no passport, I heard. (During the trip he had voiced his very strong fears of an air attack on the train.) Once in Munich I called my wife from the hotel. She had been trying to contact me to urge me to leave. The American media had, I thought, made it all seem scarier than it was. (I was even interviewed by local TV after I was home. So I contributed to the media frenzy.)

**Parting thoughts**

I have the very strong impression that the Yugoslav attack "clinched" Slovenian independence. It brutally and cleanly severed whatever ties remained to the idea of "Yugoslavism." The televised pictures of the Yugoslav military's killings and destruction caused genuine shock and dismay among Slovenians and only strengthened their determination to be fully independent and free. Viewers were seeing "their" war and were, in a way, "inside" their TV sets. The armed struggle for Slovenia also gave the Slovenians greater confidence and pride. Slovenia was winning! "Little Slovenia is doing alright," people would say.

The experience has also made me reflect on the power of culture (in the anthropological sense). The culture of every nation is as deep, complicated, and strongly interwoven as that of any other. Accordingly, understanding a small nation requires just as much effort as does understanding a large one. For example, Russia (my field of study) may look difficult to understand, but Slovenia is just as "deep" and complex. I also reflected on the fact that only two people, my parents, gave me a strong feeling for Slovenia and a "definite" amount of Slovenian "mentality." This alone shows how strong a culture is. Just a few people can pass on a good bit of it. And my parents did it in an "English" (as we called it) neighborhood.

And now, in 1991, the Slovenians achieved the statehood they had dreamt of and sought earlier in history. One of my father's brothers died in the failed attempt, after World War One, to create a Slovenian state. And after World War Two, at least some Slovenians hoped that this time independence

would be theirs (as stated in a letter from a relative in Slovenia sent to my parents right after the end of the war.)

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

**Addendum: The CIA take on the Ten Days' War: Excerpts**

In 2002 the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency published an unclassified, handsome two-volume book on the Yugoslav wars. It is "housed" in a box of sorts that includes a map case. Map 1 is of the war in Slovenia. (U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *Balkan Battlegrounds: A Military History of the Yugoslav Conflict, 1990-1995* [Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, Office of Russian and European Analysis, May 2002]) See also a book by Janez Janša, the Slovenian Defense Minister at the time, *The Making of the Slovenian State 1988–1992: The Collapse of Yugoslavia* (Ljubljana: Mladinska Knjiga, 1994). Below are some brief excerpts from the book, given to supplement my limited comments above. The CIA had time to study and assess the war from a broad perspective. I was writing from within a constrained position in one particular place.

p. 43. Significance: "Its [Yugoslavia's–KR] death sentence was pronounced in Slovenia's declaration of independence in June 1991."

p. 45. Yugoslavia's lack of preparation for the conflict to come: "The Yugoslav People's Army was ill prepared and ill suited for the complex challenges it was about to face."

p. 48. The republics' Territorial Defense (TO) forces: "It was becoming increasingly clear by the end of the 1980s that TO units were now...becoming *threats* to the JNA....The JNA's move to disable the Slovenian and Croatian territorial defenses [was-KR]...one of the many markers pointing down the road to war."

p. 49. Origins of the war: "The ground work for Slovenia's independence bid had been laid months and years before [1991–KR], in a series of carefully chosen political, economic, and military steps...."

p. 51. Preparation of the Slovene TO: "The JNA's attempt to confiscate the Slovenian TO's weapons...enabled Ljubljana to flush out all of the Territorial Defense officers whose loyalties were with Belgrade."

p. 54. Arms: "Ljubljana must have covertly imported something like 8,000 small arms between May 1990 and June 1991." "Most noteworthy and significant was...a number of Armbrust antitank rocket launchers in December 1990." A shipment of secure communications equipment arrived only on 17 June 1991 and the largest covert arms shipment (Operation BOR) did not arrive until 21 June, just before the war began. Despite all the arms imports the CIA study says it would have been impossible to arm all members of the TO

had the conflict lasted longer than it did.

p.65. Limitations of Yugoslavia: “The best the JNA might have won for its government would have been the possibility of dictating the terms of Slovenia’s secession, but no more than that.”

p. 68. Casualties: “remarkably light” for Slovenia.

Who started it? Although it is “technically correct” that the federal government was the first to use force, “the Slovenians had built and set a mousetrap for the JNA, then baited the Belgrade leadership until it sent the JNA walking into it.”

p. 72. Overall judgment: “While the Slovenians’ military successes were undoubtedly significant, in many ways their crucial victories were won not on the battlefield but on the television news and in the minds of Western decision-makers. The Slovenians managed to maneuver the JNA such that it was outflanked, literally and figuratively, at every level of the conflict.” And note: Defense Minister Janša had studied Finland’s resistance against the numerically superior Soviet forces during the Winter War of 1939–40, particularly how “the Finns used their territory to maximum advantage.”