

Milan

Literary Club

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Albert Pyle

On my most recent visit to see the Aged P., one of my many siblings pulled out for me some photographs that were stashed where our mother had put them sometime before she died, eight or so years ago. I was in town to wish my father a happy ninety-fifth birthday, but I was also there to pump him for information about the Colonel who is the subject of this paper, so the picture I was most interested in was an oversized snapshot taken on a bright day in the early nineteen-fifties. Were there not a rule against that sort of thing, I would have found a way to project the picture on the wall behind me here tonight, or to have a great glossy enlargement of the picture on an easel. Certainly if this were a magazine article, the editor would insist on including the shot. But you must be content with my description. I'll do my best.

There are five people in the photograph, and if you had spent as many hours rummaging through the family photograph collection as I have, you would know right off that someone other than my mother, who was the usual family photographer, took the picture. Mother never quite grasped the intricacies of parallax viewing, and her popout Kodak's lensless viewfinder was not user friendly, so her pictures tended to put the subject somewhere down in the lower right hand corner, smiling but legless, devoting most of the frame to grass or driveway, or sidewalk. This picture, however, was taken by someone who knew what he was doing. The focus is sharp, and the subject is centered.

The correctly centered subject is a group of four boys and a middle aged man. It's an outside shot. There is a wide white gateway arch, a shallow arc, concrete, I think, over the group, and a graveled walk running diagonally to the back of the scene. The walk is flanked by small bare trees and shrubs. There are no buildings to be seen, but I recognize the gate and know that the photograph was taken in the garden of St Sava Serbian Orthodox church and monastery, a couple of miles north of Libertyville, Illinois, where we lived.

The four boys are three of my brothers and myself. Johnno and Nicky, my two older brothers, and I are standing in the rear of the group. We are dressed in Sunday clothes. Johnno and Nicky are smiling the way they always do in pictures from those days. Johnno, the oldest, grins without a shred of self-consciousness. He will grow up to be devoid of artifice. Nicky smiles his photograph smile, an expression that will irritate him every time he runs across it in many pictures in his adulthood. I, on the other hand, am glowering, my topcoat unbuttoned, half-on and spread wide by my hands which are in the pockets, so that I look like a problem. I'm six or seven years old, and I have become a little strange when I'm in a camera viewer. I'm actually still not quite over that, and I'm not really sure what that's about.

Our brother Howard, closest to me in age and a beautiful child, stands happily between the knees of a squatting, equally pleased and perfectly groomed, grey haired man in glasses. The natty gentleman is the Colonel. His name is Milan Andjelkovic, and he is part of our household. St Sava is his church, not ours. We're Presbyterian, and, as far as we know, there is not a Slav to be found anywhere in our family tree.

The unseen St Sava church must have been a surprising sight to passing midwestern motorists, but it was familiar to us. Not

terribly large, but bristling with onion-domed spires and stuccoed in orange, St Sava's had been built close enough to the road to make quite a statement.

I realize now that it stood in a remarkably beautiful place. I say now, because then, I couldn't see the scenery for the onion domes. But the Serbs had bought perhaps 160 acres of gently rolling land that sloped down to the trees lining the ambling DesPlaines river. They weren't raising any crops other than hay for their frisky but doomed goats. With no other structures in the picture and a long view across the, wide and shallow DesPlaines valley, the countryside was as close to Constable as you got in those parts.

Downhill a bit from the church were some large barrack-like looking structures. I had gotten the idea that the buildings held hundreds of Orthodox monks, but I realize now that there were never any monks to be seen, and that the most use the buildings got was housing second generation Serbian teenagers shipped out from Chicago in the summer to get an earful of the mother tongue while enjoying the Slavic camp experience.

No one in my family ever writes anything helpful on the back of photographs, and that includes me. But I have been through the red hinged cardboard box full of photos that was the core of the collection so many times, quizzing my mother about every single snapshot, that I probably know as much as any living human about that completely unorganized and unlabeled record of family life.

I know that the picture with the Colonel was taken on some kind of special occasion, because we're all cleaned up and in those Sunday clothes I mentioned. It's possible that we are at the monastery as guests at one of the Serbian barbecued goat events that were not uncommon, but I think it is more likely that we were there for the wedding of Yelena, a Serbian girl.

This was the first wedding I had attended, and it was a doozy. It is, apparently, unorthodox to have pews in the sanctuary, so the guests had all stood for what seemed to me to be hours as Yelena, a Serbian girl we didn't know, was firmly wed to her Serbian fiance. I remember seeing their hands tied together with white cloth and watching them walk circles around the gilded altar following the priest who was dressed not at all like the Reverend James B. Muckle, the jolly, dim, Presbyterian minister we endured on ordinary Sundays. At St Sava's the priest was gotten up like a Byzantine ceiling, everything flowing from the top of a stovepipe bit of headgear. It would seem to me that it would be harder to undo such a ceremony than to end one of today's greeting-card affairs, and I wonder if that is born out in Orthodox divorce rates.

So my unpleasant expression in the photograph may have something to do with my having stood on six year old legs and breathing incense and listening to slavonic chanting for long long hours.

Or not. It is just as likely that I was reacting in graceless fashion to the favoritism being shown to the innocent four year old Howard, whom I saw as my rival in many stupid ways, by Colonel Andjelkovic, who didn't make any bones about having a favorite. This was very much against an ironclad family rule which was "No Favorites Allowed." And the Colonel was, to my very young thinking, family.

But, of course, he wasn't.

Milan Andjelkovic was a displaced person. A DP. When was the last time you heard that expression? I suppose it's possible that some of you haven't even heard the term. But there were plenty of displaced persons around in the world in which my conscious awoke. The rejiggering of Eastern Europe after the second world war was more than the placement of new

national borders. It was an occasion for ethnic cleansing on a scale that was every bit as large if not quite as vicious and fatal as that which had gone on during the war. Our esteemed Allied colleague Joe Stalin rightly understood that his wartime chums would have little interest in interfering with him if he went to work settling scores for wartime grievances, sometimes real, but mostly imagined. But Comrade Joe wasn't the only displacer of persons.

There were scores to settle in Yugoslavia, where the Communist partisans had come out on top of the murderous wartime struggle in the Balkan peninsula that was one of the nastier sideshows in the worldwide struggle. One of the first groups to learn how things would shake out was the Volksdeutsch. At the end of the war, millions of German speakers still lived in Yugoslavia where their families had drifted over hundreds of years. They had been citizens of the Kingdom of the South Slavs for generations, and were so far removed from their German past that they had no roots whatsoever in what had been the Reich. Unfortunately for them, they owned desirable land and useful businesses, and they spoke German, so as far as the new Yugoslavian socialist republic and its Croatian strongman Joseph Tito were concerned, they had lost the war and they were history. They were expelled from Yugoslavia, egested into Germany and Austria for the occupying powers to deal with.

One of those millions of displaced Volksdeutsch was a three year old girl named Erika, who would start school in an Austrian refugee camp, move with her brother and widowed mother to the United States, and grow up in Chicago where she would meet and eventually marry Johnno, the brother with the reckless grin.

But the displaced Milan Andjelkovic was not Volksdeutsch. He was a Serb, a deeply rooted native. Yugoslavian, of course, but Serb first and foremost. An army officer in the service of

the young King Peter, who was himself, at the end of the war, a displaced person. He, like thousands of other Serbs, Croats, Montenegrins, Slovenes, and Bosnians, had found themselves on the losing side in the battle to the death amongst Partisans, Chetniks, and other factions, to win control of Yugoslavia once the occupying Nazis were defeated.

The historians here tonight will remember that the Allies were influential in the outcome of intramural struggle, and some of them may actually remember how it came to pass that the communists under the Croatian Josip Broz won the trust and backing of the Americans and English, and how the Royalists under the Serb Draha Mihailovic came to lose that trust. It had to do with which side was more sincerely and obviously anti-Nazi in the struggle to regain control of Yugoslavia, a contest in which the Royalists and Mihailovic seemed to be more accommodating of the invaders, the enemies of their enemies the Partisans, than one would want to see.

Did the Royalists panic and flee needlessly when the Axis fell, or were they forced out of their own country by the new government? If you paid the least attention to the bloodletting in Yugoslavia in the nineteen-nineties you must have seen that knives are sharp in the Balkans, and memories are long.

A footnote: the latest novel from one of my all time favorite living writers Alan Furst, master of the sub-genre of thrillers set in the years between the world wars, is Spies of the Balkans. If you will take time out of your busy lives to read it, it will give you a sense of that world far better than I can here tonight.

Where do you flee if you are a middle-aged, possibly a bit fascist, career Serbian army officer loyal to the absent king whose government considers him non gratus? Well, if you want to go to a little corner of greater Serbia unbloodied by the war, a

place where you can go to sleep fairly certain that communist bully boys won't come knocking on your door to take you away in the middle of the night, a place where there are Serbs like you who sing the old songs, eat the young goats, and nurse your hatred of the Croatian interloper, you go to Lake County, up in the extreme northeast corner of Illinois, just beyond the commuter belt and near the Wisconsin state line, to the church and monastery of St Sava, a complex established decades before by homesick Serbian emigres. You will leave everything behind, including, in the case of the Colonel, your wife and two daughters, and you will start a new life.

For Milan Andjelkovic, a man for whose skills as a palace guard there was not much demand in Europe, much less in America, the new life was a place in what I must confess, was a most out-of-the-ordinary household, the large and still growing Pyle family of Libertyville, the town closest to the church of St Sava. How on earth did that happen?

That was one of a list of questions about the Colonel and his years with our family that I had for my father on the recent birthday trip. Because I remember no time before the Colonel was in residence, I had lost confidence over the years in what I thought to be the circumstances of this strange arrangement. Such information I did have, I had gotten from my mother in the Colonel's early years with us when I was too young to ask the right follow up questions, and the politics of the displaced persons had become entangled with Senator McCarthy's communist witch hunts which were going on at the same time. My father had stuck up for somebody at some public meeting, bravely, according to Mother, but I didn't know whether the tense moment was over the violently anti-communist Serbs moving into our community or traitorous pro-communists moving into the State Department. It is quite possible that the people with whom Dad exchanged words

didn't know either. Americans, I have learned over the years, have a terribly shaky grip on foreign relations.

My father's answer on this recent trip was that there was a desperate need for someone to teach English to the refugees so that they could find jobs, and somebody knew that Mother, who might not even have known there was such a thing as Serbo-Croatian, had majored in Romance languages in college, and they were foreign weren't they? so she got asked. Even my father knew that that was a weak connection, but that was all he remembered sixty years after the fact. Surely there must have been someone who had better credentials somewhere in the county. The question was probably not credentials but willingness to do the job. Mother, alas for her, knew she was smart, and thought she could do anything. She was only in her mid-thirties, had a great constitution, liked showing off, and didn't see having four children below the age of twelve to be a deal breaker.

So some of my earliest memories were coming home from kindergarten to find Mother in skirt and high heels, speaking French to a class of two or three very admiring Serbian army officers. I should note that she was as trim as a jaguar in those years, and very very pretty. She served coffee.

Those were the years before teaching English as a Second Language had become a specialty. Mother had not only not had any instruction in how to teach English, she had not had any courses in how to teach anything, so the classes must have taken their own peculiar course. The time to learn a second or third language is when one is young, which the officers were not, and their English reflected that sad truth for most of their years in diaspora. Only the dashing Major Militan P. Lilic, who went on to become an instructor at military boarding schools, really got the hang of it.

But you don't usually invite your students to come live with you, do you? You almost certainly don't invite your students to come live with you when the student is an unrelated, possible fascist collaborator with a family in Belgrade, do you? That was one of the questions I put to my father this summer, and that was just one of the questions he found himself unable to answer.

The Colonel had hung his hat in one of four bedrooms in the six room house my parents had bought a few years after the war when there were only the four boys, one of them a baby. In those days before America got rich, it was routine to have boys bunking together, which was the situation at the time at our house. The younger two in one bedroom and the older in another, leaving what my mother optimistically called the guest room available to house a jobless Balkan army officer who spoke no English.

We weren't the only ones to do this, by the way. Several families in town took in a DP. But we most assuredly had the lowest space-to-occupant ratio. We had that even before the Colonel hung his one suit and a pair of trousers in the guest closet.

"What," I asked my father, "were you thinking?" A question he asked me many many times when I was under his care and which it was my duty as a reporter to pose. "What was the discussion?" I wanted to know. The idea of installing a permanent Balkan guest under my own roof is, I guarantee you, one that would come in for more than a little debate with my own not unreasonable wife had I the brass to propose such a thing. But Dad didn't remember much discussion. And perhaps there wasn't. Mother never believed that Dad would propose anything unpleasant if it didn't have to be done.

And perhaps it did. But I probed anyway. "Didn't you ever discuss how it was working out? Was it ever a source of unhappiness?" My father said that he didn't remember any problem. And it is possible that Mother, who counted only the sunny hours, never complained. What he said last summer was that it wasn't a bad deal. The arrangement gave them a built in baby sitter. And that was true.

My parents didn't have a normal social life. Or not what I considered normal. Their odd collection of friends tended not to put on dinners, and my father had no interest in sports. But he did like to go to the movies. And at least once a week he would call home from the print shop that was the family business to see if Mother wanted to see some movie he had his eye on. As often as not the movie was in the city, an hour away by car, and didn't start until 9 or 9:30. So it was a convenience to have an adult in the house, an adult who, if he didn't exactly speak English, could be counted on to keep good martial order for a few hours.

That was the upside for Dad. The upside for mother was that she didn't have to do the dishes. The Colonel did them. And let me set the stage for that. Mother, who was from a well-run household in Lexington, had certain standards that she tried to keep up even in what she privately thought was a boorish corner of an unlovely state. Every night a couple of us boys swung an antique, Kentucky, cherry, dropleaf dining table out into the middle of a smallish living room and set out service for - seven, eventually nine, for supper. The table had to be placed with some care as perhaps a fifth of the floor space was taken up with the grand piano that was Mother's instrument and escape mechanism. Even set just so, the table required anyone rounding the corner nearest the piano to assume a posture not

unlike the profile of a table fork to make it safely through. This is something I can still do, by the way.

The kitchen was small and poorly planned, but it was what Mother had to work with, and every night she would assemble meat and two veg for four, then five, than, six boys, a daughter, a husband, and a Serbian colonel. And every night she would trash that small poorly planned kitchen as badly as a busload of hippies on an all-day acid trip. There has never been anything like it. What she did not have to do for the years the Colonel was in residence, was live with the consequences of her undisciplined culinary blitzkrieg. The Colonel did.

It was part of the arrangement, and I believe it was his idea. Perhaps I did not make it clear that the Colonel was a guest. He did not pay for his room and board. He was just there. But he, like all of his fellow officers, was a great admirer of the woman they all called Madame Pyle, and it is likely that he, unlike my father, was offended by the sight of her undoing the nightly carnage in the kitchen. So he took on the job.

This was no small favor. It was not just that Augean kitchen. It was his rank. Colonel was a meaningless term to me in those days. It was a name. I didn't know beans about military life. But a colonel is as senior an officer in the Balkan peninsula as it is in the United States of America. It may have even been more senior in the mind of Milan Andjelcovic. The army in which he served was separated only a few years from the splendor of Austria Hungary, and Serbia was so much older than the U.S. I very much doubt that the Colonel had ever washed a dish of his own before coming to live with us, but he washed hundreds of thousands before his stay ended. He cannot have enjoyed the experience. Who would? But to compare it to strutting about the palace in Beograd. Well.

After dinner, but before moving in to do KP, however, there was a fairly splendid coffee and cigarette routine. Mother would pour out coffee into her ridiculously impractical Bavarian porcelain cups, Dad and the Colonel pushed their wingback chairs from the opposite ends of the crowded table, Dad shook out a pack of Herbert Tareytons, and the Colonel got out his silver cigarette case, extracted one of the Lucky Strike halves he had created using a special cigarette slicing gizmo, the technical plans for which no longer exist, screw the Lucky into a black cigarette holder, and the two men would light up. I never really got over that, and if I knew I had only a couple of months to live, my first purchase would be a carton of Tareytons. It was a spectacular moment every night. But then, when the after dinner smokes were smoked and the coffee drained, the Colonel got up, tied on a printer's apron, and waged war on the kitchen.

That was not the only work he did for the family. Having no skills of any value on the Midwestern labor market, the Colonel went to work for my father in the bindery at the Village Press. The bindery is what Mother called it. We boys called it the basement, because that is what it was. Three fourths of the basement was taken up with the storage of paper and odd machinery that my father thought would be a crime to get rid of. It was crowded, dank, and dark. The remaining quarter, where a bit of light managed to make it through a small, seldom cleaned window, was taken up with a large worktable, a lethal looking paper cutter capable of cutting a human thorax in two, a power paper punch, a delicate and bad tempered folding machine, and a foot operated industrial-strength stapler. When he was not upstairs, feeding the ancient Gordon hand-fed letterpress, this corner of the basement was the Colonel's duty station.

Like the guest room, the bindery was an island of order in a sea of chaos. To give my father proper credit, every single piece of printed paper that left the shop was perfect. There were no typographical errors. Everything was correctly composed. Nothing was ever misspelled. But this perfect product came out of a messy process. The Village Press was a hot-type shop, a miniature version of the infernos that used to turn out newspapers in the days before the offset process. There were hundreds of trays of type sorted by font, each tray containing a lethal quantity of lead dust, electrically powered presses that blasted drying powder on every piece of paper, and, sifting from the pressed tin overhead, particulate from the coal heated years. I don't recall ever seeing a broom or a mop in use at any time.

But the Colonel's bindery was tidy. I didn't realize it at the time, but the order was military. And the packages of printing that he wrapped up in brown paper ripped from a huge roll of the stuff at the end of his worktable were splendidly uniform creations, square cornered and taped tight as Jimmy Carter's smile. You could, as they say, bounce a quarter off them. The Colonel's wrappings were as perfect as the product they protected.

There were other duties. Collating, stuffing envelopes, making up tablets, stapling, binding. None highly skilled, but all demanding patience and attention, and a determination not to die of boredom.

Like doing the dishes, running the bindery had to have been a comedown. However he made himself do it, he did it. Howard and I can still hum the one Serbian song he used to sing to himself as he worked. We thought it must have been something sad about missing Yugoslavia. After the Balkan wars of the

nineties, though, we wondered if it had been about driving Bosnian muslims into the ocean.

Because the Colonel was, above everything else, a Serb. Every night, after the kitchen had been stowed - and I should point out that he was not alone in his martyrdom - we boys dried and stowed every one of the awesome stream of dishes, megagazillions of flatware, and battalions of cooking pots that passed through his dishpan - after that awful labor, the colonel took his copy of the American Srbobran, a newspaper printed alternatively in Roman and Cyrillic type twice a week, upstairs to the guest room, closed the door, and had a private life.

When I retire every evening, I set my lurid spy thriller and overpriced Austrian eyeglasses on a cherry bedside table that used to sit in the guest room. When the Colonel was in residence, that table held a Smith-Corona portable (roman letters) on which the Colonel wrote an endless river of aerogrammes to family and friends in Beograd. The now rarely heard sound of a manual typewriter will always connote childhood evenings. As he typed, the Colonel set his cigarette on the edge, not always remembering to pick it up before it burned a shadow into the cherry. My father-in-law long ago refinished the table with his customary atomic-bomb blast-proof mirror finish, but he was unable to sand deep enough to eliminate completely the charred spots from the Luckies, and I sort of like that.

Once in a while there would be a phone call for him from another local Serb, and he would have to emerge from the smoke fug in the super-tidy bedroom, and come to the bottom of the stairs where the only telephone lived. He would squat on one of the bottom steps and chat away in rapid-fire Serbo-Croatian, laughing in a different and easier way from his broken-English

laugh, throwing in lots of "dobras", the Balkan equivalent of the Japanese mushi mushi.

Other than those phone calls, though, after the dishes were done he was out of sight. While most of the correspondence went to Madam Andjelcovic, I was given to understand that there was a fair amount of political writing going off in some direction. As far as the Colonel and his exiled friends were concerned, the murderous war between the Partisans and the Chetniks was not over, and would never be. (And, as we have all since learned, it wasn't) While we non-Serbs were gnawed with worry about the Soviets and their plans for world domination, the Colonel and his friends were obsessed with Tito's domination of the Balkans. The Croatian Communist, the cynical atheistic controller of the orthodox clergy was the Great Enemy whose overthrow the Colonel and his political cronies lived to see. Because as long as the bastard was in power, they would never be able to see their homes.

Or their families. In these days of cheap long distance and Skype - do you know what Skype is? It's an internet service that allows one to have a televised visit with anyone else who has a Skype setup - we have, I think, lost track of how lonely and isolated from one's home and family it was possible to be. And as I have told you, the Colonel had a family.

The Colonel possessed, as far as I know, only one studio portrait of his plump dentist wife, a pose featuring the pearls he had bought her from the very slender wages he earned in the bindery. I don't remember any pictures at all of his daughters, whose names I recall after all these years - Gordana and Dubrovka - I guess I thought they were some sort of cousins when first I heard about them. As far as he and we knew, it would have been impossible to reach any of them by telephone. I think that we all assumed the iron curtain had sliced through the

telephone lines when it clanked down. Perhaps that wasn't true. What is true is that after fleeing Serbia, the Colonel never again saw the daughters he and his wife had reared to adulthood.

Both of the daughters were married, and it was a source of great sadness to the Colonel that one of them was married to a communist. I have to tell you that when I heard that bit of news I was horrified and thrilled. Those were, you will perhaps recall, some of the darkest days of the cold war. Stalin was still alive, and I lived in fear of him and his dark forces. Not what you'd call crippling fear, but fear quite as real as my dread of the glaciers one of my brothers had told me about, explaining in the process that they were advancing inexorably towards our house, crushing everything in their paths. The newspapers didn't report much on the advance of the glaciers, but they were full of stuff about the menace of communism, also advancing inexorably towards our house, crushing everything in its path, and here the poor colonel's daughter was married to one of them. Voluntarily. Didn't she know he would murder her in her bed? Frightening as it was to have one of the blood-sucking enemy in our extended family, it was also, for me, an interesting and dramatic distinction, something to set us apart.

Sixty years later, I am just beginning to understand what a great sadness it must surely have been for the man. Did Duda and Gordana have children? I don't remember any pictures of what would have been my fake second cousins. If there were, the Colonel never saw them. God help him, he had to make do with me and my brothers, and, again from the distance of sixty years, I have begun to understand how he might have seen our odd family. I particularly understand how he might have seen Howard, my younger brother, the golden child in the picture, the one he holds in a loose embrace. Not only was Howard seraphic in looks, he was extremely sweet, and, barely a toddler when the

Colonel came to live with us, Howard saw our Serbian guest as part of the family, right up there with Mother and Dad, and he was as ready to love the man as he was the rest of his family. The Colonel was not stupid. He surely understood that he would never have such open and uncomplicated acceptance from me or my older brothers, who saw the displaced person as someone without legal standing, occupying extremely scarce and valuable real estate. Howard was doing valuable work as a surrogate grandchild.

In these days of houses the size of shopping centers, it is difficult to explain how we all lived in such close quarters, but we did. There was one bathroom in the house, and that was on the ground floor. Milan Andelcovic was, as I have said, a man of military habits. Every morning, probably at exactly the same time, he would come down the stairs, fully dressed, carrying in front of him his immaculate Dopp kit, stride across the living room, and take possession of that one small bathroom for what seemed to be an hour and a half to anyone who had to pee. The actual time was whatever it took to wash up - I believe he was one for spit baths - shave, and handle a bodily function or two. He was plenty squared away even before starting the bathroom routine, but when he came out, he was ready for inspection. He moved briskly, getting ready to meet the day.

This was very unlike the head of the household. My father, who stayed up late as a habit, and even later when there was one of those French movies to see, slept in. It was Mother's policy, probably a wise one, to take Dad's breakfast in to him to be eaten in bed. The alternative was for him to eat one of his children. He had something of a temper to begin with, and he had absolutely no use for the kind of routine squabbling that is bound to arise from a group of children in close quarters.

So, every morning of the world, he got a tray. What did the Colonel think about that? I have no idea. I can't even remember the Colonel eating anything for his own breakfast. I just remember his hour of ablutions.

The Colonel didn't drive. In the morning he spent a lot of time waiting for Mr. John, which is what he called Dad, to finish that breakfast in bed, pull himself together to drive into town, and face the backlog of printing and the even bigger backlog of billing. Once again looking from this distance it must have been one more thing that drove this very tidy, very orderly, very prompt military man more than a little nuts. If he could get himself up, dressed, and ready to go to battle every day of the world at exactly the same time and he was in his fifties, why couldn't Mr. John put a little effort into getting his young healthy self up and into action at a regular time?

There was no place to park himself discreetly out of sight while he waited. He just had to hang around in the living room as Madame Pyle got her excessively large family fed and ready for school. I think it must have been that in that useless and largely shapeless time slot that we had the bicycle lessons.

I was then in the third grade. Old enough to be riding a bike. I wanted to be mobile in the worst way, but the conditions for learning were not good. For reasons that remain dark and poorly understood, I was difficult to teach, as I had no grasp of the learning process. These were the dark days long ago before parents felt obliged to get their children ready for Princeton five minutes after conception. It was the early years of the baby boom when Americans sort of threw their children out in the yard and checked on them once in a while to make sure they were still in the neighborhood. This method worked well

enough if you were in a neighborhood with other kids who could turn you into a normal citizen, a place with the usual amenities like sidewalks and athletic fields. But Mother and Dad had bought in haste a half acre well outside of town and created their own odd neighborhood, populating it with their own bunch of boys.

Not that they didn't understand that some equipment was needed. There was a collection of bicycles picked up at a garage sale someplace. Johnno and Nicky had picked off the cool bikes, leaving a smaller and very hard used number, a twenty four incher with one fender made of rust for me. In my dimwitted way, I did not understand that my brothers had had a bit of what they now call a learning curve. Coming behind them as I did I thought that they had always been able to ride the same way they had always been able to walk. So I thought that I should be able to get on a bicycle and just go.

I might, I suppose, have gotten the hang of it on my own if the conditions had been right. If there had been wide sidewalks and a bike that fit me. But in this case the runway was a long, rutted, clay and gravel driveway cutting through a very hummocky front lawn. Both lawn and driveway were enough to rattle your teeth if you were walking. If you were on a bicycle you could inflict shaken baby syndrome on yourself. Dad, who had no patience as a teacher whatsoever, had given me one push on the rust mobile and told me to keep trying. I had failed to advance beyond the falling-over-immediately-on-one side-or-another stage when the Colonel decided to kill the dead time waiting for Dad to drive into town and open the press by showing me, the kid he liked least, how to ride the damned bike.

So the lumpen, obtuse third grader and the displaced Colonel grappled with the hideous battered bike on the hummocky lawn morning after morning for what seemed to me to be yet

another lifetime. The Colonel, a Lucky Strike flaming in the cigarette holder clamped in his Serbian teeth, would have me get on the bike so he could shove me across the too-long grass barking "Fast. You go fast, boy! Fast." Perhaps that's how they do it in Serbia.

It's possible that Colonel Andjelcovic was not only irritated by my existence but by the conditions that had him hanging around waiting for his dilatory boss and landlord to get him to town and to work on schedule. But he was trapped, isolated by his displacement, his Serbian-ness, and his being a senior officer. He had no money to buy a car, and even if he had, it seemed he had never learned to drive. I imagine that being an officer in a country with Austro-Hungarian history meant being driven everywhere by enlisted men. No need to take Driver's Ed. He could have walked, or even gotten on a bike and ridden into town or to the monastery on his own schedule. But I think there was a bit of snobbism going on. Peasants walked. Perhaps if we had had a Lipizan horse, that would have solved the problem.

I did learn to ride a bike, by the way. But not by the Colonel method. As usual, it was my helpful brother Nick who took the time to show me, with considerable patience, just how it was done.

Reconstructing those years is exasperating. My memory reel starts with the Colonel in the scene, but he's just one actor in a story packed with characters and confused by the strange process of developing one's conscious. For example, I remember early Christmases when the Colonel could or should have been there, but he's not in the picture, and I certainly don't remember shopping for him. And I don't remember any Christmas presents from him. So what happened? Did he tactfully remove himself from a family celebration? Was being around a happy

family too much for his displaced self? Where did he go? He was on an Orthodox calendar, which was often out of sync with our own. There were Serbs in town who had been in Libertyville since well before the war. Maybe one of those compatriots mercifully removed him from the scene, taking him into his own home or out to St. Sava for an orthodox escape from wrongheaded Western rituals. I don't know, and I'll never know, because Dad didn't seem to have been paying attention.

And the Colonel didn't come along with us on family outings. He was displaced, but he wasn't crazy. I have covered the subject of Sunday drives with Dad here, so I won't go into them again, but I will remind you that a trip in a pre-air conditioning station wagon crammed with growing boys, half of whom are torturing the other half, half of whom are desperate to stop for a pee, is no way to spend time. Did he stay at home? I don't know. Did he use the time to type his Serbian screeds? I don't know. I wish I did.

He was with us in residence for at least two childbirths, bringing the family up to six children. His exasperation level must have ratcheted up with each addition. He was, for example, furious when Tommy, the youngest child at the time, in an effort to see what dog food was like, inserted himself between the dog dish and Ronka, an eighty pound Newfoundland dog who had the bad fortune to be in residence with us. I say bad fortune because dog management in the household was pretty much like child management, which consisted of turning children and dogs outside to entertain themselves and try to avoid getting hit by the traffic on the busy highway outside the picket fence. When Tommy started digging in Ronka's Gaines Meal, Ronka took one of those big webbed paws and pushed him aside, catching a claw on Tommy's upper lip and starting a prodigious and dramatic blood flow that eventually had to be stopped with stitches.

If the Colonel had had the pistol he was no doubt issued upon his commissioning, there would have been one less Newfoundland in the world within five seconds. He was as angry as I'd ever seen him. I was crazy about that dog, but as I look back sixty some years, I understand that he must have been furious not just with the hungry dog, but with my parents. The incident with the dog was exactly the sort of thing one would worry about if one were accustomed to and happy with military order but forced to stand by and watch what must have looked to him like an eight year long train wreck.

Eventually, he got out. With a couple of other emigres he rented an apartment walking distance from the press where he began the process of bringing Mrs. Andjelcovic from Belgrade to Libertyville. He quickly discovered that the wages he had been sending back to Belgrade were nowhere what he needed to support himself and his wife, causing a face-off with Dad that must have resulted in a raise, because Mrs Andjelcovic at last arrived. She was very short with hair dyed workers' paradise black, smiled and cried at the same time, and never learned a word of English. I think she was miserable, because the plan became retirement and removal to Munich, within train distance of the daughters.

In the last week of his stay in Libertyville, the Colonel went to the barber for one of his crisp haircuts. Waiting for the next chair, he had a heart attack and died on the spot.

There was a funeral at St. Sava's. I didn't go. I had a job, and I still wasn't ready to forgive the Colonel for playing favorites. Howard went of course. He said there was much speechifying, and Mrs. Andjelcovic wept a lot, and then he was buried in the small graveyard outside the church where King Peter would himself be interred, the only monarch in an American grave. The widow went back to Belgrade, and we never heard

anything more about her or Duda or Gordana. If I have fake Slavic cousins still, their whereabouts are a mystery.

After my fruitless interview of my father, Howard, whose Balkan connection must have been smelled out by the Marines who decided he should learn Serbo-Croatian when he was in the corps, sent me the following in a letter from which I quote:

I forgot to tell you one memory of Colonel. I was talking to an instructor at the Defense Language Institute about one thing or another, and mentioned that a Serbian Army colonel had lived with us for years.

"You may have known him," I said. "He was an instructor at the academy."

"What was his name?"

"Colonel Milan Andjelcovic."

"Who? Colonel Andjelcovic?"

"That's right. What a great old guy he was."

"You LIKED him?"

"Are you kidding?" I said. "Salt of the earth. Loved him like he was my own grandfather. We learned English together."

"If I would see that son of a bitch, I would KILL him."

"Huh?"

"He was Commandant of Cadets at academy. On only weekend when family can visit, he inspected us. My button was loose. He tore it off and gave it to me. 'Confined to barracks.' I did not see my family for another year. All the cadets hated him.

"Oh. Seemed nice enough to me," I said.

The instructor stalked off, quivering - literally quivering - with anger.