

From Bojan Bujić

Rebecca West's report to the British Council of her lecture tour of Austria, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Greece, spring 1936 (typescript, Public Records Office, London)

Itinerary: Vienna – Ljubljana – Zagreb – Split – Dubrovnik – Sarajevo – Sofia (via Belgrade) – Niš – Athens – Belgrade

Excerpts

All names are reproduced in Rebecca West's idiosyncratic spelling and the correct spelling is indicated wherever possible. All editorial additions as well as the portions that are left out are indicated by square brackets.

[in pencil] Received 29/5/36

Dear Colonel Bridge,

I am not at all happy about the tour in Austria, Jugoslavia, and Greece, from which I have just returned. It was in great part a waste of your money and my time; and as the failure was due to mistakes of organisation I will describe my tour in detail. [...]

Ljubljana

Then *[from Vienna]* I went to Ljubljana; and that was perhaps the only properly planned visit of my entire tour. I stayed there two nights and that was just as long as I needed. The Society here consists of very simple people whose enthusiasm for English is great, but whose knowledge of it is considerably less than one thinks at first. It struck me as significant that Mrs Irene Ward had told me that I would find them a very intelligent audience; and that I found that while they all remembered her vividly, practically no one of them had any idea of what she had talked about. For myself I found a few people in the audience, about half a dozen, followed my lecture with intense interest, but I am sure the rest found it a strain. It seemed to me that this was a town to be cultivated mainly on an entertainment basis, and that Mrs Lewis's folk songs and her great social charm were more useful to them than I could ever be. [...] The members of the Ljubljana Club were most courteous people, and probably wrote appreciative letters after my visit; but the sober fact is that the only member who had any knowledge of her own or any other literature was the young woman who is secretary of the Club Library, but unfortunately she wished to converse with me only regarding the Legalisation of Abortion, a subject on which I had received no instructions from the British Council. [...]

Zagreb

I then went to Zagreb, arriving at noon [...] and there the porter tore the handle off my suitcase. I was therefore obliged when I arrived at the hotel to unpack all my possessions and send the suitcase to a saddler; and as the suitcase took from 12.05 to 12.40 to get from the hotel lounge, in spite of my urgent telephoning, and I was expected to lunch with Dr. Čučin [*recte*: Čurčin], the Croat patriot, at 12.45. It is easy to say that such incidents cannot be foreseen; but since they happen with the utmost regularity in the Balkans they should have been foreseen, and a proper amount of time should have been allowed for coping with them.

It was necessary that I should lunch with Dr. Čučin; but I met nobody at lunch except Mr. and Mrs Sterling of the theatrical company which performs English plays all over Europe. It was in fact Dr. Čučin's hope that I should be so struck by their personalities that I should beg the British Council to subsidise them. This I perceived while I was under the thought that they must have spread far and wide through Europe as standard English the most vicious form of telephone-girl accent imaginable. This plan of Dr. Čučin's wasted a lot of my time, as I had to see all the people I might have seen at lunch, either at a long tea party given by a wealthy Jewish family, [...] and a gathering at a café, after my lecture, which lasted till one in the morning. Even then I never met the young intellectuals or any of the University people, though they were present at my lecture and, I am told, enjoyed it. The audience for the lecture was extraordinarily intelligent, as good as a good Scandinavian audience. They had a working knowledge of European literature, and had no difficulty in following any allusion, and asked intelligent questions and took down titles. Many of them belonged to influential Croat families and were themselves distinguished. This is a field worth cultivating, and as Zagreb is the nursery of Croat intelligence (which is very considerable) it should be well worth while to send them lecturers to give isolated lectures and (let me reiterate) series of lectures. [...]

Split

[...] I stepped out of the train and was met by a young man from Zagreb, active rather than intelligent, Dr. Petnitchkey [*unlikely spelling, possibly* 'Petnički']; a Croat patriot, Dr. Lupič-Vukič [*recte*: 'Lupis-Vukić', *he held no doctoral title*], and a young woman of charming manners but feeble intellect, called Miss Peričič [*recte*: Peričić], who could speak a little, but not much English. Through the darkness I perceived that Dr. Lupič-Vukič was one of nature's Hindus. He immediately began to address me on the subject of the sufferings he had undergone in Austrian prisons, in a flow of language recalling by its substance the late Mr. Saklatvala [*a British Communist MP, not a Hindu but a Parsi*], but made uniquely horrible because he had learned his English in Louisiana and spoke with a marked Southern drawl. [...] Eventually I sat down to dinner at the hotel, but Dr. Lupič-Vukič and Miss Peričič sat down too, and he addressed me unceasingly on his achievements and merits. At a quarter past eleven I arose and said that I was so constituted

that I could not sleep unless I had a short walk before I went to bed. I led them out into the street and at the first turning shook hands with them and said goodnight. But Miss Peričič ran after me, and offered to take me to her coiffeurs the following day at 5.0. I never discovered what provoked this offer, since my hair was as tidy as Vienna could make it, and a great deal tidier than hers, and refused it. But it had consequences later.

It had been arranged that the next morning Dr. Lupič-Vukič should call for me and take me on a tour of the sights of Split and tell me about the Club and my lecture. He appeared at 9.30 and we walked about in the heat till 12.30. When we had exhausted the palace of Diocletian he took me to several spots bearing on his own career, including a church, some distance from the town along a very dusty road, where he acted as best man at a friend's wedding. Never once during these hours did I get a chance even to ask him how big my audience would be. [...] He fortunately left me alone for lunch, and as I was sitting drinking coffee outside the hotel a young man named Mr. Patrick Johnson introduced himself to me and explained that he had for some months been teaching English there. Presently he said, "I hope you realise that the people understand hardly any English." He told me that only Dr. Petnichkey and Dr. Lupič-Vukič knew English well, and that that the mass of Club members had been learning English only for a short time. [...] I therefore arranged that [Dr. Petnički] would get me a map of England to have at the back of the platform, and that I would give a light, short talk on local English conditions. [...] But at half past five Miss Peričič burst into my room, full of an inexplicable grief because I had not turned up at the Coiffeur at five and she had waited, waited, waited for me. The incident was excessively Pirandello.

At the lecture hall there was no map of England; Dr. Petnichkey had entirely forgotten it. But I made no protest, as I saw that had it arrived, there would have been nowhere to hang it. They were most appreciative and amiable, but they plainly could not follow unless I spoke slowly and distinctly in simple phrases, allowing frequent pauses. And after twenty-five minutes began to fidget. [...] Afterwards I went to a charity ball and cabaret attended by the whole

The typescript of her report breaks off on p. 7, several pages must be missing, despite the pagination running unbroken. It looks as if the set at the PRO is made up of two versions of a typed text, and a potentially fascinating description of her social evening at Split is missing. So is the description of her journey from Split to Dubrovnik, and her stay in Dubrovnik. Then page 8 begins:

From Dubrovnik to Sarajevo

...in the morning for a twelve hours journey on the dirtiest train I have ever seen. It was a narrow gauge line and the train rocked and bumped perpetually. There are over a hundred evil-smelling and filthy tunnels, which made it necessary to keep the window of the compartment shut. [...] After dark, which fell about half past six, it became intensely cold. I rolled myself in

my fur coat, but I had to use the top of my coat to protect my head from the filthy cushions, and this left my feet like icicles. [...] The carriage was so badly lit that I could not read, and there was no refreshment car. My one distraction was the frequent visits (five in all) from police officers who conducted lengthy inquisitions into my character and movements, through the medium of an Austrian commercial traveller.

Sarajevo

I arrived at Sarajevo at 11.30, cold, tired, and hungry and was met by three officials of the Club, all so eager to speak English that they sat with me at supper and did not leave until 12.45. They were so charming and enthusiastic that I was delighted that they should do so. But such a day is only possible if one has ample time to rest on the following day; and that was certainly not possible at Sarajevo. The whole of the day I spent there was crammed with appointments. I had to talk to several Serbian men who had been educated in England during the war; I had to talk with Mrs Rudoj, an Englishwoman who does much to organise the Club on the social side, and with some members of the Czech and the Jewish groups; and with some returned immigrants from America. I also had to spend some time with Mr. Sutton-Palmer, the Consul, who has since died. (By the way, he showed me the greatest kindness and went to a lot of trouble to advise me regarding my journey.) All this, with a prolonged teaparty and the lecture, kept me out of bed till midnight.

Journey to Sofia

The next morning I started on my journey to Sofia which had been planned by the Council to take two days. On the first day I went a thirteen hours journey from Sarajevo to Belgrade, and spent the night there; on the following day I went a twelve hours journey from Belgrade to Sofia.

RW then describes her travel from Sofia back to Niš, including a report of the difficulties caused by her not having had the right train ticket for travel from Sofia to Niš.

Niš

I arrived at Nish exceedingly tired, and was greeted on the platform by a small aged governess, Miss Grosser, two Generals and the Mayor.

The Club at Nish is one of the most extraordinary organisations imaginable. It depends on the genius of Miss Grosser, who arrived there during the war, with two shillings in her pocket, having escaped from Russia, where she had been a Miss for over twenty years. She dragged with her her employers, a Prince and his wife, who soon died of privations. She was taken care of by some Scottish Ambulance Corps and has remained there ever since, teaching English at the

Orphanage outside Nish, which still carries on, officered by Scotchwomen who try to leave Serbia, go home, hate it, and come back again. She also teaches English to many of the young doctors at the Military Hospital, and therein lies the charm of the situation. It happens that the General in charge of the Military Hospital is a bully and a lunatic, and he has insisted on being made President of the English Club so that he can see if there is any spying going on there. He and the tiny Miss Grosser have thundering rows and she defies him while the young doctors, who all hate him, sit round and worship her for it. I wish I could have done this Club a better turn. It is worth cultivating. Thanks to the remarkable little Miss Grosser and the Scottish sisters, there is a warm atmosphere about the Club, and the young doctors form a very influential body, drawn from all parts of Jugoslavia. [...]

The next morning I started on my twenty-four hour journey to Athens. [...]

Belgrade

I returned back to Belgrade, and spoke on successive nights at the Pen Club and to the English Societies. I was not, I found, sufficiently recovered from the early days of the trip to speak as well as I had hoped at Belgrade. I think you will realise that to cope with the conditions at Split I had to draw on what reserves I had of good temper and self-possession; and I was faced by the same necessity in Belgrade. I have only once before in all my years of lecturing experience had a lecture so completely wrecked by a member of the committee in charge of the occasion. I found that the Legation people in Belgrade believed Dr. Popovic to be a competent person, but I most emphatically dissent. I could not rest the next day after I got back [*sic*] from Athens, because he had made a number of futile appointments without consulting me, and said "it would be awkward" to cancel them. On the morning of my lecture he insisted on my making a tedious and quite unnecessary visit to the University which was empty of all students owing to the Easter vacation. At the lecture itself which took place in the Popular University, he insisted on fetching me an hour before it began, which meant that I sat in a stuffy room and had to respond to the atrocious French of the men of letters of Belgrade, while Dr. Popovic fussed round me and broke it to me that my lecture had been announced in two separate newspapers as starting at 6 and 6.30. This broke my nerve, and it was indeed the cause of a deplorable situation. At 6.30 I stood up before an audience consisting of the readers of one newspaper who were irritated by my unpunctuality, while readers of the other newspaper straggled in all the time up to 7 o'clock; certainly more than half of my audience came between 6.30 and 6.50. At 7.10 Dr Popovic made signs to me to stop, though I had been asked to speak for an hour, and I had to bring my speech to an abrupt conclusion. He then told me that I should have calculated the hour as beginning at 6.0 because the lecture room might have been required for another class, though I had myself enquired if this was so and had been assured by the head of the Popular University that I could

go on. There were other annoyances too trivial to relate, but distinctly trying to the nerves. [...] Yugoslavia is distinctly a country where one has to be in a state to deal with the unexpected. [...]

From Rebecca West's summing up

[...] It was not really worth your while to send me to Split or Dubrovnik, since there is no lecture public there nor to Athens since there are enough lecturers there already. The only places I really needed to go were Zagreb, Sarajevo, Belgrade, and Sofia; and since it is on the way I could have stopped at Nish, and could have travelled a further few hours to Skopje where there is a struggling University, and as yet very little English influence. [...]

The moral of this is, I think, that you cannot organise a Yugoslavian lecture-tour from London. I have already mentioned that I do not think accurate information about railway journeys can be obtained outside the country. [...] Whoever it is who advises you on these Balkan journeys must know nothing about either the Balkans, or journeys, or the physical limitations of those who make public appearances. [...] In Yugoslavia, of course, there is another equally obvious source of information. When I mentioned to Dr. Popovič that I had been to Split he immediately said "But what a waste of your time, there is nobody there who speaks English well except Lupič-Vukič and Petritchkey." I then found that Split was in fact a branch of the Belgrade Club, and that in any case (as the Belgrade Club is the chief recipient of the Government grant to English-speaking Clubs) he is well acquainted with the condition of the Clubs all over the country. But he told me that he too had never been consulted about the tour. I think that a great pity. Though he is a muddler he could give you facts. Of course the antagonism between the Serbs and Croats and Slovenes is so great that Dr. Popovič could not be trusted to give you advice regarding the whole country. I noticed that he showed the greatest jealousy of the Zagreb club and quite unfairly mocked at its cultural pretensions. It is significant that the Zagreb Club is so anti-Serb that it refuses the government subsidy, and that the Belgrade Club bitterly resents this refusal. But Dr. Torbarina of the Zagreb branch is a far abler man than Dr. Popovič, and could give you all the information about the Croatian and Slovenian Clubs. The young man who holds the Scholarship for Slavonic students in Yugoslavia, Mr. Hubert Butler, with whom you are already in touch, is extremely intelligent and has lived in both Zagreb and Belgrade and could give you a great deal of information regarding these matters.

Needless to say that in spite of the flaws in my tour I enjoyed it enormously. I found everywhere that there was a substantial residue of the pro-English feeling that began in the war; and since the French influence is so rapidly fading there is an appetite for culture and liberalism which will be unsatisfied unless we take steps to fill it. [...]

I append my notes on Sofia and Athens separately, since they are of a grossly offensive nature, and if this letter seems longwinded and complaining please forgive me. I was very pleased to do

this tour, and honoured that you asked me to do it, and all that troubles me is that the conditions seemed to prevent me from being as useful as I might have been.

Yours very sincerely,

[*signed*] Rebecca West