



Quelle

Vera Stein Erlich: *Story of a Survey* (1966)¹

It began in Zagreb in 1937, when a group of student friends suggested that I write for the Yugoslav press a series of articles on the position of Moslem women. The students were bitter about the “enslavement” of their sisters who had been married in traditional manner. I was not very enthusiastic about attacking the women’s veil or the lattice window, but I was willing to study and report on Bosnian family life. It was the end of the spring-summer term, and we drew up a questionnaire which the students took home with them during their summer vacation. It was to be a small research effort into the domestic way of life of the Bosnian Moslem.

During this same summer I gave a series of lectures on psychology in a teacher seminar. Teachers had come from all parts of Yugoslavia to a mountain resort. When they heard of my plan to study the Bosnian family, they at once wanted to know: Why only the Bosnian Moslems? In their own Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, there still existed bride purchase, bride abduction. ... “Come along to our parts too, and make an inquiry,” they said, “we will help you.” Alas, I told them, I had no funds for such an undertaking! But they insisted that all I needed to supply was paper and postage stamps; they would provide the rest. “We will prepare for you a list of thousand teachers, the outstanding ones from all provinces, and country doctors, too. Come on, make your inquiry!” [...]

When the reports began to come in, I realized the enthusiasm with which the work had been taken up. [...]

Many of these students and teachers – there were doctors and priests among them – lived in remote villages where they were the only educated persons. They felt that they were storing up treasures before it was too late. They were anxious to record their knowledge of old ideas and traditional attitudes before they all were lost. Already Nazis were on the march. How long would it be before Yugoslavia was attacked – and then who could tell who or what would survive? The shadows cast by the war were dark indeed.

[...] The Nazis marched into Vienna. They marched into Prague. The pressure was rising. Police and government were riddled with fifth columnists. Whoever was not in the service of Germany had become suspect. I was among the many to have my premises searched by the police. My enormous mail-bag had aroused suspicion. Who knew what lay behind it? But we still had “connections”, and they succeeded in preventing my arrest and ensuring that my research material was not touched. [...]

Then came April 1941, and the Nazis invaded Yugoslavia. The German invasion, complete with Gestapo, ended everything. [...] I now concealed the questionnaires in the house of a neighbor, but I did not let out of my sight the extracts I had made. I continued to work on my tables of statistical results, always keeping handy the colored pencils for my graphs. But at last the Gestapo caught up with me. Two of their men came “to call.” It was night, and I was alone in the large house. The rest of the family was no longer there. But I found myself absolutely calm, and I actually succeeded in persuading these agents that what I was handling were statistics on venereal diseases, a piece of work for the Institute of Hygiene, which “everybody” knew about. Wonder of wonders, they swallowed this and left me, saying they would “call again.” [...]

¹ Erlich, Vera Stein, *Story of a Survey*, preface, in: *Family in Transition. A Study of 300 Yugoslav Villages*, Princeton 1966, p. v-xi.

But after that visit I had to move. I left our home, my beloved native city, Zagreb, and my native land. A paid adventurer smuggled me through the enemy lines to Dalmatia, then occupied by Italians. My guide got me through. Few succeeded, but I was one of the lucky ones.

At that time Germans were not in control of the Adriatic coast. Before I left, I had packed my material and most important notes in a large suitcase which I handed over to some Croatian naval officers. My native Croatia was now a German vassal state, and Yugoslav naval officers of Croatian origin were – at least in name – German “allies”. Among them there were some old friends whom I trusted to keep my suitcase for me. Some weeks later, it was again in my possession. The officers had taken it across a frontier guarded by German, Croatian, and Italian troops. The naval boys brought it to me at Split, the capital of Dalmatia. With broad grins they saluted and were gone!

In the “Fortress of Europe”, there was the silence of the grave. Only in this small region under Italian command could one breathe – cautiously. Dalmatia, with its cities and former republics connected with the Republic of Venice, has a character of its own. Here, in the attics of the patrician houses, I discovered old books and papers; so during this forced stay I set about collecting further material. I also filled pages of my notebooks in the markets and the fishermen’s harbor.

In the autumn of 1943, Mussolini’s empire collapsed, after the Allies had invaded southern Italy. The Italian occupation forces in the Balkans disintegrated. Now the Nazis occupied northern Italy and the whole of the Balkan peninsula. When they came up against Split, the Partisans at first tried to defend the city. [...]

In the battle, our house had been hit and burned to the ground. Also destroyed was the place where I had intended to hide my valise. But in good time I had taken to the streets of Split, dragging my famous suitcase with me, looking for shelter. No sooner had I found one than here too German troops marched in. Trapped again, I did not leave this shelter for a month; but when I did venture out of the house a miracle happened: I ran smack into the very man, who, two years earlier, had smuggled me from Zagreb to Split. Once again he had planned an escape route and, together with his bride, he helped me to get out of the town. It was she who carried my valise through the German lines. All I carried was a string bag with bottles of milk. This girl, however, seemed on excellent terms with all soldiery, and thus I reached the guerrilla territory in the woods outside Split.

There followed months of wandering through the wild mountains, with the Germans driving us – fighting Partisans and refugees – farther and farther south. Some of us escaped in small boats through waters infested with swift German patrol boats. I held on to my suitcase. In moments of acute danger, I held it overboard, ready to drop it into the water.

Thus, at Christmas 1943, I reached the island of Vis, a Yugoslav island near the coast of Southern Italy. The Germans frequently bombed this outpost, but it remained the one Dalmatian island which they never captured. Vis became the headquarters of the Partisans, and Churchill sent a military mission to this island. All civilians were now evacuated, and only fighting personnel were allowed to remain. A small vessel built to take 300 carried 1,500 civilians to the liberated part of southern Italy. But nobody was allowed to take any luggage, and there could be no thought of taking the heavy suitcase full of documents. I concealed my treasure in a wine-cellar, in the care of a woman friend who was to stay behind.

We crossed the remaining part of the Adriatic. During our two-day voyage, Stukas bombarded us, but, though boats in front and behind us were sunk, we got through! Southern Italy had been liberated. One could breathe again. Yes, but what about my research material back in that cellar of Vis? What if the Yugoslav headquarters were transferred to Southern Italy and the island left to the Germans? That had been the fate of all other islands. Or what if somebody stumbled on my suitcase? We were at a critical point of the war. Nobody was likely to believe that all this was only scientific notes about the domestic way of life of peasant folk. A thousand sheets of text complete with maps and tables or figures? It would certainly provoke suspicion! [...]

Then came the first UNRRA mission, flown in from Cairo. Among the UNRRA people was a marvelous Canadian girl, a social welfare worker who knew little of war or spy mania and seemed

never to have heard of such things as courts martial. She listened to my tale of woe and promised to bring me back my suitcase. She was going across to Vis anyway, she said. For her it was as simple as that! And so it was. Three weeks later, there among her smart luggage, was my battered suitcase, and not one scrap of my precious papers missing, either. When I flung my arms round her neck, she was actually surprised. What was there so wonderful about bringing someone her suitcase? [...]

The war was still not over when a doctor friend of mine drove through Yugoslavia from Split to Belgrade. When he came back his words were: "The whole way through I did not see a single house in a single village with its roof on." Only when I heard that did I realize what it was that I had brought out of the war. It was the last picture of a foundering ship; the last record of the patriarchal social system which was about to crumble. After four years of enemy occupation and resistance warfare, there could now be left only fragmentary traces of the patriarchal life.

I now realized that the tense excitement I had shared with my team in those days on the eve of war had been a foreboding of what was fated to happen. However, we succeeded in saving a great part of our material, and, through a series of miracles, I had been able to take it with me. But most of those who provided me with my answers had given their lives in resistance fighting. To all those dear friends who thus in the eleventh hour helped me to prepare these records of the age in which we had lived, an age fated to vanish – to them, to those who perished and those who survived, I dedicate this book.

Erlich, Vera Stein: Story of a Survey (1966). Contribution to the web-feature „European history – gender history“. In: Themenportal Europäische Geschichte (2012), URL: <<http://www.europa.clio-online.de/2012/Article=548>>.

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