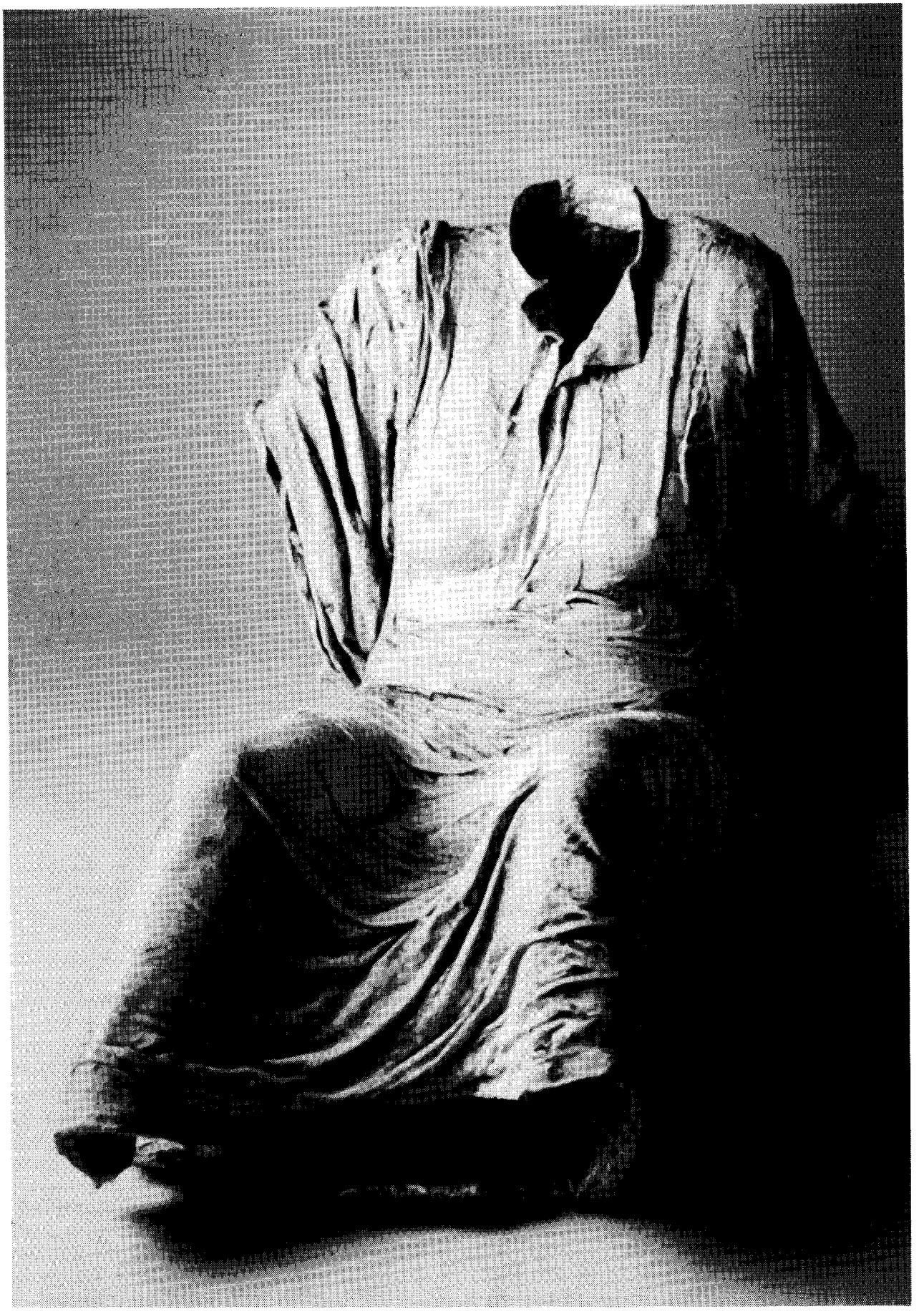

Arina Ailincai, Detail from the Installation "Presence Through Absence," Banff, December 1994. *Photo: Don Lee*

Between Despair and Hope
A Belgrade Diary

by Sara Bafo

Ces extraits parviennent du journal de l'auteure pendant les dix-huit derniers mois de sa vie en Yougoslavie.

After the Austrian-Hungarian border, we have a new dilemma: Croatia or Serbia? Belgrade or Zagreb? Dozens of times I have measured and scaled the good and bad sides of both decisions.

In August 1991, a Croatian lawyer and her Serbian husband, Milosh, a psychotherapist, left Osijek, the city in which they lived with their two children, because of the imminence of war and the social conflict of being a "mixed" couple in a country where nationalist hostilities were becoming a terrifying reality. They travelled first to Austria, in attempt to find a way out of their dilemma. When this journey proved fruitless, they decided to settle in Belgrade, which seemed like a relatively safe location. For over a year, they cobbled together a life, free from danger, but never free from the threat of Milosh being conscripted or from the difficulties of greatly diminished circumstances. As they watched the rise of nationalism and brutality, it became clear that there was no place for them as Yugoslavs in their now-fragmented country.

On the way from Vienna, September 7th, 1991

We are setting off from Vienna to the south, still not knowing exactly which direction to go. Before the last crossroad for Bratislava and Budapest, Milosh stops the car several times and urges me to go to Czechoslovakia, but I am too stubborn to agree to that. After the Austrian-Hungarian border, we have a new dilemma: Croatia or Serbia? Belgrade or Zagreb? Dozens of times I have measured and scaled the good and bad sides of both decisions, my first consideration being the security of my family. And finally, after we have covered more than half the distance through Hungary, and after a really hard internal fight with myself, I decide to return to Belgrade. My husband lets me make the decision. So after two weeks in Austria, during which we stayed in two totally different towns, Vienna and Salzburg, and for all our intentions and desire to fly across the Atlantic Ocean and reach "the promised land," or to stay in Austria at least, we return to Yugoslavia, to Belgrade. During almost the entire journey through Hungary, we are bombarded by the children's questions: "Where are we going? Shall we go to Zagreb or Belgrade? What have you decided now? Why can't we return to Osijek?" And all the time in my mind is a picture from the Austrian-Hungarian border: a group of Kurds, among whom there are many children, with Austrians chasing them from their country and Hungarians not allowing them to enter their country either. Nobody will let them come and stay; to everyone they are only a burden.

Belgrade, September 11th, 1991

The school year has already started and we have decided to send our children to the nearest school. Before that we have to go the Red Cross to be officially registered as refugees. Until now, we have been refugees only in our souls and hearts; officialdom hasn't yet recognized us as refugees. While we stand in line in the hall of a drab building in Studentski Square, I watch the river of people who are waiting to obtain their refugee status. After registration we become numbers: 10927, 10928, 10929, 10930. These numbers tell us that in the last few months, perhaps since May, more than 10,000 people from Croatia have escaped to Belgrade. They are the ones who are registered. How many of them are not?

On the way to Osijek from Belgrade, September 13th, 1991

At the Belgrade bus station I buy a ticket, and on platform 28 I recognize the people who wait with me, people I know from the bank and post offices, different stores, schools, restaurants, or just from the streets. The bus is full and we leave Belgrade in a relaxed atmosphere, listening to a Belgrade radio station and talking to each other. This atmosphere lasts only until we reach Shid. When we pass this last place in Serbia, the driver turns off the radio, the passengers stop talking, and those who were having a nap wake up. A ghostly silence falls. Only a hundred meters past Shid, although there are still a few kilometers to the Croatian border, the highway is absolutely abandoned. Our bus is the only vehicle going either direction on what was, not so long ago, one of the busiest Yugoslav roads. We are approaching the Serbo-Croatian border. The very dense Spachvanske forests are in front of us. Almost all the passengers expect something horrible to happen. The tension in the bus is unbearable. I can't explain it, but I, too, begin to feel frightened. All of us are staring at the deserted highway around us and listening to the silence.

Belgrade, September 21st, 1991

During the whole day I constantly think about returning to our apartment and to the living room. Sitting with closed eyes in a strange armchair in somebody else's residence, not mine, I am exploring our desk with our notices left on it, the books we were reading, maybe still opened, the typewriter in which I left paper and on which I was typing on the eve of our departure from our home. Everything disturbs and irritates me. I would like to go back to my home.

Our whole world is, at the moment, in this room, four by five metres; only here can we feel secure and protected. This is our territory, without borders or any danger or threat.

Both of us are looking for jobs everywhere, but without success. The official pressure on men who escaped or were exiled from Croatia grows bigger and bigger. These men are more desirable as soldiers, dead somewhere on the numerous battlefields as proof that they are not cowards and traitors to their nation, than they are alive, choosing not to participate and use weapons to kill people on the other side of the war. Commit yourself! Commit yourself! Everyone around us says just that, but we can't share ourselves in so many pieces and we don't want either.

Belgrade, October 10th, 1991

Every day we learn to live in this new town. It's hard and laborious. Above all, we are absolutely alone, very lonely, without any real help and moral support which is even more important now for us. The children are also very lonely. Our whole world is, at the moment, in this room, four by five metres; only here can we feel secure and protected. This is our territory, without borders or any danger or threat.

Belgrade, October 17th, 1991

Belgrade is in an anti-war mood. Can I conclude this on the basis of speaking to the people I work with, those with whom I meet and associate, and my reading of the newspaper *Borba* and magazine *Vreme*?[1] I don't want to believe that mine is a single and lonely opinion. I want to believe that it is the opinion of the majority because I am tired of this war, wishing it to stop immediately.

Today I am again very depressed. I think of my parents who are still on the island. I don't know if they have any money any more or how long they will be "enslaved" there. I can only imagine how they feel, surrounded by the sea, without any idea how and when they will leave. I can't help them and they can't help me, either. I can't even call them. I sent a letter to them yesterday, but I don't know if they will ever get it and read it. From their letter which I received in the meantime, I realize that they don't agree with what we have done and can't accept the fact that we are now in Belgrade, on the other side.

Belgrade, October 19th, 1991

I remember just half a year ago I was at Milosh's uncle's funeral with my mother-in-law and brother-in-law. It was a strange time, a period of no war, no peace. We were travelling by car with license plates from Zagreb. According to the circumstances of that time, we had two kinds of newspapers with us, a Serbian one called *Politika* and a *Croatian* one called *Vjesnik*. While passing Serbian villages we put *Politika* out to be seen and while passing through Croatian villages we put out *Vjesnik*. Now the people of Croatia can't buy *Politika* or any other Serbian newspapers any more and the people of Serbia can't buy *Vjesnik*. All the connections between these two republics have been cut. I also remember on that journey that Milosh's brother was paying for gas by cheque at INA's[2] gas stations, which were very soon after commandeered by Serbians, and these cheques were never cashed. A woman who was also at the funeral came to me and said that she would like to burn all the cars with Zagreb license plates if she could. I didn't understand why she would tell me something like this. After she came to apologize, saying she heard that terrible things are happening to Serbs there. I tried to tell her it wasn't true, but I think she didn't believe me. Now I can say we were blind, we didn't notice, we didn't care or we didn't want to see, where all these "little" things, events from everyday life, have led our country.

Belgrade, October 26th, 1991

The Belgrade Book Fair has opened. In pre-war times it was an event which was anticipated with impatience, suspense, and joy in Belgrade as in Zagreb, in Sarajevo as in Split, in Skopje as in Novi Sad, but today I am not sure if people outside Serbia know or would be interested that the fair has started. The four of us spend the whole of

Sunday morning among the books. But only at first glance are there as many books as in previous years. Very soon we notice that, because of the absence of publishing houses from Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia, some from Bosnia, and all from abroad, they have only filled the space with a lot of the same books. It's no longer a Yugoslav or an international book fair. Despite all these facts I can't say that we didn't enjoy being among the books at all, and that we didn't find books in which we are interested. While passing the fair's stands loaded with books, I imagine I am passing the book shelves in our apartment. At any moment I know exactly where I put Kish, where Krlezha, Tishma, Matosh and Ujevich, where Mann, Hesse, and Singer, the books about art, history, anthropology, and psychology, the dictionaries. In front of my eyes there are books, only books. Under my fingers I can feel the cover of each. I read similarities of historical events in the Balkans long ago and now. And I thought in one moment: Why did I have to be born here?

Dita Shehu

On the way to Prague, November 13th 1992

I admit that we set off full of hope and expectations, enthusiasm, and a wish to start from the beginning, this time not as refugees, but as immigrants with a huge life experience. I believe that material things are nothing in comparison to the beauty of living, peace, and fundamental human values; those things that have remained with us along with the knowledge that just a moment of evil and impetuousness is sufficient for humans to lose everything, even their souls and their humanity. We leave with an enormous pain our hearts. It is eight o'clock in the evening. Through the darkness and silence, and without a hitch at the Yugoslavian-Hungarian check point, we leave our former country Yugoslavia, leaving everything and bringing everything with us.

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"...On that November day in one of those countless panniers a dark-skinned boy of about ten years old from the mountain village of Sokolovichi sat silent and looked about him with dry eyes. In a chilled and reddened hand he held a small curved knife with which he absentmindedly whittled at the edges of his pannier, but at the same looked about him. He was to remember that stony bank overgrown with sparse, bare, and dull gray willows, the surly ferryman and the dry water-mill full of draughts and spiders' webs where they had to spend the night before it was possible to transport all of them across the troubled waters of the Drina over which the ravens were croaking. Somewhere within himself he felt a sharp stabbing pain which from time to time seemed suddenly to cut his chest in two and hurt terribly, which was always associated with the memory of that place where the road broke off, where desolation and despair were extinguished and remained on the stony banks of the river, across which the passage was so difficult, so expensive, and so unsafe. It was here, at this particularly painful spot in that hilly and poverty-stricken district, in which misfortune was open and evident, that man was halted by powers stronger than he and, ashamed of his powerlessness, was forced to recognize more clearly his own misery and that of others, his own backwardness and that of others.

All of this was summed up in that physical discomfort that the boy felt on that November day and which never completely left him though he changed his way of life, his name and his country...."

—*The Bridge on the Drina* by Ivo Andrich.

In November 1992, Sara Bafo and her family emigrated to Canada.

[1]An independent Belgrade newspaper and weekly magazine, both with a very strong anti-war position and very critical of official Serbian policy.

[2]Croatian national gas company which before the war had gas stations all over Yugoslavia.