

## LETTER BY MARTIN KARPLUS

*In 1955, following the completion of his Ph.D. at Caltech, Martin Karplus set out to travel through Europe with his VW Beetle and a Leica IIC camera, a gift from his parents. This letter to his parents describes his first impressions of the former Yugoslavia.*

### **Sežana (Slovenia) – April 1955**

What to write about Yugoslavia? It is rather hard as I have so many impressions of the country and the people, especially the people who are so friendly and warm that I found myself spending most of the time talking, taking pictures of them, being invited to houses, parties, etc. All this began almost as soon as I crossed the border from Trieste – I saw a wonderful old farmhouse which was just in the process of being thatched, so I stopped and began to take photographs – soon the whole family was crowded around and I asked questions – the older people spoke German – about Tito, Communism, collectives, etc. – the answers were mainly that now that collectives had been done away with things were alright, or better than before, really – no better than under Italians or Germans, but no worse – like many farmers I met afterwards all they wanted was to be left alone with their land with no worries about the government. Since it was lunch time they invited me in to eat and drink – simple food – and chat some more until I finally had to tear myself away since I still wanted to see the Pastopia caves and get to Rijeka-Fiume before nightfall.

The main feeling that one gets is one of poverty – in the country as well as in the cities – and just that there are no cars (almost none exist privately and even the official ones are very rare, trucks are more common, gasoline pumps: 1 in a town of 100,000) but, in general, people are poorly dressed (clothing is terribly expensive – a cheap suit costs a month's wages Dinar 12,000 = \$50, a pair of shoes – 1 week's, etc.), the streets are not finished, houses just brought to the stage of being usable but not beautified, people sell what goods – old furniture, etc. they have saved to survive – the general wages are nearly too low to live on, but most persons do something on the side (a dentist in addition to health service practice does work illegally at night for people who do not want to wait their turn and somehow have the money, probably from doing something illegal themselves – since everybody does this sort of thing restrictions cannot be very strictly enforced.

Almost everyone I talked to disliked Communism though Tito himself is sort of a national hero (of course, the majority of the people who speak a foreign language had things better before the revolution and so would reasonably complain). I was amazed at how freely people were willing to talk to me – saying that there is a dictatorship, that papers are controlled, complaining, etc. – only twice were there little incidents (once a man with whom I was talking suddenly stopped and I looked up to find that another person reading a paper had stopped walking right near us – when we stopped talking he slowly moved on and my friend told me it might have been secret police) – from what was said all this freedom is why about 5 years old – before that, in the cities, no one dared to talk to strangers. Also, religion is freer – at first, hardliners were sent to drink, make-out, etc. in churches – now people are left alone and permitted to go (government officials are not supposed to) but the number of people I saw in church on Easter Sunday was very small.

### **Skopje (North Macedonia)**

As for the country – I most enjoyed Macedonia\* which is still most primitive with women wearing their costumes, washing clothes in streams, making bread by the roadside, spinning with their strange hand shuttles while tending sheep, and so on. Not to say that Bosnia is much more developed – though the costumes are gone, the little donkeys are still the main mode of transportation. Most striking are the sudden changes from almost biblical valleys with sheep grazing and herders to a modern hydroelectric plant or steel factory which may suddenly appear around the bend; in five minutes one has passed it and its ever-present soldiers and is back in the primeval country again.

Very, very exciting.

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*\*(Note: now known as North Macedonia)*