

salon

culture

Travels with the poet



TRISTAN STEWART-ROBERTSON

Above: Overlooking Sarajevo in April. Right: Kay Smith's notebook entry about the Hotel Europa from June 1980, in front of the new hotel being rebuilt, in the centre of Sarajevo.

Nearly 30 years after Kay Smith's journey to Yugoslavia – with a war in the interim – another writer takes her notes with him as he searches for the human spirit she saw there. Story by **Tristan Stewart-Robertson**.

In June 1980, New Brunswick poet Kay Smith arrived in what was then Yugoslavia. It was the midpoint of a journey stretching from Greece to Vienna with her long-time friend Dot Phillips, a dream fulfilled after three decades teaching at the great artistic institution that was Saint John Vocational School.

Kay was a close family friend and I always remembered Yugoslavia from her description. I had long wanted to visit it, guided by Kay's original notes, particularly after her death in 2004.

There are no known photographs of Kay's expedition – and they're not needed. Almost 30 years on, there is a poetic beauty in Kay's simple diary of a journey taken by two adventuring women.

In her introduction to Kay's collection *The Bright Particulars*, fellow New Brunswick poet P.K. Page wrote: "Smith is a poet of light, of the sea, of the seasons, of the heart. Perhaps especially the heart. The speaker . . . carries a heart at times heavier than her baggage."

Kay's formal honours included an honorary doctor of letters from UNB and the Alden Nowlan Award in recognition of her outstanding contribution to New Brunswick literature. Those are just titles for someone who could touch an individual's soul, whether through her published works, or her personal travel journals.

Kay and Dot sailed north along the Adriatic coast to Split, before journeying inland towards Mostar and Sarajevo. "Late in the morning drive inland until we reached Mostar. Soon on this road we saw three lakes, very beautiful, reflecting the rich foliage, olive green in colour, glass clear," she wrote.

It is a blindingly bright day as I travel south on a 12-hour train journey from Budapest. Kay and I are meeting in space, converging from north and south on a city, but also in time. Between our two visits are the inescapable events of the war that tore Sarajevo apart, and put the world's inaction to shame.

Crossing into Croatia, bullet holes are visible on the buildings. Graffiti is everywhere. The first of the minarets, standing tall, white and strong in the distance, comes into view. The train stops in the sun at the border of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the Muslim call to prayer rings out through the hills.

Kay twisted through a winding mountain road north from Mostar to reach Sarajevo.

"The mountains were unspeakably impressive," she writes. "What is man that thou art mindful of him and the son of man that thou visitest him.' Some snow-capped with bands, strata of grey, probably volcanic rock. The tops of these mountains were varied in shape and sometimes there were mountains overlapping mountains and mountain upon mountains upon mountains. Then we would come upon a village on the side of a mountain, its red tile roofs policing the serenity, and sometimes we would come upon a pleasant stretch of green, a field glowing in sunlight.

"Sometimes there would be a threatening black cloud and a shower; then the sun would come out and we would see on the roadside two gypsies, a man and woman sitting, the dark-skinned man lighting a cigarette; a man and woman trying to lead a cow off the road, apparently frightened by the bus; an old woman in black carrying on her back a granary sack containing something heavy; women waiting for a bus perhaps, and dressed in the Turkish trousers under the skirt. Before noon we saw the first minaret."

Kay's visit took place at the beginning of decades of change. Tito, Yugoslavia's totalitarian ruler for four decades, died the month before her arrival.

Her only mention of Tito is along the road to Zagreb from Sarajevo: "A gorgeous cinnamon coloured field. Ahead a snow-streaked mountaintop. The creamy heavy heart of a mountain is bared –

stone farm houses, buildings. On top of hills TITO in white letters, simple letters."

Indira Begović, one of my hosts in Sarajevo, says everybody still loves Tito.

"Everybody had enough, then," she says. "We didn't have a lot, but we had enough. And now some people don't even have enough for food. What he didn't do was set up a system that could serve after he was gone. The transition to capitalism is still all wrong."

Star-bursts of shell fire and diagonal smatterings of sniper holes are visible on many buildings. The scars of the 1992-1995 wars on apartment towers and homes contrasts against the polished glass and marble of new businesses and car dealerships.

Kay's diary is incredibly descriptive, by times.

"Sunday can be a lonely day," she wrote. "Neither of us mentioned the kind of 'gone' feeling we had, but when we got in bed, Dot said, 'There's a sinister feeling about this hotel.' It's the heavy drapery, the carpets, the old-fashioned furniture, including a built in wardrobe with a brown brocade around a red mirror, chairs with hard-curved backs also upholstered in brown brocade and besides the draperies on the window is a shirred sickly green curtain of some sheer material. The beds – ah, the beds – are really built-in couches with the back also in brown brocade attached to the wall. There is a wide, unbroken wallboard of brown brocade framed in dark wood. The paper is palish green with narrow floral strips. The *piece de resistance* is a lamp with a sickly yellow fringed yellow shade."

The passage is the closest she came in her journal to describing the sense of uneasiness she felt travelling through Yugoslavia.

Kay's long-time friend Mary Lou Joyce, who loaned me Kay's notebooks for my trip, recounted how Kay and Dot were stopped in their touring taxi at one point. Someone – we're not sure who – tried to take Kay's notebook from her, and the driver told her to stop writing. Kay defended her craft, saying they were personal notes and refused to stop. The man was quite upset with her.

"She was uneasy, deep down in her bones," says Mary Lou. "She said she was very uneasy all the time she was there. She was really distressed by the incident, and Yugoslavia was the only place she felt a sense of foreboding."

The Europa Hotel where Kay and Dot stayed was destroyed in the war more than dozen years after their visit. Another decade and a half on, it's still not fully reopened. There's a large, glass-clad new wing, the historic bit shielded by scaffolding.

Still, Kay's description of a nearby building remains accurate.

"Across the street there is an interesting old building – brownish stone with three apartments," she writes. "On each balcony is a row of plants. There are three carved faces of women, two large and one small. On the bottom floor is a furniture shop. Well kept – once a very elegant home, no doubt. Yesterday, a man walked out on his balcony with (its) wrought-iron railing to water his flowers."

In the City Pub on a Saturday night, drinks flow, cheaper-than-bread cigarettes burn, and the beats thump-thump as they do in clubs everywhere. The language of the songs is different, but the rhythm is the same. The city lives for now, despite average earnings of just 200 uro a month.

"Everything is different now," says Amira, an Albanian from Kosovo, now living in Sarajevo. "We really hate each other. I hate. People hate each other, but they live with each other. The family I grew up with, I have to hate Serbs. It is sad. But it's hard. How do you expect to love them when they're killing your father and raping your mother?"

The hate, the confused nature of a country with three presidents, each representing a different ethnic group, the bullet holes. It is hard to escape the history between Kay's journey and my own.

Kay could see a simple human beauty wherever she went.

Outside of Sarajevo she wrote: "A youngish girl with long red skirt and bare feet stands, one hand on hip, the other grasping – grasping suggests effort – rather holding a long pitchfork. Just standing, looking. Into herself, perhaps, as she looks at something or for something or someone. A tall young woman in cream blouse and brown pantaloons walking by the grey river with shopping bag in one hand and little boy held by her other. A weather(ed) grey fence. Two women hoeing a garden, wearing dark pantaloons and shocking pink tops."

Down the road from the apartment I'm staying at, in Sarajevo's Novi Grad district, is a school with brass plaques covering one wall.

About 50 pupils died during the war at this school, dangerously perched in sight of two opposing mountains when the city was surrounded by Serb forces.

What is behind that wall gives hope for the future.

The OŠ Džemaludin Čaušević school has 618 pupils, 70 of them Roma, one of the most marginalized groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina. There are pupils from all backgrounds and teachers who don't see complicated histories – just children.

Kay would have beamed in that school, laughing out loud as she met pupils and teachers.

The value of "child-centred" education and diversity may be obvious in Canada, but OŠ Džemaludin Čaušević is one of the few to embrace them in Bosnia.

Deputy director Selma Džemidžić says that during Tito's Communist regime, pupils were treated as objects.

"Education was built on competition," she says. "They were sitting like sardines, one behind the other. They had not the possibility to interact, to talk, to look each other in the face. Children in that system did not have the possibility to learn about culture, traditions, holidays.

"If your family has ingrained attitudes, they will grow up with those prejudices"

Arbew Gasi, a Roma teenager, follows us on the tour. He knows some English.

"I love this school; it's a very nice school," he says. "It feels like home."

"Don't hate – love," declares Selma.

There are four thin notebooks from Kay's journey – the first from Greece, the last from Vienna. At the end of the second book, while Kay is still in Split, she sets an evening scene: "As we look, we see more and more ships in port, a small pleasure boat, black and yellow slips back and forth. Behind the very tall highrises of grey and beige cement, a backdrop of the mountains, the far ones misty and unsubstantial. One window burning bright sends out a copper brightness made by the moving, wavy water into a Christmas tree ornament. On the street way below us there is much traffic, cards, motorcycles.

"People are walking on the sidewalk on the water side. When I first looked out on this beautiful harbour, I saw the water silk smooth, a smoky blue."

A new poem is begun on the next page, her thoughts left rough,

Arrived

Through her eyes
filled with the beauty
of the nude statues
it was blinding whiteness
of marble, the core of
perfection, (1) The exquisite life of a chin
(2) the vein in an arm

(3) the curve of the buttocks
that filled her with
longing for the
living flesh
and the human blemishes
of her lover.

unfinished.

Kay would never have left a poem without perfecting the timing, the ebb and flow of the words, or even simply omitting the numbers. But the timing of this poem within the trip, and even the title itself, may represent the culmination of the first part of her journey.

Emerging from the perfected curves of classical Greece into controlled Yugoslavia, her writing shifted away from the buildings she'd seen to the people around her. There is a longing for the humanity of a more complex country in her words.

Kay saw the collision of cultures, visiting both mosques and churches, but she didn't rank beauty, showed preference for one over the other. Kay described everything with a measured visual equality – an eye set to a wide angle, catching the place as a whole, but zooming in on the individual people that make a place special.

As Mary Lou Joyce describes it: "Kay's connection with people was a universal thing. She was able to see people in the humanity – a poet's ability – to see detail, to give a feeling of the whole."

Kay's account of Sarajevo and Yugoslavia captures its human beauty along with its unease.

So much has changed since June 1980.

But the unease remains. And human beauty persists. **E**

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PHOTO COURTESY THE ESTATE OF KAY SMITH

Alden Nowlan once told poet Kay Smith, above, she would have been more famous if she hadn't been so modest.



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Apartment buildings in the Novi Grad district of Sarajevo still bore the scars of war this spring.