

# Art in the Yugoslav Culture: Reaching the Institutionalized Populations

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## **AUTHOR'S NOTE:**

During the late 1980s I was involved with Very Special Arts Indiana (VSAI), a federally-funded program promoting the use of art experiences with special populations. For over 4 years, I functioned as a music artist, working in schools and diagnostic centers throughout the state of Indiana, using art (mostly, but not entirely, music activities) to help reach, stimulate and educate disadvantaged kids.

In late 1988, under the auspices of VSAI, and partially funded by an Honors Grant from Indiana University (where I was a student and guitar instructor at the time), I embarked on a 3-month trip to Yugoslavia to research and document that country's use of art in special education. This was three years before Yugoslavia was to be engulfed in the horrors of the Balkan War. It is worth noting that all institutions visited and mentioned in this paper were located in Croatia, at the time a republic of Yugoslavia but now an independent country, recognized by the United Nations in 1992.

While my research paper is now an out-of-date snapshot of life in Croatia in the late 80s, it is nonetheless hoped that the narrative might serve to inform and inspire today's generation of educators and special population advocates in some practical way.

My thanks to Zorka A. Saleeby and all the participants in my informal study of the function and use of art in special education in one of the most beautiful countries in the world, and one which will forever hold a warm place in my heart and mind -- Croatia. *Zivoli Hrvatska!*

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## INTRODUCTION

I am a guitarist by profession, pursuing my own eclectic muse for over twenty years — performing, composing, teaching privately and at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana — and also, since 1984, an artist-in-education under the auspices of Very Special Arts Indiana, where I use art and music in working with special populations. I have had numerous trainings, workshops, and formal collegiate instruction in the field, and have enjoyed success in my endeavors, but am no expert in the field of special education. However, it is my feeling that, when accompanied by a simple love and compassion for a disadvantaged individual, a modicum of expertise may suffice to positively influence the quality of life for that person. As in most worthwhile endeavors, one should take care to avoid mistakes and to give one's best.

As an artist and teacher, I find it essential to maintain a healthy curiosity about this world of ours. The need of a holistic world experience for an artist should be self-evident: gist for the creative mill. For a teacher, it is clear that such experiences bring fresh perspectives and approaches to one's work. Seeing how things are done in another class, school, state, or country opens cognitive doors within me and ventilates my creative powers. This facilitates change and growth for me as a person, and enhances my competence as an educator.

Recently I had just such an opportunity traveling to Yugoslavia with my wife, a Yugoslav native. I planned to see how an Eastern European country, rich in history and art, used art to reach their handicapped populations. In addition I hoped to acquire a substantial overview of Yugoslavia's special education programs. What I discovered both delighted and disturbed me, giving me plenty upon which to ruminate as I returned to my Stateside role as resident artist for Very Special Arts Indiana.

## EXPECTATIONS

Exactly what would one encounter in Yugoslavia? Pre-conceptions, which one tries to minimize with the discipline of an anthropologist in the field, empty notebook in hand and eyes and ears open, were nonetheless gloomy. One might have considered these points:

\* Would Yugoslav special education funding be curtailed in view of the frantic downward spiral of the Yugoslav economy? In September of 1988 in Yugoslavia, the exchange rate was 2900 dinars per dollar; three months later it was 5000/1. By way of illustration, a modest

dinner for two would routinely cost 40,000 to 50,000 dinars (predominantly a cash economy, the largest denomination is the 50,000 dinar note, about ten dollars). Cuts in U.S. education funding in the face of far less threatening economic woes were fresh on my mind. If resources were found to be wanting, what filled the gap?

\* It had been said by a reliable source that Yugoslavia placed greater emphasis on science and research in special education and etiology than upon the application of compassionate individual treatment. These were energetic theorists, but would their human rights practices toward special populations be disappointing?

\* I studied Yugoslav history and culture to get a feel of the country and the people. Slavic people are often stereotyped as being intensely emotional, hearty folks who slap each other on the back and extol the virtues of the family. What, in fact, is the role of the family in the life of the average dis-advantaged Yugoslav?

## A BRIEF HISTORY

Croatia is one of six regional republics of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (regional capitol: Zagreb). As early as 1836, the need for systematic special education for the deaf was recognized, and in 1840 the first school for the deaf was opened in Gorica, now on the border of Yugoslavia and Italy. In Zagreb, the first school for the deaf opened in 1891. In 1895, *Vinko Bek* was founded; the first educational institution for the blind in Yugoslavia, as well as in the Balkans. Also in Zagreb is the Faculty of Defectology (from defektologiju, Yugoslav term for special education), a school of the University of Zagreb. In 1987, the Faculty celebrated its 25th anniversary, as well as the 40th anniversary of university education of defectologists in Croatia.

According to literature published by the Faculty of Defectology ('Twenty-Fifth Anniversary'; 1987; edited by Dr. Branko Radovancic, commemorating the above-mentioned anniversaries), study-groups for the education of special teachers were first formed at the Higher Pedagogical School in Zagreb in 1947, marking the beginning of an organized effort in Yugoslavia to address the needs of handicapped populations. In the period between the two world wars, care for impaired children, adolescents and adults was sporadic and insufficiently systematic. Most often this care was given by charitable organizations, including the Catholic church. As a result of such conditions a very small percentage of impaired children and

adolescents were included in education and rehabilitation.

Occupational training was limited to the few professions that had been traditionally reserved for people with impairments. Very few educational and rehabilitative institutions existed. Some students attended regular schools, but there they were often neglected and misunderstood. As a result, they often soon withdrew from these institutions. On July 19th, 1962, the High Defectology School of Zagreb was founded, constituting the official recognition of a department which had its beginnings with the first informal study-groups 15 years before. In 1975 a similar Faculty was founded in Belgrade, the capitol of Yugoslavia.

## **DELIVERY OF SERVICES**

A degree in Defectology is imperative in Yugoslavia. Unlike in the United States, an independent artist-in-education with special education training but holding no degree (such as the author) is not permitted to work with special populations. Such is the law; nonetheless, I experienced no reserve or intrinsic scepticism regarding my qualifications among the teachers encountered. On the contrary, teachers seemed enthusiastic about the visit, and quite willing to share their work, showing particular interest in American techniques and perspectives.

For instance, many teachers were surprised to learn that the United States had special programs for the learning disabled, as such programs do not exist in Yugoslavia. Teachers are certainly aware of the existence of an LD population in Yugoslavia, but whether the government, which sets all policy, recognizes the existence of the population or merely neglects it is not clear. Learning disabled children are placed in the normal classroom environment, and may be treated for dyslexia, if appropriate, but otherwise are provided the same program as normal children.

The enthusiastic interest in American special education approaches is largely due to an information vacuum. Caused in part by a poorly developed tele-communications system, communications among teachers, administrators, and other special education professionals remain relatively difficult in Yugoslavia. Our guide and companion, a charming man of brilliant repute and broad professional experience, remarked that the visitations and contacts being fostered were a welcome surprise, and an expansion of his own awareness of the work being done, nearby, by others in his field. Imagine, then, the isolation that exists for the many teachers and artists working daily in institutions!

Why is communication problematic? It is not, oddly enough, the result of the political

environment, *per se*. Economics plays the major role. Many professionals possess no private transportation. Often no money is available for touring other facilities or exchanging writings. Such networking as Americans enjoy in the form of workshops, creative seminars, conventions, and festivals, quite rare. Tele-communications are very expensive for the under-funded institutions, and often the staff is too pre-occupied with their own financial problems to worry about their professional isolation. As a result of these factors, sharing pedagogical approaches and other information proves to be a slow process.

A chief feature in the Yugoslav approach is the exclusive use of institutionalization. The concept of the Least Restrictive Environment is unknown. Those we would label as physically handicapped, mentally handicapped, blind, deaf, and severely/profoundly handicapped, are housed in separate, specialized institutions. From pre-school age to adulthood and beyond, the handicapped regularly enter the institution on Monday morning, staying through Friday afternoon. While in the institution, they attend classes, participate in sports, and develop social skills with their fellow students, and also with other children from the community who are encouraged to visit.

An intensive training/education program is employed, utilizing both linear, left-brain models of instruction, and a unique use of art, music, and other spatial, right-brain methods. Discipline is strict, the children well-behaved, yet one notices no oppressed look in the faces of the children. Rather, there's a sense of belonging, of accomplishment, even of pride, as graded papers, works of visual art, and musical performances are enthusiastically presented to the visitors from America.

It might be suggested that societal fear of the exploitation of children — so prevalent in the States — is not such a particular concern here, and perhaps to no dire consequences. A brief study in contrasts: whereas in the States there are child labor laws making it illegal for children to work towards the maintenance of a facility, one fine autumn day at the MH Institution in Velika Gorica, a pronounced work-ethic was in place — instructor and children gathering leaves and trimming the grounds, laughing, rosey-cheeked and energetic. Further examination within the facility revealed the children's rooms to be well-made, bearing the personal imprints of their own labors and creativity. There was a palpable feeling that *this is our home, and we all must care for it*. Such passivity as can be often observed in American children of similar circumstances were quite rare here. One is left with the distinct sense that we might safely trust

our charges to enjoy a freer, more effectual hand in their own existence than we commonly do in this country.

At Velika Gorica one finds, on average, six children residing in each bedroom. The rooms are quite nice, with sturdy, clean bunk-beds, closets, sky-lights, natural wood trim, large windows, and close proximity to the restrooms, which are clean, well-ventilated, and even feature bidets in the ladies rooms. This facility is a superior example of Yugoslavia's institutions, and testifies to the care taken by the teachers and staff in creating a most humane environment for the children. With but one exception, to be noted later, all institutions visited are clean, airy, and staffed with dedicated and, by all observed indications, quite competent teachers.

There are instances where children attend an institution by day, and go home at night, as in cases of PH, deaf, or blind children who reside near an institution, and whose parents are willing and able to provide transportation back and forth. However, in most cases, and especially with PH and MH, children and adolescents are home only on weekends. This policy is generally encouraged by the staff of the institutions, who take the view that a properly run institutional environment is preferable to familial situations encountered in many homes of the disabled, where frustrated parents abuse the child, and poor living conditions threaten to undermine the institution's best efforts. The teachers are generally of the opinion that it is in the child's best interest if home visitations are limited to weekends. This schedule, they contend, provides the child with enough time for familial nurturance, the family with enough time to re-charge the emotional batteries between visits, and the institution with enough intensive structure for the proper teaching and reinforcement of knowledge and skills.

While it remains a difficult one for American sensibilities, there is a certain logic to the widespread institutionalization. Pervasive economic problems drive the Yugoslav system. In 1988 inflation was around 300 per cent. The currency is one of the most devalued in the world. Widespread hardship and deprivation wrack the people of Yugoslavia, and alcoholism is endemic. The children suffer greatly. As hard-pressed as the institutions are, they are very often a more secure and stable environment than the homes from which most of the students come.

This is how the teachers see it. And after experiencing Yugoslavia first-hand, and upon considering the state of the American family, with the widespread child-abuse encountered in this unquestionably affluent country, an objective person is not eager to mount the American soapbox and decry the Yugoslav approach. Exclusive use of institutionalization is not, ideally, the preferred mode of treatment, to be sure. Yet all things considered, perhaps it is currently the

most humane approach for Yugoslavia.

## **THE ARTS IN EDUCATION**

In the music and art programs of the institutions, one is delighted with rich, diverse programs demonstrating an emphasis on folk traditions, ethnic identity, practical skills, and creative art.

In the area of visual art, one may find:

- \*multi-layer, almost three-dimensional collages created with spray-paint and various objects

- \*oak panels with traditional regional coats-of-arms embossed on them with wood-burning pencils

- \*colorful woven rugs and wall-hangings using traditional Slavic techniques (some patterns are quite similar to those found in the American southwest and Mexico)

- \*striking impressionistic linoleum and wood carvings

- \*clay sculptures of amazing complexity from a student deaf and blind since birth.

What can be taught through these methods? Clearly, visual art develops fine-motor skills and eye-to-hand coordination; perceptual skills such as proportion, symmetry, and figure/ground relationships; communication skills — concretely through the actual use of words as components of the art, and abstractly through the search for and expression of meaning and intention in the art. Further, the skills required for an art activity transfer very well to other applications. Transference is a powerful learning tool for individuals at all learning levels.

In these children's works one can sometimes see the recurrence of traditional ethnic themes mixing with modern influences. Other times it's simply the creative processes within a child given outlet and only a bit of direction, yielding works for us to ponder. With a minimum of resources, and dedicated teachers, much of the visual art produced by Yugoslavia's young special artists is superb.

The music programs are similarly outstanding. At Velika Gorica, a recent graduate of music school and of defectology devised a simple number system based on conventional music theory to teach music to PH youngsters. As he conducted, the children played guitars, drums, an upright acoustic bass guitar, marimbas, the ever-popular accordian, and native stringed instruments

called tamboricas, each student performing on an instrument appropriate to his/her interest, ability, and level of impairment. They played, mostly from memory, several rousing Yugoslav folk tunes. Anyone familiar with Slavic folk music, especially that of Serbia or Macedonia, can well appreciate the complexity of the music heard from these fledgling musicians. Odd meters and crisp tempos are the order of the day, and while the troupe may not be ready for the road just yet, toes were unabashedly tapping.

Considering the declining emphasis placed on the arts in the United States in recent years, witness the success of art-based education programs in place in Yugoslavia. The observations of this journey served to renew a personal commitment to art as a vehicle for information. In Yugoslavia one could plainly see perceptual—motor, socialization, and communication skills being exercised and refined, and the ancient folk traditions and Slavic heritage being passed on and used as the very crux of their education. The liberal use of folk art and song bestow a palpable human dimension to the process of teaching/learning. The result is a multi-dimensional pedagogy, a transference of indigenous culture at once timely and timeless in its appropriateness — it connects the students with their diverse ethnic heritage, and it quite simply works splendidly as a method/means of instruction.

It could be argued that the European community as a whole places considerable emphasis on the importance of the arts. In a continent which history has long favored with attention, from which many of the greatest artists of all time have emerged, and which so enjoys the fine wine of her deep culture, it could be expected that in services for disadvantaged populations the value of the arts are not underestimated.

For instance, meet Mr. Dorde ('George') Petrovic, Director of the Karlovac Center for the Deaf, who is himself a prominent professional artist and who makes visual arts not merely an important adjunct to the curriculum, but rather the central technique of pedagogy. He starts out the young ones by teaching them such things as size, perspective, gradation, direction, laterality, etc., all via visual images. In a few years these children are producing quite detailed drawings of chairs, grape-presses, looms — everyday objects — with great realism and proportion.

This could of course prepare the student for a career in architectural drawing or similar field, but to Mr. Petrovic the real benefit is to be found in the development of communication skills. By exercising the neural pathways in the brain through extensive application of visual

arts techniques, he has documented a substantial increase in student's abilities to learn and use both verbal and sign language. The discipline of the art fosters enhanced self-esteem, the courage to try new things, and, perhaps most importantly, the *desire* to communicate. In essence, art *is* communication, and is therefore a most viable path towards total communication for the individual, and further to the integration of the individual into his or her society.

### STANCIC: A BIT OF HARD REALITY

And now for the other part of the story. One evening, during a discussion with a member of the family, a social worker, one discovers the existence of a place called Stancic (stan-chich). Here reside the severe and profound cases. Determined to have a look, administrative clearance is acquired, and one day soon thereafter the visitors find themselves on a long bus-ride to the country. After clearing the gate of Stancic, there follows a long walk past a small open land-fill, full of paper and trash, to the center of the compound. Meeting briefly with the assistant director, and after the traditional shot of plum brandy and cup of thick Turkish coffee, a tour of the facility begins.

On entering the heavy steel doors of Building #1, one is assaulted with a smell so vile that many fledgling teachers become sick when entering for the first time. It is, of course, the smell of excrement, urine, and huge quantities of disinfectant. One passes through security doors and, room by room, sees children, adolescents and adults lying on tables, on the floor, sitting in plastic chairs, or running in the dimly lit halls. Many are nearly or entirely naked, or dressed in yellow diapers. Those able to are watching black and white TV's, which are showing cartoons. If tending toward self-destructive behavior, the residents are in tight gowns (essentially strait-jackets) that prohibit movements of the arms and hands. Many are isolated in beds with steel railings, in rooms crowded with up to twenty-four such beds. The restrooms are rusting and littered with old clothes and rags.

Children rush up to the strangers. They do not receive visitors often. The children's bodies smelling of disinfectant, their teeth yellow and pitted, they paw at the visitors. One particularly difficult child has a habit of spitting continuously. He spits upon the face of a nurse, who wipes away the spittle without a word, a resigned, weary look in her eyes. What can one do? During most of the day, there are two nurses for every 50 patients. During the afternoon, the ratio drops to 1/50. The nurses hope to get them all fed, and to keep the diapers changed without too much delay. There is no time for anything else. A nurse, asked how they manage it all, shakes her

head, tears immediately streaming down her face. One is moved by how close to the surface the frustrations are, how close to the edge *the people* are! As the visitors are leaving, the young man spits on them as well; they receive their anointing.

There are some classes and arts for the higher functioning children, and the teachers and nurses strive to do what can be done for them. But Stancic remains essentially a warehouse for a population no one wants to see. Underfunded, understaffed, and overburdened with every age group, they must deal with sickness, rape and violence as best they can. And perhaps the most significant obstacle for them is also their primary resource: the Yugoslav bureaucracy.

## THE SYSTEM

In assessing such things as special education programs within a particular country, it is well to place one's findings within a greater context. Political realities will always determine such details as how the disadvantaged are treated. In this regard, one may notice that the government in Yugoslavia is quite top-heavy, with an enormous number of bureaucrats per capita. At each level of the government, as responsibility is delegated and resources distributed, it is common knowledge that funds will 'disappear'. By the time the actual institutions receive their operating funds, they are found to be grossly inadequate.

To be reasonable and pragmatic about it, corruption is a common feature in all governments, but in Yugoslavia, it might fairly be called an art form: one in vogue during the post-war era, but grossly out-of-step with current world reality. Yugoslavia today is ripe for the kind of restructuring currently under way in the Soviet Union.

So we have been seeing Yugoslavia's economy stumbling, and ethnic strife ripping into the frail fabric of a country pieced together of a half-dozen quite disparate cultures. Yugoslavia's problems are found in the news, and this will continue to be so until such time as the tenuous status quo erupts and dissolves.

It is perhaps worthwhile remembering that tensions in this European region were instrumental in the sparking of *both* world wars.

## THE COUNTRY AND THE PEOPLE

Yet within the even greater context of Yugoslavia as a whole, one finds a physically diverse and beautiful country, a warm, loving people, a rich, complex history and culture, with serious political and economic problems. As one examines special education services, many dedicated instructors of handicapped people are found who labor under extreme difficulties to facilitate the growth and development of their charges, who must rely heavily upon their own wits and innovation to deliver the services required. They use the arts and 'traditional pedagogical techniques' (which is to say, paper, pencil, slate and chalk), and incorporate their culture, history, and hearty Slavic spirit in the process of teaching and caring. And their results are quite noteworthy.

There is a fundamental lesson for all special educators here. The arts are much more than 'nice things to do' in a classroom. This unfortunate attitude relegates a profoundly effective pedagogical approach and a broad array of useful tools to the level of parlor games. In working with special populations, one should take advantage of opportunities to integrate cultural resources into the curriculum. A child's ethnicity, and related cultural heritage, are a powerful connection to that child which, when sensitively exploited, could become the very avenue the teacher seeks, through which information may pass to the student.

In America the trend has been towards de-emphasizing ethnic differences. While justified in many instances of blatant discrimination, this trend is nonetheless often fear-based, and only serves to deny the wonderful variety and beauty of the world's peoples, seeking instead some sort of homogenized humanity devoid of unique characteristics. It should no longer be considered a viable approach to education. Plurality and cultural integrity should not be shunned, but embraced. These concepts are part of an enlightened, holistic context within which truly significant teaching can take place.

One of my questions was, when resources are virtually non-existent, what emerges to fill the gap? It is safely said to be the deep spiritual commitment of the Slavs, their inward strength and grace, their determination to perform well in spite of difficulties. They have learned well what is needed to survive, and even thrive, in most distressing circumstances. One wonders at their ability to laugh at adversity, and to persevere. To simply continue...

And then, what of the role of the family in the lives of dis-advantaged Yugoslavs? The answer

is, of course, as complex as the families which find themselves in such a position. The same adversity which will deal separation and despair to one family will serve to bring another family closer together in a defiant attempt to hold on to family dignity and solidarity. Some families possess the inner resources to successfully deal with the challenges of a special child; others do not. Perhaps in this regard, human beings are everywhere the same.

I returned with my wife to America, to begin new residencies as an artist-in-education, and to ponder the experiences of Yugoslavia. As a result, I have a renewed appreciation for the many blessings we enjoy in America. We, in truth, hardly know the meaning of the word 'hardship'. In our zest for abundance and the quick techno-fix, we lose sight of how little it takes materially to succeed intellectually and, especially, spiritually.

I've always felt that it was quite possible to do more with less. It *does* takes some thought and creativity. Now, after seeing what my friends just east of the Adriatic manage to accomplish with virtually nothing but love and desire and a handful of materials, I should never doubt this wisdom again.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The present paper is a brief summation of my experiences of September, October, and November of 1988, when I had the opportunity to live in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, and research their approaches to special education. My wife, Zorka Foster, a native of Yugoslavia, is a geologist, a gifted visual artist, and artist-in-training with Very Special Arts Indiana. She was responsible for a tremendous amount of both verbal and written translation, and is my fundamental connection to all the experiences that resulted in this report.

Together, we worked with Dr. Zvonko Juras, Director of *Fond Slava Raskaj*, the VSA sister chapter in Yugoslavia, and a renown member of the European special education community, specializing in services for the deaf and hard-of-hearing. Dr. Juras, as well as his wife, Ruzica Juras, guided and assisted us in our quest for information regarding the delivery of services and programs to Yugoslavia's Croatian special populations.

This, it must be noted, was no small task. Each of our numerous visitations to institutions had to be individually cleared with the Department of Education and Pedagogical Services for the Socialist Republic of Croatia, the government agency responsible for the implementation of all

special education programs in the republic. Had it not been for Dr. Juras and his substantial resume, we would surely not have been granted tours of the institutions, enjoying the liberty to record, on slides and videotape, anything we wished.

Furthermore, Dr. Juras honored my wife and me by making us official Yugoslav delegates at the Very Special Arts International Festival, held in Washington, DC during June of 1989. I thank Dr. and Mrs. Juras profusely for their many efforts on our behalf, and for their warm friendship.

In addition, I would like to thank Dr. Michael Orlansky of Ohio State University, who had been a visiting Professor of Special Education in Yugoslavia in 1984, for the gracious assistance he and his family provided us as we prepared for our endeavor. And a special thank you I gratefully give to Dr. Barbara Tymitz-Wolf, Associate Dean of Faculty at Indiana University in Bloomington and expert in the field of special education, for her kind assistance and encouragement in the shaping and editing of this manuscript.

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