

SLAVENKA DRAKULIC



HOW WE SURVIVED
COMMUNISM
AND EVEN LAUGHED

"She is a writer and journalist whose voice belongs to the world."

Slavenka
Drakulić

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LAUGHED



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By the same author
HOLOGRAMS OF FEAR
MARBLE SKIN

Acknowledgments

Books come in life like children do. First there is a seed, then it grows. The idea for this book now seems too obvious: there were so many articles and books written on Eastern Europe after 1989, but none of them spoke about women, their lives, their feelings. My traveling on assignment for *Ms. Magazine* to Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and East Germany in January and February of 1990 made me realize that. And even if I had been previously to these countries, that trip made me see what we all went through in the last forty-five years. It was as if only the present could unlock the door to the past.

Yet, this book is not only on women. To understand their (our) situation, one has to see the system at work behind.

I am grateful to Robin Morgan, who sent me on this trip in the first place. To Gloria Steinem, for trusting me more than I trust myself. To Mary Cunnane, my editor at Norton, who gave me not only the opportunity but also the support

to finish this book. To Kate Mosse, my editor at Hutchinson, for writing cheerful letters in bleak times. To my friends Andrea, Alemka, Jasmina, Vesna, Dorina and Vanja here in Zagreb, who find time to help me with their comments. And to my daughter Rujana who, as always, bravely sustained my unbearable changes of temper.

Perhaps I should first thank the women in the countries I visited and who wholeheartedly gave me their help and their time, even if I didn't know them. Instead of naming them all – because it is impossible – I dedicate this book to all women of Eastern Europe who, too, made possible the changes in 1989.

Epigraph

We are the needy relatives, we are the aborigines, we are the ones left behind – the backward, the stunted, the misshapen, the down-and-out, the moochers, parasites, connen, suckers. Sentimental, old-fashioned, childish, uninformed, troubled, melodramatic, devious, unpredictable, negligent. The ones who don't answer letters, the ones who miss the great opportunity, the hard drinkers, the babblers, the porch-sitters, the deadline-missers, the promise-breakers, the braggarts, the immature, the monstrous, the undisciplined, the easily offended, the ones who insult each other to death but cannot break off relations. We are the maladjusted, the complainers intoxicated by failure.

We are irritating, excessive, depressing, somehow unlucky. People are accustomed to slight us. We are cheap labor; merchandise may be had from us at a lower price; people bring us their old newspapers as a gift. Letters from us come sloppily typed, unnecessarily detailed. People smile

at us, pityingly, as long as we do not suddenly become unpleasant.

As long as we do not say anything strange, sharp; as long as we do not stare at our nails and bare our teeth; as long as we do not become wild and cynical.

– György Konrád, *To Cave Explorers from the West*

Introduction

The Trivial Is Political

The title of my book feels wrong, I kept thinking as my plane soared off the runway at Zagreb airport. We have not yet survived communism, and there is nothing to laugh about.

I took off for London on Thursday, 27 June 1991, the day after the two secessionist republics of Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence from the rest of Yugoslavia, one year after holding their first free elections since World War II. The previous night Slovenia's borders with Italy and Austria were closed in anticipation of clashes between its territorial defense forces and the Yugoslavian federal army commanded by Serbian generals in Belgrade. That morning I called the airport repeatedly: 'Will the Adria Airways flight to London be leaving this morning?'

'We don't know. Who knows? Who can tell?' said the young woman at the other end. I could sense panic in her voice, the same panic I recognized in myself, growing like a strange little fruit in the pit of my stomach.

On the news that evening in London I heard about the first deaths in Slovenia. There was a war going on, a real war, not in some far off country about which we knew little, but right in the heart of Europe, close to the home I had left behind. I watched the TV bulletins reporting helicopters being shot out of the sky, tanks being blown up, and people being killed. This was not how any of us had imagined the future eighteen months before, when the great wave of change had swept across Eastern Europe. This was not how it was supposed to be. I felt cheated.

Suddenly I caught myself thinking about fruit and about how nothing had changed. We had thought that after the revolution peaches would be different – bigger, sweeter, more golden. But as I stood in line at a stall in the street market I noticed that the peaches were just as green, small, and bullet-hard, somehow pre-revolutionary. The tomatoes were still far too expensive. The strawberries – still sour, the oranges – still dry and wrinkled. Then I thought about dust, the fine yellow dust that used to cover the shop windows and windowsills, the buildings and the cars, as if nobody cared. That hadn't changed either.

What did change were the faces of the politicians on TV, the names of the major streets and squares, the flags, national anthems, and monuments. These days in Duke Jelačić Square in Zagreb, the Croatian capital, sun glitters on the refurbished baroque façades, and the newly-erected bronze statue of the duke casts a long shadow across the marble pavement. He holds his sword aloft pointing the way forward, but the more I look at him, the more I am afraid he is really still directing us into the past, as if forty-

five years of living under communism cannot be erased from our collective consciousness without a substitution. There was no duke when the place was called Republic Square. It was in the spring of 1990 that the newly elected democratic government erected a statue of Duke Jelačić to replace the one that had been destroyed by Tito's partisans soon after World War II as a 'relic of the past' with no place in their 'new communist society'. It felt as though the new democracies of Eastern Europe were so weak, so fearful of the legacy of their communist past, that they had to abolish the symbols of the old regime with the same eagerness – violence even – as the revolutionary governments had used after 1945.

I clearly remember when it all began. Just before he retired, a journalist colleague returned from the Austria-Hungary border in mid-September 1989, crying with excitement. 'East Germans are crossing the border by the thousand. I didn't think I would ever live to see this!' Neither did I. That is how you are trained in this part of the world, not to believe that change is possible. You are trained to fear change, so that when change eventually begins to take place, you are suspicious, afraid, because every change you ever experienced was always for the worse. I remember that my own first reaction to my colleague's news, besides happiness, was fear, as if I were experiencing an earthquake. Much as I desired the collapse of the old system, the ground was shaking beneath my feet. The world I had thought of as permanent, stable, and secure was suddenly falling apart all around me. It was not a pleasant experience.

Later on events began unfolding with such speed that enthusiastic reporters and theoreticians – who, by the way, were taken just as much by surprise as the common people – barely had time to develop fully an Eastern European domino theory or to decide whether authentic revolutions were taking place. This disorientation mixed with hope followed me in January 1990 when I traveled through Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, East Germany, and Bulgaria. I knew that, just like every other trip I had ever made to these countries, it would feel very much like revisiting my own past – the shortages, the distinctive odors, the shabby clothing. After all, we had all long suffered under the same ideology. Despite this, I needed to see with my own eyes what was going on.

One of the first things I noticed on these travels was the influence of Hollywood movies on our media and, consequently, on our way of thinking. In newspapers and on TV revolutions looked spectacular: cut barbed wire, seas of lighted candles, masses chanting in the streets, convulsive embraces and tears of happiness, people chiseling pieces from the Berlin Wall. A famous Hollywood director once said that movies are the same as life with the boring parts cut out. I found that this was precisely right. The boring parts of the revolutions had simply finished up on the floors of television studio cutting rooms all over the world. What the world had seen and heard were only the most dramatic and symbolic images. This was all right, but it was not all. Life, for the most part, is trivial.

These trivial aspects, the small everyday things, were precisely what I wanted to see: how people ate and dressed and

talked, where they lived. Could they buy detergent? Why was there so much rubbish all over the streets? In short, I wanted to take all these fragments of recent reality, as well as my own memories of life in a communist country, and sew them back together.

Growing up in Eastern Europe you learn very young that politics is not an abstract concept, but a powerful force influencing people's everyday lives. It was this relationship between political authority and the trivia of daily living, this view from below, that interested me most. And who should I find down there, most removed from the seats of political power, but women. The biggest burden of everyday life was carried by them. Even if they fully participated in revolutionary events, they were less active and less visible in the aftermath of those events.

After the revolutions women still didn't have time to be involved; they still distrusted politics. At the same time, they deluded themselves that the new democracies would give them the opportunity to stay at home and perhaps rest for a while. There was something else, too: somebody had to take responsibility for finding food and cooking meals, a task made no easier – indeed, in some countries made more difficult – by the political changeover.

Women's lives, by no means spectacular, banal in fact, say as much about politics as no end of theoretical political analysis. I sat in their kitchens – because that was always the warmest room in their poorly heated apartments – listening to their life stories, cooking with them, drinking coffee when they had any, talking about their children and their men, about how they hoped to buy a new refrigerator

or a new stove or a new car. Then we would go shopping together or go to their workplaces or attend meetings or go walking through the streets, into restaurants, drugstores, churches, and beauty parlors. Even if, in some cases, we had never met before, I felt that the pattern of our lives was almost identical. We had all been forced to endure the same communist system, a system that ground up people's lives in a similar way wherever you lived; then, of course, as women, we shared a perspective on life that was different from men's. Ours was trivial, the 'view from below.' But trivia is political.

As the English historian Timothy Garton Ash wrote in his book *We, the People* concerning the changes in Eastern Europe: 'Sometimes a glance, a shrug, a chance remark will be more revealing than a hundred speeches.'

I understand that in the West today 'the end of communism' has become a stock phrase, a truism, a common expression supposed to indicate the current state of things in Eastern Europe. It sounds marvelous when you hear it in political speeches or read it in the newspapers. The reality is that communism persists in the way people behave, in the looks on their faces, in the way they think. Despite the free elections and the celebration of new democratic governments taking over in Prague, Budapest, and Bucharest, the truth is that the people still go home to small, crowded apartments, drive unreliable cars, worry about their sickly children, do boring jobs – if they are not unemployed – and eat poor quality food. Life has the same wearying immobility; it is something to be endured, not enjoyed. The end of communism is still remote because com-

munism, more than a political ideology or a method of government, is a state of mind. Political power may change hands overnight, economic and social life may soon follow, but people's personalities, shaped by the communist regimes they lived under, are slower to change. Their characters have so deeply incorporated a particular set of values, a way of thinking and of perceiving the world, that exorcising this way of being will take an unforeseeable length of time.

In Hungarian director Peter Basco's long-forbidden film, *Key Witness*, there is a scene in an amusement park where, in 'The Tunnel of Socialist Horror,' Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin surge out of the darkness to frighten little children. In a way things were easier in pre-revolutionary Eastern Europe. We had only to enter the tunnel, blame everything – all our private, as well as public, woes – on the party. Eighteen months ago, as we finally left the tunnel, perhaps we found that things were not exactly as we dreamed they would be. Somehow we slowly realized that we had to create our own promised land, that from now on we would be responsible for our own lives, and that there would no longer be any convenient excuses with which to ease our troubled consciences. Democracy is not like an unexpected gift that comes without effort. It must be fought for. And that is what makes it so difficult.

At this precise moment, perhaps, the title of my book feels wrong. We may have survived communism, but we have not yet outlived it.

London, 4 July 1991

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