

THE JEWISH MOTHER IN SERBIA
or
LES STRUCTURES ALIMENTAIRES DE LA PARENTÉ¹

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The title of this paper is illustrative rather than exhaustive of its content and is not, in fact, strictly accurate. None of the mothers I observed in Serbia were, to my knowledge, Jewish, and most of them come from only a segment of that area--largely the city of Belgrade, some villages around Loznica, and also from eastern Montenegro, from which area the population of western Serbia in large part derives. The paper is really about the characteristics of some familial role relationships and general qualities of behavior which, to an American observer, are rather striking and depart from those to which he is accustomed. I want to make it clear to my Yugoslav friends, whom I like and often admire, that these observations are not anti-pathetic. To my colleagues in formal analysis I can only apologize for the unstructured nature of the report, and to those who prefer the humanistic slant I offer it as a demonstration of the complete abandonment of rigor. Perhaps, in this day of acute minority sensitivity, I should also point out that the paper is not a disguised anti-Semitic tract; some of my best friends are Jewish mothers.²

The visitor to rural Serbia is immediately impressed by the generous hospitality of his host. On stopping at a peasant house to pass the time of day, he will be invited to sit at a table in the orchard, under a grape arbor, or, lacking such conveniences, in the kitchen or sitting room of the house. Food and drink are immediately brought: slatko, a very sweet fruit preserve, with a glass of water, brandy (usually the prepečenica or double-distilled variety), and Serbian coffee (rather like the Turkish). In poorer areas, the food and drink given are of lesser quality, but something is always offered, and with the same generosity. The style, as opposed to the content, of the ritual was the same in the barren rocks of Montenegro, where I was offered warm sweetened milk, or in northern Macedonia, where a ragged beekeeper offered the only sweet thing he had in the house--a plate of honey in the comb. Patterns are similar, but the affect cooler and the slatko more frequently omitted, in the cities. The warmth of the reception leads the ethnographer to assume that he has established rapport, but what he has established (or has been placed into) is a role--that of guest. The ritualized hospitality is, like much hospitality anywhere, a distance-maintaining and boundary-setting mechanism. Like any unsophisticated American, I often assumed too much and was distressed to find that contacts were limited to this kind of activity and that the ritual tended to become impoverished as it was repeated with the same informant. The Serbian proverb reads, "Tri dana je dosta i na svadbi" (Three days is enough even at a wedding), or "Najmilijeg gosta za tri dana dosta" (Three days is enough even of the nicest guest). The transition from guest to friend has to be negotiated with some care, and it is equally a burden on the visitor and the host. It is not too difficult to maintain friendly contact with the men of the family, visiting them in the fields, sitting with them as they pasture their sheep or cattle, drinking with them in the kafana (café). The difficulty arises in being received at home.³ The ethnographer is not a relative and thus cannot come in and share an

informal drink, nor is he a friend to whom slightly greater attention is due, but a stranger for whom the *slatko* must be trotted out every time. Strangers do not hang around as ethnographers do, and it is hard for the villagers to get used to it. The shift in ritual acts in part marks the transition: on a Guttman scale, *slatko* is almost always followed by brandy and coffee, brandy and coffee can occur together but without *slatko*, and coffee can be given alone. *Slatko* marks the special and occasional guest and is seldom offered to relatives (unless they have brought the guest); rakija (brandy) and coffee, or coffee alone, are for friends and relatives.

Precisely the same kind of difficulty, but at a different point in the scale of symbols and levels of group organization, was related to me by Serbs who had visited the United States. Coming to one of our universities, a Serbian academic found himself taken home for a cocktail, invited to stay for dinner, dragged to the zoo with the native's wife and children, taken on picnics, and so on. Having been treated like a cousin, the visitor was distressed to learn that he could not borrow money and that no one ever wrote to him afterwards. He came away with the feeling that Americans were accustomed to practice sham in their personal relationships. The difference between Serbian and American practice, of course, lies not in whether a boundary exists but where it is drawn and what its symbols are.

The effective boundary of immediate penetration in Serbia, the household, is not only visible in the history of the ethnographer's access to his subject but also in the quality of observable role behavior. That is, the boundary is meaningful in more than one aspect of behavior and to several roles, including that of insider and outsider. Serbian men are much given to *machismo*, expressed (at least to other males) in terms of authority over and independence from wives (and in those of sexual conquest of non-wives). Generally speaking, no male Serb will admit to a sharing of labor with his wife inside the household (except in some tense intrafamilial joking). The acknowledged sexual division is between work done inside the household and that done outside it. The thought of a husband assisting in household chores is grounds for sarcasm and mirth among men, but private behavior differs from public and real from ideal so that the laughter acquires a nervous character as the ethnographer gradually perceives more of what actually goes on. Similarly, women tend not to reveal that their husbands help them around the house, because to do so would reflect not only on their husband's masculinity but also on their own role performance.

Once the ethnographer penetrates the ideological curtain, a somewhat different picture emerges and he is impressed not so much by the sharp differentiation of sex-role behavior but rather by the efforts made to publicize it. I have been treated to a number of dramas of vacillation in which the husband was caught between the Scylla of his wife's ire and the Charybdis of my anticipated derision (or worse, presumed inability to keep mum). There are, of course, some husbands who will not lift a hand around the house, others who will carry coal, some who will help to beat rugs, and even some who will regularly carry the dirty washing to the apartment house basement, wash it, and carry the wet wash back upstairs to dry. These acts are all in increasing order of shamefulness, and the last, in one case, was always carried out well

after midnight when all other dwellers in the building might be presumed to be fast asleep. Unfortunately, I learned of no incidents in which two nocturnal washers met each other on the stairs.

Public behavior, then, emphasizes a strict separation of roles, from the general acceptance of the peremptory command, "Ženo, služi goste!" (Wife, serve the guests) to the husband's ritual cooking of meat on festive occasions (rather like carving the turkey in America) or pouring out brandy for his guests. When the ethnographer achieves sufficient rapport to be truly backstage, he finds two departures from this presentation of the conjugal relationship. First, women enjoy a good deal of authority in the home with respect to domestic matters; the separation of roles gives them something of a separate-but-equal status, and the posture of male command in Serbia is as misleading as the Mexican villager's insistence, "Aqui yo mando." (The women with real authority, however, are husbands' mothers, not wives.) Second, the separation is actually less extreme, and there is a good deal of give-and-take and cooperation. In rural areas, the cooperation is balanced, with women and men doing field work and men carrying out some household tasks, particularly of a heavier or skilled variety, like carpentry. In the city, where unemployed women have few opportunities to assist their husbands on the job, the cooperation falls more heavily on the man. If the wife is also employed, husbands tend to participate more actively in household chores. Men do go to market, do carry water, and in terribly deviant cases even help with the dishes. None of this is done with the frequency with which it occurs in the United States, but the point is that the backstage differences in division of labor are less than in public behavior or in the native theory of role separation. There is a neat difference between informants' statements in Serbia and the United States on the surface, but in both countries, the statements stress conformity to the prevailing public ideology of private behavior; American women usually claim that their husbands do more around the house than they actually do, while Serbian women claim they do less (if they talk about it at all). In both countries the men claim they do less (unless, in America, the activity is dignified by being designated a "hobby").

In another respect, however, sharper differences from American patterns appear, and these may have much to do with what is said about who does what around the house. In Serbia, the relationship between man and wife is more strongly oriented around their roles as parents than it is around their roles as spouses. Romantic love and other indications of the conjugal bond, per se, are less strongly evident than in America. Behavioral evidence of lack of emphasis on romantic love between prospective spouses manifests itself long before marriage, although romanticism is weakest afterward (the same general rule prevails of course in both countries). Urban Serbian women, unmarried, are often quite nicely turned out within the limits provided by the economy and distance from centers of fashion. Whether the girls dress well to please other girls or to emphasize their sexuality to men is a moot point, as always. First, the men seldom react visibly, neither commenting to the girl nor usually to their fellows. In contrast to the dramatic responses of Italian and Latin-American men and the snickers and sly nudging among Americans, not a Serbian head will turn. At least not at girls who might become wives. Serbian men, of course, have nothing against women, and the exploits of youths with vacationing Scandinavians on the coast are legendary (and maybe even true). Similarly, Serbian girls are not averse to an

appreciative eye. But these light-hearted exchanges usually seem to be between people of different groups, and one concludes that it is not the bait that repels, but the hook.

The evidence is not clear, nor is it easy to get, and it is sometimes downright conflicting. Note, for example, the relatively high rate of illegitimacy in rural areas; on investigation, much of this "illegitimacy" really results from trial marriages.⁴ Peasant girls go to bed to become mothers, and peasant boys look at biceps, not at buttocks. The frequency of sexual experience among university students seems low by comparison with Serbian peasants or with American students--here it may be that career aspirations (and perhaps the housing shortage) defer assumption of parental roles and thus of the sexual activities which are considered appropriate to them. In their public behavior, young urbanites tend to cluster together by sex and not to mingle. On a beach, one finds groups of pretty girls on one rock, chattering gaily, and groups of boys on others, engaged in desultory conversation and kicking rocks with their toes. The boys are not whispering about the charms of the girls nor attempting to approach them nor are the girls timidly expressing admiration of the boys. Each sex seems totally absorbed in the activities and persons of its own members (when they are out of the water--there is some playful pushing when they are in it). On the other hand, one does find mixed groups on joint vacation trips planned at offices, factories, or in youth organizations, and even boys and girls paired off. Sometimes the members of such a pair are not cousins. It is not that sexuality within the peer group is unrecognized but that it is not emphasized as highly or in the same fashion as it is in Latin or in American culture.⁵

Some of the same patterns appear after marriage, often in stronger form. Men gather by themselves in their leisure and women, if they have the time and if their husbands will allow them, visit other women. The frequency of sexual intercourse seems low, both by the general theory of how married life goes and from the testimony of people who were trying to be frank and who had lived for a long time in crowded apartments. It may be that crowded housing encourages reticence, but that cannot be the whole story. Men often say that women are sexually aggressive (I found no evidence for the fact), and they claim little engagement in sexual activity. It is in offhand and casual remarks that the lack of emphasis on conjugal sexuality is most striking; I recall pretesting a questionnaire with a group of workers and asking if it would be proper to inquire what the monthly frequency of sexual intercourse was between husband and wife. The men laughed and replied that I would do better to ask what the yearly frequency was. They were, of course, joking, but why joke in that direction rather than suggesting that I ask for the daily frequency, as a wisecracking American worker might?

In sum, the romantic and heterosexual aspects of the conjugal relationship are not emphasized, and the theory of marriage does not exert the same kinds of pressure on behavior or verbalizations about it that it does in the United States. Achievement of the masculine ideal is not acted out through close emotional involvement with a wife but rather through display of authority relationships or of sexual conquest over unnamed women in view of other males and of the society at large. Both in discussion of the division of labor and in discussion of sexual relationships, Serbians deny conjugal

domesticity to a greater extent than Americans. For other aspects of this, let us return from the bedroom to the kitchen.

Food, particularly the giving and receiving of food, are foci of much greater attention and concern in Serbia than in America. To be sure, we have ritual occasions like cocktail parties and reciprocal dinners, but in these the primary emphasis is on the presence of persons and not on their consumption of what is offered. It is worth noting that patterns of presence are less important in Serbia; people seldom eat together. When food is plentiful, Serbian mothers continually urge their children (and husbands) to eat. A fat child (and a fat husband) are signs of familial affluence and proper role performance by the mother. It is not really possible for a friend to be invited in by the mother for a cup of coffee and get just a cup of coffee. There is slatko, rakija, cheese, meats, cookies, pickles, peppers in oil, and an inexhaustible quantity of cake. Chocolate cake with a passable Riesling is an experience not to be forgotten. Now, these rituals are very different from those in which the visitor is invited into the house by the husband and given his slatko, brandy, and coffee. They are different, too, from those occasions on which one visits a colleague or official in his office and is served some fruit juice or brandy and a coffee. These are occasions when the woman of a family invites and when she controls what is offered. She also controls what is consumed. To refuse is to insult; it is only with protestations of imminent foundering, and that after a yeoman performance, that the urging will slacken. Even then, it is reluctant. Just as a casual cup of coffee is a feast, so also is an informal picnic a major gastronomic enterprise, with the donor women hovering about, demonstrating their skill in playing out a role. When the husband invites, the whole tenor of the ritual is different; you are supposed to take one spoonful of slatko, not eat the whole dish, as Americans are laughingly said to do. The host will refill your brandy glass every time a drop is drunk, but you are finally supposed to leave it full. (It took me a long time to learn not to drink the last glass, and a subsequent visitor to one village where I stayed (Andrei Simić) reported that the peasants were astonished that the professor got back down the mountain.) Finally, the (third) cup of coffee in the slatko ritual is a signal that it is over. You seldom get such a convenient signal from the women. I hesitate to gravitate from the kitchen to the bedroom again, but is this urging by the women displaced sexual aggression?

Interestingly, acceptance of food is also reluctant. One finds a good deal of asceticism about eating and drinking, particularly among older Party members (in accord with their general attitudes about sex and work, suggesting that the revolution was a final eddy of the Reformation). Children often refuse to eat, and the dialogue that ensues is really one about unrequited love phrased in alimentary terms. While Serbian children are very frequently offered food by neighbors, they almost invariably refuse it. They are not old enough to be guests and are thus not insulting by refusing; however, for non-guests, like children, food is an expression of a quite specific relationship involving dominance and submission, love and acceptance, and the boundaries of non-ritual food exchange closely match those which delimit the household. Their parents say, "You want them to think we don't feed you at home?"

It is also interesting to watch adult Serbians interact with young children and Serbs of all ages with their siblings. When Serbian mothers play with young children, they show few differences from older sisters playing with younger siblings. When adults interact with their siblings there appears a kind of spontaneous warmth and intimacy (not always smooth and pleasant) which is like that which obtains between children in the family and which differs from the guarded aloofness which characterizes non-kinship peer relationships or the balanced give and take of the conjugal relationship, whether the latter is expressed in division of labor, avoidance, a balance of terror, or in affection and exchange of food.

When I mentioned some of these things to Meyer Fortes in a recent conversation, he observed acutely that this is what the human family is most often like. (It is the American, and perhaps the French, family which is deviant.)⁶ This is a family in which the primary attachments run along lines from parent to child, with instrumental-expressive differences between father and mother, and along lines between siblings. This is a family in which trust, dependence, affection, and intense hatred are turned inward, while the rest of the world is kept at bay by turning one's back on it. This is a family in which spouses are not kin, scarcely consorts in the American sense, but affines and in which they evolve a contractual relationship which enables them to cooperate in the raising of children, and in which specific and exclusive manifestations of conjugal solidarity along sexual lines are de-emphasized, while the other general patterns expressive of solidarity in the family are extended to cover spouses. It is not a calm family with all emotional issues settled but one of constant striving for security and acceptance, with mother-child patterns as the primary vehicle and a real conflict between dominance and submission in expressive relationships. It differs from the American family not only in its structural characteristics but also in the currency by which affection is expressed. It is a family in which, when one visits it, the impression grows that perhaps even from tonight's popover, one has learned something.

ENDNOTES

¹An earlier version of this paper was read at the meetings of the American Anthropological Association, Pittsburgh, November 18, 1966.

²I have profited from some perceptive criticisms of earlier drafts of this paper, from Jugoslavs and Americans alike. None of them are responsible for any errors of fact or interpretation which remain. The most incisive comment came from a Yugoslav psychologist, who remarked, "It's not an article, it's an essay." He is absolutely correct; there is no pretense of science here, or of rigorous documentation. This essay is about things dimly seen and perhaps impossible to prove; that does not mean, however, that they ought not to receive attention even if only in an exploratory way.

Some points are worth re-stressing. The essay does not do justice to ethnographic variation along geographical or class dimensions. It is concerned mostly with interpretation of my observations in Belgrade and a few villages of Western Serbia, and with the families of peasants and workers rather than with those of intellectuals or professionals. Even in that narrow range, it does not do justice to all the variation that exists; my point is simply that the

paper is not about the variations but about some of the central tendencies. I should also note by way of explanation to my Yugoslav colleagues, whose knowledge of English is not always adequate for the point in question, that the essay was supposed to be somewhat humorous and is a blend of one American ethnic joke with several anthropological ones. (It pains me to explain humor, but I must here to avoid cross-cultural misunderstanding.)

³Serbs are quick to point out that they often avoid inviting strangers into their homes because they do not have the resources to entertain them properly. My point is not that Serbs are not hospitable but that their conception of how to treat a stranger is very different from their conception of how to treat a familiar--the difference is wider in Serbia than in America.

⁴Abortion is legally a simple matter, but peasant girls often try home remedies first, and sometimes come to the doctor in an advanced state of blood poisoning. Infanticide is extremely common in some areas. Priests frequently marry girls in an advanced state of pregnancy, or marry the parents at the baptism of their first child. By trial marriage I do not mean only literal trial marriages (which do seem to occur in more northerly parts of the country) but also folk-recognized unions not legitimized by Church or state. Some "illegitimacy" results from seduction, but the point here is that sexual intercourse is less an attribute of "romance" than it is of the married state, less an attribute of conjugal union per se than an anticipation of parenthood.

⁵These remarks are not an insult to the masculinity of Serbian men; I hasten to assure them that it is not their attitudes toward women in general that are at issue but their attitudes toward women who might be spouses. There is a very clear difference in Serbia between sacred and profane women, and behavior varies accordingly. Sacred women are mothers, sisters and wives. Profane women are Gypsies, foreigners, and particularly Scandinavian tourists. There is a good deal of sexual joking among Serbian men, but it is not about mothers, sisters, or wives, or even about the sisters of peers, who might become wives. Sex with wives is not "fun," even though it may be pleasurable. Women have been known to complain that their husbands "leap on you like a beast in the night." A man who respects his wife, or at least the role of wife, cannot expect her "to act like a whore in bed." These attitudes are of course similar to those which prevailed widely in Western Europe and the United States a generation ago, and still do in some quarters. In Serbia, they are surely related historically to patterns of separation of the sexes and attitudes toward sex prevalent in the Near East and the general Mediterranean area. Moslems still take a ritual bath after engaging in sexual intercourse (or did, traditionally); Orthodox Jews are not supposed to engage in the sexual act unclothed; a Siptar or Albanian who catches you looking at his sister will still cut your throat for it. I am reminded, too, of the reaction of a Peruvian friend several years ago, when I asked why Peruvians did not use condoms as contraceptives. He drew back in shock and said, "Condoms? Condoms are for whores--I would not so insult my wife." He also stressed what fun it was to visit a prostitute, "because then you can do whatever you want."

What is involved here, of course, is a concept of appropriate role behavior. Wives are not supposed to act like mistresses, actresses, cafe singers. It is easy to observe in Yugoslavia that, on the average, men are

more solicitous of and tender toward desirable women whom they will probably not marry than they are toward women they might marry (or already have). Courtesy toward women is formal and elaborate, but often superficial; it divides roles rather than cementing relationships or providing the road to new ones. In general (although I know of some notable exceptions), a man who is too kind to his wife is not a man. Certainly in public, and often in private, a man cannot treat his wife with the same gallantry that he would a mistress, even if he wanted to. It is his own self-image that is at stake; for such deviance (as for washing dishes) he might be considered (or consider himself) to be pod papučom (beneath the slipper).

⁶A recent survey indicates that Yugoslavs (among American, Belgians, French, Germans, Poles, Hungarians, Czechs, Russians and Bulgarians), spent the largest proportion of their time preparing meals and in social life and conversation (and gardening!). ISR, Survey Research Center, University of Michigan, September 1966.

⁷I do not intend here to suggest that male hosts do not also urge food on their guests. They do, and on formal occasions such as the feast of the patron saint (slava) stand while their guests eat; nevertheless, they seldom urge food on their guests with the same grim determination as do their wives. I should also like to point out that the behavior of guests, when food is offered them, bears out the suggestion that food giving and receiving is not just about food. It is customary to refuse an offer of food or drink twice, accepting only on the third offer. This "formal courtesy," however, is not just some crystallized relic of social behavior or a needless elaboration of a simpler rule--it is part of a conversation about the offering and acceptance of affect and assurances about role position. Nothing will upset a guest so much as to have his host take his word for "No, thank you," after the first offer. Similarly, no proper guest would act so much like a member of the family circle as to say "Yes" to the first offer.

⁸I think that what has happened in upper and upper-middle class American and French families is that all the women have become sacred, but the symbols are differentiated. It is too pessimistic to think that they have all become profane.