



## *tales from the Pannonian plain*

### TWO COMMUNITIES IN BANAT

photo © Vlado Marinkovic



for a map of the Vojvodina region see page xx

by Laurence Mitchell

**K**osovo is back in the news again, as the interim administration in Priština and the international community ponder the conundrum of how to secure a viable future for the region that is still officially an autonomous region of Serbia. But what of the Vojvodina region, a similar semi-detached portion of Serbia. It rarely gets a mention in the media. Located in northern Serbia, the autonomous province of Vojvodina (Аутономна Покрајина Војводина) is the sort of place that is easily overlooked. The fast trains to Belgrade from Zagreb and Budapest speed through Vojvodina in just two or three hours but the view from the train window reveals little of the region's fabulous cultural complexity. It is a part of Europe that takes few prizes for its scenery, but that is more than compensated for by Vojvodina's cultural landscape. Smaller

than Belgium, and more or less the same size as Wales, Vojvodina boasts no less than six official languages.

The autonomy that Vojvodina jealously guards is nothing new. Throughout the days of Tito's Yugoslavia, the socialist federal state consisted of six republics and two autonomous provinces: Kosovo and Vojvodina. True, that autonomy was curbed in 1990 under Slobodan Milošević's presidency in Belgrade, but a dozen years later many powers were again devolved to the Vojvodina assembly in the region's capital at Novi Sad on the Danube.

Laurence Mitchell reports for hidden europe from a region that deserves to be better known, and, in a second article that follows, we look more closely at the linguistic and ethnic diversity of the Vojvodina region.

Vojvodina is where the Balkans meet central Europe head on. It was in these watery flatlands around the Danube and the Tisa rivers that the Austrian Empire confronted Turkish expansionism, as Islam and Christianity, East and West, clashed swords to vie for superiority. The geography and demography of the province reveal a region that is both a frontier territory and a transition zone: the land, a flat plain locked between the hills and valleys of central Europe and the steeper terrain of the Balkan peninsula; the people, a pied patchwork

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of languages and cultures as vibrant as the sunflowers, vines and maize that take succour from Vojvodina's fertile soil.

Vojvodina is a place over which armies and political elites have tussled for two millennia or more. In the confused geographies of the ancient world, this was Dacia, the land of the Daci. Since then, a number of other empires have come and gone, each leaving their imprint on the region: Romans, Huns and Byzantine influences, and later the Franks, Bulgarians and Hungarians too. The northern Vojvodina town of Subotica is just too Habsburg to be true, yet elsewhere there are little hints of the Ottoman world.

In autumn 1918 the Vojvodina assembly in Novi Sad (Нови Сад) voted to throw in its lot with the Kingdom of Serbia, which in turn joined forces with its Balkan neighbours to become Yugoslavia in 1929. Since the wars of the 1990s, Vojvodina has remained attached to Serbia throughout the whole fragmentation process.

The province owes its fertility to a geographical ghost — the Pannonian Sea — a shallow sea that covered a vast part of the north Balkan region during the Pliocene period and which eventually drained to leave deep, fertile silty soils. The resulting Pannonian plain, which stretches across parts of Hungary, Romania and Croatia as well as Vojvodina, became the battleground for the clash of empires that dominated central and southeast Europe in the

late medieval period. During early Habsburg rule it was decided that the southern part of the region should serve as a military frontier — a buffer zone between Austrian territory to the north and the Ottoman lands to the south. Serbs had settled in the region alongside Muslims during the period of Ottoman rule but once the Habsburg monarchy took control after the treaties of Karlovci (1699) and Požarevac (1718) most Muslims fled and more Serbs arrived to settle. Non-Serb colonists followed in the 18th and 19th centuries — Germans, Hungarians, Rusyns (Ruthenians), Slovaks and Romanians — to make Vojvodina one of the most ethnically diverse regions in Europe. It remains so to this day, although following the Second World War and the victory of Tito's Partisans, virtually all of the remaining German population were forced — or at least felt it necessary — to leave.

To some extent, Vojvodina is delimited by rivers. Its northwestern and much of its southern boundary is marked by the River Danube; the Sava more or less defines the southwestern border, while in the north and east the borders to Hungary and Romania are less obvious. Vojvodina itself has three very distinct geographical areas. The smallest, Srem, in the southwest, is the territory that sits between the Danube and Sava rivers and boasts the highest land in the

*railway tracks in Kovačica (photo by Laurence Mitchell)*



region, the hills of the Fruška Gora range that lie just south of Novi Sad. The other two, Bačka and Banat, are divided laterally by the Tisa river. Bačka extends northwest to the Croatian and Hungarian frontiers while the region east of the Tisa, known as the Banat, stretches languidly into southwest Romania. Loyalty to locality is very strong throughout the Vojvodina region, and the official coat of arms of the province deftly incorporates the crests of its three component parts: Banat, Bačka and Srem.

Just twenty kilometres northeast of Belgrade, little more than half an hour by bus or train from the Serbian capital, lies the industrial town of Pančevo (Панчево). Heading out from Belgrade, it is the first community in the Vojvodina. 'Industrial' is perhaps an inappropriate adjective for a place where these days the local economy owes as much to the availability of cheap smuggled Chinese goods as ever it does to manufacturing. Pančevo's decline as an industri-

al centre is so tangible that you can almost smell the decay, although this is still masked by the reek of acrid fumes issuing from the petrochemical plant on the edge of town. Twenty-five kilo-

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metres beyond here to the north, rising modestly above near horizontal farmland, is the small, sprawling town of Kovačica (Ковачица). At first glance, it seems unremarkable, the default setting for any small Banat town: single-storey houses, a central church with a tower, straight, tree-

lined streets that seem to stretch to vanishing point. All very familiar, especially in Vojvodina, but then slowly the realisation comes that this is no longer Serbia quite as we know it.

An old woman has been approaching on a bicycle ever since I stepped off the bus. Her progress, like the pace of life here, is unhurried. Just enough forward momentum, it seems, to prevent her toppling off her bicycle. As she gets closer I see that she is wearing an embroidered blouse, a voluminous black skirt and an apron decorated with floral motifs. But this is less of a fancy dress occasion than an unselfconscious expression of cultural identity as the woman in question, squeaking by on her bicycle at a speed slower than walking pace, is not a Serb but a Slovak. There are a handful of other senior citizens like her around the town, but they are exceptions to the rule as everyone middle-aged or younger wears the standard modern apparel found anywhere in Serbia. Nevertheless, many of the people here look different from the mainstream: paler-skinned, blonder-haired, a little fuller-faced than the average Serb. And the Slovak identity of Kovačica folk manifests itself in other ways too. The houses, which to the casual observer might look like any others in Vojvodina, bear the householders' names on small plaques on the gables along with the date

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LEFT: *the Slovak church in Kovačica (photo by Laurence Mitchell)*



Zuzana Holúbeková in her studio in Kovačica (photo by Laurence Mitchell)

of construction. Not Serbian names, but names that seem exotic down here in the territory of the South Slavs — Jonáš, Chalupová, Havjur.

I take a walk along one of the streets that lead off from the town's central crossroads. Eventually, I reach a railway station that looks deserted but, if the timetable on display is to be believed, it still has nine trains a day. On the other side of the tracks, sunflowers, cabbages and beet are growing in prairie-like fields. The long, brick buildings of a defunct collective farm stand empty, windows smashed to reveal jagged gaps that are framed by glass shards like sharks' teeth. A group of blonde teenage boys are playing football next to the tracks; across the fields, a few men are loading up a horse-drawn cart with hay, their voices just audible on the breeze.

Kovačica's modest fame comes not so much from who its people are, but rather from what they do. The town is a well-known centre for naïve art and its practitioners are the town's Slovak majority who began painting here in the naïve style in the 1940s. In the town centre, the *Galerija naivne umetnosti* hosts a selection of the works of the town's artists. While the appeal of naïve painting may not be universal, seen here in its place of origin there is something undeniably fresh and engaging about it. There are commonly occurring themes and motifs — a rustic landscape of fields, farmhouses, big-handed peasants in national dress, geese and

chickens, sunflowers, rosy-cheeked children and gypsies — but what comes as a surprise is the sheer variety of execution, each artist having her or his own distinct style. The canvasses illustrate moments of bucolic contentment and dreamlike scenes of wish fulfilment: one painting shows a drunk asleep under a tree, bottle in hand, with a nude woman on horseback coming down from the sky. In this perfect world all the drunks are benign, the children rosy-cheeked, the fields full of flowers; sexual love is wholesome and innocent.

Next door to the gallery, I discover one of the town's best known painters at work in her studio. Zuzana Holúbeková was born in the town and has spent most of her life here despite recognition that has seen her exhibit abroad and attend seminars throughout Europe. Her work stands apart from much of that seen next door. There is an indisputable erotic quality about it that seems to energise the landscape with a

connections

The two Banat communities reviewed in this text — Kovačica and Vršac — are both easily accessible by train from Belgrade. In each case the journey time is about two hours. Take the local train from Belgrade's Centar Station to Pančevo glavna, whence there are four local trains daily to Kovačica and five to Vršac. Timetables are available online at [www.serbianrailways.com](http://www.serbianrailways.com). The entire Banat region is also well served by local bus services.



Vojvodina landscape near Kovačica (photo by Laurence Mitchell)

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feminine sexual charge. She portrays the Banat countryside as shimmering with an almost psychedelic glow, while the skies above tend to look turbulent and vaguely poisonous. One painting, *Pannonian Phoenix*, shows a strutting cockerel astride a sunflower with wings arching up to the sky. A vignette of black noxious-looking smoke edges the scene. As Zuzana puts her paintbrush down to show me family photographs and tell me more about her life, I sense that there may be more to her work than simply a powerful imagination.

**Vršac is a tidy town that is home to two Banat rarities: physical evidence of Ottoman rule and hilly terrain.**

Vojvodina region looked inevitable, the Slovak men in Kovačica made arrangements for their women and children to be evacuated to safety in Slovakia. Zuzana travelled with her daughter, then a teenager, to Bratislava. She describes the strangest of times in which, separated from home and husband, she found herself in a country that spoke a language quite different to the archaic version of Slovak she used back in

Zuzana was married to a Macedonian and shows me photos of the two of them together. Back in 1999, when NATO's threats of imminent bombing raids on the

Kovačica. Although there was some sense of cultural familiarity, there was also much that seemed strange and foreign to someone who had been brought up in Tito's multiethnic Yugoslavia.

During Zuzana's sojourn in Slovakia the bombing back home started in earnest; what transpired was even more devastating than had been anticipated. The worst came on the night of 18 April 1999 when the petrochemical plant at nearby Pančevo was struck, releasing dangerous pollutants into the Danube and a lethal gas cloud into the atmosphere. Local witnesses described the resulting catastrophe as an environmental Armageddon with withered, blackened crops lying dead in the fields and the sky stained a chemical yellow. Many inhabitants of the area, especially children, fell ill as a consequence; many died. The Pančevo area was already considered to be cancer black spot, the blame put firmly on inadequate environmental control of its petrochemical industry. Following the bombing and the release of vinyl chlorine monomer into the air at levels 10,000 times above the recognised safe limit, the situation became significantly worse. Zuzana's husband was among the victims, falling seriously ill just a few months after the raid then dying shortly after. It is no wonder then that such a personal tragedy finds expression in that artistic work that perhaps offers some sort of redemption.

Head due east from Kovačica and you come to the town of Vršac (Вршац) just fifteen kilometres short of the Romanian border. The close proximity of Romania has had an influence on the town's demography, with around eleven per cent being of Romanian descent but, unlike Kovačica, the rest of the towns population is predominantly Serbian. The journey here involves a traverse of the northern reaches of the Deliblatska Peščara (Делиблатска Пешчара), a long ridge of relict sand dunes left over from the prehistoric desert that formed here with the drying up of the Pannonian Sea. Now it is an important wildlife area — its wolves are well-known in Serbia.

Vršac is a tidy town that is home to two Banat rarities: physical evidence of Ottoman rule and hilly terrain. Examples of both of these co-

exist just outside the town, where a Turkish tower stands atop a 400m rise that has commanding views over the plain to the west. But Vršac is probably better known for its pilot training facilities — all JAT (Jugoslovenski Aerotransport) aircrew come here for basic instruction at the flight school — and as a provincial venue for the European Basketball Championships that were hosted by Serbia in 2005. A spanking new athletics complex — Vršac's Millennium Centre — was built especially for this event and for a brief period in September 2005 the town's pavements were pounded by extraordinarily tall young men in expensive footwear.

Aviation and sports aside, the town has some splendid Habsburg period architecture along with eighteenth-century classical buildings and others that show neo-Gothic influences. There are a few conventional sights: the neo-Gothic twin-spired Catholic Cathedral; the chocolate brown, Gothic-classical Town Hall that would look at home in a remake of *The Prisoner of Zenda*;

the pink, baroque pile that is the Bishop of Banat's palace. More enjoyable, perhaps, is the cheerful domestic architecture that lines central streets like Jaše Tomića, and which charms with its unselfconscious, brightly-painted appeal.

In high summer the Vršac locals seek the same fair-weather pleasures as are enjoyed throughout the Balkans: a gentle stroll with an ice cream, a cold beer at an outside table. The place to satisfy both these needs is the car-free central square, Trg Save Kovačevića, which is lined by cafés and endearingly old-fashioned shops that sell household goods and gift-wrapped chocolates. To the west of the square is a small park with a children's playground. The ugly modern building that overlooks the park stakes its claim as

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the town's best restaurant but its name, *Drugi Oktobar*, seems more suggestive of misspent autumns than steaks and silver-service.

On a summer visit to Vršac, I hiked up to Kula breg, the Turkish tower, following cobbled roads uphill past a tiny Orthodox chapel. From the chapel, a road ascends past a large meadow with rustic wooden tables and an outdoor amphitheatre. The footpath to the Turkish tower leads through heavily-shaded woodland, pungent with the cloying smell of lime blossom at that time of year. Eventually I reach Kula breg but, as I suspected, it turns out to be an anticlimax: a few rough foundations and a tower that is inaccessible. The view, however, is worth the sweaty climb. The twin spires of the cathedral emerge through pan-tiled roofs below to puncture the sky, and beyond the town to the west, the Pannonian plain shimmers in the July heat, its fields a mosaic of shades of green. Standing beside the tower's rather sinister presence and surveying the scene, it is hard to shake off the impression that I am standing on what used to be a shoreline — perhaps even an island — and looking at the ghost of a vanished sea. ■

*Laurence Mitchell is a regular contributor to hidden europe. To find out more about his work, visit his website at [www.laurencemitchell.com](http://www.laurencemitchell.com).*

street in Vršac (photo by Laurence Mitchell)

