

## Back to Belgrade by Jack Goldfarb

**P**eeering out the windows of my Yugoslav Airlines DC-10 as it touched down at Belgrade's Surcin Airport, I speculated on the drastic changes I would see in the Yugoslav capital since my last visit more than 20 years ago. It didn't take long to find out.

Streamlined airport facilities and smooth immigration and customs clearance whisked me through the terminal in no time at all. A privately owned Mercedes taxi driven by an enterprising cabbie—who promptly presented his engraved business card—swiftly conveyed me down a sleek highway to my gleaming, glass-walled luxury hotel.

Was I really in an Eastern European Communist country?

The 10-story Intercontinental Hotel stood in the midst of a newly built district called Novi Beograd—formerly a marshy flatland sprawled along the left bank of the Sava River, where it elbows in to join the Danube. A desolate no-man's-land the last time I had seen it, the area was now filled with blocks of towering apartment houses, clusters of Government office buildings and a vast, futuristic convention center.

In Belgrade's Old Town, I found more changes. The principal shopping street, Knez Mihailova, was now a bustling pedestrian mall, with chic boutiques carrying trendy apparel and stylish made-in-Yugoslavia footwear (in demand throughout Eastern Europe), heavily stocked food stores and gift shops awash with wood, ceramic and embroidered objects. One feature of Knez Mihailova had not changed, however—the public telephones, which still had long queues and faulty service.

In the cobblestoned Bohemian quarter, Skadarlija, the music of guitars and tamburitzas resounded more loudly, tavern patrons sang their old favorites more lustily, somber street bards reciting their poetry seemed to take themselves less seriously and

artists' canvases were more abstract. Still pervading all, however, was the familiar pungent smell of smoke rising from hundreds of *cevapcici*, kabobs, sizzling on grills in the noisy cafés and restaurants. In folksy Skadarska Street, the narrow walkway was jam-packed, as never before, with crowds of students, actors, writers and foreign tourists.

On the main boulevards—Teražije, Marsala Tita, Bulevar Revolucije—the accelerated, roaring traffic of cars, trucks and buses had chased away most of the strollers who used to take leisurely promenades along these broad thoroughfares lined with plane trees.

The area of Belgrade, known as Singidunum in ancient times, has been inhabited since the Stone Age. Razed and rebuilt 40 times in its history, Belgrade has been conquered by invading Greeks, Celts, Romans, Byzantines, Bulgars, Magyars, Austrians and Turks seeking to hold this strategic fortress city and gateway to the Balkans.

For the last century and a half, though, it has been Serbian. The capital of this land of 21 million people, Belgrade—with a million and a half residents—is also the capital of the Socialist Republic of Serbia, one of the six independent republics and two autonomous provinces that make up the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

The Jewish presence here goes back to the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. Following the Inquisition in the 15th and 16th centuries, a wave of Spanish and Portuguese Jews found a haven in Belgrade, then an outpost of the Ottoman Empire. The Jewish community survived centuries of incessant warfare only to suffer its greatest devastation in the 20th century at the hands of the Nazis and their notorious local collaborators, the Ustachi.

At the Tourist Information Office on Terazije Boulevard, I asked for the address of the local synagogue. "There isn't any," I was told politely. Taken aback, I vaguely remembered a synagogue in central Belgrade, though I had never gone there. "But are you sure?" I insisted. Again I was assured, "There is no synagogue."

It was hard to believe that Belgrade's once sizable Jewish population had left no trace. I pored over the city map offered me, but the listings of institutions and landmarks