

NYT Book Review
04/19/92

Her Life Through Their Eyes

HOW WE SURVIVED COMMUNISM AND EVEN LAUGHED

By Slavenka Drakulic.

189 pp. New York:

W. W. Norton & Company. \$22.95.

By Cathy Young

It is no longer a revelation that the essence of life under totalitarianism is contained not only in its extreme horrors — the knock on the door, the gulags, the firing squads — but also in the indignities of daily existence: the snooping neighbor, the cramped apartment, the smelly kitchen sink, the need to forage for food. These “trivial” aspects of life under the *anciens régimes* of the Eastern bloc are the focus of “How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed,” a thoughtful, beautifully written collection of essays by the Croatian journalist Slavenka Drakulic.

For the people of the Communist world, the slogan “The personal is political” was true in its literal sense. “Growing up in Eastern Europe,” Ms. Drakulic writes, “you learn very young that politics is not an abstract concept, but a powerful force influencing people’s everyday lives.” Unfortunately, the politicization of the personal was not liberating, as it was expected to be by many Western radicals, but the very opposite. “To survive, we had to divide the territory, to set a border between private and public. The state wants it all public. . . . What is public is of the enemy.”

The banality of evil is personified by a “media surveillance inspector” (“A Chat With My Censor”). Affable, friendly, he tells Ms. Drakulic that journalists who go astray should be warned “tenderly,” and that having studied her work, he knows “not only what but how” she thinks. Such “tender” treatment breeds chilling self-censorship: “I began to examine myself, to search for my errors, to look at my life through his eyes.”

If fear is degrading, so is material deprivation — something Westerners disgusted by the vulgarities of consumerism are apt to forget. In the essay “How We Survived Communism,” which concludes the book, Ms. Drakulic paints a vivid picture of the compulsive recycling and collecting typical of Eastern European house-

holds, dictated not by environmental consciousness but by poverty and fear of shortages. “While leaders were accumulating words about a bright future, people were accumulating flour and sugar, jars, cups, pantyhose, old bread, corks, rope, nails, plastic bags,” she writes. This desperate hoarding is, to her, the ultimate symbol of the failure of Communism — this, and its inability to provide something so basic as feminine hygiene products.

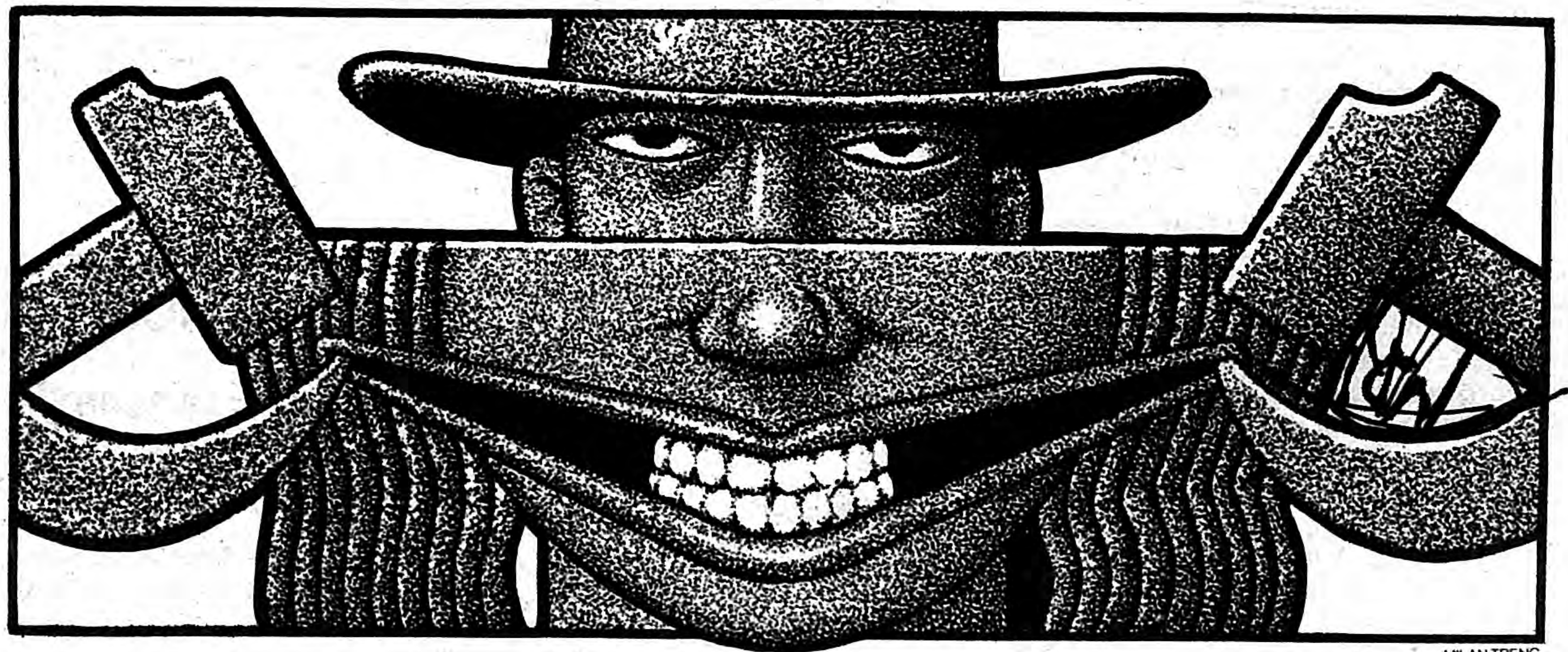
One does not have to embrace stereotypes about some uniquely female sensibility attuned to the personal (as if men never write about the personal!) to acknowledge the particular burdens that scarcity in Eastern Europe has imposed on women. Not surprisingly, Ms. Drakulic concentrates primarily on women’s lives. Her perspective is that of a feminist, but the Eastern European experience gives her feminism a special edge. She is acutely aware of a larger helplessness that unites women and men: “It’s hard to see . . . men as a gender. . . . Perhaps because everyone’s identity is denied, we want to see them as persons, not as a group, or a category, or a mass.”

Though inspired by Western feminists, Ms. Drakulic is often exasperated by their blindness to the concerns of women who lack the basics of a decent life. When an American scholar writes to her asking such things as “Do the women in Yugoslavia argue for an ‘essentialism,’ i.e., that women are different from men, or is it a matter of choice?” she is amused but also saddened, even insulted, feeling “like a white mouse in an experimental laboratory.”

Ms. Drakulic also knows that talk of an oppressive “beauty myth” rings hollow to women for whom getting good makeup or stylish clothes is a way of affirming their individuality and escaping the “uniformity that comes out of an equal distribution of poverty.” She is keenly sensitive to what she sees as the quasi-totalitarian elements in feminism (and in other causes, like environmentalism and animal welfare).

Perhaps the greatest appeal of “How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed” lies in Ms. Drakulic’s skill at blending provocative analysis with the texture of everyday life: a young girl’s awe before a luxurious foreign doll; an Eastern European’s envious amazement at the workings of the American phone system and painful bewilderment at the vast poverty in New York.

This book was completed just as the first shots were being fired in Yugoslavia’s civil war; the numbing fear of waiting for catastrophe, even as life with all its trivialities goes on, is captured in “The Day When They Say That War Will Begin.” Though not quite able to foresee the devastation the war would bring, Ms. Drakulic already knew that it was far too early to celebrate the end of Communism. “The reality is that Communism persists in the way people behave, in the looks on their faces, in the way they think,” she explains. “Life has the same wearying immobility; it is something to be endured, not enjoyed.” What makes this observation even more sobering is Ms. Drakulic’s conclusion that only the men and women of Eastern Europe themselves can change this — and that change is not likely to come soon. □



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