

THE NARRATIVE REPORT

THE ASSOCIATION OF SERBIAN WRITERS PREPARATIONS FOR THE 15TH INTERNATIONAL WRITERS OCTOBER SUMMIT IN BELGRADE IN 1978: JOHN UPDIKE

In the Association of Serbian Writers Archival Book, under the serial number 165 from the year 1978, under the title “Writers October Summit in 1978”, which was generously given to me for research purposes by the secretary of the Association, Mister Branislav Veljković, I found a couple of interesting facts which might fill the gap about the American writer, John Updike’s, visit and stay in Belgrade in 1978. The Archival Book contains facts about the Association’s operational plans regarding the 15th International Writers October Summit and also provides an insight into the organisation’s genesis and the selection of writers.

The focus of the 15th International October Summit was on the writers coming from non-aligned countries and countries in development, which is, according to the primary statement, in accordance with the Yugoslav “global political orientation”. The statement also says that there is an on-going poll among the Yugoslav writers, regarding the suggestions for a possible October summit conception, along with the names of foreign writers that ought to be invited. Among the extensive documentation, I came across a document titled “Summit Proposals – USA”, which contained names of American writers who had been proposed to get an invitation for the Summit. Among them were: Charles Simić, Mark Strand, Hortense Calisher, Curtis Harnack, Saul Bellow and John Updike (a second copy of the same document had Drenka Vilen’s name added in handwriting). In another expanded document, which also contained names of the proposers, it was written that John Updike had been proposed by the Serbian writer and translator Erich Kosch.

In a document titled “Guest Proposals for the October Summit – 1978”, under item number 6, it is written that alongside Norman Cousins, the editor of the largest literary review in America, “The Saturday Review of Literature”, and Alfred Kazin, “the most important critic and

essayist”, it would be good to bear in mind some writers like Saul Bellow and John Updike. This is followed by a commentary that “both of them might come, considering their books have been published here”. A document containing contact addresses of foreign writers can also be found in the Archival Book, and among them Updike’s:

Mr. JOHN UPDIKE

Alfred Knopf, Inc.

201 East 50th Street,

New York

N.Y. 10022, USA

The Archival Book also contains 3 documents – letters sent by the Association to John Updike, based on which we can conclude that the correspondence took place. However, John Updike’s replies were not saved.

In the invitation letter sent to Updike, filed under the reference number 351/XVII and dated 7 June 1978, it is written that the Summit organizers – The Association of Serbian Writers, the Serbian PEN Centre, the National Library of Serbia as well as the Ivo Andrić Foundation¹, have the pleasure and honour to invite the American writer to the October Summit, and that the topic of the Summit shall be ”The Communication Possibilities of Contemporary Literature”, a topic on which the invited writers will be able to talk about alongside simultaneous translations into English, French, Russian, German and Serbo-Croatian. It is also noted that participation in the main part of the Summit and in the planned discussions is not obligatory².

The invitation letter also states that, apart from the official part of the programme, events such as visits to famous places of historical and cultural importance for Serbia, literary evenings,

¹We find out that the Ivo Andrić foundation was an organizer from another document dated 10/11/1978.

²In a conversation with the secretary of the Association, Mr. Branislav Veljković, I found out that there was a big chance Updike had written a report on the main topic and participated in the discussions. If the report existed, it should be kept in the Archival Book, containing reports and documents concerning the period after the Summit that I am still waiting on.

press conferences and conversations with publishers and translators shall be organized (in further continuation). It is noted that the guests will be accommodated at the “Slavija” hotel and that they are expected to arrive on 17th October. The letter ends with a request to Updike to, if possible, notify the Association about his participation at the Summit as soon as possible, so that he could be given the detailed programme. The president of the Serbian PEN Centre, Jara Ribnikar, and the president of the Association of Serbian Writers, Vladimir Stojšin, signed the letter.

From the second letter addressed to Updike, dated 7/21/1978, it is obvious that Updike replied to the invitation letter and was interested in coming to Belgrade. The content of this letter reveals that Updike most likely wanted to know something more about the concept and nature of the Summit, about the invited authors, and whether the invited authors were expected to represent themselves or the country they came from. We can also deduce that Updike had expressed his willingness to participate in the main part of the programme, to the great satisfaction of Jara Ribnikar and Vladimir Stojšin who gave him full freedom of choice when it came to his approach and the way he would speak about the main topic or any of the topics proposed at the round table. Updike wanted to know if his wife could accompany him, to what he got a positive reply and the information that the organizers of the Summit shall provide accommodation for both of them during the Summit (17-23 October 1978). The organizers added that they would bear the travel expenses for Updike, but unfortunately, they would not be able to do the same for his wife. The letters end with kind regards, the hope of his arrival and a remark that his creative work is highly appreciated in Belgrade.

Based on the third letter to Updike, dated 8/28/1978 signed by Vladimir Stojšin, we can conclude that the writer has, to Stojšin’s high spirits, confirmed his arrival to Belgrade. In this letter, Updike was informed about the great success of his novel “Couples”, which had been, according to Stojšin, on the top-selling novels list in Yugoslavia for a long time. In the second part of the letter, Stojšin informed Updike more thoroughly about his journey to Yugoslavia and explained how the travel expenses would be covered by the United States Embassy in Belgrade, which was prepared to cover all the expenses since the person in question was an extinguished American writer. The letter ends with a positive response to Updike’s wish to return to America from Greece and with eager expectations of his arrival.

From a notice, filed under the reference number 716/XVIII and dated 10/20/1978, that the Association had sent to the “Moskva” hotel, it is clear that John Updike and his wife, as well as another participant, the American writer Mark Strand, stayed at the “Moskva” hotel during their visit to Belgrade. Although the notice states that the Association, which should be given a receipt upon completed services, paid the hotel expenses, this does not exclude the possibility that the United States Embassy, as Stojšin had earlier informed Updike, was the real bearer of the expenses. The notice was signed by the former secretary of the Association, Miroslav Maksimović.

On a document, an empty Association’s form, written in pen, in large printed letters, it says: “The press conference with Mister Updike, held on 10/17 (1978) at 11:00 AM – all journalist, radio and television representatives present”. Having in mind that 17th October was the day the writer was expected to arrive, and that the conference was held in the morning, we can conclude with what kind of enthusiasm the American writer was welcomed, and that his presence was the news of the day in Belgrade.

In a document filed under the reference number 708/XVII and dated 10/14/1978, the Executive Council of the Assembly of Serbia was delivered the final list of the 15th October Writers Summit guests, who would attend the reception organized by Milan Dragović, the vice president of the Executive Council for the Socialistic Republic of Serbia. According to the document, we can conclude that John Updike, whose name was under the number 76 out of 128 guests (the name of the writer Grozdana Olujić was added by hand), attended this reception.

There is a possibility that Updike visited the restaurant “Zlatni bokal”³ with his wife. In a notice filed under the reference number 721/XVIII, dated 10/22/1978, the Association kindly asked the restaurant’s management to serve the guests of the Summit on behalf of the Association.

³ The restaurant “Zlatni bokal” is located at number 28, Skadarska Street, Skadarlija. The telephone number of the restaurant is: +381 11 7234-834.

THE PROGRAMME OF THE 15TH INTERNATIONAL WRITERS OCTOBER
SUMMIT

Based on the programme of the October Summit, which was, among others, sent to Updike, we can conclude that the official part of the programme began on 18th October with an opening ceremony. In the name of the host town, Živorad Kovačević, the Chairperson of the City of Belgrade Assembly, welcomed the guests. The first plenary session was then held at the National Library of the Socialist Republic of Serbia (8, Skerliceva Street). The second plenary session was continued at the same venue at 17:00 p.m. In the meantime, the writers' reception was held with Milan Dragović, the vice president of the Executive Council of the Socialist Republic of Serbia.

The first session at the round table was held on Thursday, 19th October, in the period from 10:00 to 13:00 – first two of the four round tables, and the second two from 17:00 to 19:00.

It is highly possible that Updike was present at the first session of the round table, considering that the main language of the session was English. The topic was “The Communication Possibilities of Contemporary Literature”. The chair of the round table was Zoran Gavrilovic.

The main language of the second table was German, and the topic was “The Possibilities of Modern Information Technology Application and Communication in Literary Works Interpretation”, and the chair was Zoran Konstantinović.

The main language of the third table was Russian, the topic “The Communication between Literatures of Different Linguistic Areas”, with Sveta Lukić as the chair.

The main language of the fourth table was Serbo-Croatian, and the topic “The Problems Related to the Translation of the Most Important Means of Communication Among the Literatures of Different Language Areas (translation of Ivo Andrić's works in today's world), and the host was Ivan Ivanji.

Updike and the rest of the writers had a reception with the director of “Politika” at 20:00 p.m.

A visit to the Liberators of Belgrade cemetery was planned for Friday 20th October, early in the morning, or/and the continuation of work in groups, depending on the participants' interest. A literary evening was planned at 19:00 p.m., at the Ilija M. Kolarac Endowment.

Group fieldtrips to the city of Kragujevac, that is, to Novi Sad, were planned for Saturday, 21st October. There are no documents that could confirm John Updike went to one of these fieldtrips.

A luncheon and a gala dinner, in honor of the guests of the Summit, were planned for Sunday, 22nd October. The time and the place were not specified.

The last day, October 23rd, was scheduled for the guests departure.

Written by Nemanja Glintić

Translated by Anja Radić

Faculty of Philology

University of Belgrade