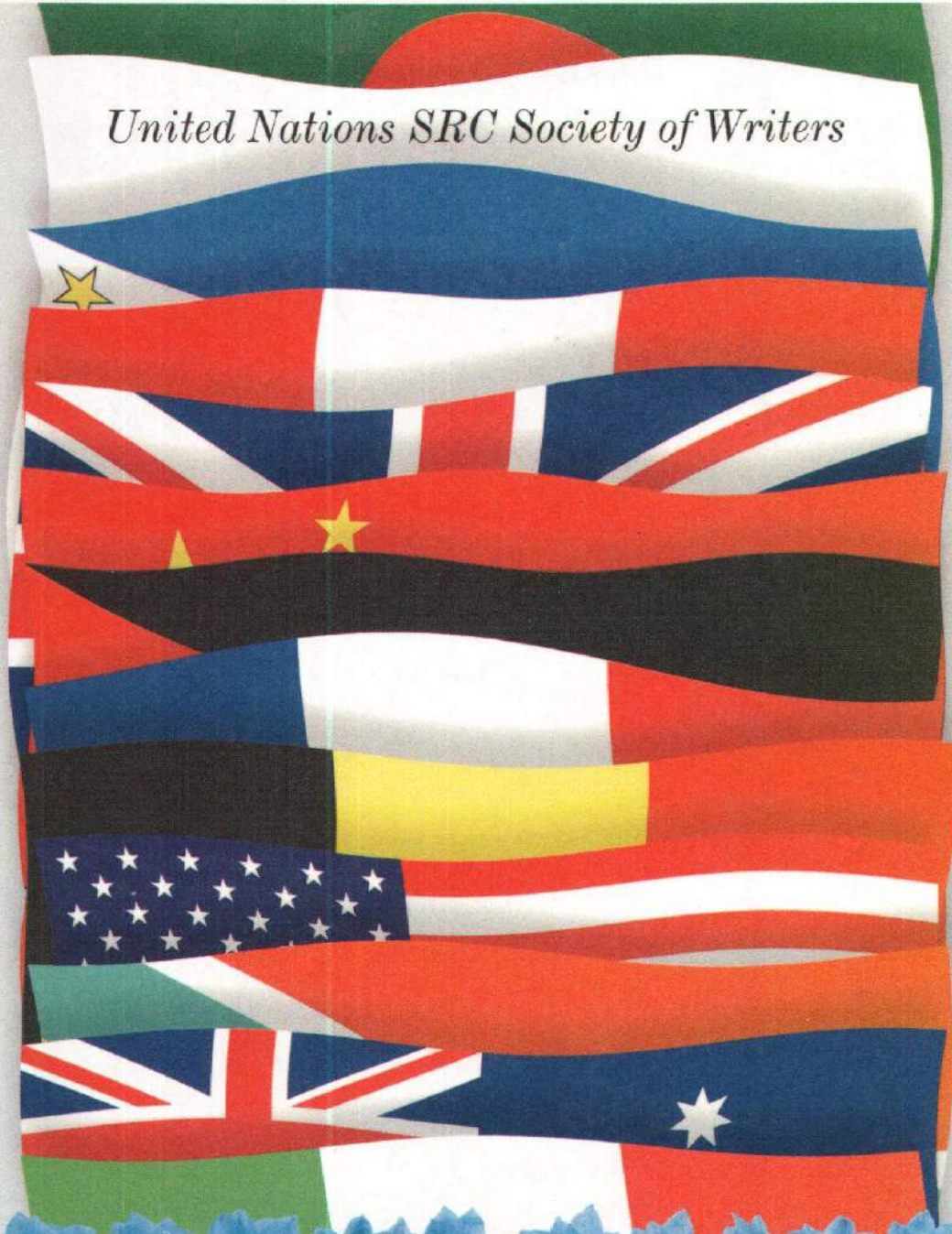


United Nations SRC Society of Writers



Reflections 2003



The River Trout

PHOTOS: MARY ELLEN ROONEY

The summer when I returned from a year of teaching in the Czech Republic, first to Deal Island on the Chesapeake Bay and then to my home in Bridgehampton, Long Island, part of the culture shock was an awareness of excess—supermarket shelves stocked to the point of bewilderment; people constantly consuming and discarding. I remember the first lunch I ate in a school cafeteria. The woman at the checkout counter handed me a pile of paper napkins. I had become so used to another, less wasteful, way of life that I was unable to discard the extra napkins, which were perfectly usable. I put

them in my purse.

That was in Maryland and the early stages of my adjustment. Later, in the Hamptons, where I had been born during a simpler time, the feeling of greed, of people taking more than they needed, reached critical mass. The experience was sharp and intriguing. Yet, these excesses seemed to be creating a smokescreen for another story more and more clearly perceived—one of scarcity and depletion.

This other theme evinced itself through small events. For the first time in the 15 years that I have been going to Deal Island in the summer, I did not bring back crab cakes for Christmas. Why? Because there were no crabs in the Chesapeake that year. Then friends returned from Newfoundland with first-hand news about the cod fishing industry and the closing of Georges Banks.

Mary Ellen Rooney is a writer and photographer. Her journalism has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Newsday*, *Sunday Magazine* and *Print Magazine*. Her fiction was featured in *Lips Unsealed*, an anthology of women's writing published by Capra Press. She is currently working on a photo-journalism project centered around her UN work in Central Asia.

Now, more accustomed to the opulence around me, I notice chilling titles in the newspapers: "The Last Salmon Run" in the *New York Times* by Katherine Ransel poignantly telling the tale of the demise of our elegant Chinook salmon; the United Nations reporting that the fish supply in the oceans is declining while the world's population and its appetite for fish is growing. The dark news is everywhere. The diminishing food supply from the sea is global: the Pollock in Russia, anchovies in Peru, redbfish in the Caribbean, cod and flounder in North America, and red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico. In the midst of all this, the memory of a particular day spent in the Sumava Mountains replenishing a small mountain brook with seed fish keeps resurfacing. Events from that simple adventure, I believe, make sense.

An early morning rendezvous at the bus stop can be bleak but today the plain cement buildings of Vodnany become peripheral while I happily anticipate a chance to get to the Sumava. The Sumava Mountains in southern Bohemia are magical. They are a country of pointed firs; the land of pure streams, bright green moss, reflective ponds and melancholy mystery. It is a place where fairy tales were born. The Czechs keep it that way. For example, Christmas trees in homes here are expendable green branches—not full-grown evergreens from their beloved Sumava, Bohemian Forest, or any other natural place of solace and beauty.

There are a couple of salami and cheese

sandwiches in my rucksack, some paper napkins, a camera, and extra film. I always take food with me when travelling here. There are no fast food stops, no roadside telephone booths. Getting out of town in a car is a luxury considering my transportation is usually by bicycle, bus or train.

The school car arrives promptly. One of my best students, Zdenek Machek, is behind the wheel. He has been appointed translator



for the day. Next to him, in the front seat, is the school's driving instructor, Jiri Janousek.

We drive for about an hour. During this time, Mr. Janousek answers my questions in Czech while waving his hands to keep Zdenek on the road. He grabs the wheel nervously and instructs continuously. I find it nerve wracking but Zdenek seems cool and doesn't skip a beat with his translations. When I ask the driving instructor's name and the spelling, he hands me his driver's license. There is also some tale about his having been another kind of teacher. Due to trouble with the Communists, however, he has had to

learn a new profession. These experiences are quite common. Here there are many disenfranchised men in their late 50s and early 60s whose careers were either destroyed or damaged because their intelligence or politics were a threat to the Communists.

Eventually, we turn on to a dirt road at the edge of the Sumava. Another student, Pavel Hurcala from Slovakia, comes for his driving lesson. Pavel seems underdressed for the cold. He looks vulnerable without gloves. These boys never complain, though.

Moody beauty

Zdenek and I enter the woods. They are splendid, filled with moody beauty. Green moss covers the rocks. We pass tiny still ponds that mirror the trees. After one false climb, we re-route ourselves and find the group of students who are working in the mountain brook. This little brook has significance. Named the Zermovicky, it is also called the Zlaty Potok or Golden Brook because it is the main artery into the Blanice River.

Down below, in the brisk-flowing water, a group of boys in khaki slickers walk behind a long pole affixed to a three-foot square piece of aluminum. A cord that is connected to a gas-powered generator trails behind them on the water. One boy moves the pole from side to side, covering the width of the narrow brook. Another carries a bucket and a long-handled dip net. They keep their eyes peeled for young Pstruh. The pole apparatus will stun the fish slightly so that the young fisherman can catch and place them in the bucket. Later they will be transported to a larger experimental pond belonging to the Fishing School. There the fish will grow for the next two years until they become mature.

This maneuver's objective is to catch all the fingerlings that were planted in the brook last year. Once the fish have been caught, the

boys will replenish the brook with seed fish (fry) from their hatcheries.

Jan Souhrada, a thoughtful, intelligent professor of Economics and Environmental Studies at the School, explains this process to me through Zdenek. All must be reported to the Ministry of Agriculture. According to Souhrada, "We must obtain a permit. We must document exactly how many fish we extract from the Potok...when, where, and what kind. We must declare how many of the Pstruh are males and how many are females. We also must declare what we do with the fish, whether we are catching them to eat or to hatch eggs from."

I photograph the boys at work. The morning light is perfect. By the time we reach the area at the wood's edge where the fry wait in tubs for placement in their new habitat, it has begun to snow.

The sky has darkened and enormous flakes swirl around us—typical March weather in the Sumava. On a rolling hillside to the north a farmer sprays weedkiller on some rye grass. Professor Souhrada excuses himself and walks up the hill to speak with the farmer. If the spraying is done correctly, there is usually not a problem. If the wrong kind of insecticide is used, or if it is applied incorrectly, the little fish that now inhabit the brook will be killed.

Democracy is complicated

Returning, Souhrada explains, "If we can prove that their (the farmers') methods have killed our fish, then they must pay us for the damage. The Czech Department of Agriculture is very strict about this kind of thing. Last year they weren't careful and had to pay us. The correct weed spray is very expensive." Apparently, years ago, before the "velvet revolution" of 1989, the Government paid for the spray. Now the farmer must pay. This tempts him to use the cheaper, more dangerous, chemicals. Transitional democracy is

complicated. I try to explain to Professor Souhrada that we also have these problems in America and, because our country is so large, it is difficult to regulate it all.

The snow thickens and the wind picks up. We pile into the truck that brought the boys from the school to the Sumava. It's huge with two rows of wooden benches for seating. There is a wood stove in the back for heat. It is the first time that I have seen a live stove used to heat the inside of a truck. It seems a little dangerous, but in the careful hands of the Czechs I doubt there will be an accident. I share my sandwiches and a large bucket of rolls are passed around with some water.

Stove blazing, we drive back to the road

where my car awaits. Drivers are exchanged. I return to Vodnany keeping the small, albeit imperfect, model of sustainable living deep inside me. The real lesson: replace what we remove—a lesson learned best when in touch with what you are removing.

As to the global problem, I don't know who is responsible. I don't think anyone else does either. It's easier to blame others than to take responsibility. I do know though, that I loved the little Pstruh that day in the Sumava. I could see them, touch them and I cared whether they survived. I'd also welcome a chance to go back to the Blanice Restaurant in Vodnany some day soon to savor a nicely roasted trout for dinner.



ILLUSTRATION: BHAGWAN KAPOOR