



DR. RISTIC

By BARBARA YUNCKER

## Daily Closeup

### WILLOWBROOK CHIEF

How does a bright young Yugoslav psychiatrist happen to wind up running Willowbrook State School—the overcrowded Staten Island institution whose bucolic name has become a synonym for the shame of neglect of the mentally retarded?

Well, one way is to back into it—“like everyone else in the field of mental retardation.” But Dr. Miodrag Ristic is, by his own account, “hooked on the job,” happy in it, flexible in the way he approaches it but “firm when decisions are made”—and moderately optimistic about the chance for successful reforms.

(He's well aware that when the public's eye is diverted, legislators get stingy, as they did two years ago despite the warnings of State Mental Hygiene Commissioner Alan D. Miller; the shameful scenes of last winter resulted.)

Ristic (pronounced “Ristich”) began backing into retardation five years ago when he was recruited from England to Minnesota and was offered either of two jobs—one in a state mental hospital, the other in a home for the retarded. He took the latter, Cambridge State School, where he became medical director in 1969, because it was closer to Minneapolis-St. Paul.

Appointed Willowbrook's acting director in August and director at \$37,511 a year last week, Ristic's first effort has gone to reducing Willowbrook's population to less than 5000 for the first time since 1958. This is done by one-by-one transfers to other facilities close to each patient's home,

in consultation with, and after approval by, the family.

“There's no more of this business of a bus pulling up and 50 people being shipped off somewhere or other,” he said.

Ristic was born in 1938 in Belgrade, first son of a Serbian banker-businessman. His parents still live in Belgrade as does his younger brother who is studying to be a dentist. Surprisingly, considering the war and postwar upheaval, he had a comfortable, doted-upon and protected childhood. Not athletic, he was very good at his lessons.

His father, 42, when Miodrag was born, managed to get out of the army when the Germans overran Yugoslavia and “sat out the war” rather than return to airplane-making. Afterward he was a bank manager.

Young Miodrag opted for medicine “because I thought I'd be good at it” and because “in a totalitarian society business is a bureaucracy and I'm not basically a bureaucrat type.” Ensclosed in his medico-bureaucrat's office, he chuckles: “Just look at me now.”

While a senior in medicine at the University of Belgrade he did a month's exchange work at Severalls Hospital, Colchester, England, a psychiatric hospital headed by Dr. Russell Barton, now director of Rochester State School.

Two years later, after interning in Belgrade and a year of general practice in the village of Dalj, Ristic was accepted for a three-year psychiatric

residency at Severalls. In 1967 on Barton's sponsorship, the Minnesota offers brought him to the U.S.

At 34, Ristic is surrounded by subordinates both older and more experienced than he. But his ideas, put forth in slightly hesitant, piquantly accented, excellent English, reveal him to be both reasonable and clever, hard-nosed and open-minded.

“A director has no rights. A right is something you can do or cannot do, as you choose. I have responsibilities. Although I must have authority I believe in giving free rein within certain controls. The management controls are essential because the most important work at Willowbrook is the least pleasant and we must see that it gets done.

“But believing in necessary authority and believing that only the director knows anything is something else. I keep an open mind on problems as long as I can so that everyone feels free to come in with any idea that might be useful.”

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Ristic, a compact brown-eyed man with a close cap of curly hair like a Greek statue's, and his English-born, red-headed wife Yvonne live on the grounds of Willowbrook with their two “pretty and very bright” little girls, Katharine, 4½, and Elizabeth, 2½.

For pleasure, he likes tennis, target-shooting, swimming, travel and poker, which has dwindled from a high school obsession to an occasional pleasure.

For a man who has come so far so fast, Ristic does not necessarily aim higher. “You have to be self-sacrificial to take a job like Alan Miller's. I'd just like to get to be as good as I possibly can in doing what needs to be done here.”