

FROM THE HEART OF THE HEART OF THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

*Bosnia has become a synonym, along with Beirut, Somalia,
and Rwanda, of murderous conflict and political anarchy.*

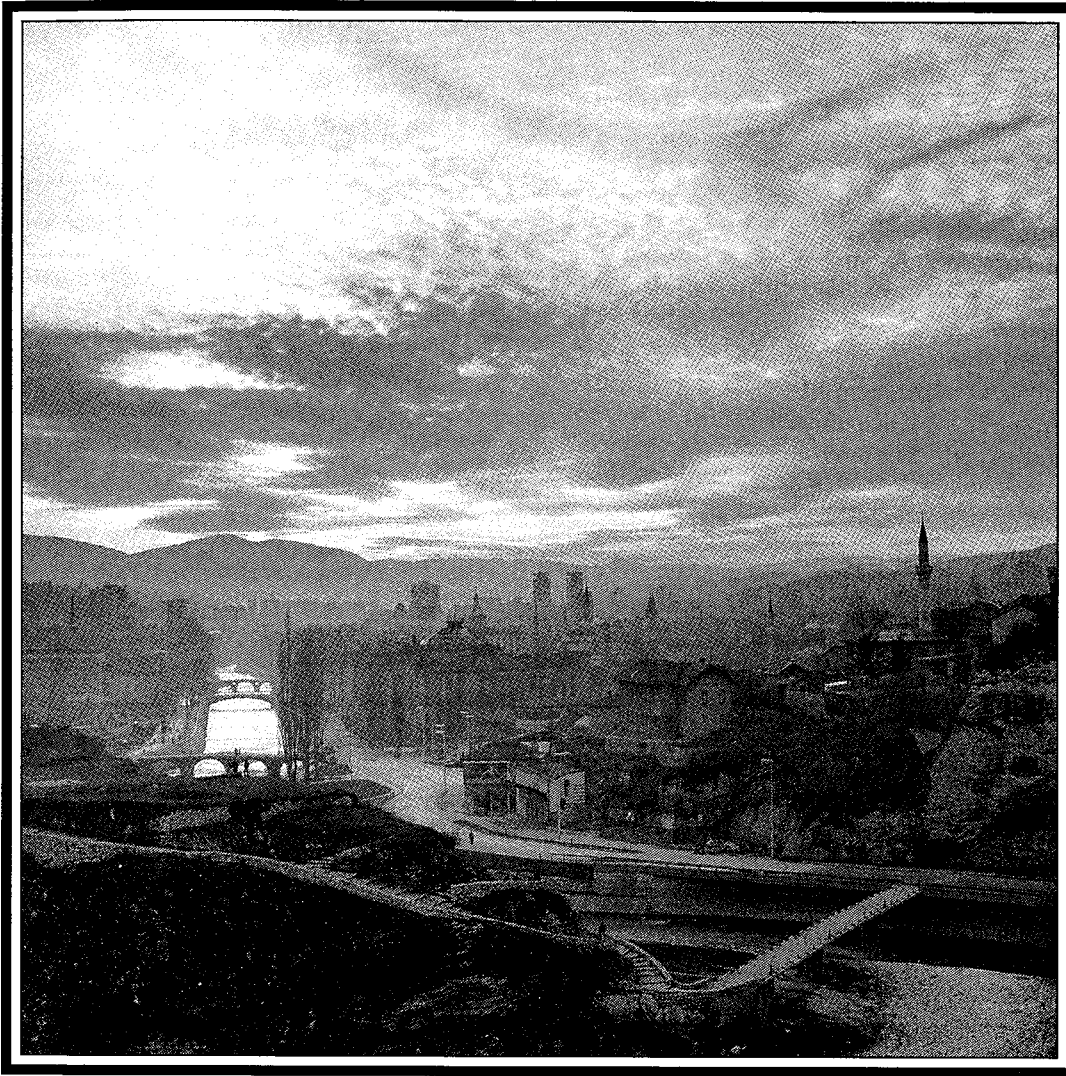
*The tragedy of this Balkan nation, a Sarajevo-born
journalist explains, cannot be understood apart
from the larger story of Yugoslavia's unraveling.*

BY LJILJANA SMAJLOVIC

Years before the thousand-day siege began, my Sarajevo neighbors and I played a waiting game with war. It was not going to confound us. We had taken a long, hard look at every possible scenario of Yugoslavia's violent breakup. Our amateur analysis invariably showed that we, the residents of Albanska Street, had nothing to fear.

We lived right across from the brand-new Military Hospital. It was an indispensable facility. And we reassured one another that it would provide unconstrained services to all sides. The war, after all, was going to be in the country, not in the city. In Sarajevo, the wounded would be treated and political treaties would be negotiated. And if things went from bad to worse, the women and children could always seek refuge in the nearby Marshal Tito army barracks.

Our hopes died a very sudden death. As it turned out, my neighborhood became one of the most perilous places in the city. The hospital was pounded, the Marshal Tito barracks were devastated, and the street around the corner soon came to be called Sniper Alley. In May 1992, a month after war broke out and the siege of Sarajevo began, a Serb shell struck my apartment building, removing part of the wall and vastly enlarging my bedroom window. Fortunately, I was then living and working in Brussels, where I'd gone the previous September to open a bureau for my newspaper,



Sarajevo, 1994: buildings symbolizing old Bosnia, including the parliament, are favored targets.

Oslobodjenje. Around the same time my apartment was hit, I received a telephone call from a Muslim woman—my neighbor, my colleague, and my best friend. Hearing artillery fire in the background, I advised her to leave her apartment. “You’re crazy,” she exclaimed. “If it’s hit I have to be here to put out the fire.”

That was the first real indication that I was on the sidelines, where I have remained uneasily throughout the war. Three months after that conversation I left Brussels for Belgrade, becoming a refugee from the war in which my former neighbors, friends, and relatives were killing each other.

We had once thought that only the zealots would fight, not nice people like us. We had badly miscalculated. Not only did barricades go up in the city—they also went up in our hearts and minds. The war divided us. But today, living temporarily in the United States, I am repeatedly told that the fratricide raging throughout my native land is not, in reality, a civil war.

Conventional wisdom in the West, shared by editorial writers and

scholars alike, holds that the "real causes" of Bosnia and Herzegovina's destruction originated on the outside—that it was "not internal tensions but neighboring states" that ripped the country apart and that, left alone, Bosnia might have lived in peace. A number of respectable historians have turned out volumes asserting that there is no historical precedent for ethnic or religious clashes among Bosnia's three peoples. According to such wisdom, nothing I remember is in reality as I remember it.

My earliest memories go back to my first home in Sarajevo, an old building left over from the Austro-Hungarian occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, located on a street, Vase Miskina, that has since become notorious as the site of one of the bloodiest episodes of the war, the bread-queue massacre that killed a score of people in May 1992. At Vase Miskina 13, I grew up on a diet of heroic tales and bitter memories. The South Slavs, I learned, had had the bad luck to build their house in the middle of a busy road. As a result, they were proselytized by three religions (Islam, Roman Catholicism, and Orthodox Christianity), fell under the rule of two powerful empires (Ottoman and Habsburg), and later suffered occupation by the Nazis. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbs, Muslims, and Croats lived together under foreign rule for centuries, inhabitants of a backwater province on the periphery of empires.

In every tale we were told, my friends and I had to wade through blood. Seven major German offensives racked Yugoslavia during World War II. Five of them were fought in the Bosnian mountains, along with two or three concomitant civil wars. The fascist Croat Ustashes set up a puppet state in Bosnia and slaughtered Serbs, Jews, Gypsies, and Partisans (of all

ethnicities) with a brutality that made their Nazi masters wince. The Serb royalist Chetniks slaughtered Muslim civilians, Serb Partisans, and Croats whenever they could lay their hands on them. The Partisan Serbs, Muslims, Croats, Montenegrins, Jews, and Gypsies simultaneously fought Nazis, Ustashes, and Chetniks.

When I grew too old to listen to heroic tales, I remained under the strong impression that memories of World War II fueled Serb fears of being separated from the bulk of the Serbian nation. (The fascist Independent State of Croatia killed hundreds of thousands of Orthodox Serbs in its program to exterminate a third, deport a third, and convert a third to Catholicism.) I also believed that the memory of the River Drina running red with Muslim blood after the Chetnik massacres in 1942 added to Muslim fears of being abandoned by Croats and left alone in a Yugoslavia dominated by Serbs.

Yet in a much-praised book, *Bosnia—A Short History* (1994), British journalist and historian Noel Malcolm insists that this is simply an "episode of violence," an "exception," "an aberration," and that generations have grown up without "personal memories" of the fighting. Moreover, Malcolm claims, "these animosities were not permanently built into the psyches of the people" because "for most of the period after 1878, the different religious or ethnic communities in Bosnia lived peacefully together."

True, I belonged to a generation that grew up without a personal recollection of civil war. My mother had fought with the Partisans in the Eighth Krajina Brigade in Bosnia for four years, but to my chagrin she would never talk about her experience. Others of my generation made their parents' stories their own. Not long before Yugo-

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slavia's breakup, a strapping Serb colleague whose village near Sarajevo was purged early in World War II, 10 years before he was born, reminisced about the horror as if he had been there: "Ljiljana, you just wouldn't believe it. Two little Croats, no taller than you—here," holding his hand approximately five feet above the ground, "led 80 men away to their deaths. To the peasants, those little guys were the state, and you did what the state told you to do. Serbs will never again live as a minority in someone else's state."

When I left Sarajevo in 1991, Bosnia and Herzegovina, slightly smaller than West Virginia but every bit as mountainous, had a population of 4.3 million people—44 percent Muslim, 31 percent Serb, and 17 percent Croat. It was still a federal republic in Yugoslavia, but Yugoslavia was rapidly disintegrating. Of six original republics, only Serbia and Montenegro remained fully committed to the federation. Slovenia and Croatia had already proclaimed their independence, and Macedonia had announced its intention to do the same. The three Bosnian ethnic nations and their coalition government were bitterly divided over the future of Bosnia. Serbs wanted to remain in Yugoslavia, together with other Serbs from Serbia and Montenegro; Muslims wanted an independent, sovereign state; Croats were more than happy to follow the Muslims out of the federation. A bloody war began in April 1992, after the European Community and the United States recognized Bosnia's sovereignty and the Serbs besieged Sarajevo.

At the same time, a war of words and ideas erupted. At stake were the hearts and minds of the Western world. By the time I arrived in Washington in the late summer of 1994, that particular war was long over. The Bosnian government of Alija Izetbegovic had won it. No contest.

The first battle of that war had been fought over the definition of the conflict. Supporters of the Bosnian government re-

jected the label "civil war" outright, knowing that no Western power would want to intercede in an internal affair. So the conflict had to be depicted as an outside aggression, and here the Serbs were of tremendous help. The initial role of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and obvious support from Serbia for the rebellious Serbs in Bosnia provided ample ammunition for those who argued that the war in Bosnia was an "external aggression." When Bosnian Croats attacked their Muslim allies in the spring of 1993, the definition of the conflict was quickly amended. Now the Bosnian government was pronounced the victim of aggression from both neighboring Serbia and Croatia. Out of three native Bosnian groups, two became "external" aggressors: the Bosnian Serbs and the Bosnian Croats.

With the best intentions, Western journalists and scholars presented the Bosnian question as a deceptively simple dichotomy: the Bosnian conflict either derived from internal tensions or was caused by neighboring states (Serbia and Croatia). Not surprisingly, the commentators came up with a deceptively clear answer: "neighboring states."

Unfortunately, the question itself was wrong. The dichotomy, specious at best, is of no use whatsoever in illuminating the Bosnian tragedy.

The Bosnian conflict is an eminently Yugoslav conflict. Bosnia's identity was so intricately linked to that of the neighboring republics that it was indivisible from Yugoslavia's as a whole. Out of six former republics, Bosnia was the one created most truly in Yugoslavia's image, a fragile amalgam of faiths, nationalities, dialects, and histories. It was Yugoslavia writ small, trying doggedly to imitate and outshine its model. The lines that separated what was "internal" and purely Bosnian from what was "external" but still Yugoslav were hopelessly blurred.

But even scholars are confused—or at

least ambivalent—on this point. In a volume of essays edited by Mark Pinson, *The Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina* (1994), historian John Fine of the University of Michigan refers to the three nationalities of Bosnia as “Yugoslavs of all ethnic groups.” Urging Bosnia’s Serbs and Croats to abandon their excess ethnic baggage (the Muslims presumably have none, being by implication the only pure Bosnians), he counsels “Yugoslavs” to “see that the true interest of their respective nationalities is represented by the Bosnian cause.”

In dispensing political advice to “Yugoslavs,” Fine makes two curiously contradictory references to Yugoslavia itself. First, he claims that “Bosnians” have no reason to feel nostalgic about Yugoslavia because Yugoslavia “was in fact a greater Serbia.” Then he suggests that Serbs and Croats should return to the spirit of *bratstvo-jedinstvo* (brotherhood and unity) that was “Yugoslavia’s salvation 50 years ago.” So Fine leaves us wondering: was Yugoslavia a Greater Serbian nightmare or the means to fraternal salvation?

John Fine is not the first to tell Bosnian Serbs and Croats that they should rid themselves of surplus ethnic identification. Bosnian purification was attempted once before, under the Austro-Hungarian policy of Benjamin Kallay, the empire’s finance minister from 1882 to 1903. Kallay developed the idea of Bosnian nationhood in an effort to induce Serbs and Croats in Bosnia to renounce their “other” identities. This unhappy experiment ended in the bloodshed of World War I.

Yugoslavia was born in the wake of that war. During its existence first as part of the Kingdom and then as a republic in the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia, Bosnia had few problems exclusively its own. Anything that happened to Serbs, Croats, and Muslims living elsewhere in Yugoslavia reverberated dramatically among Bosnia’s Serbs, Croats, and Muslims. Since precious little ever happened in Yugoslavia that did not involve the country’s three largest eth-

nic groups, almost all of Yugoslavia’s tensions at once became Bosnia’s as well. No Bosnian issue during the last 50 years would fit the current Western “internal tensions/ neighboring states” dichotomy. And the present war is no exception.

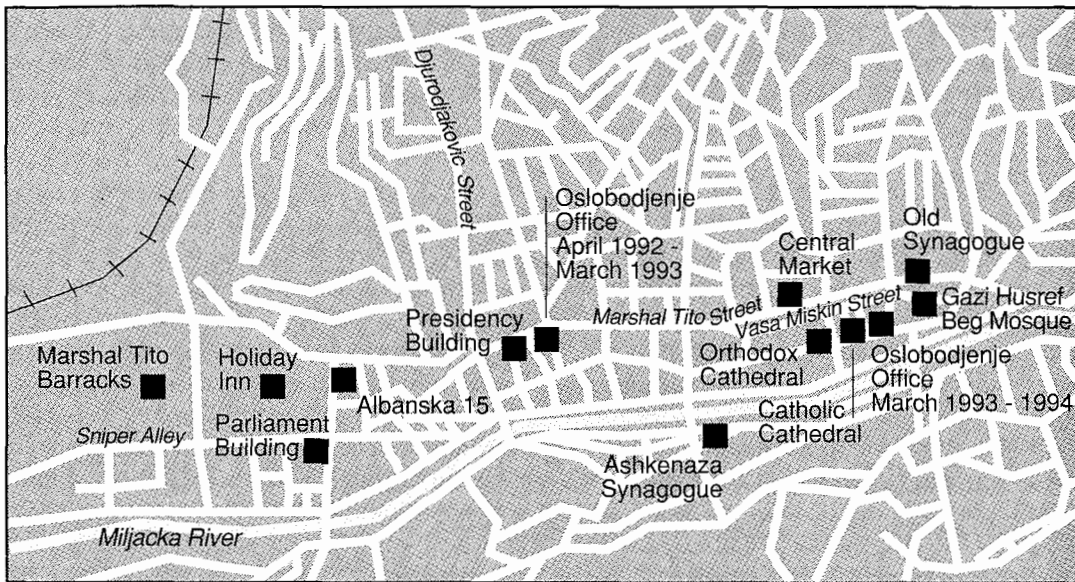
A few months before the Bosnian war erupted, a well-known intellectual and opposition politician from newly independent Croatia, Ivan Zvonimir Cicak, asked the right question: “Isn’t Bosnia being destroyed by those who fear the answer to the following question: if life together is possible in Bosnia, why was it not possible in Yugoslavia? Isn’t Bosnia being destroyed by those who fear that preserving the Yugoslav model of existence in Bosnia would prove we might have all lived differently than our violent breakup suggests?”

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Whenever I hear that, “left alone,” Bosnia might have lived in peace, I think of my last home in Sarajevo, a six-story apartment building on a small street two blocks east of the Holiday Inn and within 100 meters of Ali-Pasha’s and Magribija mosques, St. Joseph’s Catholic Church, and the Parliament, where the Communist Party once routinely held “historic” plenary sessions of its Central Committee. From where my window used to be, you no longer see the minaret of the Magribija. It was blown off by a high-explosive Serb shell.

Had we been left alone, we tenants of Albanska 15 surely would not have started a war. Yet my neighbors are now fighting in three different armies, some as “aggressors,” others as “heroic defenders.”

We had all seemed perfectly decent people before the war broke out: quiet, unassuming, hardworking. We were doctors, teachers, journalists, electricians, secretaries, housewives, and pensioners, the Yugoslav



Albanska 15, the author's former apartment building, and the surrounding portion of Sarajevo.

version of lower- and upper-middle-class townspeople. Back then, I would never have guessed who among us would come to be identified by Western journalists as "aggressors." A few might have stood accused of alcohol abuse or perhaps an illicit affair or two. But none would have been accused of being bad people—or even of being bad neighbors, for that matter.

Unaware of a horrific future, we shared small daily pleasures, such as tiny cups of potent Turkish coffee on the roof of the building, where women and children sometimes retreated in summer months to hang laundry and enjoy the view of the city—a valley city of some 500,000 people. And we shared more than pleasures. When a neighbor's daughter was diagnosed with a brain tumor, we all chipped in to help the family handle the cost of an operation in Zurich. (The Yugoslav health-care system paid for the operation; we picked up the bill only for a few Western toys.) We cried and commiserated with the parents and later cheered the child's recovery.

We were what you would call "good neighbors." But our building did not exist in a vacuum. It went to war along with the rest

of Bosnia. It was part of a whole and could no more be left alone by the "sum of its parts" than Bosnia could isolate itself from the Yugoslavia it had belonged to for 70 years.

Serbs, Croats, and Muslims, we had all dreaded the breakup of Yugoslavia. We certainly never imagined that the country could fall apart neatly at the seams, as Western leaders apparently thought it could. Or hoped it would, sometimes against their better judgment. Warren Zimmermann, Washington's last ambassador to Yugoslavia, confesses in a recent issue of *Foreign Affairs* that he and everyone at the U.S. embassy knew that "no breakup of Yugoslavia could happen peacefully." Bosnia's president Alija Izetbegovic knew so as well. Zimmermann quotes him as saying that the survival of Yugoslavia was "essential to Bosnia's survival," and that "Bosnia [would] be destroyed" if Croatia went. Zimmermann deems Izetbegovic's subsequent decision to seek independence for Bosnia a "disastrous political mistake," a "miscalculation" and a "double-game." Yet he fails to explain why he advised his own government to compound

Izetbegovic's "disastrous mistake" by recognizing Bosnia's independence.

At Albanska 15, the prospect of Yugoslavia's dissolution conjured up images that were anything but orderly. It would be like "the dismantling of a Scud missile in a provincial autoshop," as my friend Miroslav Jankovic, a journalist from an all-Serb village on the outskirts of Sarajevo, observed. We toasted his metaphor and joked about his "ethnically clean" suburb, back in pre-war days when such jesting was still acceptable among secular, liberal Sarajevans.

When the dismantling began in earnest, Jankovic upgraded his metaphor: Yugoslavia, he said, had burst into shrapnel, a fragment of which—Bosnia—was a carbon copy of the blown-away original. He wrote this two months before the West recognized this tiny piece of metaphoric shrapnel as a sovereign nation.

On April 6, 1992, the European Community's Council of Ministers unanimously recognized Bosnia, determining that the former Yugoslav republic had met all the international requirements for becoming an independent nation. My fellow Bosnian Serbs soon blasted my building with mortar shells from the hills surrounding the city. But that's not when things really began.

In the year preceding the war, my neighbors and I still drank coffee together and watched our children play in the courtyard. But when the martial music sounded, we all heard different drummers. In the first week of September 1991, tenants from my building showed up on the front steps of the nearby Parliament building to participate in two different antiwar demonstrations. War was raging in Croatia between Yugoslav army units allied with the local Serb populace on one side, and Croatian forces on the other.

Those of my neighbors who went to the first demonstration stood under bright green moon-and-crescent Muslim party flags and demanded two things from the Yugoslav

People's Army: first, that it lay down its guns and let Croatia secede, and second, that it allow Bosnian conscripts to go home.

The second demonstration was a riposte to the first. Those of my neighbors who took part in it carried a blue, white, and red Yugoslav flag with a red star in the middle. They cheered the army's efforts to prevent secession and to protect their Serb brethren in Croatia.

As a journalist, I went to both demonstrations and died a little each time.

In Washington today, I find it amusing that the currently fashionable Western view of prewar Bosnia—an island of ethnic harmony and political bliss in a sea of Yugoslav turmoil—reminds me so much of the communist myth of Bosnia.

That pretty picture is precisely the one that Bosnia's rigid, doctrinaire communist leadership tried so hard to project. The party elite carefully nurtured the image of Bosnia as the bedrock of Yugoslav communism—the secure home of brotherhood, unity, and ideological purity. Our political education glorified two things: the Yugoslav fatherland and the Yugoslav road to socialism.

Our leaders' loyalty to those sacrosanct values was anecdotal. At political rallies they repeated, ad nauseum, that Bosnia was neither Serb, nor Croat, nor Muslim, but rather Serb and Croat and Muslim. So often was this repeated that the "neither-nor republic" came to be Bosnia's derisive nickname in select political circles.

When borders among the six Yugoslav republics were drawn at the end of World War II, Bosnia's strongman, Djuro Pucar, an ethnic Serb, foolishly turned down his comrades-in-arms' offer of an Adriatic port for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Josip Broz Tito had just rebuked those who had criticized the Communist Party's decision to create the republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a separate federal unit on the grounds that it meant splitting Serbia in two: "Serbia is part of Yugoslavia, and we do not intend to create within Yugoslavia states that

will go to war against each other. If Bosnia and Herzegovina has equal rights, if [the people of Bosnia] have their own federal unit, then we have not torn Serbia apart but created happy Serbs in Bosnia instead. The same goes for Croats and Muslims. [Borders between republics] are merely administrative borders. I will have no borders in Yugoslavia that will divide our peoples: I want borders that will bind them together."

Bosnia was poor and underdeveloped, but it put Yugoslavia's development before its own. Djuro Pucar was so fiercely devoted to the common good and Yugoslavia's centralized economy that he became a joke in postwar Belgrade: it was said that he once mailed back part of Bosnia's share of federal funds, earmarking the sum for "those republics who could find better use for the money."

This was far from standard bureaucratic practice, even at the height of communist solidarity in the heady days of postwar euphoria. But there was a price to pay for excessive idealism. Before they knew it, Bosnians were supplying the market with cheap labor and raw materials, much as they had under Habsburg colonial rule. Rumor has it that even Tito laughed at a popular joke: Yugoslav laws are cooked up in Ljubljana, written in Zagreb, promulgated in Belgrade, and applied (only) in Sarajevo.

In the 1960s, the Yugoslav Communist Party set out to rectify such federal inequities. Selling cheap lumber to Slovenia and buying back expensive furniture was no longer deemed an acceptable mode of Yugoslav patriotism. But as party bureaucrats loosened their grip on the economy, they tightened their hold on political power in Bosnia. When a new generation of party leaders had their little fling with liberalism in the 1970s, Tito purged the politburos of Ljubljana, Belgrade, and Zagreb. He had no such work cut out for him in Sarajevo—Bosnia's hard-liners had kept their house in order. They were drab and humorless and

did not flirt with political enemies.

They enjoyed Tito's full confidence, but the people paid for it in the currency of political freedom. Bosnian society professed disdain for political rights such as freedom of speech. It gave priority to "higher ideals" such as brotherhood and unity. Bosnia criminally prosecuted what other regions in Yugoslavia commonly tolerated. (Alija Izetbegovic was sentenced to nine years in jail in 1983 for writing a privately printed "Islamic Declaration.")

When tolerance of dissidents became fashionable throughout Yugoslavia during the 1980s, Bosnia developed its own strain of the dissident virus. We privately referred to it as "spitting over the neighbors' fence." Some of our dissidents, discreetly cultivated by the regime, excelled in righteous indignation over ideological aberrations spied in Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Pristina. Occasional nationalist outbreaks in Bosnia were diagnosed as "imported nationalism."

Bosnia's assignment in the Yugoslav



Throughout the war in Bosnia, the Sarajevo daily newspaper, Oslobodjenje, has continued to publish.

Federation was to be its guardian, the keeper of the "holy grail" of brotherhood and unity. It wasn't a self-appointed role. Bosnia's communist leadership did not adopt the watchdog attitude simply to ingratiate itself with Tito (who always welcomed new justifications for tight communist control and the need for national unity). Nor was it motivated exclusively by the leadership's desire to rule Bosnia with an iron hand. Bosnia's mission in Yugoslavia was to prove that Yugoslavia itself was a good and workable idea, that all nations could live under one roof, in harmony and peace. If there had been no Bosnia, Tito would have had to invent one.

Bosnia assured Yugoslavia's survival by providing the "ultimate solution" to the Serb-Croat conflict—or so Yugoslavia's leaders presumed. Their presumption remained unspoken because it implied that Bosnia would exist only as long as it was an effective barrier against Serb or Croat separatism. Bosnia had long been the apple of discord between Serbs and Croats. The Communists gambled that neither Serbia nor Croatia would ever embark on the path to secession if there was no chance of dividing Bosnia. They gambled that both nations would prefer to stay put in Yugoslavia rather than risk abandoning their Serb or Croat compatriots in Bosnia (along with the real estate).

The Communists were bad gamblers. When Yugoslavia began to destroy itself after Tito's death in 1980, the Serbs and Croats in Bosnia watched first with fascination and then with horror. They were quick to exhibit symptoms of an old Balkan ailment: the "ethnic minority syndrome." But in their fears of being cut off from their respective motherlands, they could not expect much sympathy from the Bosnian Muslims, who had their own problems. While Serbs and Croats looked longingly toward Serbia and Croatia, Muslims, suffering from the anxiety of a "stateless nation," turned inward and resolved to pre-

vent Bosnia from going where Yugoslavia was headed—into oblivion. They saw the dissolution of Yugoslavia as a historic opportunity to create their first state.

But first they had to reinvent history. To do so they went back 900 years, claiming descent from Bosnia's first medieval kingdom. Yugoslavia they reduced to a speck of historical dust; it had been around for a mere seven decades. Muslim leader Izetbegovic even professed inability to discern any relevance Yugoslavia might still have for Bosnia. The latter, after all, had existed far longer than Yugoslavia and was by no means bound to follow Yugoslavia onto the trash heap of history. The Muslims, self-proclaimed heirs to Bosnia's venerable tradition of tolerance and coexistence, would in no way permit it.

Izetbegovic retained some of the flavor of the old communist rhetoric, minus the ideology. Once again, political will declared Bosnia to be a multiethnic, multicultural Garden of Eden. Bosnia's new political patrons, postcommunist ethnic Muslims, went even further than their predecessors. They claimed that Bosnia had been a land of uninterrupted religious and ethnic bliss for no less than nine centuries. The horrible fratricide of Serbs, Muslims, and Croats during World War II was only an inconsequential aberration, another speck of historical dust.

This historical revisionism was hotly contested around many dinner tables in Sarajevo, including my own at Albanska 15. Many of my friends and neighbors, not all of them Muslim, were only too happy to open their minds to this new school of thought: exit the short, bloody history of Bosnia as our parents knew it, enter timeless harmony and peace. If this was the way out of the Yugoslav morass and an alternative to civil war, it seemed perfectly reasonable to replace Bosnian writer Ivo Andric's famous image of Bosnia as a dread "land of hate" with an image of peaceful coexistence. But we all knew that this pretty picture, freshly painted, served a specific political

purpose, as had all the other pretty pictures we had been asked to treasure during the communist years. And not everyone was willing to buy it.

Late one night in February 1991, my next-door neighbors and I watched a live telecast of a session of Bosnia's Parliament, our favorite pastime in those feverish political times. Members of Bosnia's ruling coalition of three ethnic political parties (Serb, Croat, and Muslim) were locked in a bitter dispute over the sovereignty of Bosnia. A Serb member of Parliament warned that Serbs would never acquiesce to an independent Bosnia and issued a threat. "The sovereign of your sovereign state would never make it past the Gavrilo Princip Bridge," he declared, referring to the structure named after the young Bosnian Serb nationalist who assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Sophie, in 1914.

My neighbors and I were outraged at the brazen vulgarity of the threat. In other countries, people watch football games the way we watched political sessions—keenly, boisterously, querulously. We grew quiet as a Muslim member of Parliament took the podium. He retorted that in a sovereign Bosnia the Princip Bridge would no longer bear the name of a terrorist. It would be given its old appellation, Latin Bridge, in recognition of the predominantly Croatian character of the neighborhood at the turn of the century. It should never have been named after the Serb murderer in the first place, he insisted.

Again, I was loudly indignant, until I realized that my neighbors' mannerly as-
sent was chiefly motivated by sympathy for my feelings. I discovered in my own home that night that one person's hero is, indeed, another person's terrorist.

My next-door neighbors were an elderly Croatian couple, the most gentle, warm-hearted, unassuming people I have ever had the luck to share living space with.

Franjo, a retired railway worker with bad lungs and a weak heart, smoked incessantly and always had a special bottle of home-made wine—"not quite the same as the one we sampled the week before"—that he wanted me to taste. After my son went to sleep at night, we would sip wine at their kitchen table and talk politics. Franjo's wife, Lucija, dropped in daily. She came for a quick chat over a cup of coffee, often bringing her own sugar cube with her. I kept only loose sugar and she drank her Turkish coffee the Bosnian way, melting the cube in her mouth before taking a sip.

Our conversations never faltered, despite the abuse our ethnic leaders heaped on one another, even after Franjo came to feel that "my" Serb Yugoslav Army had invaded "his" Croatia. Whether hero or assassin, Gavrilo Princip would have to rest in peace as far as we were concerned. We were civilized people and good neighbors in Albanska 15. But we could not dodge the war.

Less than 48 hours after that volatile exchange in Parliament, someone attacked the plaque honoring Gavrilo Princip's world-transforming act. The words "Latin Bridge" were sprayed on the wall of the Museum of Young Bosnia (the secret organization Princip had belonged to) above the spot where the teenage assassin's steps were set in the pavement, defacing the inscription: "FROM THIS SPOT ON JUNE 28, 1914, GAVRILO PRINCIP, WITH HIS SHOT, EXPRESSED THE PEOPLE'S PROTEST AGAINST TYRANNY AND THE CENTURIES-LONG YEARNING OF OUR PEOPLES FOR PEACE."



My first home on Vase Miskina Street was only a few blocks away from the Princip Bridge in Bascarsija, the old Turkish quarter. The apartment building in which my family shared a flat with another couple

and their daughter, as was customary in the years of postwar austerity, had a most illustrious tenant. Ivo Kranjcevic was a Croat member of Young Bosnia and had taken part in the assassination plot. He had served his prison term with Gavrilo Princip in Theresienstadt, a military prison under the Habsburgs and a concentration camp under the Nazis. It is now Terezin, a small town in the Czech Republic.

Mrs. Kranjcevic was kind enough to give me French lessons in 1963, when I was seven years old, in exchange for the pittance my parents could afford. The elderly couple was not privileged in any way. Or so I suspected, noticing that my father used various excuses to bring a kilo of fruit or some such small thing to our neighbors on the fourth floor. I was an avid listener to adult political conversations from an early age, and I overheard the very dignified Mr. Kranjcevic tell my father, "You Communists believe that the world began with you." My father was an ex-Partisan and an amateur historian. Having Mr. Kranjcevic as a neighbor was, to him, like living next door to history.

Unlike Princip, Ivo Kranjcevic survived Theresienstadt. According to him, Princip was overjoyed to find himself occupying the same prison cell that formerly held Hadzi Lojo, the legendary Muslim resistance leader at the beginning of the Austro-Hungarian occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878. Princip told Ivo Kranjcevic that he was delighted that "Austria's last Bosnian prisoner was in the same cell as her first one." He was soon right. Young Gavrilo died and, shortly thereafter, so did the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Alija Izetbegovic's image of Bosnia as a country that had existed before Yugoslavia and would continue to exist after Yugoslavia was perfectly legitimate and, to a certain degree, historically accurate. But the

present-day Bosnia he was speaking of, the one I grew up in, was not King Tvrtko's medieval creation. It was a far more modern invention. The historian Maria Todorova has noted that the motif of Sarajevo as a multicultural paradise is a favorite one in current journalism: "It was in this paradise, of course, that the fatal shots of Gavrilo Princip signalled the outbreak of the First World War and prompted John Gunther to write in his immensely popular *Inside Europe* (1936), 'It is an intolerable affront to human and political nature that these two wretched and unhappy little countries in the Balkan peninsula can, and do, have quarrels that cause world wars. Some 150,000 young Americans died because of an event in 1914 in a mud-caked primitive village, Sarajevo.'"

"It is an irony," observed Todorova at a recent conference, "to read the paragraph about the 'mud-caked primitive village' in light of today's eulogies about Sarajevo as the beautiful cosmopolitan urban quintessence. It must have become this under the barbarous rule, first of the independent South Slav monarchy and especially under the Yugoslav Communists, while it had been a loathsome village under the enlightened rule of the Habsburgs, which they had inherited from the Ottomans."

Sarajevo has many true stories to tell of urban tolerance, ethnic harmony, and religious diversity. But the Sarajevo way of talking politics is special. It's a peculiar skill, and most Sarajevans shared it. We were artisans of the ambiguous statement, masters of the illusive metaphor, craftsmen of equivocal attitudes.

As war neared, we spoke of "them" an awful lot. "They" were our leaders, and we were careful to give no names, for fear of accidentally omitting political leaders of our own ethnic groups. We affected to be angry at all of them and publicly assumed the posture of innocent victims. We loved all

peoples and nationalities equally and meant no harm, but terrible leaders were taking us down the path of destruction against our will and better judgment. *Zavadjaju narod* ("They set us against one another") was "our" verdict on "them."

It was hardly hypocrisy, for no one was a dupe. Not the second time around, anyway. I had fallen for the artful Sarajevo street discourse back in 1990, prior to the first free multiparty elections. That was when we all took turns ridiculing newly created ethnic parties and their uninspiring leaders, who acted as though we could not tell the difference between our ethnic origins and our political affiliations. And we acted as though this could happen only in rural areas—after all, what did the peasants know?—or perhaps in some of the less ethnically mixed suburbs.

In the social circle I frequented, not a single soul professed the intention to vote for the "nationalists." The Muslim Party of Democratic Action (SDA) had shown itself capable of attracting 200,000 people at a campaign rally in Velika Kladusa in northwestern Bosnia. At an earlier Sarajevo rally, fewer than 5,000 people had shown up. A liberal, multiethnic, and secular Reformist Party was all the rage in our city, to judge by the huge campaign rally turnouts and by the way people talked. The Reformists packed the stadium that the Muslims were unable to fill. Similarly, the Socialist Democratic Party (the renamed Communist Party) drew huge crowds.

But the morning after the elections, I found out that even my own neighborhood in the heart of sophisticated, secular Sarajevo, a municipality called "Center," had voted strictly along ethnic lines, helping to elect a pack of nationalists in a landslide. The Reformist Party captured less than 10 percent of the vote, about the same share that was garnered by the Socialists. I fared poorly, having split my vote between the two parties. The November 1990 election results strikingly resembled the 1991

census profile: nearly 40 percent of the seats for the Muslim Party, close to 30 percent for the Serb Democratic Party (SDS), and almost 17 percent for the Croat Democratic Union (HDZ).

I still think many voters were unimpressed by Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, Izetbegovic, or their Croat counterpart Stjepan Kljuic. They simply acted out of the fear that even if they withheld their vote from a Karadzic, their Muslim neighbor would still give his vote to an Izetbegovic. In the end, they were afraid of weakening their own nation in the hour presaging the ultimate confrontation.

Their leaders also shared a common interest: defeating the Communists at the polls. And for this they needed one another. Karadzic, Izetbegovic, and Kljuic promised Bosnians that, if elected, they would mend what the Communists had broken. In the days leading to the election, they never missed an opportunity to be photographed with their arms around one another. The leaders, through their respective ethnic parties, would legitimize healthy ethnic feelings that the Communists had stifled. Pride without prejudice was now the message. There was, of course, no talk of war.

But two months into the ethnic parties' hypocritical coalition, near-anarchy prevailed. Three national platforms converged at a crossroads, and there were no stop signs. Power grabbing, not power sharing, abounded. Parliament was paralyzed. The Serbs established "autonomous" provinces across Bosnia, while the predominantly Croat region of western Herzegovina set up its own monetary system, based on the Croatian dinar. A year before war broke out Bosnia was, in effect, partitioned. The authority of the central government in Sarajevo extended only to the city's limits. Serb-dominated Banjaluka in northwestern Bosnia, for instance, refused to send tax monies to the government in Sarajevo. Mus-



lim-dominated Zenica in central Bosnia refused to send army conscripts to the JNA. Croat Listica, in western Herzegovina, refused to allow army convoys to pass through its territory.

Finally, in June 1991 in Visegrad, on the River Drina in eastern Bosnia, Muslims demonstrated in front of the police station, stopping all traffic because a Muslim motorist had been detained. Two days later, Serbs did the same when the three Serb policemen who had detained the Muslim motorist were suspended. By that time Karadzic, Izetbegovic, and Kljucic were openly snarling at one another—only six months after they assumed power.

Their hostility spilled over into the streets and *mahalas* (in Turkish, “city quarters”) of Sarajevo. The first time I felt it ripple through my own neighborhood was in February 1991. My newspaper was locked in a bitter struggle with the Izetbegovic government over editorial control, and I already had a reputation for writing stories that tweaked the sensibilities of leading politicians. But nothing prepared me for the outrage that followed my account of what I saw as a bizarre incident in Bosnia’s Parliament.

It took place in the men’s restroom. There was a recess at noon to allow Muslim members to observe the prayer ritual, and

one of our photographers captured a few members of the ruling Muslim party washing their feet in the sink—a ritual called *abdest* that precedes prayer. This was the first time the ritual had been performed in the Parliament building, but what I heard and reported as news others interpreted as disrespect.

Much earlier, before the election, my newspaper had asked Alija Izetbegovic whether he considered himself the leader of a classical political party or a religious movement. In my column on the *abdest* episode, I quoted his ambiguous reply: “Neither one. This is a Muslim Party, which strongly resembles the people it is recruited from. It is a religious people.”

Borrowing an argument from Hannah Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1968), I observed that the communist regime had long depended on the silent consent of the unorganized masses, the neutral supporters who had never been interested in politics because they felt that no parties existed to champion their interests. Under the direction of Bosnia’s ethnic parties, the silent majority had suddenly shed its apathy and voiced its anger. I pointed out that the other two ruling parties, Serb and Croat, were also strongly oriented toward history, tradition, and their ancestors’ religions.

To my dismay, a rather dense political column became, overnight, a dubious sensation; it seemed that everyone in town had either read it or at least heard about it. Unfortunately, most Muslims thought it gratuitously anti-Muslim. The reference to *abdest* was considered unduly provocative. I had breached the first law of Sarajevo’s multiethnic coexistence: do not offend thy neighbor. The resentment did not subside after several Muslim politicians pointed out that prayer rituals should more properly be

observed in one of Sarajevo's hundred mosques, several of which were close upon the Parliament building. The uproar continued even after Izetbegovic's Muslim Party discontinued the practice of Parliament prayer altogether. I was not to be forgiven for using the feet-washing episode as a symbol of the new political era in Sarajevo. This was my first inkling that secular Sarajevo was not as secular as I had once thought.

In America, I buy newspapers and history books uniformly reflecting rosy images of prewar Bosnia peddled by the old communist regime and its first freely elected one. There is no warning to consumers that these goods present anything short of historical truth. They tell me that if my neighbors and relatives are fighting each other in the land of their birth, this does not yet mean that they are waging a civil war. Robert Donia and John Fine, in *Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Tradition Betrayed* (1994), designate as "chauvinists" those who would depict the present conflict as an ethnic one. To speak of Serbs against Muslims "is a dreadful and misleading distortion," Fine writes in one chapter, "Medieval and Ottoman Roots of Modern Bosnia."

My mind full of such "distortions," I think back to my apartment building, Albanska 15. After thousands of Serb shells fell on predominantly Muslim Sarajevo, Princip Bridge was in fact renamed Latin Bridge. My neighbor Lucija died of illness, privation, cold, and misery during the first year of the war. She spent most evenings and some of her days in the

cellar, fearing bombardment. Her husband, Franjo, was still alive when American journalist friends last visited my old apartment building. He never joined Lucija in the cellar. He was too frail to walk up and down the stairs. During the shelling, he sat quietly alone in a stairwell in the dim light of an oil lamp.

Many of my other neighbors are dispersed, living in different cities in several countries. The little girl who recovered from the brain tumor is in Hamburg with her Serb father and Croat mother. The Serb family that marched off proudly with the red-star flag to demonstrate in support of Yugoslavia in September 1991, a few days after Muslims had demonstrated against the army, has split up and scattered. The mother and two children are refugees in Serbia. The father would not leave his infirm sister and aged mother and remains trapped in Sarajevo—three inadvertent statistics in the column of "loyal Serbs" that the Bosnian government and Western journalists cite to demonstrate the popularity of the Bosnian "multicultural" and "multiethnic" government. They, and many Sarajevo Serbs like them, obviously are not friends or acquaintances of John Fine, who wrote, "Most of the Sarajevo Serbs I know are still in the city, in favor of Izetbegovic's government."

The last member of the small, tightly knit group of childhood friends from Albanska 15, my half-Muslim, half-Serb son, is currently in Washington, blissfully unaware of his dual Sarajevo nature—part "aggressor," part "heroic defender"—a "neither-nor" from the heart of the heart of the former Yugoslavia.