Tale of Bosnia

What does it mean to live in Bosnia & Herzegovina?
Live in a lie or illusion?

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What does it mean to live in Bosnia-Herzegovina? Today, 16 years after the end of brutal war?

What does it mean that I am writing about a time after the end of ‘local’ war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in an area that was once the heart of the former Yugoslavia? A personal symmetry: I was born the same number of years after the end of a war on greater scale (WW-II) and therefore – theoretically – much worse, as has now passed since the end of the war I am writing about. I was a baby then, I can remember nothing of those post-war years and do not know much about that time, except some fragmented memories of what my parents used to talk about … but it seems to me that at that time, there was truly much, much more of a will to live. It was hard, yes, people were poor, there was grief … but there were those with the will, desire and faith … to live. How is it today …? Today …?! Today, it seems to me, there is least of all faith … not in God, not in Allah, not in whomever or whatever ideal …. No faith in a better today, less in a better tomorrow … and no difference between those who are religious, and those who believe in this life and the material world and their work …. It feels as if we are chess figures, that someone moves us about without concern for our desires and without consciousness …. Like a dream …. You just wake up and see that you have been ‘shifted’ and now live in a country where ‘it is normal not to be normal’. Only 4 million people live here, in Bosnia and Herzegovina. All the others who used to live here, lucky them, now live somewhere else on earth, in other states and other countries …. Nonetheless, mostly they did not want to move … they were expelled from their homes during the war 1992-1996 … or after it …! Or left for the more ordinary reasons of economics: seeking a job – or just work, a better life, a better education, running away from country that was destroyed …. Even during the war I had a feeling that I was a refugee, a refugee in my town, in Sarajevo. Today it is even worse …. I feel so sad … and so full of sorrow …. I choose to live here, I feel this is my country, and want to believe in its future … all victims believe in justice … it helps them to endure, to carry on, not only to survive, but to triumph over the legacy of misery!
We do not even know how many inhabitants live in this ‘small country on the Balkan peninsula!’ Since 1991 there has been no census, no registration of survivors .... Still, there are new lists created every day .... On the basis of these lists, most recently, stores are opened specifically for the poor .... Every day, public kitchens provide more and more food for those who do not have to eat, the very poorest among us. And every day, there are more and more rich and wealthy ... who knows how ....

I remember my professor of psychiatry saying, just after the war ended, It is going to be neo-capitalism, but this is not western Europe ... it would be a Latin-American type venture ... and I remember feeling that it was a serious and exotic expression, that it had foresight ... and ... that it was a curse .... Every day people flee this country, if not physically, then they withdraw in mind, in habit, in their way of life .... Emotionally, everything is far away and long ago ... there is no longer any appreciation for traditional education, no nourishing of culture and no respect for customs .... At the moment, people are free to go, though now it seems that Europe is once again thinking of visa confiscation .... If true, it might be the thing that actually ends up saving Bosnia.

Decency is disqualified, we are surrounded by the aggressiveness of globalization, democratization and liberalization ... -tion, -tion!!! – all of which is praised through the media, and by the diaspora . The image for a better tomorrow comes from far away .... Here darkness lives in our heads, eats at our lives .... A question to a boy: ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ And the child says: ‘Mafia’. ... It used to be a joke, and we laughed at his answer ... but that was some time ago ... – There was so much killing and now the devastation continues, but as self-destruction. The two the most vulnerable groups? The young, those who were born around, during and after the war, and those who have more than doubled in age from before the war – the oldest ... A post-war baby-boom doesn’t exist .... Love is in the air ... yes, but it is not strong enough to keep producing newborns .... More people die than born here ....

Politicians, with their bellies full, say: ‘Stay here’ ... but they do not lift a finger to improve the situation for ordinary people .... Ordinary people are hungry, both those who work, and those who do not work. The official statistics say that Bosnia and Herzegovina has the most unemployed inhabitants in south-east Europe – more than 40%. And as for those lucky who have a job ... it is sad but true that the salaries of intellectuals barely or not all allows them to make ends meet every month .... Many people are looking for a job, grabbing what they can and marching to enter into capitalism ... the words often said during the war were: ‘We’ve had enough of charity
(sadaka)’ ... and yet now, after the war, we are begging and begging ... for reconstruction, for the returnees .... Now, as a result of corruption, there is more crime due to despair ... more disease, more hunger ... and far fewer prospects. There is no vision ... it is as if we are vicious. Or numb. The country has been in a deep dream-state for 15 years .... Perhaps it reflects a collective trauma – a social numbing as a reflection of trauma!? Unpredictability is painful and unsettling .... The developed world lived in helpless or careless peace while Bosnia lay bleeding. Eventually, humanitarian assistance was sufficient to survive, but not enough to develop and thrive .... It was just enough not to be killed by starvation .... What we desperately need are small ‘peaces’ of support: more than food and clothing, more than medication ... we need elements of normality ... that which we once believed we could do by and for ourselves, if only there was no war and no danger ....

But real dreams are happening to others ...
... It is not enough for the world to help in the bringing war crimes to justice ... it helps every day, even today ... victims are equalized by civil society movement from all ex Yugoslavia territories/republics ‘REKAM’ activity.' Not crimes, but victims! ... Yes, but again, ‘my suffering is bigger than yours’. And it is great to give us international support ... but we know each other ... and who started the war, first!

Movies have been made to make the reconciliation easier. Stars are born and awards are given. Consciences are clean(ed). But ... on the street, in public transportation, in cars, in everyday interaction at home with the family, at work with colleagues, it is noisy, everyone is shouting, everyone looks at the other, music from restaurants is noisy, everyone looking for profit and advantages, they want everything first and foremost, for that’s their ‘right’ ....

We do not have time to phone each other, to visit friends, to socialize ... layering, that is: increasing social differences in the community and among friends deepens the divides between people ... we are promoting individuals and losing the group, we are losing people, losing ground ... and in the country, we give recognition and voice to minorities, while the population as a whole disappears.

Everybody is talking about multi-ethnicity, the union, and we all are vulnerable, feel jeopardized, unprotected, unsafe, and in the end everyone votes for ‘their’ candidates at elections ... and they, those ‘our candidates’, they do not meet, we are without parliamentary assembly, for a period longer than anyone else in Europe ... yet all those representatives, properly receive a huge salary, the wage increase has been the only agenda .... And nothing happens ... other politicians start with proclamation of saving the
economy because it is in crisis! Which economy, when there is nothing working?! The only thing that increases is a fleet of ever more expensive state-owned cars ... the king of kings .... And pubs and cafes are full, music is loud ... stores are full of expensive sets of things ... where, by the way, does that money come from?! For whom?! Creating false selves, the energy people invest in making themselves seem richer, cleverer, nicer than they are gives the illusion of prosperity ....

Are we vicious, sprayed by some gas, exposed to some sort of experiment? ... are we laboratory rats? ...

And as I am writing this ... the media is broadcasting the announcement of the newest prisoner of the Tribunal in the Hague ... a hero for some, a butcher to others ... once upon a time, he was, he used to be, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, about 20-odd years ago ... now, he is really just a sick old man who needs medical care and treatment ..., As do a million other Bosnians ... Irrespective of territorial or national affiliation, being sick and old, involuntarily dependent, makes all humans equal.

And where is the prince to awake us, a bewitched princess, from sleep????!! Or will we just have the Office of the High Representative (OHR) as a frog?!?

And until the roles change, Bosnia will continue to sleep-walk!

Notes

1 REKAM is civil society activity, publicly recognized all over the ex-Yugoslav territory, to overcome ghosts of the recent history and find solutions for the truth of victims and crimes. Governments from the region are quite silent about this issue.

2 The Office of the High Representative (OHR) is the chief civilian peace implementation agency in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement designated the High Representative to oversee the implementation of the civilian aspects of the Peace Agreement on behalf of the international community.