

Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal

Međunarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezični, online časopis

Dzamilia's Ideal

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This morning I was to deliver a lecture for the upper level students of the Siblings Scholl Gymnasium. As I was about to enter the room, I instantly noticed a familiar face. Who could have overlooked the dark glistening eyes of my neighbor Dzammila? This unexpected encounter was not exactly pleasant for either one of us. We knew one another well, even though until this very moment, we had barely exchanged few words with each other. Only a small fence separated our backyards in the Wiesenstrasse. Nonetheless, the modest shrubs and flowers that grew there could not prevent us from observing and getting to know one another. Thus, every day I watched Dzammila play in the backyard or at the terrace with her younger siblings. I watched the little ones eagerly make noises and run around ferally. Yet, when her father returned home from work, they would instantly change back into quiet and well-behaved children without him raising his voice. I saw a friendship develop between Dzammila and a neighborhood boy as they exchanged their CD's and videotapes. If it so happened that Dzamilia's brother caught them, a grand finale with a slap in Dzamilia's face would generally conclude this exchange. Also, Dzammila's mother would intervene loudly and screamingly. Although I was not able to understand her language, nevertheless I could easily guess what she was saying. This little woman seemed to be a good guardian of her tradition and tried to teach Dzammila the virtues of an obedient daughter. I was certain that these were the same orders that I used to hear back then from my Nana and later on even from my mother: "Girl, shame on you, your skirt is too short! Go and change fast before your father comes back! Dzammila, where are your siblings? Haven't I told you that you should be watching them? If they did something again, you'd have to pay dearly for that! Haven't I told you to come home right away after school?"

The atmosphere in the neighbor's family reminded me of my own childhood in a desolate place far away from here in a Bosnian provincial nest. And still it appeared to me that in comparison to my current situation, my childhood was a single sunny oasis. To rid myself of my war experiences and of the recently acquired condition of being a refugee in a foreign country, I started to use my childhood memories as a foundation for new stories. First, I wrote a story with the title "The Prize," and was very content with the depiction of the contradicting traits of my father's personality. Thus, I was able to forgive my father everything that had hurt me before. My newly discovered childhood gave me strength to overcome the challenges of a foreign country. This could have been a fast healing experience, if it were not for my husband's insistence to dwell psychologically on the war and the fleeing. That used to be a time of horrible arguments between us. Only deaf ears in our neighborhood could not have overheard these quarrels. In order to get away from his never-ending analyses of the situation on the Balkans, I would retreat to a table under a plum tree in the backyard, and work there during the summer. Nevertheless, the apartment

soon became too narrow for my husband. He could not stand being lonely anymore, and would come outside to share his new insights on the war, the reasons why it happened, and who was to blame.

He dealt with this in such a manner as if we were living in a waiting room, and were never allowed to forget our suffering. Thus, he failed to notice that our relationship was breaking apart gradually. In order to distance myself from him, I used my readings and writings to build my own defense wall. In this little niche, I attempted to become better acquainted with the new language and the new culture. My husband was upset because I found an activity for myself alone and hence allowed myself to continue living spiritually in exile. Consequently, our mutual respect sank to point zero, and would continue to sink even further until we both realized that it was impossible for the two of us to be living together. As a matter of fact, Dzammila and her mother were able to hear our last fight in the backyard. I was working under the tree when he came by firmly convinced to victoriously set an end to our marriage. He blamed me for not having any understanding for him and his suffering. “I have not been exactly spared. I, as well, have lost everything!” I said and stuck my nose deeper in a book in order to hide from him. Suddenly, all the books, papers, and notepads flew all over the backyard. “Stop showing off your strength to me! Who do you think you are? To me you’re nothing but a conceited, ignorant and insensitive witch that only deserves to live in solitude,” he yelled at me, pale with anger. “Fine! Go ahead, leave at last!” My voice was shrill. “I’d rather choose solitude over you being buried next to me. You’re not living any more; instead you’re only eking out a miserable existence. And, you’re also forcing me to die spiritually! You take great delight in torturing me mentally!” I was happy that Dzammila and her mother, who were sitting in their backyard, could not understand us.

After my husband returned to our home country, I found a new occupation. I collaborated on the projects of intercultural organizations that dealt with the situation of female immigrants in Germany. There, I was often introduced as a role model and invited to give readings. The organizers and moderators were always able to find very nice wording for my feminist engagement. “A woman, who was born and raised in a traditional Islamic family and later dared to pursue her own paths. A writer who had the courage to represent the society from a point of view of a woman...” – These flattering words were the balm for my wounds. This made me forget how much I missed my husband and how being in solitude had been torturing me lately. Now I was convinced that my work had a purpose. Hence, the commission to give a lecture about the women in exile led me to Dzammila’s classroom this morning. The principal, who invited me, introduced me emphatically to the students and asked me to read my narrative “The Prize,” that was already familiar to her. She was curious, and kept asking if I let my own experiences come across through my literature. “Only a little bit,” I said with a smile. While I was reading and revealing my paths between the cultures, Dzammila’s eyes were following me attentively. “Girls, please do not get me wrong,” I said, and stressed how my father, despite his patriarchic behavior, allowed me to have a happy childhood. When the reading was over, I immediately sensed that the principal was, all of a sudden, cold and distanced towards me. I could read her discontent from her petrified face expressions. It was obvious to me that I had not fulfilled her expectations. While we were drinking coffee in her office, an unpleasant silence prevailed between us. I wondered if that had anything to do with my German. She noticed my embarrassment and tried to act more friendly. “You know, you have really learned to speak our language well. Good for you!” she said. “Thanks, but I apparently must have done something wrong. “My curiosity superseded my embarrassment. Her face regained a somewhat milder expression. “You did not ... You did not emphasize enough that you had been distanced from your family. The girls have to hear clearly how you have won your struggle against tradition. You probably have to give more readings in schools. I would like to give

you a few tips for your next appearance....”

“I beg your pardon!” I tried to digest her words. “Who said that I wish to distance myself from my family and my roots?!” “Don’t you see, you do not grasp your own emancipation!” “No wonder, I cannot grasp anything anymore, my own life seems strange to me.” I tried to overcome our misunderstanding with humor. “No. No, please do not get me wrong, but how could you support a family, an Islamic family, that had treated you so badly in your childhood? You yourself described this!” “You understood that the wrong way. I described, how with the help of my family, I was able to rid myself of the obstacles imposed by the tradition. Yes, my father was very patriarchic; he may have sometimes acted as a despot. This however has nothing to do with the religion. He did not even believe in God. Nevertheless, he gave us a lot. He worked very hard in the forest and on the fields to be able to feed us and send us to school. The times were difficult in our country. I was the first girl in my family allowed to go to school. I was the first girl in our community that won a prize for literature...” “But your father wanted to beat you when he heard about this prize!” “That’s true but only because I did not ask him for permission. Instead I entered the contest secretly. But, when my teacher explained to him that he should be proud of his daughter, he gave in. I spent my vacation with other children on the sea and was able to get out from my village for the first time. That was my prize. The prize for my story. My father did not prohibit that.” “Now you talk like your old grandma in the story. I was expecting a self-confident, determined woman...” Half an hour of a heated exchange led to nothing. We parted without having reached a common understanding. I immediately forgot all the tips that she had given me for my next readings.

This afternoon, I was sitting alone and unhappy under the plum tree in my backyard. At that moment, I hated my work as a writer. There was a great weight on my soul. How could I have used and betrayed my childhood memories in this way? Never again in my life did I ever have such a feeling of complete safety as back then in my father’s house. It is a house that no longer exists for it was burned down in the war. There was no longer a place in the world where I could return, and no one who I could ask for advice. Still, in his own ways, my father did do everything for us. Angry shouting from the neighbor’s backyard pulled me away from my memories and my self-pity. Dzammila’s mother and her older brother stood behind the fence. Few minutes passed until I realized that their shouting was addressed to me. “You are the woman who’s our undoing!” interpreted the boy. Suddenly, it was apparent to me that this scene must have had something to do with my reading at school. “What did I do to you?” I tried to remain calm. “You incited our Dzammila to become a disobedient daughter.” “Wait a second, I have not exchanged a single word with your daughter,” I yelled back and was already about to disappear back into my apartment. But my curiosity was stronger. I wanted to know what on earth I did this time. “But, you were in her class this morning?” The boy avoided looking me in the eyes while interpreting. “You said that you are a Muslim and nevertheless a woman who makes her own decisions. Since childhood! Your father was a good man. You have destroyed his dignity and honor of the whole community. You went where you pleased without asking for your father’s permission. My daughter told me our neighbor is a Muslim and her role model. Dzammila had threatened to run away from home if we do not allow her to go on a class trip. You are an evil woman! You have driven your husband away; we all could see how badly you have treated him. A Muslim woman takes care of her family and her home. And what do you do? You read and write all day long. Your poor husband! He did not have anything to eat. Every day he asked you to do something sensible. Do not say ever again that you are a Muslim. I am certain that you will have to move from this apartment. My husband will not agree, for our daughter, to have such a bad role model in front of her eyes every day!” When the little woman finished pouring out her anger, she turned away. The boy still stood there. He still wanted to tell me something. “Please, understand our situation. We have no one here. Our

family has to stay together,” he said with the lowered head and so silently that I could hardly understand him. “My father had to work so hard from the beginning to be able to feed us and send us to school. We cannot disappoint him. My sister cannot become like one of these Western girls. All of us love Dzammila; we want to protect her. She’d be lost without her family’s protection. You do know that.” While he was talking, I glanced at the house where they lived. Dzamilla stood at the window. She smiled at me, and waved before she disappeared in the darkness of her room.

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