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A Letter to Tuzla

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I have never been the kind of person to do exactly as I am told. I am bad at following the crowd, tend to be contentious when I believe something is true and I know it to be so, and generally come to conclusions only after long debate and consideration. So, Tuzla: you and I, we have that in common. As a center of light and fiery resistance against a harsh and ignorant world, you, Tuzla for equality, fairness, and understanding for longer than I have existed. As once a part of a fallen socialist order and its constituent states, you and neighboring bordering cities and the nations which surround the country of Bosnia have seen a time of prosperity, and then great and immeasurable hardship. Yet, I have learned that this is nothing new to you, Tuzla. You have resisted Ottomans to gain independence, you have sheltered minorities against Nazi invaders, and you have recently withstood a test of unity so great that all your neighbors fell as of dust, while your foundations held firm like bedrock, like stone. Though your homes and streets were battered, and your people even more so, you, Tuzla, stood against the tide of nationalism; you stood against the tide of madness.

I was asked to write an essay you, Tuzla. On your people. I was asked to share my thoughts on your strife and your misery, your strength and your place in the post-socialist, post Milošević-era of Bosnia, but there is nothing which I can compare your struggles to in the United States. We are bound by a legal union and a strong military, and though our people are divided often, we have one thing in common as Americans, and it is that we live here and do not wish to change our fate. Things are not perfect. There are racists, bigots, liars, cheaters, thieves, murderers, and fools as many as you count, but by averages still our lives are well-lived. We do not see the kind of strife you have accrued over the centuries, Tuzla. We do not have genocides like you have experienced on our own soil. We do not have nationalism to such an extreme that the wholesale removal of a has divided us. The closest we have to such ill tidings as you have experienced is the slavery our country and many of the groups living here still bear the scars of. We may never move beyond it entirely, but despite that… Tuzla, not one single person who has lived in America for their entire life can consider themselves understanding of what occurred to people in the 1990's. Of that much I am certain, for yours is a fate with a scope much longer than any of our worst events in the past hundred years or more.

There is one thing I do know, personally. One thing that I have learned on my long travels abroad. I have seen what can bring. I witnessed the aftermath of wartime

suffering, and I have viewed humanity through a lens that many of my contemporaries may intellectually grasp, but never fully understand in the same way that I do, leaving me with memories and empathy for the fallen, the lost, and the hungry. I shared a small part of that unhappiness and experienced for a short time gnawing hunger and being without water to drink. That small experience, though only a taste of a -term state which many suffer through each day in the worn torn areas of the world, was enough to convince me of the indelible, horrible nature of warfare, even long after a war is over.

I cannot speak the U.N. NATO. I cannot speak for my predecessors or the soldiers who abandoned the safe zones in Srebrenica. I cannot apologize for what I was not a part of and could not do anything to stop or assist in, but Tuzla! Tuzla, I believe in you because, while learning about your country at Wittenberg University under Professor Nermina Mujagić, and after reading Stef Jansen's article "Remembering with a Difference," I can say that I am both amazed at your past and worried about the future of the wondrous town of Tuzla and what it could be and represent for Bosnia going into the future.

In "Remembering with a Difference," Stef Jansen wrote about a personal experience, one which was removed from high-tier politics and military maneuvers, far from all the academic statistics and the almost approach to history which many politicians and experts take for granted as much as some people do their own religion. Instead, Stef Jansen takes us on a short tour of the ground level of Tuzla, opening our eyes to a sliver of what it was like to be there after the conflict was over. It is a sad place, or when Jansen wrote about it, and the conversation he had was one which included himself and three of his colleagues in one of their flats. It ended with one of them storming out, notably the only one who was there during the siege of Tuzla. While two of his colleagues had been out of Bosnia during the war, that one had stayed behind, though it is unclear if they had been stuck there, or if they had made the conscious decision to stay. In addition to this, Hassan, the 'antagonist' of the story for lack of a better word, regarding how he was framed, was suspicious of Robi, a Bosnian Serb who had left merely hours before the initial shelling of Tuzla:

> Hasan immediately cast a sharp look across the table at Robi and cried, '15 May, ! Why is it always 15 May? How did you all know?' He referred to a common acquaintance, Dorde, who had left at noon on that very same day, and then fired off his next, rhetorical question: 'And when did hell break loose in Tuzla? When did the first shells fall? At one! One hour after he left!' (Jansen 200)

This is a common accusation, apparently, and one which is both unfounded and somewhat incorrect. While there were several Serbians who left, not all who did were Serbian, I have learned. Some Muslims left as well, and many Serbians remained in Tuzla, either unwilling or unable to leave despite the incoming disaster of the Bosnian-Serb army. However, Hassan's disdain for those who left is understandable from a human perspective, even if it is both untrue and a tad insulting to some involved. At the same time, when Hassan stormed out near the end of the event, the crowd of

people there seemed to all fall under the consensus that Hassan was in the wrong, but there was no introspection or attempt to truly understand the reasoning behind his outbursts throughout the event.

> After a brief pause, Samir and Lejla turned to me. They explained to me, the foreigner, and indirectly to Robi, what had happened. Lejla said she had known it was going to happen all along. She had been watching Samir and she had seen he was boiling inside. This had not been the first time, she said. Hasan and others like him really resented people who had left. It was difficult for Samir, Lejla argued, because they had spent all these years in Germany, and some people in Tuzla simply did not understand what their situation had been like there. Especially for a man, she added, this was difficult. Then Robi intervened. Perhaps he should have reacted differently, he said, but with a man like Hasan it was impossible to argue. Lejla vehemently shook her head and told him that this was not Robi's problem. It was Hasan who should have known better. Samir agreed and added that Hasan's real problem had been the presence of a Serbian guest in the house. That was what he had been unable to stomach. (Jansen 205)

While Jansen agrees with me in some capacity that the explanations which may be easiest to stomach are inadequate (Jansen 206-08), I am not worried about the opinions of one single foreign entity, watching from the outside, even with their intense study of Bosnia. Instead, my concern is the internal strife which may still be plaguing people to this day in Tuzla, hampering progress and recovery. The nationalist entity which was the Bosnian-Serb army cannot represent all Serbians who lived in Bosnia, even *if* the majority of Serbians *might* (and I say *might* because I do not know the statistics or demographics of those Bosnian Serbs who did *not* join in Milošević's insanity) have been a part of the organization which terrorized Bosnia, it cannot possibly be an accurate representation of *all*. What this situation revealed to me as I read over Jansen's work is not that Hassan or Muslims in general are a misunderstanding bunch who are saying that all Serbs are evil or abandoned Tuzla before the shelling, as if they were a hive-minded. Nor does it tell me that the rest of Jansen's company are wrong to be there or that they were wrong to be upset by Hassan's outburst. What it tells me is that the war is *still underway*. Except now it is the people's opinions which are at war. This is a *dangerous* prospect, and one which I fear may lead to further misunderstandings and stagnated recovery.

So, Tuzla. I am fearful for you, because your country is rich in history, and strong in ideal. I fear for you because the Bosnian War in the 90's never really ended. I have recently seen video evidence that there was still fighting going on in the outskirts, mountains, and hills as late as 2015. I am worried because the liberal-democracy has failed you. NATO has failed you. The U.N. has failed you, and no one I know even remembers the event here in the West, at least none whom I have been exposed to outside academic circles. I write this letter to urge you not to let the differences of experience, regarding the war, get in the way of helping one another. I beseech you to put aside human nature in order to save your humanity. I do not know the situation in

Tuzla now. I pray that this letter, this document, was pointless and unnecessary because I personally could care less if I am right in thinking that your populace could still be divided. But you are a beacon, Tuzla. You could easily, with your history of equality and understanding, your resistance and charity, become the example that perhaps all of Bosnia can follow into a brighter future. It should not matter what your experience during the war was; Whether you stayed in Tuzla, ran the gambit in the hills of Bosnia, escaped to or from Serbia, or spent years in Europe, I urge you to at least *consider* that it does not matter, because *you* are all there, and *you* are alive.

Help one another and bury the past if it causes you to mistrust your neighbor based on ethnicity or nationality, or for some other unmentioned reason, because they are who you have now, and it would be better to rebuild together, than to fall apart. I am cheering for you, City of Tuzla, and I pray your light has not burnt out yet.

Citations

Stef, Jansen, Remembering with a Difference, Clashing Memories of Bosnia Conflict in Everyday Life, pp. 193-211, Xavier Bougarel, Elissa Helms, Ger Duijzings (ed) (2007), *The New Bosnian Mosaic Identities, Memories and Moral Claims in a Post-War Society*, Ashgate.

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