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Hotel Vilina Vlas, Višegrad – Then and Now, Commemorating Rape Victims

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Kym Vercoe, an actress with the version 1.0 theatre company in Sydney, visited Višegrad in the summer of 2008. Upon a recommendation provided in a tourist guidebook, she stayed at Vilina Vlas Spa, not knowing that it used to be a notorious rape camp during the Bosnian conflict of the 1990s. When she learnt this fact upon her return to Australia, Kym decided to write a play: her work, *Seven Kilometres North East: Performance on Geography, Tourism and Crime*, deals, simultaneously, with the concepts of ignorance, geography, tourism and crime. Kym also returned to Višegrad. This is her story.

“I thought, I will bring my camera and face Višegrad again. If I look through the lens of my camera, Višegrad will merely be a small picture. But it was not that simple, especially when I was at the Mehmed Paša Sokolović Bridge. One day a young man approached me and talked to me. We could not understand each other. I started apologizing for filming, while, in fact, he was offering to take a photo of me. I removed my video camera and took out my stills camera ... as if I were a tourist. And while he, smiling kindly at me, took a photo, I kept seeing images of all the things that I had been reading about: soldiers shooting at people who were then falling, half-alive, into the Drina river and the Drina returning their dead bodies to the surface.”

In the summer of 2008 Kym was on a business trip in Belgrade. She used her free week to visit Bosnia and Herzegovina. Her Belgrade friends recommended Višegrad. It was the town closest to Serbia, with references from the distant past that she was familiar with. That July weekend Kym treated herself with a European trip to the Ottoman Empire. She was rereading Ivo Andrić's book, *The Bridge over the Drina*.

She did not know much about the 1990s. Of course, she knew that there had been a war, that people had lost their lives, but she thought that Višegrad had been a Serb-populated town even before the conflict. Our recent history was far too complicated for her. From the Australian media's superficial reporting she had understood that “grave crimes” and “ethnic cleansing” had taken place. “I knew Serbs were the ones who had committed the majority of crimes. Our media focused on the genocide in Srebrenica and the siege of Sarajevo. I was confused by the geography of Bosnia and not familiar with the war story of Višegrad. I did not think that crimes had happened there,” she admits. Her bleak smile reveals a feeling of guilt, universal guilt triggered

by her lack of knowledge. "People in Višegrad were kind," she notes. "There were a lot of people in the town since an Orthodox holiday, St. Peter's Day, was being marked."

Sleepless night

Kym says that she likes travelling alone. Her cosmopolitan spirit is accompanied by an energetic openness towards unknown regions and people. It seems that this is why she remembers well the night that she spent in Vilina Vlas Spa in July 2008.

An endemic, tiny sort of fern called Vilina Vlas, which grows at thermal water springs, chose this spa in Višegrad as its habitat. The stalk of the said plant is about twenty centimetres long and its base similar to a black hair of a woman. About thirty years ago there were multiple habitats on the sinter rocks around the spa. Only one remains, at the waterfall beneath the Turkish bath.

Kym found information on the spa in a tourist guide she had purchased in Australia. During our interview, she took out of her bag the guide that highly recommends the spot to foreign tourists: "You see, they do not mention the crimes. After a relaxed day in Višegrad I booked a room in Vilina Vlas. When I entered the hotel room, however, I felt a deep discomfort. I was overwhelmed by an unexplainable anxiety, followed by physical exhaustion. But I did not sleep a blink. I could not wait for dawn to break. I took the first bus back to Belgrade."

Like all curious tourists, Kym wanted to fill in the gaps she had in her knowledge of the town she had just visited, especially of the hotel in which she had suffered from insomnia. She googled "Vilina Vlas — Višegrad." Opening text after text in the silence of her room, Kym found out that she had spent a night in a camp where Bosnian women had been raped. "When I read that, I felt I was breaking down. I remembered the negative energy I sensed in that hotel room, but some pretty banal things were crossing my mind as well. I took a bath in that bathroom, I washed my shirt and took it out to the balcony to dry. In order to avoid rape and torture Bosniak women used to jump out of windows to their deaths. It was possible that some of them had jumped from that very balcony. It was also possible that some had been raped in the bed that I had been lying in."

The unrest caused by this horrific revelation did not leave her. Kym knew she was going to return to Višegrad to calm her consciousness and honor all the women killed in Vilina Vlas, all men, women and children killed and thrown into the Drina from the bridge by Serb soldiers. And all the Bosniaks burnt in their houses. As time passed her need to return and look into the eyes of the Serbs living in Višegrad increased.

From 2008 to 2010 Kym read many books on the aggression and genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She now believes that the terminology used by the international officials was very important, "because had the crimes in 1992 been labelled properly — as genocide — the international community would have intervened and the crimes in Srebrenica in July 1995 would not have happened."

On her second visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina Kym arrived in Sarajevo first. Our meeting was prompted by an article entitled *Višegrad in Denial Over Grisly Past*,

which I had co-authored with Rachel Irwin in December 2008 for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting. The article talks about the attitudes of people in Višegrad towards their wartime past. They deny that crimes had happened there — all but one Serb who, asking us not to reveal his identity, testified about the grave crimes and mass killings that he had witnessed.

I thought Kym wanted me to provide some contacts for her in Višegrad. She did not, however, want to go to the town with an interpreter or lead complex talks about denial with the locals. She only wanted to watch: herself and the population of Višegrad. This time, unlike in 2008, she wanted to go there familiar with the crimes that had taken place. The focus of her two-year-long research was the genocidal raping of the Bosniak women.

I saw her again upon her return from Višegrad. “I was very suspicious towards the men I was meeting there,” stated Kym. “Whenever I’d establish eye contact with one of them while passing by, I would wonder what their role in the war was. Could that man be one of the ones who did the killing? With all the information I had I could visualize the horrors of the summer of 1992. Whenever I would feel overwhelmed by these thoughts, I would remember the Serb you and Rachel had interviewed, the one who had helped his neighbours in the war, who is today willing to admit that the crimes did happen and to say that many Višegrad Serbs were involved in various ways in genocide against the Bosniaks. This helped me to correct myself. I tried to avoid seeing every man I met in the street as a criminal. I would think that each of them could be the one from your story, the one who differed from the others.”

War criminals

Halfway from Sarajevo to Višegrad, on March 12, 2010, a file of cars was waiting for Mitar Vasiljević, a war criminal. That night, entertained by trumpeters from Užice, a folk feast took place. The people celebrated the return of a war criminal who was sentenced, in 2004, to fifteen years’ imprisonment for crimes against humanity and violations of the laws and customs of war in Višegrad in 1992. He was released after having served two-thirds of his sentence. On The Hague Tribunal website Kym read that Vasiljević, together with Milan Lukić, participated in the killing of five Bosniaks. After having kept seven prisoners in Vilina Vlas hotel, Vasiljević took them to the Drina’s bank at gunpoint. He ordered them to stand in a line and opened fire, killing five of them. Two of the Bosniaks survived, lying in the water, pretending to be dead.

In November 2001 Vasiljević said to The Hague judges that he had heard Milan Lukić, the head of a Serb paramilitary group in Višegrad, had raped, killed and looted his numerous victims. According to Vasiljević’s testimony, after the Serb attack on the village of Mušići, Lukić abducted and raped several girls. Lukić was sentenced to life in prison and Sredoje Lukić, his cousin, to thirty years’ imprisonment for crimes they had committed in Višegrad. The ICTY’s judgment states that, beside numerous other crimes, Milan Lukić killed around seventy women, children and old men in a house in Pionirska Street by forcing them into the house, setting the building on fire and shooting at all those who were trying to escape. He also forced seventy Bosniaks of different ages into a house in Bikavac, closed all exits and threw several bombs inside.

It was proven that Lukić's command was stationed in the Vilina Vlas Spa, but The Hague prosecution failed to incorporate the crime of rape into the indictment. Justifications that followed were vague and unfounded. A few women survived the rapes in Vilina Vlas and were willing to testify. Some of them told their stories in a special edition of BIRN, *Nobody Hears the Cry of Victims* from Višegrad. Lukić had slaughtered a sixteen-year-old son of one of the women in front of her own eyes. After that he took her to Vilina Vlas. "They repeatedly raped me there," she said for BIRN. She remembers that there were "a lot of women in the hotel" and that "there was so much blood all over the place," as well as that "all the rooms in the hotel were locked. They would throw pieces of bread in our rooms and we had to catch them with our teeth, because our hands were tied. They would untie us only when they wanted to rape us." After the Lukić criminals were sentenced Amnesty International asked the Prosecutor's Office in Bosnia and Herzegovina to open an investigation into the rapes that were, according to witnesses, committed by the two cousins in Višegrad.

On January 12, 2009 a member of the Republika Srpska police force, Zeljko Lelek, was sentenced to sixteen years' imprisonment for crimes against humanity in Višegrad. His indictment also contains the crime of rape. The Court Council accepted the testimony of M.H., whom Lelek raped at Vilina Vlas. She also testified about other Bosniak women subjected to the same torture. Witnesses M.H. and D. were present when Lelek raped Jasmina Ahmetspahić. According to the judgment in the case: "Defense witness Petar Mitrović confirms these statements when he says that, together with the accused, he went to the Spa, where they heard their Bosniak neighbours had been killed and Jasmina Ahmetspahić had jumped out of the window." In his testimony, this witness linked the accused with the time and place of the crimes from the indictment.

Kym is trying not to generalize and not to look at the population of Višegrad through the prism of collective responsibility: "It is hard not to generalize, because the feast organized in honor of Vasiljević clearly demonstrates the fact that most Višegrad Serbs still support those who have committed crimes against the Bosniaks. The crimes committed during the war were so public that it is not possible that there were many people in Višegrad who did not know what was going on. It is possible that they were afraid to protest in the war. But why don't they protest now?"

Kym also read the story on the commemoration organized on May 25, 2008 for the victims killed in Višegrad. The event was organized by Woman — a Victim of War, Višegrad '92, Women in Black and other non-government organizations. The victims' family members and NGO activists threw 3000 flowers into the Drina from the Mehmed Paša Sokolović bridge. While 3000 flowers were floating down the river, the Serbs loudly played the song "Drina, Bloody Drina" from a nearby café, after which they took boats and scooped the flowers out of the water to sell them.

"Of course I know that not all of the present inhabitants of Višegrad were in the town during the war," observes Kym. "Some are refugees from other parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina who came to Višegrad after the war. But I can see that the TV and the radio station, as well as the press, regularly report on trials, judgments and the discovery of mass graves. It is impossible that these people, after receiving so much information, are still living in ignorance."

This summer Kym spent five days in Višegrad — alone. Although she had learnt only a few words from her Bosnian-English dictionary, which she used in her brief contact with the locals, she was able to understand a lot. The adjective “Bosnian” should never be used: when she would order a cup of Bosnian coffee, she would be corrected: “This is domestic, not Bosnian coffee.” The town is very isolated and its inhabitants are very suspicious towards foreigners — in order to feel safe she had to smile a lot and often repeat that she was merely a tourist from Australia. The people of Višegrad deny the crimes and do not want to remember the 1990s, but after they loosen up a little with the “Australian tourist” they start talking about the Turks, Ivo Andrić and *The Bridge Over the Drina*.

The fact that the Višegrad crimes are not mentioned does not imply that there are no monuments to them. “I was walking through what remained of old Bosniak streets,” describes Kym. “One day I was looking at what was left of a house that had been burnt down and a woman next door was cleaning her front yard. The man next to her, possibly her husband, was sharpening an axe. I was looking at the burnt house next to theirs and could not but wonder why such buildings were not completely torn down, since they represent a monument, reminding us of what was done to the people living there. And then it occurred to me that it was possible that many Višegrad Serbs do not even see the burnt houses. As if there was a black curtain between them and the ruins.”

200 flowers

On the last day of her stay Kym took a cab and went to Vilina Vlas Hotel. She rented a room and paid in advance. She had picked a bouquet of meadow flowers and put it on her bed. She wanted to film herself while she was counting the flowers and spreading them around the room. This would be her commemoration to the women who were raped and killed there — 200 flowers for 200 raped and killed women.

At first she could not bear the atmosphere and the energy in that room. She took a walk and tried to find a church. She did not locate one, so she returned to the hotel. “I lay down and fell asleep. I do not know how long I was asleep, but the first thing that I noticed when I woke up were notches on the wall. They were made with a pen. I thought that maybe one of the rapists had made a notch each time that he raped a woman. Or maybe they were for each of the woman he had killed?”

This thought woke her up completely. Her trip had a personal side, but she also took professional responsibility for making video footage for her play, which was to convey to Australian audiences a message on moral responsibility. “And I did that,” says Kym, “In the surreal atmosphere, I made that footage. I counted 200 flowers for 200 killed women. Because of the specific nature of this crime and protection of the victims’ identities, I could not get the list with their names. But I wanted to count every single flower, to commemorate each one of them.”

We are sitting in the Vienna Café in the Europe Hotel in Sarajevo. She turns her camera on and I am watching her sitting in her room in Vilina Vlas, going through the yellow bouquet. “Does this seem worthless?” Kym asks me. Her big eyes are filled with tears.

It is unusual. It is much more than sadness. It has a clear and deep meaning. Deeper than the Drina. For a few hours on that summer day in 2010 one room in Vilina Vlas was a sort of a monument. A place where a quiet commemoration was held for all the raped and killed women, for all those who — due to the ICTY's oversight — were not mentioned in Milan Lukić's indictment and judgment, nor in that of his cousin, Sredoje Lukić.

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