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Sarajevo: A Beginner's Guide

Ozren Kebo

My paradox is complete:

I don't want to remember and yet I cannot forget. By mid-1992, I thought it would be over in a few days. By mid-1995, I realized it would never end. These two erroneous predictions outline the agony of the city that was able to survive without water longer than without cigarettes. And today, many, many years later, as I try to comprehend and summarize the siege of Sarajevo, I often wonder whether writing it all down had any purpose whatsoever. By writing it all down I mean just that – simple notes, with no distance as the ultimate mother of all serious writing.

I can't answer that question. For me, *Sarajevo: A Beginner's Guide* is a painful memory. I wish there were no reasons for this book. Alas, since there was no way to avoid it and since there is no possibility to recall what has already been experienced and written down, I take comfort in the fact that this failure is no worse than others I've had in my life.

For in the end, it is failures and defeats that we're left with. Cheers.

An ordinary morning:

8:17 – A girl in on the bridge, a direct hit to the head. She made no sound.

9:00 – The sniper fire does not cease. The girl's body is still there, no one can reach her.

9:30 – Mortar rounds hit the Central Bakery. There is no bread anyway.

10:00 – Mortar rounds on the tram stops. Trams don't run anyway.

10:22 – A young man runs to the body, but the guy from the hill fires at him twice. He hides behind a garbage container and does not reappear.

10:45 – Con Coughlin, reporter, *Sunday Telegraph*, for the BBC: "Whoever's been to Sarajevo and witnessed the behavior of the Serbs, wished for a military intervention. This is the kind of arrogance you cannot understand unless you experience it."

10:53 – The young man appears from behind the garbage container, she crawls to the girl, wraps his left arm around her and pulls her back, still crawling. A painful sight: her head tilted to the side, covered in blood, observers screaming from their windows, the young man who disappears behind the garbage container again.

11:00 – Mortar rounds, mortar rounds, mortar rounds...

Call Karadžić for murder:

A mortar round hits on a quiet day. In such situations, the most important thing is to survive the first one. That's the worst one. It comes suddenly and no one expects it, although everyone knows that it's Sarajevo and the year is 1992.

So, the first round is the worst. We are ready for the second one: in basements or in hallways. But, not all of us. As the first one hits, while others run for cover, frantic mothers call out from windows, looking through the yard for their children. Amir, Matija, Zoran, Dženana! All faiths live in Sarajevo. If it weren't for the shells, it would be magic to listen to this harmony of diversity. But now, it's a death roll call and you just need to listen carefully. There will be no response to at least one name.

Amir is there, he yelled back and ran to the entrance. Mirsad is there, he's home already. Matija – present. Zoran – present, a cut on the arm, but nothing serious. Mothers finish the roll call one by one, they close the windows and their shadows disappear behind the UNHCR plastic sheeting. But one is not done yet, the one calling out for her daughter Dženana.

Her voice tells all. If you know how to listen, her calls reveal a mother slowly realizing the truth about her dead child. She wants to be calm, not for the sake of the people around her, but for her own sake. She does not allow feelings to overwhelm her and she calls out her little girl's name with an illusion of a calm voice. The illusion vanishes with the fifth unanswered call and she gives in to despair. She is no longer calling, she is screaming. She is calling out, but Dženana does not hear her. Dženana is on the ground in the yard, motionless, brutally deaf to her mother's calls. Death is a state with no sounds. Her body is no longer a body, there is no life in it. It is just an illusion of a child who existed in Sarajevo until a few moments ago, and whose only fault in life was that – in terms of geography – she lived 12 kilometres from Pale, and that – in terms of history – she lived in the age of Radovan Karadžić. Right there, at the place where geography and history collide, where a child and a mortar launcher collide, where coordinates and shells meet, where illusion and fate meet, where Boutros Ghali and David Owen, Russia and France, Britain and Greece, NATO and safe havens meet – that is where our children get killed.

First snow falling:

When it snows in December, silence becomes the dominant sound. There are no cars, no trams, no noise at all. A counter-revolution: a city morphs into a village. The streets radiate the kind of rustic atmosphere that makes all the memories of the urban pre-war Sarajevo lose any sense. Two equally surreal worlds collide. Illusion rules the space. A man with a wheelbarrow and a child is crossing the street. A disharmonious couple, this man and his child. His clothes have no style: rubber boots, work pants, a farmer's jacket. Mismatched gloves. The child is no more than three and in the scene, the child is the antipode to the man: lively, complementary colours of the snow overalls and a cap with a large pompom at the top. The boy is cheerful and happy, his laughter echoes down the street. He finally manages to convince his dad to let him climb into the wheelbarrow. He screams with joy as the man pushes. Two little girls look at them from the window of a building they pass by. They smile to the boy, but their smiles are sad. They would give anything to be outside themselves.

The scene is missing a single detail to be a true Sarajevo image. It is missing a sniper; he will

appear in a minute and a half, after the father and the son have stepped into an intersection, and will pull the trigger with no emotions whatsoever.

The shot kicks the kid off the wheelbarrow and blows his head away. The father is shocked into silence. The people around them run away, but that's just the initial reaction. Half a minute later, they come back. A taxi driver picks up the boy and drives off like mad, towards the Koševo Hospital. The most ominous scene in Sarajevo – a VW Golf honking its way towards the hospital. The people approach the father. No one can help him any more. He just stares, hearing no one and seeing nothing. In a minute, all that will be left from this scene is the flipped wheelbarrow and the blood beside it. Before the snow has covered it, an abandoned Pekingese will lick the blood. Before the night has fallen, the wheelbarrow will disappear too. Times are hard and even in such situations, there will always be a thief. An old lady says that there is a place in Hell reserved for such people, right next to the sharpshooters. The indifference of the man who pulled the trigger and the indifference of the man stealing from the dead are of the same origin. In the moral code of the religious, indifference is very close to evil. Because it provides it with an alibi. Back then, we did not know about our own position. We did not know whether it was hopeless or not. Every child who gets killed, we thought, intensifies the shame of Europe. It took us a long time to understand that it was just one more grave in Sarajevo.

And that is what we should forget at all costs. But it is not us who decide what is to be forgotten and what is to be remembered. It is the images that choose us and not the other way round. Just like the snipers.

A word about the writer, his person, his origin and character, and his links with other cities:

Ozren Kebo, born in 1959, Gemini, ascendant unknown. Born in Mostar, his eyes set on Dubrovnik, has lived in Sarajevo most of his life, believes that his steps carry a hidden curse: every city he steps into ends up destroyed.

He now secretly has his sights on Zagreb. But he wouldn't dare guide mortar shells anywhere else. Which is why he stays in Bosnia.

He lives and works in Sarajevo.

This was his first book. Published to date: 1996 (*Dani*) and 2003 (*Zoro*) in Sarajevo, 1997 and 2009 in France (*La Nuee Bleue*), 1998 in Sweden (*Bokforlaget DN*), and 2000 in Croatia (*Feral Tribune*).

His second book, the novel *Kako je lijepa moja Vectra* (*How beautiful is my Opel Vectra*), was published in 2007.

“Ozren Kebo is a writer in the true sense of the word. His first book is a brilliant proof of that. The siege of Sarajevo – just like the siege of Madrid in the 1930s, and the siege of Leningrad in the 1940s – it is quite clear now, will be one of the mythical events of the 20th century. It is an event that created its own sense, rich in symbols and historical lessons. Patience and irony – as we are beginning to understand – were the main virtues of the residents of the besieged city. Ozren Kebo is a living proof of that. His detailed description of life in Sarajevo – ruthless, lucid, full of fierce tenderness and angry compassion – during the endlessly long years of siege is a true delight to read...”

Jorge Semprún, Le Journal du Dimanche

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