Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal
Međunarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezični, online časopis

We, Bosnians and Herzegovinians in the US

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The Bosnian –Herzegovinian diaspora in the US seems to be somehow different. They do not let others call them refugees. They are exiled,, they were driven out of their homes by ethnic cleansing, and they like to point it out. In most every name of our organizations there is something Bosnian-Herzegovinian: BOSANA, BHeart, Bosnian American Professional Association (BAPA), New England Friends of Bosnia and Herzegovina, BHAYA, BHAAAS, Advisory Council for Bosnia and Herzegovina, and others. Whether regulations require it, or whether it is a matter of identity to be preserved, could be investigated.

As a Fulbright scholar, I came to the US in August 2019. With my modest experience, I won't say much, but I will try to give my impression of Bosnians and Herzegovinians living and working here.

So, I did not come as a refugee, I came under the Fulbright In-Residence Program which allowed me to teach at two universities here and continue with my research project concerning constitutional democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the possibility of its transformation. In meetings with my American colleagues and students, I exchange experiences and views on the future of our country on a daily basis, but I also try to capture the pulse of Bosnian Diaspora living here. However, in communication with both, I noticed interesting understandings and perceptions regarding Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Bosnians and Herzegovinians explained their choices by saying they would return to Bosnia and Herzegovina, but the children have their lives and do not want to go back; others are aware of the situation and do not want to take the risk of not getting a job in Bosnia, which is, to be honest, very accurate. The advantage of these academic exchanges is not only in getting to know another culture, in creating good academic and social networks, but also in getting to know yourself more. Almost every encounter here with Bosnians was a trigger for me, so the meetings and partings were tearful, melancholic, and surreal, but, at the same time, they would clear my anger for the misunderstanding of those on the outside, for those on the inside who simply chose to stay in Bosnia and Herzegovina, not because they could not leave, but because it was their choice. In the end, someone has to stay.

Bosnians and Herzegovinians who are here open each story and end it with the

Bosnian tragedy. The truth is, some of them have a need to distance themselves from those who came during the war, so they emphasize that they spent the war in Bosnia, that they ”did their best,” that due to lack of work they decided to look for happiness here. Only a few could boast that they came to the US for economic and professional reasons as early as the time of the former Yugoslavia. However, it seems that as much as they try to stay away from the war, they also fail to erase the memories of something that binds them to the collective trauma we carry from the last aggression in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

I also met several Americans, professors, and researchers who had professional experience with Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some wrote about us, some studied in Bosnia, some married “ours” and thus gained different knowledge and experiences. But whoever “brushed against” this little meadow of ours has not stopped dreaming and thinking about Bosnia. There is an article from Oslobođenje entitled: ”Europe needs to come to Bosnia to feel Europe” at the door of my host here, prof. Keith Doubt. This American sociologist and friend of Bosnia and Herzegovina is often in our country, in the rows of Marš Mira participants, and shows almost every day a gesture of solidarity with people who have lost and keep losing their lives in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The shelves of his library are dominated by the titles of the authors for whom Bosnia, in some way, represents a painful inspiration to express their truths. So my eyes fastened on the title: ”The River, Runs Salt, Runs Sweet: a Memoir of Višegrad,” by the great heroine and writer Jasmina Dervišević-Ćesić, who runs several great projects in Boston promoting the Bosnian spirit.

Elvedin Pašić (Ratko Mladić’s witness at The Hague trial) who testifies, even after the Hague, very courageously and argumentatively, about what had happened in Srebrenica, lives and works in St. Louis. American professors and researchers are occupied with the truth of Srebrenica. Patrick McCarthy and his constant involvement especially in directing young people to utilize the resources of American universities for further and better education is impressive. He is the founder of the St. Louis Bosnian Student Project, which provides scholarships for Bosnian displaced students. McCarthy is the author of the book: ”After the Fall: Srebrenica Survivors in St. Louis. Dr. Benjamin Moore, a professor at Fontbonne University in St. Louis, who is also the director of the Bosnia Memory Project, insists on understanding Bosnian displaced people in St. Louis and preserving the memories of those who survived the genocide. Although ICTY has stopped working, Dr.Moore is still collecting evidence, various documents that bring Bosnia closer to justice.

Keith Malik, who graduated from the faculty of medicine in Sarajevo, in the most beautiful years of Sarajevo, during the XIV Olympic Games, seemed to have lived through the Bosnian war. This great man, and a great expert in his business, does not hide his tears when he talks about besieged Sarajevo. I was amazed by his focus on the details he received from his friends’ stories. I wasn’t trying to forget, simply some of my memories were erased, but as the years go by I am happy to meet someone who can continue where my memory stopped. And it is going well, somehow.

From this distance, which is also painful, I can say that these troubles have taken root in our bodies. The Bosnian-Herzegovinian Diaspora, Socratically speaking, is fully aware that it was better to suffer evil than to do evil. People were being rescued

several times, once in the cities they had to leave, the second time in European capitals, which opened doors for refugees, and then again, here, for the third time.

But some did wonders. Among them, Adnan Karabaš from Banja Luka, whose company E.J.A. Trucking officially has its day in St. Louis. The city government gave March 10 to his largest transportation company in St. Louis. The Bosnian authorities should also recognize his efforts to recruit mostly citizens from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

To most, the "new language" was no problem; some are convinced that they can express themselves better in English than in their native languages, while others mix both languages, so it sounds tragically comical. A Bosnian man will often say to his wife in America: De'der make čimbur for all of us ?, or "Give me deset dolara." Esad Boskailo, a respected psychiatrist originally from Počitelj, calls the new language "Bosglenski".

But regardless of these criticisms, these people here, these Bosnian Americans, and vice versa, American Bosnians, have mastered the uncertainty of the capitalist world.

The BHAAAS, a non-governmental, multiethnic and multicultural organization, organized a ten-day event in Bosnia and Herzegovina last year in Sarajevo. Next year it will be organized in Mostar. By the way, the goal of this highly respected organization is to establish links between BH scientists, artists and professionals in North America and build bridges of cooperation with the homeland. A group of Bosnians, as well as Balkan people gathered around this organization, believe that science, as well as investment in science, will greatly improve the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This perspective of the future, which does not reside in Bosnia and Herzegovina for a long time, fueled my forgotten sense of patriotism, which was the trigger for me to replace journalism with a chair and a student classroom, and largely came down to the sentence: The key to the success of every nation, every society, is education. These people of different profiles (from the natural, technical and social sciences) use truly different tricks to connect the two continents, to retain and redeem all the identities they have acquired in the meantime. And they do it masterfully, professionally because they honestly believe that knowledge creates a good future.

Bosnians and Herzegovinians, consciously or unconsciously, have changed the notion of integration. They took it more seriously than it is described in dictionaries. Their goal is to promote the spirit of intellectual diversity and the free exchange of ideas, with the idea that knowledge is a wealth to be shared. And they are really impressive in all fields.

Bosnians have adapted to American conditions so much that they show their loyalty to America every day. The conferences are starting with the Bosnian and American anthem, wedding gifts are colored with the colors of the American and Bosnian flags, they regularly vote, pay taxes and other bills. Loyalty to Bosnia is not lacking either. It is even greater if there is anyone to show it to, if one can get confirmation from someone from Bosnia that they are doing their job well. However, in proving their Bosnian identity, by new ideas, good will to help, to show you the way that would be good to choose, they are not even aware of how much they have become Americans. People who will take you to the house you are looking for, give you a smile on the

street for a good morning, for free. Isn’t that something we used to say about Bosnians? Brought up in the belief that experience, knowledge and culture are carried within ourselves, they accepted from others everything that the Bosnian character approves of.

I was looking for a “hopeless sadness of assimilation” in their eyes, but I only found it in one of the fellow citizens. Of course, I also met those who want to change their identities, who have lost that “spontaneity in expressing their feelings”, which is the specificity of a Bosnian man, who sometimes want to be bigger Americans than Americans themselves, but they also somehow live with that confusion and renunciation of their roots. They have been opened to other infinite possibilities, of which we know nothing.

How do they do it, I didn’t ask them. I do not know of their ways to fight or escape. But I know that in Bosnia and Herzegovina, year after year, we have to strike back when we are denied existence, memory or the right to escape.

We need our people, who have been given the breadth of America to unite in exile, and they need us.

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