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TWO SIEGES, TWO EXPERIENCES

Gojko Beriž

I am eighty years of age and still enjoy the privilege of writing, as this text is witness. Ever since my wife died almost four years ago, I have lived by myself in a large apartment in a Austro-Hungarian building constructed on the eve of the Great War and located on the most popular street in Sarajevo, Ferhadija, a pedestrian zone in the centre of town. The windows in the two largest rooms have a view of Trebević, a legendary hill that enfolds the southern side of the city. It's spring, but I cannot feel its scent because a tiny virus from Wuhan has me under house arrest, which the authorities have merely legalised through regulations requiring all citizens older than 65 to remain in so-called self-isolation. I don't feel lonely. On nice days I open my windows wide, and, exposed to the beneficent action of the sun, I watch the rare passers-by in their masks and gloves. The isolation itself is bearable and for many even welcome. People are taking stock and dealing with things outstanding for years. Difficulties, fear, and uncertainty lurk outside your home's walls, because nobody can say what is happening or how long it will last.

In spring 1992, the Serb separatist forces surrounded Sarajevo and placed it under deadly fascistic siege. Twenty-eight years later, its spring again, and the town is under siege once more, by an invisible, insidious, and ruthless killer who spares no one. We knew everything about the criminals picking us off from the surrounding hills. Most had been our neighbours. We know practically nothing about this new killer, except that "it has neither wing nor hoof." People pass it on to each other at alarming speed. In an attempt to prevent the pandemic spreading, doctors, scientists, and politicians swap apartments at night. It is a life and death struggle. Nobody agrees on what has to be done. In an interview with the German newspaper, *Die Frankfurter Rundschau*, Jürgen Habermas (90), perhaps the leading philosopher alive today, offered a perfect definition of the current state of the world: "Never before have we known so much about our own ignorance." The Churches and Mosques are empty. (Sarajevo's Synagogues were emptied in the Holocaust by the Nazis during World War II). I'm watching an extraordinary event on the television: Pope Francis standing in the rain before a completely empty St. Peter's Square. "For weeks now it has been evening. Thick darkness has gathered over our squares, our streets and our cities; it has taken over our lives, filling every-thing with a deafening silence and a distressing void, that stops everything as it passes by; we feel it in the air, we notice in people's gestures, their glances give them away. We find ourselves afraid and lost... [We felt strong, capable of anything.] The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities... In this storm, the facade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about our image, has fallen away, uncovering once more that (blessed) common belonging, of which we cannot be deprived: our belonging as brothers and sisters."

A few days passed before I remembered one such experience, of an unjust battle between a man and a dangerous virus. It was in Albert Camus's masterpiece, "The Plague." The need to read it after many decades was self-explanatory. I found it in my home library, a 1956 edition by Belgrade's *Prosveta*, translated by Jovanka Markovic-Cizjek. The allegorical novel, written as a chronicle, is set in the 1940s, in a fictional town called Oran, which has been attacked by a plague. The main character is Doctor Bernard Rieux, who puts himself on the frontlines of the fight against this rat-transmitted virus, and who enters the fight pulling no punches. His most important colleague and friend, the old wise man Tarrou, has the idea of creating sanitary units to fight the plague, to which he will succumb, as do Dr Rieux's other friends and colleagues. There are a number of strikingly drawn characters, linked by their humanism, personal ethics, and the question of the meaning of life. The journalist Rambert counts among them. He fought in Spain on the side of the Republicans, the losing side. Happenstance brought him to Oran, where he is trying to escape a fate he doesn't consider his and reunite with a wife he loves immeasurably, but in the end he decides to stay among the suffering. The character of the Priest, Father Paneloux, is used by Camus to explore the question of God. At the beginning of the pandemic, Father Paneloux holds a sermon at his church in which he attributes Oran's tragedy to God's wrath: "for many of us must have sinned." Faced with the death of an innocent child, however, Paneloux is plagued by doubt in the existence of God. He enlists in a sanitary unit to work tirelessly until the plague is defeated. When it ends Dr Rieux realises that, after it all, he has nothing left but the memories of the plague and of his friends. He decides to write his chronicle and bear witness in the name of the victims, to save them from oblivion and say "human beings contain more to admire than to despise."

The Plague was published forty-five years before Sarajevo was enclosed by a ring of Serb howitzers, rocket launchers, heavy machine guns and snipers. The writer Miljenko Jegovic considers *The Plague* the most important and fundamental novel of the siege of Sarajevo. And truly, the entire series of events, scenes, and characters with their distinct moral evocation, empathy, and selfless sacrifices on one side and the terror of local bands under the eyes of the incompetent authorities on the other, the smuggling and the wartime profiteering, all the good and bad that made up life in wartime Sarajevo, all those everyday rhythms, seem as though copied straight from Camus' novel.

There are key differences between the Sarajevo that bled under Serb siege and the Sarajevo that is struggling because of the coronavirus pandemic today. It is no longer the same city, or the same people. The Sarajevo of the past has foundered, but not so badly as those who attacked it. They got their judgement at The Hague. But nothing in the world is as it was three decades ago. Sarajevo under siege was the biggest concentration camp in Europe since World War II, its name known around the world. Its fate was a lodestone to the world media, but Europe itself was indifferent to the suffering and death of its people, just as it was indifferent to the ethnic cleansing and mass murder of civilians across Bosnia and Herzegovina. The capitals of the most powerful countries in the world considered Balkan post-communist nationalism an isolated affair, and Sarajevo and Bosnia collateral damage. Nowadays try and find a country where nationalism isn't the leading ideology. Sarajevo under siege is difficult to imagine because of the distance of time. Bread, electricity, and water were key to survival, and we didn't have these essentials. There was no bread, no electricity, no water, no phones. There was nothing but too little humanitarian aid coming in from the rest of the world. There was no contact with outside. Death lay in the streets. But as the situation got worse empathy became more pronounced. People's resistance to dying and their life force were incredible. One late-Autumn evening, as people were waiting in line for water at a fountain by the Brewery, a targeted shell killed seven men and women and injured more. As the radio broadcasted the news, I met a neighbour from the second floor on the staircase. She was a

tiny thin lady carrying a bouquet of plastic cannisters, on her way to the water fountain, a kilometre and a half from our building, where the massacre had happened barely an hour ago. To my surprise she said: “There’s no crowd now, maybe there won’t be so many people.” There is a photograph I can’t forget, taken by one of the dozens of photo-journalists from the global agencies who risked their lives for a good picture. It was taken as day was transitioning into night and shows a one-legged man with a crutch under one arm and a bouquet in the other, making his way down an eerily desolate street. The flowers were probably for his wife. His darkened face betrayed his fear and determination. There were no doubt shells going off close-by.

1993 was a war year, the toughest Sarajevo would remember. You needed a lot of empathy and courage to take the long and uncertain road to the hell of Sarajevo. Two great women, Joan Baez and Susan Sontag, had both. One of the biggest singers of the 60s and an activist in the anti-Vietnam movement, Baez held a spectacular humanitarian concert in the hall of the Kino Imperial to show support for the citizens of the besieged city. However it happened, the author Susan Sontag, one of the most famous American women of her day, was in Sarajevo at the same time. She stayed a few weeks and went about the town in a Kevlar vest. She socialised with the locals and shared in their fate. She returned in the summer of that same year to the scene of the National Theatre to put on a production of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, a work that symbolises the fate of the besieged city. Sarajevo was waiting for its own Godot. Just before the end of the war, Sontag returned to a half-destroyed and dilapidated Sarajevo. In the newly-founded Media Centre, whose founder was the famous Sarajevo journalist Boro Kontić, she talked with journalists and said, among other things, that: “You should know, tragedies are like milk, they go off quickly.” It was as if she had a premonition that Sarajevo’s tragedy would become the monopoly of one ethno-politics and its protagonists.

War year, 1994, late autumn. Professor Hidajet Repovac and his wife Aida were on their way to a concert by the Sarajevo String Orchestra. On their way to the Kamerni (Chamber) Theatre, where the concert was to be held, they were followed by an unusually heavy rain. Shells were going off on all sides. When they made it to the Kamerni, they found no one there except for the members of the orchestra. The players performed the entire program for an audience of only two and received a sincere and long ovation from the professor and his wife, true music lovers. The emotions brought both sides to tears. There was something miraculous about how culture, in the widest sense, informed Sarajevo’s resistance, a front made up of actors and directors, musicians, painters, authors, poets, journalists, women and girls who would go out into the streets dressed up, with their hair and makeup done, whenever they were able. Back then there were incomparably more urban creators working at full force than there are today. Most are no longer among the living. Professor Repovac is dead, others left Sarajevo after the war, and some have lost the passion and strength to fight the windmills of nationalism.

Of course, people are losing their lives in this difficult and uncertain peacetime battle. But it is not my place to write about the coronavirus except to say that Sarajevo is fighting the pandemic in a manner much like the rest of the world. Sarajevo is no longer an object of international media and diplomatic attention, just an episode on the global pandemic’s progress. More than 90% of the city’s inhabitants are now Bosniaks, and its historical cosmopolitanism has been cut off from its native roots. Centuries of living together and more or less tolerable mutual toleration of religious, ethnic and cultural differences have been destroyed by guns and mass war crimes and finished off by the triune post-war politics of ethno-nationalism. The Sarajevo of today is no longer a paradigm of a better world. It is a paradigm of that world’s ruins, a world that existed once and which we still remember. What was destroyed can be rebuilt, what is lost found. It is not senseless to hope that

the Bosnian ideal of a religiously plural society refuses to be destroyed and will rediscover its reason and purpose in some future world. It comes as no surprise that the new citizens of Sarajevo, who have mostly come to the capital from rural areas, by hook or by crook, are the loudest protestors against the precautionary measures. A cynic might react to their “entitlement” as follows: “I know it’s tough being at home all the time, but wouldn’t being on a respirator be more difficult.” For those like me who survived the siege of Sarajevo in the 90s these measures have not hit hard. Maybe the curfew didn’t make that much sense, but it only lasted 32 days. I didn’t manage to keep the curfew anyway, because I go to bed early anyways. I did wake up once at 2pm and look out the window, and I saw a frighteningly empty city. The scene overwhelmed me with fear. Then, I saw a dog on a curb in the park. He seemed completely lost, turning his head from one side of the street to the other and listening desperately for signs of life. This only increased my uneasiness. I thought of how a person might behave if left alone in the city like this? Go crazy? Kill himself? Or might they notice a dog like this, and go with it to some happier place, wherever that might be?

The wartime “curfew” introduced by Ratko Mladic?, the military commander of the criminal campaign against Bosnia, lasted a full 44 months. During that period, more than 11,000 citizens of Sarajevo were killed, 1,600 of them children. Mladic?’s order to his subordinates, charged with maintaining despair and hope- lessness amongst the city’s population, was: “Send them mad.” Mladic? wanted to turn Sarajevo into a giant psychiatric ward, but the Sarajevans’ spirit was stronger. Our psychotherapists and psy- chologists didn’t bemoan the public’s mental health as it would have seemed at least inappropriate, even ridiculous. Our mental state was an expression of our resistance. Empathy wasn’t a question of politics. It went spontaneously from door to door, sur- prised by the siege. All in all, the dramas of survival differed significantly from the pandemic. In their anti-pandemic campaign, the media have been intensely concerned with the mental aspect of survival. Psychotherapists, psychologists, and sociologists are flooding our TV screens. They annoy me sometimes. They say the best medication against the frustrations and anxiousness of house arrest is reading. One cold April morning I saw a young man in the park. He was lying on his back, on a red blanket, spread out on the half-trampled grass under a tall cypress. He was dressed in black, from his heavy winter boots to his ski hat, read- ing a book. It was a witty performance by a clever Sarajevan, with the message: Stay at home and read books! But, in a cultur- ally debased city that has been literally turned into a village, as have Sarajevo and so many other cities of the former Yugoslavia, very few people actually read books.

The most famous resident of my street is the local vagabond, Ramiz. He is in fact only a vagabond because he lives on the street. He is a big, strong, intelligent, communicative sixty-year-old with short hair and a face framed by a thin beard. Ramiz has been in the newspapers. Apparently, he had a house in Zenica, but it looks like he wasn’t happy with his fate, so he moved onto the street. Ramiz sleeps in local garages and hallways. Summer or winter, he is on Ferhadija at the first sign of morning light, neatly dressed, accom- panied by his dog. He carries a thick Styrofoam pad to sit on, a backpack, a black bag, and a piece of cardboard for his dog to lie on. His street address is right across from my window. Ramiz lays his things out meticulously, lights a cigarette, and curiously observes the other early risers. As some point he starts taking out bundle of food. He unwraps its and breaks off a few bites for his dog before taking any himself. He has plenty of food each day. Butchers from the close-by Markala market and Burek (meat pie) vendors give it to him. An occasional passer-by will slip a coin into his hands. Ramiz doesn’t ask for anything, which is why he has everything he needs. Young female tourists like to have their picture taken with him; some even take a swig from his bottle. At dusk Ramiz packs his things away meticulously, he throws the day’s waste into a bin, and walks “home” with his dog. Watching him, I think to myself,

we can all be infected with the coronavirus, everyone but Ramiz.

I return now to Camus. When the plague has ended, one of his heroes says: “Some say: ‘That was a plague. We have endured a plague.’ Almost as though they expect a medal. But what is the plague? It’s life, that’s all.”

Ramiz may not have read *The Plague*. He’s not a hero and has no advice for anyone. But by following the sun, from when it rises to when it sets, he is proving in his own way that the corona virus pandemic is still just life. And that’s all.

Which is why Ramiz is an important character in the Sarajevo story of the pandemic.

Translated by Hana Maurer

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