Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne
An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal
Međunarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezični, online časopis

Tuzla of My Youth, At Goli Brijeg

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The outskirts of our town were not always easily accessible, especially if we did not have any friends or cousins there. They seemed infinitely far away and unfamiliar.

Once you cross the Jala wooden bridge, below the Kulovićes' house or above the Fire Station, following the street along the Jala, to the left you move up the hill where Goli Brijeg starts, while to the right the street continues alongside the Jala until the next bridge, Statue Bridge.

Although at that time completely dilapidated, the river bed of the Jala offered a variety of different sights to a curious child. Its banks are steep, full of garbage, with a few people fishing with a hook and line, and some boys splashing and jumping into the water where the Jala is deeper. Even though the little river Jala has always been more a stream and a canal than an actual river, it did have actual bridges across it in a few places. Every bridge crossing was an adventure for me; whether going to Goli Brijeg across the wooden bridge, or across the iron bridge to Kreka, even over the bridge under the Tower, when going to Ilinčica. It always meant going to the other side, and there was some special charm and challenge in that symbolic act of crossing to the other bank.

The Italian builders were also artists to some extent, so the buildings they had erected were recognizable, beautiful and durable. The Candottis, Piccolottis, Gojos, and Motts were still working even in the time that I remember. The buildings at Goli Brijeg, two identical large villas, close together, were built in 1914 just before the World War, and were the property of the Kajtaz family. Their name had been mentioned in the days of my childhood, but they were no longer present in Tuzla anymore, and later on the owners kept changing. The builders were from the family of an Italian contractor Candotti, who had built many other houses in Tuzla, among others, the Kulović house by the Jala. The Kadić family lived in the front, well-preserved villa with a big garden descending as far as the Jala. The other house was less spacious and quite tumbledown.

My motives to climb Goli Brijeg were various, but quite important for my life back then. Even at my youngest age, I used to go with our landlady Žanika Simić for a visit to Goli Brijeg, where her sister lived married to the lawyer Bahrija Kadić, and later on I went there with my parents.

After a gentle climb we would reach Kadić's garden at Goli Brijeg. One could tell stories about that garden, I think it was the most beautiful and the best maintained rose garden in Tuzla, or at least I have not seen one more splendid. In order to enter the house, you had to walk along the long paved path between the roses. Mother would always stop on her way among the roses, looking at them in enjoyment, because we did not have any yard, but yet she was fond of flowers and grew them in pots. From spring to autumn, Kadić's brother Hakija would always spend his time in the rose garden, working for him as a gardener. He would explain to Mother different things about roses, their grafting and protection in the wintertime. The house was in good condition, with a high ground floor and upper floor, nicely furnished. The rooms upstairs, where Kadić's mother lived, were decorated in the Turkish style, with ottomans under the windows. The most attractive place for me was the kitchen in the basement, large and to my mind huge, where everything was cooked in large quantities. As far as I remember, Bejta and Magda were the cooks, and they were not angry when we peeped into the kitchen. They baked and cooked on a big stove there, with steam and odours spreading upwards toward the living space. The women stretched the jufka dough out, spreading it across the tables; they were making kadaif, baklava, syrup biscuits, and many other tasty treats. Among the three of us, only Father really enjoyed it when we were invited there, because he admired the Bosnian cuisine – I was not interested in food, and Mother had not been used to that kind of meals.

When guests arrived, one of the mandatory rituals was going to the upper floor to greet Nana, Bahrija's mother. Three of the Kadić children, Mira Simić and I would approach Nana one by one, greeting her and kissing her on her hand. According to some custom, the Kadić children first brought her hand up to their forehead, then they kissed her on the hand, which caused confusion for me – I did not know if I should first kiss or bring her hand up to my forehead. I usually did it in a quick way, because I did not like doing that ritual and I considered it unnecessary – nobody, not even my beloved Mother, did I kiss on the hand in the village.

Nana, Bahrija's mother, was quite an unusual woman and did not resemble our Bosnian nanas. Instead of harem pants, she wore a long dress, and over it a slim-fitting, nicely tailored caftan. The way she spoke was the most unusual thing. Actually, she could not speak our language well, lacking words, with a strong foreign accent, and combined with her hoarse voice, her speech was mysterious to me. I did not ask anybody anything, nor was I given any explanations for that unusual phenomenon. It was not until many years later that I got to know that Nana, Şahsine-hanım, was actually Turkish, born in Constantinople. She had lived in Thessaloniki where she had been married, but then Kadić, a Bosnian, came along and she eloped with him to Bosnia. Bahrija had several brothers, two of whom I knew, Hakija and Husnija. They shared similar faces and appearance, wearing moustaches. Hakija worked as a gardener for his brother, and Husnija was a clerk in a law office. Whenever we came to the Kadićes for a visit in nice weather, Hakija was working there diligently, maintaining the rose garden and grafting the roses, and he would always cut a few nice roses for my mother.

It was very joyful in the house of the Kadić family back in those days. The four children: Faik, Šefika, Asima, Braco and their cousin Mira Simić, were one merry

company. They organized children's parties, masquerades in various costumes, then the celebration of two Bayrams and other holidays. The two older ones were already too old for these children's games. Faik went to high school, and Šefika was about to get married. That was the first wedding I attended. My parents were invited along with the other relatives and guests, and as one could see in the photo, we, the children, were seated on the ground in front of the adults. Šefika married Ibro Šaćiragić, a mining engineer. He had been educated in Prague, and he worked at the Kreka mine; later he became the manager of the mine. He looked older than Šefika, he wore glasses and died at a relatively young age. I think they had two children together. In the wedding photo you could see a diverse, but for Bosnian circumstances, ordinary group of people. A traditional Muslim family, with some German undertones on mother Mariška's side, then traditional Serbs, the family of Jovan Simić, as well as the other guests, all 'mixed' in terms of religion and nation. In a country where the same folk of three different religions lived, and after centuries of Turkish and later Austrian rule, it was not unusual for people of various religions and origins to come together.

The happy days of the Kadić family ended when the Ustashe came to power, and Kadić joined them, to general amazement. During the summer of 1941, Father used to repeat: 'What was the matter with Bahrija, uniting with this scum?' He was not only one of the few respectable Muslims who completely sided with the Ustashe, but he also refused to help Žanika, his sister-in-law, to rescue his brother-in-law Jovan Simić, who had been arrested and deported by the Ustashe. First, he was appointed as the high prefect of Usora and Soli county, but soon he moved to Jajce, Vrhbosna county, and later returned to Tuzla. In the autumn of 1944, during the second liberation of Tuzla, he was in the position of prefect, being the highest person among the civil authorities; he was arrested and after some time he allegedly committed suicide in prison – by cutting his veins. His family moved away to Sarajevo.

The other reason, for me quite important, for visiting Goli Brijeg was because my friend Mita lived there. Her real name was Marija, but she was called Mita, like in Slovenian. She lived in the second villa behind the Kadić house – two identical villas, but yet it seemed to me that the latter one was less cared-for, with no wide space around the house, only a small yard where we sometimes used to play. Mita's friend from the neighbouring house, Nezveta, the daughter of the merchant Husić, would often join us, and we would wander around and go down towards the Jala. Nevzeta was a beautiful, fair-haired girl, she was not wearing harem pants, and she attended the same elementary school as we did. Mita would learn from her some of 'our' words, Turkisms in fact, and she used them spontaneously as if they were proper literary expressions. For a long time I could remember those unusual words Mita used, but I have forgotten them.

My friend Marija Gruden, who sat at the same desk with me in the Kloster elementary school, or Mita as called by her family at home, was a Slovenian. They came to Tuzla in 1932. Her mother Marija Turnšek, a very beautiful lady, with dark hair and snow-white complexion, was first married to Ivan Gruden, a teacher at the School of Commerce in Ljubljana; he died of sepsis, after an operation in 1930. As a widow with a little girl, she started working as a typist at the Social Security Office, where Josip Bole, the Office director, fell in love with her and married her. Thus Mita got a

stepfather, and very soon a younger half-brother Jožek. They came all together to live in Tuzla in 1932, where they stayed until 1939, so Mita attended the elementary and the first two grades of grammar school with me. She was dark-haired like her mother, and a rather plump girl. She wore a fringe like me. She was always smiling, jolly and kind. In the summer they used to go to Mozirje or Rečica ob Savinji [small Slovenian towns]. As Director of the Insurance Bureau, Bole was discreet and low-key, but known as a good manager. They were transferred to work to Zagreb afterwards, and from there, being Slovenians, in 1941 they were expelled and fled to Serbia, to Niš, where they stayed during the entire war.

It was pleasant and joyful at Mita's house – a family atmosphere prevailed. Unlike us, Mita's mother kneaded and baked bread by herself. It seemed like the most delicious cake to me, nicely textured and white, with a crust. Josip Bole, a serious and businesslike man, took care of the children, gave them German lessons, and in music favored the accordion, so Mita was taught to play it by a Slovenian from the Army Band. At Catholic Christmas we used to decorate the fir tree, the 'krizbaum', as they called it, but there were no special rituals like with the Bauman family. Their maid Micika, tall and fair-haired, from, I think, Kreka, left their house when she married. Later, when Mita left Tuzla, every encounter with Micika reminded me of the happy days in the house of the Bole family. Then the Boles moved from Goli Brijeg to Kazan-Mahala, into a two-storey house, the property of Milan Popić. All Popić's houses were painted pink. They lived on the ground floor, and on the upper floor was the family of the forestry engineer Kudović. The brothers of Sadeta Kudović, university students, would sometimes get together with us in the yard, and we would talk about school and our teachers. From the neighbouring yard, across the high fence, one could hear the joyful voice of Sele Žunić playing a game with his friends. From time to time somebody would shout: 'Seli – point!'

We have already mentioned Mejra, our housekeeper, but one could add many stories about her. She quietly entered our lives already in the Public Health Station, coming regularly two times a week, and then she continued to do it while we were living at the Djerić house. Every visit from her was quite an experience for me because Mejra had an inborn sense of humour, and whatever she said had a comic tinge, whether it was her imitating my mum's Ekavian dialect pronunciation, or teasing me for my clumsiness, or making a ritual of putting her socks on, the 'čorape'. Those were my father's worn-out socks that my mum used to give to her, and she would make them shorter at the toes. Poor, already quite hunched, with a husband having no regular income, on the verge of poverty and misery, Mejra had a strong spirit and inner strength. She often mentioned Goli Brijeg and repeated the verse 'on the Goli Brijeg crest, Gypsies nest'. She kept inviting me to visit her at her place, since I was already visiting my friend Mita in her neighbourhood. Once I decided to do so. Going from the street, one slightly descended to the yard of the little house, built of earth and with a black wooden roof; a kitchen in the entryway and one bigger room, that was the whole living place, yet neat and cosy. A well-scrubbed yellow wooden floor, an old torn carpet, an ottoman and a bench all around the room under the windows, a charcoal-burning stove in the middle of the room, with embroidered white short curtains on the windows. Everything seemed poor and beautiful. She told me: 'Now you'll see how my Mustafa and me enjoy our time every day.' Then she brewed, or rather, boiled up some coffee and gave me a Turkish coffee cup, after having poured a little milk in,

with some Turkish delight next to it. I was not a great fan of coffee in those days, but I realized how much she cared about it, so I drank it together with them, sitting on a small stool, while they were sitting with their legs crossed, Turkish style. She told various anecdotes making us all laugh, while Mustafa was quiet. It was obvious he was glad that 'a doctor's child' had come for a visit. 'I don't know when you'll come again, so this is to remember Mejra by', and she gave me a white handkerchief that turned a bit yellow with age, trimmed with needle lace. It was a gift from Mejra that I kept for years, but it somehow got lost during the war. That touching moment of visiting Mejra is engraved in my childhood memory forever.

Like most children of my age, I was looking forward to the first snow, which would start falling where we were already at the end of November. I was enchanted with the whiteness that would gradually cover everything, the squeaking of the trampled snow underfoot, the mellowness and soundless silence that reigned over the otherwise loud streets .Yet I was most thrilled just by watching the snow come down, with no idea where from and for what purpose. The dance of snowflake swarms which descended gently as if wishing to stay longer in the air.

I would try to scrape off beautifully patterned frost from the windowpanes, so that I could look out the window. The sledding and skiing season began at Trnovac and other slopes, of which, thank God, there were plenty.

Another important reason of my going to Goli Brijeg was skiing. Since Trnovac was a bit far away for me, and carrying the skis not an easy job, I would go to one of the slopes near the Čokićes' house which was bumpy and uneven, but could serve. Throughout the whole winter a boy a bit older than me, Paša Abadinović, used to ski on that slope – I did not know his full name – so he helped me in my clumsiness to master at least the basics. He was very skillful and quick on his skis, he did not mind helping me, but his efforts failed to bear fruit. I remained completely ignorant and kept falling more than standing up on my skis. Paša attended some secondary school, I think it was a trade school; later he joined the People's Liberation Army and lost one eye there. His benevolent and smiling face belongs to the unforgettable collection of my childhood memories.

My school friend Anka Pašalić lived at the very beginning of the street, before the uphill climb starts. We went together to elementary school, and then continued to grammar school. Her father was an official in a municipal office; they were newcomers from some other regions. Anka had a beautiful, elder sister Olga, who died of typhus during the war.

There it is, these are my memories of Goli Brijeg.

In the garden of School Polyclinic, Tuzla – Dr Mustafa Mujbegović, his daughter Vera, Vera's friend Saša Bauman, his wife Zagorka and sister-in-law Ljubica, 1934.

Note: Vera Mujbegović was born in Zagreb, 1927. Until 1947, she lived in Tuzla, where she attended her elementary and grammar school. Vera studied philosophy at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade from 1947 until 1951, and defended her PhD thesis in Ljubljana, 1965, in the area of modern German history. She worked at the Institute for International Labour Movement in Belgrade until 1980.

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