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Tuzla of My Youth, Between Two Gates

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Homeland is a place where we have grown up safe at home with our parents, where we have gained our first experiences and learnings, our first friends and comrades. Wherever we go later and change our places of living, our home, or the place where we grew up, be it a town or a village, forever remains the epicentre and cosmogonic nucleus of our world.

A world in itself, surrounded on both sides by hills, open to Majevica in the upper, and to the valley of the Spreča in the lower part, Tuzla was our beginning and our end, the destination we gravitated towards, regardless of how far we went away. Coming back to our home and homeland, which has profoundly changed its appearance, is only possible through evocations and remembrances, through what was observed and engraved on our memory.

In the works of great authors, devotion and sentimental attachment to the hometown are particularly emphasized; for example, James Joyce described in detail his birthplace Dublin with such accuracy and precision that one could reconstruct the city in its entirety. Although Tuzla has had many residents gifted in literature, nobody has ever tried to reconstruct and describe the geophysical specificities of its layout in its prime days, because, unfortunately, it does not exist in its original form anymore. Precisely the fact that the city has not been preserved, that it has partly sunk, swallowed by the depths of the excavations in salt rocks, strengthens my motivation to describe it.

At the border between high vaults of the Dinaric mountains and the vast expanse of the Pannonian plain along the Sava, there is the valley of the Spreča, a peaceful valley, shielded against strong winds by the Majevica ridge, inhabited since prehistoric times. The Spreča, a small river with a short name of unclear meaning and origin, be it because it ‘obstructs’ something, or simply because it is some sort of ‘shortcut’, or maybe because it ‘washes out’ something – regardless, the meaning of its name remains uncertain.

The valley of the Spreča, in the terminology of experts, is ‘a longitudinal depression that follows the direction of the Dinaric mountains, ca. 150 km long and 30 km wide, interposed perpendicularly between the Drina and the Bosna river flows. Bounded by the Majevica ridge in the northeast, the Ozren – Javornik mountain range in the south,

and the Snagovo mountain pass in the southeast, this area is called Spreča, and its inhabitants the Spreča people.' Somewhat isolated and separate, but still connected and bound to its hinterland, it consists of three smaller areas: Upper Spreča, near the river source; the Tuzla valley; and Lower Spreča, near where it joins the Bosna. Temperate continental climate reigns in the space between the high Dinaric vault and the vast Pannonian Plain, with temperatures in winter dropping much faster than they rise in summer. The Majevica mountain range and the Gučevo ridge shield the Spreča against southeastern and northern wind attacks, storms are rare and hail does not occur frequently.

If it is true that every country is compelled to be an original phenomenon (according to Emil Cioran), then we can say that every town is a uniquely created, unparalleled form. Tuzla was not only a town and a settlement, it was much more than that to us. Thomas Mann wrote about his birthplace Lübeck as a spiritual concept or a form of life ('eine geistige Lebensform'). The town was our destiny, the frame of our existence where different nations, religions and traditions met. Every town has its colour, its centre and landmark, without which it would be something else – its own monument and symbol by which it is recognised. For Tuzla it was the Bristol Hotel and the yellow building of the Grammar School, as well as the building structure called 'Barok'. When those emblems went down, due to subsidence, Tuzla was left without its characteristic landmarks. The hotel gave an authentic urban significance to Tuzla, a refined tone and identity, and the Grammar School, a monumental building on a large area, with a nice view, although a bit aside from the town centre, was the spiritual and cultural axis. The stage on which our life was played was the downtown – čaršija. The mine, the salt pans and the other factories were the heart and bloodstream of our whole region, and their pulse, in an indirect way, controlled the rhythm of our life.

While at school we learnt about different periods: the Ice Age, the Iron Age, the Bronze Age, the Stone Age, for us in Tuzla the Sulphur Age was the current one. The smell or rather the stink of sulphur followed us from the Salt Spa to both Gates, and even beyond them. It was especially strong in the morning and in autumn, when thick fogs covered the town. One could then smell sulphur most strongly. It is not a pleasant smell, but there is something healthy in it, coming from the salty soil. Fog came down from the surrounding highlands, and the sulphur smell up from the ground, so that, on the way from home to the Grammar School, I often went through thick fog that would gradually lift, pierced by the sharp sulphur smell.

Coal and salt branded the town life. They could be felt at every step. It was first in the morning and then in the afternoon that the piercing sound of the siren woke us up, reminding us every day again around one o'clock of the work shifts in salt wells and mines. The sound of the siren became something we did not notice anymore; it was only a guest coming from outside who would be surprised upon hearing the siren and would wonder what was going on. We then noticed that the siren might agitate and upset a stranger.

All around the hills there were salt wells, which had frightened me enormously in my early childhood, but later I did not even notice them anymore. It was something that fused with our soil and surroundings. Coming close to Kreka, one could see little trains running on cable railways and pulling the coal from the depths; in front of the

‘Ferleza’ building there were miners, grubby, with carbide lamps hanging over their shoulders, standing and waiting to hear their names called. At the Gate, children from Crvene Njive or Krojčica would come with baskets of coal that they sold. Those children were frozen and mostly barefoot in the most severe winters, and they searched for coal in the open pits and collected it to earn some money. The children in ragged clothes with full coal baskets were a living reminder of our poverty at those times, which the coal, as we saw, could somewhat appease. Traces of mine, sulphuric and salty water, and salt wells were everywhere.

Many attractions and curiosities adorned the town of my youth, but no river, no real one, ran through it. Brčko lay on the Sava, the Drina ran through Zvornik, Banja Luka, often mentioned by my father, was on the Vrbas, and Tuzla had only the Jala. Not even the Spreča ran through Tuzla, but bypassed it. What is there to say about the Jala? It was a slightly larger stream, a little river with deeper whirlpools at some spots, a place where boys dived and swam, especially after heavy rains. The Jala, seemingly a calm, short rivulet, would go wild sometimes, and after rainstorms it turned into a torrent, carrying all away with it. Otherwise, it ran quietly and gloomily within the deep-cut riverbed that was neat at some points, but at some of its parts, the Jala setting served as a rubbish heap. Anyway, none of us ever thought of swimming in the Jala. Slightly above the town, above the Brčanka Malta (Brčko Gate), the little river Solina flowed into the Jala. Some of its banks were covered with pebbles, and when the swimming pool was closed during the war, we went to the Solina, where we could, at least, get our feet wet and sunbathe.

Every quarter, community or neighbourhood was a kind of ‘sacred place of living’ for its inhabitants. That ‘sacred space’ had its central point, its vertical axis, which was the exemplar, and which determined one’s behavior. The sum of these worlds, similar, but also quite different, made up the whole of our town.

Some centres and some ‘sacred spaces’ crisscrossed the town, and with their attractive power and influence brought people from all sides to one new, collective centre. Such was the town’s Corso, the yellow Grammar School, the Salt Spa, the swimming pool, and others. The town itself, as the geographers claimed, was very close to the point that marked the geographical centre of the country.

In the neighbourhoods descending the hilly slopes around the town, most of the houses were made of adobe clay or of šeper, as we called wattle and daub, with very few made of bricks. The difference between them was that some were low ‘ground-floorers’ with two or three rooms, and other houses were ‘na boj’, which meant that those houses had an upper floor. The houses ‘na boj’ indicated somewhat greater prosperity, and larger families with two or three generations, and, naturally, a better social status. Since the houses extended down the hill, there were no big yards or gardens around them, just modest backyards, and a few tiny gardens with flowers and trees. The houses were densely lined up, and a passerby could feel their warmth and hospitality. Although one had to walk along the uneven cobblestone pathway to approach these houses, they were, without exception, with a wooden fence and an entrance gate. Some order, warmth and cleanliness radiated from the little windows with white, embroidered, small curtains, well-scrubbed, yellow wood floors, and wooden slippers placed in front of the door. Also contributing to this was the

whiteness of the walls that were whitewashed every year. The low fences by which we pass, gardens full of lilacs and chrysanthemums, metal window frames, every corner, street, shop, become important parts of our life as children. To us, they are our points of reference in our everyday life, part of the fine tapestry of memories and dreams called childhood.

In search of the hidden spiritual and material heart of the times gone by, little can be found in our dear Tuzla. Traces of history are written mainly in names. There is no single remnant of the former Roman settlements, no excavations, only the name Salines, neither bridge nor palace dating from the Turkish times, only the name Tuzla.

It seems that our distant ancestors searched for ore, or for salt and silver, most extensively and thoroughly, and built less of fortifications and dwellings. If there had been any more solid constructions, they were demolished, burnt down or destroyed in the course of centuries. Our ancestors used to build huts made of mud, reed and perishable matter for centuries, but only in the Middle Ages did they start building constructions of solid material.

Time here constructed and deconstructed settlements that were in the service of excavating treasure from the Earth's womb. From the hill town of Srebrenik, or the tower town Dobor on the Bosna river, to the Castle of Captain Gradaščevic in Gradačac, this is about all of the solid dwellings that endured the passage of time. There remained oral and written accounts, and above all, names and titles.

Since the pagan and Old Bosnian times, the people of Bosnia have been packed in their high mountains, 'sky holders', in their parishes, with their rulers and 'the Bosnian church', always between the East and the West, harnessed for wars for the interests of the surrounding great powers. Non-urban, pre-Turkish Bosnia consisted of many villages and few towns. Later, settlements started to be built around mosques, instead of scattered villages.

With the arrival of Austro-Hungarian rule, Bosnia was pushed overnight into the world of modern technical civilization. Rails began to cross the Bosnian soil, forests were logged systematically instead of haphazardly, roads started linking towns and villages. Great migrations, which had shaken the lives of people in the previous times, were stopped.

One could say that the town Tuzla, condensed into one long main street and densely populated residential neighbourhoods on the slopes of the surrounding hills, was not an ideal place for a child to grow up in and gain their first impressions. Yet, if you were to ask any of its natives if they would change their hometown for a nicer, wealthier, wider and more spacious place, all of them would give a negative answer; nobody would exchange Tuzla, the Tuzla as it was.

That mythical frame of the town, the cosmogonic nucleus of our world, can only be a smaller place, the so-called provinces, which regardless of their flaws and vices, nourish a special kind of homeliness and nostalgia, what is called 'the soul of a small town', and where everything is just the right size for a man, and so for a child. Everything is within reach and sight, everything can be conquered, it is those discrete

heartbeats of a small town, the special meaning that provinces have at their best. It becomes an archetype for us, a fortress and the centre of our world. One finds familiar and seizable all the dimensions of the town and its surroundings.

The streets, even the shortest ones with only three houses on them, had their first and last name. After the 1918 upheaval, the new regime renamed the streets from the Austrian period, giving them new names, though some of them remained as they were before. The names lived in parallel, some even from the Turkish times, imprinted on our minds, and thus no decree could abolish them. Those were unofficial names, along the formal ones used on official occasions, but far less in the spoken language.

The street names were mixed up, the historical periods were blended, and one could read about different regimes in the street names. Although its official name has been changed, Capar Street has kept its name from the Austrian times. The previous Appelplatz was named Wilson Square after 1918, and Main Street was named after King Petar. Whatever the official name of a street was, people kept using their old names, and it was difficult to change this. Tabašnice remained Tabašnice, the Džindić mahalla the same way, Konjanička Street leading to Tušanj, then Hospital Street ending at the Hospital. Mejdan, Brdo, Kula, Mosnik, Borić were the toponyms and bordering hills of our town.

There was a story about a goat that ‘the whole of Tuzla’ milked, and everywhere one went, our famous goat would be mentioned. I was surprised to read in some files that the people of Livno made fun of the people from Guber, singing to them: ‘At Guber, that wealthy spot, nine houses milk one goat, they then cross the line and boast about how well they dine.’ The similarity is obvious.

The places where the Tuzla people normally arrange their meetings are: in front of the Cinema, at Corso, on the Statue Bridge, at the Gate, at Jakub’s, and so on. These places are rather confined by the configuration of the town, the flow of the little Jala River and the town’s boundaries. What is certain is that nobody would arrange a meeting in front of the King Aleksandar monument, or in front of Town Hall.

Between the nostalgic idealization of the Habsburg Empire and Krleža-style merciless and tendentious criticism, the Dual Monarchy also left us a legacy of many good things. At every step, there was evidence of the heritage of one civilization and great advances as compared to the ‘Turkish times’. While the past epochs vanished without trace, the monuments of the Austrian rule have lasted and outlived the time and the society that had created them.

It could have seemed strange for a traveller coming to Tuzla for the first time, but the usual way of entering the town was either through the eastern Brčko Gate, or through the western Kreka Gate. The fact that they denoted nothing any more, was not a reason for the Tuzla people not to jealously keep using the old names, even though they were gone. The town lay between two Gates – the eastern one, which kept its name ‘The Brčko Gate’, even when it was gone, and the western one, in the direction of Kreka, whose name got lost with time. They used to be some kind of customs and state control points for all those entering the place. In the time between the two World Wars, the gates were the remote past, but the names remained as symbols of the days

gone by, but also as some kind of natural border beyond which the town did not extend much.

In times of Austria, military troops were placed at two points outside the town, but not far from it, in two camps – the Eastern and the Western one. Those two places mark the frontier of the whole urban area. The town pavement was composed of bigger rectangular stone tiles in stretcher bond pattern. Girls would draw hopscotch grids with chalk and play on the pavement.

From outside, it was not possible to even guess what the fate of Tuzla-town would be. Located away from the main roads, the town was somewhat secluded. Fast trains were not running through or by, there were no asphalt roads, except for Main Street, buses worked their way through Snagovo towards Zvornik, and further to Serbia. Our only regular and reliable link with the world was the Tuzla–Doboj railroad, a branch line that parted from the main railroad Sarajevo–Brod at Doboj. And yet, its industrial area, numerous workers and the fact that it was the centre of the region, made Tuzla, in spite of everything, an attractive and important nucleus.

The configuration of the town and its backbone – from the winding side streets, to the neighbouring hills and rises, to the main roads through the town – all of it was still intact in the days of my childhood and, it seemed to us, in its best and most beautiful state. The neighbourhoods on the hills and mahallas were well taken care of, painted and nestled into small gardens with flowers. New houses were being built along the main streets, and some large new buildings went up, while the old ones kept their original form. The quiet vanishing of the town started only after the Second World War with accelerated and excessive exploitation and depletion of salty water for the sake of salt production, though some indications were already visible between the two wars. The town’s market squares were still preserved and undamaged; with small craft workshops often neglected and black, and orderly stores with colourful goods, which might not have been overly beautiful, but to us they were a magical frame of our childhood playful time. One-floor houses, in many parts of the town, remained small compared to the newly built two-storey ones, but in those days nobody even thought of taking them down. They stood solid and firm, yet small, but well taken care of, regularly painted, with black wooden roofs. The sky-scraping and concrete symbols of the new times, which overran the space of Tuzla in the afterwar period, could not erase from our memory the old buildings that had once endured in their place. Inspiring town centre points, of which there were a few – the famous Gate, then the market and the Municipality building with it, the famous ‘Barok’ house next to the market, also brought down in the sinking and demolition wave, the yellow building of the Grammar School, about which more will be told separately, the Bristol, the magical hotel which dominated the downtown area, the Statue Bridge at Tabašnice, the church street with benches and tree canopies providing shade, under which couples would walk and date, and the first loves started, and above all, the local Corso, a phenomenon inherent in the town of coal and salt, as much as life itself, something existing just two hours a day, under the lamps that would light up, until it gets dark, the famous Liberation Square, where in the early autumn days of 1943, the Yugoslav flag was fluttering alongside the red flag for forty days, while the whole of Europe sobbed in the dark of fascism.

In my childhood everything seemed within reach. As if there were nothing beyond that circle. That circle of familiar things and horizons was getting wider slowly and subtly, step by step, street by street, until the whole town and its surroundings were within sight. Not only did our town live according to the traditions of the old Bosnian state and two great empires, with its population mixed in the 'Bosnian hotpot', but also my personal destiny was tied to the two worlds – the world of my father and the world of my mother. To be able to live in different worlds, I consider it a privilege and advantage over the calm and nonconflicting existence in a homogenized community of people.

In fact, what does it mean to live in more than one world – is it good or bad? Is it a positive synthesis or a lack of identity? Back then I did not think this way, but I know I felt good as a child originating from two different worlds, and facing the outer one, the third world. Neither the Catholic teaching in the Kloster, nor the whispering prayers of my grandmother in front of the icon lamp in Debrc, did bother me, nor the shahada of the Islamic religion, which was taught by effendi Čokić – all of it in the communist ambience of my family. Everything was equally interesting, challenging and novel, and I was sliding through that labyrinth of beliefs, dogmas and traditions, and of prejudices, too, freely and without preconceptions.

However, both of 'the two worlds' that my mother from Debrc spoke of, tried to appropriate me. The point, put simply, was that I was either 'ours' or 'theirs'. When I visited Mother's place at Debrc in summer, she often repeated: 'You know, you are ours!' – not explaining what 'ours' meant, although it was quite clear to me. Later in Tuzla, Grandma would exclaim: 'You're one of us!' It was obvious that nobody asked me if I wanted to be 'ours' or 'theirs', but they kept appropriating me.

Each of my parents had every right to be their own, not being appropriated by anyone, since it was not even possible. They thought that they had the right to fight for my little soul, because it was equally 'ours'. Naturally and in accordance with my personality, I would withdraw myself from both sides, wanting to be neither 'ours' nor 'theirs', no matter how difficult it was. There was, at least, one advantage in it. Since I was not markedly 'somebody's', I could work together with any of the sides, i.e., everyone held me for 'theirs' well enough to be able to trust me, but no one deemed me sufficiently 'theirs' to consider me truly their own.

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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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