Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

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

Bosnian Towns At The End of the Nineteenth Century

Omer Hadžiselimović

Journalist and historian William Miller (1864-1945) was educated at Rugby and Oxford, after which he devoted himself to the study of Turkish and Balkan society and politics. His book Travels and Politics in the Near East (1898) was, as he points out in the "Preface," "the result of four visits to the Balkan Peninsula in the years 1894, 1896, 1897, and 1898, and a long study of the Eastern question" (p. ix). For Miller, the Balkan Peninsula was "a land of contradictions. Everything is the exact opposite of what it might reasonably expected to be; the traveler finds himself in the realms of romance, where all his wonted ideas are turned topsy-turvy, and soon falls into the native distinction between what they do 'on the Balkans' and what they do in 'Europe'" (xvi). In the following selections, Miller writes about Sarajevo, Travnik, Jajce, and Rogatica—Bosnian towns that the author locates in the "Near East."

Modern Sarajevo differs not a little from the Bosna Saraj of the Turkish times. In the first place, the population has largely increased, and the Bosnian capital bids fair to leave Sofia and Belgrade soon behind it in this, as in several other respects. At the last census Sarajevo contained, exclusive of the military, 37,713, of whom 17,074 were Mussulmans, 10,473 Roman Catholics, 5,855 Orthodox, and 3,994 Jews, the remainder belonging to other confessions. Inclusive of the garrison, this total reached 41,173. In order to accommodate this increased population, which had risen by 43.57 per cent, in the brief space of ten years, there has been a large amount of building in the town, and new quarters have sprung up which did not exist in the Turkish days. Hence the cost of house-rent, which was high in the early years of the Occupation, has now considerably fallen. The large plain, which extends westward and would have been preferred by some as the site of the new city at the time of the Occupation, affords ample scope for expansion, and the principal railway station has been placed at a great distance from the centre of the town, because it is considered that one day the capital will completely surround it.

In point of situation, indeed, Sarajevo is the most favoured of all Balkan capitals. It is traversed by a small stream, called by the poetic name of the Miljacka, or "gently murmuring," which has been dammed up so as to increase the amount of water. Inferior in this point alone to the Servian capital with its two splendid rivers, Sarajevo has many other advantages which Belgrade does not possess. The town lies picturesquely in a hollow between two hills and is commanded towards the east by a castle, from whose bastions there is an admirable view of the old wooden Turkish

houses and the modern European buildings. Unlike Athens and Belgrade, it possesses a considerable amount of vegetation. No doubt the modern part of the town has greatly grown at the expense of the Oriental, but Sarajevo is still the most Oriental city of the Balkan Peninsula. In Belgrade and Sofia you have nothing but brand-new edifices, while in Athens there is no alternative between the venerable ruins of antiquity and the modern German town constructed under King Otho. But at Saraj the West and the East meet, and the Oriental houses with their courtyards and gardens have not been improved out of existence as at Sofia. You may take a walk through the bazaar or čaršija, and imagine yourself in a purely Eastern town, while at a few minutes' distance the shops of the Franje Josipa Ulica transport you back to an Austrian city. In point of picturesqueness the Sarajevo bazaar is unrivalled in the Near East. It cannot perhaps be compared with the suks of Tunis or the large covered bazar at Constantinople, because it is almost entirely in the open air. To see it at its best one should visit it on a market-day. Then the country folk come in from all the neighbourhood with their wares, every one of them in costume. Here and there you may see a Bosniak carrying a ram on his back, and I noticed one or two of the peasants panting and sweating beneath their living load as far as the castle, while the animals looked on with most sublime complacency. A good many of the merchants are Spanish Jews, who wear thick fur coats, like Svengali, in summer and winter alike. They have picked up German remarkably well, and there is no difficulty in making purchases in that language–a fact which is all the more curious because they never showed much aptitude for the Bosnian idiom. Their women are easily distinguishable by their headdress, which consists of an unbecoming stiff silk cap trimmed round the edge with sequins and completely covering the hair. As in all Oriental bazars, each trade has a quarter devoted to its particular industry, so that all the shoe-makers are in one part and all the metal-workers in another. There is here far less of the bargaining which is inevitable at Constantinople, and I have known an instance where a salesman was absolutely indifferent to the sale of his goods, and declined to abate a single kreuzer of his price. At Sarajevo only the Bosniaks are permitted to have stalls in the bazar–a privilege which they much appreciate, and which is shared by all the confessions alike. Only one part of the bazar is under cover, and is almost entirely devoted to textile fabrics.

From a picturesque point of view Sarajevo, like Belgrade and Athens, suffers from the electric tram, which traverses the Appel-Quai, along the right bank of the Miljacka, but this Western mode of locomotion has not been allowed to spoil the shady turn of the river where the Mussulman delights to drink his coffee in the garden of the Bendbaši. It is near this part of the river that the town is most artistic. On the left bank tier after tier of wooden Turkish houses peer out of the greenery, with here and there a minaret rising above the foliage. Here, too, the river is not embanked, but left to nature, and instead of a level promenade there are charming contrasts between the undulating shore and the rocks which here and there rise direct from the river-bed. Formerly Sarajevo, like all Turkish towns, possessed a large number of Mussulman cemeteries, whose gravestones stood at all angles, and whose neglected vegetation formed green oases between the houses–for as every one knows the Mussulman loves to live in close proximity to the last resting-place of his kinsman. This was one of the difficulties with which the Austrians had to deal when they entered the country, for these picturesque cemeteries were permanent obstacles to the expansion of the town.

Gradually, however, this difficulty has been overcome: some have disappeared, others have been turned into gardens, but here and there one still comes across a few stones, while the hills above the town are still covered with Jewish and Mussulman graves. One historic monument has not been allowed to fall into decay–the Mosque of Ali Pasha, towards the entrance of the town, where the insurgents made a desperate resistance to the Army of Occupation on the memorable 19th of August, 1878, when Sarajevo fell, the second time in its history that the Bosnian capital, temporarily occupied by Prince Eugen in 1697, came into the hands of the Austrians. Mohammedan fanaticism now finds vent in the weekly Exercises of the dancing and howling dervishes, which take place in the Sinan tekkeh, or cloister. When I visited this building I was first of all escorted into a café, where a number of people were sitting, playing cards and drinking coffee. Traversing a stableyard I reached the wooden gallery of the place in which the dervishes perform. I expected every moment that the gallery would fall down, as it was supported by only one pillar on either side, and creaked and groaned with every movement of the spectators. There was also a latticed gallery for women. There were fourteen dervishes in the building, arranged in three lines of one, nine, and four respectively. The leader in front kept bowing his head and kissing the ground, swaying his body, and every now and again uttering cries of “Allah !” and “Mohammed !” The others followed his example, one of them being always late in his movements. This performance began a little after nine, and about ten we were told that there would be no dancing, as at least thirty dervishes were required for that. I afterwards found that the best of the dervishes had gone to the Exhibition at Buda-Pesth, so that here, as in Constantinople, their religious ecstasies have been turned into a show, to which the visitor is expected to contribute a small offering.

Of all their improvements near the capital the Austrians are proudest of the watering-place which they have created at Ilidže, about seven miles distant. It is true that the sulphur-baths of Ilidže were known to the Romans, who built a town there, of which considerable remains have been discovered. In the Middle Ages, too, here was the centre of the Government, and the baths enjoyed considerable reputation under the Turks. But at the time of the Occupation the arrangements were of the most primitive description, so that the history of Ilidže as a bath may be said, like all other civilized institutions in the country, to date from the present régime. A constant service of trains takes you out there during the season, and on Sundays and holidays le tout Sarajevo assembles at Ilidže. Special compartments are on this, as on all the lines, reserved for Mussulman women, and as a curious instance of Western progress I noted a special van for bicycles, which are very popular with the natives. Three hotels and a restaurant provide for the visitors, and it is the fashion in the season to take supper there, or to reside there altogether, and go into town every day. A very low scale of charges has been drawn up with a view of inducing people to come from a distance–in short, Ilidže has now most of the attractions, without the high prices, of “European” watering-places. The inhabitants take special interest in the three bears, natives of the Bosnian mountains, whose cage is one of the features of the grounds. When we first saw them two years ago, Mali, the “little one,” was much bullied by Miško, the tyrant of the three, and filled the air with his piteous howls, but this year we found him bigger and somewhat more courageous. Every visitor takes as a matter of course the drive of two and a half miles to the sources of the Bosna at the foot of

Mount Igman. The natural beauties of this spring, which is clear as crystal, have been too much “improved” to my taste, and the artificial embankments, bridges, and gardens might well have been spared. The swimming-bath in the other stream, the Željesnica, is a great attraction, and doctors extol highly the sulphur springs of the place. During the race week in June it is impossible to get a room in the hotels, and the presence of Madam von Kallay there gives the place social importance.

Travnik does not, of course, possess political importance that it had when it was the residence of the Turkish Governor. But it contained at the last census a population of 6,894, and is one of the purest Mohammedan towns in the country, although the Catholics are on the increase there. Should this branch line ever be prolonged to the Adriatic at Spalato, its commercial value would be much enhanced, and in the interval between my two visits I noticed a considerable advance in its development. Last year, for instance, the local authorities thought it desirable to build a new hotel, containing a theatre, an officers’ casino, and a hall where entertainments can be given, so that it contrasts very pleasantly with most towns of the same size in England. But these modern improvements have not in the least detracted from its Oriental charm. No place in Bosnia is so famous for its Mussulman tombs–huge edifices fenced in with iron railings and covered with canopies, like the immense state-beds of our ancestors. These turbeh, which are almost as large as houses, are, for the most part, the last resting-places of the Mohammedan governors of Bosnia. Another historic memorial of a very different kind is the Cafe Dervent, where the unfortunate Archduke Rudolph drank the Turkish coffee, for which the establishment is famous, during his visit to Travnik. The cup out of which he drank and the glass which, filled with water, invariably accompanies coffee in the Near East, are still preserved; but the café itself seemed to me more and more ruinous and fly-blown each time that I sat down by the rushing stream in its shady garden. The gardens and the abundance of fresh water are, indeed, the delights of Travnik, whose name means “the grassplot,” and whose situation is such as Mussulmans love. The long, straggling street, of which the town chiefly consists, is full on a market-day of the quaintest figures. Then many Catholics come in from the country, and you may see tattooed women among them, for in the district round Travnik and Jajce tattooing is by no means an uncommon practice of the female Catholics, although it is almost unknown in the other confessions, and not often observed in the case of Catholic men. It is supposed by Dr. Glück, a medical man, who has investigated the subject, that at the time of the Turkish conquest, when conversions to Islam were frequent, the Catholic priests hit upon this way of preventing their flocks from going over to the creed of the conquerors. Now that the necessity for such a precaution has ceased to exist the custom is still kept up, and old women usually officiate as tattooers. Another curiosity of the Travnik market was an important Mussulman, armed with a blue stick, who went about sampling the wares which the country folk had brought in. The old castle, which dates from the days of the Bosnian kings, looks down grimly on this variegated scene, while a new Jesuit academy and a modern Mussulman college point to the difference which exists between the religious toleration of the nineteenth, and the fierce theological conflicts of the fifteenth century. Here, too, one notices the contrast between the extreme affability and pleasant manner of the Slav Mussulman and the aloofness of his coreligionist at Constantinople. Here there seems to be no dislike of the Schwabi–an elastic term in which the Bosniaks include not merely Austrians (even Austrian Slavs)

and South Germans, but all “Europeans”–while there we are all Giaours, but the subjects of the Aleman Padishah are by far the most acceptable.

Yet another Bosnian capital–the last stronghold of the Bosnian kings–lies beyond Travnik, and is the goal of every visitor. To travel through Bosnia without seeing Jajce would be unpardonable, for it is undoubtedly the gem of the country, and has a beautiful setting. Past a gigantic poplar hundreds of years old, beneath which a famous dervish lies buried, we traversed a smiling country and then climbed up a steep ascent to the summit of the pass. A pleasing landscape, sprinkled here and there with a Bogomile tomb, lies on the other side, and we are soon at the picturesque little town of Dolnji Vakuf, with its ancient clock-tower and old bridge. From this point one line goes off to Bugojno, from which place a diligence runs through the beautiful valley of the Rama to Jablanica, while another traverses the equally charming valley of the Vrbas, and has its present terminus at Jajce. In old Hungarian days the Keglević family, to which the defence of Jajce was entrusted, commanded this valley with a castle, the ruins of which have survived the Turkish conquest. But nowadays this region is of small strategic importance, and since 1895 there have been no soldiers at Jajce.

Of all the towns in the Near East few have such a beautiful position as this last capital of the Bosnian kingdom, where the last native ruler of Bosnia sought in vain a refuge from the invading Turk; where for two generations more a Hungarian garrison held out, as the farthest outpost of Christendom; where, according to the local legend, the Evangelist Luke is said to have been buried beneath the Italian tower that bears his name; and where perhaps the finest waterfall in Europe crashes in thunder from the rocks on which the town is perched into a swiftly running stream below. Round the egg-shaped castle hill, from which the place derives its name of the “little egg,” rather than from a fancied resemblance to the Castel dell’ Uovo at Naples, cluster the black and white wooden houses, embowered in the foliage of the walnut-trees, while the slim Italian campanile of the ruined church looks as if it were out of place in so Oriental a setting. Down in the bazaar, outside the old gate, the Bosnian peasants, in their white clothes with red turbans wound round their heads, are chaffering over the wares. Stalwart Dalmatians, in sheepskins and fragmentary scarlet caps, are buying whetstones for their scythes, and the Catholic women here, as at Travnik, with their hands and arms tattooed, are chattering in the old gateway over their children’s ailments or their new aprons. These striped aprons, made of wool, and almost square, distinguish the women of Jajce from those of the rest of Bosnia. Here the Catholics and the Moslems are in about equal proportions, and, as is usually the case in Bosnia, these two confessions get on much better together than the Mohammedans and the Orthodox. Even before the Austrians came the Mussulmans of Jajce used to send their children to learn their letters in the Franciscan school, and such is the influence of the Franciscan monks, who have played an important part in the history of the country, that we saw one Sunday a peasant woman crawling on her knees round the church, followed by a boy, either in fulfillment of some vow or as a penance for some misdeed that they had committed. We saw, too, a girl kneeling during the whole service outside the door, and learnt that this was a common punishment for offences against morality. Within the church scores of men were kneeling, with their quaint pigtails hanging down from their close-shaven heads, as is the fashion in many parts of this country. And, grim relic of the past, beneath a glass case at the side of the building reposed the

skeleton of the last Bosnian King, Stephen Tomašević, the skull severed from the neck, just as it was cut off by the treacherous Sultan's orders over four centuries ago.

[Rogatica] is, indeed, one of the prettiest places in the country, for it lies, as one might expect of an almost entirely Mussulman town, in a leafy valley watered by abundant streams. Out of its population of 3,300, only 300 are Christians, and it is thus one of the most conservative towns in Bosnia. Thus the Mussulmans have strenuously refused here to allow their daughters to go to school with the Orthodox girls, and have opposed the erection of a new girls' school on that ground. In times of fasting, too, the Mussulman mayor goes round to the cafes to see that none of the faithful are smoking, or even inhaling the smoke of the infidels' cigarettes; any offender is severely punished. Yet in spite of this severity on the part of Mussulman majority, the small Christian minority, which is entirely composed of Serbs, lives peaceably with other section of the community. Here, too, the Mussulmans are noted for their learning, and many of them are begs. In fact, Rogatica boasts of having produced a former Sheik-ul-Islam, or a head of the Mohammedan hierarchy at Constantinople, who founded a mosque here called after his name. A more interesting mosque, however, is that "of the Mufti," in the courtyard of which is a fine Roman tomb–for a Roman road used, at one time, to pass through this place, and Roman remains have been found in large quantities here. The Mussulmans, with their usual disregard for classical antiquities, calmly added two steps of masonry to this ancient piece of stonework, so that in bad weather, when it is too wet to go up to the minaret, the muezzin can mount on to it and call the faithful to prayer. Another stone of a very different kind is a huge Bogomile monument, bearing a very long inscription in Cyrillic letters, which is built into the wall of the new Orthodox church. The builders of this edifice, by way of showing their impartiality, have committed another horrible act of vandalism by cutting in two a fine Roman plaque representing a man and a woman, and putting one piece on either side of the door. Other Roman stones have also been employed by the masons, and the gardens of the barracks and the charming little public garden contain several more. The latter grounds have been beautifully laid out on the bank of a small stream called the Rakitnica or "Crabs'-brook," and are really a model what a small public garden should be. It is here that the Moslems delight to come and take their ease over their coffee, supplied from a Turkish kavana, while in the evening they may also be seen performing their ablutions at the spring called Toplik, which flows out of the rocks near the old Roman road.

© 2008 Omer Hadžiselimović

(Travels and Politics in the Near East, pp. 144-147; 150-160; 202-203; included in Omer Hadžiselimović, ed., At the Gates of the East: British Travel Writers on Bosnia and Herzegovina from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Centuries. Sarajevo, 1989; Boulder, Colo., 2001)

The preceding text is copyright of the author and/or translator and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.