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An American Student in Sarajevo

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This summer I took a class on the city of Sarajevo in light of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Built into this course was the opportunity to go to Sarajevo for a week. I knew immediately that I had to take this class. I am ashamed to admit that I knew very little about the war. I was six years old when the war began in Bosnia. I remember my parents pointing out on a globe where Bosnia was and trying to explain the situation to me a young child. Up until now I only knew bits and pieces about the war. After spending a week in Sarajevo a passion was ignited to fully understand the war and its ramifications, but my question was: Am I capable of completely understanding without seeming patronizing?

The literature I read and my experience in Sarajevo gave me a hands on account of the country, but as an American I have never experienced war in close proximity. Although I have never seen the direct result on my family, my land, and my heritage, I do consider myself to be an empathetic person. I would often ask myself how I can fully understand this war when I have never experienced it myself. I want the people I meet to see that I truly care about what happened, but at the same time I am still ignorant about a lot of the details. I feel as though I am an outsider trying to understand a complex culture, language, and history on my own. I don't want to be seen as indifferent or patronizing when I ask questions. My goal was to figure out can an "international" truly understand the war and its consequences in Sarajevo?

The main character in the post-war Bosnian movie, Remake, went from a work camp to wearing a business suit and presenting his ideas. I cannot imagine having to make that shift and how trivial some things may seem. While watching the movie Remake, I was struck by the international community. While some of the attendants at the party seemed interested, the host that was promoting the main character's script had not even read the script. There is one question asked of the main character that stuck out to me, and it was "Are you a Bosnian, a Serbian, or a Croat?" This question attempts to stratify the man into one simple category. It does not ask of his experiences, it asks him simply of his ethnicity. Although this struck me as cold, I sadly could imagine asking the same question before I went to Sarajevo. When someone knows so little about a subject, these types of questions seem innocent but can come off as offensive and detached. That specific question detracts from the goal that this film was attempting to make. Remake would like to rile people up and make them see how horrific war is. I myself still do not fully comprehend the complexities of the war.

While the international community sat drinking wine, there were atrocities being committed in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We ask ourselves is curiosity the first step to understanding? Is it better to ask simplistic questions than none at all? What is the difference between a tactless and an ignorant question and one that is informative and yet still respectful?

This brings me to the reading of Sarajevo Marlboro by Miljenko Jergović. In the story an American journalist questions a gravedigger. The gravedigger asks what this journalist would like to know and the journalist states “everything”. This answer seems pompous to me. How can the gravedigger explain everything, and even if he could, how will the journalist understand it all? It is this professional hubris that leads us to ask questions that would force someone to compare apples to oranges. The American, when asking questions, shows a detached attitude. Where is the line between journalistic reporting and integrity of understanding? This journalist wants to understand and report on a shallow level. I do not think that he was fully prepared to understand everything. It is this clinical approach that can be offensive to many.

When I was in Sarajevo I asked many simplistic questions. It is true I was curious but I also was ignorant. I went to Sarajevo with one week of intensive background under my belt, so when I arrived I still had many questions. When I was there I went out with two students and I asked them questions. I am sure that some of my questions seemed silly or maybe even have been offensive. My problem was how do I convey to the people of Sarajevo that I care and that I value what they have to say? How do I let them know that I am not just curious, but empathetic and willing to learn? This is the catch 22; ignorant questions can be misinterpreted as detached.

In the anthology, Why Bosnia? Slavoj Žižek asserts that sometimes remaining neutral can be more harmful than choosing sides. In other words, impartiality may not be an authentic method of justice. He suggests that it is the need to be politically correct, to be seen as neutral that inadvertently supported ethnic cleansing. It is also the media that contributes to a sense of justice or no justice. When is it okay to step in? In the movie Remake, I was appalled that United Nations trucks sat by and watched as people were treated inhumanly. The United Nation’s need to remain neutral only gave further power to the war criminals and gave the message that oppression was not ideal but acceptable. It is not only the fault of the United Nations but the fault of the international community that unintentionally allowed the war to continue.

Where does America fit in to all this? America often is forced into a catch 22. If America does not come to the defense or aid of a country it is seen as apathetic and cold hearted. If it does come to the aid then it is viewed as interfering and unilateral. With this power comes controversy and a difficulty in relation to global politics. Although I am American I am also an individual. I do not agree with all of my country’s decisions and face critiques when I go abroad. I then ask myself what is my role as an American citizen?

When I walked by the Ashkenazi Temple I knew that I wanted to go in (since it was currently the only active temple in Sarajevo). I went inside to ask what time Shabbat Services were and to see the temple. The man there did not speak much English and I did not speak much Bosnian, but somehow we were able to communicate. I was able

to speak the several words that I knew that Jewish culture would have in common and it worked! He gave me a tour of the temple and I found out the times of Shabbat Service. Regardless of our backgrounds, my honest quest for answers turned out well. He saw me not only as a tourist but as a practicing Jew and an honest person.

After my experience I guess all I have to offer is more questions. Not only what is the role of my country, but what is my role in humanity? This class only led me to further realize that life is not always about seeing both sides. It is about understanding both sides and speaking out when something is wrong. It is the understanding that morality is not always one sided. Sometimes questions asked may not always lead to the answers one wants to hear. Is America coming to the aid of a country or is America participating in the ignoring of ethnic cleansing? I do not know which is worse. It is with the capacity of being curious and being empathetic that I should ask my questions. At the end, my knowledge was expanded about the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I used to think that I could wholly understand, but now I know that I will never truly be able to comprehend the war and its impact. What I can offer is a genuine spirit of asking questions, seeking answers, and showing I care.

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Editor's Note: The class the author took was "Sarajevo: Surviving Urbicide" at Wittenberg University, Springfield, Ohio, May 2008

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