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Remembering Sarajevo

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The following are three "entries" from An Occasional Diary of Love and War, which the author has planned and partly written and which spans some fifty years of his life in Bosnia – from his early childhood in pre-World War II Sarajevo to the present time.

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The Smile – spring 1939 to spring 1941

Her smile… How I wish I could write an ode to that heavenly apparition with such an ordinary name. But how could I even hint at the flood of emotions which that smile sent pulsing under and across my skin! Like some captivating symphony, it had an overture, two or three movements, and a finale. The overture – a gradually increasing flicker of lips and the skin around them as more and more of the white ripple of her teeth shone into the beholder's soul till all her features became a cantata singing the warmth of her inner being… How can I name the individual movements of the symphony of her smile when no words seem worthy of their splendor? But one thing I am sure of: they were all something *cantabile* because they generated in my body the same chemistry that might be triggered by a gentle melody. One of its movements was indeed a song with the baby-name she gave me – Mimile – entwined into the refrain. The smile's finale was sheer abandon across every feature – from the top of her forehead to the base of her neck – in a dance of sweetness, beauty, and hypnotic exuberance. The smile belonged to Laura Papo Bohoreta – Teta Laura, Auntie Laura, as I called her – one of a small number of Sephardic writers who wrote in Ladino, the language of the Spanish Jews in sixteenth-century Spain, whence the Jews were expelled only because they happened to have a different religion from that of Queen Isabella's.

Then… in the spring of 1941, the Nazis came to Bosnia and Teta Laura was taken away. She perished not at the hands of the living, for the living would have recognized the love and beauty in her every cell, but at the hands of the undead. Life at its most sublime killed by death, by stillborn hominoids. Where was justice? – the six-year-old child in me asked. How can anyone rob a child of an entire galaxy of his emotional cosmos, a galaxy as much begotten of Nature as the Milky Way itself? Yet, in a strange

sort of way, Teta Laura and I have triumphed over the stillborn hominoids. For her smile still warms my soul, while their cold skeletons chill the earth in which they were buried. Her beauty still illuminates my emotional paths, while their remains defile the unsoilable ground. Her memory lives on as a monument to the charm and magic of life, theirs as cosmic excrement.

The Walk – summers of 1940 and 1992

Where are the words to describe the sensations of a five-year-old boy walking with his mother on a summer morning through the web of the streets and alleys of the Baščaršija, Sarajevo's Old Bazaar? Are there words in any language that can play the music of the enchantment which engulfs the child's whole being as he walks in a dreamlike world?

First, there is the air of Sarajevo's early morning. Crisp and silvery, vibrant and scintillating, it seems to be dancing to the rhythm of your own singing heart. It is an air brimming with soothing scents: the fragrance of evergreens from the surrounding mountains, the pungent patina of eternal churches, mosques, and synagogues, the bewitching balm of the food of sultans and rajahs, steaming out of sun-drenched wide-open *aščinicas* [Turkish-style restaurants]…

Then there is the space itself, the poetic geometry of different but mutually complementary shapes and forms of Ottoman, Moorish, Austro-Hungarian, and Secessionist architecture. I have always been at odds with art critics who decry mixtures of architectural styles. Sarajevo's architecture should convince them that amalgams of building styles, like mixtures of people, can produce unexpected, unforeseen beauty. What made Sarajevo unique was the never-ending surprise of new and unusual forms alternating with one another. Even within the "Turkish" quarter, there were always variations on the basic theme. Some shops were closer to the street, others farther away from it, some were in line with it, others slightly slanting. It was as if every builder tried to reflect his unique self in his creation.

Then there is the romance of sun rays hugging roofs that, leaning randomly on each other, seem themselves to be united in a cascade of embraces. Over the roofs – human-shaped old chimneys, minarets, and steeples dancing hallelujahs to the sun. Beyond and above this scene of love and worship – the image of the surrounding mountains veiled with a light haze so as not to be dazzled by the unceasing pageant down in the valley…

Then… on a sunny June day of 1992, after the city had been shelled daily for over two months, I walked again through the Baščaršija. Many of the little old shops had lost their roofs. The great dome of the magnificent Gazi-Husrefbeg Mosque was pierced by shells. The old Orthodox Church was also badly damaged. Wherever I looked, there was rubble and dust. The stone walls of torn old buildings had been blackened by the incendiary fire from the hills around. Baščaršija was weeping bitterly, her face ravaged, her heart shocked and broken.

Yet the feeling of pity in me for those who destroyed Baščaršija's beauty is greater than the horror and bitterness which filled me when I first saw the ruins. For cities can be ruined and built anew, but the evil that was unleashed on the Baščaršija will live on. Every bullet fired on Sarajevo is also a bullet fired at a descendant of the gunman: that child will be marked for life as a member of the same group – ethnic, religious, or whatever – of those who murdered everything that did not belong to them and thus bequeathed to their offspring a burden of guilt. A guilt that nothing, nothing,

nothing can wipe clean.

The Mosque – autumn 1943, summer 1992

Some events stand out in memory because they somehow touch the innermost layers of the soul. One such event in my life is a visit to Sarajevo's four-century-old Gazi Husrefbeg Mosque with my father who, as a deeply pious man, felt it to be his duty to take his eight-year-old son to Friday prayers.

It was a mellow autumn midday, and the two tall lime trees in the courtyard of the mosque had shed some of their russet jewelry onto the stone pavement of the courtyard. Shifting to and fro in the breeze, the leaves gave the pavement the appearance of a moving mosaic. The dark-green pavilion in the middle of the courtyard sheltered a fountain protected by metal bars elegantly curved into a dome, the purl of the water in the fountain conjuring up images from *A Thousand and one Nights…*

Although I had been in the Gazi Husrefbeg Mosque before, it was on this occasion, for some inexplicable reason, that the beauty of its interior first revealed itself to me in its full magic.

I have been inside many beautiful places of worship (my favorite sights on my travels), but none seems to match the harmony and proportions of Sarajevo's main mosque. The central domed area is large but not vast, the decorations are plentiful but not overwhelming, the colors are many but not excessive. The small windows just beneath the dome are not made of stained glass, thus allowing natural, untinted light to shine on the panoply of colors within the mosque, weaving their way through carpets, walls, and calligraphies. The raised porches on each side within the entrance, the undulating pillars of their balustrades elegant in red-brown walnut, provided a fitting welcome of divine harmony and counterpoint.

When the imam started reciting Qur'anic verses in Arabic, heaven itself descended into the mosque. His melismata – winged chariots to another world, his tremolos – heartbeats of ecstasy, the pauses between verses – silence resounding with majesty. The myriad ornaments a massed choir joining the imam in celebration of divine glory. The prayers' faces aglow with poetic piety. The very air of the mosque ablaze with celestial reverberations…

I have since heard imams recite the Qur'an in many parts of the Muslim world but none seems to have equaled the imam of my childhood in Sarajevo's Gazi Husrefbeg Mosque. I once heard the following explanation from a Turkish Muslim: the Ottomans conveyed to the Bosnian Muslims a *kiraet* (a Qur'an reciting style) from over four hundred years ago, which the Turks have largely abandoned. Might the incredible beauty of the Bosnian *kiraet* be inherited from an era in which the quest for beauty was a focal point of human life, in which beauty was at the heart of every human creation?

Then… in the summer of 1992, after four months of shelling and thousands of rockets fired at my beloved city, I took a walk to the Baščarsija and passed by the Gazi Husrefbeg Mosque. What I saw still makes my whole being reel with pain. The courtyard with its lime trees, the fountain, the minaret, the pillars, the outside porch, the dome – everything was marked with shell scars, everywhere there were holes fetid with looting and vandalism. The whole place looked like a scene from a horror film showing the passage of an alien monster through an earthly edifice, a monster mindless of the earthly concerns of humans…

It seems to me that of all the crimes against humanity, crimes against places of worship are among the most abominable. Whatever our relations to the gods, there can be no denying that to millions of ordinary humans places of worship are shrines of transcendental hope, that prime sustainer of human life, sanctuaries of tradition and social identity that energize the very heartbeat of culture, holy places that provide shelter from suffering and anguish. To kill a church, a synagogue, a mosque, or any other place of worship is to kill the umbilical cord of hope, culture, and identity.
Let us pause and think of those who could easily have stopped the killing of everything that calls itself Bosnian – from human flesh to human hope – but failed to do so. And let us extend our thoughts to those who could have stopped the murder of everything Jewish half a century ago, of everything Protestant some two hundred years ago, of everything Indian some five hundred years ago, of everything… the list seems almost endless. Did those who failed to stop genocide and every other kind of '-cide' that man is capable of ever think that they themselves might one day become the victims, that they themselves might yearn for help that never comes? Will anyone stop this cycle of indifference, or will it lead on to the annihilation of humanity, the only light at the end of the tunnel of moral blackness we seem to be living in?

—The Hague, spring 1995

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