Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

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

A Letter to Noam Chomsky from a Bosnian Colleague

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Dear Professor Chomsky,

My name is Midhat Ridjanović. I am professor emeritus of English and linguistics at the University of Sarajevo. I came to the United States in the fall of 1966 on a Fulbright fellowship to do graduate work in linguistics at the University of Michigan and, in 1967, obtained a Master's degree. Thanks to a Prize Scholarship from that University, I continued my studies towards a Ph.D., which I acquired in 1969. My thesis on verbal aspect was published in the U.S. in 1975. My love of linguistics inspired many of my students in Sarajevo to continue to educate themselves in the field and become linguists of international renown. One of them is Željko Bošković, whom you know personally and who has made important contributions to the development of the Minimalist Program.

Soon after my arrival in the States there was a "linguistics party" at the Halles' residence in Boston, which I attended. I was introduced to you and we talked for about ten minutes (you gave me good advice on the choice of topic for my Ph.D. thesis).

I matured linguistically during the heyday of American structuralism. I found many things wrong with it and was preparing to write a critique of some of its basic premises. Then, your Syntactic Structures appeared and I experienced it as a new bright sun on the linguistics horizon. I have since read all your major books in linguistics, each new one deepening my appreciation for your brilliant ideas. Having written several articles and delivered a few lectures on generative grammar in Sarajevo and other major cities in former Yugoslavia, I became something of your linguistic ambassador in this part of the world. Then I started reading your political books and articles and discovered that your political views were almost identical to mine (though I would have pleaded for more self-management, the political framework which approaches mostly the utopian "rule of the people"). You became my idol, both linguistically and politically.

When in 1992 sovereign Bosnia was attacked by Serbian fascists, who started committing what have been described as some of the worst atrocities in European history, everybody expected you to stand up for the innocent victims. Instead, you sided with the fascists, supporting their claims about fake concentration camps and other laughable allegations aimed to cover up their crimes. When I read your shocking

statement “Trnopolje was a refugee camp, people could leave it if they wanted,” I couldn’t believe my eyes. Link. By now, after 18 years of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in the Hague, there are literally hundreds of thousands of pages of irrefutable evidence that what the Serb fascists did in Bosnia was aggression and genocide pure and simple. The evidence includes undeniable facts about Trnopolje being a horrible concentration camp, whose inmates were tortured and killed. People who commit genocide cannot be called anything else but fascists. You have condemned fascism many times in your writings – why did you side with fascists this time? Is it because, as a staunch critic of American imperialism, you automatically place yourself on the opposite side of the American government, especially if military intervention by the U.S.A. is part of the picture? This is bigotry and blind adherence to one’s ideology with no regard for consequences, however disastrous they may be. By siding with Serb aggressors you have aided and abetted the murder of at least 100,000 innocent people, the abominable “ethnic cleansing” of large parts of Bosnia, and the break up of Bosnia which was for centuries a model of religious tolerance. Does it not shame you that a number of liberal-minded Bosnian intellectuals, including myself, have written about you as an accomplice in these heinous crimes?

Most of the information on Bosnia disseminated in the West comes from Bosnian writers and historians with a nationalistic bent. The truth is that Bosnia is not a multi-ethnic or a multi-cultural society – until about 150 years ago there were no Serbs and Croats in Bosnia and today’s Bosnian Serbs and Croats are descendents of Orthodox and Catholic Bosnians who were persuaded by priests and teachers from Serbia and Croatia to call themselves Serbs and Croats so that Serbia and Croatia could come to their help if they are harassed by the Turks. Both Serbia and Croatia have since tried – on the pretext of defending Bosnian “Serbs” and “Croats” – to divide Bosnia between themselves; in the last war, their “help” came in the form of invading soldiers. Serbia and Croatia have as much of a claim on Bosnia as they have on the U.S.A. (which is home to large populations of Serbian and Croatian descent). If you learn more about the true history of Bosnia, you will discover that the sole aim of the Serbian attack on Bosnia in the last war was aggression and conquest.

Professor Robert Donia of the University of Michigan, a historian specializing in Bosnia, wrote in one of his books that a Bosnian never even laid his hand on another Bosnian because of a difference in religion. The best proof of traditional religious tolerance among Bosnians is found in the incredible story of eleven distinguished inhabitants of Sarajevo of Jewish faith, who were imprisoned by Ruždi-pasha, a new Vizier (governor) of Bosnia, appointed by the Sultan in 1820. The Pasha asked for a huge ransom and threatened to decapitate the Jews unless the money was paid by a certain date. The ransom amount was so high that it could not possibly be paid by the Jewish community of Sarajevo, so one of their leaders appealed to the Muslims of Sarajevo for help. The following day over 3000 Muslims went to the Pasha’s palace and, risking their lives, requested that the Pasha release the Jewish captives, which he did. This story was first told in the book *The Sefardim of Bosnia,* published in Sarajevo in 1962 and written by the chief rabbi of Sarajevo Moric Levi (later also published in *Jevrejski glasnik* (The Jewish Herald), a monthly publication of the Jewish community of Sarajevo). I would like to remind you that this episode took place at a time when anti-Semitism was rampant in Europe and when Jewish people around the world were

deprived of basic human rights.

Prof. Midhat Ridjanović

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