Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

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

To Be (or Not To Be) a Student under Siege

Lejla Panjeta

From April 1992 to the end of 1995, at the University of Sarajevo, there was no scoring, no grade percentages, no Bologna Process evaluations, no debating, no PowerPoint presentations, and no URL references in bibliographies. During the war, we used pens and old notebooks. An old typewriter and an improvised wick lantern were indispensable for writing term papers and essays. No one worried about plagiarism because there were no books to plagiarize, or there was just one single book accidently saved from the university library, or someone's private collection for all the students and their professors to share. The price of saving it was one less wood fire to help warm up the dinner.

The collected works of Kardelj and Tito cooked the most food. Communism had collapsed, but it was still feeding its people. Unlike today, when a simple negative sentence, "There's no state", has become too common in everyday speech.

What are we actually saying when we proclaim that there is no state? There are borders, there is police, traffic on the street flows as normal, we have electricity, water and, mostly available to all, food and roof over our heads. On Google's satellite map we look quite good. You can see our natural beauties, our prospective pyramid and room for building better highways. Our historical and cultural monuments are attracting people with backpacks and cameras from all over the world. We even have music for our anthem with no words. However, all these are side issues, a mere set design. We had none of this during the war, and yet this saying did not exist.

When we say that there is no state, what we mean is that there is no feeling of belonging, no sense of security, no patriotism. Human beings are by their nature social. The need to protect our young in packs is in our DNA. This anthropological imperative is presently missing. When we say that there is no state, we are thinking about the present and the future, on generations that are yet to come and on that which they will become without the sense of belonging and the support of a socially cohesive system.

The university's social eminence in passing on knowledge to younger generations is exactly what gives that sense of belonging. During the war we had nothing, but we were the students of the University of Sarajevo. We studied in Sarajevo. We were part of the University of Sarajevo community. We had the sense of belonging and the

support we needed. We knew that University of Sarajevo had our back, because we were the students at the university. The University exited for us, and we existed for the University. As a result, the only sense of belonging that I have today, is to the University of Sarajevo. I was a student there during the war, and now I am a professor. Perhaps there is no state, but there is the University of Sarajevo and it survived. It survived when there was no electricity, water or food, and when people died during class or on their way home from class. My only real sense of belonging, which can be compared with a sense of belonging to a state, is the feeling I have for the University of Sarajevo, mostly based on my memories of studying there during the siege of Sarajevo.

During the siege of the University of Sarajevo, all physical expressions of knowledge, such as books, were destroyed. Classes could take place anywhere. Some professors you had to visit at home, because they were too afraid to come out onto the streets. There were even those who literally wouldn't come out of their shelter for a year at a time. On the other hand, we had the majority – the crazy, eccentric professors who came to lectures and pretended that nothing out of the ordinary was happening. If there was a massacre on the street, and you came in late for a lecture, you would still get an absentee mark. These oddballs would never turn a blind eye. If the work that you spent the whole night typing on an old, borrowed typewriter, by the candlelight, was not up to scratch, it would end up on the fire heap, helping heat up classrooms where 'windows' were but old plastic sheets supplied by the UN peace keeping forces.

These eccentrics were actually the true measure of normality. To be normal where everything has been abnormal for a very long time, means to be abnormal yourself. But being abnormal in a world where anything is abnormal, means trying to maintain a modicum of normality. And that norm is not determined by your profession, but by your life calling. To be a teacher and a student, and both at the same time (because real teachers never give up in their quest for knowledge) meant seeking that little bit of more time, just a few more moments in this world, which awaits for so many answers and poses so many questions.

Being a student meant to fight for the indestructibility of knowledge, not just in its physical forms, but in spiritual passion for discovery and learning. The will for life reflected itself in the adrenalin-fueled experience of surviving, in order to learn and understand more. To be, meant having a child's curiosity for the world around us, no matter how abnormal this world appeared to be. So when you face the dilemma of normality in a state of siege, I think the answer to that is the student, who choosing to learn, chose simply to be. To learn, was to be.

This particular kind of escapism helped preserve the normality. We lived for the moment and we didn't need yoga, fitness, gym, meditation, or any other various techniques for healthy living, espoused by the new age philosophy of the "live in the moment" type. We were emotionally healthy, because we lived the surrealist vision of abnormal in normal. We looked death in the eye, and simply chose to be.

The common school paper topic „From home to school", became exactly the question of to be or not be. Making sure to arrive punctually to a lecture was not just about avoiding being absent from class, but avoiding being absent from life. Escapism in

learning was a form of gratitude for surviving to live another moment.

On your way from home to school, you run into a little bit of blood on the pavement, bits of human brain in the grass, a human liver on a tree branch. You briefly contemplate this and then you get yourself away from the intersection where there's a gun fire. You lurk in hiding, waiting for the right moment when it will be least likely you will get a bullet in your head if you move. That is how you win yourself a small victory during the war. You get to school. At school, you sit peacefully while the bombs fall outside, the walls shake and the wind blows at those UN plastic sheet windows. Believing they have the power to protect you from the death itself, you sit quietly and scribble what the professor is saying about the Napoleonic Wars. You are happy that you didn't miss the class and grateful for the well-timed arrival which means you missed the bombing.

Pretending that we still lived in our previous lives, we played a kind of a game with our professors. We pretended that everything was as it was before, and they escaped to their pre-war lives and enjoyed the authority they had before.

Classes take place, exams are held just like before the war. And we have fun just like before the war. When there is no bombing, we sit in the parks, playgrounds, apartment stairwells. We play the guitar, sing. Unplugged. All in all, student days pass in the illusion of normality. Everything is the same, but everything is different. In fact, we are different, everything is different, and so it seems that everything is the same. That's why for us everything that was not normal was normal.

You are answering a question about chemical compounds, and breath vapor escapes from your mouth. Professor follows your answer, and writes down a grade in some kind of an improvised grade book. The luckier ones managed to retain their pre-war grade books or managed to acquire unused ones. The grade books still bear the old national emblem with golden sheaves and a five-pointed star on top. Bloody red symbolism. Gone now, washed from the streets. Some of it by rain, which as a rule always falls after a "solid" massacre; some by well-meaning neighbors. A demon still hovers around those places, and they are to be avoided. In time, they become sacred. You know, over there died that many people; that guy from the fifth floor of my building lost his head just over here and there on that spot is where those schoolgirls were massacred, and so on. As more time passes, there is more and more of these sacred places. Up until the point where every piece of the pavement becomes its own sacred place. In sacred Sarajevo, everything is sacred. Everything can have a dual symbolism.

Do not move when the first bomb hits. Wait for three. Never gather the whole family in one place. If you want to go somewhere, then go. If you get scared and come back, maybe a direct hit is waiting for you in the living rom.

On the balconies instead of flowers, people grow tomatoes, carrots, parsley, potatoes, herbs. Everything to help spice up that which is missing – animal meat. Not human meat, that is everywhere. There are vegetable gardens even in public parks, that is unless someone isn't already buried there. The lack of electricity, water, food, heating. All of these are not, and cannot, be an excuse for not participating in the learning

process.

There were, however some canceled classes too. That was when the city was really beaten to the ground with shelling. Recently, I visited the U.S., to give a lecture about short film in Bosnia. On the second day of lectures it started snowing, or to be more precise, it started sprinkling with snow. All classes at the university were canceled. There was not even enough snow to temporarily cover the roads. However, the university was worried about road safety, especially on campus where it could come to a car accident. Due to unsuitable driving conditions, potential victims might sue the university.

This incident reminded me of our University, with its similarly dramatic situation. We were forced to cancel classes due to shower of bombs, and they, due to shower of snow. The only difference is that our students did not have anyone to sue and still do not have, thanks to the foreign systems that we've accepted as evident, while rejecting our old ones based on the "if it was any good, it wouldn't have fallen apart" premise.

I think this logic is bad, because even though we say "there is no state", we can also safely say, "there is university". Under bombing and under reforms, the university survived and will survive, due to the curious in search of knowledge for whom this need is a reason for existence. Again, even today, it stands that 'to be, means to learn'.

When asked about his miracles, and what he detests the most, Jesus (or Isa) said the following: "The Lord gave me the power to bring to life the dead, to bring back eyesight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, but the power to cure a fool, he gave me not" (Razi Marmuzati Asad, Hadiths of Isaa). Ignorance is curable, but human stupidity is not. We can guard ourselves from it, if we learn to see through propaganda of those whose sole aim is power and profit, and who, to reach those goals, are prepared to start wars between brothers and neighbors, to kill women and children, to fire with snipers on civilians and stray dogs.

It was in fact the University of Sarajevo that spat out three key figures of the Serbian Democratic Party who established the propaganda of threat and started the war. Fear of that which is different creates nationalistic and religious beast out of a man, who by one stroke of the brush erases all the knowledge and education, giving way to madness and justification of devastation and bloodshed.

Our system of general education, which included emphasis on quality as well as quantity, was one of the best in the world. Only we studied what the unemployment rate was in Madagascar or what the national rate of tractor production was in Brazil. And you know what? Our heads didn't explode from it. We were richer and freer.

The only drawback of our old system of education was that students did not get to practice enough their presentation and persuasion skills, in other words, how to sell their ideas. Our education system was lacking only one thing – instilling confidence and self-esteem into students. Fear of the teacher, developed in the early years of development, was instead, instilled in the students. That is exactly where the ideological creators of the siege of Sarajevo come from. Manipulating our sense of vulnerability digs deep into the tribal conscious of man and operates with the

archetypes of Good and Evil which subconsciously divide people in to us and them. What results is a hegemony with nationalistic tendencies and propaganda that speaks in stereotypes about the evils of others (them).

This in turn creates the need to defend ourselves, even though the perceived threat is just a well-served illusion. The need to defend becomes an attack, and that's how war and genocide are created.

This process is comparable to a student gripped by a stage fright before an oral exam. The surge of adrenalin and panic he or she feels is completely disproportionate to the actual 'threat of attack' before them. Except that students do not kill their professors. Maybe the before mentioned persons should never have been allowed to graduate.

Contrary to the unfounded fear which initiates aggression, university during the war was free of fear and was a form of resistance. Resistance of students and professors to the madness that besieged them from the surrounding hills, sowing death and mutilation of Sarajevo from above. We looked Dali's reality in the eye, and saw the meaning and futility of life and death.

The life of a Sarajevan student is a copy of Dali's dreams. Surrealism was created as a response to the meaninglessness and absurdity of war's bloodshed and destruction. It was a cry of the subconscious and the repressed to preserve the normality in dreams.

The reality of our actual siege and manipulated subconscious obsession of our oppressors is normality of abnormal in surrealism, which was guarded by professors and students at the University of Sarajevo. This is what allowed us to survive the madness of war. This experience should be left to coming generations as a reminder, a formula that can be recognized in the language of hatred, in manipulation of archetypes of Good and Evil, propagated stereotypes that speak to our tribal consciousness. The next generations need to recognize and destroy this virus of nonsense. The virus of stupidity and the animal within ourselves can only be defeated by learning. Fear of that which is different to us can only be assuaged by learning about that which is different. That is why there is no greater joy than victory over stupidity and ignorance.

There is still a lot to learn from these recollections. I think that for everyone, their own misfortune is the greatest. By nature, the humans lean toward forgetting and repressing. Because we survived hell, we think that hell cannot happen again. I would like to remind us that it can, by mentioning places where it is happening right now: Libya, Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Bahrain, Egypt, Yemen, Japan. I would like to ask for a minute of silence to commemorate all the victims of human and natural disasters, and all the victims of the siege of Sarajevo.

University of Sarajevo survived the siege, thanks to the students and the teachers for whom to be, meant to learn. Knowledge enables us to be free.

I hope that we can, thanks to the University, and without any external help, once again be able to say "there is state". So my conclusion for the day is: Let's enjoy the surrealism of Dali's art as observers, not as subjects, with the wish and hope from Kemal Monteno's song: "Let it never be repeated".

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