Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne
An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal
Međunarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezični, online časopis

Cinema Liberty

Adin Ljuca

“Hello?” Saša answered.

“Hello, it’s Adin, hello . . .” From the phone booth, I raised my voice over the clattering of a passing streetcar.

“Adin, man! You’re alive? Alive, damm, you’re alive! Where are you calling from?”

“From Zagreb.”

“Yeah, I can hear you’re in Zagreb. How did you get out? Man, I thought you were dead. You went through hell. I saw it on the news . . . Where exactly are you?”

“In a phone booth.”

“C’mon. As if Zagreb only had one phone booth! Where are you now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Look around and tell me what you see, any signs or—?”

“Cinema Liberty.”

“Okay. Listen. Get on streetcar nine towards Ljubljanica. I’ll meet you at Selska, the next-to-last stop.”

We sat in Saša’s friend Ružica’s place catching up. A month ago Saša had managed to flee besieged Sarajevo with a stroke of luck and the Red Cross. He was in much better shape already after a month in Zagreb. A month ago I’d taken a direct hit from a shell in my foxhole, but by some miracle all the shrapnel missed me. The blast, though, had rattled the brains in my skull and the marrow in my bones—even *the very soul* left over in my war-wasted, hundred-and-ten-pound body. Medical referral in hand, it had taken me a month to make my way to Rebro Clinic in Zagreb. My head was a black hole of detonation and sedatives. Rebro didn’t want to accept me, even with a referral. At the admitting desk, the nurse snarled: “We Croatians turned the other cheek to you Muslims. And just look what we got in return!” I didn’t get upset. I didn’t care. All I wanted was to get the hell out of that war. I no longer was afraid of death. “Let a streetcar run me over—fine. Let a flowerpot fall on my head, an absurd death—that’s

fine, too. Whatever. But to be slaughtered or blown up by a grenade, no way in hell. Goddammit, it's the end of the twentieth century. Out in the world people are dying of AIDS, but here it's medieval. We're getting butchered with knives!"

I contemplated my next move. "Rebro's a big hospital. There must be a Muslim doctor somewhere." I traipsed from door to door, scanning the name placards. For the first time in my life I wasn't looking for a person, but for a *Muslim*. I soon spotted a doorplate bearing a Muslim-sounding name. I knocked on the door and was in luck—the doctor was in her office. "You're Dr. So-and-So?" I called out to her. "Yes," she hollered back, "Please come in." Inside, as I told her my story, she burst into tears and opened up about herself. She'd worked at Rebro for years but had been born in Mostar. Her only sister had stayed behind, and now . . . . But I had no tears left to shed.

"We'll do all the tests, including a CAT scan," she continued, "but I don't know how to get you a bed in the hospital."

"I don't need one. I've got a place to crash."

The next few days she led me around the hospital by the hand, from specialist to specialist. Finally she gave me the diagnosis: "Your condition will improve, though in the future you might have some memory problems. I don't know exactly how to explain it, but that explosion wiped out some spots in your brain. You probably won't be able to learn and remember the way you used to."

"That's fine. I've got plenty of things I'd like to forget," I said, failing miserably as usual in my attempt to sound witty.

Later that same day I bumped into a guy from Sarajevo on the street. He told me Saša was in Zagreb and gave me a phone number, which I immediately dialed. Later on, catching up at Ružica's, Saša pulled out a stack of poems he'd written in Sarajevo. I read them, one after another. They were about killing and evil, but without a trace of anger or hate.

"Do you have any?" he asked.

"Man, I was in a foxhole, and there's no poetry in foxholes," I said, reaching into my back pocket for the single poem that had congealed in my head in the bus, on one of the legs of my escape from war-split Bosnia, on the so-called Corridor (or rather *Wild Goat Trail*) of Life. I handed him a piece of paper folded into quarters.

As soon as he read it, Saša started bounding around the room, hugging and congratulating me. His reaction surprised me. I was pleased by but also skeptical of his praise—Saša's always exaggerating. He grabbed the phone, cast me a profound glance, and began dialing. Somebody answered immediately. "Tomaž," he said, "listen and learn how to write poems!" He recited my poem into the receiver and then repeated it one more time at the listener's request. Saša even managed to keep his mouth shut for a moment or two before wrapping things up. "OK, I'll send it to you tomorrow," he said, slamming down the receiver. During the conversation I'd surmised this *Tomaž* was the well-known poet from another of the newly-minted

Balkan republics.

“I’m supposed to copy and send your poem to him immediately,” Saša explained. “He’s gonna go to Germany in a few days for some literary mingling. He wants to translate your poem and present it at a festival!”

It turned out I wasn’t the only one who wanted to get the hell out of Croatia—Saša also wanted to disappear. Zagreb hadn’t exactly been the most pleasant or welcoming place lately. Both of us lived under constant threat of the cops whisking us off the street, dressing us up in Croatian uniforms, and shipping us back to Bosnia. Back to the front. And it wasn’t that easy just to pick up and flee. At the Croatian border, the guards wouldn’t allow any draft-age men who didn’t have a special exit permit to pass. The Western countries had already gotten smart and had stopped accepting people holding visaless passports from the now-defunct Yugoslavia. But, fortunately for us, the East (as usual) lagged behind the West. Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Poland—not to mention a few others—would still accept us. Saša and I agreed we’d go together. He insisted on Krakow; my vote was for Prague.

“Man, how did you come up with Krakow?”

“Don’t you know all the giants who were studying there?” He began rattling off names. “Tesla, Ivo Andrić. This guy, that one, and remember—”

“And don’t YOU know what great beer they have in Prague? Not to mention the women!”

We had to decide fast. Zagreb was getting way too hot for comfort. In the end, we settled on Prague. I don’t recall why, but we traveled separately: Saša flew via Vienna while my train departed two days later, connecting in Budapest. I was by myself in the compartment. In Hungary, approaching the border, the conductor shook me awake.

“Wake up, sir! Romanian smugglers are in the next compartment. If they catch you sleeping, they’ll rob you!”

“Thanks for the warning,” I said, “but I really don’t have anything worth stealing.”

I peered into my bag: only a pair of socks, underpants, and a few books of poems I’d bought in Zagreb for a song (they were literally giving away anything printed in Serbia and Bosnia, especially in Cyrillic). I only really had to keep my eye on my passport, which was ridiculous. I was traveling with the passport of a country which had de facto ceased to exist, yet was still decaying, hemorrhaging. Its breakdown was a case of metastasis, with pathological cells devouring healthy ones, constantly multiplying uncontrollably until they dropped dead along with the dying organism. Disgusting.

The compartment door opened. A short drunken Romanian murmured something. I gathered he wanted a cigarette, but felt repelled by his drunkenness, his stench, and so threw him one (I’m never that impolite, but I didn’t want him to touch my cigarettes). Ten minutes later he came back, demanding another one. “No way!” I snapped. Eyeing the water bottle on the tabletop under the window, he sat down on the seat across from me and blurted, “Vodka!” The clear glass container didn’t have a

label. “It’s not vodka, moron. And I didn’t say you could sit down.” He didn’t understand or just pretended not to. Whatever. “Vodka!” he slurred, lurching for the bottle. I jumped up, grabbed the scruff of his neck, and kicked his ass out of the compartment.

Believe it or not, it’s a true story. My one hundred and ten pounds had ballooned into five hundred pounds of pure fury. And the guy wasn’t even heavier than me, just a featherweight. “If he comes back with his posse,” I raged to myself, “I’ll show ‘em vodka. Smack upside the head!”

He didn’t return. Instead, the Czechoslovak customs inspectors burst in. Ignoring the drunken smugglers in the next compartment, they dragged me, my problematic passport, and my suspiciously scanty baggage off the train and into the customs booth. Stripping me of my passport, they left me waiting in a filthy corridor with barred windows during its inspection. I didn’t get too fired up—at least I could smoke there and still had enough cigarettes. “Hey, my train’s gonna leave!” I told them. “There’ll be another one,” one of the inspectors answered. I paced nervously back and forth, puffing. “How lucky is that, my fellow Slavs,” I uttered to myself under my breath, “at least we can somehow understand each other!” After a while, they eventually called me in for questioning.”The purpose of your trip?” “Tourism,” I answered laconically. Two or three hours later they actually released me, the very moment the next train to Prague arrived. At parting, one of the inspectors even clapped me on the shoulder and politely wished me well.

It was about 4:30 A.M. when I finally arrived at Prague’s main station. Before I’d left Zagreb, my father’s friend had pressed a one-way ticket to Prague and three hundred Deutschmarks—starter money—into my hand. And somehow thirty or so Czechoslovak crowns had made their way into my pocket. Saša, who was supposed to have picked me up, was of course nowhere to be found. He was late—typical! Not knowing what else to do, I bought a can of *Staropramen* beer from the Czech change, using up almost all of it. Saša finally showed up at nine. (Saša’s always thinking in rapid fire—much faster than mere mortals. He usually sees several moves ahead, but normal everyday things he does at a snail’s pace. And he’s clumsy as hell!) Two days earlier, my friend Jiřina, a good-looking and enterprising Czech girl I’d met on the Adriatic Coast before the war, had collected him. Without her, I honestly don’t know what we would have done. We didn’t know anyone else in Prague. Jiřina let us stay a week for free (local calls for answering Room for Rent ads included) in a room in the former student dorm she’d bought and turned into a hostel after the Velvet Revolution.

After four or five days, we managed to find a cheap room. The landlord, a former gymnastics champion, was now a day laborer in construction—and a heavy alcoholic. We called him by his nickname: Bohuš. He was kind-hearted but insufferable when drunk. The apartment was dreary, our landlord desperate, and the two of us were literally shitting our pants because of the horrors of war and of refugee living. Bohuš didn’t have any extra bedding to offer us, and we were broke. And he only had an old semi-automatic, or rather hand-operated, washing machine. Saša and I had never seen such a wonder of technology—or shall I say, museum piece—and immediately christened it Perestrojka. Once I tried to wash the little underwear we had. Perestrojka ate two undershirts; I freaked out and vowed never to use it again. Jiřina

(or rather her husband, a doctor in a large suburban hospital around the corner) saved the day for us again. “The simplest thing is to do,” he advised, “would be to get bedding from me. I work the night shift, so the hospital provides me with clean sheets. I’ll give you each a set from now on—we’ll exchange dirty linens for laundered ones once a week. Don’t bother buying anything or fussing with washing and ironing.” So that year living with Bohuš, that’s how we managed: Saša and I slumbered every night on sheets stamped in indelible ink with the name of a hospital and the number of a particular shift. My letters to my refugee friends scattered around the world opened with lines like: *This week started off with number seven, Kukoč’s basketball uniform . . . or, Today I awoke to number five (Sretenović) . . . .* [1]

Saša and I signed up for Czech at the very best academic language school—it was expensive as hell and populated mostly with Western grad students; they’d waived our tuitions since we’d just fled a war zone—but in just a couple of weeks I had to drop out and earn some cash. I found a job in a workshop for leather accessories, where every day I’d stand eight hours at the leather-trimming machine selecting the proper quality and thickness of skins before cutting out pieces for bags, backpacks, wallets, and other related crap. Because leather is so expensive, they made sure I wasted as little as possible, and they deducted each and every mistake from my pay (itself one-third less than that sorry mess of a language school I’d dropped out of). Unlike me, Saša always somehow had some money in his back pocket—every now and then, a friend would think of him and send a mark or two. I didn’t have any friends who could do that. So I shuttled every day from the apartment at one end of Prague to the workshop on the other side of the city. On the bus or streetcar, I’d memorize Czech words from my pocket dictionary in those two hours before and after my eight-and-a-half-hour shift. At home I’d try to rest, but wallowing in depression isn’t exactly relaxing. Now and then I tried to put a poem together. Meanwhile Saša went on learning Czech, shutting himself up in the apartment, and going out of his mind worrying about his girl, still stuck behind in besieged Sarajevo. And of course he wrote poems. We had nothing to read so we wrote (as newcomers to Prague we didn’t yet know it had the world’s largest specialized Slavic library). One day Saša presented me with one of his numerous *ingenious* plans: “We’ll take turns writing poems for each other. One day I’ll write a poem for you to read, and the next day you’ll do the same for me.”

To make a long story short, we were broke and lonely, yet we were young and thirsty for everything. Saša kept on proposing ideas. For example, how could two guys squeeze the most fun out of the least amount of money. “I found this Latin American night club: fifteen crowns to get in and beers for ten each. If we take the last subway downtown we’ll be there at midnight. We pay at the door and we can limit ourselves to a beer an hour and a pack of cigarettes each. We make it an all-nighter and leave at five A.M. with the first subway. All that for a grand total of 200 crowns!” “And where,” I sighed, “are we gonna get 200 crowns?” Another time, exhausted from work, I met him at the doorstep: “I’ve got a plan! We’ll just sit down and write a letter to Tomaž. Remember when I called him in Zagreb? He said he’d send me a couple of bucks if I was really in need. He’s a friend. And knows both of us. Just think how much he liked your poem! Remember he knows what kind of dire straits we’re in (blah, blah) . . . . We just have to make him read between the lines (blah, blah). . . .”

“Listen, Saša, don’t do it.”

“Why not? He’s rich and famous. And he’s my friend.”

“You won’t get any money and you’ll lose a friend.”

“How can you tell if you don’t know him personally?”

“I’ve read him. I know his type.”

“Aw, Adin, c’mon. That’s bullshit. You’re not a fortune teller, are you?”

Yes, I’d known Saša forever. Always asking my advice and never following it except that one time back in Zagreb when we chose Prague over Krakow. I didn’t have the patience anymore for pointless discussions with him. “Write whatever you want,” I hissed, “just be sure you don’t mention me.” A few days later I got back from work and found Saša chain-smoking, pacing the floor, depressed out of his mind, and on the verge of tears.

“What the hell is going on?” I asked dumbstruck, fearing the worst from Bosnia.

“Nothing,” he said.

“Don’t bullshit me—what happened?”

He hesitated a moment before handing me a picture postcard from Ljubljana he’d gotten earlier that day. From Tomaž.

“Oh, that shit?! I was afraid something had really happened.”

“Just read what he wrote.”

“Why, goddammit, would I ever read that? What were you expecting?”

What Tomaž actually wrote was this: *Sure, I understand, but lately I’m having troubles of my own . . . .* Complete bullshit! The only clear and unambiguous thing on the whole postcard was a bit about how he’d started working on a new collection of poems he’d gotten a fellowship for. But he couldn’t make up his mind whether or not he should write them in Barcelona, or in Prague . . . . And he was asking Saša how things were in Prague . . . .

“Saša, that’s none of my business. Stop your bitching and get out of my sight! I don’t wanna see you like this and I can’t afford to be pulled down by such bullshit.”

Saša was literally sick for a couple of days after, but I kept on mercilessly ignoring him. After the fourth or fifth day, when I got home from work, he met me at the door with a broad smile and a kind of fanfare.

“Oooh, Adin, my man! Where’ve you been all this time? I’m throwing a little party for us, and you’ve been nowhere to be found. I bet you’ve found a little hottie in that leather works of yours?”

I immediately knew he'd written a good poem. But I had no idea yet what it would be about and just how good. He ushered me into the kitchen. On the table was a plate of two sliced tomatoes (the beautiful and expensive but tasteless and rubbery kind) and a few pieces of feta cheese, arranged nicely. And next to it was a little flask of cheap Moravian plum brandy.

I sat down. "OK, show me what you've got."

I barely remember my own verses, but that poem, made up of several scenes from Prague and situations we'd lived through together, immediately stuck in my memory. Saša begins by addressing his friend Tomaž, a famous poet, who's wondering whether or not to write his new collection of poems in Barcelona or in Prague: *In Prague you can see a tour group of the blind testing the guide's eloquence with their white canes: Gothic portals, Baroque vaulted spaces* . . . . In Prague you can also see how: *In the Latin American night club, with drunken Quechuas lying on the tables at 3:30 A.M., Prague girls fall into hopelessness like Bosnian cities on the radio news* . . . . To sum it up: a man in Prague can really see a lot, only if he really wants to—even if he's blind. At the end of the poem, Saša advises Tomaž to stay at home, anyway.

"What do you think? Should I send him the poem?"

"Send it," I said, "and you'll never hear from him again."

Of course he sent it; no answer ever arrived. Yet soon afterwards, we changed our address and moved away. We moved away from our landlord Bohuš. We left the apartment that wasn't a hospital for us—but it was our madhouse. We moved away from the days, from the nights in which we were fleeing into dreams, tucked into our bedding and pillowcases stamped with the name of a hospital and the numbers of a shift.

We changed apartments and bought new bedding.

(2005)

Translated by Wayles Browne and Stephanie Krueger

Notes

1. Toni Kukoč and Zoran Sretenović. Well-known professional ex-Yugo basketball players in the 1990s. ↩