



Erica Johnson Debeljak After the siege

Dayton's short-term goal of stopping hostilities was accomplished through the *de facto* partition of Bosnia. But its long-term goals of refugee return, reconciliation among ethnic groups, and gradual merging of the administrations of the Croat-Bosniac Federation and Srpska Republika into one functioning federal government have not been accomplished. Erica Johnson Debeljak returned to Sarajevo in 2004 to find its inhabitants' heroism during the siege between 1992 and 1995 still unrewarded.

In January of 2004, I spent several days in the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo. Sarajevo, once familiar to the world because it hosted the 1984 Winter Olympics, is now far more known for the infamous three-and-a-half-year siege of the city that began on 5 April 1992 and ended on 21 November 1995 with the signing of the American-brokered Dayton Agreement. I think that nearly anyone who watched both of these events on television or read about them in newspaper and magazine articles would have to agree that the latter — that is to say the siege — was by far the more riveting of the two entertainments. After all, the siege of Sarajevo had in abundance what organized sports events only rarely muster: it contained all the necessary elements of first-class, epic, human drama.

The ongoing backdrop to this drama, what produced a growing and nearly unbearable tension for the outside world (let alone for the Sarajevans experiencing it firsthand), was the long-term deprivation of the city's 380 000 inhabitants to food, water, and electricity. Having visited the city during the height of winter, I can attest to the misery the lack of heat alone must have caused. My hostess, Vojka, said that when she used to leave a glass of water overnight on the kitchen counter during the winters of those years (water, of course, having been a commodity as scarce as heat during the siege and one that you did not casually toss down the drain before going to bed) it was usually frozen solid by morning. Vojka told me that during winter nights she used to sleep in a pair of ski pants and her full-length mink coat — a rather elegant response to hardship, but one that she was lucky to have because, from the little I could tell from a January weekend spent in Sarajevo, without it she might have woken up frozen solid herself one morning.

Siege, a painstakingly slow method of warfare, is a military tactic that we most often associate with ancient walled cities, battering rams, and Trojan horses. It has become relatively rare in modern times: not, I believe, for ethical reasons (after all, bombing civilian settlements from airplanes, an accepted contemporary military tactic, is not particularly ethical either), but simply because most armies have neither the manpower nor the patience to encircle a city and sit down and wait for capitulation. Yet in the somewhat special case of

Sarajevo and the Bosnian war of secession from Yugoslavia, a prolonged state of siege was accomplished by Serbian paramilitary units (both former Yugoslav Army soldiers and the newly constituted Bosnian Serb forces) who apparently had nothing more pressing to do. And, perhaps even more importantly, it was carried out by Bosnian Serb civilians who either passionately supported the policy of ethnic cleansing or just went along for the wild adrenaline-filled ride. These various forces surrounded Sarajevo, located unfortunately for its inhabitants in a bowl of steep mountains, and cut it off from its power supply, the airport, the rest of Bosnia, and, with the exception of some media transmissions, the rest of the world as well.

Of course, the encirclement of the city alone might not have possessed sufficient dramatic action to hold the attention of a fickle international news audience. For that, spectacle and the tantalizing presence of evil were needed. The siege of Sarajevo, as it happened, offered something even more tantalizing than standard-issue wartime bad behavior by soldiers following orders. It offered the special frisson that accompanies the blatant, repeated, and collective defiance of the most basic taboos governing human civilization *by seemingly ordinary people*. This second ingredient in the drama was embodied in particular by the so-called weekend snipers who perched in the hills around the city, scanning the streets and capturing individual urban dwellers — as they stood in line to purchase a kilogram of flour, for example, or shook a carpet over the railing of a balcony — in the cross hairs of their rifle sights. Then in a small and quiet instant — perhaps when the sniper's prey paused for a moment to wipe an errant strand of hair from the eyes or to ponder a remembered snatch of conversation from earlier that day — bang! Somewhere up in the hills a finger pressed down on a trigger and down below a human being fell to the ground and a dark patch of blood began to spread on the gray pavement stones.

Shocking, yes. But unfortunately the perpetration of evil, even by seemingly ordinary people, has become somewhat less shocking given the many horrific events that took place in the last century and that continue into this one, and given our increasing awareness of these events through the mass media. It seems to me, therefore, that the most important ingredient in the Sarajevo mix — without which the whole thing might have been simply too dispiriting to follow — was the heroism, the breathtaking heroism, with which the Sarajevo people combated the evil that had permeated their daily lives. The men who refused to hide in basements but set out each day to scavenge for firewood, to swap a family heirloom for a bar of soap, or to help dig a grave for the son of a friend; the women who refused to stop wearing make-up and high-heeled shoes as they dodged bullets on their way to the Bas Carsia marketplace; the ethnic Serbs of Sarajevo who, ensuring a life of social ostracism from their fellow Serbs, refused to join their brothers in the hills; the *culturati* who refused to stop putting on theater and film festivals; the journalists who refused to stop reporting from the Oslobodjenje newspaper building even as it was destroyed by mortar fire; the poets who refused to stop writing poetry even as Sarajevo's beautiful old library was burned to the ground; the young lovers who refused to stop loving each other even as they were gunned down in a final mad dash across Sniper Alley; the legendary Sarajevo coffee house crowd who refused to stop meeting for coffee even when there was not a single drop left to be had in that dark and besieged city.

This was the stuff of great drama, to be sure. International journalists and even celebrities flocked to the city, either allowed in by Serb forces (who themselves had difficulty resisting the publicity) or sneaking through the 800

meter tunnel that was dug from the city to the foot of Igman pass in order to smuggle arms and food and journalists in, and those who were badly wounded or simply couldn't take it anymore out. These journalists and other visitors came to witness and, perhaps just as importantly, to participate at least for a while in the city's defiant heroism; it was a bracing stimulant in an otherwise cynical and morally confused time. And to be fair to this voyeuristic band — for they have often been criticized as lowly gawkers at a human zoo — many forged their political and ethical souls in the siege of Sarajevo. Many made deep and lasting friendships and eased the lives of their new friends by bringing in coffee, currency, soap, and cigarettes, and not least by telling the city's story to the rest of the world. And what's more, quite a few of these lowly gawkers lost their lives in Sarajevo and elsewhere in Bosnia and the former Yugoslavia doing these very things.

Yet however intense, however bracing, this battle between good and evil was, it alone might not have been enough to elevate Sarajevo's story to the level of epic drama. Looked at with the jaundiced eye of the critic — the high-end movie producer or literary agent — it might have seemed just a little bit too obvious: the victims too virtuous, the bearded evildoers too savage and irredeemable. What was needed therefore to raise this story above a hackneyed struggle between stereotypes was the anguish of a moral dilemma that would engage the hearts and spirits and intellects of those regarding the spectacle; a moral dilemma that in fact would almost make the observers complicit in the evil. This final necessary element was provided in spades by the United Nations and the international community as its various branches and organizations attempted to fairly balance the requirements and demands of the victims and their killers, of the besieged and the besiegers, of the foolhardy flaneurs of the streets of Sarajevo and the snipers who gunned them down.

But all of what I have described so far is little more than a review of the past. It is, to a greater or lesser degree, common knowledge. What remains largely unknown — or known only to those few who seek out the information — is the denouement of Sarajevo's story. What happened afterwards? The dramatic climax to the action was Dayton and the immediate end to hostilities. The snipers retreated from the hills. Daily life resumed free of mortal danger, or at least to the same extent that daily life is generally free of mortal danger. The airport opened. The electricity came back on. A glass of water left on the counter overnight no longer froze by morning. The toilets flushed after a three-year hiatus — Vojka had reported to me without a trace of irony that those who left Sarajevo during the siege did so not because of the fear of death, but because they could no longer take the pervasive smell of shit emanating from the city's nearly dry sewage system. And the great eye of the global media shifted its gaze to other dramas.

But what happened to Sarajevo after the siege?

Preparing to visit Sarajevo in the winter of 2004, I felt a certain sense of trepidation, or perhaps more accurately a sense of significance, that I would not have felt if I were setting out on a weekend trip to Salzburg or Milan. I have lived in the region now known as the former Yugoslavia for over ten years: in Slovenia, the small fraction of the doomed federation that has successfully divorced itself from the Balkans badlands and joined the European Union in May 2004. On this occasion, I had been invited to participate in a press conference by Vojka Smiljanic-Djickic, the vibrant and tireless editor of a magazine called *Sarajevo Notebooks*, a publication featuring the work of authors from all the former republics and aimed at the still elusive

goal of reconciliation.

Visiting Sarajevo nearly nine years after the siege has ended, the sense of voyeurism, if not the heroics, still lingers. Sarajevo was once one of the shiniest jewels in the former Yugoslavia — a common destination for honeymooners, pensioners, and anyone else who yearned for a taste of the exotic East. The features that made it a desirable tourist attraction were precisely the same features that made it a desirable (indeed a necessary) target for the former Yugoslavia's ethno-nationalists: the Ottoman-style Bas Carsia market with its oriental fountain and its narrow streets crowded with copper craftsmen, carpet dealers, and gypsies; the splendid Gusi Husrev Beg mosque that shares the small patch of real estate that is downtown Sarajevo with the oldest Serbian Orthodox church in Yugoslavia, one of the few remaining synagogues in this part of the world, and a Catholic Church built when Austro-Hungary reigned. Even the city's lovely but vulnerable geographical position in the midst of the hills exerts a special charm: the steep stone paths winding their way up from the market toward the higher residential neighborhoods, the embrace of forested slopes all round. And, of course, there is the renowned cosmopolitan lan of Sarajevo's inhabitants — their casual inclusiveness, their wry self-deprecating sense of humor, the pervasive feeling they give that there is all the time in the world to gather around a small table, talk and laugh and consume several cups of Turkish coffee along with several packs of western cigarettes. Fortunately, I can report that many, though perhaps not all of these features survived the war. But ironically, Sarajevo's most appealing features as a tourist destination today are not its considerable charms, but instead the physical and psychic wounds of the very war that aimed to annihilate it.

And so, sitting beside Vojka in her borrowed jeep as she ferried my husband and me in from the airport to the city, my gaze was immediately activated by the voyeuristic impulse: the desire to locate traces of Sarajevo's harrowing experience. And I was not disappointed. There was plenty to satisfy the grim hunger of my gaze. Scanning the streets, my eyes took in the small pockmarks left by sniper guns on virtually every single city building. They took in the much larger craters caused by mortar shells striking cinderblock facades and, most spectacular of all, the blackened architectural ruins that still punctuate Sarajevo's urban landscape: the Hotel Europa, the National Library, the rows of socialist-style apartment blocks that had been located nearest Serb gunner positions. More unseemly than my visual appetite was my restless need for anecdote. I could not engage in a single conversation with a Sarajevan without a silent and parallel conversation going on inside my mind: "What happened to you?" I wanted to ask them. "What is your story? Did you ever, as the Bosnian poet Semezdin Mehmedinovic recounted in one of his poems, Óslow down at the bridge to watch some dogs tear a corpse apart by the river'?"

Fortunately for the voyeur in me — and, I came to believe, unfortunately for the Sarajevans — I never needed to articulate such questions. The information was almost invariably volunteered. Like a drowned body, it bobbed up sooner or later to the surface of virtually every conversation. The experience of the three-year siege has so irreversibly fused with the souls of those who lived through it that it has become the central, almost the defining characteristic of them as human beings.

Shortly after meeting Vojka, she recounted the moment when the first surreal shell fell on Sarajevo. She was having a dinner party at her home with her husband (a retired diplomat and an extremely handsome man as I could not

help but notice since photographs of him were prominently placed in every room in Vojka's house) and another couple — a well-known Sarajevo architect and his wife. Vojka said that the four of them almost burst out laughing when they heard the whistling sound followed by an explosion; it seemed so absolutely unbelievable, so completely absurd. The next morning, the absurdity continued. Vojka went out on her balcony where she was almost struck by a sniper's bullet. After that, Vojka and her husband began to sleep in a windowless pantry. Then they moved down to the relative safety of her daughter's house for the duration of the siege.

In 1995, Vojka returned to her house alone. Her husband died from massive heart failure ten days before Dayton. She views his death, and who can really blame her given the circumstances, as a casualty of war.

Hours after that conversation, I sat down in a bookstore caf  with a friend of my husband's named Ferida. She told me immediately — I hardly had time to remove my scarf — precisely what she carried away from her childhood home when, struck by a mortar shell, it caught fire and burned to the ground: one plastic bag of clothes, "women's things" as she put it, and one plastic bag of books. Ferida's generous smile opened beneath two melancholy eyes. Her family never returned to the house, she added before I could ask her. They haven't the money to rebuild it. Then she smiled again and said as an afterthought: "My father still goes there to tend his vegetable garden."

The next day we strolled through the cold wet streets of Bas Carsia with Senadin, a philosopher-soldier, who fought with the Bosnian Army during the war and now is completing his doctorate in Florence. He casually points out Vase Miskina street where the famous Bread Line massacre took place in May of 1992 and, a little farther along, the market square where the single worst massacre — 66 killed and over 200 wounded — occurred toward the end of the siege. This is Sarajevo's new geography, its new scenic route.

That evening at dinner, I asked Devan, a young man who produces an annual theatrical festival, why so few seemed to fear for their life during the siege, why so few remained hidden in basements and cellars as I suspect I might have done. He shrugged and commented that fate began to seem entirely random. "Death will come for you or it will not, in Sarajevo and elsewhere. So you might as well go out for the evening if something interesting is on." He recalled one acquaintance who did fear obsessively for his life. He got out of Sarajevo and, not long afterwards, in Zagreb, a car ran him down. You can't outfox death. This is Sarajevo's new philosophy, its new lan.

The day after the press conference, Vojka's American friend, Chuck, took us for a drive to see the sights. He didn't bother asking where we wanted to go. Sarajevo's essence has been diluted to scenes of war. So that is what we set out to see. First he drove us up into the hills to get a sense of how close the snipers were, of what an excellent shooting range they had. The poorly plowed roads were coated in a slick layer of snow. Cautiously, we slowed down here and there to peek through the trees, down into the fish bowl of the city, towards the figures of people moving silently through brown and white streets. To the sides of the road, bright red signs stood out from the snow-coated forests, marking off large tracts of land. The signs, featuring skull and crossbones, warned of live mines. Sarajevoans, sardonic as ever, call them the Bosnian equivalent of private property signs. When the road became too treacherous, Chuck turned the jeep around and we headed toward the airport and Dobrinja, the part of the town where the famous tunnel — Sarajevo's sole functioning artery during the

war — originated.

The tunnel — now the Tunnel Museum (an unfunded private enterprise run by Edis Kolar under whose house the tunnel starts) — provided yet another lesson in the near impossibility of imagining extreme or absurd situations from afar, the impossibility of viscerally understanding the lay of the land. Like many others who were both fascinated and morally outraged by the siege, I had read plenty about it and about the tunnel as well (in some ways, my own political soul was forged in the wars of Yugoslavia, having arrived in the region only a year after Slovenia's successful Ten Day War and in the midst of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia). But I had got it all wrong. For one thing, I had always imagined a broad, clean, sandy passage. Looking back, I think I substituted a tunnel from my San Francisco childhood, one that burrowed under the dunes and emerged on a wide Pacific beach. But Sarajevo's tunnel is narrow, low, primitive, and damp. At no point does it accommodate more than one man astride. Indeed, the flow of people through the tunnel had to be carefully coordinated as it did not permit two-way traffic. At many points, the rough mud and beamed ceiling looms as low as three feet.

With a melancholy smile — melancholy smiles are one of the more common facial expressions in Sarajevo — the tunnel-keeper recounted the story of the very tall Swedish ambassador who came to visit Sarajevo during the siege. Spurning the hospitality of the Serbs who offered him safe passage through their territory, the ambassador chose to go through the tunnel instead and paid a high price for his principles. Into a city whose hospitals, being a frequent target of shelling, were in poor working condition, he emerged with a gash on his forehead requiring ten stitches.

Approximately four thousand people went back and forth through the tunnel each day. Every able man who passed through was required to carry fifty kilograms of goods (food and munitions) on his back and twenty-five in his arms. A bag weighing precisely fifty kilograms stands as an illustration at the entrance to the tunnel and, to my surprise, I could barely lift it off the ground. Vojka remarked that she had once complained about the exorbitant prices on Sarajevo's black market and an unruffled salesman had retorted: "You try walking through that tunnel every day, lady."

My greatest misconception about the tunnel (and I have since discovered that I share this with others, some of whom visited and wrote about Sarajevo) was that it led from Bosnian Muslim-controlled Sarajevo to the airport. But a glance at the map tells a very different story. Serb forces occupied all of the hills around Sarajevo with the exception of Mount Igman. Blocking access from the city to this crucial territory was not Serbs, but the UN-controlled airport: the last segment of the noose around Sarajevo's neck. Previously, I had imagined that the tunnel terminated at the airport and that fleeing Sarajevans popped their heads out on the foggy tarmac where scenes reminiscent of Casa Blanca were enacted; Ingrid Bergman in the role of the lovely, besieged Sarajevo and Humphrey Bogart — providing documents and safe passage — the hard-boiled world-weary UN. But, in fact, nothing could be farther from the truth. Kolar squinted toward the airport, visible some four or five hundred meters away. "Before the tunnel was built," he told us, "people would run across that meadow trying to get to Mount Igman." But in order to control the airport, the UN had entered into an arrangement with the Bosnian Serbs to only allow limited humanitarian aid in and, above all, to let no unauthorized people out. So when UN officials manning the traffic control tower at the airport discerned figures moving through the darkness, they illuminated the meadow

and the runways and Serb snipers on either side of the corridor shot them down. It was a perverse sort of collaboration. Finally, the only choice of the besieged Sarajevans was to dig a tunnel that went clear to the other side of the airport, to the foot of Mount Igman nearly a kilometer away.

"Hundreds were killed running across that field before the tunnel was built," Kolar told us. His expression was appropriately serious but also oddly animated — even tender. Like his many visitors — the tunnel is perhaps the single most visited site in Sarajevo — Kolar becomes strangely nostalgic at the recollected heroism, at the memory of his backyard as killing field, the craftiness and bravery and hard work that were summoned to evade the peculiar collection of forces arrayed against him and his fellow Sarajevans. He cannot imagine doing anything but running the tunnel museum. "I see my future in the tunnel," he said half-joking.

Driving back to Vojka's, we took a brief detour. In a neighborhood that could not be more than ten minutes by car from Sarajevo's center, I noticed that the signs were no longer written in Roman script, but in Cyrillic instead. Chuck turned to me with the artificial smile of the tour guide: "Welcome to Serbian Sarajevo!" I stared in disbelief. The Dayton Agreement had brought peace to Bosnia, at the price of dividing it into two separate administrative and geographical units — the Bosniac-Croat Federation and Srpska Republika — but I had no idea that the Serbian part was so close to Sarajevo, that it actually began within Sarajevo itself. "But Bosnian and Serbian children, they go to the same Sarajevo schools, don't they?" I asked dumbfounded. Vojka replied flatly: "No. Different government, different police force, different schools. We learn about the marvels of democracy and multiculturalism and they learn that Radovan Karadzic and Slobodan Milosevic are heroes. Some Bosnian Serb children don't even know there was a siege in this city."

Chuck, who has worked on and off for the international community in Sarajevo during the last decade and a half (and, to his credit, resigned in protest during the siege itself), responded with slight defensiveness: "Some progress has been made. No more check points." This last comment came just as we reentered Sarajevo proper and just before we passed a pair of Federation cops lounging against a parked car. Vojka added: "And we shop for groceries on the Serbian side — it's cheaper over there."

Such is the terrible banality of the denouement of Sarajevo's dramatic siege. The people of this city walked through a wall of fire. They defied death. They thumbed their nose at evil. They lost their houses and their husbands. They lost their children and their grandchildren: scattered to foreign countries. Many who left as babies and small children no longer speak the language of the grandparents who remained behind. And now nearly ten years later, all Sarajevans have to show for their staggering bravery and for their staggering loss is the ability to shop at each other's stores without being killed. When Bosnians fill out census and other types of forms, they must mark the box that indicates to which ethnic group they belong: Bosniac, Croat, or Serb. If you are half Croat and half Serb and are married to a Bosniac — or if you happen to consider yourself to be above all a citizen of Bosnia and not a member of an ethnic clan — you must check the box marked "other". The very identity that the people of Sarajevo struggled to keep alive during the siege has been marginalized.

Dayton's short-term goal of stopping hostilities was accomplished through the *de facto* partition of Bosnia. But its long-term goals of refugee return,

reconciliation among ethnic groups, and gradual merging of the administrations of the Croat–Bosniac Federation and Srpska Republika into one functioning federal government have not. The reluctance to amend Dayton and improve Bosnia's prognosis as a viable, united country persists despite the fact that, of the three principal signers, two are dead (Franjo Tudjman, former president of Croatia, and Alija Izetbegovic, former president of Bosnia) and one (Slobodan Milosevic, former president of Serbia) is on trial at the International Court of the Hague for genocide and war crimes. Any flickering hopes of renegotiating the flawed parts of Dayton were even more drastically dampened following 2003 elections in Bosnia (in both the Croat–Bosniac and Serb parts) and in Serbia proper. All produced more or less extreme ethno–nationalist governments.

If Sarajevo's story were test–marketed as a film, the audience would leave the theatre with a sense of disgusted outrage. They would unanimously demand a more satisfying and just conclusion to this tale of epic heroism. Better, like the famed Trojan women, to be annihilated in a blaze of glory, they would say, than for the action to sputter out in such a demoralizing fashion. In this respect alone, the 1984 winter games in Sarajevo were a superior entertainment than the great siege of the nineties. For at least during the Olympics, the fellow who skied the fastest — with the greatest elegance and daring and flair — was named the winner of the contest and walked away with a gold medal. But after Dayton, the ostensible winners, the Sarajevans, walked away with nothing: nothing that is but a degraded peace trophy. The very same constellation of good, bad, and morally ambiguous prevails in Sarajevo after the siege as did during its height. The good guys were not victorious, the bad guys did not recede under a cloud of shame and remorse — instead they were rewarded with their own mini–republic — and the international community, churning out bureaucratic forms that reflect the moral values of the city's former besiegers, continues to play the same morally ambivalent role: part benefactor and part betrayer. The perfect Trojan Horse.

It might seem frivolous or even coldhearted to regard the very real events that took place in Sarajevo as a sort of theatrical play. But indeed the shortcomings of the siege in terms of dramatic logic are identical to its shortcomings in reality. It lacks internal cohesion and integrity — closure if you prefer — which is why the city and its people still almost seem to ache, why their smiles remain melancholy, why they see their future in a tunnel. Aristotle stated that genuine dramatic tragedy must contain two plot devices: *peripeteia*, which is the reversal of fortune, and *agnorisis*, defined as a climactic recognition of what hadn't been realized before. In the case of Sarajevo, neither of these occurred. *Peripeteia* would have meant that the segregated conditions that were cemented during the siege would be reversed, and *agnorisis* that those who unleashed evil on the city of Sarajevo would have recognized it for what it was and might even have come to regret it. Dayton was concluded for one reason and one reason alone: to stop the carnage, to secure a peace, any kind of peace. I remember how much we in Slovenia, sitting at the remote edge of the cauldron, longed for peace. It almost seemed that we could not rest without it; I can only imagine how the Sarajevans felt. But the flawed peace of Dayton plunged the city of Sarajevo, and indeed all of Bosnia, into a permanent state of purgatory. Not hell, but not heaven either. Not hell, but not yet ordinary life.

There is a small bookstore and coffee house in downtown Sarajevo across the Miljacka River from the Skenderija district. It is called Buybook and functions as a sort of watering hole for the literary crowd. Indeed, most of the people I met in Sarajevo I met at Buybook which, like a magnet, tends to draw you in

toward the end of a cold winter day. The coffee is hot, the smoke is thick, and the atmosphere congenial. Buybook also carries an excellent selection of English language books, much better than in other parts of the former Yugoslavia, no doubt a consequence of Sarajevo's sizable international community. On three islands next to the wall of literature is arrayed a vast collection of books about Bosnia itself (*Bosnia -- A Short History* by Noel Malcolm, *Bosnia -- A Cultural History* by Ivan Lovrenovic, *Yugoslavia -- A Concise History* by Leslie Benson, *Bosnia and Hercegovina -- Tradition Betrayed* by Robert J. Donia, *Balkan Reconstruction* by Thanos Veremis, and so on and so forth). Arranged all together like this -- in the book stores of London and New York they would be scattered among political science, philosophy, travel, and other non-fiction categories -- the books seem to let out a howl of pure anguish: "Let this experience have meant something! Let our courage and our loss have meant something! Learn from us!"

My first reaction when I heard the silent pleading of the books was the same as I had had to conversations with Sarajevans, the same as I had during walks through town having sights of massacres and ruined landmarks pointed out to me. It all seemed so utterly pointless, so anti-climactic, so pathetic: to have such extreme heroism followed by this limp compromise. Upon reflection, however, I realize that we must continue to view Sarajevans as our heroes, that we must learn from their failure, and, more importantly, from our own.

The siege of Sarajevo and its aftermath remains relevant. It remains relevant even after September 11, which pushed Bosnia over a new cliff of oblivion (and, in one more absurd twist of fate, cast Bosnia's Muslim victims, many of whom have become more observant since the war, into an increasingly suspicious light). Not long after the failed attempt at nation building in the former Yugoslavia, the United States and some of its allies moved on, despite their apparent distaste for the activity, to other more ambitious attempts -- in Afghanistan and now in Iraq. Whenever America braces for a new bout of nation building, it invariably recalls not the failures -- Bosnia and others -- but its two great success stories (those where *peripeteia* and *agnorisis* actually did occur): namely, post-war Germany and Japan. Intellectuals and historians ponder why these two cases were successful. Some refer to the fact that Germany and Japan had been utterly defeated militarily, in a way that the Bosnian Serbs, the Baathists, and the Taliban never were (the latter two having simply melted away from the battlefield). Some point to the vast amount of political capital and, equally crucial, money poured into these two countries during the Marshall Plan and its Japanese equivalent. Others mention the historical presence of democratic and enlightenment values (which might explain success in post-war Germany, though not in post-war Japan). But very few, if any, mention the absence in these success stories of so-called "ancient ethnic hatreds". Germany and Japan were homogenous societies. When they found themselves defeated, wounded, and weary, sick of war and death, they put their remaining energies into the rebuilding process. Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Iraq are emphatically not homogenous societies, and when they found themselves defeated, wounded, and weary, sick of war and death, they amazingly still found the energy to stoke their internal divisions, an activity that inevitably has catastrophic consequences for successful nation building. Though its representatives would be loath to be counted in the same company, even the relatively peaceful European Union today faces a similar nation-building challenge: how to construct common identity, goals, and leadership in a deeply heterogeneous society.

Currently, the only response on offer to solve the problems of divided societies (Pashtun against Tajik, Sunni against Shi'a against Kurd, Serb against Croat against Muslim, New Europe against Old) is democracy. Democracy and free elections are held out as silver stakes to be driven through the heart of ethnic, religious, and national sectarianism. But this solution also fails to heed the lessons of history. Consider: in contrast to today's situation, in 1953, nearly a decade after the previous total war that swept Yugoslavia, Bosnia represented a brilliant nation-building success. Economic output exceeded prewar levels. Refugees had returned to their homes in significant numbers. The rate of intermarriage between young adults of different ethnic groups was on the rise. But that recovery and reconciliation occurred not after the most recent war, but after World War II. And it was guided not by democratic leaders, but by the iron hand of Marshall Tito. Totalitarian governments have always been relatively successful at suppressing internal divisions (ancient, ethnic, and otherwise). The introduction of a democratic free-for-all tends to exacerbate these divisions, to cause individual groups to jockey, sometimes violently, for position. I am not suggesting that we encourage the creation of homogenous states (through ethnic cleansing or other means) or that totalitarian rule is superior to democratic rule. Only that perhaps it is time to stop drawing lessons from our rather distant successes, and instead begin to learn from our more recent failures. Before we forget the heroes of the siege, let us learn from the defeat of their values.

On the night before I left Sarajevo, I stood on Vojka's balcony, right at the spot where she'd been shot at on the first morning of the war. I gazed down at the lights of the city. "Oh, I wish they'd all come back," I sighed. I was thinking in part of the scattered refugees, all the children and grandchildren, the brothers and sisters in the Netherlands, Switzerland, Canada, Australia. But I was also thinking of the moral clarity of the siege, the defiance, the dramatic grandeur of it. Now all dissipated. Now all for nothing.

Vojka stood in the doorway behind me looking down at the same lights glittering faintly in the dark bowl of Sarajevo. She answered my wish with one of her own.

"I wish I'd left Sarajevo and never come back."

Vojka longed not for the return of the refugees, but for their fate. However violently the past is ripped away from them, refugees have nothing if not the future. Sarajevo has only its past.

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