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Sarajevo's Enduring Optimism

Having witnessed mankind's capacity for violence, it is demonstrating the capacity to rebuild with art that nourishes and heals.

By REIF LARSEN OCT. 2, 2015

In June, at the end of a long day, I found myself wandering down the Ferhadija, a 16th-century pedestrian way that runs through the heart of Old Town Sarajevo. On warm evenings the walkway swells and churns until it resembles a river of humanity — people come out to see and be seen, to promenade and take in the rhythms of the city as children dart between legs, young lovers stroll arm in arm, and the distant heave of an accordion echoes down an alleyway.

Lined with cafes, the Ferhadija begins at the eternal flame World War II memorial on Marshal Tito Street and moves east, backward through time: The concrete Socialist-era buildings give way to the elaborate pastels and corniced facades of the city's Austro-Hungarian period, before finally ending in the Bascarsija, the old Ottoman district, where you walk past serene courtyards filled with introspective Muslim worshipers, the hush of a centuries-old public fountain, and stalls selling a rainbow of spices, traditional copper coffee pots, and the ubiquitous cevapi, a glorious meat-in-a-pita concoction.

This collision of past and present lends the city a hyperreal texture, as if you are walking through a postcard come to life. Whenever I roam through Sarajevo's labyrinthine streets, I am amazed that it is not overrun with more tourists, for while the city's compact size makes it feel accessible, its complex collision of cultures gives it an air of enduring mystery.

"Sarajevo is a latitudinal city," explained Amir Vuk-Zec as we sat sipping coffee in one of the city's many cafes. Mr. Vuk-Zec, perhaps the most famous architect in

Bosnia and Herzegovina, spoke in rapid, self-contained maxims, like a prophet on too much caffeine. In his left hand he held a clutch of drafting pencils. "To understand the soul of this city you must see how it runs west to east, like this." He took one of the pencils and began drawing a diagram of the lateral movement of the city on the back of our bill. "It is a long bowl, you see? It is a touchable city."

Could a city, as Mr. Vuk-Zec claimed, truly have a soul? And if you destroyed much of this city, rained artillery down upon it day after day, year after year, and then rebuilt this city all over again, would it still be the same city as before? These were some of the questions I posed to a range of Sarajevan artists, architects, designers and theater directors on my visit this past summer.

Since the siege ended almost 20 years ago, Sarajevo has become a working laboratory for such questions, made all the more fascinating by its rich, layered history. One could make the case that Sarajevo, long poised on the fault line of empires, has seen more tumultuous events in the last 150 years than any other city of its size. It has witnessed firsthand the handover from Ottoman to Austro-Hungarian rule; the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, which instigated the First World War; the rise and fall of fascism; the rise and fall of socialism; and then that horrific war in the 1990s, one of the first wars whose atrocities were televised in real time for a global audience.

And yet the beautiful, cosmopolitan, worldly city that has persisted through all of this remains an undiscovered treasure trove for the visitor, like a mini-Istanbul tucked away in the Dinaric Alps. To visit Sarajevo is to witness both our modern civilization's greatest sorrows and greatest triumphs.

"We have too much history!" Bojan Hadzihalilovic told me with a smile. "We don't know what to do with all our history!" Mr. Hadzihalilovic is a graphic designer and a former member of the legendary TRIO collective. During the war, TRIO produced a series of now-famous posters in which they inserted Sarajevo's name into various quintessential designs: Coca-Cola, Absolut vodka, Edvard Munch's "The Scream." "I WANT YOU TO SAVE SARAJEVO!" ordered Uncle Sam.

It was one of many examples of Sarajevans' humor and invention in the face of great suffering — resisting the hell of war by getting on with the business of creation.

"I would never want to live through that again," Mr. Hadzihalilovic said. "But during the siege we were at our best as citizens." Sarajevo will first enchant you with its physical beauty, but it is the people who will make you fall in love with it.

I first fell under Sarajevo's spell in 2008. I had just finished my first novel and was in search of source material for my second. I was in that particularly vulnerable and naïve state when you are hunting for stories, ears up, eyes open, ready for an unfamiliar world to unveil its secrets.

After taking the 10-hour train ride down from Zagreb, Croatia, I arrived in the city blurry-eyed and disoriented. To get my bearings, I decided to trace the route of the River Miljacka to my hotel, passing by Sarajevo's many bridges, including the five stone arches of the Latin Bridge near which young Gavrilo Princip fired his fatal shot at the archduke.

At some point during my walk, the muezzin struck up the azan, the evening call to prayer, his syrupy voice reverberating across the valley from the many minarets that dotted the skyline. After a moment, these intonations were joined by a deep peal of church bells: an Orthodox wedding. This was the audio collage of a city that for centuries was constructed around the tenets of coexistence; a city where you will find a mosque, a Catholic church, an Orthodox church and a synagogue all within 300 yards of one another.

Such cultural intermingling occurs against a dramatic backdrop of Alpine mountains that border the city on three sides, clutching this delicate urban cord in their collective palm. The proximity of their elevation is startling. These were the same mountains that once hosted the 1984 Winter Olympics, Sarajevo's glorious coming-out party to the world, a high-water mark still referenced by nearly everyone I talked to. And these were the same mountains that, only eight years later, enabled the Bosnian Serb Army to encircle the city and torture its populace for 44 months, dropping an average of 300 shells a day, and killing more than 11,000 people, according to the Research and Documentation Center. Sarajevo's topography, source of its astonishing beauty, also became its great curse.

"These mountains where I once played as a child, now they had become this place of death," Nihad Kresevljakovic would later tell me as we shared a coffee from

the top of one of Sarajevo's skyscrapers. Mr. Kresevljakovic is the artistic director of the Sarajevo War Theater, which was founded during the siege and now stages contemporary Bosnian productions. He pointed across the valley toward Mt. Trebevic, site of the Olympic bobsled course and also some of the heaviest artillery positions during the siege. "You came to see space totally differently. You knew which places were exposed, which angle the snipers could see you from."

I asked Mr. Kresevljakovic why people would go to the trouble of opening a theater in the middle of a siege, when many were without the most basic necessities. "During the war we had empirical proof that art and culture are as important as water and food," he said. "The theaters were full of people. The audience risked their lives to see the show. They knew they could be killed and they still went."

During that first evening in Sarajevo, I found myself standing in front of a once-grand building now lying largely in ruins, its windows boarded up, its crenelations collapsed, soot marks staining its walls. A sign announced that an art exhibition was being held inside. I could not resist entering; these are the types of quarries from which novelists source their materials.

What I would find out only later was that this building was the famous Vijecnica, or Town Hall, a pseudo-Moorish construction that had become emblematic of the city's entangled cultures. After World War II, Vijecnica became the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a move that would eventually seal its fate: Just before midnight on Aug. 25, 1992, the library was targeted with incendiary shells by the Bosnian Serb Army as part of a larger strategy to decimate the cultural legacy of Bosnian Muslims.

The building burned for three days. Despite the best efforts of the city's firefighters, who battled weak water pressure and persistent sniper fire in addition to the flames, more than a million books were lost. Ashen pages could be seen drifting across the city for weeks afterward, forgotten words raining down upon a heartbroken populace.

The exhibition inside the ruins of Vijecnica turned out to be a retrospective of the late Croatian artist Edo Murtic featuring his never-before-seen "Viva la Muerte"

cycle, which included huge black-on-white canvases of skeletal army officers, medals adorning their ribcages, their arms thrust in fascist salutes.

The art was dramatic but the setting even more so. To view Murtic's work, his lamentation of mankind's horrors, you navigated through what had become a cathedral of these horrors, past piles of rubble, past plaster peeling in blooms; at one point I ran my hand against the wall and it came away black, smelling of thousands of lost books. The very bones of Vijecnica cried out with our astonishing capacity for violence but also our capacity to persevere and to manifest art that nourishes, heals, reminds, rewrites. I left the exhibition bewildered, tears in my eyes, forever smitten by the endurance of a structure erected and battered by humans, a structure that had somehow risen again, stronger than ever.

After lengthy delays, Vijecnica's restoration was finally completed in 2014. When I saw the result in the summer, I was deeply moved, albeit in a radically different way from when I first encountered the building in 2008.

An unimaginable amount of work had gone into recreating every tiny detail from the original design, down to the color of paint used when it was built in 1896. The entire interior — culminating in the soaring atrium, framed by two stories of hexagonal colonnades — had been hand painted in a range of eye-popping colors, including vermilion, azure and gold. The work of repainting alone had taken two years. I stood in the atrium's exact center and gaped. It was like meeting an old friend I no longer recognized.

We don't often confront such devotion to history, but when you enter the new Vijecnica, it is as if you are stepping into a place that is both now and then, a place where all possible pasts collapse into the present.

Indeed, Vijecnica's dramatic restoration raises larger fundamental questions about what should happen in a city following a devastating war. What to rebuild? What to preserve? And what principles should guide new construction? Several people I talked to said they wished that more structures had been left in ruins following the war, frozen in a kind of silent memorial. When you walk through the streets today, it is increasingly difficult to find evidence of the siege: facades, once pockmarked with bullet holes, have long been plastered over, and many of the

famous "Sarajevo roses" — mortar craters filled in with red resin as a memorial to those who died in an explosion — are now becoming harder to spot as the city's streets and sidewalks are repaved.

A city, like its inhabitants, slowly moves on. And when I asked these same people which buildings should have been preserved, none of them could seem to agree. Though Sarajevo is not large, with just over 400,000 residents, its limited geography means the urban center is crowded, and buildings are too valuable to sacrifice.

Perhaps the most successful memorial project to date has been "Sarajevo Red Line," held on April 6, 2012, to mark the 20th anniversary of the siege. Conceived by Haris Pasovic, a well-known director, the installation consisted of 11,541 empty red chairs, each representing a Sarajevan lost in the war. The chairs were arranged in 825 rows and stretched half a mile down Marshal Tito Street. Of the chairs, 643 were small, sized for a child.

"I missed these 11,000 people," Mr. Pasovic told me, when we met in his office. "It's difficult to quantify this number but the city feels their absence." Why chairs? I asked. "I work in theater, so I am always working in front of empty chairs. They represent a future presence. They are never just chairs. Someday they will be filled again." Mr. Pasovic is familiar with the transcendent power of art to express the inexplicable, as he famously produced the Susan Sontag-directed "Waiting for Godot" during the siege. Beckett's play perfectly captured the trauma of waiting day after day for a listless international community to intervene in what had become a kind of surreal purgatory.

Mr. Pasovic pointed to a large framed picture of Red Line on his wall. "When you saw how many chairs there were, how long this line was, it was almost too much," he said. "People were crying. They would walk up and down and choose a chair and that would become the chair of someone lost. They left flowers or a message and by the end of the day all the chairs were filled. And then we took it all down."

"Sarajevo Red Line" was up for only a single day, and perhaps this transience in memorializing something so eternal contributed to its lasting emotional impact. But

the city has struggled to replicate a similar singularity of vision in more permanent civic projects. Many people I talked to cited the dysfunctional structure of Bosnia's government as perhaps the largest roadblock to establishing a dynamic urban plan for Sarajevo's future.

The government was hastily created out of thin air in Ohio in 1995, a byproduct of the Dayton Peace Accords that ended the war. To placate all sides, negotiators partitioned the country along ethnic lines into the Republika Srpska, made up of primarily Bosnian Serbs, and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, made up primarily of Bosnian Muslims and Croats. The Bosnian presidency was turned into a tripartite body with a shifting chairmanship from each of the three ethnic groups.

Such an unusual constitutional arrangement was meant to be temporary, a necessary step to ending the years of violence, but in the decades since Dayton the bloated bureaucracy has congealed into an extremely inefficient and corrupt government. The ongoing ideological warfare among the three factions has largely stifled innovation and prevented any kind of comprehensive strategy for the city's redevelopment, including agreeing on a cohesive urban identity with which to draw in international tourists. Nevertheless, visitors continue to come, and in increasing numbers. According to a government study, tourism in the city rose by 25 percent from 2014 to 2015.

This administrative dysfunction was particularly evident when the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina was closed in 2012 because of a lack of governmental support. The museum houses a world-class collection of artifacts from the region, including the famous Sarajevo Haggadah, one of the oldest and most important Sephardic Jewish manuscripts in the world. It is ironic that the National Museum, housed in four neo-Renaissance pavilions built in 1888, largely survived the shelling during the siege only to be shuttered in peacetime by an indifferent administration. In a positive turn of events, the museum finally reopened last month after financing was secured from multiple levels of government.

The National Museum is situated in a fascinating neighborhood called Marijin Dvor that marks the transition from Sarajevo's old town in the east to the weary sprawl of new Sarajevo in the west. As such it contains a collision of buildings from

past and present, a snapshot of the city's current disjointedness, including two of Sarajevo's new sleek-yet-anonymous shopping malls; the yellow Legoland abomination that is the Holiday Inn, where journalists stayed during the siege; the Bosnian Parliament (rebuilt with Norwegian money); the new fortresslike United States embassy, which spans an entire city block; as well as the city's Historical Museum (formerly the Museum of Revolution), a graceful 1958 modernist structure that resembles a white cube floating above a platform of glass, cited by many local architects as the most beautiful building in all of Sarajevo.

Behind the Historical Museum, on the shady banks of the Miljacka, is Cafe Tito, a playfully nostalgic establishment where hip Sarajevans go to sip coffee as their children crawl on a collection of old, rusting Partisan tanks and jeeps from World War II. Tito is cool again these days, though his vision of brotherly solidarity (once upon a time 20 percent of Sarajevo, the ultimate mixing pot, identified their ethnicity as "Yugoslav") seems like a distant dream.

The Historical Museum houses the city's only permanent exhibition on life during the siege, featuring many brilliantly improvised tools (a flashlight made of a hand-cranked bicycle light) donated by local citizens. The museum owes its resilience to the superhuman efforts of its eternally optimistic director, Elma Hasimbegovic. "We operate in an idealistic way as a real museum even though we don't have a budget," she said. "We depend upon donations from a variety of international sources. We find good people who believe in what we do."

Visionaries like Ms. Hasimbegovic and the Red Line-creator Mr. Pasovic seem to hold the key to Sarajevo's future. It is the persistence and ingenuity of the individual who continues to effect change in the city and in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a whole. It is this same persistence and ingenuity that allowed people to function day after day during the war with limited or no electricity, water, heat or food; to risk their lives to attend candlelit theater shows or hand-operated film screenings; to bend and bend but never to break. And it is this same persistence and ingenuity that give the city its air of buoyant survivalism today.

But there is also a new generation of young Sarajevans, born during or after the war, who are blessed with the self-belief of their generation. They see Sarajevo as

theirs and are molding the city inspired, not burdened, by the pull of history. One of the most dramatic examples of this can be seen in the Festina Lente pedestrian bridge, completed in 2012, which spans the River Miljacka directly in front of the Academy of Fine Arts, the region's foremost creative educational institution now housed in a converted evangelical church. The bridge was designed by three students from the academy. Despite their youth, their gravity-defying, loop-de-loop plan of aluminum and steel won an open international competition of over 40 entrants.

"The bridge is a bridge, but in the Bosnian tradition it is also a gateway that you must pass through," said Bojan Kanlic, 29, one of the designers. Given that the academy is located in a former church, Mr. Kanlic and his partners wanted to play with notions of spiritualism and secularism, of the artist's potential to transform a city and a society. Mr. Kanlic said that when the bridge was first completed, many in the city rejected its newness, but in the short time since, the bridge has become a beloved symbol of new Sarajevo.

On warm afternoons you will find a mixture of students, tourists and pensioners lounging inside its helixed gateway. Festina lente is Latin for "Make haste slowly," a paradoxical phrase that seems to capture that particular Sarajevan mind-set of intensity done at a leisurely pace. "We have no money here, but we have plenty of time," Mr. Kanlic said. "So we drink lots of coffee and talk about everything we hope to do."

This past summer, on my last night in the city, as I made my final lap down the Ferhadija, I could not help but feel optimistic for Sarajevo's future. The city is slowly discovering how to present its seductive brand of festina lente to the world. For all of its rich history, this is a story that is being written in the present tense.

There is now a point on the Ferhadija, right where the vertices of the Austro-Hungarian section give way to the low-slung alleys of the Ottoman Bascarsija, where a nongovernmental organization has placed a compass rose into the stone walkway with the words: "Sarajevo Meeting of Cultures." Visitors are encouraged to take selfies of themselves facing East and West and then to spin a rotating arrow that will point them in the direction they should head next. It's the type of tourist packaging that might come off as gimmicky in the well-trod cities of Western Europe, but in

Sarajevo it feels like a welcome signpost, the first line of a poem not yet composed.

I gave the arrow a spin and followed its instruction, gliding back into the steady stream of people heading from East to West, West to East, from the uncertainties of the past to the open promises of the future.

Correction: October 11, 2015

Because of an editing error, a picture caption last Sunday referring to the cover article in the Travel section about Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, described incorrectly the cemetery shown. While Sarajevo has many different kinds of cemeteries, the one pictured was a Muslim cemetery, not a cemetery "filled with all faiths."

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