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Bosnian Fragments: I

Jevremova 32A
Belgrade, Yugoslavia
31 July 1963

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Bosnia conjures a hundred powerful romantic and historic images: Sarajevo and the assassination that set off a world war; Islam in Europe, complete with minarets and muezzins; the wilderness of mountain and woodland that concealed Slav brigands from the Sultan's Janissaries and Tito's Partisans from Hitler's legions; virgin forests and vanishing rivers, waterfalls and sun-scorched deserts. This is the Dinaric heartland of the Balkan peninsula, where men and ideas are as turbulent as the topography, and for the same reason - because the Adriatic, the Alps and Asia have pressed so hard that rocks and men must change their shapes.

In Sarajevo, on the forty-ninth anniversary of the death of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, I went as every tourist does to stand at the spot where Gavrilo Princip fired the shots that set the world ablaze. Just across the river Miljačka, on the minaret of the Imperial Mosque that was built in 1450, the flag of the Ottoman Empire - never seen in modern Turkey - hung limply in the still summer air of Communist Yugoslavia.

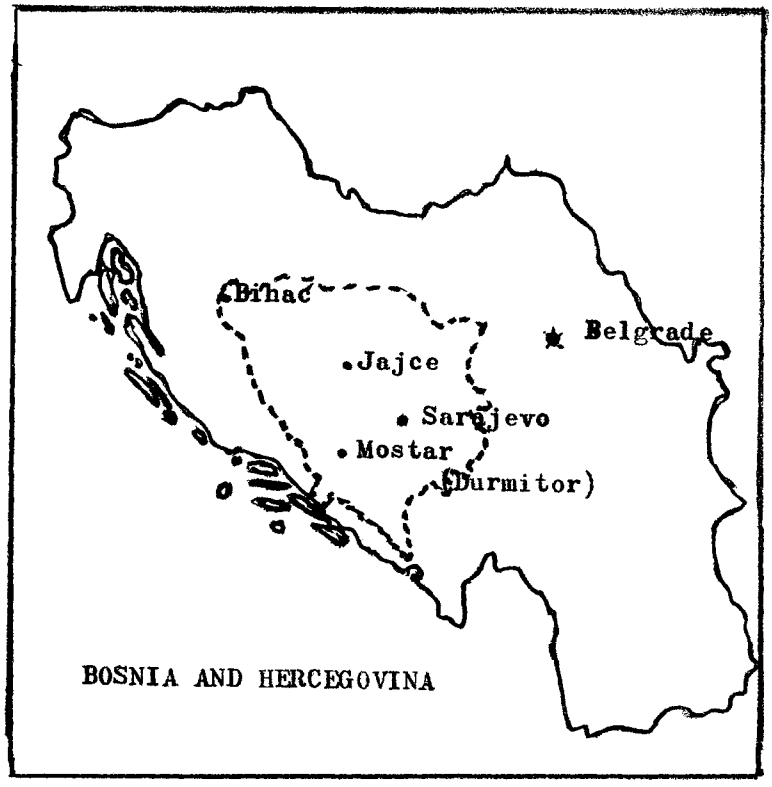
That afternoon I sat in the office of Comrade Šukrija Uzunović, Assistant Director of the Republican Planning Office, to listen to some of the reasons why Bosnia-Hercegovina, fifteen years ago listed among the underdeveloped regions of Yugoslavia, is now considered one of the developed republics. As he talked the muezzin called to prayer from the nearby Mosque of Gazi Husref beg. There, in the largest mosque in Europe west of Istanbul, the faithful would be kneeling on a carpet presented by Gamel abdel Nasser to the Moslem subjects of his friend, Josip Broz Tito.

The same evening I went to eat čevapčići in the garden of a Bosnian kafana with relatives of the man who drove the car whose wrong turning brought the Archduke and his wife to their fatal meeting with Princip. And we discussed, as everyone must, the role that Bosnia played in world history as a consequence of the events of June 28, 1914.

From such days and such contradictions one forms the mosaic of his first impressions of a strange and frequently perplexing land.

The Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Hercegovina occupies in several senses a middle position among the six republics of Yugoslavia. It is in the center of the country and ranks third in area (51,129 sq.km., 1/5 of the total) and in population (3.3 million in 1961, 1/6 of the total).

It is the fourth wealthiest, producing 1/7 of the Gross National Product. As for terrain, my first Bosnian hitch-hiker told me, somewhat ruefully: "It's all up and down." This is a slight exaggeration, because there are some flat places, but it does nicely as a general description. The hills begin at the northern border and quickly grow into mountains, which increase in height from north to south to reach 2400 meters on the Montenegrin frontier. Their main axes run from northwest to southeast, rendering communication with both the coast and the interior difficult.



The countryside itself, which often resembles one part or another of the American Southwest, is still peopled primarily by horsemen and by memories of the Partisan war of 1941–45. This is particularly true of the extremities of the Republic, and because it was one of the purposes of my trip to see as many of the sites connected with that war as can conveniently be seen by car (reserving for the future a closer look on two, or four, feet at the routes the Partisans followed and the people they encountered), I began and ended my first visit in these areas: in the northwestern corner from Bihać to Jajce and along the southeastern frontier, where Hercegovina, Montenegro and the Sandžak of Novipazer meet amid mountains still snow-covered in July. There these two images, of today's horsemen and yesterday's Partisans, dwarf to insignificance the new Jugoslavia which lies between them in the factories and modern housing developments of Sarajevo and Zenica counties and the great new hydroelectric schemes at Jablanica on the Neretva and at Perućac on the Drina.

At Bihać the traveller entering Bosnia from Croatia encounters his first mosques. This was a Turkish border town, even today predominantly Moslem in population, which stood guard against the Austrian Military Frontier from 1699 until 1878 and was the scene of frequent battles between Habsburg and Ottoman. In a later ideological war it was for a time, in 1942, Tito's headquarters and the scene of the first meeting of the Anti-Fascist National Liberation Committee of Yugoslavia, the political seed from which the Titoist Regime was to grow.

There were two reasons why this corner of Bosnia came to occupy an early and important place in Partisan history. The district was part of the Italian zone of occupation in Yugoslavia, and the Italians, needing their troops elsewhere, evacuated their Bosnian garrisons as early as the middle of 1942. It

was also part of the Fascist puppet state of Croatia, whose Catholic Ustaše rulers were attempting to exterminate their 2.2 million Orthodox Serb subjects. These desperate Serbs were therefore willing recruits for a resistance movement, and in the Drvar timber-processing zone south of Bihać, where they formed a local majority, they rose in mid-July 1942, taking advantage of the Italian evacuation and driving out the Croat authorities. In this way they created one of the largest and most consistently held Partisan "liberated zones" in the country, from which repeated enemy efforts never dislodged them more than temporarily.

When the rising occurred Tito, hard-pressed by the Germans and the poverty of the countryside around his headquarters at Foča in eastern Bosnia, had already decided to withdraw his main striking force to the inviting no-man's-land along the Bosnian-Croatian frontier. The Partisan Great March from Foča to Bihać, which began in June of 1942 and ended five months later, was the first of three fighting sweeps they made from one end of Bosnia to the other. As a result the Province became the principle theater of operations for Tito's main striking force for two dramatic years. Bihać was taken by his men at the beginning of November, only to be retaken by the enemy in January, 1943. The Partisans marched south again to the Drina, but a year later they were back once more, with headquarters at Jajce, capital of the medieval Kingdom of Bosnia, where the second meeting of the National Liberation Committee was held in November, 1943. Dislodged yet again the following January, they withdrew their headquarters to a cave at Drvar itself, where in May 1944 the Germans made their dramatic attempt to capture Tito by means of glider-borne and parachute troops.

From Bihać I took this thrice-traveled Partisan road south toward Kluć and Jajce. It is a back road across a high, rolling Karst plateau where open prairie alternates with the rock and scrub growth of steep defiles. The mountain range called Grmeć rises dusty and purple to the east, while to the west stand the wooded hills that hide the Drvar cave. The plateau is populated in equal strength by my two images of Bosnia: horsemen riding to market on handsome ponies with wooden saddles covered by colored handwoven blankets, their wives walking in the dust beside them; and frequent small monuments and graveyards to mark the site of Partisan battles and the resting place of Partisan heroes.

At Bosanski Petrovac, the dusty chief market town of this district and Tito's headquarters before the capture of Bihać, saddled horses were left to graze around a pond on the northern outskirts while their owners bought and sold, or drank Turkish coffee at the cafes and strolled arm in arm along the main street. There the promenade was so dense that my car was forced to a complete stop, and before I could start on again a zealous and zenophobic policeman pounced on me and fined me 500 dinars for "parking" in a prohibited zone. This was a reminder that another legacy of bitter war in these parts, at least among backwoods lawmen, is an enduring hatred of foreigners from the Capitalist West.

Later, at Jablanica on the road from Sarajevo to Mostar, I looked for the hills and the ruined railroad bridge that featured in the dramatic story of the crossing of the Neretva river, the vital moment in that march south again from Bihać to the mountains of Montenegro. There, for a week at the beginning of March, 1943, the Partisans transported their half-starved army of 20,000

with its baggagetrain of 4000 wounded across the flood-swollen river by means of rough planks threaded through the ruins of a bombed railroad bridge, under intensive German air attack. On the other side they stormed the precipitous slopes of Mount Prenj, where Cetniks allied with the enemy were waiting for them, and broke through to the south and Montenegro.

The scars are still to be seen in the little town of Jablanica, but the river valley has been transformed by a major hydroelectric project that has converted the Neretva into a winding mountain lake for twenty-five kilometers above the town. Still green waters today cover the route followed by the German 718th Division, hastening westward from Sarajevo to the kill, only to find that their prey had broken out of his encirclement, and the waters reflect the wild green mountains from which the Partisans had contemplated their desperate situation. Downstream, where the Neretva canyon is much as it was, I sat in the shade of a grape arbor eating roast mutton while I considered that astonishing military feat of twenty years ago and the enduring, supra-political myth with which such deeds have surrounded those who participated. The mutton was carved from a sheep that was being turned over an outdoor charcoal fire on an ingenious spit powered by the water of a sparkling mountain spring, and the little open air inn, an unexpected oasis in this mountainous wilderness, was crowded with truck drivers noisily indulging in the enjoyment of simple pleasures that is a Yugoslav specialty.

No sooner had the Partisan army reached the high mountain country on the Bosnian border, where they paused for breath, than they were again surrounded by the Germans, who were determined to destroy this enemy in their rear before the Anglo-Americans could cross the Mediterranean to his assistance. More seriously threatened with the annihilation of his entire force than ever before, Tito again led a breakthrough by means of another legendary crossing of yet another river, once more shifting his main striking force northwest through Bosnia to Jajce.

This river, too, I went to see, and on the twentieth anniversary of the critical battle that had taken place there. The terrain is far more spectacular than that at Jablanica, so much so that it is now a national park for scenic as well as historic reasons. Three mountain torrents - Sutjeska, Piva and Tara - descend from the highest mountains in this part of Yugoslavia and join to form the Drina river. On their way they carve deep canyons, whose sides rise as much as 3000 feet from the level of the streambeds. Between the eastern two of these torrents stands Durmitor, king of the Montenegrin mountains, and between the western two is the massif of Maglić, only 350 feet lower and still snow-covered at the beginning of July. When the Partisans reached Maglić, from Durmitor, all of the Sutjeska valley was strongly held by the Germans except for five kilometers above a place called Tjentište, where the canyon is at its narrowest. Here the crossing and the ascent to the next range beyond were accomplished with the greatest difficulty and heavy losses.

Today a new motel stands where the Partisan bridgehead once was, and one of the few paved roads in this part of Yugoslavia runs through the canyon. Nearby are several fixed camps for youth groups combining a Partisan pilgrimage with a mountaineering expedition. When I arrived the valley was crowded with these, for it was the eve of Warriors' Day (July 4th), and the newly-electe

Jablanica: Today's lake where yesterday's Partisans fought

Vice President of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Aleksandar Ranković, was arriving to talk to a youth rally on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the battle, and to open a new Youth Memorial Center on the Tjentište plateau. To greet him another group of Yugoslav youth retraced the route the Partisans had followed across Durmitor and Maglić, this time under the sponsorship of a mountaineering association and without the weight of wounded and of arms.

On my way down the canyon I gave a lift to two young hikers, who turned out to be instructors from the University of Novi Sad, capital of the flat Vojvodina north of Belgrade. At their camp we drank Turkish coffee and plum brandy and talked of the world. Two themes particularly interested them: President Kennedy's speech at American University, about which they were enthusiastic and excited, and West Germany's inclination to neo-Nazism and a desire for revenge, of which they were convinced. (They told me that the Tjentište Motel, because of its historic associations, does not accept German tourists, but this one doubts.)

The latter was also of the subjects of Ranković's speech the following day. The Vice President, greeted with an enthusiastic chant of "Tito-Marko" (Marko was his wartime nickname), was eager to associate memories of Partisan sacrifices at Sutjeska, which he compared to the sacrifices of the Soviet people at Stalingrad, with two contemporary themes. The first was "that one of the basic characteristics of our young generation is that it is inseparably connected with our social system, that it is seeking and achieving, together with us, new social solutions." The second was "to point out that it is both regrettable and dangerous to peace in the world today when in certain Western countries various revanchist forces of the defeated Fascist armies are being rallied and increasingly unhindered raise their heads."

(The frequent recurrence of this theme in recent Yugoslav pronouncements may or may not be of considerable significance. It has been dramatized of late by events in West Germany, where Yugoslav citizens have been attacked and the Yugoslav role in the war impugned, and by the breaking off, at Yugoslav initiative of German-Yugoslav trade negotiations, allegedly because the Germans were not forthcoming with regard to the still unsettled claims of Yugoslav citizens who were victims of Nazi atrocities. But this is another and complicated subject and does not really belong in this letter.)

The Partisan war and the passions it aroused remain live issues for all sorts of Yugoslavs. The regime makes deliberate efforts, as Ranković and the mountaineering society were doing at Sutjeska, to inculcate the traditions and legends in the minds and hearts of the generation now reaching maturity, which was too young to have participated or even unborn. But one must be very young indeed not to feel a sense of personal involvement. At Sarajevo one evening I went to have supper with the girl whose uncle had driven the lead car in the Archduke's fatal procession back in 1914, and her husband. Also present were two young men, one a Bosnian in his mid-twenties and the other a Montenegrin only a little older. It was inevitable that we should talk of the war. The Montenegrin recalled sitting under a fig tree atop a mountain by the Bay of Kotor to watch, with the excitement of a small boy, the destruction of the Royal Yugoslav Navy by German bombardment when the war began in 1941. The Bosnian had read all he could find about those years, including Fitzroy Maclean's English account in Disputed Barricades. Although a non-Communist and a Serb, whose family had suffered at the hands of the Ustaše-Croat government of wartime Bosnia, he was deeply offended at my moderate and hesitant effort to explain the motives which had led Draža Mihailović's Četniks into collaboration with the enemy. He was scarcely in his teens when the war ended, but he feels that he had personally participated in the Partisan rising, to which he is deeply committed. Even for non-Communists, it was right to attack the Germans immediately, despite hideous reprisals, rather than husband strength and avoid the reprisals until a more opportune moment, as the Četniks had intended to do.

"Foreigners," he said with conviction, "however much they study our history, can never understand our nature and why it is right for us, Serbs, unlike other people, to fight even when by all practical considerations it is foolish or unnecessary,"

Sarajevo itself contains relatively few reminders of the Partisan war. There are some monuments to the German occupation, among them the ruined synagogue, a huge piece of neo-Byzantine pretentiousness completed just in time to be ransacked by the invaders. Its skeleton is preserved, in a neighborhood otherwise undergoing modern redevelopment, as a tragic memorial to the size and strength of the pre-war Jewish community, now almost entirely vanished which was an interesting amalgam of Sephardim and Ashkenazi. Refugees from ancient persecution in the Spanish West and the Slav East, overwhelmed by the more effective "solution" invented in the German North.

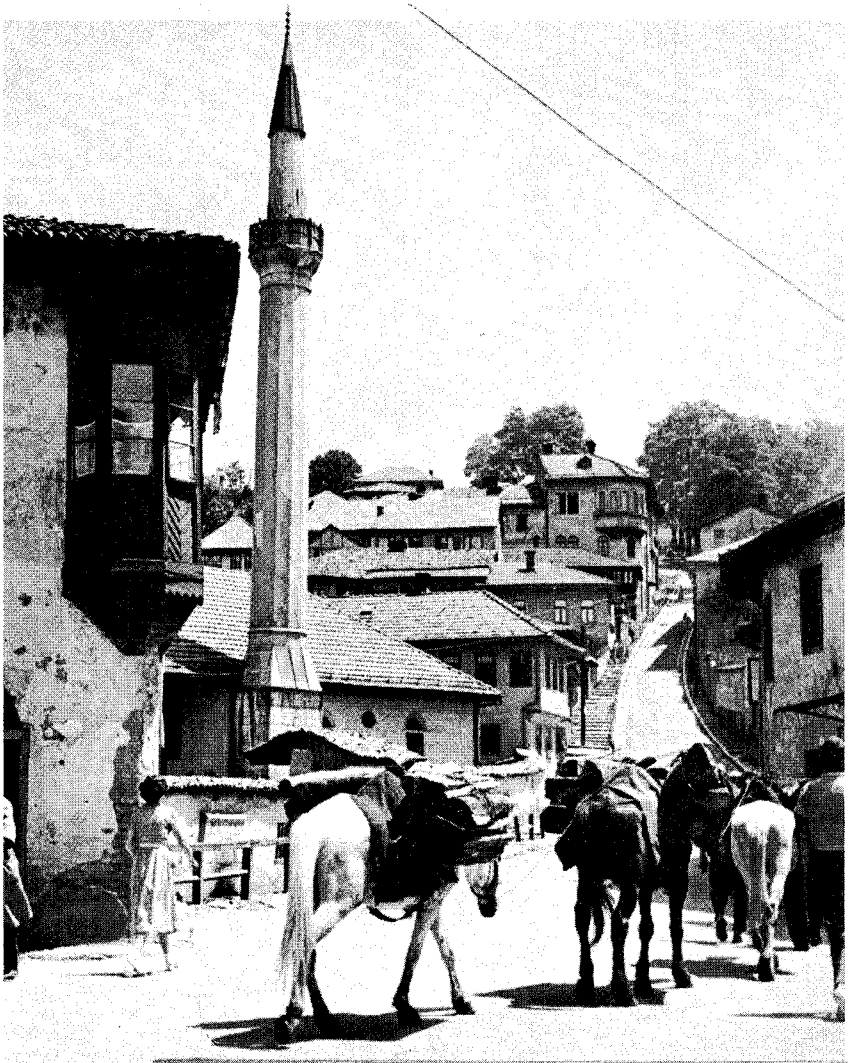
Otherwise, however, Sarajevo invokes the more distant past, the world destroyed by the echoes of Princip's shots, and the present, the Yugoslavia born in the agony of those Partisan marches through the mountains that surround the city. Both are strongly represented in the architecture of the city, and in its life. In the former case the two styles stand side by side, and from their juxtaposition the city derives a pleasing and exciting aspect unequalled in any other Yugoslav center I have visited. In the life of its citizens, however, contemporary modes and problems serve to cover and hide from the superficial glance the persistence of old grievances and of the old issues that made Bosnia the cockpit of Europe for more than half a century.

Socially and politically, therefore, Bosnia is a palimpsest that must be carefully read and with high risk of error. Some of my first, clumsy readings of the topmost layer will follow as more fragments from my Bosnian notebook.

Cordially,

Dennison Rusinow

Received in New York August 2, 1963.



Sarajevo:
Pre-Princip
and
Post Partisan