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## What is Sarajevo?

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# REMEMBERING SARAJEVO

## WHAT IS SARAJEVO?

*Ivo Soljan*

How does one define a place? How do you catch its spirit, the pervading atmosphere, the still or excited throbbing of its heart? How do you pin it down and show to the others, in order to share, in order to unburden the pent-up emotions, in order to paint a picture, a fresco suggesting life and light and motion? Can one ever do it properly? Can we really share our visions unblurred, translucent, essential?

I remember Sarajevo first as a small boy of three or four in the fifties: a city probably three times smaller than today, thousands of times more cheerful than today....Ah, "and to be boy eternal!" A short visit to some relatives there, an exotic experience: street trolleys I did not have in Split; minarets, dozens, hundreds of minarets, tall, white, slender, and small wooden ones; mountains, huge mountains all around—green, so deeply green that my unaccustomed Mediterranean eyes could not swallow all that intense color; colorful streets spilling over with people; the smell of apples and plums, fragrant Bosnian plums of a hazy bluish-gray color; excellent caramel ice-cream in the sweetshop *Egypt*, oversweet, intense yellow, and oozing embarrassingly down my hands and arms in the pleasant, intense heat of the Sarajevo summer.

Then years elapsed and, all of a sudden, I found myself in Sarajevo again, in the late fifties, this time to live there, go to school, become a part of it. It was gradually becoming *my city*, a place intimately known, not just an exotic splash of many colors, smells and sounds that had been my early Sarajevo. Imperceptibly I was becoming a Sarajevan. I was growing into the city and the city was growing into me. But Sarajevo did not lose its original charm for me, although the city was growing too, in places beautifully and in a picturesque manner, but in other places disturbingly, like any other Eastern European city intent on showing the Soviet manner, the "triumph of socialism" if not even communism. No, indeed, the "soul" of the city was miraculously, or perhaps only naturally saved, and I continued to live in an inspiring place, testifying to a creative mixture of cultures and epochs. Growing myself, I started understanding the intriguing multicultural spirit of that place, the colorful mix of the Oriental, both Turkish and Arabic or just Muslim, the Western of the Croatian Catholics and the Austro-Hungarian imperial presence, and the Eastern of the Serbian Orthodox element. The Jewish, mostly Sephardic, presence was also visible everywhere, though the unskilled could easily take it to be just another type of the Oriental. And thus Sarajevo was, unlike any other Balkan city, an exciting and dangerous mixture of colorful, often fascinating, traditions living alongside each

other, frequently intermarried in beautiful or even grotesque manners, sharing each other's treasures, customs, turfs.

That was the city I grew in and the city in which I started and continued what we often refer to as adult life. I started a family there, my parents died there, my children started growing there too, members of my extended family also lived there. Sarajevo was my city. I lived there like many others, with normal human hopes of prosperity and good health, success, and happiness in the family, and with the normal human fears of failure and illness and perhaps even war, though that idea, in the midst of relative prosperity, was distant and incredible. Wars happen to others, not to you, just like fatal diseases and terrible failures.

But war did come to my city. And it is still there. Not just a simple, destructive episode that is resolved between the warring sides on a decisive battlefield, but one of those painfully humiliating experiences, reminiscent of Beirut or Leningrad, a siege of ancient or medieval proportions and brutality, a nightmare that continues for days, and months, and years. I was mercifully spared that experience first hand; a miracle or perhaps just some kind of foresight brought me to a different world, from which I have been observing, in an agony of my own, the slow and pathetic death of Sarajevo, the real, viscerally painful, death of my friends, the brutal extinction of the great and important cultural spots of Sarajevo, the brutal terrorizing of my Sarajevans by the strategically placed Serbian bandits in the mountains surrounding Sarajevo, the same mountains I used to observe breathless from my windows, their soothing deep greenery all around me.

My experience of that city, in which my twin brother is still on the front lines, defending his shattered life and his tottering beliefs, has been increasingly a vicarious one: some episodic, anecdotal "footage" on the flickering TV screen, some pathetic interviews or "realistic" analyses in the press, some strange words trying to teach me about the city that I know so well, some puerile misconstructions explaining to me the "tribal hatreds" that "are prevalent" in this "civil war," so disgusting to the august Westerners, who do not, and cannot, remember their own tribal exterminations only sixty years ago, their terrible hatreds, supported by atomic warheads, only a couple of years ago, who cannot admit that they are a part of Sarajevo that many of them are there, in that miserable, seared Sarajevo, not so much because of Sarajevo, but because of certain geopolitical interests, of certain global strategies, because of some little profits, and who cannot admit that they are deeply afraid of their own Sarajevos, lurking ominously in their own Balkans.

On quiet days, when sun is warm and pleasant, I daydream about Sarajevo, the Sarajevo I remember and want to remember: the huge, green mountains, looming placidly over the old city, the buzz of the city, of its traffic, its normal people, its late, golden afternoons melting so lightly and imperceptibly into dusk, its white minarets and old Austrian mellow houses, the smell of ripe apples and Bosnian plums, the sounds of distant bells, the voice of the muezin from the mosque. But in Sarajevo, it is raining gun-grenades and mortar-shells, it is raining misery and pain. And the hope is gone.