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MY BOSNIAN CONNECTIONS

Anthony Parise

In 1979 I spent a semester in Sarajevo, teaching Shakespeare at our sister university. My memories of that time warm the heart of a cynic. Everyone there was so gracious! Faculty members, as I had expected of cultivated people, dined me and, more often, wined me. They took me to their homes and to their country cottages. More important, they spent a lot of time talking with me, thereby giving substance, even a kind of intimacy, to my foreign experience. Such sympathetic people, so in accord with my own attitudes and my approaches to the preoccupations of intellectuals. They were also in accord with my ideal of manners. Even the protocol of mid-morning coffee struck me as evidence of the efficacy, the downright beneficence of ceremony. Form precedes substance: the forms of civility give rise to civility itself.

My students too were altogether engaging. They too seemed determined to give me an intense Yugoslavian experience. Often they took me to local bistros after class. Sometimes they organized parties (in my apartment). Once they took me for a weekend in the mountains, where they got me obscenely drunk (and then, the day after, tenderly cared for me). When my daughter came to stay with me, the boys gallantly courted her.

I found in these comely youngsters a nice balance of rebellion and obeisance: they were intent on raising hell, as young people should, but always within—even propped up by—the paradigms of their culture. They could repudiate the old generation all evening—but rush home home before eleven because that was the rule at their house. They could explain that the state was a scandal—but end by singing, with evident emotion, of Druze Tito: "Comrade Tito, we swear to you that we will not swerve from your path...."

What a decent, civilized place I had come to! No wonder that my remembrances of that time seem self-indulgent.

Or so it used to be. Nowadays, my memories of Sarajevo bring with them abiding and imperfectly suppressed images, horrid visions of reality. I am looking at a Christmas card signed by twelve students. I can attach faces to those names. I wonder whether quiet and thoughtful Dusko is now, under the approving eye of his commander, raping the delicate and diminutive Natasa. I wonder whether the urbane, widely travelled Jadranko is a Serb or a Croat, and to what atrocious degree. And the lovely Sanya—well cast as Viola in *Twelfth Night*—what has her sweetness come to?

I hear of Serbs playing soccer with a Muslim's head. Whose head? That of Omer, gentle, ironic Omer whose office I shared? And do I know any of those soccer players? Maybe I do. And rumor has it that one faculty member—a man of great intellectual charm, who visited GVS and awed us with the tales of Homer-class bards in the relic areas of Montenegro—now swaggers about with a pistol on his hip and di-

rects the artillery that turns the Filosofski Fakultet into rubble, literally and otherwise. This sort of rumor is not incredible.

Oh, yes I know: only a hardened cynic would discount the possibility that Dusko and Jadranko are moral heroes; and, in any case, their chance to invent themselves, as good men or evil, could only come about in a fallen world. O Fortunate Fall! O Blessed Providence! O Anesthetic Theology!

And on and on....Such musings are not new to me, except in their particularity, except in the fact that I can attach names and faces to my grisly imaginings. For at some level—call it the classroom level—I always knew that plain decency, ordinary civility, is rooted in manners—and is as tenuous. I always knew that humane learning—you know, that civilizing force in the university curriculum—is perfectly compatible with monstrous behavior. I always knew, for example, that a powerful and trained mind—say Heidegger's—could demonstrate that to kill a Jew amounts to very little since it is doubtful whether a Jew can be said to have any Being at all. I would not dare to argue with Heidegger about this because I know he would overpower me with his reason. (I also know that I could, given the right circumstances, or the wrong ones, shoot him, thereby establishing several kinds of parity after all.)

I also knew that my country, being uncompelled by any national interest, could stand by while a people is wiped out. Indeed, my government could dedicate a Holocaust Museum to the proposition "Never again"—even while *Never* became *Now*.

Some people may regard these grim reflections—reverse nostalgia, one might say—as just a different form of self-indulgence. Possibly. But it's also possible that "human kind cannot bear very much reality."