

{JUNE 17 2006}

A LESSON IN ETHNIC CLEANSING

“ collected with my bare hands the body parts of my two little sons. What mother must do that? One shell of the aggressors blew them apart. Within a second, my life was destroyed forever.” The woman spoke quietly. Her third son, a boy of about eight, stood at her side and, from time to time, wiped the tears from her cheek. The well turned out woman, her hair collected in a pink kerchief, well dressed, was self-controlled but full of restrained hatred for the “aggressors” – the Serbs – who had caused her tragedy. A big wreath and the photos of the boys at the entrance of the home silently commemorated the 15th anniversary of the disaster – the first day of the siege of Sarajevo.

From the moment we – Rachel and I – arrived at the airport, Sarajevo threw us into a cauldron of emotions, which we could not escape for a moment. In Sarajevo, one simply cannot be indifferent. “For the stone shall cry out of the wall,” as the prophet Habakkuk (2, 11) said. Walls pockmarked by bullets, ruins that once were homes, people carrying with them blood-curdling stories as if they had happened but yesterday. A city that warms your heart and breaks your heart.

For a total of four years, Sarajevo was under siege. It is hard to believe – and it happened only ten years ago. The capital city of a European state, surrounded on all sides, stricken, starved, shelled, tortured – with Europe looking on.

The capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina is a beautiful town – and its very beauty became its disaster. The description of Jerusalem in Psalm 125: “The mountains are round about Jerusalem” also fits Sarajevo. It lies in a valley, surrounded by high hills on all sides. Green, wooded hills, in many places dotted with red roofs. There is almost no spot in the city where one does not see the beautiful hills. But since all the hilltops were occupied by the Serbian army that beleaguered the city, there was practically no spot in the city that was not exposed to snipers. Not for a day, a week, a month. For four long years.

Sarajevo is a town of graves – dozens of graveyards are dispersed across it, small, large and very large. Thousands of white tombstones blind the eyes, mostly of uniform dimensions and with simple inscriptions, fresh wreaths at their feet. Twelve thousand

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of the town's inhabitants were killed during the siege, 1500 of them children under 14. The entire city is still suffering from this trauma.

And in spite of that – a vibrant city. Traffic jams, old, clattering cars, roads and sidewalks scarred. The city tries to recover: many of the square houses, which look as if they had been painted by children, have been redecorated in brown, green and mustard colors, and between them are fruit trees and small garden plots with huge rosebushes.

In the center of the town – a Turkish palace, built, of all people, by the Austrians when they were ruling Bosnia. It housed the state library, one of the most important in the world. It was completely destroyed by fire during the siege. Behind the imposing front, everything is burned out.

A former commander, with grey hair and a sunburned, plowed face, showed us the battle sites and recounted the annals of the siege. I felt as if I had been there myself. Every word reminded me of my own experiences in the war of 1948. The improvised army; the feeling that “there is no alternative”; the fear that if we lose the battle, we and our families would be massacred; the shortage of weapons; the sense of “few against many”; the breakthrough to a beleaguered city (Jewish Jerusalem); the blurring of the dividing line between soldiers and civilians.

At the time, I followed the Bosnian war with the feeling that it very much resembled our own war. It was an ethnic war, a war marked by what since then is known as “ethnic cleansing”.

I was invited to Sarajevo to speak about precisely this subject, in an international conference of the “New Agora”, which is based in Poland and whose aim is to gather intellectuals from different countries to discuss the future of the world. (In ancient Greece, the Agora was the market square where the population could assemble to discuss public matters.)

An “ethnic war”, in my understanding, is different from any other war. A “normal” war takes place between states, mostly for a piece of land on the border between them. Thus, Germany and France fought for centuries over Alsace. But ethnic wars are fought by two peoples over a country that both consider their homeland. In such a war, each side strives not only to conquer as much territory as possible, but also – and mainly – to drive the other people out. That's why it is always especially cruel.

The 1948 Palestine war was an ethnic war between Arabs and Jews. Each side believed that the entire country belonged to it. Half of the Palestinian people were driven from their home and land, some by the fighting itself, some by a deliberate Israeli policy. For the sake of historical justice, it must be mentioned that in the areas conquered by the Arab side (true, they were small) no Jews remained either. But we

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conquered 78% of the country, and from these areas 750 thousand Arabs were removed, while less than 100 thousand remained. Hundreds of villages were razed after the war, and on their sites new Jewish villages were built. Entire Arab neighborhoods in the towns were emptied, and new Jewish immigrants replaced the former inhabitants. Conquest and expulsion went together. In short: ethnic cleansing.

The Bosnian war was similar – except that instead of two sides, as in our war, there were three: Bosniaks (Muslim), Serbs (Orthodox Christian) and Croats (Catholic Christian). Each of the three sides fought against the other two. Terrible massacres became almost routine. As a sad Bosniak told us: “Every day a farmer plowing his field discovers a new mass grave.”

As in Palestine before the 1948 war, the different populations lived in Bosnia interspersed with each other. The towns were mixed (like Jerusalem and Haifa), the villages lived beside each other – villages with soaring minarets, villages with Catholic church towers, villages with the domes of Orthodox churches.

Therefore, people used to think, before it happened, “it can’t happen in Sarajevo.” Serbs and Croats were already butchering each other in the other states of the disintegrating Yugoslavia, but in Bosnia? After all, there everybody had married everybody. There is hardly a person in Bosnia in whose veins there does not flow all three kinds of blood together. In the towns, they lived door to door.

In Sarajevo there was – and still is – a large majority of Muslims, side by side with minorities of Croats, Serbs and Jews, in that order. The general who explained the battles to us, Jovan Divjak, the former deputy commander of the Bosnian army, is a Serb. He left the Yugoslav (Serbian) army in order to defend Sarajevo.

The photographer who took my picture for a local magazine found it hard to explain his family tree. One grandfather, a Muslim, had married a Croat woman. The other one was himself half Serb, half Montenegrin, while his wife was Muslim. “We must all live together,” he said repeatedly, “After all, there is no real difference between us!”

And indeed – that is one big difference between our war and the Bosnian one. There, all three sides, who butchered each other with such relish, speak the same language. All three are the descendants of the same Slavic tribes that conquered this country in the 7th century. In the street, one cannot distinguish between a Muslim, a Croat and a Serb.

Sarajevo was – and remains, in spite of everything – a model of tolerance. On one square in the center of the town there stand, next to each other, a mosque, a Catholic church, an Orthodox church and a synagogue. It is hard to believe that 10 years ago there was a terrible war raging in this country.

“I can’t sleep at night,” the Muslim cook at a restaurant told us. “Every night the

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sights come back to haunt me. I want to forget, and cannot.” When he was 18 years old, a tall, muscular youngster, he was drafted into the then Yugoslav army, which was dominated by the Serbs. When the war between Serbs and Croats broke out, he was enrolled in a special unit and sent to Vucovar, where the Serbs carried out a terrible massacre of the Croats. “We mowed them down row after row, dozens, hundreds, men, women and children. Me too. I had no alternative. If you refused, the commander shot you in the neck. In the end I stole a truck with weapons, and deserted. I was caught and spent half a year in prison. It was hard, very hard. I escaped and reached the Croats. They put me into one of their special units, until I managed to desert and came home to Sarajevo. Now I live with my father and mother and want some day to open an inn, to have a family, and to hell with everyone.”

After a moment he added: “It’s the politicians who are to blame for everything. If I were God, I would kill them all!”

At the entrance of a shop in a pedestrian street in Sarajevo I saw a T-shirt with the English inscription: “I am a Muslim – don’t panic!”

For an Israeli, it is difficult to accept that almost all the people in the street are Muslim. They do not resemble the Muslims we know at home. They are white, Europeans. Almost all the children are blond. On the thousands of graves, over the name of the deceased and the dates of birth and death, one Arabic word is inscribed (Fatiha, the prayer for the dead), but except for the Grand Mufti, who sat next to me at a panel discussion, I did not meet anyone who knew Arabic. I also did not see anyone smoking a water-pipe, not even near one of the dozens of mosques in the city.

The Grand Mufti had heard only vaguely of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem who had visited the city in World War II. “Ah, that Hussein ,” he remarked dismissively. But Yasser Arafat is remembered. He met with the adored leader of the Bosnian Muslims, Aliya Izetbegovich, during the peace negotiations and advised him: “Take what you can get!”

A few women cover their hair with colorful silk kerchiefs. It is rather odd to see such young women, with colorful headcovers and elegant floor-sweeping skirts, sitting in the coffee-shops with female friends and smoking cigarettes. They also walk around in mixed groups with girls who do not cover their hair and wear tight jeans and T-shirts. There seems to be no problem.

Many shops in the market sell local art – artillery shell cases used as vases or salt/pepper mills, bullet cases used for pens. Everywhere pictures of Tito are on sale.

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Many people recall him with nostalgia. As long as he was alive, he kept the peace between the peoples of Yugoslavia.

But the most interesting place in town is the tunnel. It explains how the city could hold out during the four years of the terrible siege, without starving to death or dying for lack of medicines, or surrendering for lack of ammunition. Much as we succeeded in 1948 in breaking the siege of Jewish Jerusalem by moving the boulders and creating a primitive “Burma road”, the Bosniaks dug a tunnel under the Serb position to reach the free Bosniak area beyond. For five Bosnian Marka (two and a half Euros) one can get in: it’s 1.60 meters high, a meter wide. Through this underground passage, food, medicines and arms were brought into the city, by half crawling, and the wounded were moved out.

Now it is a museum, the pride of the town. Perhaps, some day, the tunnels of Rafah in the Gaza Strip will serve the same purpose.

The national symbol of Bosnia is the bridge of Mostar, two hours drive by bus from the capital. The Turks, who reigned in Bosnia for 400 years and are fondly remembered, built there a unique, high stone arch bridge over the river. It remained unharmed through all wars, until the last war. When the Croats besieged Mostar, they destroyed it willfully with artillery.

After the war, the bridge was rebuilt with European money, an exact replica of the ancient one. But the barbaric deed is still burning in the heart of every Bosniak. “Don’t forget 1993!” demands an inscription on a stone tablet.

When we visited the place, in the heart of the fascinating old town, soldiers of the international peace-keeping force were strolling around. I looked at their shoulder tags, and could not help laughing. They were Austrian soldiers.

On June 28, 1914, a Serb nationalist called Gavrilo Princip murdered the Austrian heir to the throne on the main street of Sarajevo, in protest against the Austrian occupation of the country. That led directly to World War I.

Now, 92 years later, the Austrian soldiers have returned to Bosnia, and the inhabitants are glad to see them there. True, many people in Bosnia believe that another war is impossible: “It can’t happen again. We have learned our lesson!” But a young woman of 20, who is still carrying within her the trauma of the siege, told us: “Have no doubt – if the international soldiers leave, everything will start again!”

It is possible that the ethnic war in Bosnia, like the ethnic war in our country, is not yet over.