

## Sarajevo Moments

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### Sažetak

Sa doktorom Nakašem, nedavno preminulim direktorom sarajevske bolnice, sam imao čast porazgovarati na njegovom radnom mjestu, u prominentnoj bijeloj zgradi Kliničkog centra Koševo, što se svojim izgledom jasno izdvajala od ostalih. Za vrijeme opsade Sarajeva, broj pacijenata kojima je pružena pomoć je bio tri puta veći od ukupnog broja stanovnika Sarajeva. Bolnica je direktno pogođena sa oko dvjesto artiljerijskih projektila, što ukazuje na ciljano gađanje bolnice. Dr. Nakaš je bio ponosan na činjenicu da bolnica nikad nije prestala funkcionirati, čak i kada je bila u potpunosti bez struje. Jednog dana, za vrijeme opsade, dok je sjedio u svom uredu, snajperski metak je uletio kroz prozor i za par centimetara promašio glavu doktora Nakaša, nakon čega je metak rikošetirao po prostoriji. Dr. Nakaš je zadržao metak i često ga pokazivao svojim gostima. Upitan da zamisli šta li je snajperista mislio dok je povlačio obarač, pokušavajući da ubije ljekara u bolnici, doktor Nakaš je odgovorio da je i sam često o tome razmišljao. Na kraju je došao do zaključka, koji je vjerovao da je jedini moguć, da se o tome ne pita, jer odbijajući da pita to pitanje je jedini način da se krene prema naprijed. "Ukoliko se stvarno zapitamo i zahtijevamo odgovor, morat ćemo se suočiti sa time šta se sve nalazi u ljudskim srcima", kazao je doktor Nakaš.

Sarajevo je grad priča: priča o bolu i gorčini, mržnji i ponosu, hrabrosti i lojalnosti, brutalnosti i dobroti, miru i ratu. Svako u Sarajevu ima svoju priču: svako još osjeća bol nedavno minulog rata. Sarajevo je grad civilizacije, tolerancije i kosmopolitanizma. To je također grad koji se ne može riječima opričati niti opisati.

### Abstract

Dr Nakaš is the Director of Sarajevo Hospital, a conspicuous white building that stands out clearly from those around it. During the siege of Sarajevo the number of patients treated at the hospital totalled three times the city's population. The hospital took about 200 direct hits from artillery shells, most

of which could only have been the result of direct targeting. Dr Nakaš is proud that the hospital did not stop functioning for a moment, even when there was complete power failure. One day during the siege when he was sitting in his office a sniper's bullet came through the window, missing his head by inches and ricocheting around the room. Dr Nakaš still has the bullet, which he shows to visitors. When asked what he imagines the sniper was thinking at the moment he pulled the trigger, trying to kill a doctor in a hospital, he replies that he has thought about this question many times. He has come to the conclusion – which he believes is the only one possible – that this is a question that cannot be asked. For it is only by refusing to ask this question that we will be able to move on. If we ask the question and demand an answer, he says, we will have to face up to what might be in the hearts of men.<sup>1</sup>

Sarajevo is a city of stories: stories of pain and bitterness, hatred and pride, courage and loyalty, brutality and kindness, peace and war. Everyone in Sarajevo has a story; everyone is still living the pain of the recent war. Sarajevo is the city of civilisation, of tolerance and cosmopolitanism. It is also the city of the unspeakable and the unsayable.

*Sadly, Dr Nakaš passed away in late 2005.*

Since the Middle Ages, Bosnia has been a complex and multifaceted society in which cultural and religious influences from East and West have met and interacted, both with each other and with a rich indigenous tradition. The culture of Sarajevo was characterised by pluralism and tolerance. The *Sarajevo Tourist–Historic Guide* provides the following advice to the visitor:

Visiting the Old Town you will learn about Bosnian history from her founders and key personalities. Through the legacy of the Ottoman commanders and prominent personality you will learn about the city's existence through present (*sic*) ...

In the area of Baščaršija you will encounter past and present lifestyles. In this part of the city, past and present are not separated: they exist in harmony, side by side, for already five hundred years, in the part of the city that will never submit to becoming a museum, although every inch of this neighbourhood has the scent of the time that once was ...

Should you continue ... you will see how the city grew and expanded. You will see monumental structures from the period of the Austro-Hungarian reign in Bosnia ... You will find remains of the ancient Roman civilisation, with thermal springs and romantic hotels built more than a hundred years ago by Austrian, Czech and Hungarian architects ...

We guarantee that in this abundance of culture and tradition you will find a part of history you believed vanished long ago. Perhaps you will find a part of yourself, regardless of where you come from. You will find yourself in places that will mesmerise you and at the same time confuse you, for you will not know if you have forever entered into the world that once was or if you are still in the present.<sup>2</sup>

One of the great historical monuments of Sarajevo featured in the Tourist Guide is the National Library. During the siege of Sarajevo this building was attacked and burnt. According to the description of Andras Riedlmayer:

An hour after nightfall on the evening of August 25, 1992, the National Library was bombarded and set on fire by a tightly targeted barrage of incendiary shells, fired by Serb nationalist forces from the heights overlooking the building.<sup>3</sup>

The incendiary shells – which have little explosive power but are designed to start high-temperature blazes that are difficult to extinguish – were fired at the library from half-a-dozen artillery emplacements on the mountains facing the old town.

Once the library was fully ablaze, the shelling ceased. However, Bosnian-Serb Army troops swept the surroundings with heavy machine gun and anti-aircraft cannon fire aimed at street level in order to keep away the Sarajevo firemen and volunteers trying to save books from the burning building. As the flames started to die down around daybreak, the shelling ... resumed and the building continued to burn for some fifteen hours; it smouldered for days thereafter. An estimated 1.5 million volumes were consumed by the flames in this, the largest single incident of deliberate book-burning in modern history.

A librarian who was there described the scene:

‘The fire lasted for days. The sun was obscured by the smoke of books, and all over the city sheets of burned paper, fragile pages of grey ashes, floated down like a dirty black snow. Catching a page you could feel its heat, and for a moment read a fragment of text in a strange kind of black and grey negative, until, as the heat dissipated, the page melted to dust in your hand.’

The inferno left the library a gutted shell, its interior filled with rubble and the carbonised remains of more than a million books. Before it was burned, the National Library held 155,000 rare books, unique special collections and archives, 478 manuscript codices, more than 600 sets of Bosnian periodicals, the national collection of record of the books, newspapers and journals published in Bosnia since the mid-19th century, as well as the main research collections of the University of Sarajevo. The books and archives destroyed by the fire included many items recorded nowhere else – irreplaceable documents of centuries of Bosnia’s social, cultural and political life. One of the Sarajevo citizens who risked their lives to pass books out of the burning library building told a television camera crew: ‘We managed to save just a few, very precious books. Everything else burned down. And a lot of our heritage, national history, lay down there in ashes.’<sup>4</sup>

## **Pain**

Anka was a 15 year old girl in Srebrenica in 1995. Her father was the rock of her life, her protector and mentor, a source of knowledge, strength and unlimited love. On the day the troops came to the city all the people were gathered together. At first the children thought it was a holiday and were happy, but

Anka sensed her father's anxiety. Don't worry, my little princess, he said, but she knew he didn't mean it. She watched him standing tensely as she and her mother were bundled into buses and driven away. She never saw him again. Suffering unspeakable privations, the two of them made their way to Germany and eventually to Australia. Now, ten years later, she has learnt her third language, has two university degrees, and has just married. She has thought about her father, and her loss, every day. She wonders what he would have thought, whether he would have been proud of what his little princess has been able to accomplish. She continues to draw a deep, sad inspiration from his love.

It is impossible to understand the pain of another, especially when the injury that generated it was at the far extreme of what is possible to imagine. The war in Bosnia irrevocably damaged many lives. The brutality and the cruelty have so far been only partially documented, including the crimes against civilians, the torture, the systematic rape. One account provides the following cool catalogue:

All elements of the criminal act of war crimes were committed against the population of children. This was primarily manifested through attacks against the civilian population: attacks with no particular target, hitting civilians and civilian objects ... murder; torture, including great suffering and injury to physical integrity and health; unlawful displacement; forced conversion to a different religion or nationality; forced prostitution; rape; measures of intimidation and terror; hostage taking; collective punishment; unlawful imprisonment in concentration camps and other illegal prisons; forced labour; starvation ...<sup>5</sup>

Another adds more detail:

Rape and sexual abuse (were) systematic and calculated actions and important elements of the Serbian war strategy ... The most notorious site of rape of under-age girls was a pub, 'Kod Sonje', in Vogošća. Cases of rape of girls from seven to thirteen years of age were recorded. This pub was turned into a brothel/night club where under-age girls were kept and forced into prostitution ... N.N. (born in 1977) was raped in Kod Sonje, after which she was killed on the hill Zuc. Other raped girls were also taken up the hill Zuc and executed. In the village Vranjak, near Vogošća, sixteen women ... were raped and murdered ...<sup>6</sup>

How is it possible for a community that has been so traumatised to move forward, to look away from the past and to start to imagine a future of hope and promise? How is it possible to believe in the possibility of moral or cultural value after having been exposed to such deep turpitude? Is it possible to come to terms with the pain and to turn unspeakable suffering into openness and magnanimity? This is the problem posed implicitly by the concept of reconciliation.

### **What is Reconciliation?**

*A taxi ride from Sarajevo airport. The taxi driver speaks almost no English, but that does not inhibit him from talking non-stop. Even in a foreign language the ideas come through perspicuously. His strong opinions are clearly and forcefully expressed. Bosnia*

*is a multicultural society, he says. Very old. Five hundred years. Moslems, Christians, Jews. Churches, mosques, synagogues. Peaceful city. The assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand. Historical importance. War, aggression, many deaths. Divided country bad. Need peace now. Need to move ahead. Much work to be done. Future still very good ...*

Reconciliation is concerned with enabling or facilitating communication and dialogue where it has encountered obstacles or has been obstructed and frustrated, where language is difficult, or has broken down or proved deficient. It is about breaking the silence, speaking the unspeakable.

Reconciliation seeks to foment processes of mutual reflection that can support forms of association that are in themselves creative of new meanings. It therefore seeks to avoid installing or enforcing one dominant discourse in preference to another, even where a particular discourse supports apparently praiseworthy causes such as human rights, social justice or conflict resolution.

The process of reconciliation is one not of forgetting or annulling the past, but rather of the opposite. It is about developing a process whereby past experiences are recorded in an enduring archive and converted into a resource on which future generations can draw for both guidance and inspiration.

Reconciliation takes the form of an intervention within civil society rather than one at the level of the institutions of power. This is not to depreciate the importance of policy interventions. Indeed, the two strategies are interdependent: institutional change only becomes possible when the community preconditions are satisfied, while conversely, to lead to enduring outcomes community change ultimately requires institutional support. Both strategies are therefore important, although building the community infrastructure for peace – the task of reconciliation – is arguably the more painstaking, uncertain, and unpredictable.

## **Theory of Reconciliation**

Dijana and Muhamed are eighteen and go to university, where they study sociology and psychology. Their parents were crippled by the war, which they cannot understand. For them, it was a pointless exercise: they cannot accept that there was a valid reason for starting it and they can see no meaningful conclusion emerging out of it. For them, the old enmities are merely anachronisms. In their group of friends are Croats, Serbs, Bosniaks, Christians and Moslems. They listen to Eurobeat pop music, American rock and hip hop. They use the internet and exchange emails and text messages with friends around the world. While they are realistic about the implications of an unemployment rate of 50 per cent, they are nonetheless optimistic about the future. They are keen to extend their contacts with young people overseas and listen with interest to what is happening in South Africa, Israel, Northern Ireland. They want to talk – to anyone, about anything. ‘The war is over’, says Dijana, ‘and so are the old boundaries of geography and culture about which it was fought. This is a new world; we can talk to anyone’.

The modern theory of reconciliation is informed by two main sources: Christianity and Marxism. Both recognise a gap to be filled and an obstacle to be

transcended. Both envisage a state of recovered wholeness as the outcome of a social and personal process.

In the Christian tradition, the idea of reconciliation refers to the messianic tradition of transcending alienation from God, which belongs to the common heritage of Judeo-Christian belief. The divine order has been violated; man has 'fallen from grace' and become alienated from the ways of God. The messianic mission consists in rescuing man from this state of self-alienation. While not all Christians agree on the precise meaning of reconciliation, all agree that it has to do with personal relationships with God connected to relationships with others.<sup>7</sup>

The words of St Paul express the core idea clearly:

Remember that ye were without Christ, being alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenant of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ ... Now there ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the Household of God.<sup>8</sup>

A related idea was developed by Hegel in the concept of *Aufhebung*, the overcoming of difference as the transcendence in a unity of opposites. In the 'humanistic' writings of the young Marx, this Hegelian idea was applied in a socio-historical context:

The worker is related to the product of his labour as to an alien object. For it is clear according to this premise: the more the worker exerts himself, the more powerful becomes the alien objective world which he fashions against himself, the poorer he and his inner world become, the less there is that belongs to him ...<sup>9</sup>

Marx asks two sets of questions: why there is an antagonistic contradiction between philosophy and science and the theoretical and practical spheres; and how to supersede the existing system of alienation to achieve a unity of opposites in the place of the overwhelming preponderance of antagonistic oppositions.

Later Marxian theory, influenced by psychoanalysis and modern linguistic analysis, shifted the emphasis from ontology to language. The task of reconciliation was seen as the overcoming of blockages to communication, albeit still in a schematic and universalistic manner. According to Habermas, it is possible to identify and reconstruct the universal conditions of possible understanding. These are the 'general presuppositions of communicative action'.<sup>10</sup> Anyone acting communicatively must, in performing any speech action, raise the following validity claims: (a) uttering something understandable; (b) giving the hearer something to understand; (c) making himself thereby understandable; and (d) coming to an understanding with another person.<sup>11</sup>

Habermas outlined a program for reconstructing the 'universal validity' basis of speech, for establishing and maintaining what he called 'communicative rule competence': namely, the competence to employ sentences in speech acts such that speakers can embed sentences in relation to reality 'in such a way that they can take on the general pragmatic functions of representation, expression, and establishing legitimate interpersonal relations'.<sup>12</sup>

In the modern practice of reconciliation, the focus has shifted from universalistic formulations, strategies and algorithms to a recognition of the irreducible complexity and heterogeneity of actual social relationships. This, in turn, has led to a shift in emphasis from repairing the communication itself to healing the communities engaged in it. This healing process is to be effected through the mutual sharing of meaning. What is more, this is always possible, at least to some extent. As imperfect as communication is, there are no barriers to dialogue in any interactive context that cannot be overcome: that is, no matter how profound the differences are with respect to culture or theory, some kind of dialogical contact is possible.

Effective communication can be established across large-scale barriers: the barriers of narrative voice and lifeworld, of philosophical assumptions and epistemological difference, and of deep cultural and geographical distance. There are many modalities of such cross-discursive communication, although they are not explained by formal process of translation and there are no hermeneutic rules or algorithms to guide their realisation. The exact transmission of information unchanged between cultural systems of meaning is not required, and the boundaries and limitations also remain. The process of communication, or dialogical contact, is not therefore one of pure translation but of the actual generation of new meaning within the specific syntactical, semantic and pragmatic contexts of the distinct discursive unities.<sup>13</sup>

Every concrete utterance is irreducibly a social act. If we tear the utterance out of its social context and materialise it, we lose the organic unity of all its elements. Under such circumstances, words, grammatical forms, sentences, turn into technical signs of meanings that are as yet only possible at a formal level but not individualised historically.<sup>14</sup> It is impossible to understand a concrete utterance independently of its values and its evaluations in the cultural environment.

Instead of goals or outcomes in the early Christian and Marxian theories, the focus is therefore now on processes. Furthermore, because of the multipolar nature of modern societies, these processes are relational and perspectival. They acknowledge and respect a radical alterity that is open and uncontainable, but nonetheless endowed with and rooted in the hybrid cultural contents of the modern world.<sup>15</sup> The modern world is the world of Dijana and Muhamed, the world of the internet, of email, of diverse and fluid cultures. It is the world of grounded, open and fecund – if not unfettered – communication.

### **Practical Strategies**

Mirsad works with the Committee for Missing Persons. He is thirty-two and walks with a limp due to a back injury experienced during the war. His job entails exhuming decaying bodies and taking biological samples so that DNA identification can be undertaken. He has photographs of gruesome finds: decaying bodies in a cave, body parts found in a field, the remains of tortured children. He has taken only two days off in eighteen months. The work is too urgent, he says, to take a holiday. He knows how important it is for the relatives of the dead and is fully committed to it. In answer to questions he says that he

would rather work with dead bodies than with the living, which would just be too hard to bear. He weeps as he contemplates the possibility.

Mido is twenty-three. He was twelve at the time of the massacre in Srebrenica. The Serb troops came into the city and rounded up all the people. The men and boys were separated from the women and girls. Although a child, Mido was put with the men and boys but his mother somehow managed to pull him free. His mother, his sister and he found their way to Australia, where Mido completed a performing arts degree. Ten years later, after leaving Srebrenica, he was watching television in Melbourne and saw fragments of a video shot by the fascist military team that carried out the massacre. He recognised the blue shirt his father was wearing that day and went to the television studio, where he viewed the unspeakable horror of his father's murder. He has now returned to Sarajevo 'to face his demons' and to search for a way forward. His aim is to write a book or a play or to make a film that puts into words his suffering and that of his people. He wants to find the words to tell others, and a way to store and safeguard the memories.

Everyone in Sarajevo has a story and most are prepared to tell it. They talk in the streets, in the bars, in conferences, to visitors, government officials and researchers. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission is about to be established. A Research and Documentation Centre gathers facts, documents and other data about the experiences of the conflict, regardless of the backgrounds of the victims: already the archive has accumulated millions of pages of documents, audio-visual materials and testimonies from surviving victims and eyewitnesses. An international academic collaboration has been established to resurrect the lost collections of the National Library and other archives by drawing together microfilms, photocopies and other facsimiles taken by foreign scholars as part of research projects or sent abroad as part of exchanges between Bosnian libraries and foreign institutions; so far several hundreds pages of priceless manuscripts have been reconstructed in this way.

Each one of these acts and endeavours is a contribution to breaking the silence, to finding the words to speak the unspeakable, to overcoming the gap that opened into the abyss of the civil conflict. There are many resources available to help with the task: these include the experiences, some more successful than others, of the more than twenty 'truth commissions' that have been established around the world since the early 1970s: in El Salvador, Rwanda, Paraguay, South Africa, Argentina, Bolivia, Haiti, Sierra Leone, East Timor, to name a few.<sup>16</sup> They include access to international reconciliation projects in health care, culture, youth and environmental issues, and others effected through international organisations. They include personal contacts established through national and international reconciliation meetings and fostered through the internet and other media.

However, no matter how deep and extensive the international experience may be, the path to reconciliation developed by the people of Bosnia will be theirs alone. It will draw on the heroism and deep sensitivity of people like Dr Nakaš, Anka, Dijana, Muhamed, Mirsad, Mido and many others. It will refer to the local conditions they have created, and will depend on the extent to which they are able to re-establish the complex structure of trust and responsibility that is

the basis of the multifaceted alterity of a diverse and cosmopolitan society. The process has been and will continue to be uneven, uncertain, ambiguous. It will never shake off, even if it seeks to do so, the fardels of the past. The end point is unknown, and may never be fully apparent.

The poet Goran Simic lived through the siege of Sarajevo and now resides in Toronto, Canada. His words express the deep complexity of his own unending process, which well expresses that of the project of reconciliation:

*After I buried my mother, running from the shelling of the graveyard; after soldiers returned my brother's body wrapped in a tarp; after I saw the fire reflected in the eyes of my children as they ran to the cellar among the dreadful rats; after I wiped with a dishtowel the blood from the face of an old woman, fearing I would recognise her; after I saw a hungry dog licking the blood of a man lying at a crossing; after everything, I would like to write poems which resemble newspaper reports, so bare and cold that I could forget them the very moment a stranger asks: why do you write poems which resemble newspaper reports?<sup>17</sup>*

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> All personal stories are factually valid, although, except for Dr Nakaš and Mido, names and personal details have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the informants.

<sup>2</sup> M. Dizdar, *Sarajevo: The Tourist–Historic Guide*, Sejtarija, Sarajevo, 2005 (text slightly edited).

<sup>3</sup> See A. Riedlmayer, 'From the Ashes: The Past and Future of Bosnia's Cultural Heritage', in M. Shatzmiller, ed. *Islam and Bosnia: Conflict Resolution and Foreign Policy in Multi-Ethnic States*, Montreal, McGill-Queens University Press, 2002, pp. 98–135.

<sup>4</sup> 'Three months earlier, the Serb nationalist gunners' target had been Sarajevo's Oriental Institute, which housed the country's largest collection of Islamic manuscript texts and the former Ottoman provincial archives. It was shelled and burned with all of its contents during the night of May 17, 1992. Once again, the Institute was targeted with incendiary munitions, while the surrounding buildings were left untouched. In addition to more than 5,200 manuscript codices in Arabic, Persian, Ottoman Turkish, and Alhamijado (Bosnian Slavic written in Arabic script), the Oriental Institute's destroyed collection included the Ottoman-era provincial archive and a set of nineteenth-century cadastral registers recording the ownership of land in Bosnia at the end of Ottoman rule.' A. Riedlmayer, 'From the Ashes: The Past and Future of Bosnia's Cultural Heritage', pp. 98–135.

<sup>5</sup> B. Macic, 'Crimes against Children in Bosnian War Cataclysm', in M.

Takaca, ed., *Pokidani Pupoljc – The Plucked Buds*, Sarajevo, Commission for Gathering Facts on War Crimes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> M. Tokaca, 'Children and Violation of International Humanitarian Law During the War in the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina', in M. Takaca, ed., *Pokidani Pupoljc – The Plucked Buds*.

<sup>7</sup> J.W. De Gruchy, *Reconciliatio: Restoring Justice*, Mineapolis, Fortress Press, 2002, p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> Paul's 'Epistle to the Ephesians', Ch 2.

<sup>9</sup> L.D. Easton, and K.H. Guddat, eds, *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, Doubleday Anchor, New York, pp. 289–90.

<sup>10</sup> J. Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1976, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32–33.

<sup>13</sup> P.A. Komesaroff, 'Sources of Security', in P. James, ed., *Sources of Insecurity*, RMIT, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> M. Bakhtin, *The Bakhtin Reader* p. 156.

<sup>15</sup> R. Radhakrishnan, *Theory in an Uneven World*, Blackwell, Massachusetts, 2003, pp. 34–5.

<sup>16</sup> K. Avruch and B. Vejarano, 'Truth and Reconciliation Commissions: A Review Essay and Annotated Bibliography', *Social Justice: Anthropology, Peace, and Human Rights*. Volume 2(1–2), 2001, pp. 47–108.

<sup>17</sup> G. Simic, *From Sarajevo with Sorrow*, Biblioasis, 2005.