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The new Old Bridge in Mostar

Mostar: Where Bridges Divide

Jelena Kopanja | 05 Mar 2009

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On July 25th, 2008, I lost my country. It fell out of my heart, bounced off the polished stones of the new Old Bridge and with a suicidal *salto mortale*, landed in the folds of the Neretva river. The indifferent water continued to course along its path.

The Old Bridge in Mostar, [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), hovered at 20 meters for over 400 years, before the Bosnian-Croat artillery shot it down in 1993. It bridged the banks, but also the Ottoman and European cultures which in times long gone, met and traded on the river's shores. A legend has it that local boys used to plunge into the icy water in front of their lovers' eyes, in acts of heroic courtship.

The bridge—now referred to as the new Old Bridge—was resurrected in 2004 by the efforts of UNESCO and the World Bank. Some of its original stones were fished out of the river and reinserted into the structure; others were dug from the very quarry that builders mined over 400 years ago.

For the architects of the Bosnian peace, the erection of the bridge was a laudable symbol of reunification of a country that had been split into two governing entities; a country with three presidents and three official languages of negligible differences; a country in which Bosniak (Muslim), Croat (Catholic) and Serb (Orthodox) children attend segregated schools. It is said that victors rewrite histories that wars have erased—but what happens if no one wins?

To put all this in its grim context: the years 1992 through 1995 saw more than 100,000 Bosnians and Herzegovinians die, and millions flee their homes. Poets, stuck on alliteration, called it yet another "Balkan bloodletting." The declaration of Bosnia's independence from Yugoslavia in 1992 marked the beginning of a war that would split families, make first-door neighbors into enemies and divide a multiethnic country along what were formerly inconsequential blood lines. I fear that savvy political historians will dismiss my naiveté with a condescending nod of their wise heads when to the question "what happened to your people?" I reply:

"I do not know. We were one people."

Dina, a middle-aged woman I met in Mostar while trying to photograph the antique doorknobs on her garden gate, put it simply. Pointing to a small girl who clutched her other hand until a playmate called her into the house, she asked "What are we to do? I am a Muslim and she is a Croat, the daughter of a relative. People intermarried. Are we going to split beds?"

Perhaps not beds—just heads. In Mostar—a city belonging to the Bosniak-Croat Federation, one of the governing entities of Bosnia—some kids attend "two schools under one roof." Bosniak students come in one shift; Bosnian Croats in another—or they attend at the same time but in separate classrooms. Originally established to help refugees feel safer about returning to areas that had become ethnically homogenous during the war, these schools—apart from being an administrative mess—perpetuate divisions, branding the new generations with distrust. There are approximately 50 such establishments in Bosnia today. In schools that are not physically segregated, the "national subjects" are taught according to an ethnically-oriented curriculum that emphasizes negligible differences in the languages and teaches distinct versions of history and geography. In the Serb Republic—the other governing entity—people scowl at the notion of a unified Bosnia. "What did our men die for, if not for the autonomy of the Serb people?" a friend remarked.

The apprehension of [Radovan Karadzic](#) last summer in Serbia underlined these tensions. My boyfriend Thomas and I were in Sarajevo, on my first visit to my country's capital. We had

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started our trip in my hometown, Banja Luka, and were slowly making our way down south, to Mostar. The night before, incessant honking had wafted through the windows at midnight, keeping us awake. We thought it may have been a wedding but it was a weeknight, an unusual time for such a celebration. The next morning, the front page of Sarajevo's daily, *Oslobodjene* clarified our confusion: Karadzic had been arrested and Sarajevo had celebrated with sporadic—though in retrospect, mild—outbursts of joy.

That morning the two main articles in *Oslobodjene* highlighted Bosnia's division: while Sarajevo rejoiced over the arrest of a war criminal, in Banja Luka, the *de facto* capital of the Serb Republic, people lamented the capture of their war hero.

In Mostar, the new Old Bridge is a misnomer. Rather than uniting the two sides, it divides the Bosniak eastern part of the town and the Croat western part. People have started crossing back and forth with regularity just in the last few years. Often, when embarking on these ten-minute journeys they'll say, "I'm going to *their* side."

Memories, heavy, are on display throughout this land. They are cemented in the mosques that sprout along the hillsides, built with money from Saudi Arabia and in styles alien to the architectural legacies of the Ottoman Empire for which Bosnia and Herzegovina were known. Humongous Catholic crosses conquer the mountaintops. Serbs have been silenced in Mostar, but they overcompensate in other parts of Bosnia with churches that mirror their Byzantine-style predecessors, and are erected wherever space will allow—even if that means plopping one in the middle of my hometown's central park.

The religious paraphernalia are the only trophies of this war without victors. That and the dead, the exiled, and the living, who are stuck in a country which, hooked onto a dwindling international life support, is barely breathing. The most recent elections held in October showed that the nationalism that has leached Bosnia shows no signs of letting go. The overwhelming majority of the people voted along ethnic lines for parties whose platforms are rooted in empty nationalistic rhetoric.

If nothing else, we do share one thing: our peculiar sense of humor. In Mostar's tourist district, sprawled outside of the souvenir shops are helmets that bore witness to our most recent wars.

I try to bargain for the UN blue helmet, because I cannot afford the eighty euros it costs. The seller won't budge. A shame, as I'm sure it would have made for a lovely present.

But I am not discouraged. "How about that bullet-shaped pen?"

I stumble on a cobblestone. This city must have served as an inspiration for children's fairytale books. Thomas and I walk in a daze, mesmerized by the minarets that peek through the lush greenery of the surrounding hilltops. Playing a tourist in my country was a gamble. I lost. What remains for me here is only that intangible hope for a common European identity—an identity that would transcend recent histories and these venomous nationalisms, which transform bridges here into impenetrable borders.

"The more we talk to people, the less I get it," Thomas says suddenly. "Is there a 'Yugoslav Wars for Dummies'?"

His humor is dark—fitting for this place. A Bosnian would laugh. So I do.

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