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The Lie of Intractable Hatred

ALENKA: *What happened here never was about ethnicity or religion. That's a fake excuse used by the politicians who started the war.*

SUZANA: *During Tito's time, ethnicity wasn't an issue.*

KADA: *Why did they destroy mosques?¹ If we believe in God, we basically believe the same way—Orthodox and Muslims. Before the war, it wasn't like this. Did somebody create that feeling? I wonder.*

NURDZIHANA: *I've never accepted ethnic divisions! The way I was raised, we didn't say someone belongs to this or that ethnic group. The atrocities I witnessed had no ethnicity, no religion. We lived together until the day before.*

KRISTINA: *I've never in my life wanted to divide people into groups.*

“Those people have been fighting for centuries.” We read that sentiment in Washington newspapers. We heard it on the streets in Vienna. We listened to it in London speeches. We watched it tragically acted on by key leaders in the international community. “Those people” obviously had a problem—and it was their problem, their decidedly Balkan problem.

Some saw in Yugoslavia a basic impossibility: people of different religious faiths, languages, and alphabet building their lives in harmony. Others pointed to the multicultural successes of Yugoslavia:² Per capita, Bosnia has many more ethnically mixed marriages than the United States has racially mixed ones; and Bosnian society doesn't suffer the gross inequities by which, in America, income, education level, life expectancy, and even prison terms are linked to race. In short, although marred by historical distortions that were an extension of conflict experienced across Europe in World War II, Bosnian society under Tito didn't ex-



Remnants of better days in Mostar. July 1997.

perience the sort of rage and distrust among social groups that led, for example, to riots in Los Angeles and other U.S. cities.

In lengthy conversations with former Foreign Service officers posted in Yugoslavia, I've discussed this issue of ethnic divides in Bosnia. One has opined that the women I've interviewed suffer from Yugo-nostalgia, evidenced in their refusing to admit that prewar Bosnia was a smoldering volcano of ethnic tension, waiting to erupt. The next has insisted that the women's portrayal is accurate. The reader will have to decide whether the first Foreign Service officer's objectivity as an observer or the women's subjective experience is more valid in this debate. My role is to relay the voices I heard; and, strikingly, as different as they were in every other way, the women were united in the assertion that pre-Milosevic Bosnia was not a society in which ethnic hatred festered—above or below the surface. Instead, they described—for hours on end—events and relationships that belied the notion that their country was doomed to divide. Historical ethnic grievances? Clearly, yes. Intractable ethnic hatred? Emphatically, no.

How did this idea of deep divisions gain a foothold in the foreign policy world? It was difficult, caught up in the progressive pandemonium, to see the step-by-step rational design behind the conflict, led by the man with whom diplomats were now dealing as they went about their political assignments.³ Intractable hatred was also an undemanding stereotype: dramatic, simplifying, and easy to understand—even if wrong. But more insidiously, the notion that “those people are always fighting” provided an excuse for officials who, often for institutional or personal reasons, didn't want to become involved in the Balkan conflict.

A Most Convenient Excuse

TANJA: *Before Dayton, we Bosnian political leaders held a press conference in London. We tried to tell the international community what was really happening . . . but they weren't interested.*

A grand success of Slobodan Milosevic was his propagating the notion that Yugoslavs had been fighting each other for centuries and always would be. In foreign policy jargon, a “fault line” ran straight through the Balkans, dividing Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Muslims. A “clash of civilizations” was inevitable, and woe to those idealistic helpers caught in the tectonic ethnic crunch.⁴ That policy

paradigm, which might as well have been crafted in Belgrade, became a most convenient excuse for those outside the Balkans looking for justification not to get involved.⁵ Since their concern was ensuring that a military intervention or political strategy would be precise, well-defined, and delimited, U.S. and other international leaders were reluctant to get involved in trying to rectify what might be a basic part of the Bosnian society.

In times of social change, such as that being experienced in Yugoslavia with the implosion of communism, identity conflicts among groups proliferate.⁶ In the stressful time of change, Milosevic, an opportunist more than true Serb nationalist,⁷ rose to popularity by dredging up old nationalism — not so unlike the practice of some right-wing U.S. politicians playing on long-standing racist sentiments to insist on an “English only” policy in the States. Flowing across Europe, at the same time, was a worrisome, far-right resurgence epitomized by neo-Nazis in Germany, Le Pen’s xenophobic appeal in France, the separatist Lombard League in Northern Italy, and Joerg Haider’s antiforeigner campaign in Austria. In fact, some in the European right regarded Slovenia and Croatia as a healthy expression of anticommunist attitudes. In Hegelian terms, if the expansion of the EU and NATO represented a new thesis of European integration, the antithesis was represented by right-wing movements demanding separation. What form the synthesis might take was anyone’s guess.

Perceptions of the Balkans in the late 1980s were as different as the contexts of the observers. While Washington policymakers were observing a new geopolitical era unfolding, Bosnians were experiencing their lives unraveling. AMNA says: *I was living like a princess. I had everything. I just made a wish, and my parents would fulfill it. Then 1991 came, and suddenly I had to take care of my whole extended family. In 1992, there were twelve of us living near Split in a house with three rooms, including the kitchen. We were refugees — three families of us. Six slept in each room. I worked in a humanitarian organization, just to have some food to bring them at the end of the day. At the same time, I kept going to university.* Meanwhile, Americans, oblivious to Amna’s plight, were still celebrating the long-awaited fall of communism. The United States was suddenly the lone superpower — and most of us were decidedly unsure of how to fulfill that role.

Some were concerned that the demise of Soviet tyranny had uncorked a vessel offermenting nationalism. In response to the Serb aggression, the Western world mustered just enough outrage to impose trade sanctions. Whatever good might have come of that move was outweighed by the arms embargo the UN imposed on Yugoslavia in September 1991 at the request of Belgrade, which effectively

froze the military imbalance in which Serbs controlled the fourth-largest army in Europe, and non-Serbs were essentially unarmed.⁸ This was one of a long series of unfortunate unintended consequences, sparked by the actions of would-be international helpers. That enormous war-making advantage emboldened Serb nationalists and, ironically, rather than decreasing the violence in the region (the UN aim), most likely intensified it. Throughout those months, the U.S. government stood back. President Bush, after all, had been advised by General Colin Powell, Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, not to get involved in Yugoslavia.⁹ Better to end his presidential first term (and hopefully enter his second) riding the crest of the “clean” Gulf War.¹⁰

The U.S. attitude toward Milosevic and the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) in early 1991 was intensely conflicted. The American ambassador, Warren Zimmermann, was initially a strong supporter of Yugoslavian territorial unity, although he condemned Milosevic’s tyranny and demanded democratic rule.¹¹ In June 1991, tanks from the JNA barracks in Slovenia were ordered to “defend the border” from the Slovene separatists who had proclaimed independence and taken over the Slovene customs facilities. But it wasn’t until mid-1992 that Secretary of State James Baker advocated multilateral military intervention in Bosnia to ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid. Although he won George Bush’s go-ahead, Baker was not in a position to oversee the implementation, being immediately pulled out of the State Department to run Bush’s flagging reelection campaign. His successor was Lawrence Eagleburger, a former ambassador to Yugoslavia in the late 1970s, who supported Bush’s reluctance to intervene.¹²

In summer 1991, Europeans sent a clear message to U.S. officials that they saw this as a European problem. Soon afterward, Nurdzihana was faced with keeping her elderly mother safe for months on end in a crowded cellar. Galina was helping refugee children streaming into Banja Luka find their lost parents. Kristina was frantically worried about her teenage boy on the front line. Irma was holding her hands over her ears, cringing as shells exploded. But across an ocean, life paraded on. The lack of early U.S. leadership in opposition to Milosevic didn’t disturb an American public usually generous in spirit but woefully ignorant of international affairs. A bipolar global struggle was comprehensible to Americans. But without the “Evil Empire” of the Reagan/Bush foreign policy, or the “Axis of Evil” on which the future foreign policy of George W. Bush spun, Americans couldn’t be roused to support U.S. leadership in a place most would be unable to locate, even on a map of Europe. The “CNN factor” was shorthand for the power of the press to shape foreign policy, exemplified by gruesome footage

of U.S. soldiers dragged through Mogadishu streets, which led to the pullout of UN troops from Somalia in 1992. When it came to the Balkans, such news reports of atrocities were ineffective in forcing intervention. President Clinton was slow off the mark in the foreign policy arena. He was notably indecisive on the Balkans, caught in a tug-of-war between his own high-level officials advocating or discouraging intervention. Instead, he poured his effort into wooing a Congress preoccupied with domestic and economic concerns.¹³ That was well and good for Milosevic, who continued, unabated, to employ his powerful media machine in tandem with his aggressive military plan.

Similarly, given that “force protection” — no American body bags — had become a preoccupation of the Pentagon, Milosevic’s propaganda about intractable ethnic hatred served two functions. First, it provided a framework for understanding the violent expulsion of millions of non-Serbs from their homes. Second, by painting the conflict as a natural consequence of local culture, it also provided noninterventionists, including the American military, the cover they needed to stay out of the fight. Those who raised questions or dissented were told that there was no political will in the upper echelons of Washington to back military intervention. Ambassadors Bob Hunter, Madeleine Albright, and Dick Holbrooke made clear their views that intervention was the correct course; but the prevailing voice was a powerful choir of key analysts, intelligence experts, and policymakers across Europe and the United States who sang of the deep-seated hatred in the Balkans.¹⁴

The international community could thus excuse itself from getting involved. Never mind that the last time there had been an intra-Balkan conflict (between Nazi sympathizers in Croatia and communist Partisan resisters), Germany was also at war with France — again. Did anyone in 1992 talk about a hazardous hatred between those two leading European states, dooming them to a future of perpetual violent conflict? Could anyone imagine standing back as observers during an expulsion of German speakers from Alsace at the end of the twentieth century? As in the Balkans, the Franco-German conflicts led not only to boys and men lost in battle but also to a citizenry suffering homelessness, fear, hunger, and economic devastation. In addition, there was another sad similarity to the situation fifty years earlier: The noncommittal stance of the United States from 1992 till mid-1995 was reminiscent of America’s isolationist response before Pearl Harbor, as Hitler advanced across Europe.

Despite outsiders’ beliefs about endemic ethnic hatred, scores of people I’ve interviewed insist that few citizens of Bosnia, the most ethnically diverse of the six

Yugoslav republics, could imagine an ethnic struggle in their land.¹⁵ The women were quick to cite examples of multicultural values intrinsic to their lives. They pointed out that given the large number of mixed marriages (more in the cities, but in rural areas as well), it was impossible to identify many people by ethnicity. Repeatedly, as if to counter the claims disseminated from Belgrade, the women expressed in clear, articulate terms why they could never have anticipated the divisive nationalist cancer that spread over their land.

Unfortunately, their resolute spirit was in bold contrast to the indecisiveness of the international Contact Group, which frittered away months with one unproductive meeting after another. Often split along historical lines,¹⁶ these countries couldn't accept leadership among themselves, and thus they failed to reach consensus—even as Serb forces burned their way across Croatia, then Bosnia. While the world stood back and waited, many of the women in this book were being terrorized.

Of all the women I spoke with, GRETA, as a European Jew, is uniquely qualified to address the question of whether an ethnic war was inevitable. She is acutely sensitive to implications of genocide and the importance of confronting prejudice. While her story is the one most dramatically linked to World War II, she isn't swallowed up by the comparison of the times. Even as she recalls events fifty years earlier, she's unwilling to conclude that war is somehow symptomatic of the Balkans—a potent reminder to outsiders who merged those wars into one bellicose cultural stereotype and then threw up their hands in resignation.

Twenty-year-old Greta was deported to Auschwitz in 1944, where she lived on the edge of death. *Then one morning, they told everybody who could walk to come forward, because the camp was to be evacuated and burned. The gas chambers and crematorium had already been destroyed, because the Nazis didn't want people to know they had existed. I went to the "hospital"—which took some courage. If you said, "I'm sick," you never knew where you'd end up. I simply had no strength. To everyone who could walk, they gave a blanket and loaf of bread. I said to the girls with me, "You know, if they burn this place [she laughs under her breath], at least it will be warm." They didn't even have time to set the camp on fire, because the Russians came in about two hours. She made her way back to Yugoslavia, one of a tiny proportion of Jews to have lived through the deportation to camps. At home, she found herself in a quandary when it was time to get an identity card. Even though Israel did not yet exist, I said, "My nationality is Jewish." They told me I could not say that, because there was no such land. I said, "That may be, but I was in a camp because I am a Jew, I have a number on my skin because I am a Jew, and I lost all my family because I am a Jew. So I'm*

remaining a Jew. I am a Jew, never mind where. I can be a Jew anywhere. Do you know how to write or don't you?" [Greta brushes the air with her hand, as if dismissing the bureaucrat.] *So my identity card said "Jew." Nobody else's, only mine — because I demanded it. Later on, Yugoslav identity cards had no nationality — which is another way of saying we could not imagine something like this war.*

Moving between reminiscences and the present, Greta juxtaposes the improbability of both wars. *Yugoslavia was a solid political state. For fifty years, I experienced no trace of nationalism. I still can't explain World War II, because we did not feel animosity among us. Returning from the concentration camp, I went to Belgrade to study. There was no hostility among people. In '52 I came to Sarajevo — an entirely different surrounding, because I'd never lived around Muslims. Even the Jews are different in Sarajevo* [she smiles]: *I'm Ashkenazi, and they're Sephardic. But in all this time, I've never felt any difficulties, any difference. I speak a dialect, but nobody has said, "Why do you talk like that?" Then all these years later, suddenly* [her hands demonstrate an eruption] *it began again. Public meetings were held every week: Should we have a confederation or some other arrangement? Still, we didn't think there would be war. A friend of mine told me at the beginning, "Did you hear them say everyone will be killed?" I said, "How can you repeat such things? Remember, in '45 we said, 'Never again.'"* Greta shakes her head, trying to understand why "again" did, in fact, come to pass. Then like Nurdzihana, her thoughts move on. *There were Serbs who had lived in Sarajevo for years and years and years. They didn't stay, but went away and fought against us. I cannot imagine! I had relationships with those people, and I never thought they held anything against anybody else.*

Greta can understand outsiders being unprepared for the emergence of nationalism in Yugoslavia even as she was, but she has no patience for the tendency of those outsiders who shrink from involvement. Once again, she reaches across decades as she critiques the myopic mistake of the international community, reluctant to intervene earlier in Bosnia. Like many who endured the Holocaust, she recognizes danger for all in the targeting of a few. *In the beginning, the war was against Muslims, but it would have spread to Jews. And who next? After all, the ethnic lines were already blurred. According to Greta, many Bosnian Jews were fully assimilated and, like many other Yugoslavs, didn't hold on to a separate identity. People from mixed marriages call themselves "Yugoslav," and my son says he's "Yugoslav," because he's from Yugoslavia. My daughter-in-law, she says "Yugoslav," too; her father was Macedonian, but her mother is a Jew — which I didn't know till well after I met her!*¹⁷ For Greta, assimilation of Jews is not a response to danger due to anti-Semitism. She describes how upset the citizenry was when, in 2000, Sarajevo's Jewish cemetery was vandalized. On the other hand, she tells with pride how La

Benevolencija (a Jewish charity with members from Britain, the Netherlands, the United States, and Germany) contributed to the wartime Sarajevo soup kitchen, which served about 350 people a day. Only a third of those helped were Jews. In fact, Greta recalls how, in spite of the shelling by Serb forces, food and garments were delivered to a Bosnian Serb professor of biology. And when a group of Jews collaborated from inside and outside the country to evacuate some of the elderly and children from the besieged city, they included non-Jews as well.

Even if the status and role of Jews was exemplary, perhaps the international community was prudent to delay entering a “religious war.” Nonsense, according to Greta, who draws a firm line between religion as a passion that is a source of division and can compel war, and religion as a key ingredient of culture. To debunk the first notion, she describes how, as a child in pre-Tito Novi Sad (a major city in northern Serbia), she attended compulsory Serb Orthodox religion classes; but outside school, Roman Catholics went to their churches and Jews to the synagogue. She adds, a bit ruefully, that although she was considered Jewish enough to be shipped off to a concentration camp, her family did not practice their faith. Her father never went to the synagogue. *I learned a lot of prayers, but the practice of religion wasn't important to me. Then, after the Second World War, there was no study of religion, which is a pity. Under Tito, religion was a private matter. For a devoted communist, you can say that ideology took the place of religion, although for most people a trace of religion remained. You could go to church, but you had no right to proselytize.*

It's difficult to square accounts of the rich mix of religious traditions in Bosnian culture with Tito's periodic brutal repression of religious expression. After World War II, intellectuals who were believers were summarily executed. In 1946, the courts of Islamic sacred law were suppressed, education of children in mosques was outlawed, and women were forbidden from wearing the veil. Muslims in the military were forced to eat pork, and communist officials were warned against having their sons circumcised. Both the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church were at times persecuted, at times infiltrated. All this was in spite of the 1946 constitution proclaiming freedom of belief and separation of church and state.¹⁸ This background helps explain why, in Greta's social critique, religion was too weak to be a cause of conflict. In an unusual twist, having just endured three years of a war others thought was religious-based, she expressed regret at Bosnians' lack of religious interest. The notion of religion as central to culture is consistent with basic Jewish tenets, but at the most practical level, this professor of architectural construction feels strongly: *Even if not as worship, religion should have been taught as history.* Her reasoning? Without an understanding

of the society's core set of beliefs and values, intellectual activity suffers. *When I took my students on architectural excursions to churches, I couldn't really explain what they were seeing because they knew almost nothing about religion.* That notion was reinforced by a young Sarajevo man who remarked to me that all the religions had one thing in common: The Muslims didn't go to the mosque, the Catholics and Orthodox didn't go to church, and the Jews didn't go to the synagogue.¹⁹

While many of the women acknowledged the historical roots of violent conflict in the Balkans, they kept history in context. No one can (or should) erase the evidence of past massacres and other atrocities that took on ethnic features, but just as clearly history must not be distorted into an all-too-easy determinism. The international community could have intervened early in the Bosnian war and, in doing so, saved a huge number of lives.²⁰ It chose not to do so for a variety of reasons, often primarily its own domestic considerations. In meetings at NATO, the White House, and the U.S. State Department, I was privy to some of the internal back and forth regarding whether the U.S. should lead an intervention against the Serb forces ravaging the Bosnian countryside. State lined up against the Pentagon and CIA — and lost. The United States failed to intervene more because of the situation in Washington, D.C., rather than the situation in Bosnia. Among the people of Bosnia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there were certainly differences. But apart from providing a convenient excuse to policymakers who didn't want to get involved in the political conflict, those differences were neither dangerous nor destructive. In fact, rather than creating divisions, the diversity blended in a rich multiculturalism that Bosnians either took for granted or celebrated. Continuing on, Greta's discourse on religion is developed by women from every tradition lauding the complexly textured lives of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Richness of Multiculturalism

BILJANA: *I was born "Sabiha," but when I was about two, my sister began to call me "Biljana," just because she liked the sound. Soon everyone, including my mother, picked it up. Nobody cared that I was Muslim with a Serb name.*

TANJA: *I didn't even know my neighbors' ethnicity. My friends and I cared about character.*

Sarajevo was a perfect setting for the 1984 Winter Olympics. What better backdrop to the parading array of athletes than a city that prided itself on an extraordi-

nary amalgam of cultures?²¹ The swirl of musical styles, historical backgrounds, culinary traditions, and distinctive costumes combined in a delightful cacophony of sight and sound. Mosques, Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, and a synagogue shared a few square blocks.²² Bosnia was a trade crossroads where people from different traditions not only mingled but also married.

That social blend bore international political consequence: Bill Clinton, who was raised a white boy with black playmates, had a particular appreciation for a society that discouraged ethnic divides. In 1995, when he addressed the nation to explain his decision to order military intervention to stop the genocide, the president was not able to convince the American people. He moved forward without public support to protect a society across the Atlantic that exemplified the tolerance, equal rights, and inclusion he was trying to promote in the United States. His decision to intervene in the Bosnian war was consistent with his emphasis on race relations in America. The Bosnian war was, for Clinton, an affront to the values that had made America great.

The women I interviewed told me hours of stories demonstrating those values. For these twenty-six, regardless of whether they were from cities or villages, not only was the mix of ethnicities not a problem, but multiculturalism was appreciated as one of the great strengths of their society.²³ Diversity was based not only on indigenous traditions; it was also a mix of Balkan and modern Western culture. Yugoslavs were not as restricted in their travel as most other citizens of communist countries. They needed no visas from their own government to study in the United States, shop in Italy, or vacation in France and Spain. In return, cities like Mostar were tourist destinations for other Europeans, and the locals spoke German, Italian, and Spanish for the sake of their customers. Given that flow of people and ideas, it's no surprise that in the former Yugoslavia, compared to other communist states, objective news was remarkably available. I found *Time* magazine at a Belgrade newsstand in the mid 1970s.

It's not difficult to find Bosnians like *MEDIHA* who speak both concretely and abstractly about the importance of multicultural values: *My best friend, with whom I shared a school desk for eight years, was Catholic, and I was as happy during Christmas as she was! I used to wait for her in front of the church when she sang in the choir. Our parents were friends. She'd stay at our house; you couldn't pull us apart. Mediha becomes reflective. Difference shouldn't be a source of conflict, just of richness. After all, other people can't make you poorer; they only let you see problems from another angle. There's no reason for people who think differently not to be able to coexist — even under the same roof. My mother had three children. We're totally different. The same people raised us the same way, but our political views developed through literature, theater, rela-*

relationships. . . . We have distinct ways of seeing the world, but we don't love each other less for those differences. Although Mediha is a member of parliament, her only child has joined a different political party — with his mother's blessings. *I fully respect his political stands, as well as his views of life, love, science. . . . I love him more for our differences. I learn from him because he has his own vision, and we can augment and enrich each other. Forcing single-mindedness results in a horrible deprivation of values for every one of us.*

Mediha is wonderfully facile at applying personal lessons to professional situations, and vice versa. *As an orthodontist, over the years I've looked at thousands of children's mouths, and I haven't seen two the same. That doesn't mean this mouth isn't pretty, or that smile isn't beautiful. The difference is part of the beauty.* From the dental chair to the halls of parliament: *I'm convinced people can find a mutual language for every issue. That's how I approach my political work. I'm sure we'll rebuild and find a way to live together, as we always did. I can't remember feeling negative toward anyone because he or she was "this" or "that." I approach people based on their thinking. If I can accept it, I build a friendship with those people. If not, I move away. But I would never consider destroying that person. I'm certain the majority of people think the same way.*

She ends with a light touch. Just before the war broke out, the father of one of her close friends died. She went to the funeral service, which was being held at a local cemetery with a large plaza, surrounded by seven chapels: for Jewish, Orthodox, Catholic, atheist, Protestant, Adventist, and Islamic services. Mediha stood, in a respectful pose, at the back of the crowd gathered in the Orthodox chapel as the funeral went on and on. Finally, someone who'd been at another chapel saw her and came over to tell her she'd been at the wrong service. In all the years, she hadn't realized her friend's family was Roman Catholic. *You see, in Bosnia, religion just didn't matter.*

Given the reality, from where she was living abroad, SABIHA could hardly believe the news of a so-called religious war breaking out back home. *People weren't prepared for this war.* In fact, even now Sabiha is not prepared. As she tries to sort through the categories of identity that surfaced during the war, she stumbles. *Especially Bosniaks, the people I belong to — although I've always felt I was a Yugoslav, a Bosnian, a European, and a citizen of the world. . . . This war has damaged Bosniaks — the Muslims — a lot, but it hurt Serbs and Croats too. Well, they're not Serbs and Croats — just Bosnians of a different religion.* Her own family is a case in point. *My brother's married to a Croat. My uncle, to an Austrian. My second husband was French. My daughter's married to an American. My aunt, to a Serb. One cousin is married to a Hungarian, another to an Italian. So who am I? There are seven nationalities in*

my family. What could be more beautiful? Bosnia has four religions and multiple ethnic groups. No one can convince me we can't live together, have tolerance toward each other, understand each other, love each other. We're like a meadow filled with different flowers — a mixture of the Orient and Europe, and something else that comes just from this soil.

The connection in Bosnia between ethnicity and religion is not straightforward. To speak of “Croats” doesn't indicate practicing Catholics. The same is true of Serbs (who have a Serb Orthodox background) and Bosniaks (associated with Islamic tradition). Was this a religious war, built on religious passion? Hardly. Yugoslavia was a communist country for fifty years. Religion was underplayed, and at times downright discouraged. The war in Bosnia was no more about religious faith than the Troubles in Northern Ireland are about the authority of the Pope. Certainly the exigencies of war drove some people toward religion, either for solace or group identity. To paraphrase Greta's comment about her Jewish identity, if villagers were Muslim enough to be driven from their homes, they may well have felt an increased identification with Islam.

The temptation to develop a thesis of prayers devolving into war cries is repeatedly and resoundingly quashed by the women, who assured me that religion didn't guide most Bosnians in their decisions or actions. That being said, religious institutions took on a prominent position within the new nationalist movements throughout the Yugoslav republics, with priests appearing at pre-election rallies and often using (or abusing) religious ceremonies to urge their flocks to vote a certain way in the elections. Despite this, although they spoke extensively of religious differences, not one woman of the twenty-six named religious identity as a dividing element in Bosnian society or as a cause of the war. In addition to pictures of Tito and family members, one home might have the Virgin Mary on the wall, another a picture of a girl in a head scarf praying. In both cases the female symbol of the religion was significant, because rural girls were less pulled than boys into the public, secular Yugoslav world.²⁴ But religion in Bosnia had its strongest manifestation not in credos but customs, many rooted in Slavic folk traditions transformed to fit contemporary religious practice.

For Sabiha, the mix of religions evoked much more than tolerance. Appreciation for diverse traditions was distilled in the sounds of faith. *When I was in Sarajevo at Christmas, even though I wasn't Christian I went to church for midnight mass. Wherever I travel, I love to listen to a church organ and hear the bells. But to hear the voice of muezzin from the mosque at the same time — that's really something! It's fantastic! You hear an echo, as if it's coming from the sky. I never understood why Serbs wanted to destroy mosques, because this is wonderful music — the muezzin's voice asking*

people to pray and to respect God, nature, and each other. Who's so crazy that they hate church bells? It's priceless . . . spiritual food. You'll never hear the organ and bells and crier together anywhere else. This makes Sarajevo a very, very special city; but you had this also in Banja Luka, and in Mostar. It's uniquely Bosnia. That blend of sounds taught me to respect and embrace all religions. I thought people living next to each other and knowing all those cultures were so fortunate. That's why I was crushed when the war started and one community attacked another. I thought we loved each other. I couldn't understand how they hated . . . [Her voice trails off.]

Not only is the notion of a religious war impossible for Sabiha. She goes further to stake out a claim for Bosnians as the European paragon of tolerance. *It's not true that Bosnians have always been fighting each other; we've known how to live together for centuries. When Jews were forced out of Spain, Bosnia gave them refuge. There's a beautiful story about how Jewish people came with the keys to their houses, hoping one day they'd go back to their country. They never returned, but the key became their symbol. The Sephardic language they brought with them still exists in Bosnia, and they still sing in the Ladino dialect.*²⁵ *I've been involved in many Jewish activities; they're carrying their culture across generations. A valuable copy of the Jewish Haggadah was kept in Sarajevo through the First World War, the Second World War, until today. It was saved by a Muslim man, who hid it from the Nazis.* Sabiha recounts how Jews inside and outside Bosnia organized support during the recent war through political, intellectual, and humanitarian actions.²⁶ Perhaps, she imagines, this was the result of the Bosnians taking in Jews during their expulsion from Spain, or protecting and hiding them during the Nazi era. After all, she muses: *What goes around comes around. We had a great community of Jews in Sarajevo. Bosnia may be the only place where Muslims and Jews are working together toward peace and cultural preservation. It's not happening in the Middle East.* Then she adds, with a smile: *Maybe we should go to Jerusalem — Bosnian Muslims and Jews — to help them out.*

It's a challenge to reconcile the women's tearful accounts of cross-ethnic cruelty with these stories of multicultural diversity, recounted with smiles and laughter. But then reconciling American lynchings with contemporaneous jazz clubs also requires some mental gymnastics. Staying with the comparison, American society hasn't seen intermarriage among Hispanics, Asians, blacks, and whites comparable to the Bosnian mix across ethnic lines. As in countries worldwide, a continuum of social tolerance existed in Bosnia, with countervailing forces of integration and division. I learned not to be surprised when the same woman shifted from telling me how Croats did this, or Muslims thought that, to emotional stories demonstrating unity among people from different religious traditions.

That theme comes through in Biljana's description of herself as a schoolgirl struggling with Latin and math. *The Catholic seminary for students preparing for the priesthood was close to my school. I went there for free tutoring, and no questions about my religion were asked.* A priest-in-training, Metodie, was assigned by his professor to be her tutor; he was from a small, distant village, so he often went home with Biljana for meals with her family. Biljana lights up when she describes him: *He had a round face, tiny round glasses. I loved his gentleness. And he was always smiling.* When it was time for Metodie to leave for his parish assignment in Germany, Biljana's entire family escorted him to the train station. *He'd adopted us—or we'd adopted him.* The tutoring had ended, but Metodie was part of the family. His leaving was an emotional occasion for all. *Metodie was a big influence in my life. I asked him one time how could he exist in a communist state with such a strong belief in God. (I was really nowhere, because I wasn't committed to God, and I wasn't committed to communism. I was just having a good time, I guess.) He told me, "What's most important is that I respect you as a person— who you are, what your beliefs are. As for this communist state, I expect them to feel the same way about me. So, if they believe there is no God, that's their choice. I'll respect it, but I won't believe it."* He appeared to be comfortable with that arrangement, very much at peace with it.

Biljana credits her mentor with teaching her tolerance, not only of atheism but also of other faiths. The tolerance, she insists, was not based on ignorance. Everyone knew everyone else's religious tradition and even helped them celebrate the holidays. Although she knew everyone in her Sarajevo neighborhood, she says: *I truly cannot tell you that I knew a communist, because the Communist Party forbade their members celebrating religious holidays. I don't remember any family in my neighborhood that didn't celebrate those holidays.* In Biljana's family, that meant new clothes for Ramadan. But no other celebration compared with the Catholics'. *We were so happy for the Catholic girls, in their white dresses, with white gloves and a little white cloth, like a hankie, on top of their heads. We would wait outside their homes. Although we didn't go to Mass, we walked alongside them on their way to church, holding their hands— so proud they were celebrating their first Communion. The excitement was infectious.* She has an Orthodox version of the story as well. *My neighbor would fill my little skirt with colored eggs. Eggs were a rarity, unless you had your own chickens. I walked home with a whole skirt-full! We were happier than the people celebrating Easter!*

The argument that the Bosnian conflict was essentially an age-old religious war wears thinner and thinner as Biljana speaks, comparing other cultures with the Bosnia she knew as a child. Years before the conflict started, she would ask her American friends, "Why do the Irish have problems? Where I grew up, all people were respected." And the United States? *In Colorado Springs, someone comes for a facial,*

looks up at me, and asks “Do you have Jesus in your heart?” That would never have happened in Bosnia.

I realized, as I studied the transcripts of the interviews, that the women’s accounts almost exclusively concerned religious holidays rather than the content of their faith. In contrast to a scholarly theological taxonomy or an index of creeds, the women’s personal stories provide a wealth of understanding of community life. The stories were so similar across rural and urban spheres, age groups, and ethnic/religious lines that the tales became their own litany. Biljana’s skirt-load of eggs spilled into similar stories from Galina, Jelka, and Karolina, tumbling willy-nilly across geographical regions as well as faith traditions.

Like Sabiha, from a Muslim family, RADA, Serb Orthodox, did not only tolerate cultural differences. She cherished them. Like others, her memories reach back to childhood with her best friend, Kika, the younger daughter of the family next door. *We were always at each other’s house, and she’s remained my friend all my life. When she and her husband were expelled from Pale [the Bosnian Serb stronghold just outside Sarajevo], my mother and brother took them into our home. It was an awful risk for my brother, because he wasn’t a member of the Serb nationalist party. One night he transported the furniture from Kika’s house into ours. That could have meant death, because our house was surrounded by the strongest Serb extremists.*

We never had religious-based problems. I developed a love for Islamic culture and tradition in Kika’s house. Something silky runs in my veins. In my mother’s house, coffee was always gulped down, then everybody left. But I’d go to Kika’s home . . . [Rada’s face lights up as her hands describe every aspect of the scene.] Her mother made coffee and served it on beautiful copper trays. We’d sit for hours on the “sinija”—the settee that goes around the walls—and drink that coffee. That something “silky” in her veins is the Islamic-oriental influence on Bosnian life, whether rural or urban. Every district had its own mosque. Guests were invited to enjoy their coffee with dignity, while servants tended to the water pipe.²⁷ Kika’s family never said things like, “Don’t lean against that cushion ’cause it’s been starched and ironed.” The setting was always warm and quiet, typical of Muslim homes, where life was slow and peaceful. There’s a local saying, “No worry, no hurry.” In those houses there were rooms upstairs called “chardaks,” with high windows so there’s a view all around. When I had my own flat, my house was full of all that oriental furniture, as well as copper plates, prayer beads, and other typical Muslim things.

Given the disconnect between such personal experience and the wartime propaganda, Rada—who is, after all, a documentary filmmaker—goes on to reflect on the meaning of cultural differences. *Before the war, different ethnic groups co-*

existed. Especially in the rural areas, people knew who was Serb, Croat, or Muslim. But it was just for identification purposes. The differences didn't affect our living together. Sure, the most important thing was that a Serb girl not marry a Muslim boy, or a Croat man [Rada is laughing]. But young people did marry whoever they wanted, the world survived, and everybody was happy later and accepted it. Just how thorough that acceptance of others was is reflected in Rada's experience later, in the heat of the war. As a Serb staying in Sarajevo, sometimes I heard people say, "There's that Chetnik woman." She tosses off the insult with a psychological interpretation: *I could somehow understand. People who were suffering so terribly had to express at least a bit of resistance. Apart from the Serbs, there was nobody toward whom they could direct that feeling. I didn't let it get to me.*

IRMA is not so gentle. *Who cares about these categories?* She asks defiantly. As a young adolescent on summer break just before the war started, she remembers hearing about the conflict brewing in Slovenia. *They were talking about "Serbs," "Muslims," "Catholics," and "Croats," and I couldn't understand it. Then I started to learn among my Sarajevo friends: he's Muslim, she's Serb, she's Catholic. I'd never thought my friend's name wasn't Muslim or Croat or anything else. And of course with mixed marriages, you have mixed names. And now, after all she's been through, Irma has a simple request: I just want to respect my friends who have another religion, and I want them to respect me, too. We're all just human.*

As difficult as it's been, Irma's life stretches before her. She hasn't yet raised a family or launched a career. In contrast, there's DANICA, from a town not a city, expressing the same theme as the girl fifty years her junior: *Before the war nobody thought about what ethnic group they were. I never understood what Serb, Croat, or Muslim meant. I grew up in Slovenia and spent forty years in Bosnia as an adult, but we never experienced intolerance because we weren't Bosnian. People wanted to be closer to us because of our differences. People today are saying we didn't live together. I can tell you: People in our region lived side by side happily, regardless of religion or ethnicity. I'll never, ever believe this was a religious war.*

Some would say Danica must be idealizing the past. After all, if life was so copacetic among ethnic groups, how could the society have shifted so suddenly and exploded in war? Danica could only clutch at her carefully constructed life as it was dragged off its trajectory. I saw in her face the psyche of a weary state emerging from years of terror. *When the war came* [Danica's voice is much lower, more subdued], *everything suddenly changed. There were no more "Croat," "Serb," or "Muslim," but "Chetnik," "Ustasha," and "Mujahadeen" — insulting names for people who'd lived together for years. We were still the same people, but nobody could see it*

anymore. Considering that she's been living in exile, unable to return to her Serb-controlled town, her measured words are particularly remarkable. *Sure, there were always differences. But we didn't hate each other; that was the most important thing.*

Danica closes with another emotion, even stronger than her sadness: *I'm just so afraid the war might start again.* For every woman in this volume, a return to that madness is a powerful threat, but the conflict is not necessarily linked in their minds to hatred among groups. Ironically, many of the stories of multicultural life they chose to tell me are drawn from the war years. Below, three more women describe experiences of cross-ethnic support that prevailed in spite of the exigency of war, although they may be couched in past memories. KAROLINA begins with a declaration: *Sarajevo has always been "multi" in every way. I married a Muslim from an old family. The house in which I live is hundreds of years old, and I entered as a young Catholic girl. According to my husband's family tradition, for religious occasions they'd slaughter a sheep. But we also had Christmas trees. I bought eggs for coloring, because I wanted my children to know my customs and my religion. When my husband died, I buried him according to Muslim customs. That was his life and origin. But I made sure our children knew both religious traditions, and then the choice was theirs. My son wanted to be a Muslim. He wanted to continue where his father left off. That's how he feels, and I respect that. If I go to the cathedral, that's my choice.*

Karolina lives in the old part of town, where she's one of the only non-Muslims. *During the war, we shared a basement shelter. Across the street from me there was a Hadjija—a well-off Muslim who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Somebody from an Iranian organization visited him.²⁸ It was the month of Ramadan, when Muslims fast until sundown. They were writing down names of people to be given food in the afternoon. As a gift, he put my name on the list, saying "You're part of our family. You mustn't be hungry. When we eat, you have to eat with us, even though you're not Muslim." Of course the organization took my name off the list. I didn't belong to Muslims or Catholics, so I didn't get anything from their organizations. But my neighbors didn't forget me, even though the Hadjija was killed in the marketplace slaughter.*

While the war was going on, my daughter got married, then had a baby. It's the custom here that when you give birth, people bring presents. My next-door neighbor came in the afternoon. He's from an old Sarajevo family. He was in his mid-fifties, too old to be drafted into the army but still active in the local community. He called me "Lina Hanuma," using the Muslim title for the lady of the house, and said, "I can't buy anything, but every day at six o'clock, I'll bring twenty-five liters of water for the baby." The neighbor had difficulty walking because of problems with both hips; Karolina's home was on a steep hill. It was really far for him. He had to go down, cross the river,

fetch water, and come back up the hill. It took more than an hour, but every day he'd bring that water for my granddaughter. And then, giving me time to let the meaning of these impossibly conflicting loyalties soak in, Karolina adds an understatement: Life is interesting.

Interesting indeed—and baffling in its blend of goodness and evil. Stories like Karolina's turn conventional wisdom on its head and debunk the image of a hate-filled population, even as gruesome ethnic cleansing and barbaric shelling of the capital continued. Like Karolina's daughter, Ana's child VALENTINA married and gave birth in the midst of political upheaval. She tells of their time in Belgrade, trying to escape the danger in her Bosnian village. In the heart of Serbia, Valentina found a doctor who gave her the finest care she could imagine as her pregnancy progressed. Beyond the medical help, she's still moved by memories of that care. *If he could have, he would have shared my labor! It didn't matter that they were Serbs, and I was Croat, and we were at war. The whole hospital—all the nurses and doctors—were wonderful. They probably took even better care of me than the other patients.*

As a doctor who fled with her children just as the war was breaking out, FAHRIJA chafed at being on the outside of the need as her husband served as one of the seven-member, multiethnic Bosnian presidency. From the Albanian royal family, she insists that growing up in Yugoslavia meant having friends of different religions, both at home and at work. *Ethnic distinctions were never an issue, to me or my children.* She describes a project she undertook while a refugee in upstate New York. *I went to the hospitals and spoke to my colleagues, asking for donations of medicines. I told them that earlier, when I worked as a volunteer in a public hospital in America, I never cared whether a person was black, Hispanic, or Irish. I helped everyone. Now my people needed help. I asked for samples of medicines you get from drug factories. I hadn't known what to do with them when I worked as a doctor in the U.S., but now my people needed them badly. You wouldn't believe how much we were able to collect. One colleague wrote a check for \$10,000. Some brought instruments and other medical supplies. Twice we collected several tons of aid. We paid for two doctors and four nurses to come to the U.S. to learn cardiac surgery and brought over children needing medical treatment that couldn't be provided in the war situation, making it possible for many to have surgery on their eyes, arms, and legs—giving them another chance for a happy childhood.*

Fahrija managed to recruit forty doctors to go to Sarajevo. *My husband made arrangements with our Ministry of Health, but the doctors ended up stranded outside Sarajevo with tons of equipment, unable to enter the city because of the constant bom-*

*bardment. They could have waited months, so I told them to give the equipment to the hospital in Zagreb, Croatia, and come back—even though at the time we were fighting the Croats. I just made sure the people in Zagreb didn't know I was behind it. I figured the medications weren't for politicians; they were for people who were victims of this madness, no matter what group they belonged to.*²⁹

In our interviews, there were as many such stories of cross-cultural experience as we had hours to spend. Each reinforced the other, adding to a compelling argument that for most everyday Bosnians—whether educated or not, rural or urban, Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim, or Jewish—life at both public and private levels was not built around differences. Such a statement is much more than a negative. It's an affirmation of the richness of coexisting or blended traditions.