REFLECTIONS OF A HOPEFUL REALIST (OR RELUCTANT PESSIMIST)

Truth Telling and Reconciliation in Srebrenica

Since lecturing as a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Sarajevo in 2001, I have returned to Bosnia on a number of occasions. This trip, like all the rest, had a professional focus. However, my journeys have become increasingly personal, perhaps intimate, over the years. But this visit was to be different because I finally decided to act on a “deeply felt need” to visit Srebrenica and the cemetery and memorial at Potocari. Of course, my scholarly interest in Bosnia’s difficult past and rocky present indicated to me that I should visit those places in eastern Bosnia. More importantly, however, was this felt need to “see, smell, hear, and touch” an area that became the “crucible of genocide” for so many people—for the more than 8000 people who lost their lives; the survivors and their families and friends whose lives were torn apart; and the perpetrators of the inhumanity, as well as their collaborators and sympathizers. They all lived it, with some continuing to live its aftermath. Just as the pleasant experiences that I have had while living in Bosnia were woven into the tapestry of my lived world, so too the experiences of those who survived were woven into their tapestries, except that their tapestries are stained red with blood. This was made clear to me in August of 2008 when I covered the Sarajevo Film Festival for my department’s religion and film journal. The particular event that touched me was the film that slowly drew in the viewer, for my professional focus. However, my journeys would greatly depend on shuttling people back and forth to Potocari. A passerby and a driver were quite helpful in getting me to the cemetery and memorial. The cemetery/memorial is not a large place. What few trees there are—a smattering of Sycamore, Birch, and Chestnut—offer the visitor little shade. The trees are no doubt as young as the youngest of those who have been laid to rest. And on that day, any shade would have been a relief from the intense sunlight and heat. Despite the extreme conditions that afternoon, the experience of walking past the rows and rows of white stone and green wooden markers was a touching one. It is one thing to see the figure “8372…” on the stone near the entrance and another to see a field of markers, each indicating the site of an individual’s grave, and the memorial engraved with the thousands of names of those who died in the genocide. I made my way through the parcels of gravesites, eventually arriving at the memorial an hour later. I moved along the stone slabs, each with its etched names arranged in alphabetical order, from A to Z and back again, looking for surnames of my friends. I found many: Ademovic, Babic, Harbas, Salihovic…Some surnames had many individuals listed, but some had far fewer: Salihovic 229; Suljic 139; Ademovic 99; Tihic 27; Velic 16; and Lošić and Dulakovic 1. So many names; too many names. Unfortunately, there will be more names, for there are many victims whose remains have yet to be discovered and identified. The abstractness of 8372… is humanized as one’s eyes find their mark on the rows of markers and on the long list of victim names.
The cemetery and its memorial remind us that the deaths of thousands in the genocide were part of a human reality. Large segments of the male population were extinguished: children lost fathers and grandfathers; wives lost husbands, and mothers lost their sons. Boys who would one day have become fathers themselves had their lives cut short. That number was made human by the wait of the survivors of Potocari to see for themselves how the past was obliterated. Interethic communication rarely exists, and then only for pragmatic reasons. One might say that I went considerably far in dwelling on the Davidoff Affair in order to reduce the nationalist threat to one that seeks only to delete realities of the past. What I lost sight of was the reification of this threat as a lived reality in the present, kept alive by the xenophobia and chauvinism that stretch deep into the hearts of nationalists. It was never simply a matter of forgetting the genocide in its entirety, but rather a deletion of just one side of the narrative so as to punish the victims further, as well as a resurrection of another side of the genocidal narrative in order to give legitimacy to the victimizers. And so, becoming better informed led me to believe one thing: the city is a labyrinth of hatred; behind the facade of a rebuilt mosque, freshly painted houses, and the cemetery and memorial lies a grim reminder that all is not well in Sребренica and elsewhere. Even at the best of times, I suspect that the few Muslims left behind, perhaps with no place else to go, rarely feel secure while living in a broken and violated city. Yet in spite of the constant angst, they have managed to avoid capitulation or worse, their own violent death.

Success Is Difficult to Gauge

Šavija-Valha made it clear that there were growing signs of progress amidst the continued turmoil. NDC Sarajevo has been working in Sребренica and Bratunac since 2006. Instead of carrying out reconciliation projects, Šavija-Valha noted that NDC has simply "offered open 'space' for dialogue to take place, where people from those communities could discuss interethnic issues that burden their communities." The dialogue process was, of course, more complicated. According to Šavija-Valha, it meant "bringing people together from different ethnic groups, providing (technical) training, and facilitating interethnic dialogue on concrete issues." Thus, the key to resolving concrete issues in the ethnically divided communities was to make permanent interethnic communication that would "encourage the restructuring of social networks, to transform mono-ethnic networks into multiethnic social networks." But the process was set up to be as holistic as possible, so three "target groups" were selected: municipalities' structures, ethnically divided schools, and youth. Although success is difficult to gauge, there have been some positive results: municipality coordination boards were formed that eventually lead to an independent Srebrenica and Bratunac Dialogue Centre; parents from both communities engaged in joint projects; and the youth from each community joined youth NGOs that were previously monoethnic. Although what Nansen has done is to offer open space to the different communities, some would argue that there can be no real success until reconciliation is achieved. What is reconciliation? It is the acceptance of one another and the development of mutual trust, which in turn is dependent on truth telling and forgiveness. Because all this is predicated on the parties coming (or being brought) into contact with one another, the social dynamics found in places like Srebrenica and Bratunac have played into the hands of the dominant ideological group, which in this case are the Serb nationalists. Interaction and thus, reconciliation, is impeded because group polarization and enclaves have led to more extreme views that reflect certain deep-seated tendencies. Since those tendencies include deep-seated xenophobia and chauvinism, the kind of constructive interaction needed for reconciliation will be extremely difficult to achieve. It is these negative processes that are precisely what the work of the Nansen Dialogue Centre tries to combat. It is through opening a space for the Serb to hear the competing Bosniak view that extremism or fanaticism on the part of the majority can be reduced. Thus, creating open space is one-step towards reconciliation, for it is hoped that over time a threshold will be reached such that the dominant group will embrace tendencies that are more conducive for dialogue and, thus, the precursors of reconciliation. It will never be easy and trouble free to deal with the likes of those at Kafe Bar Davidoff. Indeed, they may never stray from their xenophobic and chauvinist tendencies. The fact that the way people look at the world leads to changes in the world helps to perpetuate these damaging tendencies. However, this same connection between thought and change also allows for the possibility of progressive change like that resulting from an open space for dialogue, and this is ultimately what provides hope for those who want to create a better Bosnia. Integration accommodative of difference will eventually take hold, and when it does, the precursors of reconciliation, and thus reconciliation itself, will become a reality. Confidence runs high that the hopeful realist or the reluctant pessimist will see the day when there is a peaceful and prosperous multiethnic society in Bosnia.