

# 11 Between Past and Future: Young People's Strategies for Living a "Normal Life" in Postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina

Monika Palmberger

## Mostar and Its Institutionalized Postwar Division

Mostar, the city where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the period 2005–2008, is often referred to as the worst-case scenario of postwar partition.<sup>1</sup> This stands in stark opposition to accounts of prewar Mostar, which depict the city as a showcase for good interethnic neighborliness among Bosniaks,<sup>2</sup> Croats, and Serbs. Mostar, a city located in Herzegovina (the southern part of the country) is beautifully situated along the Neretva River. While Mostar has long been a favored tourist destination, its main attraction, the Old Ottoman Bridge, became known around the world when it was destroyed in 1993. The pictures of the destroyed bridge were then taken as a symbol of the shattered cross-ethnic relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Yet in Mostar, in the beginning, Croat and Bosniak armed forces fought together against the Serb-dominated Yugoslav National Army. When the latter finally retreated, the former allies started war among themselves. The war has remained visible in Mostar's cityscape, not least because of the many ruins and the division of the city in a Croat-dominated west and a Bosniak-dominated east side. This division has encompassed most aspects of life: politically, economically, culturally, and also in terms of health care, education, and the media.<sup>3</sup>

The young people this chapter is concerned about were teenagers or in their early twenties when I met them, between two and ten years old when the war started, and between five and fourteen years old when it ended. This means all of them lived more years of their lives in post-wartime than in pre-wartime and thus have been educated in an ethnically divided education system. This postwar division has the effect that the youngest generation is much less familiar with customs, names, and particular expressions associated with the other ethno-national groups, which are part of the older population's common knowledge. An

age difference of only a couple of years already matters in this respect.<sup>4</sup> A Bosnian-Croat friend of mine from Mostar, in her late twenties, repeatedly expressed her astonishment about the younger generation this chapter is concerned about. For instance, she once expressed disbelief at the fact that her younger friends are no longer familiar with Bosniak names. Names that for her were typically Bosnian (i.e., not Bosniak) did not sound familiar to her friends who were only a few years younger than her. This unfamiliarity also extends to socialist festivities, prewar rock bands, and *turcizmi*<sup>5</sup> (in the case of Croat youth), which were all common in prewar Bosnia and Herzegovina. For many of those belonging to older generations, prewar Mostar is still the true Mostar while postwar Mostar is a kind of artificial state. Following this line of thought, the youngest generation is pitied for their lack of memory of true (prewar) Mostar.<sup>6</sup>

The division of schools and universities (and even kindergartens) introduced during the war, constitute an effective way of institutionalizing Mostar's division. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, officially three languages are spoken—Bosniak, Croatian, and Serbian—which are, however, very close to each other and the differences used to be first and foremost of a regional (rather than an ethno-national) nature. While during Tito's Yugoslavia schools were shared by Bosniak, Croat, and Serb pupils, today a curriculum for each of them exists. Those in favor of the educational division argue that separate curricula are necessary, particularly in respect to so-called national subjects, such as history, geography, and local language. Due to a lack of space after the war, many school buildings in Herzegovina have hosted two schools, one teaching the Croatian and the other the Bosniak curriculum, one taught in the morning, the other in the afternoon. The best-known example of this kind of schools is Mostar's old grammar school (Stara gimnazija), which was officially reunited in 2004. Although uniting "two schools under one roof" was sold as a big success by the international community at that time, it needs to be said that Bosniak and Croat students attended different classes following different curricula even though they shared the same school building.<sup>7</sup>

History in present Bosnia and Herzegovina is a particularly sensitive subject, not least because it is taken to ground the nation's past and justify the nation's destiny. The different curricula teach history in very divergent ways. Even if the curricula do not cover the period of the war (1992–95), the war is not completely absent from the classroom. The situation presents itself in a similar fashion at the university level. Mostar, while a relatively small city with about 120,000 inhabitants, since the war has two universities, one Croat- and one Bosniak-dominated. During lectures on the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia in the twentieth century at the two universities, I witnessed the effort to rewrite history after the fall of Yugoslavia. It was common to teach history in a positivistic way, teaching so-called historical facts whereby professors claimed authority over the interpretation of history. While the 1992–95 war was not part of the books used for the class and little room was given to explicit discussion of this period, the war was still overly present. References were made frequently linking experiences of the recent war with injustices and atrocities each nation experienced earlier

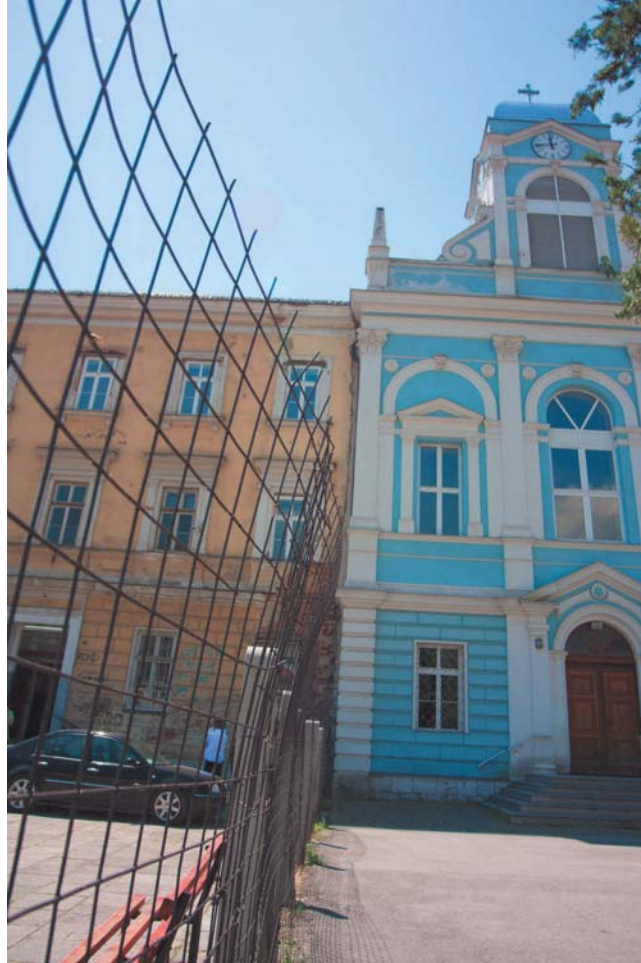


Figure 11.1. Two schools under one roof. A divided school in Travnik, Bosnia and Herzegovina, where ethnic Bosniaks and Croats attend classes in the same building yet are taught different curricula and are physically separated from each other. Photograph by Roska Vrgova.

in history. The 1992–95 war was thereby presented only as the peak of an iceberg of humiliations against one's nation. In order to validate the suffering of their own nation, different historical periods were strung into one coherent narrative, a narrative of victimization and suppression. A history teacher in an interview with me cemented this link between World War II and the 1992–95 war because of the recurring importance of a specific date, which he took as proof that the recent war was a repetition of World War II. He underpinned the connection between the aggression against Bosnia and Herzegovina against the Bosniak nation (he used the two interchangeably) by fascists during World War II and the war of 1992–1995, by calling attention to the date, November 9: November 9, 1938, the Reichskristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass) and November 9, 1993, the final destruction of the Old Bridge.

## The (Un)Spoilt Generation?

Due to their limited (if any) prewar memories and because they spent their childhood in a war-torn country, Mostar's youth was often presented by the older generations as the one most effected by ethno-national hatred. Adults among my interlocutors (locals as well as foreigners) frequently referred to these youth as a "lost generation"—lethargic and disillusioned—that cannot rely on the memory of a better life and thus has fallen subject to manipulation by nationalist propaganda. These stereotypical representations, however, are vehemently rejected by Mostar's youth. In defense against the stigmatization of being trapped in the realm of the "lost generation," my young interlocutors found strategies to "detach" themselves from the legacy of the war.<sup>8</sup> Young people attribute their young age during the war period as the reason for them being less affected by the war. This was the case with Mario, a Croatian in his late teens. Mario claimed that the war would surely have had a completely different effect on his life if it broke out now and he had to take up a rifle and fight. Although the war had a traumatic influence on people, this was not the case for him personally, he told me. Mario's narrative of the war is ambiguous. While he states that this war, like any war, did leave behind many scars, he simultaneously removes himself from that experience by stating he had been too young to understand what was going on. He explained why he was spared any feelings of hate due to his age and his lack of direct war experience: "Because when my town [Mostar] was shelled, I was in Split. I went to excursions on islands. I went swimming. I didn't feel the war, and later on when I came back to my community, I didn't have anything against Muslims or Serbs. . . . Coexistence [*suživot*] is good, especially among young people of my age who didn't feel the war a lot." When narrating the war, Mario distances his personal story, and to some extent also that of his entire generation, from what is often described as a collective experience.

Other interlocutors of his age narrated their war experiences to me in a similar way, especially when they had been evacuated to safer places. This was also the case for Lejla, a sixteen-year-old Bosniak woman. Lejla is from a Mostar family whose members identified themselves as Yugoslavs (a supranational identity) before the war but today declare themselves Bosniaks. Lejla left Mostar with her parents and sister in 1992 for Italy and only returned six years later, while her grandparents, cousins, and other family members remained in Mostar throughout the war. Lejla told me the following: "It is for sure easier for us than for our parents, because they are familiar with everything, with the situation that led to war and everything else, while we were protected from everything; we were just facing some consequences of the war." Here, Lejla, similarly to Mario, clearly expresses what I so often encountered in conversations with young people in Mostar; namely, that they present themselves as the "unspoilt" generation due to their young age and thereby distance their personal experiences from that of the wider society. Lejla did so with phrases like "we were protected from everything" and "we were just facing some consequences of the war." These phrases also show that Lejla (like others of my young interlocutors) speaks of youth in Mostar (at



Figure 11.2. Recent graduates standing outside the United World College in Mostar, 2010. Photograph by Srdjan Jordanovski.

times at least) as a “we”-group, although the lives of young Bosniaks and Croats are separated and points of encounter are rare. This does not mean that Lejla did not see the “indirect” effects of the war on her life. Like others of her generation, Lejla was devastated with the grim job prospects in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which she would eventually face after completing her education. Moreover, she was also not fond of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s education system, especially of the old-fashioned teaching and examining methods. Lejla was also very unhappy with the present division of Mostar and thus became active in a youth organization that aims to bridge the division. But not all of my young interlocutors were upset with the division. Several of them even presented the division as if it were natural, with roots in ancient history. This was also the case with Mario, whom I introduced earlier. He did not present the division as artificial and related to the war but as a division between two different “civilizations.”<sup>9</sup>

Returning to the previously described strategy of my interlocutors to remove their personal memories from that of their nation, this strategy also enabled them to remove personal memories from the discourse of victimization, which is a strong element in both the national Bosniak and Croat meta-narratives, as well as in the older generations’ narratives. But it would be wrong to say that my young interlocutors denied that their lives were affected by the war altogether. Although they presented themselves as less affected by personal war experiences, as described, their accounts of wartime included personal hardship. Many of them were evacuated to safer places, often outside the country, and remember

that time as a time of separation from family members (sometimes even from their parents). Narratives of the war period also include feelings of confusion and insecurity due to a lack of information they received at that time from older family members and other adults about what was going on.

Besides the strategy to distance their past experiences from that of their co-nationals, I encountered a strong tendency among young people in Mostar to dissociate their lives from politics in a more general sense. Young people in Mostar aimed to present the city they lived in, and thereby their lives, as just any other city and any other young person's life. This strategy seemed specifically important to those young people who felt the consequences of war in their personal lives the most: they were the ones who particularly skillfully avoided addressing their experience as related to the wider problems Mostar's society faces today.

I encountered this vividly in Elvira, a twenty-one-year-old woman with whom I became friends at the beginning of my fieldwork and whose life I followed for the three years I was based in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Elvira faced the difficulties of the city's division in her private life more than most others I knew. She had been in a relationship with a Bosniak man but had to keep it entirely secret since she was from a Croat family; neither her friends nor her family were allowed to know about it, as they would have greatly disapproved. Unlike her parents who avoided crossing to the Bosniak-dominated east side of the city, Elvira crossed sides almost every day because she studied at the Bosniak-dominated university. Her parents approved this choice only because the Croat-dominated university did not offer the subject she had chosen. When asked about the experience of being a Croat student at the Bosniak-dominated university, she told me she had not encountered any problems, after a while adding that indeed nobody knew of her Croat origins, as her first and last names are not clearly and exclusively identifiable as Croat. I was surprised she never complained about having to keep the issue about her Croat background as yet another secret.

When from time to time I went for coffee with Elvira and her fellow students in a café on the university campus, I understood how it was possible for her to keep her national identity out of conversations. Elvira and her friends talked about exams, professors, fellow students, fashion, and other topics but avoided conversations about local politics. Their dissatisfaction with Mostar's present situation was expressed mainly through sharing their mutual dissatisfaction with the bad economic situation and bleak job prospects. Almost all of them saw the extremely weak (and corrupt) economy as particularly burdensome for their individual future. Like many others of her generation, Elvira would consider leaving Mostar if the right opportunity presented itself.<sup>10</sup>

It was interesting to see that it was her Bosniak partner who, from time to time, challenged her way of presenting Mostar's reality as removed from the legacy of the war. Once, in a coffee bar at the beginning of my stay in Mostar, Elvira, her boyfriend, and I discussed in which parts of the city it would be good for me and my family to live. Elvira suggested West Mostar (where she lived) since it was greener than East Mostar. Her Bosniak boyfriend, however, found this statement provocative, adding that the east side used to be green as well but

during the war, people needed heating material so they had cut down most of the trees. I never felt quite comfortable challenging Elvira's depoliticized presentations in such a way and assumed that once we knew each other better she would share her thoughts on such matters anyway. But I was wrong; all my subtle attempts to engage her in conversation about the political situation of her city failed, even though we met frequently. By offering me only monosyllabic answers she indicated her desire to change the topic and talk about more light-hearted things, such as parties and holiday plans. When once she and I attended a photograph exhibition in the Bosniak-dominated university showing images of a heavily destroyed Mostar, I was sure she would be moved to share her thoughts about Mostar's recent past with me. However, she expressed her feelings with only three words: "That is horrible!" For Elvira, crossing sides when studying at the Bosniak-dominated university and upholding a relation with a Bosniak man seemed only feasible when she detached her private everyday life from the politicized public. One could even argue that only this strategy made it possible for Elvira to cross sides.

### Discrepancies between Past and Future

Although there is a general discrepancy between the public sphere in which the war takes a dominant role (e.g., in memorials, commemorations, the media, and speeches of politicians) and private everyday life in which the war is a much less explicit topic, this discrepancy was most pronounced among those who had experienced the war as children. Their narratives included strong elements of silencing and distancing the effects the war may have had on their lives. Although those belonging to older generations sometimes expressed the wish to forget about war atrocities they themselves or their nation had experienced, the war and its aftermath snuck into almost every longer conversation.<sup>11</sup>

In this chapter, I suggested that the phenomenon of distancing personal (generational) memories among Mostar's youth from that of the nation may be interpreted as a strategy used to cope with the legacy of the war and as a defense against stigmatization by the older generations. Even if individuals tend to embed their personal memories into wider officially accepted narratives, one is likely to also encounter dissonance between stories of individual experience and their larger social and historical context. According to Jacob Climo, distancing autobiographic memories from memories of the group one belongs to can be a personal decision.<sup>12</sup> This can occur when it feels too threatening to put oneself into the recognized historical context. So, by separating personal memories from collective memories, the person feels protected from the difficult collective experiences.<sup>13</sup>

Similar observations by Lynne Jones, a psychiatrist working in Goražde and Foča a year after the war had ended, support this understanding: "The fact that for some children, in some situations, distancing is an effective means of coping challenges widely held assumptions about the psychological effect of stressful events. It suggests that we might do well to pay more attention to avoidance as a constructive rather than pathological coping mechanism."<sup>14</sup> This suggests that

past events of war are so overwhelming and threatening that young people in Mostar prefer to remove their personal stories from the wider social context and at the same time dissociate their present lives from the politicized public. These strategies are then utilized in order to cope with the legacy of the war and as a defense against stigmatization by the older generations, as well as to create room for hope for the city to which the post-Yugoslavs' lives are inextricably bound. This dynamic is likely to be connected to the post-Yugoslavs' strong orientation toward the present and the future, which also becomes visible in their narratives, which are less past-oriented than those of the older generations.<sup>15</sup> But the relative silence of war experiences may also be connected to the fact that the post-Yugoslavs have not yet found their meta-narrative. Silence, as Connerton rightly reminds us, "is not a unitary phenomenon; there are, rather, a plurality of silences", which seems also to be the case here.<sup>16</sup>

## Notes

I would like to express my gratitude to the Austrian Academy of Sciences, the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity and the Austrian Science Fund (FWF T702-G18) for their generous support. Parts of this chapter have been published in the article "Distancing Personal Experiences from the Collective—Discursive Tactics among Youth in Post-War Mostar" in *L'Europe en formation: Journal of Studies on European Integration and Federalism*.

1. The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina that lasted from 1992 until 1995.
2. *Bosniak* is today the official term for Bosnian Muslims.
3. See Palmberger 2006, Palmberger 2018.
4. see Palmberger 2010.
5. *Turcizam* (pl. *turcizmi*) is the local name for a word of Arabic origin incorporated into what used to be referred to as Serbo-Croatian and is nowadays used mainly by Bosniaks or the older population.
6. See Palmberger 2013a.
7. See Hromadžić 2008, 2015.
8. The act of silencing memories of war in order to reestablish cross-national relationships has been described by several authors working in the region as conducive for postwar coexistence (Eastmond and Mannergren Selimovic 2012; Hayden 2009; Stefansson 2010). By drawing close attention to strategic silences, the "ethics of memory" is a question that emerged at the end of the twentieth century and in which remembering is presented as a virtue and forgetting as a failure (Connerton 2011, 33).
9. See Palmberger 2016.
10. Several opinion polls in Bosnia and Herzegovina have shown a high percentage (more than 70 percent) of young people want to leave their country, especially for economic reasons. See, for example, a report by the Youth Information Agency Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2005 for the UN Review of the World Programme of Action for Youth. It states that 77 percent of youth in Bosnia and Herzegovina want to leave the country, 24 percent of whom want to leave without ever returning.
11. See Palmberger 2008, 2013b.
12. Climo 2002.
13. *Ibid.*, 126; see also Leydesdorff et al. 1999.



14. Jones 2004, 247.
15. See Neyzi 2004.
16. Connerton 2011, 53.

## References

- Climo, Jacob. 2002. "Memories of the American Jewish Aliyah: Connecting Individual and Collective Experience." In *Social Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives*, edited by J. Climo and M.G. Cattell, 111–127. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.
- Connerton, Paul. 2011. *The Spirit of Mourning: History, Memory and the Body*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eastmond, Marita, and Johanna Mannergren Selimovic. 2012. "Silence as Possibility in Postwar Everyday Life." *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 6 (3): 502–524.
- Hayden, Robert. 2009. "Comments to Carol Kidron 'Toward an Ethnography of Silence: The Lived Presence of the Past in the Everyday Life of Holocaust Trauma Survivors and Their Descendants in Israel.'" *Current Anthropology* 50 (1): 5–27.
- Hromadžić, Azra. 2008. "Discourses of Integration and Practices of Reunification at the Mostar Gymnasium, Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Comparative Education Review* 52 (4): 541–563.
- Hromadžić, Azra. 2015. *Citizens of an Empty Nation: Youth and State-Making in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Jones, Lynne. 2004. *Then They Started Shooting: Growing Up in Wartime Bosnia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Leydesdorff, Selma, Graham Dawson, Natasha Burchardt, and Timothy G. Ashplant. 1999. "Introduction: Trauma and Life Stories." In *Trauma and Life Stories: International Perspectives*, edited by K. L. Rogers, S. Leydesdorff, and G. Dawson, 1–26. New York: Routledge.
- Neyzi, Leyla. 2004. "Exploring Memory through Oral History in Turkey." In *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory*, edited by Maria Nikolaeva Todorova, 60–76. London: Hurst.
- Palmberger, Monika. 2006. "Making and Breaking Boundaries: Memory Discourses and Memory Politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina." In Bufon, Milan et al. (eds.), *The Western Balkans: A European Challenge*. Koper: Annales, 525–536.
- Palmberger, Monika. 2008. "Nostalgia Matters: Nostalgia for Yugoslavia as Potential Vision for a Better Future?" *Sociologija. Časopis za sociologiju, socijalnu psihologiju i socijalnu antropologiju* 50 (4): 355–70.
- Palmberger, Monika. 2010. "Distancing Personal Experiences from the Collective—Discursive Tactics among Youth in Post-War Mostar." *L'Europe en formation: Journal of Studies on European Integration and Federalism* 357: 107–124.
- Palmberger, Monika. 2013a. "Practices of Border Crossing in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Case of Mostar." *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 20 (5): 544–560.
- Palmberger, Monika. 2013b. "Ruptured Pasts and Captured Futures: Life Narratives in Post-War Mostar." *Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 66: 14–24.
- Palmberger, Monika. 2016. *How Generations Remember: Conflicting Histories and Shared Memories in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Palmberger, Monika. 2018. "Renaming Streets and Nationalizing Public Space: The Case of Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina." In Rose-Redwood, R., D. Alderman, and M. Azaryahu (eds.). *The Political Life of Urban Streetscapes: Naming, Politics, and Place*. London: Routledge.
- Stefansson, Anders. 2010. "Coffee after Cleansing? Co-Existence, Co-Operation, and Communication in Post-Conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 57: 62–76.
- UN Review of the World Programme of Action for Youth. 2005. *Independent Evaluation of the National Youth Policy in Bosnia-Herzegovina*. Accessed June 24, 2015. <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/wpaysubmissions/bosnia.pdf>.

MONIKA PALMBERGER is a research fellow at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna, and at the Interculturalism, Migration and Minorities Research Centre, University of Leuven. She is author of *How Generations Remember: Conflicting Histories and Shared Memories in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina* and editor of *Care across Distance: Ethnographic Explorations of Aging and Migration* (with Azra Hromadžić) and *Memories on the Move: Experiencing Mobility, Rethinking the Past* (with Jelena Tošić).