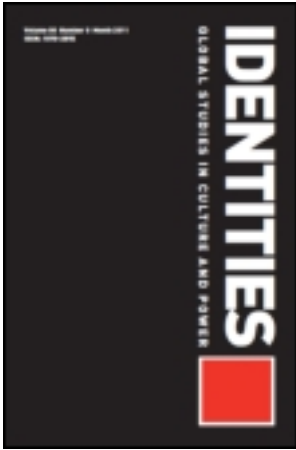


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### Practices of border crossing in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina: the case of Mostar

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## Practices of border crossing in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina: the case of Mostar

Monika Palmberger

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In this article, I bring together literature from the fields of memory and reconciliation to investigate practices of ‘border crossing’ in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina. While national divisions prevail, subtle attempts at border crossing can be witnessed even in those areas most impacted by the war’s partition, such as in Mostar, a city that has been left divided into Croat and Bosniak sides. Borders are physically crossed to reintegrate the ‘other side’ into one’s everyday life, but also in a more metonymical sense through the questioning of absolute national identities. Such acts of border crossing heavily rely on memories of positive pre-war cross-national relations, which are brought forward to re-establish these relations in post-war times. The research findings suggest that re-enacting a shared common ground – most often found in the past rather than in the present – bears an integrative potential that deserves more attention in post-conflict settings.

**Keywords:** Bosnia and Herzegovina; Mostar; border crossing; memory; national identities; reconciliation

### Introduction

On 19 June 2006, I participated in an anti-violence march in Mostar organised by the alternative youth cultural centre *Abrašević*. The march was organised in protest against the violent clashes that had taken place a few days earlier between Bosniak and Croat football fans after the World Cup championship game between Brazil and Croatia, in which the latter had lost. An excerpt of my field diary notes read as follows:

Before the police arrive at 12 noon the number of participants is around 50; the gender division is quite equal and most are between 20 and 50 years old. Among the participants is a young woman I have spoken to several times before, who was in Mostar during the war and went through a lot of horrible things. She shifts her weight from one foot to the other and is obviously quite nervous about the march. I ask her about her motivations for participating in this march and the answer she gives, mainly about basic rights people in Mostar are denied, sounds as if she has learnt it by heart. Perhaps the reasons she reels off seemingly from a list helps her convince herself once more that she made the right decision to come here. Before we leave the organizers give exact instructions about how we should behave in case of provocation or attack. Listening to these instructions, my concerns that this event

itself has the potential to fall victim to renewed violence grows. After all instructions have been given to us, we leave the youth center under the burning mid-summer sun, heading towards the Boulevard, the former frontline and the main artery and present border between Bosniak-dominated East and Croat-dominated West Mostar. The first row carries a big banner stating 'stop nasilju' ('stop the violence'). Excitement rises when we cross the bridge to the Croat side, although the reactions of the passers-by are reserved. Most turn and look at the march but only a few shout insults at us. Still, several policemen and police cars accompany us closely. A man in his 50s walks next to me, looking very serious and tense. When I ask him whether it is his first time joining a march organized by the youth center Abrašević, he denies it but then adds that it is a test of courage for him each time. At the end of the march, everyone, including myself, seems relieved that it went without incident.

The event described above helped me better understand the immediacy of the border that left Mostar divided after the 1992–1995 war into a Bosniak (Muslim)-dominated east and a Croat (Catholic)-dominated west side. Only after I participated in the march could I fully understand the emotional dimension this border still bears, particularly (although not exclusively) for people who remained in Mostar during the war. With the Dayton Peace Agreement that ended the war, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) became a state with two entities – the Bosniak-Croat Federation with its 10 cantons and the Serb Republic. The city of Mostar is the capital of one of the only two mixed cantons and traditionally has been the centre of the Herzegovinian Croats (as Sarajevo is the centre for BiH's Bosniaks and Banja Luka for BiH's Serbs) (Vetters 2007). For tourists, Mostar, a city in the southern region of BiH, initially impresses with its beauty and Mediterranean charm. Only after gaining deeper insights into the lives of people do the scars left by the war become visible. Even if the border and its 'side-effects' are not visible at first sight, they still dominate life in Mostar.

When I speak of Mostar's 'border,' I do not refer to a physical border, but rather to a border created by economic, political and cultural forces and manifested in everyday social practices (Aure 2011, p. 173). 'Interpreted along these lines, a border is not so much an object or a material artefact as a belief, an imagination that creates and shapes a world, a social reality' (Houtum et al. 2005, p. 3). Houtum *et al.* remind us with the notion of 'b/ordering' that practices of border making are also practices of order making. Moreover, a border is likely to have two faces: it may be interpreted as an obstacle to be overcome for some, while for others it may be associated with protection and safety.<sup>1</sup>

In Mostar's post-war setting, it is important to acknowledge the manifold experiences and interpretations of b/ordering. While for part of the population, a border between Bosniak- and Croat-dominated Mostar is welcomed as a protection of national 'rights,' for others such a border is an obstacle in the way of a normal life (*normalan život*). This article focuses on the latter group, on those who engage in border crossing in order to overcome Mostar's division. I deliberately speak of 'border crossing' rather than of reconciliation since the latter is a concept that is hard to grasp and even harder to relate to concrete social practices. Moreover, the

concept of reconciliation is widely absent in emic discourses and ‘(. . .) reconciliation initiatives seem to be curiously at odds with the primary concerns of many Bosnians, as they struggle to find their bearings in a profoundly changing socio-political reality’ (Eastmond 2010, p. 12). We must also bear in mind that not all cross-national interactions are sought for a higher moral aim (Jansen 2010).

The practices of border crossing that this article is concerned with are subtle and less publicly visible than the border crossing during the march against violence. Borders are crossed physically but also in a more metonymical sense when absolute and exclusive national identities are questioned. Border crossing thus implies not only acts of scrutinising and deconstructing national identities, but also the re-conquest of the city and the reintegration of ‘the other side’ into one’s everyday life. The presented border crossers show curiosity and willingness to engage with those of another nationality to re-establish what they perceive as *normalan život* (normal life) tightly connected to an urban space where nationality does not dominate social interactions.

In this article, I show how positive memories of pre-war cross-national relations bear a strong integrative potential and how practices of post-war border crossing greatly build on these memories. These memories around an idealised past are powerful tales put forward in support of a shared future as well as in concrete cross-border interactions to establish common ground. I further argue that these tales present not only individual counter-memories, but also alternative collective memories. In order to strengthen the integrative potential of these memories, more attention needs to be paid to them, not as the only true and valuable interpretation of the past but as an integral part of the same.

The insights drawn from practices of border crossing in Mostar may also be valuable for other post-war societies that are equally divided along ethno-national lines, particularly if a relatively peaceful past preceded the violence. Even in cases such as that of Northern Ireland, whose violent past stretches back centuries, there have been peaceful periods in between the violence that are easily overlooked. To shift the focus from violence between national groups to positive coexistence and to elements of a ‘shared identity’ helps to re-establish post-conflict trust and subsequently encourage more cross-national engagement (see Barton and McCully 2003).

The work presented here builds on the premise that memory (or better ‘remembering’) is an active process that enhances political subjectivity. Remembering therefore has little to do with a mere retrospection of the past. Rather than asking for the truth of the narratives told, the more interesting questions revolve around which events people narrate while they silence others and the reasons for these choices (Rasmussen 2002). Moreover, memory is not only tied to the past, but also relates with the way one’s present and future is conceptualised (Ochs and Capps 2001, p. 255). Memory thus acts as an orienting force and ‘there are times when a very specific vision of the future frames the utilization of the past’ (Irwin-Zarecka 1994, p. 101). In the case of the informants introduced in this article, their vision of the future is a united Mostar, and the past that is utilised for this vision is the

period of Yugoslavia. These individual memories of positive pre-war coexistence, however, are politically marginalised in the public discourse in order to enforce nationalist politics while official national histories centre on narratives of national suppression and collective victimhood (see Palmberger 2006).

This article is based on data collected during long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Bosniak-dominated East Mostar as well as in Croat-dominated West Mostar between 2005 and 2008. Methods were qualitative in nature and included, among others, participant observation, life history interviews and memory-guided city tours. Moreover, I participated in numerous commemorations, reburials and other public events as well as attended history lectures at both the Bosniak- and the Croat-dominated universities in Mostar. I conducted formal and informal interviews with members of different generations and also with representatives of NGOs and international organisations. Some of the interviewees I already knew well prior to the interview, and I remained in contact with them for the entire period of my stay in BiH.

The majority of my informants crossed sides only under special circumstances; only a minority of my informants crossed sides on a regular basis. In the selection of the border crossers I introduce in this article, I aimed for a variety in age, gender, nationality and faith. Despite their differences, the border crossers presented here show that experiences of war and violence, even if they created distrust, do not prevent them from searching for communalities and re-establishing neighbourliness. Although past experiences certainly matter, it is not necessarily the 'degree' of 'trauma' which appears decisive in whether cross-national encounters are sought (or not), but the value orientation to which individuals subscribe is at least as important (Lederach 1997, MacDonald 2013).

### **Coexistence, memory and reconciliation**

The scholarly debate on reconciliation focuses first and foremost on the question of how to deal with memories of a violent past. Two arguments are predominant in this debate: the first stresses the importance of addressing memories of violence in order to initiate a healing process, while the second stresses the importance of forgetting the violent past in order to move forward (Devine-Wright 2003). Without suggesting that one line of argument should be preferred over the other, I realised that those of my informants engaged in border crossing tended to opt for the latter (at least for the time being). However, they not only silenced the violent past, but also simultaneously focused on positive aspects of a shared past.

The strategy of silencing sensitive issues runs counter to the assumptions that the only way towards peaceful coexistence is the direct reappraisal of the past (Das and Kleinman 2001, Jackson 2006). Avoidance, at least in some post-conflict situations, has proven itself to be a valuable first step towards peaceful coexistence. In the few studies that have concentrated on peaceful cross-national encounters in post-war BiH, anthropologists have affirmed that silencing sensitive topics is an often-utilised strategy (see Sampson 2003, Jansen 2010, Stefansson 2010).

In contrast to scholars who only accept outspoken empathy as the way to rebuild relations (see, for example, Halpern and Weinstein 2004), these authors underscore the potential inherent in avoidance and silencing. Moreover, some hints have been given by scholars working in the Yugoslav successor states in regard to the entanglement of pre-war and post-war practices of cross-national engagement. Stefansson (2010), for example, draws a connection between the strategy of not addressing sensitive issues in post-war BiH and the ‘culture of co-existence’ of pre-war time when he writes ‘(. . .) this strategy [of silencing sensitive issues] indicates a deep-seated cultural knowledge of living with difference and preparedness among parts of the population to share a social space (. . .)’ (Stefansson 2010, p. 62). Leutloff-Grandits (2004), who conducted research in the Knin region, similarly underscores the importance of pre-war traditions of coexistence for shared post-war festivities: ‘People might recall individual experiences of religious festivals in pre-war times in which they celebrated with neighbours, relatives and friends of the other national group, and can revive such joint celebrations in post-war times’ (Leutloff-Grandits 2004, p. 231). Armakolas (2007), on the other hand, identifies nostalgia for the ‘pre-war home’ as a driving force to cross boundaries for Sarajevo’s Serbs who left their hometown in order to live in nearby Serb-dominated Pale (Armakolas 2007, p. 98). Finally, in her fieldwork in Mostar’s only quasi-nationally united gymnasium, Hromadžić (2011) noticed that in the way Bosniak and Croat students intermingled, they were ‘(re)producing and twisting the long-standing practices of public mixing [*miješanje*]’ (Hromadžić 2011, p. 278). Thus, Hromadžić links the students’ practices in the post-war setting to such practices of mixing in pre-war times. But, at the same time she shows that post-war mixing is limited to designated (semi-)public areas and does not enter private life as was the case in pre-war times. The observations of scholars working in the field briefly described here, support the argument presented in this article that pre-war memories of cross-national coexistence play an important role in post-war border-crossing activities.

Central to the discourse on people’s coexistence (*suživot*) in BiH is the concept of *komšiluk* (neighbourliness). If people speak about *komšiluk* when narrating the past, they are usually referring to the good pre-war neighbourliness. Even if Sorabji (2008) rightly reminds us that the concept of *komšiluk* cannot be reduced to cross-national relations, in discourses about the past it is usually invested with this meaning. Hence, *komšiluk* is a way to express what was and what no longer is and to emphasise today’s tense relations between Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs. Pre-war *komšiluk* is narrated as the art of being neighbourly, regardless of national affiliation (although Roma are usually excluded in this discourse), meaning neighbours who help each other out (for example, during illness), celebrate festivities together and share daily practices, such as drinking coffee with one another. This discourse is often characterised by strong nostalgic sentiments and is, as every retrospective narrative, a subjective response to present conditions and future prospects as much as it is a description of past times (Palmberger 2008).

The way scholars present Tito's multi-national Yugoslavia unsurprisingly differs, but generally the aspect of peaceful national coexistence is emphasised, sometimes even to a romanticised degree. Most scholars studying BiH (as well as many locals), however, agree that warmongers created (rather than drew on) clear-cut national identities in Mostar and elsewhere in BiH (Gagnon 2004). This does not mean that ordinary people did not actively engage in exclusive nationalist discourses or actively participate in creating national cleavages. However, even if the aim was to create nationally 'pure' territories and to eliminate meaningful interactions between Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs, it was not possible to break all ties, nor were identities always as clear-cut as extreme nationalists propagated. In BiH, as has been the case in many post-conflict societies, journalists as well as academics have not paid sufficient attention to topics other than cross-national violence (Lubkemann 2008). As a result, intra-national divisions and cross-national solidarities, which could be observed in individual cases even during the time of war, have rarely been studied (Tuathail 2010).<sup>2</sup>

Bringa (1995), who conducted research in a Bosnian village in the years before the war, provides us with important observations that may help explain the discrepancy between pre-war good neighbourliness and the violence that erupted in 1992. Bringa recognised that in social interactions, it was personality rather than nationality that mattered. This does not mean that nationality was not important in the social structure of the village, but that in face-to-face contact it was the personality of the interlocutor that counted most. Hence, there is a discrepancy between the practices in everyday life and those at the political level. I believe it is crucial to be aware of this discrepancy between politics and discourses on politics and practices in everyday life in order to understand the complexity of national coexistence in BiH, both in pre-war and post-war times (although in the latter there is much less room for cross-national interaction).

### **Mostar: war and its aftermath**

Pre-war Mostar, it was said, best exemplified what Bosnia and Herzegovina supposedly stood for: peaceful coexistence among individuals of different national backgrounds. Accordingly, statistics showed Mostar to be the city with the highest number of cross-national marriages in all of Yugoslavia. The destruction of Mostar's Old Ottoman Bridge in 1993 by Croat nationalist forces became a symbol for the destruction of this multinational coexistence in BiH (Bjelakovic and Strazzari 1999).

The Bosniak and Croat national narratives deviate starkly when it comes to the interpretation of the 1992–1995 war. Although Bosniaks and Croats agree that the Serb-dominated Yugoslav National Army presented the primary threat to Mostar, they disagree about the reasons for the outbreak of the war among themselves after they had successfully pushed back the Yugoslav National Army. While in the Bosniak national discourse, the Bosniak-Croat war is narrated as a war of Bosniaks liberating Mostar from Croat fascists (like the Partisans' liberation of Mostar from



the Nazis at the end of WWII), in the Croat national discourse the Bosniaks are portrayed as traitors who turned against their former protectors in order to Islamise Mostar.

The composition of Mostar's population has changed drastically as a consequence of the war. The once multi-national city – 35% Muslims (Bosniaks), 34% Croats, 19% Serbs and 12% Others (including those who identified themselves as Yugoslavs) – has been split in half between Croats and Bosniaks, who make up the vast majority of the population. Of the approximately 20,000 Serbs, only about 1000 remained in the divided city during the war, and only a minority returned thereafter (Bose 2002).<sup>3</sup>

While in the recent years a lot has been reconstructed, there still are ruins all around the city, most prominent on the east side and along the former frontline, the Boulevard. Many buildings that survived the war are still heavily marked by grenade holes and/or hold memorial plaques listing victims of the war. Although there are no clear signs identifying the exact border between Mostar's two sides, markers giving hints of the 'nationality' of the two city parts clearly exist. Since religion is the main marker of national identity in BiH, religious symbols are the most straightforward territorial markers: Catholic churches on the west side and mosques on the east side. As found throughout BiH, in Mostar, these places of worship have also significantly grown in number since the end of the war, and they not only attempt to outnumber one another but also seem to compete in size. Another powerful sign of boundary making is the political graffiti sprayed on public buildings on both sides of the city. In a similar vein, the renaming of streets in West Mostar during and after the war is a space-claiming practice (Palmberger 2013b). Even if violent incidents are the exception, rumours about them contribute to an atmosphere of insecurity, and minority return remained a critical issue for years after the end of the war. Those who returned to Mostar often did not return to their pre-war homes but instead exchanged their flats in order to live on the 'right' side of the city.

The two main political players in Mostar are the SDA (Bosniak nationalist party) and the HDZ (Croat nationalist party), whose positions regarding Mostar's division have been bound to political cost-benefit calculations. Each party was in favour of the division as long as the other party was assumed to hold majority status. For the first 10 years after the war ended, the HDZ was a strong opponent of a reunified Mostar. Unlike Croat politicians, Bosniak politicians initially supported the idea of Mostar's reunification, but according to a report by the International Crisis Group (ICG 2000), this was only so long as the Bosniak population in Mostar formed the numerical majority. In this respect, the SDA shared the interests of the international community, for whom the reunification presented the only post-war solution, which they enforced in 2004 with a new city statute. At this point, the positions of the Croat HDZ and the Bosniak SDA were reversed: the HDZ expressed interest in unifying the city, while the SDA defended the status quo. Although there was confusion about this turnaround, it is most likely connected to demographic changes whereby Bosniaks lost their majority status in

Mostar. Therefore, the SDA now feared subordination by Croats while the HDZ was eager to unify Mostar once they had outgrown the formerly strongest national group, the Bosniaks (ICG 2009).

The city's reunification seemed to signal a final breakthrough towards normalisation. Through this move, more spaces of mutual interaction were created, such as more civil servants of different backgrounds sharing a workplace. In many respects, however, the unification of Mostar has only been superficial, while in reality deep divisions remain in public as well as private domains. The city remains divided not only politically and economically but also in terms of education, culture, the media and public services (see Veters 2007). Even those who are in favour of Mostar's division, these 'side-effects' cause great inconvenience in their everyday lives.

The great majority of my informants did not feel equally at home on both sides. Even if they were born on 'the other side,' they no longer experience that part of the city as home. In the case of Lejla,<sup>4</sup> an informant I wish to introduce in the following section, I show that recapturing 'the other side' in one's everyday life is difficult even for those who perceive themselves as anti-nationalists wholeheartedly and ideologically against Mostar's division. Moreover, I show that pre-war memories of a shared past feed hopes for a united future Mostar. This does not mean that memories of pre-war Mostar provide an empowering component for everyone. There are also those for whom the nostalgia of pre-war times is still so overwhelming and the pain of losing the city they once called home so immediate that memories of pre-war times have a paralysing rather than empowering effect (Palmerberg 2008). This is particularly true for individuals who saw their future prospects (not least in respect to their careers) vanish due to the war (Palmerberg 2013a).

### **Reconquering the city: Lejla**

Lejla, a Bosniak woman in her late forties, lived her entire life in Mostar. Still, she characterised Mostar more than once as a 'crazy city' and herself as someone from another planet. Although she never expressed it like this, it became clear to me that this 'other planet' Lejla referred to was Mostar during Yugoslav times. Lejla was convinced that after the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed, people would eventually approach each other again and work towards re-establishing peaceful coexistence. She was greatly disappointed when she realised this was not the case. However, Lejla was positive about the fact that she remained one and the same person even if destructive nationalist forces had changed her surroundings. This gave her hope that she would find other similar-minded individuals who had not forgotten their shared past. She primarily blamed those in power for what had happened and knew that she could not rely on them to restore what they had ruined. In doing so, she engaged in a popular local discourse in which people differentiate between politics (*politika*) and ordinary people (*narod*), whereby politics, not the ordinary people, are responsible for the war as well as the difficult post-war

situation (Helms 2007). Many of my informants stated that war came over their country in cyclic order, thereby referring to the history of occupation and the Balkan's historically contested boundaries (see Green 2005). This view of history makes it potentially easier for people to re-approach those who were on the enemy side during the war.

Lejla was lucky to find work after the war in Mostar's international NGO scene. She even acknowledged that this work environment gave her the opportunity to establish a wide network of international friendships and to build up a career. The NGOs Lejla worked for provided a mixed work environment and offered their services to people regardless of their national background. Even if Lejla was working in mixed teams and on both sides of the city, in her free time Mostar remained reduced to only the Bosniak-dominated east part of the city. Moreover, since losing contact with most of her Croat and Serb friends from pre-war times, not least since many had left the country during the war, most of her close friends were Bosniaks.

When I met Lejla, more than 10 years after the war had ended, the war was still present in her apartment in the form of grenade holes. During the war, Lejla, her husband and her son (only a toddler at the beginning of the war), lived under extremely precarious conditions. The space she and her son were able to navigate was sometimes reduced to her apartment and, at times, even to one room. Lejla told me that her son had to sit in the bathtub, sometimes for the entire day, because it was the safest place in the building. She did her best to make the time bearable for him with toys and games. When I met Lejla, she and her husband were still in the process of reconquering the territory that was forcefully taken away from them. After the war, they spent their leisure time almost exclusively in East Mostar, including their regular evening strolls. Because they were restricted to only one side of the city, there was little alternation in their routine; they had to stroll along the same pedestrian streets, so from time to time they visited Sarajevo (a drive of approximately 3 hours) for variety. At some point, Lejla found it bizarre that they had to travel so far when they needed a change, and one evening proposed to her husband that they cross over to West Mostar. She described to me in detail how from that moment the city grew again. The couple was so pleased to pass other cafes and look at different shop windows. It was almost like visiting a foreign city, Lejla told me. It was not that Lejla had never been to the other side before – she had crossed regularly for professional reasons since she worked for a multinational NGO – but she had not incorporated West Mostar into her leisure time.

The reader might be surprised to learn it took Lejla more than 10 years to recapture the entire city, especially because she strongly positions herself against Mostar's division. In conversations with Lejla, I realised it was not enough to be against the division in order to actually breach it. Some scholars ascribe a great integrative potential to mixed workplaces in BiH, even if they foster weak rather than strong ties. Pickering's (2006) research, for example, concentrating on minorities in the Bosnian cities of Sarajevo and Bihać, reveals that the workplace, more than the neighbourhood, enables minorities to build cross-national ties. But, Pickering also makes clear that this cannot be expected in cities that have been

affected by 'neighbour-on-neighbour' violence like Mostar. As shown in the case of Lejla, sharing a workplace does not mean that Mostar's spatial division is overcome. I also observed this phenomenon with other informants. When I invited informants who worked on the 'other side' to cross sides with me, I often realised that they did not know places (e.g. newly opened cafes) they would have been familiar with if they also crossed sides in their free time. Even if informants were engaged in a strong anti-nationalist discourse (as was the case for the participants in the march against violence described above), they sometimes still felt 'safer' or at least 'more at home' on 'their own' side. This means that non-crossing is not necessarily connected to a nationalist orientation, but may rather be connected to a sense of 'safety' or 'home.' This also became apparent when I asked my informants for a memory-guided city tour and they restricted the tour to only one side of the city. Even if they had spent their entire childhood on the 'other side,' they refused to visit places of their childhood with me; they told me that these places have changed so drastically that they can hardly recognise them. The exceptions to this were the children of mixed marriages, who felt free to cross sides with me during the memory-guided city tours.

Children of mixed marriages or spouses in mixed marriages have no choice but to deal with border issues and border crossing. They are forced to find strategies to contend with the division in their everyday lives while often confronted with resentment and mistrust by their compatriots. Mixed families were among the first victims of the war, and most of them left the country as early as they could. Because of the ongoing difficult situation, very few have returned to Mostar. In the next section, I introduce a couple from not only nationally mixed families, but which moreover belongs to a minority religion. Thus, they cannot be characterised as either belonging to 'this' or 'that' side. I will show that due to their 'outsider status,' they feel freer to cross sides. However, their practices of border crossing and reflections on the same are, like Lejla's, grounded in experiences of pre-war cross-national coexistence.

### **Mixed marriages and national boundaries: Danijel and Višnja**

I visited the Evangelical pastor Danijel and his wife Višnja<sup>5</sup> in the spring of 2007 in their home in Croat-dominated West Mostar, where they lived with their two children after they had lived in Bosniak-dominated East Mostar for several years. The two of them have very similar backgrounds, having grown up in Tuzla, a city known for its multinational character. During the war, Višnja and Danijel both fled the country to a safe European destination. Independently of each other, they both found their new faith, Evangelicalism, during the war period.

The Evangelical Church in BiH is very small and includes all types of Evangelicals, whose only common denominator is that the Bible is at the centre of their faith. The Evangelical Church in BiH is unknown to most people, and those who have heard of it regard it as a dubious sect in the same way they think of Jehovah's Witnesses. Atheism is not well regarded in post-war BiH, and the choice

of an alternative religion, one not associated with one of the three constituent peoples, is seen as even more of a social misdemeanour. Resisting national categorisation is unacceptable to those who promote neat national categorisation, and Danijel and Višnja do so in several ways: they are children of mixed marriages and of parents who refused to categorise themselves in tidy, clear-cut national identities, and they have chosen a religion that is incompatible with the three constituent peoples. Both are aware of the fact that they are hard to categorise, as Danijel explains in the following excerpt:

Once people find out that I am not a Muslim, they ask me: 'What are you then: Orthodox or Catholic?' I say: 'I'm Evangelical.' 'Yeah, but I mean nationality.' And I say something like: 'Nationality. You mean Croat, Serb, whatever? I'm a Croat.' And then I have to tell them the way I became a Croat after being Yugoslav: I was a refugee in Germany and I say I'm a Bosnian, because there was no Yugoslavia in 1994 anymore. And they [civil servants] say: 'You cannot be Bosnian.' I said: 'What do you tell me? I cannot be a Bosnian? I'm born in Bosnia and I have lived in Bosnia all my life.' Then they say something like: 'Yeah, but Bosnians are Muslims.'

This excerpt neatly depicts how people from former Yugoslavia, especially from mixed marriages, felt when forced to choose a national identity not only in their home country but also as refugees, if only for the sake of bureaucracy.

The Evangelical Church is commonly dismissed as a church meant for people from mixed marriages. Danijel and Višnja vehemently reject this view. For them, people become believers because they hear the voice of Jesus. It is nevertheless interesting that both are children from mixed marriages and that they, as well as their parents, became believers during the war. Both Danijel's and Višnja's mothers are Croats, while both their fathers are Serbs. While their mothers were practicing Catholics to some extent before they became Evangelicals, their fathers were atheists and communists. Danijel and Višnja are aware that their backgrounds, coming from mixed marriages and from a traditionally multinational city like Tuzla, provide them with a more critical stance on nationalist politics. Danijel explained this to me:

And people are just . . . we always wanna belong to the same tribe. You know, the same idea, the same nationality, the same faith, the same whatever. And the problem is that some people don't know where the border is between me being whatever I am, my identity, and still having unity with somebody who does not share my identity. And I can say that, maybe because I am born in a mixed marriage. And our, my first cousin is a Muslim and her first cousin is a Muslim. My father's sister married a Muslim man. So, we, we lived like that our whole lives. So, we are from, both from mixed marriages. And we grew up in a city which is very much mixed. And that was appreciated, that was valued. And even if we were not believers, at that time, for 19 years of our lives, we celebrated holidays with believers; they celebrated the communist stuff with us, birthdays and everything. And we remained friends with them.

Višnja and Danijel reject essentialised national identities and divisions. Through their status as outsiders, they feel free to subvert the current nationalist discourses. Through their engagement with the Evangelical Church, they have found a way to embrace and sustain ideals they had already held during Yugoslav times. Similar to Lejla, they bring up their memories of a multinational BiH when explaining their border-crossing practices.

The next person I wish to introduce, Sanja, is significantly younger than the informants I have presented thus far. In contrast to Lejla, Danijel and Višnja, Sanja has spent most of her life in post-war and post-socialist BiH and has only very limited personal memories of Yugoslav times. Nevertheless, something connects her with the three older informants, namely that she brings memories of a shared past forward to re-establish broken relationships in Mostar.

### **Pre-war memories as a means to re-establish relations: Sanja**

When I met Sanja, she was in her early twenties and a very energetic and communicative young woman. She grew up in a town about 50 kilometres from Mostar, but spent the years of war in split while her parents stayed behind in their hometown and her father joined the Croat army. She moved to Mostar to take up her university studies in Croat language and literature at the Croat-dominated university in West Mostar.<sup>6</sup>

From the first days after her arrival in Mostar, Sanja had been desperate to see the Old Bridge. However, all her colleagues warned her not to go to the old town (located on the east side), telling her that she would put herself in great danger if she did not heed their advice. But she did not pay attention to what they said and, as she had expected, nothing happened. Sanja knows that nobody can tell the difference between a Bosniak and a Croat just from appearance. They might have been able to recognise her accent as Croatian (mainly since she spent a long time in Croatia during the war), but nobody ever accosted her.

Sanja displays a peculiar mixture of sympathy and antipathy towards Yugoslavia. Her parents had told her many negative stories about it; she was taught, for example, that the communists had killed her paternal grandfather and that legal action had been taken against her mother for using the Croat language (instead of Serbo-Croatian) at her workplace. But, Sanja was also exposed to positive stories of Yugoslavia, particularly at her maternal grandmother's place where she spent most of her childhood. It is likely that it is to her grandmother that Sanja owes the positive picture she also maintains of Yugoslavia. Sanja is highly aware of her national background and shows an interest in learning more about it by choosing to study Croat language and literature. Catholicism plays a central part in her life as well. Nevertheless, her strong national awareness does not prevent her from believing that Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs can live together in one city and in one and the same state. For her, Bosnians of all national backgrounds share many local customs and a common mentality. Therefore, what they share is at least as strong as what sets them apart. Sanja defines her identity as twofold, as Croat as well as

Bosnian. Her Croat identity is more the private/family-based identity, where religion and religious holidays play a considerable role. Her Bosnian identity links her to all the other compatriots, whether they are Muslims, Catholics, Orthodox, atheists or belong to a minority religion.

Sanja's personal memories of Yugoslavia are limited, but nonetheless very present, particularly the childhood memories of her excitement about becoming one of Tito's *Pioniri* (Pioneers) and the apartment complex where she grew up, which accommodated families of all national backgrounds:

I remember we lived at my grandparents', my mother's parents' place. We lived here and other Croats there and a Serb family over there and next to them another Croat family and downstairs Muslims and one mixed couple, she was Serb and he Muslim. They were all married couples of similar age like my parents, and they all had kids. We used to play together, hanging out, chatting. My parents used to drink coffee each day with our Serbian neighbours and they visited us for Christmas.

Sanja's memories of Yugoslavia are mainly about the multinational coexistence she experienced as a child in the apartment complex she grew up in. But, more often than being directed towards the past, her memories of Yugoslavia are an expression of her political view, and she uses them to criticise the present political situation. She strongly believes that BiH should be a multinational place. In Sanja's case, memories of Yugoslavia are a tool for overcoming the troubled relationship between Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs in her country; she uses memories of peaceful coexistence as a 'guiding star' for the future. She moreover uses these good memories to establish common ground with those of Bosniak background, such as with my friend Minela. Both Minela and Sanja were frequent guests in our house, where one day they had the chance to meet. The first time they met, one could feel the uneasiness in the air. It was the time of Ramadan, and Minela was fasting. Sanja was not aware that it was Ramadan, and was surprised to hear that Minela did not want to join us for coffee and cake. After a while, they found a subject that broke the ice in this somewhat tense situation: they talked about their pre-war memories. They remembered their time as *Pioniri* (Pioneers), the candy they liked back then and many other things connected to their childhood in Yugoslavia. It was a safe topic to engage in, since it showed the mutual willingness to communicate, to get to know each other without having to fear being caught up in some political discussion related to the war or post-war politics in their country.

Sanja, in contrast to many of her peers, frequently crosses the Boulevard (the former frontline and present imagined border between the two city parts), especially because of her involvement in one of the youth NGOs situated on the east side. Through her activities in the NGO she met a young Bosniak and fell in love with him. Sanja knows that if her parents found out about the relationship, they would strongly disapprove. In contrast to 'economic-driven' border crossing, which is generally accepted, practices of border crossing based on personal relations and particularly cross-national love relations are not well perceived by

society in BiH. Sometimes it seems as if such relations are considered a betrayal not only of the family, but also the nation. As a result, cross-national couples often find themselves forced to keep their relationship a secret. These cross-national relationships among my younger informants had an aura of 'secret love' about them, like the story of Romeo and Juliet. Interestingly, even those who considered such a relationship were sceptical of cross-national marriage (see also Hromadžić 2008).

While the pastor and his wife present nationality not as primordial but as etiquette, Sanja, the youngest informant, has a very different understanding of her national identity. Whereas she understands her Croat identity as an identity she inherited from her family, she does acknowledge that she has multiple identities, including her Bosnian identity that connects her to her compatriots, regardless of their national affiliations. I realised that many of my younger informants (those who were children during the war and who spent most of their lifetime in post-war Mostar) presented their national identity as given. This generation is often deemed by the older generation to be the 'lost generation,' the generation most affected by the war and nationalist politics. Their self-perception, however, is very different, and they tend to present themselves as those who are less affected by the war because of their young age during the war period (Palmberger 2010). And as shown in this article, even those who have no personal memories of a united pre-war time are able to draw on positive memories of Yugoslavia from older family members. It is therefore not only the older generations who rely on pre-war memories in order to envision a shared future. As argued elsewhere (Palmberger 2008), my young informants often found it easier to light-heartedly 'play' with memories of Yugoslavia.

## **Conclusion**

As I have shown for the case of border-crossing practices in Mostar, positive (often nostalgic) memories of pre-war times bear an integrative potential. They cannot be reduced to individual counter-memories but rather represent alternative collective memories of the local past. In contrast to the rather homogenised accounts of official national history, these alternative (localised) collective memories are nuanced representations of the past tightly interwoven with autobiographical memories. When it comes to personal memories, Yugoslavia is fondly remembered by a great part of the population. Even those who today follow a nationalist discourse and primarily stress national suppression under Tito, often simultaneously engage in a parallel discourse of good neighbourliness and a fulfilled life during this particular period (Palmberger 2013a). This does not mean that everyone preserving positive memories of national coexistence during Yugoslav times is keen to re-establish cross-national relationships, but a shift in focus towards emphasising what works or what has worked in the past is likely to have a reassuring and trust-building effect (Dembinska 2010). MacDonald (2013) outlines such a 'positive history approach' for the Yugoslav successor states as follows:



'positive history' – a narrative of cooperation and tolerance that cuts across ethnic and religious divisions, stressing the commonalities of people during the existence of the former Yugoslavia and their shared experiences of hardship, powerlessness, and victimization during the succession wars of the 1990s. (p. 395)

While I have shown that border crossers in Mostar shift their focus in exactly that way, a shift in focus on a broader societal level supported by the media and the educational sector would encourage more cross-national engagement (see Barton and McCully 2003). Importantly, this change in emphasis should by no means be understood as a charter to sweep past atrocities under the carpet. While silencing of the violent past has been discussed in this article as a strategy of individuals for establishing common ground, this silencing on the political level may have the opposite effect. The shift in focus should be primarily based on personal accounts while also preventing the whitewashing of nationalist warmongers as well as of Tito's Yugoslavia. In a society that has gone through war, as is the case in Mostar, it is this shared past, these shared memories that centre around subjects such as good neighbourliness, which may be re-enacted to re-establish cross-national relations even before a clear shared vision for BiH's future becomes feasible.

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### Notes

1. B/ordering practices in Mostar can also be found in everyday bureaucratic procedures, as Veters (2009) vividly describes the case of residence registration in Mostar.
2. In order to provide space for stories about cross-national solidarity during the time of war, the NGO *Istraživačko dokumentacioni centar Sarajevo* (Research and Documentation Center Sarajevo) launched a project called *Pozitivne priče* (Positive Stories), in which oral history interviews were conducted with individuals who experienced or showed solidarity during the war that exceeded national borders. Two of these stories are in the author's possession. A similar collection can be found in Broz (2002).
3. In 2007, the *Federalni Zavod za Statistiku* estimated the population of Mostar to be 111,198.
4. The author changed all informants' names. All interviews cited in this article were conducted in the local language and were translated by the author except the one with Danijel and Višnja, which was conducted in English.
5. Višnja means cherry and represents a neutral (not nationally defined) name that was popular in former Yugoslavia, especially, but not only, for children of mixed marriages.
6. Higher education is nationally divided in Mostar, as is the entire education system.

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