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Voivode Putnika – "Sniper Alley"

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The Mousetrap

Translated from the Spanish

by Peter Bush

The journey to Sarajevo

has all the appearance of a game of blind-man's buff that ends in a mouse-trap. The French military Hercules which fly daily loads of humanitarian aid from Split to the Bosnian capital usually set aside a dozen seats for the press and for officials from international agencies and organisations. I realise on the airstrip at the Dalmatian airport that I am the only journalist: Sadoka Ogata, director of the United Nations High Commission for Aid to Refugees (UNHCR) and her team of advisers occupy the remaining empty places. A swarm of photographers and cameras surround them as soon as we set foot on the ground, and the military hurriedly guide us through a labyrinth of corridors protected by walls and sand bags to an improvised press conference. A United Nations Security force armoured car is to take me across the territory controlled by Serbian radicals to the former Post Office which is the start of the urban centre still in the hands of the Bosnian presidency. Before that, I must sign a document in which I absolve the UN forces of all responsibility for "loss, injury, or death" that may befall me during the journey. After what happened to the Bosnian vice-president Hakija Turajlic, who was forcibly dragged from one of these bullet-proof vehicles by Karadzic's militiamen and quietly murdered in the presence of his escort despite the latter's "violent protests", I can understand how the blue helmets learned from their experience

and now prefer to cover their own backs. The law of the fittest rules in Bosnia. The UN commanders' impotence, their resignation before the crimes and abuses of Karadzic and his cronies suggest an advertising slogan in keeping with the chancey nature of their transport operations: "You provide the corpse. UN security will see to the rest."

A Spanish NCO, forewarned by Alfonso Armada and Gervasio Sanchez, comes to meet me and helps me and my modest luggage into the armoured car. The escort comprises Jordanian and Egyptian soldiers and, through a side peep-hole as we move forward I catch glimpses of a bleak, wasted landscape: houses with roofs blown off, blackened car chassis, truncated telephone posts, frieze horses, roads plagued by pot-holes which lead nowhere.

In the Post Office car park, the game is repeated: questioning, frisking, a short labyrinth of sand bags and finally we reach the hectic frontier building where French soldiers are offering their colleagues an exquisite cold buffet of canapés, chicken, meat, cakes, wine and champagne on the occasion of the 14 July, la fête nationale! My friends find me in the office devoted to recording and archiving the data of press correspondents and we drive off at once in the direction of the Holiday Inn.

The Voivode Putnika that runs across the modern part of Sarajevo has been renamed by the besieged as "Sniper Alley". In an illustrated guide to the capital published only seven years ago one can read this kind of description: "The city lights, like fireflies, puncture the darkness more brilliantly than the stars of the Bosnian night: this is the impression gained by the tourist who reaches the outskirts of Sarajevo by night. If he journeys by day, he will discover an oriental city of the type that only exists in fairy tales and will be amazed to see broad avenues and brand new or nineteenth-century Austrian style buildings." But the city I now observe is an area of devastation: wounded, mutilated, its guts hang out, its sores suppurate, its scars are horrific. Entire streets and buildings have disappeared, no trams or buses circulate, the Voivode Putnika is desperately empty, the trees have been felled, people crouch down in their hide-outs. The facades of some ten – or twelve – storey houses present charred

features or are covered in cavernous, yawning holes or disturbing eyelets. Reverberating glass skyscrapers rise up like hives of black honeycombs: mirrors where the sun reflects and flashes alternate with hollow cavities and wily one-eyed looks. Cars and buses reduced to ashes prolong the horror of the conflagration in the middle of the roadway. Red and white trams, becalmed and bullet-ridden, gather rust by pavements invaded by weeds and wild shrubs. Trolley bus cables hang down dangerously between posts, curling around each other on the ground like snakes. There are buildings reduced to their metal frames, crushed and half-molten telephone-boxes and kiosks, useless, contorted wirefences, heap upon heap of scrap, vehicles disembowled and black as coal. Almost no building maintains its windows intact: those that are still inhabited despite being exposed to the snipers, have had their window space modestly covered with plastic patches supplied by UN Security. In the midst of that geography of desolation a clock has immobilised its hands at exactly eight o'clock (which day?, which month?, which year?). Without water, gas, electricity, public transport or telephones Sarajevo looks at first sight like a phantom city, a dislocated skeleton or lifeless corpse. But the intermittent crackle of machine-gun fire, the occasional blast of mortars, the whistle of the snipers' bullets opportunely remind the visitor that its torture continues. In spite of the deluge of fire capriciously raining down and the cruel strangulation it is suffering, the Bosnian capital resists and miraculously remains on its feet.

As soon as a foreigner arrives in Sarajevo, he must initiate himself in the laws and rules of an elementary code of survival. Accustomed to a free, untrammelled existence, his new space, the mouse-trap shared with 380,000 human beings, forces a rapid apprenticeship upon him: awareness of high-risk areas and areas where one can move without excessive risk, of districts where the mortar bombs usually fall, of the snipers' favourite corners and paths, of places where it is better to walk with a stoop or which you must abandon at a moment's notice. Any distraction or miscalculation in the choice of route may prove fatal: as the people of Sarajevo tell you, anyone foraging into the open – and everybody has to go out in search of water,

wood or food – engages in Russian roulette. And so, as I find out on my first day, prudence advises departure from the hotel at full pelt, avoidance of “Sniper Alley” overlooked by the former entrance to the Holiday Inn, then a scarp up the slope to the Krajcevika to reach the safer areas of Marshal Tito Avenue and the pedestrian zone of Vase Meskina that leads behind it. The cars that still circulate accelerate in a rush when they drive over an unprotected intersection, risking collision with another vehicle or one of the white UN Security armoured cars that tour the city throughout the day. To protect themselves from the “heroes” who lie in wait on neighbouring hillsides and prefer to shoot at women and children, the soldiers in the Bosnian army have blocked off the most dangerous gaps with whatever was at hand: containers, buses, cars, publicity hoardings that act as a curtain or screen against the blood-thirsty crusades of Greater Serbia.

On the “safe streets”, the people of Sarajevo stop to buy what they can or queue up at the fountains laden with water-containers. But the safety is an illusion and the chetniks are quick to dispel it the moment the population begins to drop its guard: the butchery opposite the bakery in Vase Meskina, on a young lads’ sportsground, at the crowded fountains where water still spurts out or on funeral corteges in the cemeteries, demonstrate that nobody, absolutely nobody can feel secure at any point in the city. A family from the block of houses near the hotel, who fled their unprotected, windowless home at the beginning of a hailstorm of shells in order to hide in the bomb-shelter, died when it was blown apart by a mortar blast.

Everyone runs the risk of bad luck or, if a believer, of the delicate touch of the wings of Israfil, the angel of death in Islamic religious tradition. In this city where there is no wood to make coffins, you must get used to sleeping, moving, walking about fully aware of your defencelessness and precarious existence. Nobody can guarantee a crack marksman hasn’t chanced to get your insignificant being in his sights or that a grenade or shell won’t explode inside your room.

The inhabitants of Sarajevo have withstood for more than a year this risk of extermination, this life as inmates of an open

prison, with dignity and sang-froid. But the combined effect of hunger, exhaustion and a general feeling of betrayal and abandon has finally overtaken them since the day the shameful Washington agreement was signed, forcing their moral resistance to the limit of what is bearable. They have suddenly understood that the chips are down, that they must not expect help from any quarter: whether from the white armoured cars of the UN that are incapable of defending themselves or from the American planes that fly over the city on their futile, derisory mission of keeping the airspace clear. In Sarajevo, as in the rest of Bosnia, murder, destruction, massacre – the whole infamous ritual known as ethnic cleansing – is conducted on the ground with impunity.

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