

**KENNETH BROWN**

Mostar,  
Without Bridges,  
Without Light

# By the time of the cease fire

in March 1994, the ten bridges spanning the Neretva River where it runs through Hercegovina's capital had all been destroyed. Nine of them by Serbian and Montenegrin militias in the first war for Mostar from April to June 1992. The tenth, the Old Bridge, *Stari Most* – a 16th century Ottoman masterpiece of engineering – by Croatian forces during the second war of May 1993 to February 1994. "Can you imagine, they've killed the Old Bridge," a shopkeeper said to me when I went there in May 1995.

The name of the city – Mostar – comes from the Serbo-Croatian-Bosnian word for "bridge" – *most* – and it means "guardian of the bridge." I learned this from Alija Kebu, a poet aged 63 who works for the radio station in East Mostar. He had recently returned to his city, now divided and largely in ruins, from Zagreb, via Sarajevo where he had presented his latest collection of poetry – *MOSTARI i BARBARI* – "Mostarians [Guardians of the Bridge] and Barbarians." For Alija, Mostar's bridges had symbolised its culture, denied the existence of frontiers. Now he feels claustrophobic in East Mostar, the "Muslim" or "Bosniac" half of a city without bridges. A Muslim and an atheist, married to a Croat, his children in Sarajevo and London, Alija insisted that the war was about neither ethnicity, nor religion: "it's a war between reason and madness," he said.

Alija's gentleness, politeness, reasonableness, and his adoration of Brel and Lorca made him accessible and likeable. If he felt anger and resentment, it was not apparent. He talked matter-of-factly: he used to live on the west side of Mostar; during the second war, when the "Fascists" (the Hercegovinian

Croat nationalists) had forced the Muslims to cross over to the east side, he had lost his apartment, his possessions, his books, his papers; he had fled to Zagreb and then returned to East Mostar, the "Muslim" part of the now-divided city.

Later I heard Alija recite from his poetry. He said words that I recognised – "Auschwitz," "Dresden," "Hiroshima." We were sitting in a cafe, and I looked out through the window onto the ruins of the city – pulverised buildings, caved-in roofs, piles of concrete, steel and glass and thought to myself "well, maybe not quite that degree of horror, but I know what he means." I was aware of the poverty of words in the face of devastation, in the face of several thousands of people killed and tens of thousands wounded. I felt anger and resentment – his and mine.

Mostar's skyline and townscape bear witness to an attempted "urbicide," a murderous onslaught on a city – its built environment, its culture and its inhabitants. I walked down to what had been the centre of the old city, where the Stari Most had stood and where the Neretva still must be "the greenest river in the world," as the poets claim. The town, which UNESCO is trying to place on the list of cities of "world cultural heritage," is devastated. I found a few shops being repaired, and I began to talk with the shopkeepers. The name of Danilo Kis came up. "Ah, Danilo Kis," one of the shopkeepers said. "You know, when he heard that the Croatian artillery had purposely destroyed the Stari Most, he said that it was as if they had killed the sun!" In fact, Kis had died some years before, but the image attributed to him was gripping: the "killing" of the Old Bridge of Mostar was like the "killing" of the sun, the death of a city, of light itself.

"You must tell the truth about Mostar," said Sa'ir, a driver for the municipality.

"And what is that truth?" I asked him.

"What took place here wasn't a civil war, but a war of pure aggression."

Sa'ir was referring to the second war, that of Mostar's Croats against its Muslims. He wanted me to use clear categories, straightforward explanations. In his view, Croatian propaganda had made beasts of ordinary people: indoctrination in the churches, on the TV, radio and in the newspapers had transformed envy of Muslims into hatred, and this had led to murderous assaults against them and everything associated with

them. I report his version as a partial truth, because at present it's impossible to ascertain the responsibility for what actually happened in these two wars of Mostar. This will be the task of historians of future generations. In the meantime, however, memory becomes selective, explanations simplified.

People remember the second war in Mostar almost to the exclusion of the first; the polarisation and all consuming enmity between what are now referred to as the western (Croatian) and the eastern (Muslim) sides of the city have rooted themselves in emotions and perceptions. Closer in time and more immediately present in space, that view of things replaces earlier memories. "Sometimes what is recent makes people forget what happened before, although the latter may be the principal cause of the former," as Paul Garde points out in his *Journal de voyage en Bosnie-Herzégovine : octobre 1994* (La Nuée Bleue, 1995). In fact, in 1992-93 hundreds of thousands of Muslims and Croats had been forced by Serbian militias to flee from their homes in northern and eastern Bosnia, and these victims of "ethnic cleansing" had been crowded into a small area in Central Bosnia and Hercegovina (including large numbers of refugees into East and West Mostar) where they ended up at each other's throats. At the same time many of the native inhabitants of Mostar, particularly the professional classes (including Serbs and Croats, as well as Muslims) had fled the city and emigrated abroad. Thus, much of the present population of the two sides are refugees from other places in Bosnia and Hercegovina.

Among those Muslims who experienced the fighting, there exists a strong tendency to suppress the memories of the hostility and destructiveness of the first war, to downplay the responsibility of Serbian-Montenegrin forces, and to project all of the blame onto the Croats and the second war. More likely, Croat militias finished the destruction that Serbs had begun. Moreover, although the Muslim forces were vastly outnumbered and outgunned, they undoubtedly added to the overall damage. For their part, the Croats in Mostar seemed equally fixated on Muslims as *The Enemy*. Meanwhile the Serbian troops, peering down the barrels of their guns from the surrounding mountainsides, all but invisible, were almost forgotten.

The use of ethnic categories for Mostar, past or present, is problematic. The native inhabitants, and indeed city dwellers

most everywhere in former Yugoslavia, refer to themselves as *raja*. (It's originally a Turkish word borrowed from Arabic where it meant a "tended flock," thus "the ruled," the tax-paying "subjects"). The Mostarians define the term as groups of individuals who live together in friendship, confidence and mutual aid based on familiarity, humour, shared values and without knowledge of or interest in their various ethnic or religious identities. It's a group of "buddies," a community of the like-minded, of those excluded from political power.

In the café outside the radio station in East Mostar, a young musician, doing his military service in the army band of the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, insisted that people here are *raja*, one community. The band was rehearsing for a concert in three months time in support of the Chechnya. In his combat trousers, he looked less like a soldier than a young fellow from anywhere – shades, long hair, a dangling fag. He will, he said, stay in Mostar till the end of the war. Once there's peace, he wants to go to the States. Only one problem: "how will I ever express my deeper feelings, write my songs, in a language other than my own?" He has the bitter-sweet humour of the *raja*. I asked him about the first war: "When the Serbian-Montenegrin militia occupied East Mostar, did the town's Serbs flee with the rest of the inhabitants?" He answered: "Some did, some didn't. You know, it's a hard question. My father's a Serb, my mother a Muslim. A lot of marriages here were like that. In any case, we fled and when the militia left, we came back. Everybody was looting. I found all of my stereo gear at my neighbours; he said he was guarding it for me."

During the first war, most of the population of the city and its suburbs had fled, some of them permanently. (According to the 1991 census, there had been about 120,000 people in the area, 80,000 of them in the town itself – 34.8% Muslims, 33.8% Croats, 19% Serbs). Some 30,000 Mostarians – Muslims and Croats together – had gathered in the western part of the city to fight against the Serbian-Montenegrin militia who held the eastern part. When the latter retreated into the surrounding mountains, the Mostarians claimed a victory.

Yet, within a few months, in September 1992, the self-proclaimed Croatian Republic of Herceg-Bosna had taken over the west side of the city, and begun a campaign of Croatian

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nationalist propaganda aimed mainly against Muslims. At Radio Mostar, some of the journalists and technicians decided to quit and to establish a new station where men and women would work together against separation and nationalisms. With help from the community they started "Radio Bosnia-Hercegovina – War Studio Mostar."

In early 1993, when fighting between Croats and Muslims began in earnest, the new station was closed down several times and the journalists threatened and arrested. Then, in May, troops from Croatia together with those of the illegal Republic attacked the town, forced most of the Muslim population into East Mostar, and destroyed the station. Journalists and technicians were arrested. One of them was Dario – the fellow who interpreted for me in my conversation with Alija Kebu. He had been interrogated by the police. They wanted to know his ethnic identity. He said that he was a Bosnian Catholic. They beat him and insisted that he identify himself as a Croat. When he refused, they dressed him in the uniform of a Croatian soldier and sent him across the lines of the now divided city, certain that he would be killed. Luckily he was recognised by Bosnian Muslim soldiers on the other side and saved. Throughout the second war and until today he has been working with the station which has moved to East Mostar and survived the fighting.

I met Dario at the station. He is young, charming, energetic and tired. Their working space is tiny, the equipment rudimentary, the material sparse, the salary non-existent, the perks a daily meal in a public kitchen and odd parcels from humanitarian aid. Nonetheless, the morale and dedication of people working there seem extraordinary. The station is on the air daily from 5 a.m. till midnight, with news, music, cultural programmes, shows for children. (They need contributions: fresh music, CDs, record players, recorders, typewriters.)

The editors told me about their work and their ambition to become self-sustaining and to reach listeners from Sarajevo to the Adriatic. An attractive and articulate woman editor described going to the weekly press conferences held by the European Union Administration (EUAM) in the Ero Hotel in West Mostar. Every time she goes there, she sees the confiscated apartment where she used to live: it looks much the same, but neither the



*Mostar, 1995. Photo by Meta Kresa.*

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cars in the driveway, nor the clothes on the line are familiar. She asked me to imagine how she must feel and bristled with anger.

Half of the building in which the radio station is housed lies in ruins. When you step outside of it you return to a moonscape of destruction – the debris of what's left of Ottoman, Austrian, and modern Yugoslavian architecture. By what miracle can this formerly beautiful city and its social fabric ever be reconstructed? The EUAM is trying to create the conditions for reunification within the framework of the Federation between the Bosnian government in Sarajevo and the self-proclaimed Croat Republic of Herceg-Bosna. No one I talked to thought that the Federation was workable, but they wanted to believe that the reunification and rebuilding of Mostar could take place. Dr. Colin Kaiser, the UNESCO and Council of Europe representative, is documenting damage and encouraging the recognition and safeguarding of the city's heritage and its reconstruction through collaborative work by all parties. Amir Pasic, originally from Mostar and now a professor of architecture in Istanbul, is generating projects for the conservation and reconstruction of the city. Many NGOs are striving to help the inhabitants in a myriad of ways, including War Child's programme of establishing a music centre for children in one of the now destroyed monumental buildings of the Austro-Hungarian period in East Mostar.

I kept crossing back and forth in the divided city. The UN forces (UNPROFOR) and the EUAM have put up two bridges, one for transport, and the other a metal foot bridge where the Stari Most had stood. Checkpoints are on the western side. The foot bridge connects the two banks of East Mostar, because at that point the border doesn't run along the river, but along a main road about a kilometre to the west – Bulevar Narodne Revolucije. It's the main section of a no-man's-land and looks like a bomb site.

In West Mostar the streets are broad and tree-lined. Life seems almost normal, and the signs of destruction are incomparably less than on the east side. Some UN tanks roll down the main street, an unwelcome sight for the locals on this side who decidedly don't like the presence of foreigners. Cars with Croatian plates and pedestrians fill the streets and sidewalks; people sit about in cafes with loud pop music in the background and look relatively relaxed and self-assured. This part



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of Hercegovina considers itself a part of Croatia. The currency is Croatian Cuna (it's Bosnian Dinars on the other side), but the prices in the shop windows are in German Marks – Levis for 135 DM, Reeboks for 130 DM. Everywhere the international look of blue jeans and tennis shoes. A lot of young men wearing army or police uniforms. Crew cuts in style on both sides, although the East bankers have a penchant for Tintin-like forelocks; young women tend towards dark hair colouring with a large dose of henna and lipstick verging on black. The models, I'm told, are "The Cure," an Irish rock group.

A fellow who ran a tourist agency in the Hotel Ero offered to take me around in his car. He showed me the hospital and a residential area of villas, before dropping me off at the university. A congenial man, and a bigot. He said that he no longer knew any of the Muslims in Mostar, that it was impossible to envisage living together with them, because of their higher birth rate, and because they were barbarians: the "Turks," as he called them had contributed nothing to Mostar besides mosques; "civilisation" had only come to the city with the Austrians.

The University looked sleepy and neglected, but has kept its doors open. Nearby, up a small hill with a splendid view overlooking the city, a park and monument designed by Bogdan Bogdanovic in memory of the partisans who died during World War II. Overgrown and dirty, tombstones scattered about, it seemed unused, forgotten, perhaps vandalised. (In a nearby Croatian town, another monument to the partisans built by Bogdanovic had been vandalised on the day of the Armistice this year).

On the walls of the rundown apartment buildings on the way to the Catholic Cathedral, the graffiti of local gangs includes the following, in English: "*Kasenova*" / *We are the best/ who fuck the rest*. Then came a drawing of what looked like two crossed hammers, followed by the (to me) cryptic words, /*Hammer/ and/ Little mundirs*.

At the Cathedral of the Bishop I spoke with one of the priests and he showed me the roof of corrugated iron that had replaced the damage done by bombardments and praised God for the end of the communist regime. Of course, it is the Franciscan churches that have real influence here and who are said to wield power among the nationalists, but I didn't get to them, didn't

make an effort to speak with the Croats, had allowed myself to be turned against them. Down to the Rondo area of posh, neo-Oriental, Austrian stone houses, some of them shell-pocked from the fighting, to the edge of no-man's-land and the Bulevar where, tough-looking, bored soldiers, with tiny crosses dangling from their ears, checked my identity and sent me the other way round to a crossing point.

Back again to East Mostar, felt better there. Conversations and impressions have begun to accumulate:

- A soldier in a café with frightened, scary, glacial blue eyes showed me his shrapnel wounds: told me he'd been a pacifist, was now a professional killer, his life wasted at the age of 28, his head full of waking nightmares.

- A very pretty young lady with warm dark eyes talked about the horror of the war, living underground, her father and brother away in the army, her claustrophobia, her humiliation by the Serbs and the Croats: told me that a woman is recognised as a Muslim by her gold jewellery.

- The man who wants me to write the "truth," met again in one of the parks that's become a cemetery: told me that on the festival of Bairam when people place flowers on the tombs of their relatives and friends, they can't get to those tombs because they are on the other side of the city (no doubt, the same is true for some of the Croats on the other side); that he'll be a "Muslim" if that's what the "Fascists" want, even if it means he'll have to learn how to pray.

- The painter Ekrem Handzic, his atelier filled with paintings of the destruction of the city: told me that of the twelve men famous as divers from the Stari Most seven had been killed in the fighting, that a Croatian boy, who had worked for him for 13 years and been like a member of his family and who would cry if a cat died, had become a murderer of Muslim women and children and an officer in the Croatian army. He showed me photographs, said "Maybe some day we'll buy and sell with the Croats, but we'll never again live together."

Safet Besovic, a shopkeeper in the bazaar, mid-fifties, wearing white seroual and shirt, a red fez, a small man with a dark beard and lively eyes, demoralised and initially unfriendly until he got talking: Mostar had been "an extraordinarily wonderful town where different peoples lived in relative harmony, a place of

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students, youth, joy, a Little Amsterdam." He spoke English slowly and precisely, as well as several other foreign languages. His mother tongue used to be called Serbo-Croatian, and the Mostar dialect was considered a model of that language which some now call Bosnian. He is a Slav, a Mostarian, a Bosnian-Hercegovinian, a Bosniac, a Muslim, an ex-Yugoslavian, a European, a citizen of the world, depending on circumstances and in no particular order. These categories don't interest him. He intends to write a children's book about tolerance – "they're the only ones for whom there's any hope" – to make clear to them that all religions have the same God, and that all peoples are descendants of the same original ancestors. He has wandered widely, in Europe, the Indian sub-continent and Africa. For him the attraction of Mostar came from the diversity and mixture of peoples living there. To live in a partitioned city, segregated as Muslims, Croats or Serbs will bring on claustrophobia and madness. It will be like trying to separate the waters of the sea and the river in an estuary where they flow into each other.

I pressed Safet to discuss the present situation. "It's like half-time in a football game," he said, matter-of-factly. Most people I talked with shared his view that the war in Mostar, not to speak of the rest of Bosnia-Hercegovina, hadn't ended. When I left, he gave me a book of poetry and told me that the writer, Fadil Krpo, was still living on the other side, in West Mostar.

Back across the river. With some searching and luck I found the poet. He was reading Dante, holed up in his apartment in a housing estate with boarded-up windows and doors. A tall, handsome man in his early sixties, a retired First Mate from the Yugoslav navy and merchant marines, a wanderer and polyglot. "Look at my face," he told me, "you can see I'm a Mediterranean and a sailor, but this place is still home." Although he had been threatened during the second war by Croat soldiers (he showed me the bullets they had fired into his ceiling and furniture to frighten him) and imprisoned in the stadium with other Muslims, he had refused to cross over to East Mostar. He didn't want to leave his books and manuscripts and venture into the unknown, although he realised it might cost him and his wife their lives. But, they had managed to get their three grown daughters out to Germany and Italy.

I had heard that anywhere between 2000 and 9000 Muslims



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unable) to get out. Afterwards they'd been fired from their jobs because they weren't Croats. For the same reason they can't get passports. His job as a driver has saved them from absolute impoverishment. His wife has no chance of working. His 12 year old son has a name that can't be identified ethnically, and so they take the risk of sending him to school. Rarely have I met anyone who looked so anguished. It was in his face and tone of voice as he spoke in the halting, precise English that his son was teaching him in preparation for their hoped-for departure. His only desire was to emigrate. He had reached the firm conclusion that a mixed couple has no place in the divided city.

The prospects for the renewal of a multi-ethnic community in a reunited Mostar, in particular, and in a federated Bosnia-Herzegovina, in general, remained bleak at the time of writing. Journalists who I met from the Croatian newspaper *Feral Tribune* in Split made a convincing analysis of fundamental government policies: they think that the 1991 agreement in Karadordevo between Presidents Milosevic and Tudjman, an agreement to divide Bosnia-Herzegovina between Serbia and Croatia, still holds, and that the Muslim population will be the ultimate victims of that agreement (see the headline right). The editor of the Sarajevo newspaper *Oslobodenje* made the same argument in an article addressed to Tudjman in the spring of 1993:

*"From the very start, you shared with your most hated enemy whose desire to create a 'Greater Serbia' caused so much misery to thousands of people in Croatia, this love for Bosnia-Herzegovina. A Bosnia carved up by the two of you. And finally, following your latest outburst about division as the best solution, these two [Karadzic and Boban, the leaders of the self-proclaimed Serbian and Croatian autonomous regions in Bosnia-Herzegovina] shamefully agreed in Graz on the division of BiH... I recall just one of their difficulties – should Mostar be half Croat and half Serb, or simply all Croat despite the fact that Muslims make up the relative majority in the city!"*

The buoyant and combative mayor of East Mostar thought that the Serbs and Croats were intent on dividing up Bosnia between them: "We may well have to fight until the bitter end, and we may be wiped out in the process," he said. I replied that his scenario was tragic. He smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

*Paris, July 1995*

# Feral Tribune



1 broj 1 broj 412  
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1 satnik, 1 satnik, 1 satnik  
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## JESMO LI SE ZA TO BORILI?

detaljnije na stranicama 4-6

The Croatian newspaper Feral Tribune, 28 December 1993, shows presidents Milosevic and Tudjman in bed together: IS THIS WHAT WE FOUGHT FOR? asks the headline.