My last Bosnian destination lay to the east,

in the valley of the Drina, primordial among Balkan boundaries. When Theodosius the Great divided the Roman Empire in 395 AD, the Drina was the junction in its Eastern and Western halves. Later, the river's middle course separated Bosnia and Serbia; which it still does.

Much of this course cleaves through gorges, and the little town of Visegrad lies on a rare terrace of level ground where a tributary joins the Drina. Visegrad stands midway on the direct route between Belgrade and Dubrovnik. It was among the first Bosnian towns to fall to the Turks, and in the sixteenth century the enlightened Grand Vizier, Mehmed Pasha Sokolivic – himself a Bosnian Christian by birth – ordered the construction of a bridge to span the river at this important juncture, where troops and trade passed constantly. After four centuries the bridge still bears all the traffic on this route; my coach trundled across it and left me in the little square, near where the caravanserai that could accommodate 10,000 camels, mules and horses once stood.

I knew about Visegrad and Mehmed Pasha from the magnificent novel by Ivo Andric (1892-1975). *The Bridge on the Drina* chronicles the building of the bridge and the events that

occurred on and around it, through the ages, until the First World War. The scene never shifts from this remote corner of Bosnia, but the subject is immense: the retreat of Turkish power "like some fantastic ocean tide," and the irruption of modernity. The story is told as if Andric had stood in this square beside the bridge for those hundreds of years, overhearing conversations, jotting down legends, observing the gyrations of history and human dreams. Nothing escapes his eye and empathy; the attitude of a gypsy executioner impaling his victim is recounted as intimately as the agony of a girl forced into an unwanted marriage.

Andric's name is Croat and he called himself a Serbian writer; yet he was a Bosnian artist, for the characters who call forth an extra measure of compassion from this impassive creator are the stoical Muslims who fight against Ottoman decadence on one side and infidel backwardness on the other: the vizier who "could never think of Bosnia without a sense of gloom"; the keeper of the caravanserai who "had long become reconciled to the idea that our destiny on this earth lies in the struggle against decay, death and dissolution, and that man must persevere in this struggle, even if it were completely in vain." Andric much respects this lucid resignation, perhaps because in his own youth he had experienced its opposite: revolutionary idealism. As a member of the Young Bosnia movement, he had been imprisoned by the Austrians in the First World War.

Near the end of *The Bridge on the Drina* a Yugoslav nationalist and a Muslim discuss the future. The date is 1913, and Bosnia is buzzing with rebellious energy. Toma and Fehim meet on the bridge, and Toma does most of the talking. "You will see," he says passionately, "you will see. We shall create a state which will make the most precious contribution to the progress of humanity, in which every effort will be blessed, every sacrifice holy, every thought original and expressed in our own words, and every deed marked with the stamp of our name. We are destined to realise all that the generations before us have aspired to: a state, born in freedom and founded on justice, like a part of God's thought realised here on earth." These yearning generalisations are alien to Fehim, who cannot express why he knows his friend is wrong, so keeps silent. Andric keeps silent too, condensing his wisdom into an image; as they walk back

to town, "one or other of the pair" tosses his cigarette stub over the parapet, and it falls "like a shooting star in a great curve from the bridge into the Drina."

Freed from the responsibilities of fiction, the older Andric was not optimistic for Yugoslavia. "Our people's lives pass," he wrote, "bitter and empty, among malicious, vengeful thoughts and periodic revolts. To anything else they are insensitive and inaccessible. One sometimes wonders whether the spirit of the majority of the Balkan peoples has not been for ever poisoned and that perhaps they will never again be able to do anything other than suffer violence, or inflict it."

After strolling across the bridge I found a smoky, listless tavern, ordered a coffee and hoped someone would start a conversation. The berets and a lone fez showed that I had picked the Muslim local (Visegrad is two-third Muslim). A Turkish word, *sevdah*, evokes the peculiar suspended torpor in Bosnian cafés, especially Muslim cafés in the provinces. Sevdah is a condition of the Bosnian soul, a ruminative pessimism brought on by heartbreak or simply by too much staring through grimy windows at cars and cattle passing randomly into and out of vision. At the tail-end of a day measured in cigarettes, coffee grounds, and desultory chat, this randomness can seem devastating, proof of fate's calm ill-will toward all human aspiration.

I sipped coffee and tried to write letters, but *sevdah* or maybe plain tiredness sapped the muscles in my hand. Two characters at another table invited me to join them. One returned to contemplating the wall; the other wanted to talk politics. With a great show of secrecy he pulled out an SDA (Democratic Action Party) membership badge and flashed it.

"Why do you support SDA?" I asked.

He drew back in surprise. "Because they're much better than MBO (Bosnian Muslim Organisation)," he said. "SDA is the only party. I still don't know what their programme is, it's true. Somehow they don't say!" He shrugged and rolled his eyes complacently.

His friend revived, and fixed me with a bleary gaze. "Bosnia is my *mother*," he growled slowly. "The Slovenes have *their* mother, the Croats have their Croatia. I have Bosnia and I *love* her so much. There is no other Bosnia in all the world, from

Japan to South America, and here is where I want to be, here with my Serb and Croat brothers." The other man winked at me and stage-whispered, "Pay no attention, he's a communist!" The other was too far down to be roused; peering at the ashy, stained tablecloth between his elbows, he murmured, "Life." Pause. "Life."

The waiter stood us a final round of *rakia* and pulled up a chair. When he learned I was a foreigner, he gravely presented me with his cigarette lighter. So I gave him my last packet of cigarettes, because he was fresh out. Now I was out too, so he insisted I have one of mine, and did the honours with his lighter. Bosnian protocol.

We walked back to the river through empty streets. Night air revived the philosopher. "Pluralism is coming, look" – pointing at election posters on the walls – "and we must keep it when we get it. Tell me, why do French and English and Americans dislike all Muslims?" I didn't try to answer, and he didn't press. "You go to your church and worship Christ, I go to the mosque and worship Allah. There is only one god in the universe. Every one lives beneath one sun and lives but one life." We had come in sight of the bridge, and suddenly he was worried that its perfection had eluded me. "Built by Sinan in 1571," he said, gesturing at the shadowy arches, "the Turkish Michelangelo, *better* than Michelangelo." Did I know about the great flood of 1896, for instance? He lead us into the hotel above riverbank; a photo on the lobby wall showed the bridge wholly engulfed by a colossal sleek torrent. The water vanished, the stones remain.

London, March 1992

POSTSCRIPT (ZAGHREB, APRIL 1995)

If my café companions are still alive, they almost certainly no longer live in Visegrad. Perhaps they joined the flight to nearby Gorazde and subsist there, besieged, on crumbs of aid. Maybe they reached Sarajevo or central Bosnia. Who knows? Three years on, after 200,000 or more people killed and two million or more displaced, thought for their single destinies is long lost in the roar of suffering from Bosnia, itself long dimmed to white noise around our western ears.

The encounter related above, which appeared in the book *Paper House* (Vintage, 1992), happened four and a half years ago – just a tenth of the span of Tito's Yugoslavia – but an Andric of our era, apportioning his narrative by time's epic density, would spend more pages on these four and a half years than on the preceding forty-five.

Within those pages, 1992 would loom largest and darkest. It was a year infested with evil. Visegrad, with its population of 21,000 (62,8 per cent Muslim), was a prime target of Serb conquest in eastern Bosnia; and nowhere in the region was the conquest more successful. Between late May and the beginning of July, Muslim residents were terrorised, expelled, killed. According to recent investigators, most of the killing was done on the town's two bridges, Mehmed Pasha's bridge and another one upriver. "On 19 June alone, 147 Bosniacs [Muslims] of all ages were killed and thrown in the Drina, a watery grave." (1) Survivors' accounts implicate a local policeman by the name of Milan Lukic. One teenager watched Lukic execute his 16 year-old friend on the bridge. "They do the killing at night. They drink first in the Visegrad hotel. When the Chetniks go into action, they must drink. They bulldozed the two mosques in the main street so we wouldn't come back." Another survivor has described how she alone escaped from a house where, on 27 June, 70 Muslims were packed into a room, including elderly women and children, the exits were blocked and the house set on fire by men who watched it burn, drinking the while. (2)

I know a German journalist who passed through Visegrad that autumn. She got blank looks when she asked where the mosques had stood; then she spotted a minaret on a postcard and made her way to the site – "cleansed" of its temple.

The Bosnian Serb "leaders," desperate for legitimation in their own people's eyes too, especially after Milosevic himself repulsed them in August 1994, batten on Ivo Andric, bulldozing the arduous commitments of his life, and the ambiguities and suspensions in his work, into slogans that can be twisted to disguise genocide as something else. In life, the elderly Andric

(1) *Zijad Kasapovic and Mustafa Smajlovic,* Vecernje novine, *7 April 1995.*
(2) *See the* Guardian Weekly, *30 August 1992.*

became a monument of self-protective inscrutability – open, as his writing is, to varied interpretation. In death, he is helpless against abuse; his work can only speak for itself to its readers.

Conveniently for these "leaders," a Muslim fighter, brave but half-witted, had destroyed the Andric monument in Visegrad during the tense stand-off before the 1992 onslaught. They unveiled a new monument on the writer's birthday in October 1994, at a ceremony attended by the usual crew of Serbian "intellectuals": Brana Crncevic, Rajko Nogo, Momo Kapor, Dragos Kalajic... A few months later, in March, the twentieth anniversary of Andric's death was pretext for another jamboree. This time the novelist Dobrica Cosic drove down from Belgrade, the "father of the nation" himself, declaring that "if the Serb Republic [the self-proclaimed Bosnian Serb statelet] does not defend its right to freedom and sovereignty, and if the Serbs in Bosnia lose this war, Serbia and Montenegro will lose all the victorious wars of this century": a typically moronic threat which, by manipulating the fabric of history like putty for propaganda, proves his actual (nationalist) contempt for the past he reveres.

What chance now, in 1995, that Serbia and the Bosnian Serbs will lose the war they started against Bosnia and Hercegovina? The world insists that only Serbia can beat the Bosnian Serbs. Our world and our children's world will suffer the stain of this appeasement.

And still the stones remain, redeeming nothing.