

Mostar: A Bridge for Schizopolis

The day of the dedication of the reconstructed *Stari Most* (“old bridge”), the world-famous arch over the Neretva, will be exactly ten years after the end of the war. But the city of Mostar is still deeply divided between its Christian and Muslim riverbanks. The youth organization *Mladi Most* refuses to accept the division. It insists on building invisible bridges between the two enemy camps.

Me, afraid? I am Mostari from head to toe. Even as a young man, I jumped from the old bridge.

– Himna za Mostare (Song of the Bridge-Jumpers)

A brief barrage was enough to kill the dream. The dream had the form of a graceful, white stone arch that had spanned the rushing, translucent green waters of the Neretva for 438 years. It had carried every load with ease, defied every storm, survived every spring flood. *Stari Most*, as everyone calls the old bridge whether Bosnian, Serb, or Croatian, was the heart and soul of the city. Over great distances it served as a visual anchor in the soft landscape of the riverbanks. When it collapsed on a November morning at 10:12 after taking exactly 65 grenade hits from the muzzle of a Croatian tank, the hope of the people of Mostar collapsed as well.

The hope that died that day was different for each of the Mostaraca. For the elderly Safa, a souvenir vendor and philosopher who liked to involve German summertime visitors in discussions of Kant and Hegel before invoking a categorical imperative to buy his etchings, what died was a generous patroness who had fed him for decades. Vanja lost the backdrop for the daily heroics with which he fascinated not only impressionable girls of his own age but even the most jaded onlookers: He would dive with outstretched arms 82 feet from the bridge into the river’s freezing glacial runoff. The 18-year-old Muslim Senada was driven from her home at gunpoint by Croatian soldiers while indifferent Christian neighbors watched. She found herself unable ever to return to the western bank. In each of these stories, the thread of someone’s life was irreparably torn.

Several thousand Mostaraca died around that day. Tens of thousands were made refugees. After several months of artillery fire, the Muslim eastern section of the city lay in ruins. But it was the assassination of *Stari Most*, a pedestrian bridge with zero strategic value, that distilled all the sickening activity of the recent months into a single traumatic image. Pale stone exploded into fountains of dust and mortar whose clay stained the river red. Beauty was destroyed for destruction’s sake. What remained were two stumps that reached out to each other with no chance of meeting. Their gesture of helplessness seemed to express what many people felt: Mostar will never be the same.

Ten years later, Turkish stonemasons chisel the last irregularities from the blocks that will finish the arch. *Stari Most*, missing and believed dead, gets a new lease on life. The towers that control access to the bridge on both sides of the Neretva look as defiant as ever. Neighboring mosques have been repaired and new ones begun. The reconstruction has cost €15 million so far. In July the new bridge will be dedicated with all attendant pomp. People all over the world will take time to admire photographs of an unblemished icon. They will think Mostar’s gaping wound is healed and that the specter of the war has been exorcised. In Mostar champagne will

flow as spectators proudly declare that the city has been reunited. They will be getting it all wrong.

“In reality we’re a long way from peace,” says Senada Zuric, the Muslim woman who was forced to switch sides of the river during the war. Since the ethnic cleansing, the river has become something like the Berlin wall – a barrier between two increasingly divergent cultures. On the eastern side live Muslim Bosnians, in the west Christian Croats. The result is a “schizopolis” – a city with multiple personalities. With a population of fewer than 100,000, Mostar has two universities, two labor bureaus, and two civil codes. In Schizopolis the motto is “Divide and conquer.” The war created new elites and new sinecures for them to monopolize. With promises of continued violence, with tirades against the other side, the hard line political leadership cements its power.

Senada, 28, is too young to accept the city’s division. “That would mean giving up the idea that one day we in Mostar will be able to live normally again.” She doesn’t ask for much, neither for herself nor for her generation: a job, a few cultural events, a chance to take a walk without fear. A chance would be enough. The two halves of Mostar are not independently viable. Senada chose to join forces with other young people, Bosnians, Croats, and Serbs. All are architects in their way, building invisible but vital bridges over the Neretva. Their organization is called Mladi Most (“young bridge”). The prospective MBA Senada coordinates the program, obtaining financing and keeping up important international contacts with her excellent English. She sees herself as a modern Muslim, observing Ramadan because she enjoys fasting while rejecting the asceticism of the Koranic prohibition on alcohol.

At the founding of Mladi Most, just after the end of the war, German students from the organization Aktion Sühnezeichen (“operation atonement”) helped to build its youth center among streets lined with rubble and vacant lots pitted by artillery fire. The center straddles the old front, open to every side. At first glance, the young people in the Abrasevic Center aren’t doing anything their counterparts in any small town farther west don’t do. They have a photo club and an internet cafe. They play in rock bands, put out a newspaper, produce plays and videotapes. But in such an extreme environment, normality becomes conspicuous.

Dva dva djela, two two parts. On the altar of the devil
You cut the city in two. Politicians fan the flames of hate.
The city cries with pain when its people hate each other.
Let’s bury the hatchet and stitch up the wounds.
Djela grada, divided city,
Drive out the assholes, the hatemongers, become one with yourself again

The three 20-year-olds who make up the rap group Corpus Delicti scream out their frustration. They lay down staccato rhymes to taped beats that shake the youth center’s tiny sound studio. Their goatees and low-slung pants may be symbols on loan from the American hip-hop scene, but their anger is entirely personal.

Children of war, they have seen women washing clothes by the river mowed down by snipers. As teenagers they used the ruined buildings along the once hotly contested Bulevar to sneak cigarettes. “But now that life is supposed to start up again, nothing happens,” says Mirko, one of the three. Because, although the war is over, there’s

still no peace? “No, because there are no jobs.” If there were work for everyone, the conflict would vanish overnight. “*Dva dva djela*, bickering twins, hate and love, we’re not Bosnians, not Croatians, we’re Mostaraca, we scream it out with one voice, not with two.”

No wonder the Abrasevic center is regarded with distrust by the nationalistic hatemongers who set the political tone in Bosnia-Herzegovina. “Drug dealer” is one of the milder reproaches. “Traitor” is more dangerous. During the war, treason was punishable by death. In an atmosphere where even the most trivial cultural differences are magnified into defining elements of identity, an ethnically mixed youth center is adjudged a provocation.

For Damir, it’s a chance to relax, a hate-free zone, a place to run to when there’s trouble at home. “My father is Croatian and my mother is Muslim. The minute they turn on the TV and something comes on about politics, they’re taking opposite sides. They fight every day. Sometimes I feel like I’m being torn in half. Even talking is a problem. Muslims call bread *hlyeb*, Croatians call it *kruh*. If I’m supposed to buy bread and I go to a Croatian bakery and order *kruh*, I feel like I’m betraying my mother.” For his peers on the western bank he is a Muslim. They want nothing to do with him. In the east, he is regarded with suspicion as a Croatian. “At this point I don’t take it so personally.”

Damir survived the mass murders in Mostar by a lucky coincidence. “We were playing soccer. You know how kids are, they play even in the middle of a war. I had just run off the field, chasing some guy who had gotten on my nerves. That’s when the grenade arrived. It hit right between the two sticks we had set up as a goal. Sevens kids were hurt, one died later.” Damir’s family fled to Germany. He lived for four years in Augsburg, Bavaria, making new friends. “I want to go back there as soon as I can, even if the teachers don’t like hearing it. They keep telling us we owe it to our country to stay.” Seventy percent of young people say they would leave Bosnia if they had the chance. Often it is the best educated who leave – the ones with language skills and courage. With every one who leaves, the future dries out a little, like a lake slowly turning to desert.

Mladi Most, despite its meager resources, tries to counter this trend. “After the war ended, our first priority was to bring young Bosnians, Serbs, and Croatians together,” Senada explains. She remembers long discussions that began in an atmosphere of cloying mutual fondness, only to capitulate to explosions of psychic trauma. Seminars intended to foster reconciliation instead reopened old wounds. With time, other problems took center stage. The youth felt they had been betrayed twice over. After the implosion of the east bloc there was suffering in all the former planned economies, but in Bosnia it was compounded by the war. The country is an economic ruin as well. “So most kids were sick and tired of war stories. They said, this has nothing to do with us, even this talk of ethnic differences, Croatians here, Bosnians there. It’s all bullshit cooked up by politicians.”

At Abrasevic the kids come and go, seldom knowing who comes from which side of the Neretva. It’s irrelevant. The atmosphere reminds one of the good old days, to which the elder Mostaraca gladly hearken, when people knew each other’s nicknames but not their religions. Before the war, Mostar was a model of diversity. Forty percent of marriages were mixed Muslim-Christian. In the former Yugoslavia,

people inherited their religion the way you inherit a pair of pants from your big brother: without much enthusiasm, but you'll grow into it. And today? The gods of young people are very much of this world. They answer to names like Britney Spears, Brad Pitt, or Michael Schumacher. MTV and badly dubbed *telenovelas* dominate the weekly rhythm of life. In their dreams of pop and pomp, religion takes a back seat.

The Mladi Most activists are already planning the next generation of bridges. They will lead not over the Neretva but into the future. "More than half of young Bosnians are unemployed. That's a ticking time-bomb," says Senada. She is afraid that "frustration could easily escalate into new violence." So she writes grant applications and calls up foundations in Austria, Denmark, and Germany, trying to finance more positions in cultural work and offer more courses that might qualify youth for eventual jobs. Some of the photo workshop participants are already earning money taking wedding pictures. Employers appreciate computer skills, and the video projects have spawned young journalists. "We know how little we can do," Senada says, "but we're young, we're still hopeful, so we try."

Dzermal is trying his luck with photography. A giant with a ponytail and soft features, he spent six of his 26 years as a refugee in Bad Neuenahr. The forced break inspired him to make portraits of members of his generation. He calls his project "*Einstürzende Neubauten*" after a German noise-rock band, "collapsing new construction." His black-and-white photos show the bullet-ridden walls of houses, in front of them young faces with broken biographies – life plans that caved in like the Stari Most. A refugee girl from Kosovo, deported from Italy, who somehow ended up in Mostar; a Muslim friend whose religion prevents him from attending a university in Mostar and who therefore commutes to Pristina; a man who lost both parents in the war and subsists on farming despite training as a journalist. But what is visible in the faces is not depression but a tremendous will to self-reinvention, to defy the ruins in the background and find the beauty among the horror. The postwar generation doesn't want to be crushed by its own past. It wants to defend its future.

Dzermal is a little late in arriving at his future. At an age where others are preparing for their final university exams, he wants to qualify to begin training as a photographer. "I don't have wild fantasies. A little job, that would be something." In Mostar? "I'd have to be pretty lucky. What you can find is work that's illegal. Or lousy pay as a waiter. But I don't want to be a waiter." Where can he go? "Two of my brothers live in America. Maybe I can go there." If everyone leaves, who will rebuild Mostar? "I worked hard to make things better here. But the economy keeps going downhill. In the end I have to think of myself."

His friend Igor, a constant presence at Abrasevic, shows the same signs of impatience. You find him painting on wooden panels, setting up a concert stage, acting in the theater troupe, climbing a nearby construction crane, rappelling back down. "I live as fast as I can," says Igor. The war robbed him of years of normal life – now he lives in the fast lane, trying to catch up.

Abrasevic offers a lot of space for recovering lost childhood. The center consists of 16 containers, protected from the rain and sun by a white circus tent. The little encampment was thought up by Freimut Duve, a German politician specializing in media issues, endowed with high tech equipment by western foundations, and towed

to Mostar through the nations of the former Yugoslavia. In Mostar, its final destination, the culture caravan put down roots. It was a lucky break for a city where youth had nowhere to go but cafes. The metal boxes, decorated with blazing graffiti, conceal a high-tech adventure playground: a professional kitchen, internet cafe, sound studio, video-editing equipment, an administrative office, and in the middle a fully equipped stage for concerts and theater.

The center's unlikely setting also gets attention. The circle of containers stands in the middle of a reinforced concrete fortress. It was planned as a multi-use stadium and left unfinished during the war. Tearing it down would be prohibitively expensive. With its massive grandstands and columns reaching for the sky but supporting nothing, sprinkled here and there with saxifrage and wild poppies, it looks like a Greek amphitheater freshly excavated by archaeologists. The gray walls seem to protect the colorful tent city from outside attacks, creating safe neutral ground. But it is only a theater, and the kids are just visiting. Sooner or later they have to go home, some to the east, some to the west, back into the clutches of Schizopolis.

"What happens if, here at Abrasevic, a boy from the east bank meets a girl from the west?" asks Denan Behmen, 25, who works for one of the five organizations that sponsor the center. "They might be together for a while, but at some point it's going to get complicated." He's not talking about just any boy. He means himself. When he met a Croatian girl, his own parents weren't the problem. They had been born Muslims and left it at that. He brought Maria home to meet them. But on the other side of the Neretva, the two couldn't let themselves be seen hand in hand. Maria's parents would have given her hell for dating a Muslim. She asked him, should they happen to meet her parents on the street, to introduce himself as "Daniel" – a Christian name, as camouflage.

"I would have done it," he says now, "but there came a time when we couldn't keep our relationship a secret anymore. It broke up under the pressure from above. The adults just aren't as far along as we are." That's the situation in divided Mostar: A flirtation can cross the Neretva, but when there begins to be talk of marriage, all bridges seem to collapse. The parents say mixed marriages bring trouble, though they ought to know better. As recently as fifteen years ago, mixed marriages were perfectly normal. But that was before the war.

"You can forget the old people," says Denen. "They're a lost generation." If anyone's going to be able to reunite their home town, "then it'll be us, the young." One of Schizopolis' peculiarities is the way those who try to reawaken the old spirit of tolerance, diversity, and laissez-faire are written off as delusional.

How it once was – part of that was the lunatics who, for love or money, leapt head first off the bridge. Mostly they were boys, but even a few girls made the jump. They called themselves Mostari, "bridgers." Religion was irrelevant. Their acrobatic leaps were as popular as Stari Most itself.

Vanja jumps. He stretches his muscular torso, his head raised high, his hair fluttering in the wind. Five stories below, the Neretva rushes downstream. Vanja doesn't look down – that wouldn't look good. The pose is everything. He swings his arms back and forth, but the actual power comes from his legs. He is flying. His feet pressed together, he shoots straight down, his back so arched that his chest seems to

precede his head. The Mostari call this dive “the swallow” and regard it as the most dangerous of all. If the diver brings his arms forward too early, he is regarded as a coward. If he waits too long, he finds out just how hard water can be. After three seconds in the air, Vanja lowers his arms at the last possible moment and slips into the water like an arrow. Under the surface he describes a tiny loop, seeming to descend no more than three feet under the surface, and soon his head emerges from the ice-cold eddies. The tourists on the banks applaud. Several years ago he touched bottom with his face. He broke his shoulder and was clinically dead for a good 30 seconds. “But I jumped again the same day,” he says as casually as he can. The Mostari cultivate an impassive machismo familiar from the free climbing scene.

Vanja is a bridge-jumper without a bridge. His family was torn apart by the war. He fled to Split with his mother. At 17 he was practicing his climbing skills on the steep cliffs of the Croatian coast, “always thinking, if I get back someday, I’m going to jump from Stari Most.” As Mostari have been doing for centuries: The white stone arch was erected in 1556 by an Ottoman architect, and from that day on, so the legend goes, people have been jumping. Vanja Golos, now 27, was the first refugee to reach Mostar in April, 1994. Since then he has leapt more than a thousand times from – well, not from the bridge. He has leapt from its remains, from the nearby towers, or from the planks of its makeshift replacement. He is looking forward to July. “Leaping from the repaired bridge, that’s going to be a totally different feeling.”

Soon after the dedication will be the first competition, and then hopefully a good season with a plethora of tourists to bring money into Mostar and, with luck, leave some of it there. Bridge-jumping, formerly an initiation rite and test of courage, has become a flowing source of dollars and euros. The income is shared between Croatians like Vanja and Muslims like his friend Dzevad. “Our club is open to everyone,” says Dzevad, and Vanja nods.

Anywhere else, it’s a mistake to mix business with pleasure. Interestingly enough, friendship in Mostar starts with commerce. A tourist group can easily tip €100 for a dive – a lot of money in Mostar where a waiter earns €300 a month. The Mostari Club regulates commerce on the bridge, who jumps when and how often, and how the take is divided. Formerly the Stari Most was the scene of physical confrontations that ended in police intervention. The Mostari were seen as violent louts. Since the club’s founding, harmony is in the air over the Neretva – and between the ethnic groups as well. “We don’t care if a guy goes to a mosque or a church, we only care if he’s an elegant jumper,” Dzevad explains. He can tell the difference between his Croatian friend Vanja and the nationalists who ordered the bridge destroyed. “They celebrated its destruction on the western bank by firing tracers into the air. They were overjoyed, like soccer fans after a victory.” That hurt him. “When the bridge collapsed, a part of me collapsed too.” Croatians whose names appear on a blacklist of war criminals have no chance of joining the cartel. “You have to draw a line somewhere. No one can demand of us that we forgive them.”

He, too, is eager to see the new Stari Most completed: “Then I’ll feel complete again as well.” Local patriotism is mingled with business sense. In three months on the bridge, he can make enough to live for a year.

Hans Koschnick finds the €15 million that international donors are putting into the bridge’s reconstruction well spent. The former mayor of Bremen governed Mostar for

two years as EU administrator. The date of the dedication, July 23, recalls the day ten years ago when he began work. The Muslim quarter, especially, lay in ruins. There was no water, no electricity. Since then the EU has invested €250 million in the city. Koschnick was there again last year. The progress impressed and disappointed him at the same time. "The city is growing back together, as far as administration is concerned. But we haven't succeeded in reuniting the population." He calls it "an illusion to think money can effect a quick reconciliation." To destroy a bridge is a matter of minutes. To repair it takes a long time. The same is true of the rapprochement between the former enemies. His hopes rest on two groups. "The elderly still remember the intact, multicultural Mostar and long for its return. The very young want to forget the war and know that Mostar only has a chance if it presents a united front."

Stari Most, a jewel of the Osmanic builders' craft, linked orient and occident. Its destruction was "an act of barbarism," says Koschnick. When he was administrator in Mostar, all sides declared their support for its immediate reconstruction. "But gradually that support was eroded. The Croats didn't want it anymore, because they were aiming at a divided city. A divided city doesn't need a bridge. And the Bosnians wanted to leave the open wound. They were afraid international support would evaporate if the bridge were restored." In the end, it was nostalgia that won. Everyone could agree that Mostar without the old bridge was like Pisa without a leaning tower or Lourdes without a grotto. The economic value of the world-famous monument, Koschnick adds, cannot be overestimated. "It may draw even more visitors in the future than before the war. As a tourist attraction it's one of the few economic rays of hope in Mostar."

And don't forget the symbolic value. Now that kalashnikovs are no longer the weapon of choice, fanatical politicians have discovered other means of continuing the war – a war of symbols. Croats erected a 75-foot cross of iron that dominates the skyline at the exact position on Mt. Hum that Croatian artillery used to reduce entire Muslim neighborhoods to rubble and ash. The imams countered by installing more powerful loudspeakers on the mosques so that church bells are drowned out by the muezzins' calls to prayer five times a day. The Franciscans rose to the challenge by putting incongruously high additions on their steeples. Now no minaret is taller than a church. And so on.

The engineers and architects rebuilding Stari Most are walking on an ideological minefield. Because the contractor is Turkish, the inspectors had to come from Croatia. It was convenient that the archaeologists preparing the project discovered that the old bridge had rested on foundations from before the Turkish conquest of Mostar. It was a Muslim bridge, but on Christian pilings – another lucky break. The Stari Most had acquired a politically correct past.

Politically active young people regard such schoolyard bickering with a mixture of amazement and disgust. "Nothing," says the youth worker Senada Zuric, "is too silly for adults to take seriously. And they can find donors to pay for it, while we have to fight for every dollar." She hopes that no one abroad will succumb to the notion that peace has descended on Mostar just because the bridge has risen again. The new bridge is just a copy, made of new stones joined with old techniques. And Mostar, like its bridge, can never be the same. It is just a copy. But, Senada says, Stari Most

could symbolize a new beginning. "It emphasizes the importance of connection. A bridge can never belong to just one side. It belongs to both."