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The summer of 2003 found me at the Hague interning with the International Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). But before I tell you about my experience allow me to digress for a moment and reflect on the circumstances that brought the establishment of the ICTY.

As the twentieth century wore in, less than eight hundred miles far (near!!!) from Zurich, Paris, Vienna, London and Berlin, there was an ethnically driven war as cliché went “in Europe’s backyard.”

Let me take a moment and explain who was fighting whom.

In a country smaller than the state of New York Serbs briefly fought Slovenes and Slovenes fought Serbs, and then Serbs fought Croats and Muslims, and Croats fought Serbs and Muslims, and Muslims fought Serbs and Croats; Muslims and Croats later joined forces to fight Serbs (are you following me!!!), and several years later, Serb forces unleashed hell on Albanian civilians in Kosova, forcefully expelling more than half of Kosova’s two million population, including me and my family. This Hobbesian war of all against all introduced an ugly euphemism that entered the English language (courtesy of the Serbs): “ethnic cleansing.” Close to three hundred thousand people died, mostly noncombatants. While people were slaughtered in Sarajevo and shocking scenes of emaciated Muslim prisoners – scenes reminiscent of World War II – appeared in western media, the former United Nations Secretary General Boutros Ghali declared dismissively that he could think of at least ten other places on earth that were worse than Sarajevo. I always wondered how this fact (if it were a fact) exonerated him and the obsolete organization (at least in this case) he was heading from doing anything.

The conflict in former Yugoslavia had perplexed and caught the whole world by surprise. Richard Holbrooke, former US Ambassador to the United Nations and more importantly in this case, the linchpin behind the peace agreement that ended the bloodshed in Bosnia had claimed that former Yugoslavia was “the greatest collective security failure of the West since the 1930s.” Former US Secretary of State Christopher Walker had referred to the war in Bosnia as “the problem from hell.” Seeking to keep the United States out of the Balkan conflict, the more conservative James Baker, George Bush’s Secretary of State, remarked “we have no dog in this fight.”

The media, however, had done their job. The camera lens had been ubiquitous. The bloodshed in this region had introduced another cliché: the CNN factor. Appalling scenes were permeating the comfortable homes of the civilized world through numerous foreign networks and only nonhumans could remain oblivious to these tragic scenes. During all this havoc, the international community (read: the United States) decided that, after all, it had a dog in that fight. The abuse of the right to live should be everybody’s fight. Hence, ICTY was established in May 1993 as an ad hoc tribunal with the aim of bringing perpetrators responsible for all this carnage into the face of justice.

After all the wars and wrestling, here I was in the summer of 2003 wrestling the pedals of my bike (did I mention wearing a suit) through the beautiful Scheveningen Street which leads you to the building of the ICTY at the Hague in Netherlands. The Hague is home to both Dutch parliament and government. The city is a sort of political capital of Europe. Numerous conferences and conventions were held under the auspices of the city of the Hague dealing with topics ranging from launching of explosives from balloons in 1899 to launching of nuclear weapons more than half a century later; from laws and customs of war to human rights violations.

During my internship at the ICTY I worked for the section of the Tribunal called Outreach Program. The aim of Outreach is to make the work of the Tribunal more transparent, tangible and easily accessible to the people affected by the war. The Tribunal realized that while it renders justice to one side, it eventually aggravates the other. The task of maintaining an amiable posture proves to be even more difficult having in mind that, often, the indicted individuals enjoy a vast support among the citizens of their ethnic background, due to their “patriotic contribution” during the war.

In order to bridge the gap between the Tribunal at the Hague and the people in the region of former Yugoslavia, the Outreach Program has thus established and coordinates the work of four of its field offices in Sarajevo, Belgrade, Zagreb and Prishtina. The main purpose of the field offices is to share the necessary information on the work of the Tribunal with the local population. In this respect, the Outreach Program has also created and maintains the ICTY website in the local languages of the region.

Upon my arrival at the Hague, I took upon the task of correcting and enhancing the ICTY website in Albanian language, which is my native language. Hence, coming myself from the region affected by this war, I tried to suggest the department some changes in order to make the information on the web more intelligible and accessible to the local population. To my delight, some changes were immediately adopted, but other changes were not. I was grateful that the head of Outreach enjoyed confidence in me by tasking me to correct and update the publication of several indictments. At times however, it was frustrating not to have a clear idea of what I needed to accomplish during the time spent there. Although the staff that I worked with were certainly professional and overly kind with me, I wish they would have assigned me less ambiguous tasks and made more use of my stay there.

Nonetheless, the most valuable part of my internship was the very fact that I was a part of this institution. This meant that I enjoyed a firsthand experience of directly observing the trials, conversing with the employees, lawyers, journalists and other experts involved on different issues related to these trials. It was interesting to learn that (in words of one of the employees working at the Hague detention center) “if Guantanamo Bay is hell for detainees, the detention center at the Hague is paradise.”

I must admit that my experience at the Hague was certainly emotionally challenging, perhaps difficult. Having been myself subject to the violence initiated by most of the detainees currently undergoing trials, I felt that I personally had a stake in the outcome of the judgments. I often found myself - while observing the testimonies of the charismatic murderer Slobodan Milosevic from a distance of less than ten meters – swinging between revenge and justice. At times, retribution was the only option I felt could vindicate the senselessness of the killing of my cousin, the abduction of my friend and the burning of my home. But ultimately, I know that justice achieved at the Hague will render the best retribution that we could seek.

Last but not least, I need to thank the people at the Human Rights Project and Thomas Keenan in particular for supporting me throughout this internship.