

LETTER FROM TUZLA  
**SALT CITY**

*What did the war in Bosnia do to a tolerant and industrious city like Tuzla? Its people tell stories of what could not be defeated.*

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Haris Hurem got ethnically cleansed while playing cards with friends one Friday night in June, 1992. It happened in Grbavica, a fashionable Sarajevo neighborhood where Haris, then a twenty-three-year-old economics student, lived with his parents. The war had started two months earlier, as the international community prepared to recognize the independence of Bosnia-Herzegovina from Yugoslavia. Rebel Bosnian Serbs, supported by the Yugoslav Army, had already overrun much of the country, expelling and slaughtering tens of thousands of Muslims. In Sarajevo, the rebels had already taken most of the western suburbs, and now they were slowly, brutally expanding their hold on Grbavica, which is near the city's center but backs against hills that the Serbs controlled. Before the war, the neighborhood had been ethnically mixed. Now the Bosnian Serb military police were going door to door. When they burst into the apartment where Haris and his friends were playing cards, they inspected everyone's documents, then took away the two young men with Muslim names.

Haris's parents had been at their weekend house when the war broke out. Caught by surprise, like most Bosnians, they had been unable to get home to Sarajevo, though they were less than a dozen miles away. Their youngest son was with them; their two older boys were in the city. For the first few weeks, they kept in touch with Haris, the oldest, and his brother by telephone. Then the phone lines were cut. In late May, rebel troops came to the mountain village where the Hurems were marooned. They burned houses; they destroyed the mosque. Haris's father, Zihno, a civil engineer, sent his wife and son on foot through the forest to Kiseljak, a small town fifteen miles northwest of Sarajevo. Twelve days later, warned by a Serb neighbor to flee for his life, Zihno followed them. Zihno had grown up in a village near Kiseljak, and his brother still lived there, so he and his wife and son moved in with his brother. There was no news of the boys trapped in the city.

Haris, meanwhile, had been put in a concentration camp. His captors had accused him, improbably, of burning seven rebel tanks and killing twenty Serbs. They beat him severely while interrogating him. The camp was in Lukavica, a Sarajevo suburb near the airport. Hundreds, possibly thousands, of Muslims and Croats were taken there. Rebel soldiers and militiamen entertained themselves by raping the women, by carving crosses into the backs of the Muslim men, by chopping off the three fingers used in the traditional Serbian salute, or by simply killing inmates. The camp's guards were themselves rarely the perpetrators of these atrocities; the villains tended to be fighters from the countryside, men with a ferocious hatred and fear of the Bosnian urban élite, of Croats in general, whom they called Ustashe (after the Croatian Fascist regime that murdered hundreds of thousands of Serbs in the Second World War), and of Muslims in general (whom they called fundamentalists, though Bosnian Muslims are, on the whole, a strikingly secular group). Haris was kept busy digging graves: half a metre deep for Muslims and Croats, two metres deep for the infrequent Serb corpse. The diet for inmates was bread and water. Conditions were unspeakable, and many inmates died within days.

The Lukavica camp was not a secret. It was actually part of the headquarters complex of General Ratko Mladic, the rebel Bosnian Serbs' military chief. Haris, assigned to sweep

near command headquarters, once saw General Mladic and Radovan Karadzic, the President of the self-styled Serb Republic, walk past. On another occasion, while digging a trench, he saw, beyond the barbed wire, Karadzic and the Canadian general Lewis MacKenzie, who was then in charge of the United Nations force in Bosnia, eating and drinking together outdoors. There was even a U.N. barracks not far away, and Haris once encountered a Canadian U.N. soldier in a latrine he had been sent to clean near General Mladic's headquarters. Haris, who spoke fluent English, appealed to the soldier. He told him that people were being tortured and executed every day in the Lukavica camp. The soldier hurried away. He did not want to hear about it.

In late July, Zihno, still staying with his brother in the mountains, heard a rumor that Haris was in a Serb prison. He wrote a letter to the International Committee of the Red Cross, but got no reply. He made informal inquiries locally, and, finally, toward the end of the year, he got a break. The Bosnian government was starting to put an army in the field, scrambling to stop the rebels' advances, and in a battle southwest of Kiseljak government troops had captured a fighter who turned out to be the brother of an important Bosnian Serb police commander. Friends of Zihno's thought a prisoner exchange might be arranged. They brought Zihno the police commander's brother.

Zihno, who is a gentle, white-haired, highly cultured man, began an excruciating series of negotiations with his son's jailers over the telephone. At first, they told him that Haris was dead. Zihno said that in that case he wanted his son's body, and that if an autopsy showed that Haris had indeed died at some point before this conversation the police commander's brother would be released.

Haris, in the meantime, was moved from Lukavica to Hadzici, a Serbian-held town west of Sarajevo, where he was fed relatively well. He did not know that his father was in contact with the Serbs, or that they were trying to decide what to do with him. It was now December; he had been in captivity for six months. The sticking point of the negotiations for his release, it later became clear, was that he had seen too much brutality inside Lukavica. But the police commander wanted his brother back just as badly as Zihno wanted his son, and eventually the exchange was set. It took place in late December, near the Hurems' weekend house, at a snow-covered checkpoint manned by Bosnian Croat forces, who were at that time on the sidelines in the war between the Serb rebels and the Muslim-led government. Haris and the police commander's brother each walked alone to the checkpoint. When they met, they kissed. "What else could we do?" Haris said later. "We were both prisoners." For a moment or so, Zihno did not recognize his son, who had not bathed or shaved or had a haircut for six months. In the car riding back to a cousin's house, Zihno held on to his son so tightly that Haris complained that he couldn't breathe.

I recently heard this story from both Zihno and Haris, in a series of overlapping narratives, in Tuzla, an industrial city fifty miles northeast of Sarajevo. Friends of theirs had suggested that I ask them about it. Neither father nor son had seemed eager to talk. Haris had already given a detailed statement to Bosnian government war-crimes investigators on what he had seen at Lukavica. Zihno gets choked up when he thinks about Haris's ordeal. Once they started talking to me, however, each man seemed intent on making sure I understood exactly what had happened.

For a visitor to Bosnia these days, it sometimes seems as if half the people you meet, after nearly four years of pervasive, weirdly intimate war, have an extraordinary story to tell, a Balkan "Doctor Zhivago" of their own survival. It also seems as if many of them feel, in a land where solid, agreed-upon historical facts can be hard to come by, a peculiar responsibility to get at least their own part of it right. Zihno drew me a map, with all the towns, villages, roads, and shifting front lines in his tale rendered with an engineer's

precision. He even used different-colored felt pens to show which forces held which territory when.

"Oh, those colored pens," Haris said. "Every night, when we were kids, he'd want to see our homework, and then he'd get out his colored pens to show us how algebra really works."

Haris is now twenty-six, but he looks much younger. Somehow, I think, he should look older, considering what he's been through. But Bosnia has a way of confounding such expectations. Haris has a quickness, a sturdy, supple brightness about him, that is the farthest thing from what one associates with post-traumatic stress, with survivor guilt. He looks, for that matter, nothing like what Westerners usually associate with the word "Muslim." He is fair-skinned, blond, and hazel-eyed; his physical appearance is more Scandinavian than Levantine. He drinks alcohol (indeed, he's now the co-owner of a bar in Tuzla), smokes cigarettes, eats pork, and has never set foot in a mosque. He recently got married, and he did it the old, Communist way: at the mayor's office, without religious sanction. What is more, his new wife, Aleksandra, is a Serb.

"I grew up in Tuzla," Aleksandra, a poised young woman, told me. "So most of my friends are Muslim. It's no big deal."

Haris shrugged. "That's right," he said. "No big deal."

Tuzla is in fact known for its indifference to ethnic passions. Back in 1990, local elections were held throughout what was then the Yugoslav republic of Bosnia, and Tuzla's was the only significant contest won by anti-nationalists -- by the Reformisti, a social-democratic coalition. The three big nationalist parties, representing Muslims, Serbs, and Croats, won everywhere else, strictly according to which group was most numerous in a district. (These groups are actually less distinct ethnically -- since in Bosnia they all speak the same language and share the same land and much of the same history -- than they are distinct religiously: Croats are Catholics, Serbs are Eastern Orthodox. Even so, the lines can be blurry. Degrees of devoutness range widely, of course, and then there are the countless people of mixed ancestry.) Since the Muslims were the largest group in Bosnia (forty-four per cent in the 1991 census, compared with thirty-one per cent identifying themselves as Serbs and seventeen per cent as Croatians), they gained effective control of the republic's central government. What almost no one foresaw was that the party of the Bosnian Serbs, backed by Slobodan Milosevic, the Serb-nationalist President of Yugoslavia, and led by ruthless extremists such as Karadzic, would soon transform itself into an army of conquest, expulsion, and genocide.

Tuzla actually had a grace period of a few weeks after the war started. Towns and cities throughout eastern Bosnia were being attacked; many quickly succumbed. Tuzla's municipal government, however, called for volunteers, got more than three thousand on the first night, and began to organize the city's defense. Legal and illegal arms were hastily collected; tactics and training were coordinated by the local police; and the nearby units of the Yugoslav Army, which had formidable barracks near the center of town and at the airfield, were given an ultimatum: either support Bosnia or depart for the rump Yugoslavia (which was by then dominated totally by Serbia), leaving behind those arms that rightly belonged to the local authorities. Because Tuzla is a mining center, many of its defenders were miners experienced in the use of explosives, which helped to even the odds somewhat with the Army. Still, when the Army, after pretending to be leaving peacefully for Serbia, suddenly turned and tried to enter central Tuzla, a pitched battle ensued that was, by all accounts, ferocious, and the heavy artillery was all on the Army's side.

Tuzla's defenders nevertheless succeeded in turning back the Army. They also captured more than twelve thousand guns, which were then used to drive the Army north and east, mile by hard-fought mile, in the course of a couple of months. Just as important, the Army abandoned the airfield eight miles south of town -- the airfield that is now being used by the American peacekeeping force as its Bosnia headquarters -- from which it could have launched devastating aerial attacks. And the city's defenders secured the nearby hills, preventing the rebels from seizing positions that would have allowed them to pour close-range shell and sniper fire into the town. Tuzla was shelled extensively during the war, but always from long distance -- a less destructive, demoralizing type of siege than that suffered by, say, Sarajevo.

The importance of the successful defense of Tuzla -- the first Bosnian victory of the war -- can scarcely be overstated. Without it, the Serb rebels would probably have encountered little organized resistance anywhere in northeastern Bosnia, and might well have won the war in its first year. Bosnia would have been strangled at birth. The irony that Tuzla, with its "soft," social-democratic politics, should have proved to be the country's stoutest polity in the face of armed aggression was lost on no one. All local factions have sought to claim credit for the victory, but the strongest claim belongs to Selim Beslagic, the city's mayor and the chief organizer of its defense. An audiotape even surfaced, a recording, made covertly, of a CB-radio conversation between Beslagic and the vice-commander of the airfield in May, 1992, at the height of the crisis. On the tape, the vice-commander can be clearly heard urging Beslagic to issue a statement opposing Bosnia's independence, and offering to cut him and Tuzla a special deal in a new, non-Bosnian dispensation. And Beslagic can be heard just as clearly replying that he wants no part of the vice-commander's "Serboslavia," and then telling him, in somewhat rougher language, to take a hike.

Tuzla's anti-nationalism, incidentally, does not arise from any pious, picturesque liberalism among its residents; it is not the Vermont of Bosnia. Rather, it is a tough old industrial city, more reminiscent of Manchester, with a tradition of factory-floor radicalism which reaches back at least to the late nineteenth century, when the Hapsburgs ruled Bosnia. "This has always been a rebellious area," Jasminko Arnautovic, a Tuzla writer who also works for the city, told me. Salt has been collected there for almost six thousand years -- the Turkish word for salt is tuz, and the Ottomans built up a city on the site -- "and being the keepers and protectors of salt is something special," Arnautovic says. "It connects you to the ground."

In the post-Communist era, Tuzlans have often been accused by their more ethnically minded neighbors of romanticizing an old-style proletariat, of indulging in "Yugo-nostalgia." But the truth is that the Tito regime exploited Tuzla's workers and natural resources, which include a large coal deposit, much as earlier rulers did, despoiling the city's land and air with crude extractive industry. Tuzla occupies a narrow valley, and what with a huge chemical plant just west of town, pervasive burning of cheap coal, and an inversion layer that settles over the city in winter, its air quality makes Mexico City's pollution look mild. Everyone in Bosnia smokes cigarettes; in Tuzla people say they smoke to protect themselves from breathing the local air straight.

The millennia of salt mining, moreover, have left vast caverns deep beneath the town, causing a steady, disastrous ground subsidence, which over the past decades has destroyed much of the old, intimate city, and forced a majority of Tuzla's residents to move into a scattering of bleak high-rise blocks of flats.

Then, there is the toll taken by the war. Physically, it includes all the scars of shelling, mortar fire, and the gun battles of the defense, plus the neglect of normal maintenance.

The psychological costs of the war cannot be easily seen, let alone measured, but the suffering was obviously immense. Tuzla did not starve -- U.N. trucks came in with relief supplies, and hunger was general only during the winter of 1993-94, when fighting between the Bosnian Croats and the government's forces cut the city off from the outside world. Still, food prices soared throughout the war, and the black market flourished viciously. At one stage, cigarettes were being sold by the puff. Refugees from "cleansed" regions swamped the city and its hinterland. Tuzla's prewar population was a hundred and thirty thousand; the wartime population of the city and its environs peaked at nine hundred thousand. Exactly one United Nations relief flight, carrying Yasushi Akashi, the Secretary-General's much disparaged special representative to the former Yugoslavia, landed at the Tuzla airfield during the war; that was in March, 1994, and Mr. Akashi promised it would initiate a stream of U.N. relief flights, but none materialized.

In May, 1993, Tuzla was declared one of the U.N.'s six "safe havens," which its enemies would thenceforth attack at their peril. But that did not deter the Serbs from firing a massive shell into a crowded square in the Old City on the evening of May 25, 1995. Some months earlier, another Serb shell had hit close by, so Tuzlans knew that the distant gunners had precise coordinates for the square. Outdoor gatherings had been prohibited by the police. But Tuzla's young people, with no money to meet inside cafés, and with a long tradition of gathering on nice summer evenings in the square -- actually just a cobbled open space where eight streets converge -- had ignored the police order. Seventy-two were killed, and more than two hundred were maimed and wounded. Tuzla, even now, is not a big city: you can scarcely find anyone there who didn't lose a friend or a family member that night.

While some of the city's factories managed to stay open throughout the war, production plummeted, unemployment soared, and today Suhreta Ramic, the local representative of UNICEF, calculates that fewer than ten per cent of the people in Tuzla have the means to lead what was considered a "normal life" before the war, and that more than half the population is still dependent in some way on humanitarian aid. The hundreds of thousands of displaced people still living in and around Tuzla are the neediest, naturally. Nearly all are Muslims, "cleansed" from their towns and villages to the east and north. With the signing of the United States-sponsored Dayton Peace Agreement, in December, their chances of returning to their homes, while officially assured by provisions in the agreement, were effectively dashed: the self-styled Serb Republic, an "entity" built on Nazi-type theories of race and violently dedicated to ethnic "purity," has now been internationally legitimized, and most of the Muslim refugees' homes are deep within its territory.

The refugees have transformed Tuzla, including its politics. The great majority are conservative villagers, harboring deep anger against the "Chetniks" (the name taken by Serb partisans in the Second World War, which is now widely used in Bosnia to deride the rebels, their supporters, and Serbs in general) and no little resentment of the relatively comfortable and unscathed Tuzlans among whom they live. The refugees tend to support the Party of Democratic Action (known by its Serbo-Croatian initials, S.D.A.), which is the Muslim-nationalist ruling party. A cantonal government recently established by Sarajevo for Tuzla and its hinterland is already firmly under S.D.A. control, and if local elections are held in 1996, as the Dayton agreement foresees, they will almost surely spell the end of the social-democratic, anti-nationalist coalition government of Selim Beslagic in Tuzla. In the meantime, Beslagic is battling to preserve, among other things, the property rights of Serbs who fled Tuzla during the war and whose homes are coveted by the many refugees without permanent places to live.

There was no ethnic conflict in Tuzla during the war, no suggestion that the city might, like Sarajevo and Mostar, ever need to be divided. Most of the city's Serbs did flee, it is true,

either to Serbia or overseas, many driven by hunger and want and ordinary war fear; others' fears were fanned by the extreme propaganda pouring out of Belgrade before the war and at its beginning, which warned of the Muslims' genocidal designs. But those who stayed, many of them in mixed marriages, laugh at the suggestion that their religion might cause them to be mistreated in Tuzla -- at least, they laughed whenever I asked about it. The city's Orthodox church was shelled during the war, and Beslagic's government helped with repairs. I attended a service there on Orthodox Christmas (January 7th) and found the place crowded with worshippers, young and old. Tuzlans still joke about the "news," reported on Belgrade TV, that Tuzla's Orthodox church had been destroyed, and that the Jala River, which runs through the city, was jammed with Serb corpses. The Jala is a modest stream; two dead goats might dam it. During the war, when public transportation began to break down, Tuzlans used to tell their employers, "No problem. I'll just ride a body down the Jala."

New Year's is still a universal holiday in what's left of Bosnia and Herzegovina: that is to say, everybody celebrates it. This year, with the ceasefire holding and NATO troops arriving, people seemed to celebrate with a special intensity. In Tuzla, firecrackers and gunfire started rattling even before dark on New Year's Eve. I had been invited to a party by a young English-speaking soldier named Dino Miskovic, who was on leave for the holiday, but when he picked me up at my hotel he announced a change of venue. He said that "the flats" -- meaning the big apartment blocks where most Tuzlans live -- were becoming too dangerous. Celebratory gunfire might come through the walls and floors and ceilings. So we were going to a party at a farmhouse. We stopped to pick up Dino's girlfriend, Zvijezdana, at her parents' flat (American gangsta rap was pounding on the stereo there), and then set off for the countryside on foot.

Dino and Zvijezdana were a typical Tuzla couple, I discovered as we walked. That is, she was half Serb, half Croat, and he was half Croat, half Muslim. Echoing Haris and Aleksandra, they assured me that it was no big deal. (Indeed, I later shared a brandy with Dino's mother, Safeta -- she is a Muslim economist, and still reveres Tito and the peace and relative prosperity he presided over -- while she explained the significance of the Christmas tree that she and her husband, a miner, display each year in their immaculate flat. They put it up for the Catholic, or Croat, Christmas, and keep it up through the Orthodox, or Serb, Christmas, in order to honor both traditions. This was not an uncommon practice among Bosnia's Muslims, she said -- at least, not in Tuzla. It also helped keep the children happy, since they had picked up, from TV and elsewhere, some of the fierce Western commercialization of Christmas.) We walked past smoky, raucous high-rise blocks, along dark roads, through broad, muddy fields, then up a long hill past farmhouses and orchards. We were slowly rising out of Tuzla's fogbound valley into winter moonlight. As we climbed, Dino said, indicating a snowy hillside of brush and stumps, "This was a deep forest. When there was no electricity, everyone from Tuzla climbed up here and cut down the trees for firewood."

I asked Zvijezdana if she had been among the woodcutters.

She snorted.

"Her father was," Dino said. "She is lazy."

Every now and then, Dino cocked an ear to a blast in the distance and said, "That was hard. A cannon." Once, he said, "That was the front. It is the first time we've heard heavy weapons in a month. Zvijezdana's father's at the front, twenty kilometres from here. Maybe the war is starting again."

Zvijezdana seemed more concerned about the deepening mud and its effect on her dancing shoes than about a resumption of war. Noticing that I was walking carefully, too, Dino said, "Don't worry. The girls at the party will clean our shoes when we get there."

He was wrong. When we arrived, the party was going full blast -- a dozen young people dancing, drinking, eating from a groaning board, and bellowing Bosnian folk songs in a small, smoky hut decorated with colored lights and heated by a wood-burning stove -- and no one seemed at all interested in the shoes we left on the porch.

A minimum of fuss was made over the American visitor. One beefy blond teen-ager in a baggy football jersey did inform me that the future of Bosnia was now entirely in the hands of the Americans, so if America, as the world's strongest country, decreed peace there would be peace, and if it decreed war there would be war. That was about the extent of the evening's political discussion. There were, of course, endlessly complex ethnic undercurrents. Songs were identified for me as Croatian ballads, Serbian love songs, Muslim laments, or Bosnian anthems, and everybody seemed to know every word of all of them. A Muslim kid with a pale face and deep-set eyes under fierce black brows abruptly grabbed the cross hanging around the neck of a Croatian boy, then ostentatiously kissed it while the Croat smirked. Dino had brought a tape by his favorite group, the Cure, and everyone sang along with it, too, but it was less popular than the Balkan music. I tried to learn some folk-dance steps, and when I half mastered one I was told, "Now you are a Bosnian boy!"

For me, things got less jovial just before midnight, when two hand grenades appeared. As the elder of the party, I sternly confiscated the weapons and hid them -- cleverly, I thought -- on top of an armoire. But then the grenades reappeared at midnight, and Dino and I were outnumbered and outmaneuvered by the pro-detonation crowd. Our host, a dapper, mischievous red-faced boy of about eighteen, pulled the pin on one; the kid in the football jersey pulled the pin on the other. The rest of us backed away, suddenly sober, though there was actually nowhere to go in the tiny, crowded room. The boys danced intently for a minute or so with their grenades, keeping the safety levers clenched, then tramped out onto the porch and hurled them gleefully into the darkness, where they blew major holes in the night.

Several hours and another thousand plum brandies later, I set off for Tuzla alone. The others were planning to party till noon; though I felt immortal, I was ready to sleep. Gunfire still rattled from the blocks of flats as I descended the now frozen road into the shrouded city.

Alija Izetbegovic, the President of Bosnia, apparently scolded those who celebrated so wildly on New Year's, after all the recent death and suffering. I didn't actually hear what he said, but I did hear plenty of Tuzlans grumbling that he was an old spoilsport. I talked the question over with a young soldier named Muris Djug. "What you need to understand here is how happy everyone is simply to have survived," he said. Muris, I knew, had narrowly escaped death in the May 25th massacre, having left the square only moments before the shell hit. His brother, who remained behind in the square, had been injured. (For that matter, Dino's brother was also injured and has had two operations on his stomach so far.) Muris, moreover, had survived many months on the front line, and that is where he was on November 21st, the day the Dayton Peace Agreement was announced.

"The Serbs were so happy that day," he recalled. "I knew some of them quite well, because our trenches were at one point only thirty metres apart, and we used to shout across, especially at night. Those guys had it much worse than we did. Some of them hadn't been out of the trenches for two months. I don't think you can imagine what that

means. We were relieved every five or six days, and that was bad enough. Also, we were starting to win the war. So they were very happy about the ceasefire.

They celebrated with tracer bullets -- everything. I was also happy, because I am from Tuzla, and I knew that this meant I could go back to my studies, to my girlfriend and my family, to the swim team I coach. But I didn't celebrate, out of respect for the other boys in my trench. One was from Zvornik, another from Vlasenica" -- Serb-held territory. "I pray they'll be able to go home now, but I doubt it. The Chetniks won't let them. For that reason, our commander told us we had nothing to celebrate."

No one with an interest in the survival of Bosnia as a country could find much to celebrate in the Dayton agreement. In the field, the government's forces, with the help of their erstwhile foes the Bosnian Croats and of the Croatian Army itself, were, for the first time in the war, consistently defeating the Serbs. The decision to call off the offensive in October was militarily questionable. Indeed, it seemed to be dictated primarily by pressures from the government's main international ally, the United States: President Clinton, in order to win his struggle with Congress over Bosnia policy, needed quick results from the manic diplomatic initiative being run by Richard Holbrooke.

The agreement itself pulverizes the idea of a unitary Bosnia. It creates an exceedingly weak central state, without even the basic mechanisms of control over its own territory, such as a single, integrated army. By acknowledging the Serb Republic, the agreement effectively partitions the country. Even if rebel leaders like Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic are arrested and tried for war crimes, the racist statelet they built by mass murder will survive. Although the Muslims (and non-Muslims still loyal to the Sarajevo government) and Croats are ostensibly partners in the "entity" now known as the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the long-term commitment of the Croat leadership is plainly not to strengthening Bosnia but to folding its territory into a Greater Croatia.

Economically, too, this divided Bosnia is a non-starter. The Serb Republic, in particular, is a hopeless concoction -- depopulated and largely rural, with a tiny new élite of war profiteers and relatively few educated people left around. Amputated from the rest of Bosnia by its politicians, the Serb Republic's economy makes little sense. It has, for instance, the majority of the region's iron deposits, but the means of processing iron are all in the Federation. Serbia itself, meanwhile, its economy broken by sanctions, is not in a position to help its impoverished, self-mutilated stepchild.

The basic problem of the Dayton agreement's approach to Bosnia is its assumption that the nationalist parties -- or their "motherland" representatives, President Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia and the arch-nationalist President of Croatia, Franjo Tudjman -- represent the interests of the people of Bosnia. They do not. They simply have power, and are therefore men who the United States and its allies can do business with. Ethnically defined states and parties are inherently inimical to democracy and to the protection of human rights -- the West's putative goals for stable successor states to the former Yugoslavia. The Clinton Administration's plan to strengthen the Bosnian military, while justifiable in terms of the regional balance of power, will also work inevitably against the development of multiparty politics in Bosnia, where the Army, already the country's largest employer and most powerful institution, is closely identified with the Muslim-nationalist ruling party.

Even so, the Dayton agreement, followed by the NATO intervention, has already brought Bosnia the most desperately needed development of all: a ceasefire. This may be only what the historian Ivo Banac has called a "centaurian peace" -- monstrous, half human -- but, certainly, no civil society can begin to be rebuilt in wartime. If the forces under NATO (properly known as IFOR, an acronym for Implementation Force, because they include non-

NATO troops) stay only a year, as is currently planned, the chances of a lasting peace are slight. The war parties will still be in power, the rage they thrive on still fresh. Moreover, the economic incentive to return to war will still be there for all those who have learned how to make fear, hatred, shortages, and bloodshed work for them.

And yet at the moment the armies are separated, with many soldiers being demobilized.

And those who have survived must indeed count themselves lucky.

"I'm more worried about the Croats than about the Serbs," Haris said. "The Serbs are like us -- they're tired, beat up, they feel they lost the war. But the Croats think they won, and they did."

We were sitting in Haris's bar, a handsome little place of polished wood and frosted windows in the Old City. It was a quiet evening: there were just a couple of players on the electronic dartboard. "Look at Mostar," Haris said. Tensions were high in Mostar, where Croats and Muslims faced each other across a river. "The Croats there are being real hard-asses."

I had been asking Haris about his life since he was released by the Serbs, and he had surprised me by expressing no particular enmity toward them. "Look, every side has its extremists," he said. "With the Serbs, it might be forty per cent. With the Croats, maybe fifteen. With the Muslims, maybe five. At least, that's how it looks to me. But those few extremists are enough to get things started, and before it's over everybody's involved. I know it was hard for my father to accept. The day after I got out, he sat me down and asked me, 'What did you do? It must have been something.' And I told him, 'Dad, I had a Muslim name. That was it.' You know, he couldn't believe it, having grown up in Yugoslavia. So I could see, even after everything that had happened, that he was still waiting to hear it from me. And it was like the last drop of water in a full glass. He finally had to face it."

The Hurems' story is not really typical of the Bosnian Muslim experience in the war. They have survived, for a start, and have landed on their feet in Tuzla. Zihno has even found work in his field, hydro engineering, with a Scottish aid project. All the same, I was struck by Haris's sturdy indifference to the idea of himself as a victim. "You know, when I first got out I wasn't sure what to do," he said. "I didn't have to go in the Army, because I'd already been a prisoner of war. So I just volunteered for a while, in the mountains near Sarajevo. And one day I was helping unload bodies from a truck. They were soldiers killed on Mt. Igman, about thirty of them. And this old man was helping me. I'd grab the arms, he'd grab the legs. Then, suddenly, he let go of this guy, and he just stood there staring at him. I asked what was wrong, and he said, 'This is my son.' Then, after a minute, he picked up the legs, and we went back to work. That old man showed me what it is to be strong."

Haris has an easy, pithy way of telling a story. He went for six years to the American School in Tripoli, where Zihno was working on a giant construction project, so his English is not the mid-Atlantic concoction you usually hear in Europe but instead carries echoes of a soft Texas twang. He even turns his mouth down, Western style, when he bites off a sentence to make a point. In his description of the last, tense days before his release by the Serbs, he told me about a confrontation with one of his captors, who had brought him to a house near what turned out to be the prisoner-exchange point. Haris had no idea what was planned, and thought he was about to be killed. The Serb offered him a drink. "I said, 'No, thanks,' " Haris told me. "He got upset. He wanted to know what I was afraid of, and said something about me being a Muslim. And I told him no, it wasn't that. 'I'm just in kind

of a situation here,' I said, 'so I don't really feel like a drink.' " Haris turned his mouth down, gave me a faintly amused but really fathomless look, then seemed to shake off the memory, and sipped his beer.

After coming to Tuzla, he landed a job as a driver and interpreter for a Dutch branch of Médecins Sans Frontières. He kept the job even after he got the bar running. "Here you need to have a few things going," he told me. "At home in Sarajevo, even while I was a student I had a café, and my family had a little basement factory making 'Italian' socks. I'm going to start making those socks again as soon as I can get the machines."

Haris met Aleksandra in the operating room at a Tuzla hospital. He was working as an interpreter for foreign surgeons. She had been volunteering there since the beginning of the war, which happened to come just as she was finishing high school. She accused Haris, mock-seriously, of trying to impersonate a foreigner, with his fluent English behind his surgical mask. He saw her in town a few nights later, when he had been drinking, which gave him the courage to ask for a date.

Now -- if the war is really over -- Haris wants to move back to Sarajevo, but Aleksandra is dubious, and on his first visit back since the siege was lifted he himself was shocked, not just by the physical destruction but by the city's social transformation. "I went walking in Bascarsija, the Old City," he told me. "It used to be that if I walked there an hour I would see two hundred people I knew. This time, I saw maybe two. All my friends are dead, wounded, overseas, or on the other side. The city is full of people, but they're all refugees, country people." Aleksandra fears that in Sarajevo people who have lost their homes and families will notice her Serb-sounding first name and irrationally blame her. Haris points out that there are just as many embittered Muslim refugees in Tuzla as in Sarajevo. But, Aleksandra replies, in Tuzla she is at least known. Zihno, for his part, pronounces his oldest son "very lucky" to have married "an absolutely lovely girl."

On this evening, Haris and I are joined first by Aleksandra and then by a couple of his former colleagues -- a British nurse, female, and a Dutch logistics specialist, male -- from Médecins Sans Frontières. Haris and the nurse start trading stories about a certain alcoholic doctor in a village clinic near the front line east of Tuzla, and about all the close scrapes they had on the road to his clinic: the shells exploding around them; the time the M.S.F. van got riddled with bullets from a Browning machine gun and Haris, unhurt, never even hit the brakes. Earlier, Haris had told me that he sometimes carried either a pistol (and fifty bullets) or a grenade when he drove near the front. "I decided that they weren't going to take me prisoner again, that I'd kill myself first, and maybe try to take a few Serbs with me," he said. Then he added quietly, "Just because I know how things run on the other side when you're caught."

Again, I'm struck by the lack of rancor with which Haris talks about the Serb gunners who fired on him, a noncombatant, while he drove for M.S.F. "This one guy, he could have killed me so easy," he says. "He shot up the road in front of me to stop me, then in back of me, so I couldn't back up. He was just having fun. He was probably bored. If I were him, I would have done the same thing."

"You would, would you?" the nurse asks dryly.

I once asked Haris if his experience with M.S.F., which included plenty of on-the-job first-aid training, might inspire him to become a doctor himself.

He said no, and gave me a crooked grin. "I'm an economist," he said. "Wherever the money is, that's where I want to be."

Now his former colleagues start kidding him about his recent decision to leave M.S.F., after two and a half years with them -- to start driving and interpreting, at substantially better pay, for one of the American news organizations that have flocked into Tuzla since it became the headquarters of the American forces.

The conversation is shattered suddenly by a long burst of automatic gunfire, seemingly just outside the frosted windows. There are two bursts, actually, with a slight pause between them, and when the second burst ends Haris says casually, "That's thirty. It's a Kalashnikov, so he has to reload."

We quickly finish our beers and put on our coats. Haris opens the front door, pokes his head out, and studies the street in both directions. No gunman. He gives his crooked grin, then nods to Aleksandra and the nurse to step out. "Women first," he says. "Then children. This is Bosnia."

When the Tuzlans heard that the Americans were coming, many had visions of twenty thousand free-spending G.I.s filling the town with dollars. (And drugs, and aids: there was a series of small local panics.) But, aside from the few hundred drivers, interpreters, and fixers working with the foreign news crews and IFOR, and the owners of shops and restaurants near the airfield, almost no one in Tuzla has yet reaped any financial gain from the United States presence. Indeed, very few Tuzlans have seen a G.I. The Americans, unlike their European (previously U.N., now IFOR) counterparts, are restricted to their bases when off duty, apparently out of concern for their safety, and in Tuzla that means the airfield, many miles from town. A U.S. military spokesman told me they might eventually run some special bus tours, to give troops a look at the city, and General William Nash, the commander of Task Force Eagle, as the Tuzla-based mission is called, said that the supercautious fraternization policy might be reconsidered "as the theatre matures." But for now the G.I.s are reduced to asking reporters who visit the airfield whether the women in Tuzla are really as pretty as they've heard. When President Clinton visited Tuzla, in mid-January, he went no farther than the airfield.

Of course, IFOR's task is not to stimulate local commerce or facilitate romance but to carry out the terms of the peace agreement, and that will be done mainly from within armored fighting vehicles, along the front lines. A four-kilometre-wide Zone of Separation between the opposing armies will be strictly enforced. Heavy weapons will be withdrawn to barracks, prisoners of war released, civilian militias disarmed and disbanded. IFOR units will patrol the countryside, maintain checkpoints along the roads, and use aerial and ground reconnaissance to monitor artillery and troop concentrations. They will also begin the immense task of removing untold millions of land mines. Finally, unlike their U.N. predecessors, they will have broad latitude to respond with lethal force to attacks or provocations.

This well-delineated mission became murky almost immediately, as the Serbs began to test its provisions, demanding delays in the schedule for their withdrawal from certain Sarajevo suburbs, continuing to impede movement on roads they controlled, and so on. In early January, I watched William Perry, our Secretary of Defense, give a performance at the Tuzla airfield that was worthy of Yasushi Akashi, the U.N.'s fainthearted former chief in Bosnia. After being asked about the fate of sixteen civilians illegally seized by the Bosnian Serbs near Sarajevo, Perry, in effect, threw up his hands, then tried to shift the responsibility for dealing with such blatant violations of the Dayton agreement to an international police force, which he admitted had not yet been deployed. Over the days that followed, Perry's terror of "mission creep" seemed to recede, though, to the point where, after the Times reported that the Serbs were working around the clock to bury evidence of

large-scale civilian massacres in open-pit mines, he suggested that IFOR might eventually provide security escorts for war-crimes investigators seeking to preserve such evidence. There was a night club in Tuzla that interested me. It was in the basement of the Hotel Tuzla, a grimy high-rise monstrosity of the Communist era, and it reeked of new, war-related money: it was dark and low-ceilinged, with overpriced drinks and everything in deep-red imitation velvet. One of this night club's owners (or perhaps he is only the chief of security; it depends on whom you ask) is Naser Oric. Oric was the commander of the defense of Srebrenica, the refugee-jammed town in eastern Bosnia (another of the U.N.'s "safe havens") that, after a desperate three-year siege, finally fell to a Serb offensive last July. It is generally believed that as many as eight thousand men were massacred, on the direct orders of General Ratko Mladic, after Srebrenica fell. Tens of thousands of civilians were expelled, and many of them fled over the mountains on foot toward Tuzla. Oric and his forces could not help them -- they had been withdrawn several weeks before, by the Bosnian High Command. One story goes that Oric went three times to his superiors in Tuzla, pleading to be allowed to fight his way back into Srebrenica before it fell, and was three times refused.

I wanted to ask him about that story, and, for that reason, I went several times to his night club around midnight, when he could be counted on to show up. I also wanted to ask him about the rumors that he might be the first Muslim to be indicted by the International War Crimes Tribunal, in The Hague.

Oric, who is a powerfully built, surprisingly young man, politely declined to talk to me each time we met, saying that he was waiting for permission from his superiors to do so. Actually, I had some difficulty hanging on to interpreters once they learned who I was hoping to interview at midnight. One man, who came highly recommended, and who had assured me that the wartime curfew still in force in Tuzla did not apply to him, blanched when he heard Oric's name, then stammered, "I cannot do it. I have a Serb last name, and he is a very, very dangerous man." Haris, hearing of my troubles, agreed to help. He knew Oric, he said, and was not afraid of him, and he accompanied me twice to Oric's club. But Oric still refused to talk.

A number of people in Tuzla, though, including Zlatko Berbic, the owner of a popular radio station called Radio Kameleon, told me that Oric had already announced that if the Hague Tribunal charged him he would voluntarily go there to stand trial. He apparently wanted to tell his story, wanted to explain what had happened at Srebrenica. (During the siege, Oric showed a videotape of burned Serb houses and headless Serb corpses to a Washington Post reporter; he presumably has a less graphic presentation in mind for The Hague.) If his military methods, which were undoubtedly brutal, were judged to be war crimes, he'd said, he would accept his sentence. But he wanted the world to know what the Serbs had done there, what the U.N. had (and had not) done there, what his superiors in Sarajevo had (and had not) done there, and why he had done what he did.

I was fascinated by Oric's status in and around Tuzla. Many people, particularly refugees -- and including Haris Hurem -- consider him a war hero. One group from Srebrenica, now living in Italy, is reported to have bought him, out of gratitude, a white Mercedes-Benz, which you see him driving around town. But other Tuzlans, including members of Beslagic's coalition, regard Oric and his ilk as part of Bosnia's problem. "He is just a big Muslim, a killer," one young man, a Muslim himself but an anti-nationalist, told me. The only war hero from Srebrenica, he said, was the doctor who stayed there throughout the war, working alone in terrible conditions. (The government tried to fly in two more doctors, but their helicopter was shot down by the Serbs and both were killed.) About the thousands of refugees from Srebrenica and elsewhere now living in Tuzla, this young man was blunt. "We hate them," he said. "They are village people, and they are destroying our city."

Paradoxically, what he meant was that the urban culture of ethnic tolerance and social-democratic politics was under threat. But the strained relations between city and country cut several ways. Jasminko Arnautovic, the writer, told me that during the worst parts of the war his stepmother used to rise before dawn, gather up her most valuable possessions -- things that had been in her family for generations -- in a sack, and catch an open truck out to the countryside near Kalesjia, a town fifteen miles away. There, along with other Tuzlans in similar straits, she would spread a plastic sheet out in a muddy field and display her precious heirlooms for local peasants to pick over. "Because the peasants had food, and we had none," Arnautovic said simply. Another Tuzla intellectual told me that her sister had been offered, in exchange for the most beautiful, most expensive suit of clothes she owned, a kilo of beans, a jar of sour cream, and a jar of jam.

Muris Djug, the soldier who was at the front on the day the Dayton agreement was announced, and whose family has been in Tuzla for centuries, grimaced when I mentioned the young anti-nationalist's remark about hating villagers. "Some Tuzla people do not understand what those from the countryside have suffered," he said delicately. "They only see that they are poor and primitive, and don't know how to act in town. But when people from the villages, where every boy either was killed or became a soldier, come here and see these boys whose families have arranged for them to work as policemen, or have found some other way to keep them out of the Army, they are angry. Some Tuzlans who sit in their cafés and sneer don't understand what they're sneering at."

The 1991 census registered a population of 4.3 million Bosnians. More than half -- as many as 2.5 million -- have been driven from their homes. During the winter of 1993-94, Tuzla's sprawling sports center, along with many other public facilities, was given over completely to emergency housing. Today, most of the displaced are in private accommodations. This doesn't mean that people have remade their lives, or that things around Tuzla have returned to normal. It means only that the displaced have become a less dramatic presence to the outside eye, and that all available housing is jammed to the rafters with extended families and disoriented peasants.

When I set out to interview displaced people, I found them everywhere -- and to me they looked exactly like Tuzlans. They told unbearable stories, of murder and expulsion and hunger and flight. Some had been driven from their villages years before, in the first weeks of the war. Some had lost their families. Some still hoped to go home again. Many had given up that hope. Some had survived Srebrenica. One man I interviewed had fought under Naser Oric for two and a half years and had been wounded twice, but he would not discuss the details of his military service. He did tell me about the march out of Srebrenica, and about the many men lost along the way, and about how the Chetniks mutilated their bodies. He was twenty-three years old, he said, and he looked, to my eye, utterly lost.

I headed east to Kalesjia, near the front line, which had been completely destroyed by fighting. On the road from Sarajevo to Tuzla, I had passed through many burned-out villages, seen the roofless houses standing at the ends of neat driveways, with maybe a wrecked, snow-covered family car on its side in the garden. These were scenes of fierce, small-scale, almost domestic violence. Kalesjia was another matter. The Bosnian Serbs had taken it early in the war, but the government had quickly retaken it, as part of the push out of Tuzla, and then the Serbs had shelled it relentlessly from the hills they held to the south. It had been a fair-sized town, with factories and blocks of flats, but there didn't seem to be an unscarred piece of masonry, let alone a pane of glass, left. Confronted with such a scene, the stunned eye scans stupidly for any shard of normalcy -- a plastic flower box still strapped to a balcony railing, say. When my driver pointed out the hill with the Serb artillery position, I thought it looked like a good spot for a ski resort.

But when I asked him to proceed to the front, which was less than a mile away, he balked. I wanted to test the border, to see if we would be allowed to pass, in accordance with the peace agreement, and maybe interview some Serb soldiers while we were at it. The driver said the road beyond Kalesjia was mined. I knew that an IFOR convoy had passed down it the day before, without incident, but he was clearly too frightened to go on. Where I saw a shattered yet peaceful countryside -- children in bright jackets sledding, sleepy-looking soldiers driving horse carts filled with freshly cut logs -- he saw mortal peril. We turned back.

The former mayor of Kalesjia was the governor of the new canton that encompassed Tuzla. I later interviewed him in his office, in Tuzla. A ponderous man named Izet Hadzic, he took for himself rather more credit for the liberation of Kalesjia from the Serbs than anyone else around Tuzla seemed inclined to give him. He is, in fact, widely resented in the city, as a simple rural politician whom the central government in Sarajevo has seen fit to put in charge of a regional structure that is stripping away Tuzla's autonomy. With me, Governor Hadzic criticized what he called the "naïve-society option" of the local anti-nationalists, and said that, in any case, Tuzla had always been unduly influenced by Belgrade, the capital of Serbia.

That remark reminded me of a story that Zlatko Berbic, of Radio Kameleon, tells. It seems that a famous Belgrade dissident, an elderly professor named Miladin Zivotic, best known for a ritual he maintained throughout the war -- lighting a peace candle each day outside the Presidential palace of Slobodan Milosevic -- came to Tuzla at the height of the war to apologize, in the name of normal Serbs, for his government's aggression against Bosnia. Naturally, Berbic let Professor Zivotic use Radio Kameleon to deliver his message. Afterward, however, Hadzic went on another station and denounced Radio Kameleon for giving airtime to Chetniks. At a meeting of the cantonal assembly there was talk of a Serb plot "named Kameleon," and, according to the radio station's managers, a vigorous campaign of official harassment ensued.

Baisa Baki, a Tuzla actress, is trying to raise money for a production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream." It's a difficult task, she says, not only because there isn't, to put it mildly, much money around but also because of a prevailing, semi-official view that everything in the performing arts in Bosnia these days must be political and relevant to the war. "I have begun to hate how our performers and our playwrights just make money from people's fears and pain," she told me intently. We were nursing espressos in a downtown café. "During the war, all you could think about was leaving," she said. "Here you were just a walking target. Sooner or later, you felt, a shell would find you. But now that the war may really be over, it's hard to know what to do. Do you leave our beautiful Bosnia now, after everything we've been through, and just go be a refugee someplace -- a nobody, fighting for nothing but survival? Is there still a Bosnia to fight for? And, even if there is, won't a generation now be sacrificed to patriotism, to nationalism? Many of us could end up in jail or worse. It's happened before."

Haris had to drive to Orasje, the Bosnian border town, on the Sava River, where the Americans were coming in from Croatia. CNN, his new employer, was sending people and equipment from Zagreb to the Sava. Haris would be picking them up. Because the Americans were using the road from Orasje to Tuzla to bring their forces south, it was now presumably safe, and, in fact, Haris had already made the trip once or twice. But he had found it nerve-racking. The route ran straight across the Posavina Corridor, a thin east-west strip that connects all the Serb-held lands of western Bosnia with the Serb-held lands of eastern Bosnia, and with Mother Serbia. Many people believed that, in a sense, the whole war had been over Posavina. Certainly it had seen some of the worst, most concentrated

fighting, and had been a main bone of contention at Dayton. Now the Serbs were going to be allowed to keep Posavina, and the Bosnians were not happy about it.

I was feeling ready to leave Tuzla, and decided to hitch a lift with Haris. We left on a wet, cold, misty morning. Dz'ordz'e Ristic, another driver/interpreter -- known professionally as George -- was with us. George and Haris were concerned about the fact that CNN's van had Croatian license plates. For reasons I never understood, the plates, they said, might arouse Serb suspicions. Under the peace agreement, there were not supposed to be any military checkpoints along this road, except those manned by IFOR, but this was some of the most lawless territory in Bosnia, and George and Haris muttered that anything -- absolutely anything -- could happen. Zipping along through the snow and fog, we saw a pleasing number of American tanks, Humvees, and Bradley Fighting Vehicles parked in clearings and alongside crossroads and grinding past us in the other direction. A Beethoven symphony played on the tape deck.

"Watch George when we cross into Serb territory," Haris told me. "He will jump out and kiss the ground. He can't help it. He is already smiling."

George was a Serb. When the war broke out, he was in Tuzla, where he had lived since he was a child, and his parents, who had moved to Serbia, were frantic. But then they saw some of the more outlandish propaganda on Belgrade TV about what was being done to Serbs in areas around Tuzla they happened to know well, "and they realized that it was all bullshit," George said. George had served in the Bosnian Army, and had married a Muslim. "You watch Haris if the Serbs stop us," he told me. "He knows more Chetnik songs than I do, and he'll sing every one if they ask."

Haris confirmed that he was a walking anthology of Serb folk music. "I learned all their songs in the camp," he said. "It was good. It empties you to sing. They used to scream at us, 'Sing louder!' And they used to make me step out of the line and sing alone. I didn't care about the words. You feel better afterward. It's better to sing than to be beaten up." The countryside began to flatten out. Traffic thinned. The few buildings we could see now were all shell-damaged. We came to a Bosnian police checkpoint, and were waved through. "Posavina," Haris said quietly.

It was a landscape from the First World War: There wasn't a tree that hadn't been split or felled by a shell. Heavy log bunkers showed up as lumps in the snow. "The Chetnik front line," Haris said. "Our front line was just over there." He pointed into the fog. The road was pocked by deep shell and mortar holes. George, who was driving, picked his way silently between them. Then, in a small patch of standing woods, a group of Serb soldiers suddenly appeared, standing in the road, signalling us to stop. George stopped. He rolled down his window.

The Serbs said nothing. They studied our Croatian plates. They took our identification documents. Haris and I had credentials issued by IFOR, but George's I.D. was older and had been issued by the U.N. The Serbs didn't like it. An officer appeared, with an angry face under a high, short-billed cap decorated with the Serbian double eagle. I thought he looked remarkably like Ratko Mladic. His soldiers kept peering up and down the road, which remained empty. Haris and George were absolutely silent. I wondered if Haris still carried the pistol and grenade he had told me about. The phrase he had used -- "how things run on the other side when you are caught" -- kept going through my mind. I wasn't afraid for myself -- these guys would surely not mess with an American journalist at this point -- but I had no idea what was going through my companions' minds. Finally, having detained us for several minutes, the Serbs let us pass.

George drove extra carefully for a while. Haris started kicking his left boot with his right. George snickered. "Trying to get my heart back out of my shoe," Haris explained to me, with his crooked grin. "I think I'll have two cigarettes," he said, fumbling theatrically for his pack. Then he said to George, quite seriously, "I was bad enough, they thought -- a fucking Muslim. But you were worse -- a Serb, a fucking traitor. George, if they had made you get out of the vehicle and taken you off someplace, I would have jumped behind the wheel and run for it. You would have been on your own."

"That would have been the right thing to do," George said.

A mile or two later, we passed a small American IFOR encampment. "Wrong spot, boys," Haris muttered. "The bad guys are back there." He sighed. "And they'll always know where you are, and you'll never know where they are."

We crossed back into Bosnian-held territory (actually, Bosnian Croat territory) and entered the small town of Orasje. Haris said that he had shown a group of G.I.s around Orasje the last time he was there, and that they had scared him badly at one stop by all jumping out on the wrong side of the van. "I told them, 'This was the front line. Anywhere that was ever the front line in this war, don't step anywhere that isn't paved. It might be a mine.' But they all jumped right out onto the ground. I dived behind the van. I guess they thought I was crazy. I just hope they don't have to learn the hard way."

We parked on a side street and made our way on foot to the riverbank. The Sava was flooded -- a cold, brown expanse maybe a half mile across. The bridge over the river to Croatia had been destroyed in the war, and a long line of cars now waited on each side for a couple of small ferries to take them across. But there were also little flat-bottomed skiffs with outboard motors carrying the foot traffic. I tossed my bags into one of them. A freezing rain was falling, and I said goodbye to Haris and George on the bank. Haris pulled up the hood of his windbreaker and gave me a traditional Bosnian farewell: "Come back." He grinned, and at that moment he looked, I thought, like any happy-go-lucky Balkan kid standing there -- except for his quiet, unusually intense eyes. I huddled on a bench between a Croatian soldier and an old market woman as we putted off across the water. To the east we could see American tanks and big military trucks lumbering south across a pontoon bridge. ©