

## JOSIP NOVAKOVICH

# Café Sarajevo

In the Balkans, nothing vanishes completely. In my hometown, people give directions like this, You go two blocks past the oil refinery, and then one block up, past the military barracks, and then turn left . . . The oil refinery shut down a long time ago as have the barracks, but in people's minds, it's all still there. For a newcomer it's maddening but for the old perhaps it's comforting to have in the midst of all the changes, the map of the old town, from fifty years ago. The old town is still stronger than the new one.

In the new world, in North America, it's very different. So many new buildings come up that we quickly forget about the old ones that used to be there. The new impressive Sports Station has just opened up, and Café Sarajevo has vanished, and nobody seems to notice or comment. Sarajevo used to be a large café with Balkan mix music, à la Bregović, and burek, baklava, and many other Bosnian delicacies.

There aren't enough of us of a single ethnicity, and we don't have the pan-ethnic ex-Yugoslav community to maintain a Balkan café. Quantity amounts to quality, to use the maxim of dialectical materialism, and there just aren't enough of us.

But when I least expect it, I run into Serbs and Croats. For example, while watching a tennis match between Djokovic and Federer at the Sports Station on Saint

Catherine, I met a man in a leather jacket, with brown hair combed straight up, on the sidewalk who was looking in, Branko. He didn't want to come in but preferred to watch from the sidewalk so he could smoke, and moreover, he said, he feared any kind of enclosure.

Actually, I think I see you nearly every day walking around, I said. Am I right?

It's the walking syndrome, he said.

He offered me a flask of French brandy, Courvoisier, the cheapest, but pretty good.

By the way, what's your ethnicity? I asked him.

Only peasants and fascists ask such a crude question.

It's not rude, just curiosity. Even if I didn't ask you, I would wonder. You don't want me to be a hypocrite, do you? You probably wonder what nationality I am.

No, you sound Croatian, but you could be Serbian, I have no idea, and I don't care. It doesn't matter what nationality you are, only that you drink well, and that you are not a bad drunk. Have a sip! He pushed the starred flask toward me.

No I don't drink at the moment, I said.

Oh Jesus, don't tell me you are a born-again North American prude.

So why do you walk so much? I admire the fact that you can.

Yes, it's healthy, but I am restless, I can't be still very long. I was trapped so long during the siege of Sarajevo that now I must walk outdoors, I have fear of entrapment.

Really? But you were a Serb in Sarajevo.

Why do you say that?

Well, you root for Djokovic.

Come on, I also root for the Croatian national soccer team. But all right, if you insist. Sure, okay, but that didn't matter once you were trapped in the city. Grenades and shrapnel don't ask for your ID.

Why the hell didn't you leave? And didn't you know this was coming? In my hometown, Serbs knew there would be a Serbian siege, so most of them left.

But not all? Well, that was the case in Sarajevo. I didn't believe any of the crap I was hearing. I thought it was just hate talk, so I didn't leave. And then I was stuck. There was no way out unless you had special connections with the UN.

What did you do in Sarajevo?

I was an opera singer.

And you made a good living?

No, you guessed it. But I won the Sportska prognoza once—twelve hits. There were only three of us in the entire country that round who did, and I got something like 80,000 deutsche marks. See, that's why I love sports. And I can tell you, Djokovic is behind, but he's gonna win this match.

Really, opera? I asked.

To substantiate his story, he took a good swig of brandy and sang several arias. He stood straight, and gesticulated, and threw back his somewhat balding head, to look up high. He sounded good. When he talked you would never guess he had an operatic voice as his voice was kind of subdued and damaged.

Everything went to hell during the siege, even my voice, he said.

So how do you live here?

I came as an exile and war invalid. They call it a post-traumatic stress disorder. It's not a disorder, to my mind. If you went through what I went through, you'd be crazy not to be disturbed. Fifteen grenades hit my apartment on several occasions, and I had to spend weeks in the basement in the dark. I'd want to see how these guys who like to call my mental state disordered would take it.

But it's all right to be an invalid, they support you.

The Canadian government gives me enough for rent and thirty dollars a day for food.

That's not bad.

You try eating and drinking on thirty a day. Not complaining. But the damned cigarettes cost ten bucks.

And look at this, he pointed to the tree. It's the seventh of May, and the leaves are not out yet. I heard in Sarajevo they were all out in February. It was a horrible winter.

But you are holding out? Why not go back? You know I visited Sarajevo, stayed on Ljubljanska across the Vrbanja Bridge, toward Grbavica.

That's the bridge I used to escape. I had to pay 5,000 deutsche marks, and I left one year before the siege was over. You know what they call the bridge now? Romeo and Juliet. At the beginning of the siege, a couple wanted to run across it, to escape to Dubrovnik. He was a Serb and she was Muslim. Snipers got them in the middle of the bridge and they lay there for three days and nights, and nobody

dared pick them up because the snipers covered the whole range. So we watched the bodies from a distance.

I showed him some pictures on the computer from Sarajevo, a pavement near the Croatian cathedral, marked in red, to commemorate victims of a grenade.

I stood right there, on that spot, one day, he said, after a bomb fell up the hill and killed several dozen people. The stream of blood was an inch thick, covering the heels of my shoes. So now you see why I couldn't walk there again.

Hmm. So when is Novak Djokovic playing again?

See you later, Brother, he said. And you know, if you walk enough, you will.

Several days later I walked down on Bernard Street and I thought I saw him. I didn't. But his presence is strong in my mind, wherever I go, he could appear, and even if he doesn't, he's there.

**Josip Novakovich** emigrated from Croatia to the United States at the age of twenty. He has published a dozen books, including a novel, *April Fool's Day* (in ten languages), four story collections (*Infidelities*, *Yolk*, *Salvation and Other Disasters*, *Heritage of Smoke*), and three collections of narrative essays as well as two books of practical criticism. His work was anthologized in *Best American Poetry*, *The Pushcart Prize*, and *The O. Henry Prize Stories*. He has received the Whiting Award, in Fiction and Nonfiction, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Ingram Merrill Award and an American Book Award, and in 2013 he was a Man Booker International Prize finalist. He teaches creative writing at Concordia University in Montreal.