

A travel diary searching for normality lost. The writer Elvira Mujcic, a Croatian Muslim, was 12 years old at the time of the genocide. In a book, which she defines as “therapy and travelling”, she tells of the horror of war in an ironic, intelligent, unusual and non-rhetorical manner. Writing about the many clichés still surrounding the former Yugoslavia today...

A book to survive in Srebrenica

ARTS&WORKS 2

edited by Sanja Lucic

“Guard all the material objects you have well, guard your photos well and one day, if you have nothing left that reminds you that you existed, it will be hard to prove it even to yourself because you won’t even know you existed”. These are the words of a Bosnian writer which Elvira Mujcic took to heart by preserving a photo of her childhood when she was 12 years old, posing with her

relatives at Srebrenica. The photo has become the cover of her book *Al Di Là Del Caos – Cosa Rimane Dopo Srebrenica (Beyond the Chaos – What Remains After Srebrenica)*. The book is a travel diary searching for normality lost in Srebrenica before the war, which she knew as a child: a nostalgic book that does not tell of the war, rather of the marks it leaves on people who



Anna Di Sacco

survive and continue fighting the demons of the past, everyday. It's a book she defines as "therapy and travelling" in Italy, but also in Srebrenica where she went to search the places and symbols of her childhood that could tell her who she was and who she is now. In intelligent and meaningful language, never rhetorical, and dense with irony, Elvira Mujcic tells us about herself, searching for mental salvation. A long and tormented journey in which she goes back to find that nothing of her past life has remained, which haunts her with its memories and nightmares. She tries to make known the consequences of a war that she did not experience directly, a war that took away her father and uncle, leaving permanent wounds in her soul, hidden in the depth of memories. Like thousands of families in Srebrenica, she also yearns for justice, accusing a world that does not punish the guilty, that only thinks about itself, and that separates the dead who count from those who count less. Justice which would help bereavement and finally let her cry. Part of the book's copyright is allocated to the Casa Pappagallo in Tuzla, a home for children who must leave the orphanage, managed by the Tuzlanska Amica association; other revenue is allocated to the project of the Pl@netnoprofit ABCSOLETERRE A SCUOLA association, to guarantee the right to education and recreational-training experience for children in Chaouia-Ouardigha, in Morocco.

Where does the title of your book come from?

It came to mind towards the end. I realised that there was a common thread in what I had written, which went beyond the Balkans and Srebrenica, and was my personal search for my normality. Since I came to Italy I have not done anything else other than try to assimilate Italians in an attempt to be "normal". It seems to me that I passed my 12 years in Italy trying to go beyond the chaos.

In reality you tell of things which do not concern the war much...

The war is a question of flashback. I was 24 when I wrote the book and had been



Contrasto

living in Italy for 12 years. I had problems such as panic attacks, an obsessive fear of death and instead of going to a psychologist I kept a kind of a diary. I never thought about writing a book, I wrote things only for myself.

You were born in 1980. You were 12 years old when everything happened. Did you experience the war first hand?

Not in Srebrenica. My mother, two brothers and I went to another city in Bosnia imagining it would only be temporary, but then the war arrived around the area of Doboj. We were stuck, we could not go back and I saw the war there. Instead my father had remained in Srebrenica.

When was the last time you saw your father?

When we left on 16 April 1992.

Afterwards you moved to a refugee camp in Croatia. How long did you live there?

I lived there for a year. At the beginning we went to people who we used to visit on holiday, we entered Croatia illegally and these people helped us to get the documents to be able to live in the refugee camp.



_There were various ethnic groups and various religions in Yugoslavia and people spoke different languages. No one would have guessed that people hated each other so much that they would engage for years in a bloody war

Are you a Muslim?

Yes.

In the war of former Yugoslavia everybody was against everybody. How was it to go to Croatia as a Muslim? How did you feel?

At the beginning, given that things occurred in stages, first one war and then the other, there was no hostility. Obviously they were not over the moon to have all these refugees, but the real problem happened later, when war broke out in Mostar and problems began, which forced us to flee to Italy since we were a minority in Croatia. Our lives were not in danger. There was no war in Croatia. There were provocations, fights between children my age. I do not know if it was real hatred. I was 13, so were they and I do not know if they knew what they were saying. It became critical when the Croats did not want us in Croatia anymore and we were made to leave for Italy.

How was the journey to Italy?

It was very distressing because I wanted to stay in Croatia.

Why did you want to stay?

Firstly because they spoke my language. Despite everything, even though there were problems concerning religion and other issues, it seemed to me that the further we moved away, the more impossible it would be to go back to Bosnia.

Because despite everything, despite the war, the country was your home?

I remember how on the last day in Croatia, I beat up a boy who always beat up my brothers, I had revenge for everything he had done. I remember that a Croat man arrived who had hosted us in Croatia, and said: "My goodness, if Tito was still here, he would not allow characters like this to exist. Even children are fighting and all these things..." So I thought I did not want to live anywhere else other than Yugoslavia and I was sad also for this, because for me that country was Yugoslavia, I was born there and I thought that the war was temporary and that everything would go back to normal.

Yugoslavia was a country where everyone lived together, various religions, various ethnic groups. Did it seem impossible and absurd that people could hate each other to the point of killing each other?

Yes. To be honest, I had not immediately understood that we really hated each other. Five days before leaving Srebrenica, we went to collect signatures for peace and everybody signed. Srebrenica consisted of mainly orthodox Serbs and Muslims and they all signed. My parents said that if everybody signed then war was impossible. Later, prior to the conflict, some friends from Belgrade called us to hide with them. It was insane to think that such a thing could occur, because if people in Belgrade called us to go and stay with them until the chaos calmed down in Bosnia, it was absurd to think that we could hate each other so much.

But do you think that your friends, who called you to offer a place to stay, hated you after?

No, no, I don't think so. They were the witnesses at my parents' wedding, so no, it is impossible.

I am asking you because, leaving generalisations aside, people tend to think that everybody hated everybody, but in reality it was not like that...

It was not true then and is not true now. As soon as we arrived in Italy we met a mixed couple, a Serb and Croat and they were our only contact with Yugoslavia and Bosnia. They were the only people who came to visit us. They even came when the slaughter happened, feeling embarrassed during the days of 1995 because they thought we did not want to see them. It is sad to generalise and it is often done because it is easy to say: "These people did this so all people belonging to their ethnic group are like that". I think it is easier for those on the *inside* to understand rather than those who look in from the *outside*.

Even though you have been in Italy for 12 years do you sometimes feel you are not understood? Do you have the feeling that people do not really understand the conflict in Yugoslavia?

Absolutely, but not just the man on the street but those who in theory should

understand, journalists, for example. There is too much disinformation. I think that very few people, really a tiny amount, understand what happened in former Yugoslavia.

You mention journalists. In your opinion how much have they contributed to building a distorted image of the events in Yugoslavia?

When I graduated I did my thesis on the propaganda in the Yugoslavian conflict because it seemed impossible that so much hatred blew up from one day to another. Was there really something within us that made us hate each other? I discovered that the media exaggerated everything, thus creating fear, and when people are scared they do crazy things...

So a kind of psychological war?

Yes, I think so. But then going further back and analysing the events from 1982, concerning the question of Kosovo in 1982 and again in 1986, all of Yugoslavia (Muslim, Croat, Serb) went to Kosovo to calm down the Albanians, because these people were described in a certain way. I was young and I do not know but very probably everybody believed that they went to create a certain situation. I believe this is the problem of racism, just like in Italy where immigrants are seen as thieves and Slavs as cruel and primitive people. I think that this happens because we are far away from certain realities, because Bosnia was far away from Serbia, so anyone with just one image that television offers of a certain population, or a country, will love or hate it. It all depends on what the media tell us and how the media represent it. The same thing happens on Italian TV.

Why do you think this happens?

Sometimes for ideological reasons, one is led to back one side or another without reading between the lines, just black or white. Often if someone is leftwing they must think leftwing in everything, even when they realise that it might be wrong. On the other side there are political dynamics that I cannot understand, that are behind closed doors, which make us



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_The tombs of the 8,000 Bosnian Muslims massacred by the Serbs in July 1995 and the Dutch headquarters of the United Nations in Srebrenica. Civilians and men who would subsequently be killed were assembled here in 1995

think it is right to wage five wars one after another, after the attack on the Twin Towers, therefore we are made to believe that the various actions carried out around the world were necessary. We always need to be at war somewhere, a war somewhere to keep the Western World rich and happy.

You mention the Twin Towers. If you had to compare what happened in the US with what happened in Srebrenica, would you conclude that in reality much more

coverage was given to the first event than the events of Srebrenica, where 8,000 people died...

Sometimes I think that there are deaths which count more than others. I have also thought that the image counts much more than the event. I watched the history of Srebrenica on Italian television where you saw images of men looking like skeletons because they had not eaten for three and a half years and thus very far from the West. Many people looking at them couldn't identify with them. Instead if they saw images of gentlemen in suits throwing themselves from the Twin Towers, they connected because they were more similar to us and our life. Therefore, I think, after everything, events occurring in powerful states are worth much more than in poor countries from both an economic and political viewpoint. Many wars followed the Twin Towers, but the dead of Baghdad and Afghanistan don't count despite being many more than on 11 September.

The sub-title of your book is *What Remains After Srebrenica*. What do you mean: Srebrenica meant as genocide or the Srebrenica you knew, where you lived and had a happy childhood?

The genocide is implicit because it happened. I lost my father and I lost other male relatives, an event that has fragmented my family irreversibly. It is what has remained after the Srebrenica that I knew, the one I dreamt of for 12 years, the one I hoped to go back to and live in. I did actually return to see it and realised I could never live there again. It is a very nostalgic fact, of a country that was Bosnia, Yugoslavia, a city that was Srebrenica, but the one it was before and not the one it became: the symbol of genocide because when one speaks about Srebrenica that is all we think about.

So you wanted to go beyond this, show a different Srebrenica, the one you knew?

Exactly. Many of the tales are episodes before the war. Within them are flashbacks, however many concern a period before the war. Most of my memories in the book concern the beautiful and healthy Srebrenica, which I will truly miss for the rest of my life.

I read a part of the book where you tell of playing with your cousin: the small things which take you back to a time which is no more. Do you still have this nostalgia?

Yes, in some parts of the book I say that I am a “collector of nostalgias”, nostalgia for stupid things like seeing that my street is still called “Maresciallo Tito” and almost cry for the joy of thinking that everything is the same. However I could not recognise my house since it was almost completely destroyed; for a moment I was fooled into returning to the past. Unfortunately there were too many events, so I realise that it is not so and the reason why I do not want to live in the new Bosnia is because the Bosnia I want is no more. It might seem childish to say “I want”. I am often accused of wanting Tito’s dictatorship back and realise it is difficult to understand. It is not nostalgia of that negative sort, I miss what we were: further ahead of any country in terms of tolerance, religious and ethnic integration because in any case in Bosnia and Yugoslavia there were no ghettos, everybody lived together, got married, with no discrimination against one religion or another.

Do you have Serbian friends?

Here in Italy, yes. When I was younger, for five years, I was madly in love with a Serbian boy with whom I spent the last days in Srebrenica. As a young girl I had more Serbian friends than Muslim friends, though at the time I did not know if they were one or the other.

Would you like your book to be translated and published in Serbia?

I would be a little scared of being misunderstood. I would like it to be translated because if you look critically at it you can see that there is no nationalistic hate, just some anger, but that, I think, is justified.

Anger towards whom?

I would be happy if war criminals were cleared out of Bosnia, and I’m talking about all sides. Perhaps we could start living again, maybe not like before. However if certain people were brought to justice who participated in the war on all three sides, a good relationship with Serbs could be



possible. There are no problems in Italy: I have Serbian friends and know Serbs. Whereas when I go back to Srebrenica it is as if the Serbs assumed a different connotation, it is as if I see my father’s executioner in all of them.

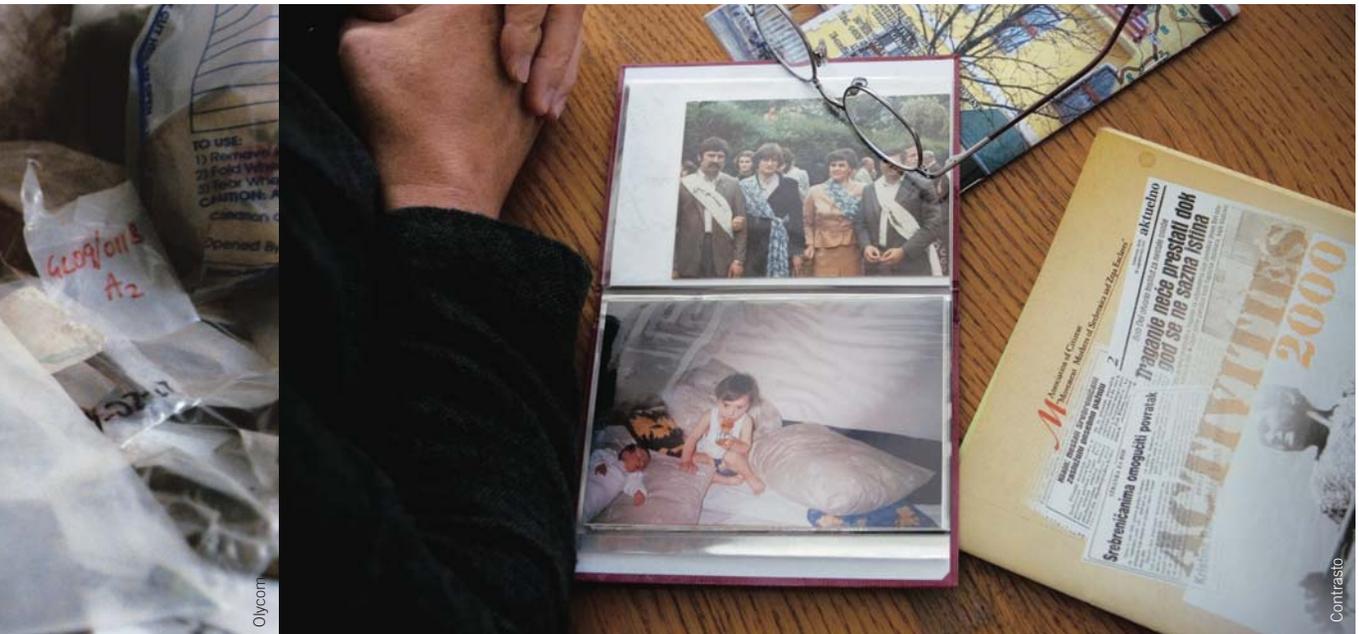
To vindicate the Serb part, the right thing to do would be identify the guilty and take them out of the country. Also for the Serbs it would be more correct; they would have nothing to do with the usual stereotype that sees them as criminals.

In your opinion the guilty are among all sides, Muslims, Croats and Serbs?

Yes, because hatred breeds hatred. I read about the Hague Tribunal where Muslims are also prosecuted. I think this is absolutely normal at a time when mass hatred takes hold; those who are criminals in peacetime especially exploit it as an outlet. There is a difference, though: in Bosnia the war was not started by the Muslims, who in a certain way defended themselves. Someone decided to start the whole thing. In this sense there are those who are guiltier than others.

Do you think that people with different religions who lived in Yugoslavia and people who have nothing to do with Yugoslavia know the truth?

Many people do not know. There are many events we do not know about that



_The Hague Tribunal has admitted that in Srebrenica there had been a genocide, but did not condemn Serbia. Some of the main culprits, such as Mladic and Karadzic, are still free

occurred in the Balkans from 1989 onwards. I often read revisionist stories about Srebrenica claiming that nothing happened and that these 8,000 people are not dead. There are witnesses though. Me, for starters, and people found in mass graves, so there is proof. But the whole truth, no, because if we had known before, no one would have started the horrific Balkan war. So the whole truth no, unfortunately each of us has his own truth and everyone feathers their own nest.

You have lived in Italy for 15 years, 12 lived in Bosnia. Where is your homeland?

In truth I feel Italian, but I am not comfortable with it in all honesty. I know I think like my Italian friends while in Bosnia they have other concerns and thoughts because it is another type of society.

Because you were a child in Bosnia and have grown up here?

Yes, exactly, also because I speak Italian fluently, while I am unable to use a sophisticated vocabulary in Bosnian. So it is

as if there is a gap: when I think about my childhood I feel completely Bosnian, when I think about recent years of my life I feel much more Italian. So I do not know if I am one or the other or just a hybrid.

You define yourself as “Bosnian” not “Yugoslavian” even if Yugoslavia was the country where you were born?

Yes, I see it even when I speak about the language. I do not call it Serbo-Croat anymore, I call it Bosnian. Perhaps because since I have been in Italy there is this meaning and even my residency permit states that I am Bosnian; I go to the Bosnian embassy for the passport. It has become a way of identifying yourself abroad.

Do you have the sensation when you mention Yugoslavia that it has an almost negative sound?

Yes, because you are expected to say former Yugoslavia and it sounds strange. I remember when I used to say that I was born in Yugoslavia, people commented “Ah yes, former Yugoslavia” and I would say “No, what does former Yugoslavia mean? I was born in Yugoslavia”. So these days, since Yugoslavia does not exist any more, I started saying “Bosnian” or “I speak Bosnian” rather than Serbo-Croat. It might be a question of habit: forced to hear myself called in a certain way, I started defining myself as Bosnian too.

I know that all your earnings from the book will be donated to associations not just in Bosnia, but also in Morocco. Why did you make this decision?

It works like this: my earnings go to Bosnia, the publisher decided to donate part of their earnings for literacy teaching in Morocco.

I decided in favour of Casa Pappagallo, which is a home for children who became orphans during the war and have become adults and cannot stay in the orphanage any longer. So, since fortunately I still care about old Yugoslavia's social welfare issues, I believe in equal opportunities and that everybody has great potential. Only opportunities are lacking for many. Since I had the opportunity to continue studying and to finish university in Italy, it seems correct that many other people – rather than finding themselves on the street at 18 – have the right to the same chance thanks to Casa Pappagallo, where laboratories will also be built, so that those who decide to continue studying have a place to sleep. If I had not had the chance to study, my life would very probably be different and maybe much less satisfying.

You wrote a book which is a kind of diary. How did it change from a diary into a book a publisher wanted to publish?

I began working on it for social reasons again. At the beginning it was a private outlet. I wrote my thoughts trying to free myself on paper. I do not remember when I began compiling it as a book, also inserting criticisms toward politicians, instead of towards the UN or people who went to Bosnia to help humanitarian organisations and act as peacekeepers. My disillusionment with politics and justice (a Bosnian journalist said that Bosnia is the "cemetery of the bureaucrats" and it is true: it is full of people looking for a role in Bosnia because it is easier than looking for a role in a developed country), re-awakened my anger because it seems that this war was instrumental for the purposes of other States. Also justice seemed to be exploited. Just to give an example, the two Most Wanted, Mladic and Karadzic, are still free, relaxed and blessed, never found and I do not think

they ever will be. All these things made me think about writing something people could read, without expecting to be believed, because I am not a historiographer and I do not want to write a history book. I wrote my story; this is what I experienced and what I thought.

Also Predrag Matvejevic has a role in your "adventure"; how did you contact him and the publisher?

I began doing my university thesis and I needed documents which concerned the Croatian press. I did not know who to turn to. One day when surfing the net, I found the email address of Professor Matvejevic at La Sapienza University. So I did some research on him and decided to email him. And it all went from there, I asked him if he could help me in some way to track down some material and we kept in touch also for the thesis. When I wrote the book I sent it to him. He read and liked it and decided to take care of the preface. I met the publisher through a theatre actress.

Predrag Matvejevic is a Croat, you are a Muslim, I am personally not surprised by this co-operation, as many things which concerned populations which were once together do not surprise me. But this may in some way surprise those, as we said, who do not understand Yugoslavia.

I imagine that it might be surprising for people. I speak quite badly of Croatia but not in a rhetorical sense. I tell the events that happened to me in the refugee camp in Croatia or maybe at school. For example I really wanted to go to school in Croatia. I went for a week in hiding. I was found and expelled for not being catholic or Croatian. I did not know how Predrag would react, I said: "I do not know, perhaps he will be upset that I am telling these things". However, for him these were situations that I had experienced and he was ashamed of the fact that they had happened in a country that was his and that was once *ours*. In Italy there is an association for young Bosnians and the chairman is a young man from a mixed marriage, half Serb, half Croat and it seems completely normal to work with the Bosnian association and all the various religions, there is nothing strange about it.

How do you see your future?

I live in Italy. I might stay for a while even though it is a country that does not offer great opportunities to young people and this saddens me. I think things would be much better if young people had a little more power. Everything is precarious here, obviously things are much worse in Bosnia... I do not know.

The last question is linked to the decision of the Hague Tribunal to admit that Srebrenica was genocide, without condemning Serbia. How do you feel about this?

I expected it since it is the first time a country, a state and a government are prosecuted. Therefore I imagine that there would have been political consequences, even serious, if Serbia had been found guilty.

In your opinion, is it possible to speak about an entirely guilty country? Should we speak about a government or only certain people?

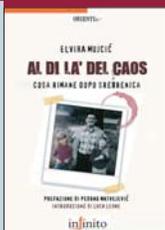
The Serb government 1992 – 1995 was prosecuted, including Milosevic, not today's government and not the people.

Yes, but the two things are connected. If you prosecute a State it is as if you prosecute the people, who must then live with this accusation of belonging to a country that was condemned for a serious crime. They now fear the Serbs from the Republic of Srpska since Serbia was not condemned. In reality all the blame will**fall on them because, at this point, it is believed that the Serbs in Bosnia had a part in all of this...**

In any case I know that the army, which at that time was the Yugoslav army, was found to have besieged Sarajevo. There is also another episode: before the war around Sarajevo there were tanks and someone in the Bosnian government had asked what was happening. They were told that it was the Yugoslav army, there to defend them. But then, around 10 April, the Yugoslav army said it had different orders and was no longer serving all of Yugoslavia, only Serbia. Therefore I do not think that only the Serbs of Bosnia are guilty, and if the Republic of Srpska was the only one blamed, it would be only part of the blame.

If the book were published in Serbia, would you go and present it?

Of course, absolutely. I made the first presentation a few months ago. I had a web link and one of my Serbian friends from Belgrade living in Rome was one of the first people who connected to watch me. I happily held my presentation, she was also happy, without denying she was a Serb. She listened to my opinions and what I had to say. She would surely have other things to say, because her story is different since she comes from Belgrade. She experienced another story, not Bosnia's. I would have no problem if it was ever published in Serbia. I would happily go and listen and discuss it with other people because we are only speaking, because I hope my generation can speak without shouting or resorting to other means.

**Who is Elvira Mujčić?**

Elvira Mujčić has lived in Italy for 15 years. She was born in 1980 in Loznica, Serbia. She lived, in Srebrenica, until the age of 12, when the war forced her to flee to Croatia together with her mother and two brothers. Her father stayed in Srebrenica. He has been missing since 1995 with another 8,000

men who were probably victims of genocide. After a year in a refugee camp in Croatia, Elvira came to Italy in August of 1993 thanks to a humanitarian project. She lived in the province of Brescia for five years where she attended a linguistic high school and graduated in Foreign Languages and Literatures at Cattolica University in Milan. She now lives in Rome. *Al di là del Caos* (Beyond the Chaos) is her first book.