

IVO ANDRIĆ

LETTER FROM 1920.

My dear old friend,

When we ran into one another in Slavonski Brod our conversation was disjointed and difficult. And even had we had a far better occasion and more time, I don't believe we would have understood one another and got to the bottom of everything. The unexpected meeting and abrupt departure made that quite impossible. I'm getting ready to leave Trieste where my mother is living. I'm going to Paris, where I have some relatives on my mother's side. If they'll allow me, as a foreigner, to practise medicine there, I'll stay in Paris; if not, I'm truly going to South America.

I don't believe that these few disjointed paragraphs I am writing in haste will be able to explain the matter fully, or justify in your eyes my "running away" from Bosnia. But I send them anyway, because I feel I owe you an answer, and remembering our school-days. I don't want you to misunderstand me and see in me an ordinary Kraut and "carpetbagger" who lightly leaves the country he was born in, the moment she is beginning a free life and needs every ounce of her strength.

But let me come straight to the point. Bosnia is a wonderful country, fascinating, with nothing ordinary in the habitat or people. And just there are mineral riches under the earth in Bosnia, so undoubtedly are Bosnians rich in hidden moral values, which are more rarely found in their compatriots in other Yugoslav lands. But, you see, there's one thing that the people of Bosnia, at least people of your kind, must realise and never lose sight of- Bosnia is a country of hatred and fear.

But leaving fear aside, which is only a correlative of hatred, the natural result of it, let us talk about hatred. Yes, about hatred. And instinctively you recoil and protest when you hear that word (I saw it that night at the station), just as every one of you refuses to hear, grasp, and understand it. But it is precisely this that needs to be recognised, confirmed, and analysed. And the real harm lies in the fact that no one either wants or knows how to do it. For the fatal characteristic of this hatred is that the Bosnian man is unaware of the hatred that lives in him, shrinks from analysing it and - hates everyone who tries to do so. And yet it's a fact that in Bosnia and Herzegovina there are more people ready in fits of this subconscious hatred to kill and be killed, for different reasons, and under different pretexts, than in other much bigger Slav and non-Slav lands.

I know that hatred, like anger, has its function in the development of society, because hatred gives strength, and anger provokes action. I know that there are ancient and deeply rooted injustices and abuses which only torrents of hatred and anger can uproot and wash away. And when these torrents dwindle and dry up, room for freedom remains, for the creation of a better life.

The people living at the time see the hatred and anger far better, because they are the sufferers by them, but their descendants see only the fruits of this strength and action. That I know well. But what I have seen in Bosnia - that is something different. It is hatred but not limited just to a moment in the course of social change, or an inevitable part of the historical process;

rather, it is hatred acting as an independent force, as an independent force as an end in itself. Hatred which sets man against man and casts both alike into misery and misfortune, on drives both opponents to the grave; hatred like a cancer in an organism, consuming and eating up everything around it, only to die itself at the last; because this kind of hatred, like a flame, has neither one constant form, nor a life of its own: it is simply the agent of the instinct of destruction or self destruction. It exists only in this form, and only until its task of total destruction has been completed. Yes, Bosnia is a country of hatred.

That is Bosnia. And by strange contrast, which in fact isn't so strange, and could perhaps be easily explained by careful analysis, it can also be said that there are a few countries with such firm belief, elevated strength of character, so much tenderness and loving passion, such depth of feeling, of loyalty and unshakeable devotion, or with such a thirst for justice. But in secret depths underneath all this hide burning hatreds, entire hurricanes of tethered and compressed hatreds maturing and awaiting their hour.

The relationship between your loves and your hatred is the same as between your high mountains and the invisible geological strata underlying them, a thousand times larger and heavier. And thus you are condemned to live on deep layers of explosive which are lit from time to time by the very sparks of your loves and your fiery and violent emotion. Perhaps your greatest misfortune is precisely that you do not suspect just how much hatred there is in your loves and passions, traditions and pieties. And just as, under the influence of atmospheric moisture and warmth, the earth on which we live passes into our bodies and gives them colour and form, determining the character and direction of our way of life and our actions - so does the strong, underground and invisible hatred on which Bosnia man lives, imperceptibly and indirectly enter into all his actions, even the best of them. Vice gives to hatred everywhere in the world, because it consumes and does not create, destroys, and does not build; but in countries like Bosnia, virtue itself often speaks and acts through hatred. With you, ascetics derive no love from their asceticism, but hatred for the voluptuary instead., abstainers hate those who drink, and drunkards feel a murderous hatred for the whole world.

Those who do believe and love feel a mortal hatred for those who don't, or those who believe and love differently. And unhappily, the chief part of their belief and love is often consumed in this hatred. (The most evil and sinister-looking faces can be met in greatest numbers at places of worship - monasteries, and dervish tekkes.) Those who oppress and exploit the economically weaker do it with hatred into the bargain, which makes that exploitation a hundred times harder and uglier; while those who bear these injustices dream of justice and reprisal, but as some explosion of vengeance which, if it were realised according to their ideas, would performe be so complete that it would blow to pieces the oppressed along with the hated oppressors.

You Bosnians have, for the most part, got used to keeping all the strength of your hatred for that which is closest to you. Your holy of holiest is, as a rule, three hundred rivers and mountains away, but the objects of your repulsion and hatred are right beside you, in the same town, often on the other side of your courtyard wall. So your love remains inert, but your hatred is easily spurred into action. And you love your homeland, you passionately love it, but in three or four different ways which are mutually exclusive, often come to blows, and hate each other to death.

In some Maupassant story there is a Dionysiac description of spring which ends with the remark that on such days, there should be a warning posted on every corner: "Citizens! This is

spring-beware of love!" Perhaps in Bosnia men should be warned at every step in their every thought and their every feeling, even the most elevated, to be beware of hatred - of innate, unconscious, endemic hatred. Because this poor, backward country, in which four different faiths live cheek by jowl, needs four times as much love, mutual understanding and tolerance as other countries.

But in Bosnia, on the contrary, lack of understanding, periodically spilling over into open hatred, is the general characteristic of its people. The rifts between the different faiths are so deep that hatred alone can sometimes succeed in crossing them. I know that you could argue, and with sufficient reason, that a certain amount of progress can be seen in this direction., that the ideas of the nineteenth century have done their work here too, and after liberation and unification all this will go much better and faster. I'm afraid that this is not quite so. (In these past few months I think I have had a good view of the real relationships between people of different faiths and nationalities in Sarajevo!) On every occasion you will be told, and wherever you go you will read, "Love your brother, though his religion is other", "It's not the cross that marks the Slav", "Respect others' ways and take pride in your own", "Total national solidarity recognises no religious or ethnic differences".

But from time immemorial in Bosnian urban life there has been plenty of counterfeit courtesy, the wise deception of oneself and others by resounding words and empty ceremonies. That conceals the hatred up to a point, but doesn't get rid of it or thwart its growth. I'm afraid that in these circles, under the cover of all these contemporary maxims, old instincts and Cainlike plans may only be slumbering, and will live on until the foundations of material and spiritual life in Bosnia are altogether changed. And when will that time come, and who will have the strength to carry it out? it will come one day, that I do believe; but what I've seen in Bosnia does not indicate that things are advancing along that path at present. On the contrary.

I have thought this over and over, especially in the last few months, when I was still struggling against my decision to leave Bosnia for ever. Of course a man obsessed with such thoughts cannot sleep well, and I would lie in front of an open window in the room where I was born, while the sound of the Miljacka alternated with the rustling of the leaves in the early autumn wind.

Whoever lies awake at night in Sarajevo hears the voices of the Sarajevo night. The clock on the Catholic cathedral strikes the hour with weighty confidence: 2 AM. More than a minute passes (to be exact, seventy-five seconds - I counted) and only then with a rather weaker, but piercing sound does the Orthodox church announce the hour, and chime its own 2 AM. A moment after it the tower clock on the Beys' mosque strikes the hour in a hoarse, faraway voice, and that strikes 11, the ghostly Turkish hour, by the strange calculation of distant and alien parts of the world. The Jews have no clock to sound their hour, so God alone knows what time it is for them by the Sephardic reckoning or the Ashkenazy.

Thus at night, while everyone is sleeping, division keeps vigil in the counting of the late, small hours, and separates these sleeping people who, awake, rejoice and mourn, feast and fast by four different and antagonistic calendars, and send all their prayers and wishes to one heaven in four different ecclesiastical languages. And this difference, sometimes visible and open, sometimes invisible and hidden, is always similar to hatred, and often completely identical with it. This uniquely Bosnian hatred should be studied and eradicated like some pernicious, deeply-rooted disease.

Foreign scholars should come to Bosnia to study hatred, were only recognised as a separate, classified subject of study, as leprosy is. I considered whether I should devote myself to the

study of this hatred and, by analysing it and bringing it to the of day, make my contribution to its destruction. Perhaps I was in duty bound to try, since, although a foreigner by birth, it was in Bosnia I first "saw the light of day", as they say. But after my first attempts and much reflection, I realised I had neither the strength nor the ability to do it. I would be required to take sides, to hate and be hated; and that I neither wanted nor was able to do. Perhaps, if it had to be, I could have consented to fall a victim to hatred; but to live in hatred and with hatred, to be a part of it- that I can not do.

And in country like present-day Bosnia, the man who does not know how to hate or, what is still better and harder, consciously does not want to hate, is always something of a foreigner, and freak, often a martyr. That holds true for all you who are born in Bosnia, and even more so for a newcomer. And so on one of those autumn nights listening to the strange chimes of the various and many-voiced Sarajevo towers, I concluded that I could not stay in Bosnia, my second home land, and did not have to. I'm not so naive as to look for any town in the world that has no hatred. No, I only need a place where I shall be able to live and work. Here, I would not be able to. You may now repeat your remark about my running away from Bosnia with mockery, perhaps even with contempt. This letter of mine won't have the power to explain and justify my action to you, but it appears that there are occasions in life when the ancient Latin maxim *non est salus nisi in fuga* holds true. I beg you to believe one thing only: I am not running away from my duty as a man, but only attempting to perform it more completely, without hindrance. I wish you and our Bosnia the best of luck in its independent life in the new state.

Yours, M.L.

Not so much the description of Sarajevo, but the rationalisation for emigration, made a particular impression on me because at the time I first read it I was personally wrestling with the question of whether I would return to Northern Ireland after working in Bosnia. I had invested a great deal of my own time and intellectual capital in my political work with the Alliance Party, and I do love the place in general; and, as with Andrić's Bosnia of 1920, big political changes which would certainly open up many new possibilities were on the way (this was in 1997). But I felt increasingly that I couldn't go back, that having dipped my toes in the river of international politics I couldn't returned a life of fighting occasionally successful elections in Newtownabbey, leavened by the odd foreign trip; I wanted something a bit more substantial. Yet this feeling did feel like a sort of betrayal, and Andrić's story crystallised it for me. So it was an important point in the thought processes that led me to where I am today.

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