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Where the World War Began

Joseph Roth

The Great War began in Sarajevo, on a hot summer day in 1914. It was a Sunday; I was a student. In the afternoon a girl came by, in pigtails as was the custom in those days. She held a large yellow straw hat in her hand. The hat was like summer: it reminded one of hay, crickets, and poppies. In the straw hat lay a telegram, the first “special edition” that I had ever seen. It was crumpled up, terrifying, a bolt of lightning on paper. “Know what?” the girl said. “They shot the heir to the throne. My daddy, he came right home from the coffee house. We won’t be staying here, you know?”

I couldn’t summon the seriousness of that father who’d skedaddled straight home from the coffee house. We were riding along a tramway, and outside there was a path with jasmine that the streetcar was brushing against. The trees stood right by the tracks. One rode along—kling, klang—and it was a kind of sleigh ride for summer days. The girl was light blue, soft, standing close, with cool breath, a morning in the afternoon. She had brought me the news from Sarajevo—and that name hovered over her, composed of dark red smoke, like a fire above the head of an unsuspecting child.

A year and a half later—how durable was the love dating from times of peace!—there she stood in Freight Yard II. Now even she stood in the midst of that cloud of smoke. Music blared incessantly, the train cars screeched, locomotives whistled, diminutive freezing women hung like withered wreaths on green-clad men, and the new uniforms smelled of their factory finish. We were a company on the move. Destination: obscure. Hunch: Serbia. We were probably both thinking of that Sunday, the “special edition” wire, Sarajevo. Her father never went to the café anymore; he was already lying in a mass grave.

Today, thirteen years after the first shot, I am seeing Sarajevo. Innocent city, laden with curses! It’s still standing! Melancholy sheath for the most frightful catastrophes. It has not budged an inch! No rain of fire fell, the houses are intact, and girls are walking home after school, although pigtails are no longer the fashion. It’s one o’clock in the afternoon. The sky is made of blue satin. The train station where the archduke had arrived, death hard on his heels, stands a long way from downtown. To the left, leading to the city, is a wide, dusty road, partly covered with asphalt and partly with gravel. Trees—with thick foliage, dark and dusty—are scattered irregularly along the edge of the road; they are remnants of a time in which the street was still a proper parkway. We are seated in a roomy car sent by the hotel. We ride through the streets, along the river bank—there, on the corner, is where the world war began. Nothing has changed. I look for traces of blood. They have been washed away. Thirteen years, countless rains, and millions of people have wiped away the blood.

The young people are coming out of the school-buildings; do they study the world war there?

The main street is very quiet. At its upper end a small Turkish cemetery is located, flowers of stone in a little garden of the dead. At the lower end is the entrance to the oriental bazaar. More or less halfway in between stand two large hotels with coffee houses on their terraces, diagonally across from each other. The wind leafs through old newspapers like they were last year's foliage. Waiters stand expectantly in the doorways, more as tokens than as functioning elements of the tourist trade. Old porters lean against walls, reminding one of peace, of the antebellum era. One of them has big sideburns, a ghost straight out of the Dual Monarchy. Very old men, most likely retired notaries, speak the bureaucratic German of Habsburg days. A bookseller offers paper and books and literary journals—but mostly just as representative samples. From him I pick up a Maupassant (although he also has Dekobra in stock) for a night in a train with no sleeping car. One word leads to another, and I learn that in Sarajevo the interest in literature has fallen off. There's only one teacher who subscribes to two literary weeklies. (What a comfort to know that such teachers exist!)

In the evening the beautiful women, stern in their propriety, take their strolls. This is the corso of a small city. The pretty women walk in twos or threes, like the residents of a boarding school. The men tip their hats low, constantly—these people know each other so well that I'm a stranger three times over. I am on the verge of going to see a movie, some period piece. In a historical costume drama the people don't know each other at all, and the scenes where they greet each other are left out; one is a stranger among strangers. I'm only nervous about the cruel, well-lighted intermissions. Reading newspapers would be salutary, too. You hear something about the world you just left—in order to see the world.

At ten o'clock everything is quiet. A restaurant shines in the distance, from a dark street. A family celebration beckons. On the other side of the river, in the Turkish town, the rows of houses ascend in terraces. Their lights quiver and dissolve in the fog, reminiscent of distant candles on the broad steps of a wide and lofty altar.

There is a theater in Sarajevo, and they're putting on an opera, and they have a museum, and there are hospitals, a town hall, policemen—everything that a city could need. A city! As if Sarajevo were a city like any other! As if the greatest of all wars had not started in Sarajevo! All the heroes' graves, all the mass burial sites, all the battlefields, all the poison gas, all the cripples, all the widows, all the unknown soldiers: this is where they started. I do not wish ruin upon this city—why should I? It has good, kind people, beautiful women, marvelously innocent children, pets that are happy to be alive, and butterflies resting on the stones in the Turkish cemetery. Nonetheless the war began here. And the world is wrecked. And Sarajevo stands. It shouldn't be a city. It should be a monument, to make everyone remember with horror.

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