

## A Rush into Perilous Night

*Ethan Gelber*

We paused at the edge of the Lendava Tunnel. It would be the longest one, almost 700m end to end. Several of the previous passages had been short enough that we never dipped fully into darkness. But this one had daunting span, a befuddling bend in the middle, and no lights at all, the bulbs and wiring having not been renewed since the cessation of hostilities. A pedal through this monster would be a rush into perilous night. Although traffic was only sporadic, daring it not to rage through the gloom while we were snared and invisible within was too much of a gamble.

It was a rainy spring day in 1998 in Bosnia-Herzegovina and we were cycling down towards the Dalmatian coast, returning from a visit to Sarajevo as part of an educational bicycle expedition. All morning we had coasted through an eerie hush, beneath the cloud-shrouded, weather-rutted, towering and majestic walls of two karst massifs, the Vrsnica and Prenj mountains, split by the unruly Neretva River. The landscape was truly spectacular, serenely at odds with the remnants of the recent human tragedy it had witnessed – ruined cadavers of buildings, rare, battered vehicles (often armoured personnel carriers or military jeeps), occasional tentative signs of the kind of life that could one day return (shuttered roadside grilled-lamb restaurants, dented food kiosks at abandoned panoramic rest areas).

We had already been travelling, mostly on two wheels, for more than six months, tracing the shores of the Mediterranean Sea counter-

clockwise from Morocco across parts of North Africa, through the Middle East and Turkey, and into Eastern Europe. We had been through so much: alternately iced and singed by the elements, chastened by winds and fear and despair, touched by generosity and indigence, and buoyed by kindness. But not until that pause before the tunnel mouth on a desolate stretch of war-ravaged Herzegovinian road between Jablanica and Mostar, flanked by the raucous, opaque-turquoise Neretva, did I feel momentarily lost. Not off course, but marooned.

There is nothing uplifting about a war zone, perhaps even less so once a conflict has ended. Roads and bridges scarred by mortars; homes and businesses thrashed and pocked by artillery; lawns uprooted by tank tracks and heavy ordnance; once-colourful scraps of clothing and household goods sundered and muddied; and, more haunting than anything, the vacant faces of the living, pale and pained death masks more unnerving than the shattered features of the dead – everything screams of forced dislocation and destruction.

No, there is nothing cheerful about a war zone. And yet, on more than one occasion, I have found myself gazing through blast holes at shrapnel-strafed walls, trying to imagine the happiness of the innocent family for which the walls had once provided shelter, until caught in crossfire. I have stilled my breathing to wonder at the morbid silence. To the residents of a quiet rural community, the silence had probably been a boon. Now emptiness and loss have turned the

silence sinister and hollow. I have sniffed the exploded soil, searching beneath the saltpetre and char for the satisfying and pungent earthy redolence of natural decay.

This is what had happened in the Balkans. In town after town, war had chased ambulant life out of Neretva River valley. Its aftermath left me feeling incongruous. What is to become of a little abandoned village, I asked, after its name has been swept away by the currents of violence, after it is deserted by humanity? A sense of devastation had redoubled as I wandered about and sought out (or had been found by) the survivors – unaffected townsfolk, artisans with calloused hands, farmers and anglers with a crust of bread or drop of whiskey to share, innocently over-inquisitive children. What goes on inside the heads of these victims of the incomprehensible battles brought to them?

A honk snapped me out of my reverie. My attention had been wandering, divided between the grand pageantry of the natural arena and the tiny, tainted traces of the vanished people. I had begun to long for a return to a place where

the juxtaposition was less brutal. Where I, a lonely cyclist, wouldn't feel so absurd. I longed for a place, and for a future to this place, where people's faces would bring just as much grounding radiance to a cloudless afternoon as the light glinting off the water running through it.

Another honk. A bus had eased its pace behind us and was flashing its headlights. The driver, a sallow, disembodied visage blurred between sweeps of ineffective windshield wipers, motioned to the road in front of him. He would usher us through the tunnel, protect us from the pitfalls of obscurity, the threats of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and our own trapped thoughts.

There really is nothing heartening about a war zone, except the people who show hints of the gentle monotony, the humanity, the peace that will follow.

*Ethan Gelber, never unhappily lost, has rolled on two wheels in 40 countries on five continents, including a circumnavigation of the Mediterranean Sea by bike.*

PREVIOUS: The Bosnian War ended in 1995 and in many parts of the countryside both the land and the shells of partially destroyed buildings are still littered with landmines.

OPPOSITE: Following the wilful destruction of the Old Bridge of Mostar, the international community rallied to build a replica using stones from the earlier construction.