

Hana Petric: Life Story

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I

Nobody has the will to survive like a human being. When found in a danger people use all their energy and mind to save life. Scientists are constantly amazed at how an individual can survive in mountains, deserts, and forests, but especially in a war. It looks like that fear recognizes no fear.

A 24-years old Slovenian reporter Hana Petric talked to the soldier at Kosevo Hospital who jumped with his comrades from 30 meters high cliff into the woods running from the enemy. For most of them it was the last thing they have done. Yet another attempt by Bosnian army to regain the control over mountain Trebevic ended in blood. Entrenched troops rejected the assault and stormed the attackers. That day one man survived manhunt and he is now resting in a hospital in Bosnia's capitol Sarajevo. Bosnians dominate the city and the country. This young soldier sees his broken legs as God's blessing compared to being captured by Serbs. Rebellion Serbs took over control of the mountain in 1992 when the war broke out and didn't let it go since. It is the second year of Sarajevo siege. Serb's guns kill everybody moving if noticed behind burnt cars and sand bags that provide a protection for the citizens. Government's units can't break the siege as rebels control hills and mountains around the city. Citizens are held hostage to Serbian politics targeted to set up ethically pure territories in Balkans.

Hana Petric writes for the Mladina magazine. As a student at the Political Science Faculty in Ljubljana she witnesses the war for independence. Her country Slovenia managed to abandon Yugoslavia with minimal casualties.

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Outside, at the hillsides of the city, sounds of war dominated. Because of a smoke it come into view like a morning mist although it was a noon. Petric decides to visit troops first thing in the morning at the slopes of Trebevic. The 1st Mountain Brigade held position few kilometers from the downtown in a steep side of the mountain. In days without combat activities soldiers look like a group of men at the holiday. Chess and play-cards are the most popular soldier's games. A soldier's meal always is a topic. Today, a meat can of questionable quality is shared by dozen. Local herbs found in surrounding of trench make the meal more eatable. Skinny cook gives his best to prepare the meal, which boils in a big metal bucket. Meat and rice with herbs smells good as Petric prepares to lunch with boys deep in a trench, safe from bombs. A meal brings back all good memories when these guys enjoyed their picnics in near by. Roasted lamb represents the favorite memory and the biggest wish in this flashback. Their thoughts move from desire to anger. The soldiers talk about smugglers inevitable for conflict areas. The food smuggling is blooming in the city while these hungry guys risk their lives in muddy trenches, armed with thirty bullets in the magazine. Petric feels sorry for them because of situation they were in but also likes them as they strongly defend their families and homes. Fight to protect their families represents their ideology, their faith and their strength.

Small photo camera witnesses brothers in arms smiling for the readers and talking about the war in its Bosnian humorous way. Petric laughed with them absent minded about the menace hidden just some fifty feet's away. She wanted to see the enemy on that peaceful day. Peeking from the top of the trench seemed like a good idea. A gunshot breached the silence. Petric felt down quietly. The soldiers saw her right eye smashed in blood with the exit wound at the back of the head. Before losing consciousness, Petric caught one of them saying: "She must be dead."

Outside of the main Sarajevo hospital a car stops abruptly. The sound of breaks draws attention of the medical staff who smoked cigarettes outdoors. A man in the camouflage uniform comes out of the car carrying a young woman with bloody bandage over her head. The soldier screams while walking toward the entrance: "Sniper shot her in the head, but she's still alive". From opposite direction, joining him with the trolleys, a nurse asks about her identity. "She is Slovenian journalist. Her name is Hana." Soldier places lifeless body on the trolleys bouncing on the broken road.

They disappeared in the dark hospital hallway making the car engine the only sound outside.



Hana Petric was a victim of a different war from the one she personally knew. The conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina was more vicious than in Slovenia. Big cities are bombarded night and day. Eastern part of the country is raped, killed, burnt. Running through forests, thousands of refugees are looking for safety in the capital Sarajevo. The local schools became refugee shelters. The sound of happy school kids was replaced with crying of hungry babies. Hallways are packed. Classrooms became apartments for up to ten families where books were used for heating and preparing meals. Running for a story she was seen as an enemy for the other side. It was not as same as fights between football fans where nobody cares about a reporter. Here, she witnessed the crimes. But she wasn't alone. Hundreds of international correspondents covered the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Fearless reporting and traveling where another civilian wouldn't created a bond of brothers among war correspondents. If someone leaves the country others wave him: "See you in another war".

A job took Petric to Kosevo hospital more often than she would like. Inside, disoriented people flooded the corridors. Hospital staff shouts at each other looking for a way to help everyone in the need. It mixes with scaring screams of wounded men and a silent pray of their family members leaned on bloody walls. Being coolheaded in such circumstances terrified Hana. Other people's pain was just a good story for her. "Doctor, how many dead people have you counted today?" she asked. "Well it is about the daily average – twelve", doctor said and left for the surgery room. As she walked in the direction of way out she saw a one-leg boy standing at the door facing inside holding on two sticks. His crippled shadow covering almost the whole hallway marked the exit. Due to strong back light she couldn't see his face until they almost touched at the door. "How are you doing?", Petric started a conversation. He must have been 15 years old she guessed. She felt sorry for him thinking that he won't have a chance to play sports again as he lost most of his left leg. "I feel sorry for families of these dead soldiers," he whispered, "my mom still got me." Petric gently squeezed his shoulder and left the scene ob-

viously disturbed. She wanted to understand how a boy, with disabled life, can be so positive and calm.

IV

Now, she was back to the same corridor traveling on the trolley to the surgery room. After a week Petric became conscious. She sees the ceiling with her left eye. The sun entering the room creates a square at the white background. The blurred picture follows horrible pain in the head. Petric tries to scream, to release the pain, but hears nothing. Overtaken by the pain and panic, she questions: “What happened?” Thousands of questions bombarded her mind, but she was helpless to ask for the answer. Her body refused to obey commands: arms stayed under the sheet, head deep in a pillow, mouth speechless. That evening, the doctor provides her with explanations of her condition. She lost her right eye. Brain has been damaged so much that she lost an ability to speak. She needs to be transferred from Sarajevo as soon as possible in order to receive proper medical care to be able to improve her condition, which could be worsening. The doctor ends: “But you are still alive”. She was surprised with the comment as she realized that her life has been ruined. “What kind of life I have without ability to speak?” Petric questioned in despair, and increased her agony concluding, “I’m half blind”.

A woman who hated to be hemmed in, who had gone where she wanted when she wanted, Petric was medicated and placed under constant observation, her nights filled with the screams and rants of other patients. Lonely, Petric remembered all news reports she did from Sarajevo. Recalling her memory she pictures the situation in the city in spring 1992 when she arrived looking to prove herself as fearless war reporter. The quickest way to win respect among colleagues is to be where is the news. The Yugoslavia was falling apart and international media attention was on Bosnia and Herzegovina as the only enclave of multicultural society in this part of Balkans.

The United Nations is trying to bring humanitarian convoys with food and medicines to the city but Serbs are squeezing them at the checkpoints. Delivered help was not enough to satisfy all citizens. Surprisingly for Petric, citizens of Sarajevo proudly bear the war. Moreover in old cloths they walked tall. With limited water supplies and cosmetics gone the women demonstrated beauty totally unknown to the war. Petric loved them because of this. They represented all she wanted to be – free from Western culture important things, simply enjoying her life. One of the best reports Petric sent was on the beauty contest where the Miss of the City under the Siege was promoted. She witnessed natural beauty free of modern cosmetic and stylish dresses. Fashion show beats war. Clothes were hand-made deep in basements of war-torn buildings. Petric felt sorry for them because of their modest appearance but admired them for the courage to confront the reality. Today, stuck to a bed, she was horrified at her own looks.

V

But, in every pain there is moment when a person discovers being not lonely in its misery. War correspondents who used to share notes with Hana Petric helped her to raise money for her operations abroad. With the money she managed to find doctors to reconstruct her face. Petric spent whole year in the United States recovering. It took her eight months to learn how to speak again. Rehabilitation was a painful experience for her. She

missed home, friends and most of all – Sarajevo. That city caused the greatest pain that she suffered and all joy she experienced. The ultimate pleasure in life of every journalist is producing story, which triggers public debate. There is no greater satisfaction when you story leads to positive action. Petric found herself useless in the US and determined to return to the city that she couldn't completely understand but pulled her as the magnet and couldn't let her go.

But before that she needed to return to the homeland. Back in the Mladina she felt different approach but her colleagues. They were too kind to her. One thing she couldn't bear is to be seen based on the outside appearance rather than personality that she possesses. She knew that back in Sarajevo people don't judge others by their face as they all were in the same box – standing in the line to be executed. Making it through the day is what matters. She needed not to be noticed as different. She wanted to be on the same frequency with the group. Sarajevo makes life worth living.

It has been more than a year since Petric left Sarajevo thinking that her life is lost. As she looks through the small plane window she sees familiar ground. A place she embraces as safe haven. That sunny autumn, the UN plane landed at the airport welcomed with ceremonial machinegun music typical for this area. Even pilots pay no attention to few bullets bouncing off the damaged airfield. Old friend returns to witness another attempt of the city to break the chains that kept him imprisoned for more than three years. Heart beating Petric tried to spot new scars at local buildings as she walks between the soldiers guarding the airport hoping to recognize some of the press people buzzing around.

Half an hour later she stood in front of Holiday Inn Hotel where the UN Peace Troops organized the Press Center. Emotionally at the edge, waiting to see familiar faces, Petric walked in. Feelings erupt in the hall when war correspondents met again. In matter of hours she became the news story. It helped her to free all emotions deeply hidden inside for years, healing the soul at the same time and making the return a sensible choice.

The Slobodna Bosna reporter Edin Saric came to the hotel in order to do an interview with Slovenian journalist who was badly injured in Sarajevo and returned again as journalist. The interview is conducted in the main hall. Weak, but hot coffee steaming from the cups provides aroma to the interview. An introduction is followed with exchange of cigarettes that is typical for print reporters, but this is not ordinary interview. They are about same age and similar affiliations. As he learns more about her the more she's glorified in his view. Saric tries to be funny as he wants her to like him and she knows the game. "Bosnians are charming people in its nature", she comments to herself, and proposes another meeting later in the week to discuss current political and military situation in the country. Occupied by the topic, the bomb explosion in the neighborhood passed unnoticed. Their laughter blows outside sounds.

The war nears its end. Serbian politics to conquer Balkan countries and to form alliance of Serbs territories failed. Pressured by the international community, financially exhausted warlords signed a peace agreement late that year in the US air base, some 10.000 miles away from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Hana and Edin jointly worked on citizen's reactions to the signing of the new peace agreement. It wasn't the first time that Saric was at her apartment. After filing reports, two journalists watched the CNN broad-

casts NATO's statement on deployment of troops on Bosnian terrain. Totally non-romantic moment became turning point for Petric as she kissed him for the first time. War reporting ends in Bosnia that evening opening a path for country's recovery.

Petric never assumed to find happiness in war-torn place. Personal and professional satisfaction doesn't come with the place but with people. Love, respect and understanding clears the way for ordinary problems making the life complete. "We chose no country but people who want to be old with. Who take us for what we are and not by our outside. Who possess the will to live life with me". Petric stated at the wedding, in 4th month of pregnancy, outside her new home in a peaceful city of Sarajevo.

End