

Echoes of War, Threads of Peace: Lessons from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Emory

Sabrina Lane

"Eastern Europe? Bosnia? For two years? Why would you want to live there?"

As a Jewish person, I'm often unsure how to answer this. During COVID, I found myself drawn to a region whose mere mention unsettled my family. I chose the United World College in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina—an international boarding school where 200 students from 70 countries converged. My great-grandfather had left Europe at 17; a century later, at the same age, I was returning. That first train ride from Sarajevo to Mostar captivated me: snow-capped peaks piercing the sky, deep blue water rushing through gorges. At Konjic, history came alive. Here, 80 years ago during the Battle of Neretva, Yugoslav partisans had severed rail lines to halt the Nazi advance. I was seeing history anew.

"Caj or Kafa?" Adna asks months later in her apartment. *"Kafa molim,"* I answer, as the call to prayer echoes and the Balkan sun streams through windows. Though we shared neither language, culture, nor religion, Adna had become family. Every day after school, we share coffee beneath the photo of her brother, lost to the wars of the 1990s. War's ugliness, once theoretical, became tangible in Mostar's bullet-scarred walls and modern swastikas defacing them. I found myself wondering: how did a multi-ethnic country like Yugoslavia descend to this? What drives people to engage in violence over their differences?

Two Junes ago, I found myself in war-time Ukraine. My father, a journalist, had work to do, and I had asked to join him to hear firsthand experiences of those cursed by war. As the air sirens wailed, Dad and I raced into the bunker beneath our hotel. This wasn't a test: we were in Lviv, Ukraine. After spending the year studying in a post-conflict country, I could now learn firsthand what people endure during active conflict.

These experiences with conflict and reconciliation led me to Emory University, where I would study History and Political Science. Learning from the past taught me to appreciate the present, and I began looking to the future to figure out ways to solve the question I had pondered long before. In Professor Payne's class, I learned about the history of war in Russia, and the mentality behind it. In Professor Rosenblatt's class, I learned more about my heritage of being Jewish and the realities of it in America.

However, my deepest learning came from the students themselves. In my first week at Emory, I met Val, a Ukrainian student from Odessa—the very city my great-grandfather had fled. Over late-night study sessions and dining hall meals, we shared our stories: my experiences in Lviv's bunkers and life in post-war Bosnia, and her family's ongoing struggles back home. Through Val's stories of Odessa, I found unexpected connections to my ancestors, while sharing my own culture with her.

This was just the beginning. Soon I found myself surrounded by a tapestry of perspectives—Lithuanian exchange students, Azerbaijani friends who'd lived abroad, and diverse voices from within the U.S. itself. My sophomore year roommates embodied this diversity: Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist, all under one roof. My friendship with Bineta particularly touched me. Though we were both from New York, our paths had never crossed until Emory. Her parents were from Senegal, and we bonded over missing places far from us. Despite our different faiths—she Muslim, I Jewish—she gave me a Star of David necklace for my birthday that I

treasure. In a world often torn by hatred, these connections across faiths and cultures became a source of healing.

A year after starting at Emory, I returned to Mostar, following my school's tradition. That first night back, we stayed up until dawn, talking endlessly. As the sunset painted the *Stari Most* in golden light and the green mountains embraced the city, I felt tears well up. I had missed this place deeply. Yet as I shared stories of my new friends at Emory, I realized something: my fear of not finding the same diverse perspectives I'd loved in Bosnia had been unfounded.

While I am still debating the answer to my questions about division, each connection I make brings me closer to understanding. My journey from that first Bosnian train ride to Emory's classrooms has shown me that history lives not just in textbooks, but in shared coffees, exchanged stories, and bridges built across divides. I carry with me Adna's warmth, the echo of air raid sirens, and the conviction that human connection is the first step toward creating a more just, and peaceful world.¹

¹ Chat GPT was used to edit grammatical mistakes.