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THE NEVER-ENDING SIEGE

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WHILE DRIVING THROUGH Sarajevo in the fall of 2002, I had the funny feeling that something was not quite right. By normal standards, this should have felt like a good day. I was visiting Sarajevo for the first time, I had tasted *chevapchichi*, and I had just concluded 5 days of executive education. However, something did not feel right.

As we headed to the airport, my driver, a local working for the British attachment to the United Nations in Sarajevo, announced that

we were approaching the Olympic Stadium. As we passed the stadium I asked, "Why are there so many crosses next to the stadium?" My driver then told me about some of the more intense fighting during the war. Citizens, scared for their lives, fled their homes and crowded into the stadium in hopes of surviving. As the casualties mounted, there was no place to put all the bodies. Those taking refuge in the stadium did the only thing they could do: They buried the dead in the football pitch beside the stadium. Now, as a daily reminder, the citizens of Sarajevo must view crosses instead of a sports competition on this football pitch.

On seeing the crosses, I could not stop comparing what I saw at the stadium with what I just experienced in the classroom. I had finished teaching negotiation and conflict resolution techniques at a successful pharmaceutical company. Similar to my experiences teaching at the Bled School of Management in Slovenia, the pharmaceutical professionals were hungry to learn about management thinking and research. So with the help of a translator, an undergraduate from a local university, I delivered my sessions.

The scene at the stadium evoked memories of a particular exercise I used. Participants were divided into teams, asked to complete a prenegotiation planning sheet, and then negotiated a settlement. The translator kindly remained in one of the breakout rooms with me and translated the small group discussion. I hoped that by observing one group, I could better facilitate the postnegotiation discussion.

I had taught this particular exercise many times and in several different countries (United States, Finland, Slovenia, and Germany, among others). I thought I knew what to expect but was surprised to see the participants in this particular small group begin what I perceived to be a shouting match. Five strong-willed executives sat around a table, arranged their case materials in front of them, and proceeded to debate the case in a very loud and heated manner. By American standards, they were shouting at one another. Periodically, the translator would update me on what was being discussed, but the shouting continued (and occasionally became more heated) for an entire hour. It stopped only when the CEO spoke up, and the shouting resumed as soon as he finished speaking. At the end of the hour, I stopped the group and, noticing they had written nothing on their worksheets, I asked about the outcome of their discussion. One

participant looked me directly in the eye and without apology said, “We are still trying to get our arms around the problem.”

At that moment I had no doubt I had entered a different culture.

The day continued, we completed the negotiation training, and I delivered a half-day session on conflict styles and resolution techniques. The gratitude at the end of my session was overwhelming. Participants quickly came to the front, shook my hand, and thanked me. Others took the time to say how appreciative they were to have this learning opportunity. Nobody before had ever taken the time to share such concepts and tools. Others even spoke quietly about the importance of negotiation and conflict management to their future.

For me, the trip to Sarajevo began as an opportunity to maximize the value of a journey to Central and Eastern Europe, see a new city, and perhaps learn something about the people and culture of Sarajevo. Certainly I was eager to taste *chevapchichi*. I never expected such a warm response.

After the handshakes and many goodbyes, my driver took me to the airport. It was during this drive that my uneasy feeling emerged, and I saw the graves next to the Olympic Stadium. Farther up the road, I saw a beautiful old home surrounded by temporary walls and large signs. “They must be restoring this beautiful old home after the war?” I asked. My driver explained that landmines were being removed from the property and cautioned me to always use the sidewalks in Sarajevo because landmines could be anywhere.

As we continued toward the airport, we reached a point where I had a nice view of the surrounding mountains. The Olympic Park was somewhere in those mountains, but it too was a minefield and not safe to visit. And then suddenly, I saw everything clearly. I knew the source of my uneasiness. I realized what was different.

On the mountainsides surrounding Sarajevo were many cemeteries. But these were not like the cemeteries we might expect. Most appeared as neat rectangles with a uniform color. Think about that for a moment: To create a cemetery that is a neat geometric shape, with no visible gaps between headstones, you would have to have many people die at once. In a land without war, people do not pass away in perfect sequential order, allowing one to create an orderly and filled cemetery. Also, think about headstones. When we visit our loved ones, do we not commonly see headstones of different styles and colors,

such as grieving families might choose over decades? In a land of peace, cemeteries grow unevenly over time, both in space and color.

Such was not the case here.

The good people of Sarajevo were reminded each day of their history. Nearly 10 years after the war, buildings were still scarred by bullets, landmines continued to litter the surrounding countryside, and structures remained as little more than bombed and burned-out skeletons along what was once the frontline. And, most strikingly for me, the beautiful hillsides around Sarajevo displayed cemeteries unlike any others I had seen: monochromatic, geometric reminders of war.

Somehow, my time with the pharmaceutical company seemed simultaneously both insignificant and important. Much had changed since the 1984 Winter Olympics.

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