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University of
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International Educator

The Newsletter of UNH Global Engagement

Fall 2013

RETURNING TO BOSNIA

A UNH STUDENT AND REFUGEE FROM THE BOSNIAN WAR REFLECTS ON SARAJEVO AS A UNIQUE PLACE OF TOLERANCE

Contributed by Jasmin Cesko '14 (Political Science and International Affairs)



Jasmin Cesko in Mostar, capital of Herzegovina, with Stari Most (Old Bridge) and the Neretva River in the background.

Jasmin's photo of this scene won first place in American Councils for International Education's Spring 2013

Outbound Photo Contest--[view here](#).

I knew that studying abroad in a foreign country was a requirement of the International Affairs dual major. This was an important decision and I thought about it carefully. I thought about various countries and cities and tried to imagine where it would be worthwhile to spend a semester of my college career. And then it occurred to me – there was no better place than Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, my birthplace. I was born in Sarajevo in 1991 and my family was forced to leave that same year because it became clear that war was imminent. For the next 5 years we moved from one town to the next, trying to outrun the advancing Serbian war machine. My earliest childhood memories are of huddling in bomb shelters in my mother's arms while my father was on the frontlines. My family returned to Sarajevo in 1996 after we were reunited following my father's release from a Serbian concentration camp where he was held for nearly a year. I lived in Sarajevo for the next 5 years until we immigrated to New Hampshire in 2001. Luckily I was able to visit Sarajevo every 2-3 years after I moved to America, but it was no longer the same. Sarajevo was undergoing a dramatic transformation. The war scars were disappearing and my childhood friends had all moved away. I had become an alien in my own city and this was becoming increasingly bothersome as the years passed. Going back to Sarajevo to live and learn was the perfect opportunity to remove the bitterness that had built up inside me.

During the process of identifying potential study abroad programs in Sarajevo, Professor Chris Reardon, my advisor, introduced me to the [David L. Boren Scholarship](#). The Boren Scholarship provides funding for language studies in regions critical to U.S. interests. The Bosnian language was on the list as one of the critical languages and I ended up applying and was awarded the Boren Scholarship to study abroad in Bosnia. Although I could speak Bosnian fluently (my parents always insisted that my siblings and I speak our native tongue at home to ensure that we would not forget it), I had never had the chance to learn proper writing and grammar. Receiving the Boren made this dream a reality. I was excited about the opportunity to return to Sarajevo to reside and study for four months. However, having the privilege to study abroad in Sarajevo was much more meaningful than that. This was a chance to reconnect with my culture and identity so that I would no longer feel like a foreigner in my native land. It was especially important for me to devote an abundance of my time for my extensive family that lives in Sarajevo and other parts of Bosnia.



The Sarajevo tunnel was dug in the basement of this family home that is now a museum; the sign reads 'Tunnel of Hope'

While I was in Sarajevo, I made it my mission to visit all of the city's historically and culturally significant landmarks. Upon arrival in Sarajevo, I made a list of all the sites that I wanted to visit and all of the things I wanted to accomplish. One of the advantages in Sarajevo is that many of these locations are concentrated in and around the city center, within walking distance of each other. I visited many museums where many of my curiosities about the history of Bosnia and Sarajevo were answered. I was very disappointed that I could not visit the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina because it was closed to the public due to the lack of funding by the national government. One of the most remarkable sites I visited was the Sarajevo Tunnel Museum. The 800-meter tunnel was secretly dug during the siege of Sarajevo to connect Bosnian-controlled territory to the airport, under UN control. The tunnel was Sarajevo's lifeline during the siege through which essential

food and medical supplies passed. I felt a sense of pride when I saw the name of my relatives on the plaque commemorating those who worked on its construction.

Sarajevo is often referred to as the "Jerusalem of Europe", and city dwellers are proud of their city's long tradition of tolerance and coexistence. Going to mosque for the Friday noon prayer was a special event because it is obligatory for all Muslim worshippers; even those who do not attend regularly turn out in large numbers on this day. I also visited the city's oldest Orthodox and Catholic churches. One of my friends also took me to Sarajevo's oldest synagogue and Holocaust museum, which I was unaware existed. Sarajevo is one of the rare places in the world where calls to prayer can simultaneously be heard from Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox houses of worship. In one instance, I remember sitting at a cafe, drinking coffee and enjoying kadayif, one of the most popular Bosnian desserts when I heard the call to prayer from a nearby mosque, followed by the sound of church bells across the street. At that moment it hit me, this is truly where East and West meet — I had never felt more proud to be a Sarajevan. One of my favorite quotes that Sarajevans say about their history is that "our greatest strength lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall." We are once again experiencing this poignant phenomenon.

For me, living in Sarajevo was a significant change of tempo. Life in Bosnia is slower than in New England. In the first few weeks, my friends noticed that I walked at a much faster pace and they constantly reminded me to walk slower, the phrase they used, crudely translated into English was: "slow down, and walk at the Sarajevo pace." I also learned how to properly drink and enjoy the dark and thick Bosnian coffee, served in traditional copper pots, and Bosnian Delight (similar to the more famous Turkish Delight). Drinking coffee in public is a daily leisure activity among Sarajevans and it usually lasts for hours. I learned to slowly sip the coffee and savor its taste. Sometimes I chose to drink coffee alone and reminisce about my experiences in Sarajevo. I would often take walks on the central boulevard, along the Miljacka River, marveling at the

surrounding architecture marking different periods in history: Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, communist and contemporary. I would then make my way to Old Town, the heart and soul of Sarajevo and hop on the tram and back to class. As the weeks quickly passed, I thought about the progress I had made in my Bosnian classes. I now had a more complete picture of the history of my country, my city, and of my people. I was reminded of how I had grown spiritually by frequently attending prayers. I reestablished connections with many family members and developed new friendships that I am certain will last a lifetime. I came to realize that I no longer felt like a tourist but rather like a native Sarajevan, something that I had lost leaving the city as a young boy.



Jasmin Cesko at the Kocatepe Mosque in Ankara, Turkey

It was very difficult when the time came to leave Sarajevo. Saying goodbye to family and friends was a tearful affair. I was on my way to Istanbul where I spent the entire summer interning at the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and teaching English. Although my emotional connection with Sarajevo is deep and irreplaceable, I realize that I cannot allow the feeling of nostalgia to impede my future academic and professional ambitions. My stay in Sarajevo was personally enriching and educationally beneficial. As a recipient of the Boren Scholarship, which made studying abroad in Sarajevo financially possible, I will be required to complete a one year service requirement at a U.S. federal agency, an experience that will be valuable for my future career goals. In Turkey, I also gained substantial insight in Turkish foreign relations with the U.S., the European Union, and Balkan countries. Achieving my language objectives in Bosnia and spending time in Turkey has inspired me to apply for the [Critical Language Scholarship](#) to start learning Turkish next summer. These experiences overseas have been instrumental in broadening my worldview and helping me understand complex intergovernmental relations as I work towards my goal of being a U.S. Foreign Service Officer.

For more information about fellowship opportunities and assistance in applying for them, please visit the [UNH Office of National Fellowships](#).

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