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PERSONAL RECOLLECTION OF A LABOR LEFT UNDONE

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Sarajevo 2001. December, near the end of Ramadan, near the end of Chanukah, approaching Christmas and a few of us, Jews, Muslims, and Christians were in the Aeroplan Restaurant debating how to continue our collaborations which had begun a few years previously. At that meeting we established the *International Summer School on Religion and Public Life (ISSRPL)* what became with time, and remains, *CEDAR-Communities Engaging with Religion and Difference*.

About four years earlier Rusmir Mahmutcehajic had invited me to Sarajevo to find out just who I was. A visiting American sociologist had given him my book on trust, and he realized that this was the most important component of any post-war social order in Bosnia-Herzegovina. He had invited me to Sarajevo to learn more on trust and how it could be promoted in society. That first meeting, back in the late 1990's became the basis of many joint projects and inter-commual activities.

I was fortunate enough to involve Prof. Mahmutcehajic in quite a few initiatives in Jerusalem with the Shalom Hartman Institute and he became a dear friend of the late Rabbi Professor, David Hartman. Rabbi Hartman and Professor Menachem Fisch (now emeritus), also of the Hartman Institute (and Tel Aviv University) invited Prof. Mahmutcehajic back to the Institute numerous times as well as other colleagues from Sarajevo (such as Asim Zubčević and Amra Hadžimuhamedović I believe). After Rabbi Hartman passed away those programs slowly ceased to operate but I know how important they were to all participants not least to Prof Mahmutcehajic and his wife Halida. The ability to visit the Dome of the Rock and Al Aksa were of course important moments of those "lost" times in Jerusalem.

Thinking back, a quarter of a century and more, those distant days of our collaboration seem almost a dream, a dream of hope, mutuality, and joint work toward understanding and sharing across what has

now become an unbridgeable chasm of peoples, religions, politics, and belongings. Together we were exploring different ways to approach the problem of communal differences with a vision of trying to create something that did not hitherto exist. In the following I will try to give a taste of those times, of our work and of the spirit of what we were attempting to accomplish.

For nearly a decade, I worked together with Prof. Mahmutcehajic in many many forums. Together with the late Professor Ivo Banach, Dr. Shlomo Fischer, and others in our circle we never ceased trying to open doors and make room of new understandings, perspectives, and judgements. Conferences in Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo, Italy, Israel and elsewhere were all part of an ongoing conversation on the sacred and the human and how to prevent those catastrophes that, tragically seem to define our world today. Indeed, I believe the last time I saw Professor Mahmutcehajic was at such an event in Kosovo in 2012.

In the course of our collaboration much was accomplished. Not only the multiple texts published by International Forum Bosnia, but the connection I managed to make between Prof. Mahmutcehajic and Fordham University Press, which then led to other American publishers and the expanding possibilities of publication of his work in English. Critical in this were the efforts of the late Fr. Burrell who was a strong supporter of Professor Mahmutcehajic. One such publication was the book, *Modest Claims: dialogues and essays on tolerance and tradition* published in 2004 by Notre Dame University Press and to which Prof. Mahmutcehajic contributed.

The more communal initiatives we worked on together in those years are in fact too many to name. Two that stand out as exceptional were, first: the development of curricula for tolerance from religious premises that was done both in Bosnia and in Israel by Professor Mahmutcehajic and Forum Bosnia and Dr. Shlomo Fischer and Yesodot respectively. Both projects included Jewish, Muslim, and Christian perspectives and the Israel project also included those of the Druze community.

To the best of my knowledge these curricula were actually put to use, though I do not know for how long – in Israel they continue to exist as part of the ongoing work of Yesodot in its education for democracy among religious students and teachers.

The second and very important project was an idea that I developed but which Rusmir Mahmutcehajic put in practice, organized, and oversaw. This was the mobilization of youth, Bosnian and foreign to rebuild some of the mosques in Stolac that had been purposely destroyed during the war. As I recall Prof. Mahmutcehajic managed to organize international scout teams to do this work which continued over several summers.

The idea here was when young people are working together long hours in the hot sun, working, eating, joking – but critically doing things together; then the discussion and disagreements over religion, politics, gender, whatever, will take on a very different tone than they usually do across a conference table. The very work and sharing, the joint overcoming of challenges will contribute to a more open perspective, a greater sensitivity and willingness to listen to the other and ability to step out of our own preconceived opinions, prejudices, and taken-for-granted assumptions. Whether this was indeed the case, I do not know as I was not privy to these events when they actually got off the ground.

Of course, the most important of our joint projects was the *International Summer School on Religion and Public Life*, conceived as noted in Sarajevo in 2001 and first implemented in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Montenegro in 2003. We organized another school in the Balkans in 2004, in Jerusalem in 2005 and in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Boston, Massachusetts in 2006. That was sadly the last school we organized together. Since those years the *ISSRPL* has grown, been transformed into *CEDAR*, widened its scope, developed programs in well over a dozen countries and established a permanent presence in universities and NGOs in Japan, Indonesia, Uganda, and Kenya.

Its inchoate beginnings have given birth to a well-developed, theoretically sophisticated, ongoing set of pedagogical principles focused no longer on religion alone, but on difference per se. These principles and practices have been adopted as components of degree granting programs in universities in Africa and Asia as well as among NGO activists and projects in those continents.

And though the project has grown, aged and expanded, is much more coherent and legible than it was in those early days; I persist in calling what we do "the summer school", even though it is not always done in the summer (in East Africa it is mostly organized in December) and even if many of the principal actors have changed (though not all). Primarily I guess my sticking to the old locution is because those early years, with dinner at 3:00 in the morning, with interminable bus rides

along dark treacherous roads, with little or no concern for personal needs and amenities (like bathroom breaks), those early days had some special magic to them. Those were generative times, of putting into practice a truly experimental, collaborative, and innovative vision that broke with past models and received opinions to explore new ways of "living together differently". Perhaps in fact my persistence in calling what we do a "school" is my notion of school as a place of deep personal and inter-personal learning and not simply an institution where lessons are given by "experts".

The exhilaration of starting something new and untried. The courage to make mistakes (and we made many), the thrill of learning anew what we thought we knew – about the other, about ourselves and about how we understand the other. There was a beautiful naiveté that characterized those early years. We were naive about social change, about the ability of people to change and of course about our capacities in fostering change. But this was in some way our strength (if also the reason behind many false starts).

I remember for example the first set of readings we compiled for the school. It weighed about 6 kilo and was about 30 centimeters thick. Good only for a doorstop. What hubris we had to think people would wade through all those readings. (Today no more than 100 pages, if that, for the whole 2-week school). The endless lectures – with no appreciation of all the many different ways people really begin to learn through theater, improvisation, working together, formal, and informal times to share personal stories and experiences. There was a steep learning curve in those years, but learn we did.

More significantly there were as well no small number of political pressures, from the US. State Department for example, in matters of funding and how, where and to whom funds could be allocated. (I was once called away from a vacation with my young daughter to take up a phone conversation with a State Department official on these matters). There were, I know, also more personal pressures on Prof. Mahmutcehajic from various Muslim governments seeking to influence him and his civic agendas.

And of course, the whole landscape (literally and metaphorically) was much different than today. I recall our trip to Trebinje and the monastery where the monks carried automatic weapons under their cassocks, the hidden rooms with one-way mirrors behind which Radovan Karadic had

been hiding. I remember too that as everyone entered the Church my wife remained outside. With her European-Jewish sensitivity she sensed that there was something deeply wrong, impure, and compromised on that ground.

It was in the same year that the whole ISSRPL group participated in some preliminary work of reconstruction – of churches and mosques and of a waqf in Stolac. This activity was to a great extent preliminary to the larger youth project discussed earlier. Stolac was then a very divided city with Moslems and Catholics keeping very much apart from one another, frequenting different cafes, different school schedules and, indeed, our group was subjected to some small degree of violence. My eldest daughter who had participated with others in restoration work at the waqf was almost run down on the road and Prof. Mahmutcehajic's house was broken into and desecrated. Those were difficult, tension filled days in Stolac, everyone on edge, the tensions in the town, refracted in the relations between fellows and organizers and the mistrust between the town inhabitants almost palpably felt by our fellows. The move on to Mostar came as a relief.

Below is a picture of two fellows: a Bulgarian theologian and a Serbian social worker in the 2006 program, engaged in reconstructing an Orthodox Church destroyed in Stolac during the war.



And here below, a young woman (my daughter actually) engaged in restoration work at the Waqf under the direction of an Italian master who oversaw all restoration work, making sure that the original recipes/components for dyes, paints, plaster and so on were used.



Of course, there were many other moments as well, much laughter and bringing together of different peoples, from different backgrounds, with different histories, commitments, definitions of home and moral understandings. Indeed, Professor Mahmutcehajic immediately understood and appreciated just how central this component of difference as a lived experience is to our program.

And we pursued this with a vengeance you may say. From the beginning we would bring both religious and secular Jews and Muslims from Israel and the USA to the programs in the Balkans. This was critical not only for them, but for everyone else as well. One occasion comes to mind as an example – of a dinner served much too late at night, when all were starving and we had to wait and wait to be served, everyone pounced on their food when it finally arrived. All except the Israeli Jews and Muslims. The Jews because their fish, cooked in tin foil (to maintain

the demands of Jewish dietary laws, *kashruth*) was not yet ready and the Muslims who would not eat until their Jewish colleagues were served.

Later, when the program was over, all the participants from Israel flew home on the same flight with an 8 hour stop-over in Budapest. When the religiously observant Jewish women told their husbands over the phone that they would spend the layover time visiting in Budapest, their husbands were shocked and worried. Religious Jewish women do not travel alone in foreign cities. The wives told their husbands not to worry as they would be "chaperoned" by their Muslim friends from Nazareth. At which point the husbands were only that much more chagrined. These were indeed the glory days of the program.

Here, below, you can see a picture from the 2004 school. Dinner at a restaurant on the hill overlooking Sarajevo. Rusmir Mahmutcehajic is laughing with Ahmet Yukleyen, a Turkish student completing a PhD at Boston University, later to be entangled in Recep Erdogan's political repression in Istanbul. I do not know the woman is next to Ahmet, but next to her you can see Fr. Mile Babic, and next to him the late Ivo Banac.



Indeed, looking over the pictures of those first two years, I am struck by two attributes of so many of the images. The first is just how much laughter there was. We worked and learned and argued and taught and experienced our differences – but through it all, we laughed and laughed. That quintessential human capacity was on endless display in those early schools. Not just in the picture above, but in so many of the pictures and in our memories as well.

The other striking aspect of the pictures is how incredibly successful we were in bringing together an almost unimaginable group of different people from different backgrounds, religions, ethnicities, races, with different hopes, pasts, commitments, obligations, moral orders, and constraints. All working together to understand not just the other but ourselves as well. A short list includes Albanians, Bulgarians, Indians, Catholic priests from Brazil and Anglican priests from the USA (female) religiously observant Jews and Muslims from Israel, as well as Christian Palestinians, Pakistani-Americans, and Black American religious leaders, of course Serbs, Bosnians, and Croatians, but also Kyrgyz and French, teen-agers and elders, secular philosophers and rabbis, law professors and social workers, educators, scholars, students and musicians … and the list can go on and on.

Those were in many ways glorious years. Difficult to be sure, but also glorious. Bearing major responsibilities for it all was Rusmir Mahmutcehajic. And anyone who participated in those early programs and learned from them is much in his debt. Between the laughter and the learned there were also, to be sure, not a few complaints by the fellows – some justified, some less so. We were all learning and the burden of responsibility lay heavy on our shoulders. Sometimes we stumbled, Rusmir and I. But at least in those years, we stumbled together.

The 2005 school in Israel was already different. Rusmir Mahmutcehajic was spared the responsibilities of organization and could spent an easier time, enjoying the school and the locale, visits to Muslim and other holy sites and at ease in his role as lecturer. The school – which focused on the Israel-Palestine conflict - travelled from Jerusalem to Nazareth to Haifa, Tel Aviv, and their environs. In the course of these trips all participants began to understand the seriousness of the tensions and conflicts of the country and its inhabitants; all of which, indeed, were central to the school's program. The unmanageable past and the yet to be managed future.

Here below is Prof. Mahmutcehajic with Paul Ballanfat at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial Center in Jerusalem.



The 2006 program was held in Bosnia and in Boston and the Bosnian component was the last project Rusmir Mahmutcehajic and I collaborated on. Disagreements over content, organizational structure, project direction and oversight eventually led us to take different paths. We met only very briefly, two or three times after that.

It is a shame of course. For though the spirit and many of the practices of those early *ISSRPL* years continue in *CEDAR*, have informed schools for more than 20 years in over a dozen countries, and provide the basis of the more permanent programs now existing in Africa and Asia, there was something terribly special in this collaboration of Jewish, Christian, and Moslem organizers, across borders, enmities, and our terrible histories. Sharing responsibilities, we laid the foundation for a building that we never built.

Our children are already paying for our failures.