

THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS (excerpts)

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Foreword

Music is my profession. I began to play and compose a little at the age of six when my parents bought me my first violin - slightly bigger than a toy - with which I started my lessons. Our family's life was a poor, even bleak one. That is how it must have seemed from the outside. But on the inside, it had another, spiritually rich and creative dimension. The apartment in downtown Belgrade we shared with another two families was full of books. The radio, tuned to a classical music station, was a close companion with which we spent our evenings. The time was the 1950s, the early stage of Yugoslavia's specific form of socialism, a time marked by the hardships left by the ravages of World War II.

Our pleasures were few but there were some, and I still remember moments of deep fulfillment. Ljubica Marić, a family friend and a leading Serbian composer, taught me how to listen to "the bells" by putting my ear close to a pair of tongs hanging by a string. The string would go through the ring at the top of the implement, which was then struck lightly against the wood-burning stove. Does anyone today know what fire-tongs are? Though they were covered with soot and ash, the sounds they made were beautiful and I loved the game. It stirred my imagination and, perhaps, taught me to take in the world around me through my sense of hearing.

Later on, after I had graduated from the Academy of Music in Belgrade with a degree in composition, I devoted much time to a branch of music I call *Ars Acoustica* in which the composition, instead of notes generated by instruments, consists of the sounds of nature and life recorded on tape.

During my studies, I followed with interest the developments in contemporary European and American music, and attended festivals whenever possible. A curiosity and openness to the new in the arts was characteristic of not a large but still significant number of people in what was then Yugoslavia. Windows on the world such as Radio Belgrade's Third Program afforded us a view of what was going abroad and the latest trends.

Wishing to learn more, I went to France in the late seventies and early eighties. I spent some time at the famous Acoustica/Musica Research and Coordination Institute (IRCAM), familiarizing myself with computer-generated music, then in its first phase. During all that time, I continued composing, especially music for the theater.

Many years later, when I accompanied my diplomat husband to Syria, my passion for music stayed with me. What is more, I encouraged it in myself and underlined it to others. This was in the period between 1995 and 1999, when any mention of Belgrade and Serbia evoked only negative associations. Fellowship with music was my salvation, showing me and others that Serbia could also have another, better face.

Beside music, noting down my impressions and thoughts took up much of my time during those years. Music simply was not enough. It was probably because of my father and grandfather, both writers, that I took up the pen. Thus two strong emotional currents rose to the surface. One of them was getting to know what was for me a completely unknown country and culture. It was my first time in the Middle East for, until then, my travels had taken me only to European countries. It took some time to gain insights into the newly discovered Arab world and learn to accept it. It was all so different, everything was happening for the first time.

Writing also made it possible for me to keep intellectually and emotionally in touch with friends and relations in Belgrade and Serbia when they were going through so much. Like the rest of the population, the whole family - elderly parents, student son, and relatives, all our friends - were being held to ransom by the regime of Slobodan Milošević. Life in Serbia was hard indeed: long-lasting strikes, protests in the streets, student demonstrations, large numbers of people losing their jobs, many emigrating from the fast-sinking country and, ultimately, the NATO bombing.

This book is the result of these two emotionally intertwined worlds and is on the whole based on real events. By noting them down, I made sure I remembered what I saw and heard when travelling around Syria. Descriptions of the events concerning Yugoslavia are also factual and, when cited, the names of persons their real names.

The notes include some which only distantly relate to real external events. Although not in rhyme, they should be read primarily as verses, a poetic reflection of my innermost personal feelings.

An Almost White Night

Tonight someone said *Salaam aleikum*. And then *Ahlan wa sahan*.

What does this mean? I asked. Peace be with you, was the reply. Peace be with you and welcome. What I heard was not so much a language with long vowels but the sound of a brook tumbling over the rounded stones in its bed.

The night I arrived in Damascus was probably an ordinary Syrian night. But to me it seemed very special, unique, the start of something new.

It was not a dark, black night. In fact it was pale, almost white. I thought this was the effect of the bright moonlight but found out later that the paleness was an echo of the white rocks strewn everywhere along the road.

The plants were not green, but filmed gray with the fine dust that covers everything in the Middle East, and even finds its way between the pages of a book long left unopened.

I did not know this when I first came to Damascus on that almost white night, just as I didn't know the meaning of the greeting.

The Streets of the City

The streets of Damascus taste like sweetmeat. Laced with a little gasoline. And grains of sand that sometimes crack between the teeth.

The Old City

The streets of old Damascus are restless. None follows a straight line; nowhere can a peaceful scene be seen. Symmetry is rare in these latitudes in spite of what we read in histories of Islamic art which have so much to say about it. Everything in the city seems to hang in the air, swaying and leaning against invisible supports. Where is the architrave, the golden section? Some buildings in old Damascus are more sharply inclined than even the famous Leaning Tower of Pisa.

Whole districts lack the sloped, tiled roofs that are for me the logical architectural conclusion of a building. They end instead with a flat top on which Damascenes spend the short, hot nights of summer, with the starry sky as their coverlet. Like everything in and around them, the houses are always open to change, to being torn down and built anew, to being extended. Depending on the momentary needs of their residents, parts will be demolished and additions made. As a rule, the builder is the owner himself, and no one will ask to see his permit or he will find a way of getting around the formality.

In this way, the city has been constantly transforming itself for more than seven thousand years.

The Newer City

The part of Damascus that consists mainly of solid three- or four-story buildings in the Mediterranean style originated in the last century. But these structures too seem to be precarious, as if their center of gravity is under threat from the inclination of the terrain, the multitude of balconies, loggias and verandas clinging to them, the depth of their basements and, above all, a myriad subsequent additions on the otherwise similar façades. Again, this creates an impression of endless diversity and restlessness.

Almost none of the buildings remain as their builders left them and additions are not always easy to identify or count. Windows appear in the most unexpected places, their frames frequently in completely different styles and colors. Floors are haphazardly added, and rooms and cubbyholes are tucked under the roofs. Glassed-in balconies, open balconies, loggias turned into rooms with thick curtains or left open, abandoned, like yawning cavemouths in the urban ambience.

A thick forest of television antennas and, in recent years, satellite dishes, sprouts from the tops of buildings, interspersed in places with barrels to catch precious rainwater. And all over hang interlaced cables and wires of all kinds that swing in the wind. All this makes the skyline look like a piece of intricate fretwork. Everything dances and moves, vibrates and quivers.

Most of the windows have wooden shutters, as a rule painted green. Balconies too are protected by wooden lattice screens, sometimes painted green, sometimes left in the natural color of wood, but most often in the dark ochre that is characteristic of the whole Middle East. Behind these lattices, people can observe life in the streets without being observed themselves. When they lack lattice screens, windows and balconies are shaded by awnings or thick curtains.

The wind that comes from the Mediterranean, over the high Al-Jabal ash-Sharqi or Anti-Lebanon, brings with it cooler mountain air, sometimes with a smell of the sea. But when it comes from the other side, it is laden with dust and sand from the desert. Sometimes, though not often, the sea seems to be very near, right behind the house, but is actually some fifty kilometers away. Much more frequently, and for months at a time, a whitish sun blazes over the city and, even when it is not to be seen, Damascus is bathed in a bright but somehow diffused light.

Damascus is a city of wind and a city of light. The buildings are festooned with strings of multi-colored light bulbs which impart a feeling of gaiety when they go on at night.

The traffic is incredibly loud, chaotic and dangerous. It is hard to get across the street, even at marked pedestrian crossings. Traffic lights are few and far between and the many policemen override them anyway with their directions.

They use signals or whistles in a way unknown elsewhere. The most important signals here are gestures, mime, movements of the head and hands. People cross the streets anywhere they find convenient, and neither drivers nor pedestrians put themselves out for each other. Rules simply do not stand for much.

The cars in the streets of Damascus are overwhelmingly what teenagers call junk heaps. But there are also more and more luxury cars belonging to the new rich elite. Taxi cabs are mainly vintage US-made vehicles, painted bright yellow, and look like they have just come off a car-chase movie set. Now and then, one sees a charming old-timer, a veritable museum piece.

The Modern City

Damascus is said to be the oldest continually inhabited city in the world, going back some 7,000 years according to the guidebooks. It was founded and endured through the millennia thanks to a river, the Barada, which waters an oasis in the foothills of the arid mountains situated in the middle of the Syrian semi-desert.

Over the past twenty or so years, modern featureless buildings of the kind found all over the world have been spreading over this fertile land, once occupied by small houses surrounded by lush gardens and orchards in which huge radishes and eggplants, lemons and dates were grown.

The eclipse

A complete solar eclipse crossed over the northern Syrian region between Turkey and Iran in August 1999.

A holiday was declared for the entire country. Parents were told to stay inside with their children behind closed blinds and curtains. A national restlessness was felt days before the event. Everyone was talking about protective glasses and why watching this occurrence would be harmful for the eyes. However, worry and unease became even more apparent due to all the efforts to hide it. No one was able to answer "fear of what?" Stories of catastrophes, including floods, fires, and comets falling from the sky were floating among the people.

The streets began to empty in the early morning, and by the time noon approached they were deserted. From our Embassy in Damascus, I could hear an old air-conditioner in a nearby building still rumbling like a tractor and a lonely car in the distance honking its horn in panic . . . maybe transporting a patient in an emergency.

Then, silence reigned. However, at the office, there was a startling contrast on the television screen. Thousands of Europeans, gathered on city squares under heavy clouds and massive rains, appeared to celebrate this rare astronomical occurrence, seemingly without fear or reverence. For Syria though, the eclipse seemed to bring not only darkness, but an unusual reign of peace.

(.....)

Two images

When I envision an Arab man, I have a mental picture in front of my eyes... a quiet man with a cigarette in his mouth, with a serious dark face and a wondering dark look, gazing in an unknown direction. He squats in baggy pants with knees wide open, by a stone wall in a narrow strip of shade.

The Arab men that I see in reality are a complete contrast to this image. They are fast, like hunting dogs, ready to jump, focused, impatient and in complete contradiction to the most common Arabic gesture "shway, shway" that translates into "easy, no hurry."

On my way to the bakery or The sound of silence

Today, Friday, is the first day of spring. And since there's no work on Friday, it's peaceful everywhere. The shops are mostly closed and there aren't many people on the streets. The country is as still as a field in the summer. It's prayer time.

Because I am a composer and a musician, I feel that I can discern sounds through silence. But I know that an untrained ear needs time and concentration to hear those silent murmurs. By Saturday evening, the world will begin to stir and the silence will turn into a forest of sounds. Even though I am relishing the silence, I will soon be overwhelmed with thousands of different rhythms... horns honking, pneumatics drilling, the earth trembling. Invisible, but audible, switches are turned on... like buttons on a sound mix board. Prayers from speakers, perched on tops of minarets, echo over the city. First, the muezzin's song is heard, soon followed by the imam's discourse. Then starts the *[pp]* and *adagio*, slowly increasing, soon becoming *[f]*. I hear people speaking to each other and their conversational dynamics are spiral, a little bit forward, a little bit backward, a little *crescendo*, then back into *decrescendo*, but steadily louder, until finally in *[ff]* the accents kick in *staccato*. Then it turns to night and the soft evening air fills with frightening yells...warning syncopes. Then long pauses *subito [pp]*, *subito [f]* ...and a sudden *crescendo molto* ...

On my way to the bakery, I pass by a car pulling into a parking spot. When it goes in reverse, an automatic mechanism turns on the tune of "Für Elise." Many cars in this city have that unique, disquieting musical mechanism. They are probably all imported by the same company.

A few minutes later, I come upon a horse pulling a cart. The head and body of the horse are covered in colorful decorations. It's the same way that nomadic peoples decorate camels in the desert and busses in the cities. Along with brightly woven belts, colored ropes, quilts and cloths, this horse is prancing with bells. Actually, I hear it before I see it. Coming from a side street, it has turned onto the main thoroughfare. Its bells make music ... its wheels squeal to the rhythm of a changed direction ... and then it halts in front of the bakery. It's the bread wagon, wafting the yeasty smell of fresh-baked bread.

Rose

Rose says her name is Rose, or, she says that we should call her that. She says that she is from Lebanon and that her mother is Russian. Her mother never wanted her children to learn to speak Russian, and she, herself, never learned Arabic. Rose says that she's Christian. I tell her that that we are Christians, too, and then, secretly, I ask her "Orthodox or Catholic?" She crosses herself, slowly, with three fingers, proudly. We laugh, as if in a conspiracy. This is Muslim world, after all.

I never succeeded in finding out how many children she had, maybe because everything that Rose calculates, she calculates using her fingers. She certainly knows how many children she has, but I can never understand. She mentions a daughter who is married in Kuwait; a second daughter who is married in Damascus; another daughter who has children; and one who does not. She doesn't quite know how to say things in plural in English, so behind those daughters, that do and do not have children, other daughters could be hiding. She never mentions their names. And there is also a boy. How many? One, two, three?

A bench

Student benches in the teaching amphitheater of the School of Dentistry are new and relatively clean. Once in a while though, an Arabic letter or a drawing of a tooth is engraved with a knife or the sharp end of a pen. "Look, future dentists are drawing teeth," I say to a friend as we wait for appointments.

But, in the middle of one bench, engraved very deep in italics, as if the hand was swayed with a fast wind... in Latin letters and not in Arabic... on a freshly painted smooth wood surface... it was carved clear... a message, loud as a scream: Palestine.

Dinner on the periphery

Syrians usually gather for dinner in late hours, closer to midnight. We were invited to arrive at 8pm out of respect for us—the foreigners.

We were greeted by the head of the household, his wife, their two children, the host's sister, a music teacher and her Palestinian husband, a couple of other relatives, and a neighbor couple and their five children. One of the sons was wearing a uniform. He's a soldier serving in the army for two and a half years. One of the older sons was a former student in the Soviet Union and is still a student, while the youngest son skillfully plays traditional Arabic drums, to the pride of his parents.

In the beginning of the dinner they served coffee, then whisky, water, sweet wine, water, arac, water. At the end of the dinner, they again served coffee, then two coffees, then several more coffees, and water, of course. The table was crowded with plates, bowls, little plates and small bowls, and yet everything eventually fit somehow. In that small room and around that small table there were many guests, but everyone, somehow fit, too. Everything that's on the table was served, there are no seconds; the host served us, his confused guests. The others took as they pleased...however much they wanted. There were hands and arms all over the table, while people were served with forks and spoons. There was much spilling, especially olive oil on our plates. The food tasted rich and complex, with three octaves of smells and spices. It seemed never ending: meat from the grill, kebab, creamy hummus and mutabal, tabuleh salad with parsley, fattush, burgul (coarsely ground wheat), hot muhamara with walnuts, k'be libanie (dough with eggs and meat in the middle), small cheese and meat pies, zeitun (olives in oil). (I find it amusing that only children are quietly allowed to add commercial ketchup to their shawerma.) And we all, stuffed as we were, still happily awaited knafe, a special pudding with goat cheese.

People ate, smoked and talked at the same time. Cigarettes were burning in the ashtray, waiting for a bite to be swallowed; crossed utensils were waiting for another puff from the nargileh. Men drank whiskey, women smoked nargilehs and cigarettes, too. At the end of the meal everyone sang and decorated the songs by moving their heads in a backwards, circular movement.

Before the dinner's end there was music and dance. Someone played the tarambuk. Someone else, who suddenly appeared after the dinner, and whose presence somehow seemed staged, played the uda (lute). Maybe he was paid by the host. He played a number of songs with different characters and context. The one I liked the most was a folksong from the hills of Syria. It sounded strong, less wispy than some of the others.

Then a woman rose. She encouraged a second one...who then encouraged a third and so on and so on. They danced, hands up in the air, shaking their hips and breasts. The prettier ones shake prettier, those less fortunate and older are more modest. They dance the "dance bake" which means that there is no excuse...all the women must dance. Nevertheless, the younger women dance the most. Their fathers insist – there's no excuse. Then our host's daughter poses, shows her leg peeking through a slit in her skirt... and then it suddenly tears and widens... and the host triumphantly shows the girl's beauty to his guests.

This completes the host's job. The best equipped house, the best food, the invited musicians; even his women have been shown, so the guests can use their imagination as to what they are hiding and how they please their husbands.

Women at the international airport

The airport is big and looks like a provincial bus station. There are more places to sit than there are passengers. And most of the time there are more staff members than travelers. Most people are found concentrated in the entry halls, where passengers are both seen off and greeted home.

Women are clustered in groups. One such group consists of a mother and many girls. At first they all stand, but then they sit down a moment later. Some are shorter, some taller, some wear glasses, some don't, but all of them wear long dark robes with white cloths on their heads that come down their foreheads, all the way down to the eyebrows, so that not even one strand of hair shows. Like in a choreographed dance, one of them says something, and they all turn at the same time and look in the same direction. Then they turn again, all the way towards the image that is grabbing their attention... all together. All together... as if they are in front of an invisible conductor. Ah, they are astonished by the presence of my daughter, a young foreign woman. They don't look at her with hate as much as with wonder.

Is their glare harmless? On the surface, it is. However, other layers hide behind it: jealousy, envy, even hatred. The looks of the older women grow stronger and stronger, harsher, and reach the strength of malice. My daughter has long beautiful hair and is wearing jeans, a t-shirt and a long sleeved shirt, like most

other teenagers. Nothing unusual. She looks the same as everyone, people say. But in this huge, huge Muslim world there are rules to be obeyed, and my daughter and I, unintentionally, have broken them.

Happenstance

A sudden turn in my life is taking me to the Middle East.

Before departing, I go to my favorite bookstore to say goodbye to the Belgrade I love, now but a shadow of what it used to be. I pick up the first book at hand and open it at random. The first thing I see on the page opened by happenstance are not the letters but some dashes. I try to make out the words marked by the dashes. What is the purpose of these dashes? Are they supposed to cut the text or underline it? I'm still not sure but the dashes draw my attention to those words. One, then two more dashes, that might serve to separate or to connect, stress, or maybe just draw my attention.

I was in a bookstore, distracted, with a plane ticket in my pocket and just about to embark on a journey. It was 1995 and no international flights were operating from Belgrade. Sanctions had been imposed and Yugoslavia was an international pariah. The closest city in which a plane flight could be caught was Budapest, the capital of neighboring Hungary.

The poem I read in the bookstore as I said goodbye to Belgrade was Friedrich Hölderlin's "Festival of Peace." Though I was preoccupied and did not quite understand what I was reading, I nonetheless felt strongly the presence of a signpost. It was then that I believed, for the first time, that my road to Damascus would be no ordinary one.

Those words printed on a page opened at random seemed to have an important message for me. At Budapest airport, during the long wait for the flight to the Middle East, I returned to the page. And again later, while flying through the black night to the rumbling of the plane's engines. I took the first step that night.

Many months later in Damascus, I went tentatively back to that page. But I was not yet ready to fully understand the "Festival of Peace," with its meaning wrapped in so many layers.

About three weeks before Easter, in the cold March days of 1996, I was finally able to read the poem and to understand it. Only then was I able to perceive the whole, clear vision that emerged in the poetic imagination of Hölderlin 192 years ago.

What was it that was underlined, separated or connected on the page opened for me by happenstance just before I left for the Middle East?

Inverted time

Ramadan is a time of abstinence for all devout Muslims. They do not eat, drink, smoke or have contact with women during this religious holiday. They abstain from everything. But only during the day. At sunset, they break their fast and return to their food, coffee, smoking, women, or at least fantasies about women.

When Ramadan falls in winter, the fasting is not too hard. Nothing is taken from about four in the morning to around five in the afternoon. But when the holy month occurs in the summer, it is much harder to adhere to the strictures. Going without a drink of water in the heat, when the day is at its longest, must be the hardest of all.

A canon fired at the precisely calculated time of sunset proclaims to Damascenes that fasting is over for the day. This year, 1998, the sun goes down as early as five in the afternoon. The city changes - the streets, usually crowded with people and cars, are all of a sudden completely empty, silent. Everything looks different. You can no longer tell which shop sells what. Until a moment ago, the goods were displayed in brightly lighted windows. Now they are concealed by rusty metal shutters.

It is a curious, seemingly inverted time. The gathering twilight is reminiscent of dawn, with the same color of the sky, and play of light and shadows. Because the usual day-time bustle is missing one does not feel that it is the end of the day and beginning of night but the other way around. The city is deserted, silent. The sight of a rare passerby makes you think he is either a foreigner or about on some urgent business; there must be an important reason indeed for a Muslim to be abroad at that time.

When the people disappear and the shops vanish behind their shutters, the darkness becomes thick and heavy. From inside the houses comes the sound of clinking plates and cutlery, a sign that *iftar*, the first meal of the day, is being served.

Iftar is no ordinary meal. It is a ritual to which friends and relatives are invited to partake of specially prepared foods. The meal lasts about two hours and then, just after seven o'clock, the streets begin to fill, drivers resume honking their horns, the noise rises, thousands of lights go on, and people start streaming by again.

The Palestinian

Jouma died unexpectedly yesterday. I don't even know his last name. Jouma has died, my husband said when I came into the kitchen this morning.

In contrast to most people in these parts, Jouma, a Palestinian, was a tall man. He made and served coffee, ran errands, did a little cleaning at the Embassy. When the country for which he worked became the "rump Yugoslavia" and the

number of those travelling to it dropped sharply and available funding decreased, he helped with the Embassy's consular affairs. Jouma had succeeded his father, who worked for the Embassy for decades, and from him learned a little of what he called "Yugoslavian."

Making coffee seemed to be Jouma's most important job. He would bring a tray to the ambassador's office to serve guests, often ambassadors of other countries, who he would have just opened the front door for a few minutes earlier. Cradling the coffee tiny cups in his huge palm, he would lower them carefully to the table, always with an air of anxiety about him. For he knew what could strike at any time - an epileptic fit. Jouma had suffered from epilepsy from childhood. The disease is one that traditional Arab society considers shameful and embarrassing for the individual concerned, his family and, in particular, in the work environment. Families here keep their handicapped and disabled children well away from the public eye.

Along with coffee, Jouma would also bring glasses of water, in accordance with local custom. The first glass is always set down before the most senior, either in years or position, person present. Murmuring a few words, Jouma would put the glass down on the table with exaggerated care, as if stressing the importance of water in a waterless land.

I didn't see a lot of Jouma as I was not in the habit of frequenting the offices where he worked. In the mornings, I would hear him watering the flowerbeds and lawns and hosing down the pathways. I would see him at times in the kitchen, always dignified and always in a suit. I think he felt like a general whose talents were not appreciated. He felt important and was because his life's journey could have been so different. He knew what his life would have been like in the refugee camps, the only homes of hundreds of thousands fellow-Palestinians, and he must have known that his was a success story.

One of the last times I saw him was at the front door of the Embassy, waiting for an announced visitor. I waved to him from the other side of the street and, as always, he asked, "How are you, Madam?" "Fine, thank you," I replied, "How are you?" "Good, good," he said, with the inflection of a person who had known a little Serbian for a long time and was certain about the often-repeated phrases.

It is late afternoon. Jouma has already been buried in the dry Arab soil. Funerals take place quickly in these parts, usually on the same day as death occurs, probably because of the heat. Only men attend. They leave in a hurry because of the belief that the last man at the graveside will be the next to be buried.

When she heard the news this morning, Rose, the cook, said: This life is nothing. Suheil, the cleaner, said: This world is nothing.

Was it Andrić?

My husband and I went out very rarely in the spring of 1999, and then only if we made a special effort. Belgrade and Yugoslavia were being bombed and we spent sleepless nights listening to the news of more and more airstrikes and more and more casualties, many of them innocent civilians.

Light and sound were hurtful. Talk was hurtful, especially empty talk. And the questions, in particular the inappropriate ones. Even going out on the terrace overlooking the street was like an act of facing the world.

During one of my rare excursions onto the terrace I saw Mr Crocker, the US ambassador to Syria, and his wife. They were passing the building in which we lived on foot, walking slowly and without visible security. Did they walk this way often and was it by chance that our eyes met?

Later, when we met occasionally on "neutral" ground, at events whose hosts were able to invite them and us, Americans and Yugoslavs, the American could frequently be seen in the company of the Yugoslav.

Ambassador Crocker was a man of small stature, with gray hair and a calm disposition. He was considered to be an expert on Balkan affairs, and knew the works of Ivo Andrić, an author who, before going on to become a laureate of the Nobel Prize for Literature, had himself been a diplomat. Andrić, who considered himself a Yugoslav, was of both Croat and Serb descent and was born in Bosnia. He too knew the Balkans well, especially Bosnia, which was the subject of many of his novels. Ambassador Crocker had read these works, including "The Damned Alley," and learned from them about the people, relationships, and the Balkan "dark villayet," a term denoting an evil force that stands in the way of making the right decisions. Mr Crocker told me once that he learned a lot about diplomacy from Andrić and even more about Bosnia and the hatreds that have repeatedly torn it asunder.

Was it the Nobel laureate Andrić who sent Ambassador Crocker to our street that day, at a time when bombs were falling on Andrić's country like angry hail?

Orthodox Easter 1999

The telephone rang early that morning, and she said she was coming. She arrived soon after and we met at the gate. A short, hard hug, our eyes not meeting. A handclasp, a trembling of the whole body, and the scent of a huge bouquet of flowers. It was all so brief, except for the silent hug.

When the heavy metal gates were shut once more, I stood there with my arms full of crushed flowers and my left shoulder damp with her tears. An impenetrable barrier, a prohibition of contact, stood between me, the wife of the ambassador whose country was under sanctions and was being bombed, and the wife of an ambassador whose country had imposed the sanctions and was dropping the bombs on mine. Did that encounter on Orthodox Easter of 1999, when this Protestant woman came to my door with flowers, constitute contact?

The day was sunny and warm. We had lunch outdoors, saying almost nothing. My left shoulder was stayed damp. It still feels damp today.

You ask how I spend my time

Well, I watch television sometimes, not often and only when something is expected to happen, when there is political uncertainty, when someone is being bombed somewhere, or when a head of state is being grilled in public about the most personal, intimate, details of his life. And when a concert is being carried live. Everything is live on television nowadays.

Sometimes I stand on the terrace, absorbing the silence, waiting. For when the television is turned off and the voices of protesters and war correspondents and the explosions of bombs are heard no more, the sounds of children playing and laughing come from a nearby street or garden. Carefree, blithe sounds, the voices of peace. Life, live.

Buffer of silence

I am in the habit of creating a buffer of silence around me. The silence here is generated by the absence of the sounds I know well: the rain falling against my window in Belgrade, the footsteps of my neighbors on the landing, voices saying words I can't make out coming from other apartments.

These sounds exist here in Damascus: footsteps, voices, neighbors' squabbles, car horns. But it is silent nonetheless. Perhaps this silence is really loneliness. Every word echoes in the silence. And the echoes are even louder when no words are spoken.

They are leaving

I leave everything to light the icon lamp, something I seem to be doing more and more often. They are leaving. Every piece of news comes from above, crashing through the roof and falling like a heavy rock into the middle of dinner.

I stand facing the wall, seeing only the wall and the flickering flame of the icon lamp. They are leaving.

The news crashes down, there is a great turmoil in my soul, but outside the silence continues.

Yes, they are leaving, I stay still facing the wall. Were it not for the flickering flame, I would say it was quite dark. Silence, only the occasional spurt of burning oil. In the silence, the news stands out starkly. Terrible, they are leaving.

*And Solomon built ... Tadmor¹ in the wilderness, in the land ...
First Book of Kings, 9:18*

The trip

We are on our way to Palmyra, an ancient city in the desert with many Roman ruins. It's five hundred kilometers there and back. Traffic on the road through the desert is very light; we see barely fifty vehicles in two days. Most of the road is as straight as a ruler, like the borders of some African countries drawn in the offices of defense ministers and heads of state. Both the road and the borders are completely out of tune with their environments. Nothing is straight here. Harmony is not in sameness but in the monotony of small differences.

I keep my nose close to the window of the car to avoid feeling as if on some kind of safari and to see things more clearly, as they really are.

In the distance, a few tents are scattered like dry pods in the enormous expanse of desert, looking as if they will spread their wings and fly off any minute.

The tents in the desert do not tend to congregate - usually there is just one or two close together. They are made entirely of *kilim* rugs, - *kilims* for roof, walls and partitions, *kilims* for divans, and yet more *kilims* covering the sandy ground. The nomads sit, sleep, and eat on the rugs, and cover themselves with them at night. Some more "upscale" tents have courtyards walled off from the desert with burlap and occasionally there is a clothes line with the family's washing flapping in the hot dry wind. The clothes are the color of the sand and rocks, which is much the same. Everything is in the same hue: the tent, the ground, the sheep pen, the sheep themselves.

Each flock is tended by a single shepherd, often a boy. The sheep can be seen from far off. Only the lambs are white or black, the rest the color of the ground. One day, their wool will be sheared and woven into more rugs.

Long distances lie between the tents along the road to Palmyra. There is nothing between them but desert and flocks of sheep.

At first glance, everything appears to be at a standstill, like on a photograph. But there are small movements. A woman walks from one tent to another, taking long, gliding steps with her long dark skirts eddying around her. A sheep slowly crosses the road, leaving one flock to join another.

The boys

We are at a restaurant in Palmyra called - what else - Palmyra Restaurant. We and our friends, an Armenian family, are the only guests. Before getting out of

¹ Palmyra, formally known as Tadmor, was not built by Solomon.

the car, we see the waiters squatting on the steps, waiting for the arrival of the announced party. All the lights inside are on and two small wood stoves make the huge room pleasantly warm.

We eat the usual Arab foods, which can be indifferent but are this time well prepared and full of flavor. One of the many waiters heats the flat Arab bread for us, pressing it down with both hands against the hot, smoke-stained stovepipe. The children frown but we adults accept the gesture. It is the custom, the way things are done here. And the bread is much tastier when warmed up.

It is a pleasant evening. We laugh when the children ask each other the meaning of Serbian and Armenian words. All evening, they ask "How do you say...?"

Suddenly, out of the darkness that has fallen outside a group of boys, all between eight and twelve years of age, appears walking down the street. Their heads are wrapped tightly in the Arab head scarves so that only their eyes can be seen. They are in some kind of military uniform and have knives stuck in their belts. They pass by the window of the restaurant while we eat our *hummus*, *muhamar*, *tahina* and *kebab*, walking with firm, resolute steps. The boys are frightening, like miniature men, angry and dangerous. Their knives are the real thing, there is nothing childlike in their eyes. They materialize out of the dark, a closely knit group, walking steadily, never with the skip or jump of a child. And then they disappear into the night.

At our table, we laugh and ask "How do you say...?"

Sunday in Damascus

Some Arabs are not Muslims. When Islam conquered the region in the seventh century, their ancestors did not convert, continuing to cross themselves as their forebears had done for centuries, ever since Saint Paul had preached Christianity in the region. These Christian Arab bless themselves with five quick movements so that the sign of the cross they make is akin to both the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox. In church, most cover their heads with either the red-white Bedouin or the white-black checkered Palestinian scarf. Some pray with their hands palms upward, as if holding a book, which is reminiscent of how Muslims pray. Before entering the church, women cover their heads with delicate lacy scarves, usually black, like the women of the Armenian Orthodox and Greek Orthodox faiths.

Most Christian churches in Syria, especially new ones, have a happy air about them. They are full of light, natural and artificial, full of chattering children, and free of the mournful, melancholy atmosphere of churches in the West, and the humility and contrition of the Orthodox churches. Syrian churches are large buildings but never over-dimensioned. All are kept in a good state of repair, at

times too good so that many of the old ones have lost the appealing patina of age.

On feast days, cloth banners are stretched between poles or trees and sway in the wind. Grownups and children dressed in their Sunday best gather in the churchyards, which have always been their place to meet and talk. They come bearing flowers and everything they need and want is there.

Members of the government who are Christians also come with their wives and children. There are not many of them but still more than someone who is not aware of the circumstances in Syria believes. They stand in the first row and the priests address them with respect. In their sermons, the priests never forget to mention the Syrian president and to pray for the ministers' success in life.

On Sunday mornings, church bells in Damascus call the faithful to prayer.

The road to Damascus

When I was a small child, we used to take the narrow-gauge railway to the coast, changing trains at dawn in Sarajevo.

I traveled by bus to Novi Sad many times in connection with my work.

In my student days, I flew often to Paris and sometimes with friends took the ferry to Calais.

In winter, I soared on chair lifts to the peaks of Mt Kopaonik.

Once, when I was still a child, my uncle took me in a horse-drawn wagon to a small town where he worked in an armaments factory.

As a student, I went several times to music festivals in Warsaw, a train journey of 36 hours.

My friends and I often drove to Dubrovnik, sometimes just for the weekend.

A train with a restaurant and sleeping cars would take us to Opatija, a fashionable winter and summer resort on the northern Croatian coast.

At least once a week I walked from my downtown home to the Topčider Park on the outskirts of Belgrade.

The number 7 tram was my conveyance to the New Belgrade suburb across the Sava River.

During summer vacations on the Montenegrin coast, I crossed from one side of the bay to the other in a small boat.

Each and every one of these trips was a part of my road to Damascus. Every one starts out on their own road to Damascus without even knowing it. It is a journey every one of us must make. We begin it at an early age, when traveling with our parents like pieces of baggage and head counts being taken at every

stop on the way. There are no plans or bookings for the journey. You just take the first step but still without knowing, thinking it is only a trip on vacation, to a festival, competition, business meeting, a visit to family. But every one of these destinations is a halting-place on the road to Damascus.

The road is a very long one and Damascus is almost never reached. There are no milestones, no discernible way stations, summer or winter timetables, no tracks or signposts, no lights to show the route at night. The traveler, though unaware of the journey he is taking, is nonetheless changed.

The deep meaning and sense of this journey is the movement itself. By road, shortcut, path, street, through the wilderness or down a blind alley, the movement at all times leads forward, forward to Damascus.

Those who at last manage to reach the city will see a vast horizon. Under these unfolded skies, the traveler may feel blinded by the intensity of the yellow-permeated light. For this part of the world has always been known for its intense light. The light and the horizon attract, absorb, and intoxicate the traveler, sucking him into the endless suspended bright white ocean, the Deep White.

Blinded by the splendor, the traveler may not notice the city spread before him, not even if his docile horse suddenly rears and throws him off.

I do not feel a stranger here but, at the same time, I feel my increasing self-integration. I am more and more what I am. Something akin to a dream emerges from the entwining of the images from my childhood and those of the present.

The world before my eyes now is a shimmering, dancing world of disorder. The image is never still and balanced. This may be due only to the hot air which turns everything into a blurred picture. The desert moves, the sand floats. The air is opaque, saturated with the dust and everything else it carries.

But the world whose image emerges slowly before my inner eye is completely different. It is peaceful, almost without motion. It is an apple orchard in the Serbian countryside in the fall, when the trees are dropping their leaves and their fruit thuds to the ground to rot in the damp grass.

Anyway...

Anyway, few things in the Middle East can be accurately described, especially if one lacks the essential tool of language. And this language is for me an incomprehensible guttural yet singsong tongue.

Everything in these notes is therefore only an unreliable, completely personal impression, based solely on the senses of sight, taste, smell, occasionally touch and hearing and, to an extent, intuition.