Bosnian Chronicle
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Early in 1807 a number of unusual, previously unheard-of things began to happen in Travnik.

No one in Travnik had ever imagined that this was a town created for the commonplace. No one, not even the lowliest Muslim peasant from the slopes of Vilenica. This fundamental sense that they were in some way different from other people, destined for something better and finer, entered into every human creature with the cold wind from Vlasic mountain, with the biting water from the Roaring Brook, with the “sweet” wheat from the south-facing slopes round Travnik. It never left them, not even in their sleep, in poverty, or at the hour of their death.

This applied particularly to the Turks who lived in the town itself. But even the rayah of all three faiths, scattered over the steep outskirts or crowded together in their separate district, were filled with the same feeling, each in their own way and in accordance with their own condition. It applied to the very town, in whose position and layout there was something special, individual and proud.

Their town was in fact a deep, narrow ravine which generations had built up and cultivated, a fortified pass in which people had stayed to live permanently, adapting themselves to it over the centuries and adapting it to themselves. On both sides hills sloped steeply down to meet at a sharp angle in the valley where there was scarcely room for the narrow river and the road beside it. The whole place looked like a half-open book, with gardens, alleyways, houses, fields, graveyards and mosques drawn on each page.
No one has ever calculated how many hours of sunlight nature has denied this town, but it is certain that the sun rises later here and sets earlier than in any of the other numerous towns and villages of Bosnia. Even the people of Travnik do not deny this, although they insist that, when it does shine, it is nowhere so bright as over their town.

In this narrow, damp and draughty valley through which the Lašva flows and whose sides are studded with springs, dykes and brooks, there is virtually no straight road or any flat place where a man might step freely. Everything is steep and uneven, tortuous and intricate, connected or interrupted by private roads, fences, blind alleys, gardens and back-gates, graveyards and places of worship.

Here by the water, that mysterious, inconstant and powerful element, the generations are born and die. Here they grow, feeble and pale, but resilient and equal to anything. Here they live with the Vizier’s Residence before their eyes – proud, slender, stylish, discriminating and shrewd. Here they work and prosper or sit idle and grow poor, all of them reserved and cautious, never laughing out loud, but inclined to sneer; not saying much, but enjoying whispered gossip. And here they are buried when their time comes, each according to his faith and customs, in water-logged graves, making way for a new generation of people just like themselves.

So the generations replace one another, handing down not only established characteristics, both physical and mental, but their land and their faith, not only an inherited sense of measure and proportion, not only a familiarity with all the roads, side-entrances and alleyways of their tortuous town, but an innate ability to understand the whole world and its people. The children of Travnik come into the world with all of this, but above all with a sense of pride. Pride is their second nature, a vital driving force which accompanies them throughout their lives, marking them out and distinguishing them readily from other people.
Their pride has nothing in common with the naïve brashness of well-to-do peasants or provincial townspeople who brag and bluster in ostentatious self-satisfaction. On the contrary, their pride is all inward; more a weighty heritage and a painful sense of responsibility to themselves, their family and town, or rather, to the grand, proud and unattainable image they have of themselves and their town.

Every human emotion has its limits, however, even the sense of one’s own distinction. It was true that Travnik was the seat of the Vizier, and that its people were noble, smart, restrained and wise, fit to converse with kings. But even the people of Travnik had days when their pride stuck in their throats and they would secretly long to live, tranquil and carefree, in one of those ordinary, insignificant towns which do not enter into the calculations of emperors or conflicts between states, which do not bear the brunt of world events and do not lie in the path of celebrated and important figures.

The times were such that nothing agreeable could be expected and no good could come of anything. This was why the proud and cunning people of Travnik wanted nothing at all to happen but just to go on living, as far as possible without any changes or surprises. What good could be expected when the rulers of the world were at loggerheads, the peoples at each other's throats and their countries in flames? A new Vizier? He would be no better, probably worse, than the last, and his retinue would be unknown and numerous, hungry with God knows what new appetites. (“The best Vizier is the one who got as far as the border and then turned back to Istanbul without ever setting foot in Bosnia.”) A foreigner? A distinguished traveller, perhaps? They knew all about such people. They would spend a bit of money and leave a few gifts in the town, but they would be followed by a search party or the very next day there would be questions. Who were they, what were they, where had they stayed, who had they talked to? By the time you had extricated
yourself and shrugged it all off, you had spent that pittance ten times
over. An informer? Or the agent of some unknown power with
suspect intentions? After all there was never any way of telling what
people might be carrying with them or who was working for whom.

In a word, there was no good anywhere these days. So, let’s eat
up the crust of bread we have and live out in peace what few days
remain to each of us, in this noblest city on earth, and God preserve
us from glory, important visitors and major events.

This was what the prominent people were secretly thinking
in those first years of the nineteenth century, but it goes without
saying that they kept it to themselves, for in every citizen of Travnik
there is a long, tortuous path between a thought or desire and its
visible or audible expression.

And there really had been a great many occurrences and
changes of all kinds in recent years – at the end of the eighteenth
and beginning of the nineteenth century. Events crowded in from
all directions, colliding and rolling across Europe and the great
Ottoman Empire and reaching even into this valley, to stop there
like floodwater or its silt.

Ever since the Turks had withdrawn from Hungary, relations
between Muslims and Christians had become increasingly difficult
and complex and conditions in general had deteriorated. The
soldiers of the great Empire, the agas and spahis, who had been
obliged to abandon rich properties in the fertile plains of Hungary
and return to their confined and wretched homeland, were bitter
and resentful of everything Christian. Their presence increased the
number of mouths to be filled, while the number of working hands
remained the same. At the same time, those wars of the eighteenth
century which had driven the Turks out of the neighbouring
Christian lands and back into Bosnia, raised bold hopes among
the Christian rayah, opening up previously unimagined prospects.
And that inevitably also affected the attitude of the rayah towards
their “Imperial masters, the Turks”. Both sides, if it is possible to speak of two sides at this stage of the struggle, were now fighting, each in its own way and with the means appropriate to the circumstances. The Turks fought with pressure and force, the Christians with patience, cunning and conspiracy, or readiness for conspiracy. The Turks fought for the protection of their right to their way of life, and the Christians for the attainment of that same right. The rayah felt that the Turks were becoming even more of a burden, while the Turks observed with bitterness that the rayah were beginning to throw their weight around and were no longer what they had been. These clashes of such opposing interests, beliefs, ambitions and hopes, formed an intricate knot which the long Turkish wars with Venice, Austria and Russia complicated and tied ever tighter. Bosnia grew increasingly constrained and sombre, conflicts were more frequent and life more difficult, with less and less order and certainty.

Then, with the beginning of the nineteenth century, the uprising in Serbia came as a visible sign of the new times and new methods of struggle. The tangled knot in Bosnia tightened still further.

As time went on that uprising in Serbia was the cause of increasing anxiety, damage, expense and loss to the whole of Turkish Bosnia including Travnik. But far more so to the Vizier, the authorities and the other Bosnian towns than to the Travnik Muslims, who did not consider any war sufficiently large or important for them to contribute either money or men to it. The people of Travnik talked about “Karageorge’s trouble-making” with forced scorn, just as they always found some disparaging word for the army which the Vizier had sent against Serbia and which the indecisive, quarrelsome local commanders were bringing slowly straggling into Travnik.

Napoleon’s wars in Europe were a rather more worthy topic of conversation in Travnik. At first those wars were spoken of as distant events which are recounted and interpreted, but which do not and cannot have anything to do with real life. But the arrival of
the French army in Dalmatia had brought that “Bunaparta” of the stories unexpectedly close to Bosnia and Travnik.

At the same time a new Vizier, Husref Mehmed Pasha, arrived in Travnik. He brought a personal respect for Napoleon and an interest in all things French, which appeared to the people of Travnik far greater than was appropriate for an Ottoman and a dignitary of the Empire.

All of this disturbed and irritated the Travnik Turks and they began to refer to Napoleon and his achievements in brief meaningless remarks or simply with a haughty and disdainful pursing of the lips. But none of that could distance them or altogether protect them from that “Bunaparta” or from the events which spread out from him with amazing speed across Europe, like a ripple of waves from their centre, and which, like a fire or a plague, overtook both those who fled and those who sat still. As in so many towns and cities of the world, that invisible, unknown conqueror had provoked anxiety, unrest and agitation even in Travnik. The brittle, resonant name of “Bunaparta” was going to fill the valley of Travnik for a number of years and, whether they liked it or not, the people would often have to break their jaws on its knotty, angular syllables. It was going to hum in their ears and flicker before their eyes for a long time. For the days of the Consuls had begun.

Without exception, all the people of Travnik liked to feign indifference and appear impassive. But the news of the consuls’ coming – one moment French, the next Austrian, then Russian or all three at once – provoked either hope or unease, and aroused desires and expectations. None of this could be altogether disguised, as it made their hearts beat faster and brought a new liveliness to their conversation.

Few people knew what the reports circulating since the autumn actually meant. Nor could anyone have said either which consuls were supposed to be coming or what they would be doing in Travnik. In
the present circumstances, a single piece of news or an unusual word was enough to stir the people’s imagination, to give rise to conjecture, and even to suspicions and fears, secret desires and thoughts, which they kept to themselves and never expressed or articulated.

As we have seen, the local Turks were anxious and they alluded sullenly to the possibility of the consuls’ coming. Mistrustful of everything that came from abroad and ill-disposed in advance to any innovation, the Turks still secretly hoped that these were only ominous rumours, a sign of the inauspicious circumstances, that the consuls might not come, or, if they did, they would soon depart along with the bad times that had brought them.

On the other hand, the Christians – both Catholic and Orthodox – welcomed the news and passed it on, whispering it to one another furtively, finding in it cause for obscure hopes and the prospect of change. And change could only be for the better.

Of course, each of them had his own way of looking at things, from different, often opposite points of view.

The Catholics, who were in the majority, dreamed of an influential Austrian consul who would bring them the help and protection of the powerful Catholic Emperor in Vienna. The Orthodox, who were few in number and had been continuously persecuted over the last few years because of the uprising in Serbia, did not expect much from either an Austrian or a French consul. But they took the news as a good sign, proof that Turkish power was waning and that favourable times of upheaval and salvation were on their way. And they added immediately, of course, that “there could be nothing without a Russian consul”.

In the face of such rumours, even the Sephardic Jews, a small but lively community, could not maintain the proverbial reticence taught them by the centuries. They too were excited by the thought that a consul of the great French Emperor Napoleon – “as kindly to the Jews as a kind father” – might be coming to Bosnia.
Reports of the arrival of the foreign consuls, like all news in our lands, sprang up suddenly, grew to fantastic proportions, and then disappeared all at once, only to re-emerge some weeks later with new force and in a new form.

In the middle of the winter, which was mild and brief that year, these reports acquired their first semblance of reality. A Jew by the name of Pardo arrived in Travnik from Split and, with Juso Atijas, a Travnik merchant, began to look for a suitable house for the French Consulate. They looked everywhere, visited the Vizier’s Deputy, and examined the state properties, accompanied by the caretaker. They decided on a large, somewhat dilapidated house belonging to the State, where Dubrovnik merchants had usually stayed and which was therefore known as the Dubrovnik Khan. The house was on a slope, above a Muslim school, in the middle of a large, steep garden, divided in two by a stream. As soon as terms had been agreed, builders, carpenters and craftsmen were found to repair the house and put it in order. And that house, which had stood until then on its own, unnoticed, its blank windows gaping at the world, now suddenly came to life, attracting people’s attention and the curiosity of children and those with nothing better to do. For some reason people began to talk about the coat of arms and the flag which would be prominently and constantly displayed on the building of the foreign consulate. These were things no one had actually ever yet seen. But these two significant words, which the Turks muttered rarely, with a scowl, the Christians spoke often, in a malicious whisper.

The Travnik Turks were, of course, too wise and proud to show they were upset, but in private conversations they did not hide it. They had long been troubled by the knowledge that the Imperial defences along the frontiers had collapsed and that Bosnia was becoming an unguarded country, trampled over not only by Ottomans but by infidels from the four corners of the earth, a
country where even the rayah was beginning to raise its head more insolently than ever before. And now some faithless consuls and spies were supposed to be thrusting their way in, freely proclaiming their authority and the power of their emperors at every step. So, little by little, an end would come to the good order and “blessed silence” of Turkish Bosnia, which for some time now had in any case become increasingly difficult to protect and preserve. Divine Will had ordained that the Turks should rule as far as the Sava river and the Austrians from the Sava on. But everything Christian was working against that clear Divine Order, shaking the frontier fence and undermining it by day and night, both openly and in secret. And recently even Divine Will itself had become somehow less evident and distinct. “What else is going to happen and who else will be coming?” the old Turks wondered with real bitterness.

And, indeed, what the Christians were saying about the opening of the foreign consulates showed that the anxiety of the Turks was not unjustified.

“There’ll be a flag flying!” people whispered and their eyes flashed defiantly as though it would be their very own flag. In fact no one really knew what kind of flag it was supposed to be, nor what could be expected to happen when it appeared. But the mere thought that different colours could unfurl and flutter freely beside the green Turkish flag brought a joyous gleam to people’s eyes and raised hopes of a kind that only the rayah could ever know. Those mere words – “There’ll be a flag flying!” – made many a poor man feel at least for a second that his hovel was brighter, his empty stomach more comfortable and his thin clothing warmer. Those few vague words made Christian hearts leap, their eyes blink with the dazzle of brilliant colours and golden crosses; and all the flags of all the Christian emperors and kings of the world seemed to unfurl, roaring triumphantly in their ears, like a whirlwind. For a man can live on one word, if he is resolute enough to fight and win through.
Apart from all of this, there was another consideration which made many a trader in the bazaar think of the changes with hope. There was a prospect of profit with the arrival of these unknown, but probably wealthy people, who would certainly have to buy and spend. For in the last few years activity in the bazaar had lessened and income had dwindled, particularly since the uprising in Serbia. The many army suppliers, compulsory labour demands and frequent requisitions kept the peasants away from the town, so that now they sold virtually nothing and bought only the barest essentials. State purchases were badly and erratically paid. Trade with Slavonia had ceased and, since the arrival of the French army, Dalmatia had become an irregular and uncertain market.

In these circumstances, the traders of the Travnik bazaar welcomed even the slightest chance of making money and sought everywhere the longed-for sign of a turn for the better.

At last, what had been talked about for months actually took place. The first of the consuls, the French Consul General, arrived in Travnik.

It was the end of February, the last day of Ramadan. An hour before the evening meal in the light of the cold, setting February sun, the people of the lower bazaar were able to witness the arrival of the Consul. The shopkeepers had begun to take in their goods and lower their shutters when the scampering feet of inquisitive Gypsy children announced the Consul’s arrival.

The procession was short. At its head rode the Vizier’s envoys, two of his closest attendants, with six horsemen. They had ridden out as far as the Lašva to meet the Consul. They were all mounted on good horses and well turned out. To the side and behind rode guards sent by the Governor of Livno. They had accompanied the Consul the whole way and looked rather nondescript: cold and weary as they were, on small, ungroomed ponies. In the middle of the procession, on a fat, ageing dapple-grey, rode the French
Consul General, Monsieur Jean Daville, a tall, fair-haired, red-faced man with blue eyes and a moustache. Beside him was a chance travelling companion, Monsieur Pouqueville, who was on his way to Yannina, where his brother was the French consul. Behind them, some paces distant, rode that same Pardo, the Jew from Split, and two burly men from Sinj, in the French service. All three of them were wrapped up to the eyes in black capes and red peasant scarves, and there was hay poking out of their boots.

The procession, as may be gathered, was not particularly brilliant or numerous, and the winter weather still further reduced its dignity, for the bitter cold necessitated thick clothes, a hunched bearing and rapid gait.

Apart from those few frozen gypsy children, the procession met with general indifference on the part of the townspeople. The Turks pretended not to see it, while the Christians did not dare watch it blatantly. Those who did see it, out of the corner of their eye or from some hidden place, were a little disappointed by so mean and prosaic an arrival of “Bunaparta’s” consul, for the majority had imagined consuls as high dignitaries who wore splendid apparel, covered with braid and medals, and rode on fine horses or travelled in carriages.
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