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Thomas Obruča

AHMIĆI

The eight days of the 13 year old Adnan

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Nor Burned
Nor Killed

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Prologue

A thirteen-year-old, yet unprepared for adult life, whose family is the world to him, is suddenly being torn away from his familiar surroundings by an incomprehensible shock. Immediately and personally confronted with the brutality of the conflict, deeply traumatised, he manages to keep his will to live in the solitude of his hiding place without giving up.

For eight long days.
Eight days that shape his life.

»This tragedy carried out in April 1993 in the small village of Ahmići reflects in a microcosm the much wider tensions, conflicts and hatreds which have, since 1991, plagued the former Yugoslavia and caused so much suffering and bloodshed.

In a matter of a few months, persons belonging to different ethnic groups, who used to enjoy good neighbourly relations, and who previously lived side by side in a peaceful manner and who once respected one another's different religious habits, customs and traditions, were transformed into enemies.

Nationalist propaganda gradually fuelled a change in the perception and self-identification of members of the various ethnic groups. Gradually the ›others‹, i. e. the members of other ethnic groups, originally perceived merely as ›diverse‹, came instead to be perceived as ›alien‹ and then as ›enemy‹; as potential threats to the identity and prosperity of one's group. What was earlier friendly neighbourly coexistence turned into persecution of those ›others«.¹

I could not get this emotionally stirring story out of my mind, even after the end of my work as an international special investigator

¹ Excerpt from the summary of the reasons given for the judgment in the proceedings
Prosecutor vs. Kupreškić et al., January 14, 2000.

AHMIĆI – Adnan
April 1993

in Bosnia after the war which followed the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and it has preoccupied me for years. After consulting with the young man that he is today, I have decided to tell his story. These are the experiences of a thirteen-year-old who had to go through the War and a massacre.

These experiences are almost unbearable for the writer as well as the reader.

The boy is a witness to the murder of his parents and his sister. Gravely injured and left to his own devices, he faces the choice of giving up or surviving. It is not a nightmare, but evidence of a gruesome reality. The individual fate of a child in a conflict that is deemed settled today, can be translated to thousands of other children and adults in this world. Even now.

Over and over again, as can be seen in present-day Syria, Afghanistan or the Ukraine.

This is what makes this story relevant and important to society, because the past can repeat itself. Especially if one forgets one's own history.

It's the words of his father, »When we make money, then we can fulfil our dreams, have our own shop and build a house for you«, and the joyful and proud mindset on which they are based, which Adnan keeps recalling during these eight days.

Only his father's words provide him with the strength not to lose hope, not to despair and not to give up, despite his grave injuries and the looming danger.

Father
April 1993

The days are happy with you
And each one is an adventure too.
You have so many ideas and stories for me
Which shape and form me.
You are my role model and my hero,
You, my father!

The Night
April 1993

»When the imam calls to evening prayers, you have to be home. And not one second later!«

My mother's words cross my mind. Today again, they were so insistent, when I left our home in the afternoon to play. This coming home on time never used to be an issue. Mother has become over-protective and anxious at the same time, in the last couple of months. There is no doubt, our parents want to protect us from something. My two sisters and me. From what or from whom, I don't know. When I ask, the answer is always the same:

»It's nothing, don't worry!«

But it must be something terrible. So disturbing that it has changed our parents somehow. In a way that I even sometimes believe, these are different people before me. People that I love and respect, but that I don't recognise anymore. Fear has been written all over my mother's face for weeks.

This is hard to understand for me. By drawing pictures in my head I try to imagine what the problem could be. But I realise that this only heightens my own fear. Every sound makes me shudder. Now it's here, it's coming to get us! Whatever it may be! I can feel the horror. It's coming closer. It's surrounding us. It's casting an invisible net around us. Visible to no one, but still one feels able to grasp it. It's something bad, for which I can't find a pattern in my mind. I lie in bed and my thoughts circle around the next day.

*I hope that tomorrow more friends will come to play again.
Strange, none of the Croat children came to school today.*

There, my heart is racing again, I can literally hear it. The same thoughts come back over and over. Like they often did in the last few days. What would I have given to sleep next to my sisters, only not be

alone. And to be able to block these images. Those images swirling in my mind and that I simply cannot understand.

Unable to sleep, I turn from one side to another. Something is wrong. I perceive the darkness and the night differently, since I know that there is something there. A threat. The darkness suddenly feels cool, as if someone was blowing cold air on you. Like in winter, when you play outside. Invisible to others, staring at me, I imagine something that is slowly coming towards me. In the darkness everything feels alive. The trees. Their shadows take up forms, sometimes they are faces looking at me threateningly. It used to be different. »The others« seem to determine the events, our actions, our everyday life. Not directly, but they take possession of the spirits and minds of the inhabitants. For weeks, they've been setting the pace and lead us, as if we were puppets. At least that's the way it is with the adults of our village. And we children don't know how to deal with these impressions. Can't process them. How could we. We don't know this kind of fear. We've all grown up feeling secure and cared for. A good village life for us children, without barriers or problems.

I shouldn't have told Mother that the Croat children did not come to school today.

This preoccupied her the whole day, and she was like a different person. But actually, her behaviour did not surprise me, because it had been changing for months now. When my father's company had been bombed and he had lost his job. Since then she had been anxious, easy to scare and overcautious. The slightest noise makes her flinch. During the day it's not that bad. But when night falls, she becomes gripped by fear, and is unable to shake off. Her behaviour is so different then, without her however becoming less caring towards us children. Quite the opposite, she becomes more caring every day. So that it's sometimes becoming too much for us. But everything else about her is not the same. Our mother. She has become a different person.

Father was very quiet, when he came home at night. A good sign. He doesn't seem to share my mother's anxieties. Not even, when

she told him about school. But despite his calm, he appeared even more preoccupied and helpless than in the last months, since the men have been doing their rounds. He hasn't been going to work for a few months now. He used to be at the factory during the week and home for the weekend, when he was mostly helping out the neighbours. »We have to make money«, he told me over and over, when we had the Sundays to ourselves.

»Then we can fulfil our dreams. Have our own shop. And build a house for you«, he said full of pride.

But that is over now too. He is home all the time, unless he is doing his rounds with the men at night. They are armed then, each the men has a gun. My father does not actually own a gun, but when they are doing their rounds, they carry guns. Even though I am only 13 years old, I notice that something is off in our village. Perhaps something has already happened. And so that it won't happen again, the men go on their nightly patrol. With weapons.

That must be it.

I imagine the most horrible things. I am sure that my parents know something, but won't tell us children. They don't want to scare us. And so everything feels all right again, my thoughts are dissipating. Everything is all right!

But so much has become funny. Different somehow. In the village. At school. On the football ground. Just everywhere. And that hasn't just occurred to me. Also to my friends. Even though many of them don't come to my place anymore.

Surely, that must be connected to »the others« that their parents won't let them come anymore.

I am tired. In my mind, the events of the day change minute by minute, and this is why I can't sleep, although I am tired. My thoughts circle around the day at school again.

The children from the next village did not come to school today.

Normally we take the same bus. In my class too they were all missing. And in the afternoon Igor and Sladjana from the house across from us left by car. They both had their large backpacks with them, as if they were going on a trip. A hour later, their father came back. Without the two of them.

Strange. It's not the holidays, and school is on again on Monday.

There it is again, this strange feeling in my belly, which I usually get before exams. Or when I've done something wrong and I am waiting for my father's reaction. It's hard to describe. It feels as if everything tightens and starts to tingle. Fear and queasiness are starting to mount. Why don't the neighbours inform us, if they know something about »the others«. Then we could have left too. Which is what my mother is telling my father we should do. Go to the upper village, to my grandmother. My parents don't want to leave, and so going to the upper part of the village already provides a little added security. In the village everyone knows everyone else and everyone helps the neighbours out. Everyone watches everyone else. And everyone knows everything about everyone else. Normally.

But in the last few weeks, these rules seem to fall apart. The women don't gossip in front of the store, the men don't chat on the street. A few groups of men are standing next to one other. But only separately. Not like before, when they stood together. The main street of the village has become an unsurmountable barrier.

I am staring at the opposite wall. The clock is ticking and I can see the small red light of the television. My room on the first floor is actually our kitchen. I am sleeping on the sofa. My own room. My two sisters have to share one. I squint and look at the clock. Even though it's pitch dark outside, there is a reflection in the window, so that the dial is being slightly illuminated. Enough to read the time. It is 10 p.m. already.

*You have to sleep now. Tomorrow a new day is waiting for you,
to play with friends. It's the weekend, no school.*

The endless thoughts won't let me come to rest, however. I am trying to distract myself. To tell myself that my father knows what he's doing. He always has the right advice or the right answer to every problem. Now too. I am sure about that!

Tomorrow is a Saturday, I don't have to go to school.

The queasiness in my belly does not disappear, however. It is persistent, nourished by uncertainty. The evil is here. I can feel it, with its invisible cold breath. But I can't grasp or see it, to understand it. Finally, my eyelids are getting heavy.

Suddenly I am being roused from sleep. The scary and anxious cries of my parents reach my ears. I am disoriented, don't know what's happening. Even though I have been roused from sleep, I can pull myself together quickly. My eyes move to the window, to the garden in the back. I can see that it's very bright. Too bright for this time of day. I look at the kitchen clock. It's half past five. Actually, it should still be dark. Around me it seems to be raining broken glass, that's the way it sounds. This well-known clattering sound of breaking windows is starting to become constant, accompanied by the snap of bursting tiles. This unreal and overwhelming sound increases second by second. Mixed with the unmistakable weeping of my sisters, and my mother's cries. Panic is gripping me. I run to the window and shudder.

The village's houses are ablaze. It's dark on the horizon, the fire in our village is turning the night into day. My mother's cries don't stop. They are desperate and helpless. My whole body starts to shake, and I am standing there, as if rooted to the spot. I don't know what to make of the images before me.

What happened? Is it here? Or are they? »The others«.

My father flings my door open and storms in.

»Quick, we have to go down, our house is on fire.«

His voice sounds so strange. I stare at him, but can't utter a word. My father's face, distorted by fear and hard to recognise! Father has tears in his eyes.

My sisters whimper. Out of fear and despair. But mostly because they don't know what is going on, because they don't know what to make of our mother's repeated scary sighs, the way she shakes her head. Over and over she's letting her head fall from one side to the other.

Flames are bursting from one of the rooms. Smoke is coming down from the attic, thick wads are winding down the stairs. The fire is illuminating the staircase and my parents' faces.

Father is white as a ghost. His eyes, wide open, seem to be popping from their sockets. He doesn't say a word. My mother's face is black and white. A mix of soot and tears, an unreal pattern created by wiping away tears. In spite of the gravity of the situation, she's trying to hide her feelings, trying not to make us children feel even more insecure. It's all so unreal. From one second to the next, our entire life was turned upside down. Without any warning. Just like that.

My heart is racing and seems to want to jump out of my breast. The blood is pulsing in my ears, my temples throb, my veins are about to burst. I am standing next to my door, as if frozen. Time has stopped. At least for us. But not for the fire. It's spreading very fast. Its yellow tongues are avidly shooting out of the rooms into the hallway. It's constantly getting hotter and more unbearable.

»We have to go down, we can't stay here«, my father's voice calls out loudly.

Quickly, we gather some clothes from our rooms and scramble down to the ground floor. We slip under the curtain on the right of the stairs. First us children and then my parents.

»Babo, what happened, why is our house on fire – and the whole village?«

My voice is cracking out of excitement and fear, so that I have to start twice. But my father doesn't answer. There is probably too much going through his head. The fear for his family, but also for his own life is written into his face.

»We must hide here, be quiet, we'll be all right there. We'll be safe if the fire doesn't come down, and can leave the house as soon as it gets light.«

He turns to my mother and takes her head in both hands.

»My love, I know I should've listened to you. I'm sorry. But trust me, we will be out of here fast and then we'll go to somewhere safe. The way you wanted.«

My mother's sigh breaks the short silence.

»Trust me, my love!«

My mother doesn't say a word, she only looks into my father's face, impassively. Only her deep sobs can be heard.

What might be going through my mother's head? Her fears of the last few months have all come true. She had been right.

Huddled together we cower below the staircase, one after the other slipping into their clothes. My father lights a candle, which we keep there for emergencies. The weak light illuminates the dark hiding-place slightly and makes it possible to see the outlines of faces. For the moment everyone seems to have quietened down a bit. But this impression is misleading. The silence reinforces the tension, and my sisters start to cry loudly.

»We can't stay here«, my mother suddenly says with a clear and calm voice.

»We have to get out of the house and hide away from the houses.«

Then she jumps up from her crouching position and runs towards the stairs. »If we leave, we need our money and the jewellery«, she calls down, while bounding up the stairs.

My father wants to hold her back, but this reaction was a

surprise to us all. Before he could do anything, she had already reached the middle of the stairs. Then we hear an ear-splitting bang and a piercing cry. Father and I jump from our hiding-place and see my mother stand at the upper end of the stairs. A shrill hissing sound and another loud bang shake the upper floor. My mother comes rushing down. Her voice is cracking. All the rooms are in flames and something was just thrown through the window. Shots can be heard from the outside. Uninterrupted salvos, first short and then longer. Accompanied by heavy explosions. I'm only noticing that now. It can't be ignored. They're getting louder. These are people shooting. People are the reason why my parents and many neighbours have been so distressed in the last few weeks. But now I notice, this is something else. Something unimaginable is happening. This is about our future. About our survival. About our lives. I can't think straight, but can't ask anyone in this situation. For explanations. For answers. I am on my own, even though I am surrounded by my family.

In school, we learned that there were wars from time to time. That people humiliate and kill each other. Just like that. But that was always so far away, both in time and in place. I imagined myself in these situations that our teacher told us about or I had read about in books. I thought about why people were doing that to each other. This question has often come to my head and occupied my thoughts. But these stories always felt so distant and unimaginable to me.

My father's words pull me out of my thoughts. The fire in the house is gaining strength and threatens to make it collapse. The smoke is getting thicker and the curtain does not protect us any longer. The smell is sharp and unbearable.

»We have to get out. We have to get away from here. The shots are coming from the street, so we have to get up to the village through the garden«, my father yells.

»First to Zijad's, and then further up.«

Thomas Obruča

(*1969 in St. Pölten, Lower Austria)

Today he is looking back on a 33year professional career as a civil servant in the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior. Constant curiosity, willingness to leave the beaten path and being open for any challenge enabled him, besides classical uniformed and criminal police work, to work across borders. »Internationality« has shaped his professional field of activity for 18 years. Eight of them took him to Bosnia and Herzegowina, where he was active within the framework of two UN foreign missions of the Ministry and further on working as special investigator of the War Crimes Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. His familiarity with the country and its recent history allow him to paint a memorable and realistic picture of this part of Europe.

He lives with his family in Hürm (Lower Austria) and is father of three children.

www.ahmici.com

Adnan Zec

(*1979 in Travnik, Bosnia)

He spent his childhood in Ahmići until he was expelled from his home by HVO soldiers in April 1993. After the end of the war he returned to his destroyed house, finished primary school in Vitez and secondary school in Novi Travnik. Yet, for safety reasons he had to leave the country shortly after.

After settling in The Netherlands, Adnan finished High School in the field of process technology. This has become his current, professional working environment in the Netherlands, where he now lives with his family.

Next to his employment Adnan has engaged himself in voluntary work and, whenever possible, gladly visits his Heimat and looks forward to living one day in Ahmići again.

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