A Remembrance

I met Kemal in late October 1996 when everyone associated with the Bosnia Library Project gathered in Washington for a ceremony of recognition hosted by Hillary Clinton at the White House. He created a vivid impression at first sight, appearing somewhat lupine, with a lean and hungry look like someone one might have encountered in a bar in a film by Jean-Pierre Melville, an appearance enhanced by his smoking. This distinguished him dramatically from the rest of us, probably a bunch of ex-smokers. Of course, he had seen things one should never have to see, including much more than his share of human folly and destructiveness, and had endured the privations of the siege, not long past, and I quickly discovered what a spirited and warm-hearted man he was, filled with ideas, projects, and hopes.

It was Kemal who dubbed our little group FOH (“Friends of Hillary”), and who, after a weeks' stay in my living room, which subs periodically as my guest room, declared it “my room,” and would reference it now and again in future years. He loved to make and then enshrine personal relationships by virtue of labels such as these, nicknames, and honorifics. Kemal managed to combine his darkly humorous, offbeat, verbally-riffing nature with an uncommon capacity to inspire and mobilize others to action. He remained undaunted by the tragedy and loss of the war, and, if anything, seemed prompted by them to achieve more rather than fall into depression and defeatism.

Kemal was the Bosnian who participated with me, and colleagues in Maribor, Slovenia, and London, in an effort to develop a proposal for the comprehensive modernization of Bosnian academic libraries, in order to get them back on their feet. His participation was critical in making this something that would be not only acceptable on the home front, but would fully exploit local capabilities rather than simply rely on outside resources. It remains my great regret that I was unable to find funding to fulfill our common vision and justify so much labor.

During my long-postponed, long-anticipated visit to Sarajevo in April 2005, given extra purpose and motivation by Kemal's invitation to speak at a conference he was planning, I grew concerned that there was something slightly amiss in his manner, which, however, I attributed to his exhaustion from the hard duties of organizing that notably successful event. My fears were allayed on my last full day in Sarajevo, largely spent with Kemal at the Zemaljski Muzej – about which he had proprietary feelings despite his lack of desire to become its director--walking and riding about being shown the Sarajevo of his childhood
and youth, and being taken to a lovely lunch high above the city, looking right down at the
Vijecnica, which had played such a role in my imagining of Bosnia and its fate, a
characteristically thoughtful gesture on his part. At that moment all seemed right in the world,
so it was a terrible shock to learn that our dear friend started manifesting acute symptoms
of what would prove to be his fatal illness scarcely a week later. Having lost four friends to
brain tumors already, I considered the prospects grim, but Kemal was, despite his many trials,
a hopeful person, filled with ideas and plans to the last, and I could only hope with him, with
Marina, and all of those who cared for him.

That this charismatic, deeply original, and capable man should have died so young is not
only a loss to Marina, his friends, colleagues and students, but to all of Bosnia. Every society
needs its special, imaginative people, whatever their fields of endeavor, who are largely
immune to the pettiness, hesitancy, corruption, and ideological blindness that warp the vision
and actions of so many.

My last, heartrending conversation with Kemal came roughly two weeks before he died.
Marina had prepared me for the fact that he was reduced to uttering phrases, yet he
remained perfectly lucid. I was attempting to carry the conversation, and began to describe
my planned visit to England, Belgium and Holland. After a while, Kemal quietly said, “I will
be there with you.” Knowing this to be his valedictory, but the kind of affirmation one would
expect from few others, and fighting tears, I responded, “Yes, Kemal, you will be with me
always,” after which there was nothing left to be said.

I am deeply saddened at the prospect that he will never visit his room again, but, far more
importantly, at the loss of future projects, of opportunities that would bring people together
for rewarding encounters, and for all the students who will never receive knowledge and
inspiration from him. I know numerous individuals whose most significant common bond
will be that they were Friends of Kemal.

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