Filling the empty cup

The coffee culture of Bosnia fuels the work of visual artist Aida Sehovic

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White as snow and barely bigger than a thimble, the Bosnian coffee cup represents more than just a porcelain container for a stiff, caffeinated drink. It brings Bosnians together to talk, to enjoy life, to keep the bonds of family and friendship strong.

When war hit Bosnia two decades ago, those bonds were broken violently and, in many cases, permanently. Like most Bosnians, Aida Sehovic couldn’t begin to comprehend why.

Sehovic and her family fled Bosnia in 1992 when she was a teenager and eventually settled in the safe haven of Vermont. They returned to Bosnia for a visit a decade ago, when victims of genocide killed during the Bosnian War were being excavated and reburied. That’s when Sehovic began to grasp the magnitude of what happened in her homeland.

“I realized how lucky I was, me and my family,” she said. “We managed to kind of rebuild our lives. But I just don’t understand it, this systematic organized violence that we all silently take part in.”

“We’re complicit.”

Sehovic, who studied art at the University of Vermont, knew what she had to do. She had to tell the story of her country. And to tell that story, she would use the tiny, humble, all-important coffee cup.

‘Silent extermination’

The coffee-cup metaphor applies to Sehovic’s life growing up in Banja Luka, the second-largest city in Bosnia, not far from the border with Croatia. Her childhood was all about togetherness. She re-

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calls innocent times with her sister and cousins in the huge yard at her grandmother’s large house near the Vrbas River.

“That was funny too,” Sehovic said by phone from New York City, where she lives and works as an artist.

One thing she doesn’t remember from her childhood is division between people of different religions, because there wasn’t any. “It really didn’t matter,” Sehovic said. She knew her Muslim family celebrated different holidays than the Catholics, Orthodox Serbs and Jews who lived in Banja Luka, but the cultures coexisted peacefully. “I had friends on all sides, and before the war I wasn’t aware they were on different sides.”

That changed in 1991 as the nation of Yugoslavia began crumbling with the fall of Communism. “Obviously we started hearing news about horrific things happening in Croatia, very close to us,” Sehovic said. “You could see a sense of fear that was worrying my parents.”

Banja Luka had a large military base that produced weapons, and Sehovic said the city of 350,000 became a center of nationalist Bosnian Serb military groups. Soldiers flooded the city. “It was a very eerie presence,” Sehovic said. “It kind of crept up slowly.”

The military began initiating attacks from Banja Luka. Police installed barricades and enacted curfews. Soldiers stopped children on the way to school, asking for identification. One day Sehovic and some friends skipped school and went to a café; drunken soldiers gathered in a corner, and one soldier pulled out a gun.

Those kinds of incidents started becoming part of life, and that was very scary,” Sehovic said. “It was like this quiet, silent extermination and pushing out of the non-Serb population.”

By May of 1992, her family had to act. “I think it was frustrating and confusing because there was not too much explanation. From what I remember, basically our parents sat us down and said, ‘We are leaving. You are leaving with your mother in three days but you can’t tell anybody,’” Sehovic said. “I think I was in denial because at that age you can’t even imagine what war is.”

She, her mother, sister, grandmother, aunt and cousins boarded a bus out of the city, and one soldier pulled out a gun as if nothing dramatic was happening. “But look,” Sehovic remembers thinking to herself. “Nobody cares.”

Her family relocated to Turkey, where her mother found out she was pregnant with twins (Sehovic’s twin sisters are now 21 and seniors at UVM). Shehovic was sure the troubles in Banja Luka would end and her family would go back to Bosnia after the summer. They stayed in Turkey, where her father joined them before relocating to Germany. The family reunited with him there after a friend paid another family to drive them through a loose German checkpoint. Sehovic and her family were allowed to stay in Germany until 1997. They felt they couldn’t return to post-war, Serb-dominated Banja Luka, so they moved to the United States.

Sehovic was 20 when she landed in Burlington on June 9, 1997. She earned her GED and applied to all the famous American colleges, including Harvard.

“I just remember dreaming — I guess that’s why I’m an artist — believing I could get into these schools,” Sehovic said. Her mother suggested UVM. Sehovic recalls a pointed conversation with an admissions counselor.

“If I don’t get in I’m going to die,” Sehovic told the counselor. “You don’t understand what I went through.”

“Part of who we are”

No one in Sehovic’s family was an artist. She always enjoyed drawing, but became captivated by three-dimensional art

People pour coffee into cups in July 2011 in front of Burlington City Hall as part of Aida Sehovic’s project “Sto Te Nema?” in memory of more than 8,000 Muslim boys and men who were systematically killed in United Nations protected “safe areas” of Srebrenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Bosnian civil war. FILE

Aida Sehovic’s “Sto Te Nema?” monument in Stockholm, Sweden on July 11, 2009. FILE

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through a class taught by Kathleen Schneider at UVM.

“That really changed everything for me,” Sehovic said. Schneider asked students to research contemporary artists, and Sehovic chose one who explored loss and death in Colombian society. Suddenly, Sehovic had a way to come to grips with loss and death in her own Bosnian society.

“It just opened up this world to me to express myself,” she said. For her honors thesis, Sehovic created a tree suspended on a rough frame, with the tree’s roots cut off and red with blood, accompanied by a poem about the pain of leaving.

“It was all very personal, very literal,” Sehovic said. “But powerful.”

She graduated from UVM in 2002. The following year was when she and her family took the trip to Bosnia that inspired her coffee-cup project titled “Sto Te Nema?” or “Why are you not here?” in Bosnian.

“Sto Te Nema?” represents the Bosnian women who poured coffee while waiting for the men of their households to return; many of them, of course, never came back. The empty coffee cups sit on the ground, waiting to be filled with thick Bosnian-style coffee made throughout the day.

“This monument,” Sehovic said, “is about loss and grieving and remembering.”

Sehovic had what she thought would be a one-time display of “Sto Te Nema?” in Bosnia’s largest city, Sarajevo, eight years ago. She emailed women who survived the war and explained that she wanted to collect coffee cups for her project. Some people thought she was crazy, she said, but she brought in 932 cups that first year.

Now, Sehovic has about 3,500 cups. She presents “Sto Te Nema?” once a year in cities throughout the world, including Burlington in 2011, Istanbul last year and New York City this year. The project has influenced all the work she does, including a recent installation in Long Island City where she set up a fully-interactive military-style obstacle course meant to explore the idea that we’re all complicit in the world’s violence.

The obstacle course and the coffee cups are effective, Sehovic said, because they’re personal. “I’m still growing and learning as an artist, but I realize my best projects are where I allow the public to directly be a part of it,” she said. “I’m not interested in creating a painting that someone admires from a distance. That’s beautiful, but I’m interested in something else. I’m interested in the intimacy of the experience.”

“Sto Te Nema?” allows participants to process violence, especially the violence of the Bosnian War, on a meaningful level, Sehovic said.

“It allows this horrific event not to be forgotten and ignored, which I think is a tendency, and I think that’s why history repeats itself,” she said. “It allows us to remember what has happened and commemorate the lives that were lost.”

“And on another level,” Sehovic said, “it also allows Bosnians, no matter where they are, the Bosnian diaspora, to connect to this part of our history and reality that’s very painful for a lot of us, but at the same time it’s part of who we are. I can never forget that I wouldn’t be here (in America) if the war hadn’t happened.”

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