



Essay

My Stay in a Wounded Town by Jelena Madir

Jelena Madir lives in Split, Croatia, where she studies English, German and Latin in the third form of the Language Grammar School. Concurrently, she is learning Italian and Spanish at a private school. Among her many interests are swimming, running, reading, and writing. She sings in her church's choir and plays piano.

I used to spend every summer holiday in Dubrovnik, the most beautiful town in Croatia. That custom had to be given up two years ago because of the war that broke out in those parts and because of the barbaric attacks upon that beautiful town. This year, circumstances allowed me to return to this dear, but badly damaged town and to spend most of my summer holiday there.

Dubrovnik is one of the most beautiful towns in the world, and well-known for its natural beauties, culture, and notable people. Unfortunately, it was not lucky enough to escape serious destruction caused by the brutal Serbian attacks. I saw the damage with my own eyes while strolling through the old, historical part of town.

First I went to Sponza, one of the most beautiful palaces in Dubrovnik. It houses historical archives and important historical data concerning countries in the Balkans, as well as those countries (Serbia and Montenegro) that were trying to destroy this town monument. If the palace had caught fire, much of our historical identity would have been lost to sight forever.

The roof of the town museum was hit by a high-explosive shell; during the war it was used as a shelter. Just accidentally, or perhaps not, the museum was hit exactly above the entrance to the shelter.

Mineta, one of four stone fortresses which make up part of the town walls,

was a target of rigorous and cruel attacks. Yet, she managed to resist and remains strong, solid, vigorous, and unbreakable. There she stands, eager as ever for the writers, actors, and the famous Dubrovnik Summer Festival.

Hundreds of monuments were damaged in the worst attacks on Dubrovnik. And if we add the damage caused by detonations, we may conclude that irreparable harm has been done to this old town, a town on the UNESCO register of protected monumental zones. So

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when we say "a protected monument," we have every right to doubt and distrust and to be disappointed in the worth of the resolutions, laws and rules.

Talking to my friends and other inhabitants of the town, I heard all kinds of stories about life without water and electricity lasting several months, and about the tragic death of young people who were eager for life, love and all the joy life can offer. They were hiding in the shelters like moles, with no sight of sunbeams, with no whiffs of wind. Only with hope in their hearts. The cheerful games with friends, crazy rides on motorcycles, long walks in the evening—they are all gone now. All at once, they have become mature adults who were forced to experience the worst aspects of life so early. It seems they have already learned all there is to know about life's sorrows. Now, al-

though the war is over, they are all still tense and feel great uncertainty and insecurity. They are afraid of the future. Older boys mostly think about military activities and engagements. Quite a lot of young men were killed; many of them became disabled and will bear scars of war for the rest of their lives. Thousands of children lost their parents: how can we expect them to forget the horrors of this terrible war? How can one forgive killers when among their victims are children as well? And who is going to replace someone you were close to?

What kinds of thoughts are in the heads of those who caused all these horrible and indescribable monstrosities? Do these people know the stricken faces of the children, their eyes full of fear? Already they look like old people. Do they know how horrible it is to see burned and razed houses, abandoned streets that used to be full of children's laughter and life? Residents of these villages were forced to leave their homes in a hurry, taking only the most essential things. They left behind not only their property, cultivated fields and cattle, but also all those "unimportant details" such as children's toys and family albums.

And what kind of childhood will these children have? Wistful memories of the past, of the friends killed, and longing for the native soil that used to be theirs fill their hearts. It is almost unbelievable that such atrocities should have been possible now at the dawn of the twenty-first century as we stand on the threshold to a new world of freedom, democracy and creativity.

Despite all of this, the agonized citizens of Dubrovnik and thousands of refugees from its destroyed and burned surroundings—even the frightened pigeons in the cathedral tower—have kept up their spirits. They have reaffirmed the priceless value of liberty. This town has always considered that value as something sublime, something sacred.

Dubrovnik is a cultural treasure, a culture of ancient origin that has always stood in defense of civilization. Even though enemy criminals have threatened it, even though they have managed to destroy some of its beauty in their cruel and inhuman aggression, we will persevere and remedy that! These values are inseparable parts of our heritage and always will be. ★