

# CAUGHT IN A WAR ZONE

By Aleksander Hemon



**Croats, Serbs, Muslims and others fought over territory in the former Yugoslavia in the brutal Bosnian War which raged from 1992 until 1995 when a peace agreement was brokered and signed in Ohio America**

Below Aleksander Hemon tells the story of his family and their Irish Setter Mek who resided in Sarajevo, Bosnia at the beginning the war - Ed

My family's first and only dog arrived in the spring of 1991. That April, my sister drove with her new boyfriend to Novi Sad, a town in northern Serbia, hundreds of miles from Sarajevo, where there was an Irish Setter breeder she'd somehow tracked down. In her early 20s, my sister was still living with our parents, but she'd long asserted her unimpeachable right to do whatever she felt like. Thus, without even consulting Mama and Tata, with the money she's saved from her modelling gigs, she bought a gorgeous, blazingly auburn Irish Setter puppy. When she brought him home, Tata was shocked – city dogs were self-evidently useless, a resplendent Irish Setter even more so – and unconvincingly demanded that she return him immediately. Mama offered some predictable rhetorical resistance to yet another creature (after a couple of cats she'd had to mourn) she would worry about excessively, but it was clear she fell in love with the dog on the spot. Within a day or two he chewed up someone's shoe and was instantly forgiven. We named him Mek.

In a small city like Sarajevo, where people are tightly interconnected and no one can live in isolation, all experiences end up shared. Just as Mek joined our family, my best friend Veba, who lived across the street from us, acquired a dog himself, a German shepherd named Don. Cika-Vlado, Veba's father, a low ranking officer of the Yugoslav People's Army, was working at a military warehouse near Sarajevo where a guard dog gave birth to a litter of puppies. Veba drove over to his father's workplace and picked the slowest, clumsiest

puppy, as he knew that, if they were to be destroyed, that one would be the first one to go. Veba had been my sister's first boyfriend and the only one I'd ever really liked. We were often inseparable, particularly after we'd started making music and playing in a band together. After my sister managed to get over their break-up, they renewed their friendship.

Soon after the puppies arrived, they'd take them out for a walk at the same time. I was no longer living with my parents, but often came home for food and family time, particularly after Mek's arrival – I loved to take him out. My childhood dream of owning a pet fulfilled by my indomitable sister. Veba and I would walk with Mek and Don by the river, or sit on a bench and watch them roll in the grass, smoking and talking about music and books, girls and movies, while our dogs gnawed playfully at each others throats. I don't know how dogs really become friends, but Mek and Don were as close friends as Veba and I were.

Much of the summer of 1991 I spent in Kiev, Ukraine, managing to be present for the demise of the Soviet Union and Ukraine's declaration of independence. That same summer, the war in Croatia progressed rapidly from incidents to massacres, from skirmishes to the Yugoslav People's Army's completely destroying the town called Vukovar. When I returned from Ukraine at the end of August, there was not yet fighting in Sarajevo – the siege would commence the following spring – but the war had already settled in people's minds, fear, confusion and drugs reigned. I had no money, so a friend of mine offered me hack work on a porn magazine (he thought that people would want distraction from the oncoming disaster) but I declined, because I didn't want bad sex writing (as though there were any other kind) to be the last thing I'd done if I were to be killed in the war. I packed a car full of books and moved up to our cabin on a mountain called Jahorina to read as many thick classical novels as possible (and write a slim volume of muddled stories) before the war consigned everything and all to death and oblivion. If I was going down, I was going down reading and writing.

I stayed in the mountain from September to December, I read the fat classics (War and Peace, The Magic Mountain) and Kafka's letters. I wrote stuff full of madness, death and wordplay, I listened to music while staring at the embers in our fireplace, I chopped wood. At night, I could hear the tree branches over our cabin scratching the roof in the wind, the wooden frame creaked and, occasionally the bell of a lost cow echoed through the dense night. Years later, I would struggle to perform exercises that were supposed to help me with managing my frequent outbursts of anger. On the advice of my therapist, I'd try to control my breathing while envisioning in detail a place I associated with peace and safety, I'd invariably invoke our cabin in the mountains, the smooth surface of the wooden table my father built without using a single nail; a cluster of old ski passes hanging under the mute cuckoo clock; the ancient fridge whose brand name – *Obod Cetinje* – were the first words I read by myself. The peace and safety belonged to the time I'd spent in the cabin when reading in solitude cleared my mind and my hurt was healed by the crisp mountain air and ubiquitous pine smell.

Mek would also feature prominently in my anger-management visualizations. My parents and sister occasionally gave him leave to keep me company in the mountains. Before sleep, his steady breathing would calm me, distracting me from the cacophony of night sounds. In the early morning, his long warm tongue would wake me up, pasting my face with his happy saliva. He'd put his head in my lap as I read and I'd scratch him behind his ears. I'd go out hiking with him by my side, the thoughts generated by what I'd been reading racing in my head, just as Mek raced up and down the mountain slopes. When Veba came to visit me, we hiked together, while Mek and Don chased each other, stopping only to try to excavate phantom subterranean rodents.

We fantasized that, when the war came to Sarajevo, we could always retreat with our dogs to Jahorina and stay up there until it was all over. The last time we went up to the mountains was to mark the arrival of 1992 – we didn't know then that the week we spent together would amount to a farewell party to our common Sarajevo life. Apart from my sister and me and our friends – 10 humans in total – there were also three dogs: Mek, Don, and our friend Gusa's Laki, an energetic dog of indeterminate breed (Gusa called him a cocktail spaniel); In the restricted space of a smallish mountain cabin, the humans would trip over the dogs, while they'd often get into their canine arguments and would have to be pulled apart. On night, playing cards into the wee hours, Gusa and I got into a chest-thumping argument, which made the dogs crazy – there was enough barking and screaming to blow the roof off, but I recall that moment with warmth, for all the intense intimacy of our shared previous life was in it.

A couple of weeks later, I departed for the United States, never to return to our mountain cabin. My sister and Veba remember the last time they took Mek and Don for a walk before the war started. It was April 1992 and there was shooting up in the hills around Sarajevo, a Yugoslav People's Army plane menacingly broke the sound barrier above the city, the dogs barked like crazy. They said "See you later!" to each other as they parted, but would not see each other for five years.

Soon thereafter, my sister followed her latest boyfriend to Belgrade. My parents stayed behind for a couple of weeks, during which time sporadic gunfire and shelling increased daily. I'd call from Chicago and ask how things were and my mother would say "They're already shooting less than yesterday." More and more, they spent time with their neighbours in the improvised basement shelter. On May 2, 1992 with Mek in tow, Mama and Tata took a train out of Sarajevo before the relentless siege commenced – indeed, half an hour after the train left, the station was subject to a rocket attack; no other train would leave the city for 10 years or so.

My parents were heading to the village in north western Bosnia where my father was born, a few miles from the town of Prnjavor, which came under Serb control. My dead grand parents house still stood on a hill called Vucijak (translatable as Wolfhill). My father had been keeping beehives on my

grandparents' homestead and insisted on leaving Sarajevo largely because it was time to attend to the bees and prepare them for the summer. In wilful denial of the distinct possibility that they might not return for a long time, they brought no warm clothes or passports, just a small bag of summer clothes. All they had was left in Sarajevo.

They spent the first few months of the war on Vucijak, their chief means of sustenance my father's bee-keeping and my mother's vegetable garden. Convoys of drunken Serbian soldiers passed by the house on their way to an ethnic cleansing operation or returning from the front line where they fought the Bosnian forces, singing songs of slaughter or angrily shooting in the air. When the air was clear, my parents, cowering in the house, secretly listened to the news from the besieged Sarajevo. Mek would sometimes happily chase after the military trucks and my parents desperately ran after him, calling out, terrified that the drunken soldiers might shoot him for malicious fun.

Sometime that summer, Mek fell ill. He could not get up on his feet, he refused food and water and there was blood in his urine. My parents laid him on the floor in the bathroom, which was the coolest space in the house – where there was no air conditioning and meals were cooked on a wood stove. My mother would stroke Mek, talking to him, while he looked straight into her eyes – she always claimed he understood everything she told him. They called the vet, but the vet station had only one car at its disposal, which was continuously on the road with the vet on call attending to all the sick animals in the area. It took a couple of days before a vet finally came by. He instantly recognized that Mek was riddled with deer ticks, all of them bloated with his blood, poisoning him. The prognosis was not good, he said, but at the vet station he could give him a shot that might help. My father borrowed my uncle's tractor and cart in which pigs were normally transported to market or slaughter. He put the limp Mek in the cart and drove down the hill, all the way to Prnjavor, to get the shot that could save his life. On his way, he was passed by the Serb Army trucks, the soldiers looking down on the panting Mek.

The magic injection worked and Mek lived, recovering after a few days, but then it was my mother's turn to get terribly sick. Her gall bladder was infected, as it was full of stones – back in Sarajevo, she'd been advised to undergo surgery to remove them, but she'd kept postponing her decision and then the war broke out. Now, her brother, my uncle Milisav, drove down from Subotica, a town at the Serbian-Hungarian border, and took her back with him for urgent surgical treatment. My father had to wait for his friend Dragan to come and get Mek and her. While my father was preparing his beehives for his long absence, Mek would lie nearby, stretched in the grass, keeping her company.

A few days after Mama's departure, Tata's friend Dragan arrived. On the way to get my father, he was stopped at the checkpoint at the top of Vucijak. The men at the checkpoint were drunk and impatient. They asked Dragan where

he was heading, and when he told them my father was waiting for him they menacingly informed him that they'd been watching my father closely for a while, that they knew all about him (my father's family was ethnically Ukrainian – earlier that year the Ukrainian Church in Prnjavar had been blown up by the Serbs) and that they were well aware of his son (of me, that is) who had written against the Serbs and was now in America. They were just about ready to take care of my father once and for all, they told Dragan. The men belonged to a paramilitary unit that called itself Vukovi (the Wolves) and were led by one Veljko, whom a few years earlier my father had thrown out of a meeting he'd organized to discuss bringing in running water from a nearby mountain well. Veljko went on to Austria to pursue a rewarding criminal career, only to return right before the war to put his paramilitary unit together,. "You let Hemon know we're coming", the Wolves told Dragan as they let him through.

When Dragan reported the incident, which he took very seriously, my father thought it would be better to try to get out as soon as possible rather than waiting for the Wolves to come at night and slit his throat. When they drove up the road to the checkpoint, the guard shift had just changed and the new men were not drunk, or churlish enough to care, so my father and Dragan were waved through. The Wolves at the checkpoint failed to sniff out or see Mek, because Tata kept him down on the floor. Later on, in their mindless rage, or possibly trying to steal the honey, the Wolves destroyed my father's hives. In a letter he'd send me in Chicago he'd tell me that of all the losses the war inflicted upon him, losing his bees was the most painful.

On their way toward the Serbian border, Tata and Dragan passed many checkpoints. My father was concerned that if those manning the checkpoints saw a beautiful Irish setter, they'd immediately understand that he was coming from a city, as there were few auburn Irish Setters in the Bosnian countryside largely populated by mangy mutts and wolves. Furthermore, the armed men could easily get pissed at someone trying to save a fancy dog in the middle of a war, when people were killed left and right. At each checkpoint, Mek would try to get up and my father would press him down with his hand, whispering calming words into his ear. Mek would lie back down. He never produced a sound, never insisted on standing up, and, miraculously, no one at the checkpoints noticed him.

My father and Mek eventually joined my mother in Subotica. When she sufficiently recovered from her gall-bladder surgery, my parents moved to Novi Sad, not far away from Subotica, where Mama's other brother owned a little one-bedroom apartment. They spent a year or so there, trying all along to get the papers to emigrate to Canada. During that time, Tata was often gone for weeks, working in Hungary with Dragan's construction company. Mama longed for Sarajevo, was devastated with what was happening in Bosnia,. insulted by the relentless Serbian propaganda that was pouring out of TV and radio. She spent days crying and Mek would put his head in her lap and look up at her with his moist setter look, and my mother talked to him as to her only friend. Every day, she had a hard time confronting the fact that they had lost

everything they'd worked for their whole life, the only remnant of their comfortable previous life was the gorgeous Irish setter.

The one-bedroom in Novi Sad was often full of refugees from Bosnia – friends of friends or family of the family – whom my parents put up until the unfortunate people could make it to Germany or France or some other place where they were not wanted and never would be. They slept scattered all over the floor, my mother stepping over the bodies on her way to the bathroom, Mek always at her heels. He never bothered the refugees, never barked at those miserable people. He let the children pet him.

Young male that he was, Mek would often brawl with other dogs. Once, when my mother took him out, he got into a confrontation with a mean Rottweiler. She tried to separate them, unwisely, as they were about to go at each other's throats, and the Rottweiler tore my mother's hand apart. My sister Tina was there at the time, and she took Mama to the emergency room where they had absolutely nothing needed to treat the injury, they did give her the address of a doctor who could sell them the bandages and a tetanus shot. They spent all of the money they had to pay the doctor and then take a cab back home. In fact, they didn't have enough to pay the cab and the driver said he'd come the next day to get the rest of the money. My sister bluntly told him that there was no reason for him to come back, for they'd have no money tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, or anytime soon (the cabbie didn't insist" The daily inflation in Serbia at that time was 300% and the money would have been worthless by the next day anyway). For years afterward, Mama could not move her hand properly or grip anything with it, Mek would go crazy if he but smelled a Rottweiler on the same block.

In the fall of 1993, my parents and sister finally got all the papers and the plane tickets for Canada. Family and friends came over to bid them farewell. Everyone was sure they'd never see them again, and my parents and sister knew that emigrating to Canada would irreversibly sever all connections with their previous life. There were a lot of tears, as at a funeral. Mek figured out that something was up, he never let my mother or father out of his sight, as if worried they might leave him, he became especially cuddly, putting his head into their laps whenever he could, leaning against their shins when lying down. Touched though my father may have been with Mek's love, he didn't want to take him along to Canada – he couldn't know what was waiting for them there, where they'd live, whether he'd be able to take care of themselves, let alone a dog. Tata called me in Chicago to demand from me that I reason with Mama and Tina and convince them that Mek must be left behind. :Mek is family", I told him, "Do not cross the ocean without him." But I knew that Tata had a point and my heart sank to my stomach at the thought of their leaving him. My mother could not bring herself to discuss the possibility of moving to Canada without him' she just wept at the very thought of abandoning him with people who were strangers to him.

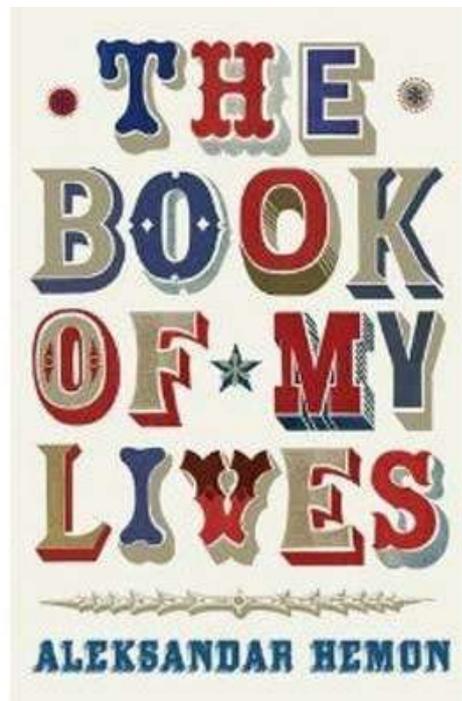
In December, my parents, sister and Mek, drove to Budapest. At the airport, my sister negotiated a cheap ticket and a place in the cargo hold for Mek.

After they arrived in Canada, I rushed over from Chicago to see them for the first time in two very rough years. As soon as I walked in the door of their barely furnished 15<sup>th</sup> floor apartment in Hamilton, Ontario, Mek ran toward me, wagging his tail. I was astonished that he remembered me after nearly two years, I'd felt that large parts of my Sarajevo self had vanished, but when Mek put his head in my lap, some of me came back. Mek had a happy life in Hamilton, My mother always said that he was a "lucky boy". He died in 2007 at the age of 17. My parent would never consider having a dog again. My mother confides in a parakeet these days and cries whenever Mek is but mentioned.

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## THE AUTHOR



Aleksandar Hemon was born on 9<sup>th</sup> September 1964 and graduated from the University of Sarajevo. He was a published writer in the former Yugoslavia by the time he was 26. In 1992 he emigrated to America, residing in Chicago and his first work in English was published in 1995. He is noted for his articles and, short stories many of which have appeared in newspapers and periodicals, He has also written several novels and his autobiography The Book of My Lives, which was published in 2013