STATE OF THE UNION

Bosnia's Lonely European

A child of the Holocaust, Jakob Finci pushes for reconciliation after another genocidal war.

By Matthew Kaminski

SARAJEVO, Bosnia-Herzegovina—Why is Bosnia so free of anti-Semitism, asks Jakob Finci, a mischievous smile on his face? "Because the Muslims, Croats and Serbs are all too busy hating each other to hate us."

The black humor rings sadly true each time I visit him in Sarajevo and hear this one-liner. The awful civil war in Bosnia ended six years ago. The three national factions continue their war for power and land by other means. After a few days, the open wounds of this place—country may be too generous a word—leave me depressed and eager to get out.

Jakob Finci could leave, too. But this seventh-generation Sarajevan has a humble wish not to be the last Finci buried in this town. In the years I've known him, he has been busy trying to save and perhaps revive a bit of the old spirit of Bosnia, of tolerance, of mixed races living together.

The brutal ethnic cleansing campaigns of the early 1990s make such visions seem romantic, possibly foolish. Maybe they are. Yet Mr. Finci has become Bosnia's walking conscience. His public efforts are taken seriously.

As a Jew who survived the Holocaust and stayed on in Europe, he personifies the possibility of reconciliation. He is the leader of a small community of about a 1,000 and his family and friends are the few Bosnians who have no choice but to believe in the possibility of a multi-ethnic future here. "We the Jews are a minority all over the world except in Israel," Mr. Finci tells me on one of my visits with him. "We show it's possible to live together even if you are a minority."

During the Bosnian war, Mr. Finci sent his children abroad but stayed put in Sarajevo. He helped deliver humanitarian aid; after the 1995 Dayton peace deal, he has made reconciliation a personal mission. "Without reconciliation everything"—the economic aid, the thousands of peacekeepers, the six years of a fragile peace—"is for nothing," he says.

As a Jew, Mr. Finci has a unique ability to mediate among Bosnia's warring factions, who mistrust each other but aren't threatened by him. Five years ago he got Bosnia's Muslim, Catholic and Orthodox religious leaders to form an inter-religious council which meets regularly.

More recently Mr. Finci, a lawyer by training, has struggled to create a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, modeled on the one in post-Apartheid South Africa. A draft law to create the seven-member body is now ready to go before parliament. The commission will take testimony and, in two years, issue a final report. The goal is to set the historical record straight. The country now has three different and distorted versions of the truth.

To paraphrase Freud, the best way for Bosnians to forget about the recent past is to remember it. They must understand what happened in the 1990s if they are to move on with their lives. Mr. Finci believes the daily reports from the trial of Slobodan Milosevic have already helped clarify the picture. He says all three groups are slowly accepting that they weren't blameless.

Yet the commission may not even get off the ground. Each ethnic faction uses the past for its own purposes; few people in power want a truly multi-ethnic single state. Everyone in Bosnia claims he's willing to grant forgiveness but none asks for it.

The inter-religious council shows, in miniature, how far off any real reconciliation is. The council's first statement on "shared moral commitment," for example, was published only in English to get around a ridiculous language dispute. Before the war, everyone spoke just Serbo-Croat; now each of the three groups claims its own language. The three leaders have spent the past year squabbling over how to open a common bank account to disburse foreign donations meant to rebuild religious buildings.

"They're hopeless," says Jacques Klein, a veteran American diplomat who runs the U.N. mission in Bosnia. "They don't like each other. Finci is the only honest one. He's the only one around here who's actually decent." While the religious council happily takes trips abroad to talk about how Bosnians can get along, he adds, they don't send the same message to their own people at home.

"If you mean by reconciliation the recognition of the fact of the existence of others, the reconciliation is in process," says Mustafa Ceric, the leader of the Muslim community, less than hopefully.

Mr. Ceric, the Grand Mufti, seems uncomfortable about going any further. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Bosnia, imported during and after the war from Saudi Arabia and other Arab states, challenges his own position in his community. One of his clerics was recently assaulted by a group of hard-liners. The Catholic and Orthodox leaders, too, must contend with extremists within their ranks. No one seems ready to take any political risks for reconciliation.

Bosnia has changed, probably forever. An old Bosnian joke asks about the difference between a Bosnian Muslim and Christian: The Muslim doesn't go to mosque on Friday and the Christian doesn't go to church on Sunday. Yet in this secular country, a war fought along religious lines, if not over religion, has radicalized all three communities.

Why be hopeful? "This is Europe," says Mr. Ceric. True, Bosnia was home to two multi-ethnic empires long gone, the Ottoman and the Hapsburg. Maybe it might yet be swallowed by their contemporary successor, the European Union.

This would be a fitting bookend to the Finci family story. Joining the wave of Sephardic Jews, Mr. Finci's ancestors fled the Spanish Inquisition in the late 15th century, settling in this once mixed and welcoming Balkan town. The Finci name appears on Sarajevo's first ever census, in 1655. He was born in a Fascist Italian detention camp, in 1943, the first Finci in memory not born in Bosnia. If multi-ethnicity doesn't have a future among Bosnia's four million people, then what future does the EU have? Mr. Finci asks.

A different ending seems as likely. Mr. Finci's son, seeing little future in Bosnia, has settled in California. The last rabbi left Sarajevo in 1967. The Jewish community, a fifth of the city's population before the Holocaust, numbers about 700 today, and its numbers are declining. Bosnia's own genocidal war, which didn't target the Jews, may yet claim them as a victim. By prodding Bosnia's Slavs to begin trying to put to rest their differences, and rebuild a multi-ethnic and civic society, Mr. Finci, perhaps quixotically, wants to make sure it doesn't.

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