

INTRODUCTION TO *DUST*

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Life can change with a look, a glance.

In September 1998 I stood on a balcony overlooking a courtyard in a monastery on Mount Athos (1) together with Robert Runcie, a retired Archbishop of Canterbury, and James Thomson, a surgeon (who had as it happened successfully operated on me for cancer in 1995). We were talking about how we might get out of attending another long Orthodox liturgy without offending our hosts. We were on a pilgrimage. That July I had completed eighteen years as Rector of St James's Piccadilly in London, and was thinking about my future.

As we talked I noticed two Serbs in the courtyard below. They were intrigued by Robert's purple cassock and beckoned me to join them.

Lazar Markovich (2) is an art historian. Together with his friend they wanted to know more about us. I told them about my life as a parish priest for thirty years in London, and how I now intended to establish a European Network of City Centre Churches to explore new kinds of ministries welcoming different Faiths and open to discussion about matters that concern everyone, politics, social problems, health, the arts and the imagination, building on what I had begun in London. They told me about the situation in the Balkans and we talked about plans to involve young Europeans in the rebuilding of mosques, Orthodox and Catholic churches destroyed in the Bosnia War as gestures towards peace and reconciliation

Lazar offered to arrange a visit to Serbia.

So started a big adventure. Little did I realise in that courtyard of a monastery on Mount Athos that three years later I had committed to rebuilding the Ferhadija Mosque in Banja Luka, a landmark monument in European Islamic architecture, and that I would bring together religious leaders, senior politicians, the mayor and his cabinet, business leaders and teachers from Banja Luka for a four day consultation at the International Centre for Reconciliation in Coventry Cathedral. We were to meet to consider steps to be taken together for reconciliation in Bosnia, six years after the conflict there had been brought to an end. This event led to further peace building projects in the Balkans and over Europe, journeys which also led to North Africa and the Middle East.

Dust describes this adventure.

At the heart of this adventure are three people. Adnan Jabucar, a journalist from Sarajevo, who replaced Lazar as our project manager and became a trusted friend. Peter Pelz, whose book this is, is an artist and writer. He and I are the directors of what became the Soul of Europe.

I met Peter in 1970 a year after being made incumbent of St Peter's Church Morden, on the St Helier Estate in South London. I commissioned him to paint the Stations of the Cross. That led to a collaboration on many and varied projects in London and across the country. He initiated the Piccadilly Arts Festival that flourished in the 1980s and was instrumental in establishing the Piccadilly Film Festival, the Lufthansa Baroque Festival and the William Blake Society. This collaboration continued when I left St James's and we began working on this European project. Peter with his cosmopolitan part Jewish background, is instinctively European, fluent in German and also speaking French and Russian, useful skills on our journeys across the continent. He is a rapporteur. Since we use interpreters, he has time to transcribe everything. The passages in blue provide a commentary on what we did. They aim

to add depth and breadth to the narrative. They can be read separately, but work best within their context.

The European Network of City Centre Churches was a cumbersome and uninspiring way of describing ourselves. At a fund raising meeting Jeremy Paxman the broadcaster told us to find a snappier name, and we came up with the Soul of Europe. He judged we were being too modest in our demands and declared: ‘You can’t travel around Europe by donkey and playing the flute,’ and gave us a donation to help us on our initial travels. Between 1999 and the year 2000 we travelled across Europe and searched for partners in our plans to reconstruct destroyed churches and mosques in the Balkans. Our visits to France, Germany, Finland, Austria, Sweden and Denmark are described in Peter Pelz’s *A Tender Bridge – a Journey to another Europe* (3).

On our first visit to Serbia in February 2000 and Bosnia in June 2000 our ideas were tested and became clearer. Out of these grew the project to reconstruct the Ferhadija Mosque.

The Ferhadija project is the primary narrative of *Dust*. All our activities, journeys and meetings, including those to Libya, Turkey and the Vatican, were made to gather support for the rebuilding of the mosque. Christian Orthodox Serbs had deliberately and painstakingly destroyed all sixteen mosques in Banja Luka between May and November 1993. We therefore searched for partners, Muslim, Christian and of no faith, to ensure the rebuilt mosque would be a sign of reparation and reconciliation. To that end we focused on securing support from interfaith organizations. Not one person or organization stepped forward to join us as partners. The project was either too difficult or no one trusted us. Time and again we were told how the Balkans were very ‘problematic’ and we should leave them alone.

Nor were the international NGOs in Bosnia interested. They preferred to arrange programs and workshops on reconciliation: dialogue rather than a commitment to rebuilding a mosque

in Banja Luka of all places, a town which had become majority Orthodox Serb because of the successful ethnic cleansing carried out in the Bosnia War.

People not mosques are what matter most we were told. But a sign of a civilised society is that the short term interests of one generation have to be balanced against the values enshrined in the past, and against the rights of future generations to share that past (4). The cultural genocide in Bosnia was the forerunner of the destruction of important historic monuments in former Mesopotamia. Nimrod, Hafia and Nineveh, now being destroyed by the Islamic State, are six thousand year old bedrocks of our civilization. When these are destroyed the narrative that shapes humanity's history vanishes. It is as if that civilization had never existed. In Banja Luka we were told that the authorities planned to turn the space where the Ferhadija Mosque had once stood into a car park.

The Ferhadija was no ordinary mosque. Together with the famous Mostar Bridge, dynamited by Croats, and the National Library in Sarajevo, destroyed by Serbs in the Bosnia War, the Ferhadija Mosque was the third Islamic building of historic and cultural significance waiting to rise from the ashes. It stood on the frontier of the Ottoman Empire, an eloquent testimony to the work of Sinan, that empire's greatest architect, famous mainly for the Sulejmanija Mosque in Istanbul, the one that dominates the skyline. (5)

Ferhad Pasha who in 1578 commissioned the mosque which bears his name in Banja Luka was so struck by its beauty that, so the story goes, he ordered the masons to be locked in the minaret so they could never build anything so beautiful again. However the masons made artificial wings and flew away.

Cultural Heritage without Borders (6) describes the Ferhadija Mosque as 'one of the most important Islamic monuments of the region and of Europe.' The building stood as a striking representative of the relationship between Islam and Christianity in which many of the

technical and spatial features were related to traditions belonging as much to the architecture of Christian churches as of Ottoman mosques. The architect Sinan himself came from a Christian Orthodox family.

We soon discovered that among the different Muslim communities in Europe not one was interested in becoming partners with the Soul of Europe for the reconstruction of the Ferhadija Mosque. Let them build their own mosque, we were told. At the same time we learned that there is no such thing as European Islam; rather a puzzle of separate pieces, few of which fit together (7).

Meanwhile the Grand Mufti of Bosnia, known as the Reis, appointed me Vice President of the project. There was however no organization. In spite of repeated attempts to create structures, nothing transpired. Time and again in public the Reis said, correctly, that there would be no Ferhadija without the Soul of Europe. He added flatteringly: 'There was Lawrence of Arabia, and now there is Reeves of Bosnia!'

But the reality was different. For instance when I heard that the then Emir of Qatar intended to call on the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, at Lambeth Palace, I asked the Archbishop who had long been a personal friend to arrange for me to meet the Emir. The Archbishop spoke with the Emir about our project, and the Emir expressed interest. I then spent many hours and days trying in vain to contact the Emir. The situation became clear at an Interfaith Conference in Tripoli, Libya, to which the Reis and I had been invited. He confronted me saying: 'I hear you are trying to raise funds from Qatar; don't. We have other plans.'

In a letter dated 24th January 2005, John Calume of the Minerva Partnership wrote to me: 'What you have accomplished in Banja Luke strikes me as astonishing. You are doing what the World Bank and UNESCO could never do, though they probably wouldn't admit it. You

have invested personally and emotionally without getting buried by politics – and you have been honest about your perceptions of injustice and culpability. Bosnians are awfully good at sizing up foreign ‘interveners’ and locating their Achilles heel, and so far your honesty and competence has kept the more cynical snipers in abeyance – amazing.’ (8)

The reader might be surprised at the amount of time we spent with other religious leaders, particularly the Catholic bishop and the Serbian Orthodox bishop of Banja Luka.

We counted on their support for the Ferhadija project. We also wanted to be even-handed. Hence we became unofficial ambassadors for the much diminished Catholic diocese, decimated as a result of ruthless ethnic cleaning of non-Serbs during the Bosnia War.

With less success but with as much determination we tried to encourage the Orthodox bishop. Shy and cautious the bishop was expert in deftly and politely refusing our many proposals for creating links with other Christian churches and bringing Muslims and Catholics together with the Orthodox in Bosnia. Naturally reserved, his suspicions about Europe were to do with history. Serbs have long regarded themselves as not belonging to Europe. The Serbian Orthodox Church played a significant part in establishing nationalism which began to flourish once the Ottoman influence waned in the region. This explains the reluctance to be involved with ecumenism. Those Serbian Orthodox theologians who were interested in conversations with other Churches and faiths were and are regarded as heretics.

Orthodox bishops and priests can be alarming in appearance. With large bushy beards and dressed in black cassocks it is difficult to determine if they are glaring or smiling. They seem unapproachable and reluctant to engage in ordinary human contact. To me it seemed like arrogance, but I was wrong. At a Kosovo Interfaith Conference which the Soul of Europe helped arrange in 2013 in Pec, seat of the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate, I met Bishop Andrei, then the Patriarch’s Secretary of the Cabinet. Now he is the Bishop for the Serbian

Diaspora in Austria and Switzerland. He told me: ‘The doors of the Serbian Orthodox Church are always open to you. You have given us confidence. Thank you. Do not forget us.’

The chapters in *Dust* describing the journeys with separately the Catholic and the Orthodox bishop of Banja Luka reveal how much they appreciated our presence and efforts to understand them.

The second substantial narrative describes the establishing of the Banja Luka Civic Forum. We intended the forum to light a spark in the public life of the city, to kindle participation and passion for a living democracy, to stimulate people out of widespread depression and apathy and not leave decision-making to transitory internationals and corrupt local politicians. If the reconstruction of the Ferhadija Mosque was to become a sign of reconciliation between Islam and Christianity, then there had simultaneously to be the creation of vigorous debate about the rights of minorities, to attract funding for the creation of jobs and revive the stagnant economy. These matters became central in the discussions at the Coventry Consultation.

The story of the Civic Forum is instructive about the destructive way international politics interfere in countries devastated by war and economic collapse. The people were committed and the forum was on the way to being established as part of the life of Banja Luka, had they been supported and left in charge with advice when asked for. Its failure was due mostly to the incompetence and inexperience of young diplomats deputised to oversee the project, and the cynicism and self interest of the European Union which acts in the role of a colonial master.

Alongside these two main narratives is another which describes our attempt to create a partnership to stimulate the local economy in the city of Bihac in North West Bosnia.

Whereas Bosnian Muslims had been driven out of Banja Luka, in Bihac it was the Bosnian

Serbs who were being displaced, their churches and monasteries vandalised and destroyed. The project began well but disintegrated mainly due to our inexperience. The story is however a significant part of the bigger narrative, not only because of what we learnt from our mistakes, but because it is a portrait of a time and place and the suffering of a people traumatised by war.

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There is little mention of theology in *Dust*. I had devoted much of my life to thinking, speaking, writing, praying and preaching about the Christian faith and tried to shape the two parishes where I had been incumbent to reflect these convictions (9). But once engaged in the Balkans I needed to let this knowledge and distilled experience settle. I saw it as a reservoir which I could access as and when I needed.

I experienced a steep learning curve. Religious leaders showed no interest in matters which had previously engaged my attention. Muslims wanted mosques to be rebuilt and compensation paid for stolen property. The Catholic bishop of Banja Luka was tireless in his demands to the UN for Catholic Croats to be allowed to return home. The Orthodox bishop was only interested in paying attention to what he called spiritual matters, by which he meant building more and more churches as statements about the land where they stood belonging to the Orthodox Church.

One matter on which they all agreed was how internationals patronised or ignored them. I learnt how so many of these officials were illiterate when it came to understanding religions, which for Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims is as much about the identity of a person as a matter of belief and practice.

I came to understand what Winston Churchill once said: ‘The Balkans produce more history than they can consume.’ We learnt as we went along, drawing on the academic and practical experience of the writings of John Paul Lederach and Adam Curle (10). I became used to meeting Patriarchs, Presidents and Prime Ministers and learnt how to prepare for these meetings with care and to identify spoilers. I had to learn patience and put up with being addressed as if I were a public meeting, then being ambushed afterwards by the local media. I soon became and remain exasperated by the sclerotic bureaucracy of the EU and the Foreign Office. I learned how to manipulate data in our many applications for funding, because the assumptions behind business and the market with their concerns for impact and targets, their mechanistic terminology and expectations do not fit the slow and painstaking process of reconciliation. Not everything of value can be measured in this way. I learnt to be neutral. I would not have chosen to share a drink with some of the people we met, but as I told them all: ‘I will be your friend, but this will not stop me from being friends with others.’

Above all we had to remember we were visitors to the Balkans. We did not speak the language. When we arrived in February 2000 no one knew who we were or what we were doing there. It takes time to be trusted. We never gave up, and we still do not give up. Senad Pecanin, then chief editor of the Bosnian newspaper Dana, took us out for supper in a restaurant overlooking Sarajevo, in thanks for inviting him to the Coventry Consultation, and declared: ‘You guys are different. You keep turning up.’

I have discovered that peace building is an art. This is apart from the skills that need to be learnt. We tried to remain watchful, carefully noting what we saw and heard and what others made of us. With Adnan and others we spent much time digesting all the information we received. We were constantly trying to make sense of our encounters and discussions as we tramped the streets of Sarajevo and Banja Luka. We tried to follow the precepts of Nelson Mandela about peace making. ‘The first thing,’ he says, ‘is to be honest with yourself. You

can never have an impact on society if you have not changed yourself. Influential peace makers are people of integrity, honesty and humility.’ Peacemaking is not for wimps (11)

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The reconstructed Ferhadija Mosque was inaugurated in July 2014. By 2007 the Soul of Europe had done as much as we could. The old stones which had been dumped in a large rubbish tip outside Banja Luka were now being collected, cleaned, numbered and labelled. In April 2006 the government of the Republika Srpska gave 110,000 Euros towards the reconstruction, specifically for preparing the foundations. This donation came about through many painstaking conversations and negotiations. Eventually the Turkish International Development Agency took charge of the project. But as the Reis frequently told us, without the Soul of Europe there would have been no reconstruction. We instigated the project successfully and against all the odds.

Our other projects in the Balkans continued as part of the two main narratives. We had applied for funding from the global mining company operating the iron ore mine at Omarska near Banja Luka, which had been used as a killing camp during the Bosnia War. The Chief Executive Officer based in Rotterdam responded by saying that in the light of what we had succeeded in doing in Banja Luka he wanted to commission us to mediate between survivors and perpetrators and create a memorial to those who had been murdered in the Omarska mine. We saw this as a way of bringing the different communities together, and so create the conditions where reconciliation might emerge and prepare the way for positive acceptance of the reconstructed Ferhadija Mosque by all communities. This story is told in Peter Pelz’s *the white house: From Fear to a Handshake* (13)

In 2008 we were invited to mediate in Kosovo between Serbian Orthodox monasteries, at Decani and the Pec Patriarchate, and their Muslim municipalities. We accepted this

commission to honour our promise to help all the faith communities in the Balkans.

Perseverance and determination are qualities the Soul of Europe has learnt. We prepared the ground for the healthy growth of community relations, and since are in the process of helping to establish an international inter-faith centre in Kosovo.

Even when it came to reconstructing a monument like the Ferhadija Mosque, it was essential that the Muslim community took responsibility for it, even if it meant enduring the impatience of the local mufti who in the first difficult years of the project constantly jabbed his finger at me demanding to know: ‘Where is my mosque!’ Had the project been collaborative from the start, with our role clearly defined, the mosque might well have been rebuilt sooner, and therefore have offered an opportunity to become a place of reconciliation, not only in Banja Luka, but the whole of the Balkans, the rest of Europe and beyond, which had always been our aim. Be that as it may, the mosque is once again standing there, a presence that we never believed could happen in our lifetime, and one that could never have been even dreamed of when we first arrived there.

The next stage can begin. But that is another story.

- 1 Mount Athos is an Orthodox spiritual centre situated on a peninsular of North West Greece, consisting of some twenty monasteries.
- 2 Lazar Predrag Markovic. *Dust* opens with Lazar and ourselves visiting the late Jim Cotter. We had the idea of creating links with the Small Pilgrim Places Network. Jim Cotter was the founder.
- 3 *A Tender Bridge* (Cairns Publications). Richard Holloway, former Bishop of Edinburgh, describes it as 'an exhilarating account of the odyssey of three visionaries a renegade priest, a Montenegrin bandit and a crazy artist - in search of the soul of Europe'.
- 4 I draw on Simon Jenkins' article in the Spectator March 15 2015: 'When Isis destroys monuments it's not always true that people are more important.'
- 5 Sinan came from an Orthodox family. He often delegated under supervision buildings he designed for provinces in the Ottoman Empire.
- 6 Cultural Heritage Without Borders is a Swedish NGO dedicated to 'rescuing and preserving cultural heritage'. We worked out a detailed project with them but lacked the funds to implement it
- 7 European Islam. There are many factors to describe a European citizen other than Muslim. See *Identity and Violence* by Amartya Sen (Penquin Books 2006)
- 8 Jon Calame is a founding partner of Minerva Partners - a preservation and planning firm in New York. Minerva was a key partner in the project to reconstruct the Bridge at Mostar.
- 9 From 1969-1980 I was the Vicar of St Peter's Morden and from 1980-1998 St James's Piccadilly - described in my Autobiography *Memoirs of a Very Dangerous Man* (Continuum 2009).
- 10 John Paul Lederach is Professor of International Peace-building at the Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice at Notre Dame University. Adam Curle was the first Professor in Peace Studies at Bradford University. Adam Curle and John Paul Lederach taught us the importance of establishing strong working relationships with all parties..
- 11 *Peacebuilding is not for Wimps* is an essay I contributed to *Just Reconciliation. - The Practice and Morality of Making Peace - New International Studies in Applied Ethics*. (Peter Lang Publishing 2011))
- 12 The process we used for the Memorial Project at Omarska is described in Peter Pelz's *the white house - from Fear to a Handshake* (O Books 2008).

We returned to Bosnia in 2014 - Peter Pelz's reflections are found in an article *Return to Bosnia* for *Race and Class* (a journal on Racism, Empire and Globalisation) in the March 2015 issue on the theme of Crime and Punishment.