Aleksandar Hemon: A personal history of Sarajevo

Aleksandar Hemon's new memoir is an effort to restore the fragile memories of his Sarajevo, and follow the threads that link his Bosnian past to his American present

John Freeman
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An ice storm looms over Chicago and Aleksandar Hemon is going for a walk. Flat-capped, black-coated, his stride restricted by old football injuries, he gives the impression of a man older than he is. Hemon is tall, and has a shaved head. Everyone who knows him even a little bit calls him Saša. "I walked a lot when I first moved here,"
Hemon says, as we enter a small, nondescript storefront. For the past year he has gone to this studio during the day to write. He makes a coffee and leads us to a silent conference room; it is 21 years ago to the day that Hemon landed in America – 27 January 1992. The Serbs' terrible siege of Sarajevo had yet to begin, and Hemon was just a young Bosnian journalist about to set off on a tour of the United States. His plan was to return home with the cultural loot of new experience.

"I landed in DC, and an escort from the US information agency and I went to see his friends," Hemon recalls. "We parked in Georgetown, and I remember the street. It was a nice townhouse in Georgetown, and I could see the light inside and the people inside moving, and whatever little bit of furniture, and I thought with that kind of pressing clarity: I will never get inside this house.

"And there was no basis for that. I did not intend to stay, I had no experience in the United States – I may have been here less than 24 hours – but I knew I would never get inside there. And 'there' not being America necessarily, but that harmonious mode of living that some people are lucky enough to have in this country."

It was an inauspicious first feeling, and one he would have to live with for a while. Hemon wasn’t able to return to Sarajevo for eight years. Shortly after he arrived in the US war descended on Bosnia, cutting him off from friends and family. Rare phone calls brought him news of friends conscripted into the army, separated from their fathers and brothers and killed. Snipers riddled his neighbourhood with bullet holes. The snipers shot dogs when it was discovered that the animals could anticipate a shelling.

Many Sarajevans who escaped lost their whole family. Hemon was luckier. His parents, an engineer and a schoolteacher, got out the day before the siege began. So did his sister. Eventually, they wound up in Canada, where they worked in grim jobs and his father was able to resurrect his love of beekeeping. Stuck in Chicago, Hemon watched as his city was destroyed.

The loss of Sarajevo was, to him, a metaphysical loss, as it removed him from his past. He has spent the past two decades trying to narrativise it back to wholeness. His work, from his 2000 debut collection *The Question of Bruno* with its eight, radically different tales, to his most recent work of fiction, *Love and Obstacles*, borrow heavily from his
own life to tell tales of love and loyalty, but also the difficulty of living within a fractured self.

Now he has written a memoir, *The Book of My Lives*, a tale that stretches from his early years in Sarajevo with his parents and younger sister to his recent life in Chicago. It is less an autobiography than a series of maps inside his head.

To understand Hemon's displacement, it is important to understand two things about him – his childhood, and the Proustian way in which he has always linked memory and the sensory experience of a place – both of which he lays bare in *The Book of My Lives*. Hemon had a happy childhood. He played football, performed in mathematics competitions, became a reader and learned to play chess from his charismatic, domineering father. Like so many teenagers, he fell in love with Salinger and Rimbaud, he was sex-crazed, listened to the Sex Pistols, played in a terrible band, and drove recklessly over the roads home when he was allowed a driver's licence. His family curated their imagined noble past. Hemon calls it all back in the first half of his book, beginning often with an object, sometimes a lost object. "For people who are displaced, you can reconstruct the story of your life from the objects you have access to, but if you don't have the objects then there are holes in your life. This is why people in Bosnia – if anyone was running back into a burning house it was to salvage photos."

When he first arrived in Chicago, Hemon didn't just lack photographs. He barely had a change of shirt. So he roamed the city, haunting diners and coffee shops where chess was played and cigarettes were smoked, and clothed himself in stories. In *The Book of My Lives* he described meeting Peter, an Armenian Iraqi who had lived in Europe and lost his family, winding up in Chicago alone. In another, more humorous piece, Hemon describes playing football with a ragtag bunch of immigrants from Italy, Cameroon, Nigeria, Tibet and elsewhere.

When Hemon wrote a tale about Peter, whose trauma was greater than Hemon's own, he was evidently a young man seeking out people who were like him. People who had a before and after. Hemon insists this was not the case. He was looking, rather, for complication, and for Hemon complication is the stories we tell about ourselves. "The privilege of a middle-class, stable, bourgeois life is that you can pretend that you are not complicated and project yourself as a solid, uncomplicated person, with refined life goals and achievements."

Hemon saw these things from the outside because he was tumbling down a ladder into the underclass. For the first time in his life he was poor. When the fellowship ran out and the lies on his CV were detected – sure, he had been a salesman, yes he had been a
bartender! – he was nearly homeless. A smoker then, he remembers upending an armchair "like some kind of Hercules," to try to shake the change out of it so that he could buy cigarettes. He ate terrible food and gained weight. And he wasn't writing. For three years, from 1992 to 1995, Hemon simply couldn't write. "I couldn't write in Bosnian, because I was cut off from that, and it was traumatic," he recalls. Friends asked him to file dispatches for their magazine from afar – their principle being that if the war led everyone to talk only about the war, then the war had won. Hemon couldn't do it. He walked and he listened, he smoked and he worked at jobs that made it hard to do nothing but think about what he had lost.

Finally he began to start again, first with deciding how to write. Hemon began rereading the books that mattered to him, this time entirely in English: Salinger, who held up, and Michael Ondaatje; others who had not. "I had to reevaluate my aesthetics," Hemon says, "because of the war and the siege, and the fact that my professor would have been at work had he not shot himself."

The man who taught Hemon to read and write critically, he explains in The Book of My Lives, turned into a rightwing genocide-enabler during the war. Everything the man had planted in Hemon felt tainted.

Most brutally, Hemon reread his own work. "I went back to things I had written, many of the things I had written in the 90s, and there was only one paragraph that I really liked." From the very beginning, when he began to publish pieces in Story magazine and Ploughshares, and later Granta and The New Yorker, Hemon's prose has been chiselled, direct, though saturated with similes. Hemon has been widely praised for the unexpected images this style creates, but it was not, he says, the hallmark of a writer trying to bridge here and there. It was deliberate, honed, and in some cases, mapped out.

At a certain point Hemon decided if he was to survive in Chicago, the city would have to become as intensely real to him as Sarajevo. He would have to be able to hear it and sense it and taste it. Simultaneously, he would have to retrieve and capture the Sarajevo that he had left behind, before memory and his changing self destroyed it. "Memory narrativises itself," Hemon says, like a warning.

So he went back to Sarajevo and stayed with his aunt, and strolled the streets in a state of delirious confusion and deja vu. People who had stayed behind were hollowed out, like the buildings around them. He began to go back more often.

Hemon also continued to write about people, like himself, who were caught between two
worlds, looking strangely at the new one while the old one remained fraught and internally present. In *Nowhere Man*, Hemon's second book, he included an extended series of fragments about Pronek, who appeared in *The Question of Bruno*. "One of Pronek's problems is that he seeks a kind of moral continuity," Hemon says. "If I change suddenly and decide not to be who I am right now what happens to all the other people that I'm connected with, and how do I sustain some kind of moral continuity."

*The Lazarus Project*, Hemon's debut novel, attacked this question in a two-pronged narrative that shows how moral continuity can come from an unlikely connection with the past. The book portrays a confused Bosnian-American writer named Vladmir Brik who is living in Chicago and adrift in his life and work. He becomes obsessed with the story of another immigrant, Lazarus Averbuch, a Jewish man who escaped the pogroms in what is now Moldova, and came to Chicago. Shortly after his arrival Averbuch was murdered by a police officer.

Moving elliptically from Chicago in the long-ago past, to a trip Brik takes with a photographer friend, the novel circles the idea of memory and morality. What happens, it asks, when certain memories recede from American life, and how can a nation have any moral continuity if its culture is amnesiac? Hemon wrote the book at the height of the Bush years, when his attention began to shift away from Sarajevo to what his new nation was doing in the name of the "war on terror". The novel was a critical hit. It was a finalist for the *National Book award*, a literary prize open only to American citizens. In the runup to the prize, Hemon was interviewed and profiled, and his story became a deeply American one: the war-stranded immigrant who arrived on these shores and made the language and a big multi-ethnic city his home by holding them up to the highest standards.

There was a lot of truth to the narrative, too. But this tale, the yarn of Hemon as heroic immigrant, reduces his journey to its destination. And even now that is a notion about which Hemon is extremely ambivalent.

In his early days in Chicago he struggled to charm the opposite sex – he had never before had to hit on a girl. Sarajevo-living, Hemon describes in *The Book of My Lives*, was different in many regards from the reality he came to in America. If it was not communal, it was a shared space, with a fixed number of figures. "There was a network of people you've known for 20 years and you've never spoken one word to each other," he says. "And then one day you might end up at a party and then you might start dating, or just become best friends. But there was no rush, and there was no need to impress anyone." Hemon found it easier to collect the casual yet close relationships that amount from mapping a place.
Eventually, in spite of his terrible memories, and the anger he carried, Hemon did meet and marry Lisa Stodder, a writer and neurologist. This provided some stability during the publication of his first two books. But in a later chapter in *The Book of My Lives*, Hemon describes the slow, then sudden, breakdown of their relationship. He returns to the dumps and nearly feels more at home there.

The memoir is full of such reversals of fortune. He experiences again and again the impossibility of retrieving Sarajevo, while what happens to him in Chicago seems to threaten any idea that it, too, will be a stable, safe place. After his split with Lisa, Hemon quickly met and married Teri Boyd, a photo editor from Florida. They had a daughter, Ella, born in Chicago. Two years later, Isabel was born.

And here *The Book of My Lives* enters its sad, final chapter. Nine months into Isabel's life, a doctor's appointment revealed her head to be slightly larger than normal. A Cat scan showed that this was not a harmless aberration, but the result of a small tumour on her brain. Surgery was scheduled immediately. It was discovered that she had a very rare form of cancer, one with very low survival rates. Still, for Hemon and Boyd, there is no choice but to fight it. Many surgeries and several months of chemo later, Isabel died.

In the chapter *The Aquarium*, Hemon describes the peculiar disembodiment of being in the middle of the worst imaginable thing. The way the world recedes and the laws and priorities around which the outside world revolves don't just cease to apply, they become offensive. Language, the thing meant to help us connect, breaks down, too. Meanwhile, storytelling remains essential. Hemon writes of how when he became a father he used to start to imagine something terrible happening, but would stop himself. He knew, from imagining his own life in Chicago, and from flinging himself into experience that was not his own so that his language could catch up, that this was playing with fire.

In the meantime, his first daughter, Ella, began to tell stories about an imaginary friend called Mingus. After Isabel got sick, sometimes Mingus would be taking care of a sister, also called Isabel. In other moments Mingus himself was sick, but would always get better. Hemon watched as his daughter used the facility he had relied on to survive in Chicago to survive something she could only grasp through narrative.

*The Book of My Lives* is dedicated "to Isabel, forever sleeping on my chest". It's hard to read this line without thinking of another one in the book. It appears in the essay "The Lives of Grandmasters" on learning chess with his father, Hemon writes that the old board he was given, was "proof that there once was a boy who used to be me”. For Hemon, there will always be a before and after, but, it turns out, there will also always
be the period between. The time he had to make a choice about who he was, where he pointed his compass.

"I was cut off," he says, emphatically, "the language was cut off, all my friends were scattered, I had no access to them. This was, among other things, before the internet, and before the money. So I couldn't even call. And so I had this sense that I could make up my life entirely and that no one would know. Because who could say, "No, no, no, he was not that, he was this"? Book by book, he is making that impossible, it's all right there on the page, especially with the *The Book of My Lives*.

- John Freeman is the editor of *Granta magazine*.