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Photographs: Bosnia 1954-1996

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Photographs: Bosnia 1954-1996

Introductory Statement
by
Joel Halpern

To the photos

The images which appear here are, unless otherwise indicated, are copyright Joel M. Halpern and taken from the catalog of an exhibition entitled *The Thin Veneer; the Peoples of Bosnia and their Disappearing Cultural Heritage* (Copyright 1997, University of Massachusetts Amherst and used by permission). Copies of the catalog are available for $ 6.00 including postage, from: Betsy Siersma, Director, University Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA 01002.

The exhibit, which is of a larger magnitude than these web pages, is available and arrangments may be made for hosting it by contacting Betsy Siersma at the above address.

For further information about the background of the exhibit and the accompanying video by Barbara Kerewsky Halpern please contact:

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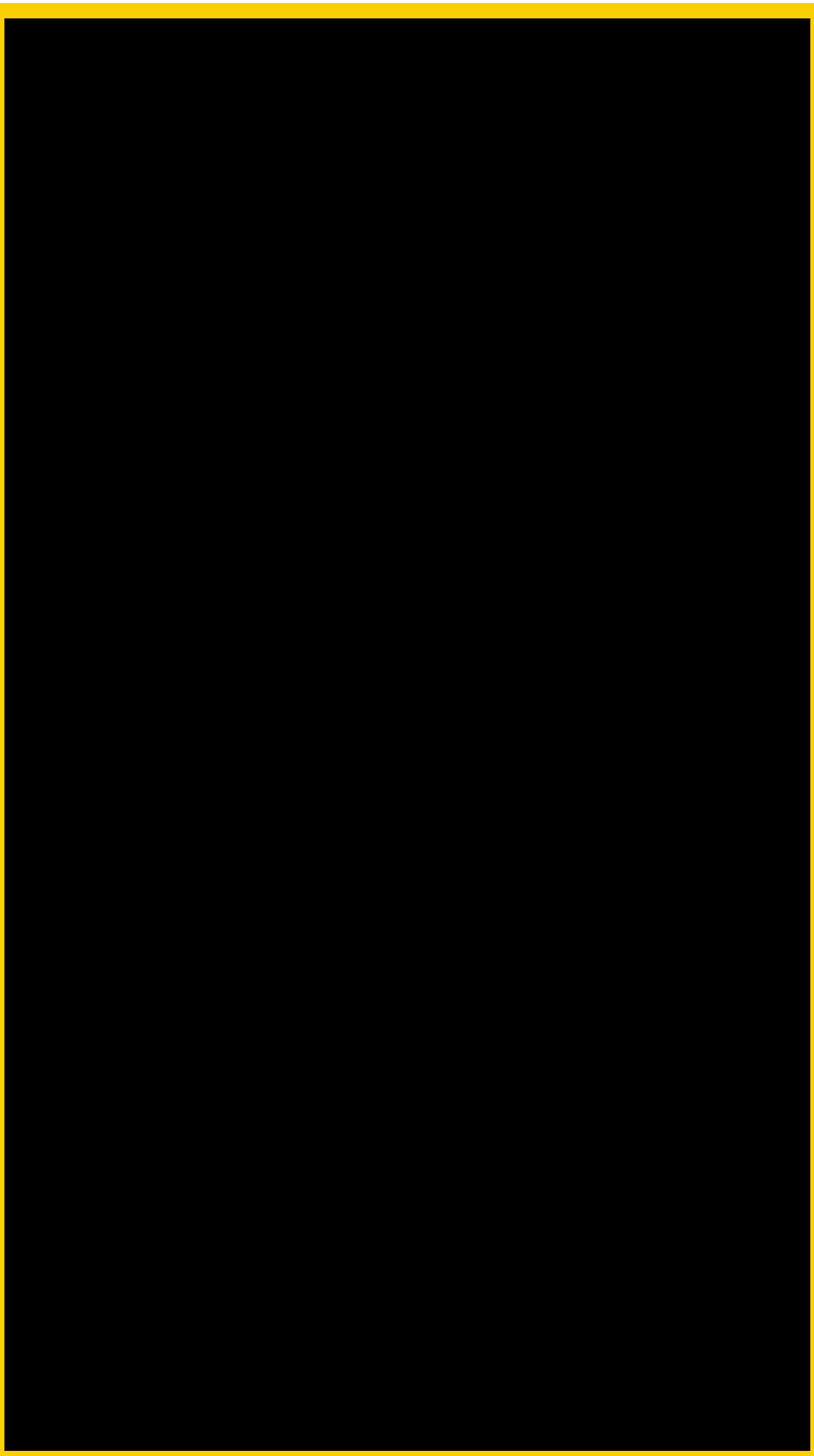
Web site conception and design by Tony Galt

We first visited Bosnia in 1953-54, only eight years after World War II. The country was still in the process of healing the wounds of war, the German invasion and especially the bitter results of civil war. A new socialist government was about to embark on an ambitious program of modernization that would transform the countryside and the cities. By the 1980s Yugoslavia had a status which had begun to approach that of Western Europe. But in 1954 the dominant image in much of Bosnia was that of a traditional peasant society.

Traveling in the Bosnian countryside in 1986 I was impressed that many of the markers separating rural and urban in housing, architecture, dress and hand-crafted technology had almost disappeared. In the 1950s the anthropologist noted these markers of status and ethnicity as dominant. The people themselves, however, were then most concerned about escaping from poverty. Questions of national identification, apart from the obvious matter of religious observance, were not discussed. The authoritarian socialist



government decreed a policy of "brotherhood and unity" and those who dissented attracted the attention of the police. While the foreigner might have found the society picturesque, villagers were universally anxious to "climb out of the mud." This meant education for their children and salaried work.

The struggle over ethnic cleansing has meant not only reciprocal destruction of cultural monuments, but also the partial obliteration of a half century of "socialist construction" including factories, communal facilities, and the large amount of private home construction in both countryside and city. This private enterprise was financed by the wages of the new industrial workers and by those who remitted earnings from employment in Western Europe. These large, multi-storied, homes were built by extended families and meant to last for generations.

These photos show the sociocultural context from which the process of modernization was launched.

-J.H.

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Images of Bosnia by Joel Halpern

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Muslim village homes near Sarajevo, 1954. Serb homes in the adjoining village were identical. Built by local craftsmen from available materials. Steep roofs were designed to shed the heavy mountain snows. By the 1980s this house style, shared by all groups, had virtually disappeared, replaced by uniform concrete homes with electricity and plumbing.

One of the characteristics of the preindustrial Bosnian city was the domnance of religious architecture. Monumental mosques provided the backdrop for the daily, weekly and monthly gatherings of villagers and their urban customers. Banja Luka marketpla ce in 1954 provided a setting for different groups to trade and a place where they could interact peacefully. The blowing up of this mosque and the expelling and killing by the Bosnian Serbs of the local Muslim and Croat population has permanently altered this city.

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A mosque's courtyard provides a convenient place for Muslim elders to gather on a sunny spring afternoon in 1954. The white band on the cap of the man at the right signifies his completion of the pilgrimage to Mecca. His cane is a further mark of status. A worker's cap defines another member of the group.

Generational differences are clearly apparent in the different dress styles of the governing board of the Maglaj mosque. Bosnian Muslims always accommodated themselves to the policies of the socialist government, which were relatively lenient toward organized religion as long as it never constitutied an overt threat to communist power.

A Muslim rope seller and Croat customer at the Maglaj market, 1964. Although Maglaj at that time had a large paper factory, local craftsmen still prospered. Most of their customers were other peasants from surrounding villages. Ethnic differences were no barrier to trade.

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Muslim man with wooden plow 1954. This technology can be seen in American farm museums representing early 19th century technology. In Bosnia within two decades wooden plows became almost universally replaced by steel ones. Yugoslav agriculture in the 1950s and 1960s received substantial American assistance in the form of wheat shipments. These were designed to secure a cold-war alliance.

Playing cards at a Maglaj cafe (1964). Occupations were no barrier to social interactions. But the distinctions with rural people were clearly marked because peas ant vendors at the market would not have the time for such leisure activities.

A Croat village woman experiments with shopping at a new supermarket in Maglaj in 1964. Folk dress, a marker of marital status, ethnic and regional identity, was tied to locale.

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Catholic bishop celebrating the Feast of the Assumption in Vares, 1964. It is reported that the local Bosnian authorities now in control at Vares, a one-time steel industry town north of Sarajevo, are not permitting the return of Catholics to the area.

Boy with flute at the Maglaj market. This was then a look toward a future with no overt markers of ethnic identity.