



Serbenmädchen aus Mostar  
(1896). Sammlung Belović

**Coming of Age on the  
Bosnian Frontier:  
*The Memoirs of Jelica Belović in  
Bosnia, 1896-1908***

Much has been written about the events leading up to the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914. To explore the long term origins of this event, most historians have agreed on the role of nationalism and confessionism in the region. This project adds a new dimension to that literature by reframing the discussion to include theories of colonization and gender. To accomplish this, I draw upon the memories of Jelica Belović, a young Croatian woman who, from 1893 to around 1900 was a schoolteacher in the Austrian-administered territories of Bosnia and Hercegovina. During her time in Bosnia she became increasingly noted for her drift away from Austrian patriotism toward a “pro Serbian” position. Having been forced out of the school system in 1900, she lived in Sarajevo, working as a journalist who was increasingly critical of the Austrian administration of the occupied territories. This has remained part of her history to this day. Indeed, even a recent literary biography of Belović places her within the field Serbian literature field. [Slide 2]

Her memoir is located in the City Archive of Sarajevo.<sup>1</sup> It was written between 1908 and 1909, and it is likely that the events of 1908, particularly Bosnia’s official annexation to the Dual Monarchy influenced her decision to give an account of her experiences; the memoir mostly describes the events that culminated in her removal from the Austrian school system and provides lists of enemies and former friends who deserted her in her time of need. But what is most unusual about the text is her journey from an apolitical and naive acceptance of Austrian hegemony into a passionate nationalist and advocate of Yugoslav independence. As an educated woman and member of the class of *kuferaši* who flocked to help rule Bosnia after 1878, she provides a new perspective on the formation of national identities in the region before 1914. More important, we can see the ways in which her disillusionment with the Austrian

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<sup>1</sup> The author of this article wishes to acknowledge the work of Gašić Aleksandar, who both transcribed and translated this document into English. Without him, this essay could not have been written.

administration eventually led her into a political stance that many of her former colleagues interpreted as pro-Serbian

For Jelica, however, this political journey from Croatian teacher to pro-Serbian journalist was not a foregone conclusion. She began her career in Bosnia as an enthusiastic, pro-Austrian, Croatian, Catholic young woman. How she abandoned those positions sheds light on some of the inner workings of the Austrian Administration in these lands. This memoir shows that the hatred of Austrian rule was not only the defining feature of the group of young men who planned the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand; Jelica Belović shows us that this sentiment was more widespread. Even a formerly pro-Austrian patriot like this young woman could switch sides and take up a position that saw the end of Austrian rule as the best outcome for the southern Slavic peoples.

What I hope to accomplish today is to present a portion of Jelica's memoir (part of an ongoing book project) with the purpose of illustrating how the memoir adds to our understanding of how anti-Austrian sentiments could develop in a wider population. The paper considers four aspects of Jelica's life and career as depicted in this memoir; as a Croatian, as a *kuferaši*, as a culture worker, and a critic of Austria.

## I. A Croatian Maiden

Jelica's background and upbringing made her an unlikely candidate for pro-Serbian sentiments. She was born and educated in Croatia. Her father was a school teacher who embraced the German intellectual tradition. She learned both Croatian and German at home and French at school. Her youthful reading included the German and western European canon. After primary school in Osijek she traveled to Zagreb where she was educated at the convent schools

for teaching. She absorbed the Catholic traditions and was a devout and appropriately naive young woman.

What set Jelica apart from her peers; however, were her intellect and her literary ambitions. She excelled in her schooling as she trained for the only professional career open to her, that of school teacher. In addition, however she had literary aspirations. Not only did she pursue pedagogical and psychological theories, she also hoped to make a substantial contribution to Croatian literature. She was encouraged in this by several mentors, journalists and teachers who noted her talent.<sup>2</sup> But she was unusually aware of the status of women in southern Slavic society as well; she also aspired to make her writing more “masculine”—that is logical, meaningful, and non-sentimental. We cannot follow all these themes here, but what I want to emphasize is how much she identified with western, German, and the Croatian literary scene. How then, did she arrive at a position in Bosnia that many described as “pro-Serbian?” This transition was part of her own “coming of age” as a young woman in a man’s world. Not only did Jelica lose her innocence in Bosnia, she also lost her Austrian/Germanic patriotism.

Her loss of idealism began after the completion of her education. The young Jelica was raised to obey authority and she encountered her first professional disillusionment with the school authorities in Croatia, where she spent three years teaching in primary schools. To her surprise, she found both school and local administrators both corrupt and patriarchal. After completing her first year of teaching she attended the mayor of Ruma to take her oath of office, and describes the following encounter:

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<sup>2</sup> Memoir section 279, her Mentor in Sarajevo wishes her to avoid marriage because it would take her away from “Croatian Literature” as well as himself.

[Page 212) I had to take a public oath that year, because I had received my tenure. The mayor [of Ruma] had been in the spa, so that oath was postponed until his return. I went to perform that “sacred act” with fear, since it was an act of conscience and sacredness in my eyes. With the decree in my hand, I entered the office of the mayor, who was an elderly, married man. As soon as he saw me, he sent his scribe to bring the document number –xx-. The scribe went out, and the mayor spread his hands, pressed me against his chest and started kissing me. I was really scared: his eyes were bloody and so strange. I started crying loudly, and I did not calm myself down until he said that he was not going to hurt me, that I was a “little girl” and he was a great friend of young people; however, if I did not like that he loved me, he would not be mad, and I just have to keep quiet about that. He was not able to resist my beauty, and the teachers usually were not so “cold” or such “crybabies”

– “Raise three fingers!” he said, finishing that official action.

He then began murmuring something.

“Done!”

That was my first official “oath”. Trembling with disgust and disappointment, I returned home, without saying anything to anybody. The mayor was a “big man” in Ruma, he could have had his revenge on me... I understood that much.<sup>3</sup>

This confrontation with patriarchy and protection was confusing for Jelica. Nothing in her earlier life had prepared her for this and, having lost her own father at the age of five, she hoped to find sympathetic mentors in older men. And more important, she had believed that education and talent alone was enough to get ahead in the world of education. Instead she found a professional world that was full of men who were free to make advances on their underlings.

Encounters like this followed her everywhere and are a major theme of the memoir. More important, however, was how they shaped her professional and psychological life as she grew increasingly angry over repeated insults to her intelligence and talent.

The world of scholarship and journalism was controlled by men: this she learned early. As the result of her pedagogical and literary writings, she had come to the attention of several important Croatian scholars; the most important of these was Professor Isidor Kršnjavi in Zagreb, who held the power and influence to not only advance her literary career but also to promote her within the Croatian educational system. She refused his interest, however, mostly because his attention came at a price: a sexual relationship euphemistically known as “protection.” Here Jelica describes events at a teachers’ conference.

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<sup>3</sup> Section 212.

**266.**

His Grace Mr. Kršnjavi was supposed to come to Dalj, to participate at the assembly of the teachers' society "Zajednica" from Osijek. My colleague Hirc and I were selected as lecturers. I was the youngest one and they chose me to give a lecture ... .

"Why did they choose me?" I asked [my friend] Glembay.

- "Because Kršnjavi likes you!" she said.

- "He likes me?" That was somewhat repulsive thought. So, they considered me to be "some lady", and they wanted to cheer him up with me. That recognition pleased my writer's vanity, but my idealistic understanding of life was disgusted. Patronage! I had heard many immoral anecdotes about Kršnjavi and his young "protégées", and that had made me so embittered, and there: they considered me to be one of those same "protégées" of his! I was not a very practical girl, I admit. Some other girl would have drawn countless benefits and privileges from that "chief's" grace, but I was ashamed that I was being patronized. That day, which would have marked a beginning of the career for some other girl, was the end of it for me<sup>4</sup>

While we cannot go into details here, Jelica recounts several instances of attempted seduction on the part of Kršnjavi. These events made it clear that both funding for school materials and promotions only went to those teachers who complied with the system of patronage in Croatia.

But Jelica found a solution to her problems: Bosnia. Her pedagogical writings had also attracted the attention of another Croatian administrator, the regional Secretary for Education Ljuobe Dlustuš, who invited her to join the school system in Bosnia<sup>5</sup>. This appealed to Jelica for several reasons. First she, like many others, viewed Bosnia as a place of professional freedom and fulfillment. Post-colonial research on other regions has demonstrated how young women found greater personal freedom from social norms by traveling to colonial regions. In addition, there was another whiff of the new imperialism in her reasoning, she was deeply attracted to the idea of the Austrian "civilizing mission" in the region. Here was an opportunity to do some real work. Finally, Dlustuš painted a picture of Bosnia as a place where she would be recognized for her talents, not her gender. She would be free from patriarchy and patronage in Bosnia. She recounts this conversation with her supervisor before her departure to Bosnia:

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<sup>4</sup> Memoir 266

<sup>55</sup> *Hof-und Staatshandbuch des österr. Kaiserthumes*. 1900, 1042.

I had not talked to anyone about my decision (following Dlustuš' wish) before, so when I told it to the supervisor ... in Osijek, he was very surprised.

“You want to go to Bosnia – although you are Kršnjavi's protégée, and you could go to Zagreb, just if you wanted to! Even to the advanced school; you just need to ask!”

“As a protégée – yes! But I despise that. They do not invite me to Bosnia due to some patronage, but because of my diplomas!” I said, convinced that that was the truth.<sup>6</sup>

## II. *A kuferashi* in Bosnia

In 1893, Jelica left her homeland and moved to Bosnia, where she was assigned to a girls' school in Mostar. She found the countryside beautiful and overwhelming. Still young and hopeful, she remained under Dlustuš influence, calling him “mentor” and hoping to find a father figure in him. She also believed his rhetoric about the special role of teachers in the Austrian bureaucracy: “My mentor described the service in Bosnia as a service in the “promised land”, where Justice and Righteousness reigned, where people appreciated talent, diligence and merits, and where only the chosen ones could be teachers.”,<sup>7</sup> she wrote. This appeal to talent and brains attracted her, for she hoped to escape the patronage she hated in Croatia.

She quickly realized her mistake on both accounts :

...I was being lured by the letters full of the purest idealism and enchanting diction, written by the head of department, [Ljuobe] Dlustuš. I had no idea back then that people were the same everywhere, and the men were lustful everywhere, although not always so obviously as Kršnjavi. There was no one to tell me any different.<sup>8</sup>

Her first disappointment in Bosnia, therefore, was to learn that she could not escape male patronage; her second came as she understood the conditions of the Austrian Administration there. Upon her arrival in Mostar, she encountered an unexpected level of greed and corruption among not only the local bureaucrats, but also the teachers at the girls' school. Observing the bribes, sexual freedom and high life of her colleagues in most government positions, she quickly

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<sup>6</sup> Section 271

<sup>7</sup> Section 274

<sup>8</sup> 267

became disillusioned and angry. There appeared to be no connection between the ideal of “Austria’s civilizing mission” and reality she encountered in Mostar, but she dared not complain. Through patronage one became both important and wealthy:

With patronage – you can do anything in the Bosnian El Dorado, in the country of the “gratuity” en gros. I could not have written about any of that to my Mentor, because he would not have believed me.”<sup>9</sup>

The young, idealistic and literary Jelica Belović was definitely out of place. To obtain some protection from the sexual advances of her superiors and the daily torment of walking down the street as a single woman, she quickly married another bureaucrat, a minor Polish aristocrat Johannes (Janko) Bernadzikowski, who was part of the legal branch. This marriage, which eventually foundered on unfaithfulness, drunkenness and syphilis, proved to be another disappointment in the male gender that led her into feminism and political activism after 1914, that is, in the years after she completed this memoir.

In the meantime, however, Jelica and her new husband left Mostar for Sarajevo in 1896, where she taught at the girls’ school in Sarajevo. Here she had daily encounters with her “mentor”, who continued to press his claims. Her marriage to another made no difference. In 1898, after refusing to accept Dlustuš as a lover, she was “transferred” to Banja Luka as punishment.

In Banja Luka, Jelica began to voice her criticisms of her superiors’ prejudices and the personal consequences of refusing male “protection”. Four instances can be mentioned briefly here:

- a. A Serbian teacher (co-worker) was fired for no apparent reason, and Jelica asked what he had done. She was given the answer, “Nothing. He’s a damned Serb, that’s enough”<sup>10</sup>
- b. The local administrator was forcing Muslims out of the area and selling land to German colonists.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Section 285

<sup>1010</sup> Section 318



- c. Although the local population was Serbian, teachers refused to allow Serbs to celebrate religious holidays. When Jelica did so, out of a spirit of even-handedness she gained the reputation of being “Serb friendly”. Local administration ultimately refused to allow her to celebrate the Serbian holiday (St. Sava), at her Serbian girls school<sup>12</sup>
- d. She was denied school materials and funding on the basis of having refused Dlustuš’ “protection”<sup>13</sup>

In the three years she spent at Banja Luka, Jelica experienced the grim reality of Austrian administrators in Bosnia; greed, infighting, bribery, jockeying for position, and complete disregard for the needs of the population. The corruption of nearly every Austrian official was a given. Everywhere she turned she saw patriarchy and protection for ambitious men (and women) who accepted these terms.

Over time, she came to reject all the authorities put in place by the Austrian administration as hopelessly greedy and corrupt. This was true not only of her educational supervisors but also religious and cultural authorities, both Catholic and Serbian. How and why she lost her position in Banja Luka and the effect of her premature retirement occupies much of the middle portion of this memoir.

### III. The Civilizing Mission

A corresponding theme of the memoir is her gradual loss of faith in the Austrian authorities; their religious underlings and the cultural “mission” of Austria in the territories.

The cultural mission of Austria included a strong emphasis on finding and documenting the regional crafts and folk arts. In this, Jelica’s background and interests brought her to the highest levels of the Bosnian exhibitionary establishment: the regional museum (Landesmuseum) in Sarajevo and the provincial museum in Zagreb. Already in Mostar, Jelica had developed an avid interest in embroidery and costumes. Her collection began to grow and she came to the attention of the exhibitionary establishment, gaining fame as an ethnographer and design

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<sup>11</sup> Baron Lazarini’s activities are described in Section 323

<sup>12</sup> Section 326

<sup>13</sup> Sections 314-327 describe the intrigues and misunderstandings in Banja Luka

collector. In this capacity, she also worked overtime with local Museums that were attempting to display the southern Slavic crafts and designs. This put her in contact with the powerful men who organized Bosnian presence on the world stage: Constantin Hörman at the Landesmuseum in Sarajevo, among them. But these cultivated men also proved to be a disappointment as they put profit, prestige, and local politics over the goals of collection and protection of culture.<sup>14</sup> They used her skills and talents shamelessly, without proper reward or recognition. She recounts how she acted as French translator and guide for an observer from Paris, who planned to write a book on Bosnia.

That year, a French writer Térèse Cesari Colonna, comtesse Della Rocca came to Bosnia. She was a correspondent of several magazines from Paris; she came from Istanbul and Bulgaria, but her place of residence was Paris. Since I spoke French the best of all teachers, I got a 14-day leave and I was assigned to be her interpreter. During that time, I got in contact with Mr. Kosta Hörman (director of the museum at that time), who was often visiting me with the requests to inform him of everything that that woman wanted and thought about Bosnia. I was spending all day with her, and, at night, I was writing, filling three thick notebooks with the information about women's lives in Bosnia, folk songs, tales, embroidery and ornaments. . . .

Drs. Truhelka and Apfelbeck from the museum were courting her and flattering her, in order to be able to go on picnics outside Sarajevo with her and still account for their daily wages. Neither of them spoke French, so she was telling all her major wishes to me. We also went to see Kučera (civilian adlatus), and we spoke French there, so he thought I was French too. When she saw that, she said: "She is one of your clerks, don't you know about her? An educated woman; I am very impressed with her!" From that moment on, the baron was much colder toward me, and he was carefully choosing words and topics in our conversation. I suppose he thought, as Ibsen said: "To be a man and a clerk at the same time is a difficult task."

She received an enormous amount of money, thousands of crowns, from the Bosnian Government for her visit, and for the publicity she would bring Bosnia. I, as her main assistant, did not get anything. She only sent me some small lamp from Paris (a modern object), and I had to pay a bigger customs fee for it than the lamp was worth.<sup>15</sup>

In this way, Jelica and her particular set of knowledge was appropriated by powerful cultural leaders; another form of intellectual colonization. As a *kuferaši*, Belović was a colonizer in Bosnia, but as a woman and subordinate she was also colonized as well. Not only her body, but her intellect was subject to the power of men.

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<sup>14</sup> See Section 403 for a discussion of the faltering "Bosnian Institute" that failed to get government support for political reasons.

<sup>15</sup> Section 301. The book, *Contes de la Bosnie*, by Mathilde Colonna appeared in Paris in 1898 (Nilsson Per Lamm, publisher)

#### IV. A Critique of “Austria”

But what disturbed Jelica profoundly in the final section of her memoir was the growing and divisive influence of Croatian Catholicisms at the expense of both the Serbian and Muslim populations in the region. From her vantage point, this had increased in recent years; perhaps she was more sensitive due to her own setbacks, however. Nevertheless, when she arrived in Bosnia, and for several years thereafter, Jelica claimed to have no interest in politics. But after moving to Banja Luka, she began to see the injustices of the Austrian system. Even though she was a Catholic Croatian, she became suspicious of a new Croat nationalism afoot in Bosnia.

I had never been in politics, so I was not aware [in 1898] that the “agitations” against Serbs had already begun, and that was “in fashion” to be a good catholic. My position as a principal of an institute with almost strictly Serbian students demanded me to be on their, Serbs’ side, and not against them, which would have been much more “lucrative”. Naturally, it was held against me that I wrote for Serbian magazines and that I “liked Serbs”.<sup>16</sup>

How had her putative fondness for Serbians come about? When she first arrived in Bosnia, it was apparently part of the Austrian strategy to woo Serbians. Her mentor, Ljuboje Dlustuš, not only encouraged her to continue her pedagogical and literary ambitions in Croatian, but also to learn Cyrillic and to publish in Serbian magazines.<sup>17</sup> This she accomplished with great enthusiasm, making a name for herself in Serbian circles as well. In the early 1890s this was a strategy of conciliation—a Croatian catholic educator writing in Serbian journals.<sup>18</sup> As we have seen, however, she was also sensitive to the cultural needs of her Serbian students in Banja Luka, much to the distress of her superiors.

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<sup>16</sup> Section 332.

<sup>17</sup> Section 292 Belović learned Serbian under the influence of her “mentor” [Ljuboje Dlustuš]...’ I had to start teaching him French, and he started educate me about our folk literature and Serbian authors, since I did not know much about that. He often took me to visit his friend Kosta [Constantin] Hörman at the museum

<sup>18</sup> Sections 292-297 Belović describes her time in Sarajevo and the influence of her “Mentor” in publishing for Serbian periodicals.

By 1909, Jelica observed a sea change in Austrian policy with regard to Croatism and Serbianism in the region. She interpreted what she saw as an intentional Austrian policy to privilege Croatian Catholicism against Serbianism.

On the streets of Sarajevo nowadays (1909), the army brass bands play the Croatian songs: “Oj banovci”, “Imuk iz Like”, even “Lijepa naša”<sup>19</sup>. When I recall that, 10 years ago, nobody would dare to even mention the word “Croatian”, let alone sing it or write about it, I should be glad about it. My articles, which were being published in “Školski Vjesnik”, did not have the word “Croatian” even once...; Dlustuš erased all of them. On one occasion, [a colleague] ..(Prof. Purić) reproached me because of that, and today, the people are showing off with “great Croatis m”; those same people who had been banning it as a plague some time before: Dlustuš, Treščec, Hörman and their creatures. Trade! Dirty trade! That is why I am not glad about it. Hypersanguine eruptions of patriotism, brought to market to be used for lucrative political speculations....<sup>20</sup>

But what she also saw was the general plunder of Bosnia and Hercegovina by Austrian officials along with the rise of anti-Serbian rhetoric in the name of Croatian Catholicism. Now she wrote with disdain about the distance between Austria’s civilizing mission and the realities of ‘ethno-confessional preferencing’ (for Croatian Catholicism) in the region. She describes the sea change in Dlustuš attitude toward Serbs in disgruntled tones:

He [once] instructed me to like Serbs and to write for the Serbian newspapers and magazines, and look at him today! A “Frankovac” who is persecuting the Serbs, because that trend is “lucrative” today. ... Not: Grosskroatien, but: “Grossbriefftaschien” – their own pockets. That is it! ...

It was not surprising that they were supporting “Frankis m”, but without any patriotism, just for “gescheft”. Neither Hörman nor Stadler were Croats, to say nothing of Kučera. However, by the means of “Frankis m”, they can acquire honors and money; that is why the entire Bosnia is handed over to his mercy. Poor Bosnia. I know those people down to their souls. Here, the teachers are the greatest propagators of “Frank’s gescheft”; moreover, that is why their salaries and “ranks” were increased. Dlustuš took care of that, because that was for his benefit. He covered his moral mud stains with that!<sup>21</sup>

There are several themes we can trace in these memoirs, but what I would like to leave you with today is the emphasis on how Jelica perceived the hardening of nationalist positions in Sarajevo after 1900. As she became more critical of her former bosses, she noted their increasing anti-Serbian positions. In numerous instances in her diary she indicates sympathy for both Muslim and Serb victims of the administration. Finally, she concluded Austria had brought nothing good to her peoples;

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<sup>19</sup> “Our beautiful”, Still the official Croatian anthem today. –trans. rem.

<sup>20</sup> Section 394

<sup>21</sup> Section 344

**That is what the cultural mission of Austria in Bosnia looks like: its price is immorality and the poisoned youth of my people. Before Austria came, there had been no immoral women and syphilis in Bosnia. Today, they both play the leading role here.**<sup>22</sup>

Written before 1914, Jelica's memoir is devoted to issues of patriarchy and corruption within a system that had several similarities with imperialist practices elsewhere. In the rough and tumble world of the Bosnian frontier, Jelica might have been freed from some social conventions, but she was also helpless against male power; her middle-class ideals did not fit with the frontier, and she could not, no matter how hard she tried, get ahead on brains or talent alone.

But between the lines we can also see how she notices an increased degree of ethno-religious tension in the region with a decisive shift toward anti-Serb ideas after 1900. And we experience, through her, disillusionment with the status quo that eventually led her into feminism, sympathy for Serbia, and political activism after the Great War.

Whether her 'anti-Austrianism' was pro-Serbian or Yugoslavian remains unclear; What matters, however, is how Jelica's memoir, which contains far more than I can discuss here, is a testament of change among another portion of the population in Sarajevo. In this, a young educated woman from Croatia, in everything the exact opposite of the young men who planned the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, corroborates their opinion about the charade of Austrian rule and echoed their passion for independence from corrupting colonizers.

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<sup>22</sup> Section 405