

Emina Hasanagic
21203115
POLS
Library Essay Competition

My First Visit to the Library

I am nine years old. My hair is an ashy shade of blonde. I am wearing a thick, knitted white and purple sweater. Red rubber boots on my feet are marching slowly next to my father's cowboy boots. I have 10 German marks in my pocket. My mama left them for me in the morning next to a pack of coffee, a carton of cube sugar and a box of Turkish Delight – an old Bosnian tradition. Mama left me a message saying "Money is to register at the library. Go there straight from home and ask for Adisa, she knows me well. Give her the bag. Get the book you need and come to my office straight from there. Your father cannot take you – he has business to take care of. Love you more than the sky."

The first libraries in the world were found in Sumer, Mesopotamia. The People's Library of Mostar was formed roughly 3000 years later, in 1570. Since my early childhood, I thought this name "People's Library" very odd. It wasn't until later, after long hours of studying political regimes that I understood that socialism demanded everything and nothing to be people's and of the people. An interesting fact about this library is that it does not have one building – children's section is in one part of the city, near the synagogue, "mature" literature behind the Orthodox church, theological books are near the city's *madrakah*, academic books in the Mostar University campus, past the Catholic cathedral, then left. A lot more of them were hiding in Mostar's narrow residential streets called *sokaks*. Libraries will always provide home for those in need.

One important lesson that I learned from this library is that, as big as you are, knowledge will always be bigger than you. The building of the library with children's books is an imposing edifice built in 1905. The facade is dark red and ruined from surviving a hundred years of standing tall despite one empire, World War I, one kingdom, the long and hard World War II, one socialist republic, one destructive and painful war of independence and in the end one sovereign republic Bosnia and Herzegovina. It's tall windows are framed with white ornaments, giving the momentary impression of Austria-meets-Mauri-meets-Ottoman. The building has only two floors but high ceilings make sure you feel very, very small standing in front of it.

I would lie if I said that I was excited. Honestly, I was afraid of the library. I was also scared to walk there on my own. Mostar was still not a place that safe. The war was over for a couple of years already, but gunshots and explosions could still be heard in random nights. Parents used to tell us that there are a lot of bad people outside to prevent us from leaving the house on our own. On the other hand, I felt very, very proud that I had 10 German Marks in

my pocket! As my grandmother was combing my hair and murmuring under her voice about how irresponsible my parents were for telling me to walk outside alone, "someone may steal you", I looked around our house. Our home was two rooms on one floor and a kitchen in the ground floor for six of us. But still, it was home. It had a certain warmth that we could never get into our new house. Grandma and grandpa had their own room. My brother, mama, baba and me were in the other bedroom. Kitchen was a neutral area that baba would take every now and then after him and mama shouted at each other. I still couldn't believe that there was a book in the world that I needed that was not already in our home! Despite living in one room, a huge wall was taken by a giant shelf containing what I know was about two thousand titles of books, articles, comics and albums. I believed that all that I ever needed was found there and nowhere else. I heard the front door open and footsteps approaching. Through long white curtains I saw the grey silhouette of my baba. My face turned into a huge grim and I thought to myself - "I knew he would come".

My baba is an extraordinary man indeed. In the hard post-war times he would come to the house pushing a wheelbarrow full of flour, sugar, oil, beans and anything that could stay outside. The food was covered with nylon sheets that said either *Merhamet* or *Red cross* or *Caritas*. On other days, he would come home with plastic bags full of books that people sold on the streets because they needed money. His pockets would be empty and his face happy. I jumped from my place, ran and let baba's strong hands raise me until I was able to touch the ceiling. "*Come on! We have to leave!*", he said laughingly. My grandmother changed her face expression from nervous to victorious. Her son was now the hero that saved her granddaughter from the witch, my mother, that would make the poor child, me, walk to the library herself.

Baba opened the wooden door and we walked out into the Mediterranean sun. Ten minutes later, we're there. Across the street from a ruined shopping mall stands all the red building, white window frames and all. We open the door and come in, and I can't help but notice the familiarity with which he walked through the halls. We come into a big circular room and there they were – dozens of shelves on floors from bottom to ceiling, thick maroon curtains, working tables in the middle and a lady that turned her head sharply as if to see who disrupted her peace as we came in. The place was completely empty. "Good afternoon, Adisa". My father said with a pleasant smile. I just stood there completely amazed by the seriousness of the insides of the building. I didn't like it – I was impressed and afraid. I felt the walls could swallow me. I stopped listening to baba and Adisa speaking and I inhaled deeply. A heavy smell of dust and paper entered my nostrils. Adisa's heavy perfume mixed with the smell of minced meat burek, a greasy pie that smells of onion and deep-cooked meat. I believe that somewhere around that moment of my life I started disliking people that had no consideration of their bodily odors. She had round glasses, not very chick but very Yugoslavian. Her hair was merino-sheep curly. Bright blue eyeshadow combined with red lipstick made her a clown-like figure and I got even more scared. "What's your name?" she asked rather loudly. Her voice echoed between the shelves. "Emina", I murmured. Baba repeated it louder like he could feel my embarrassment. "Emina, she's my youngest." She handed me the book and said nothing else. I realized I didn't tell her the title, baba did. I

wasn't even listening to them speaking. I opened my mouth to tell her I have the money to pay for registration but then baba told her we will be leaving. "Emina, tell your mother to stop by!", she said opening her mouth even more. "She will!". My father said already walking out. I got a feeling he didn't like Adisa. I didn't like her at all, but I loved the library. The sense of power it had made me feel like I could take it all in, only if I had enough time, and then I would become powerful just like the library was, and nobody could hurt either me or mama or baba or abi or nana or papa. I was scared and amazed by it, always a winning combination of emotions that shake you up like a tornado and leave you wrecked, but somehow perversely beautiful in your ruins. Libraries will always provide hope for those in need.

After that came the time when I would visit the library every day, take a new book, go to mama's office and start reading it there only to end it in the middle of the night. Around that time, baba used to recommend books for me, some very hard and complex, others very interesting. He started buying me books in English "so that I'd perfect my writing", a pretty long shot for a ten-year-old. I never perfected my writing, but I believe I started understanding my father somewhere in the sokaks between my house and the library. I started understanding why he couldn't leave those books abandoned on the streets. He didn't regret his last coins for old editions in Serbo-Croatian, old Bosnian, English, Russian, German, written in Latin, Cyrillic or Arabic for religious texts... If it was on paper, it was deserved a place in our home. If it's on paper, it's worth a place in my heart.

Libraries will always provide hope for those in need. My father started writing and publishing books of his own. I grew up to be a book worm. I wear glasses almost as thick as Adisa's, but I never eat burek in my workplace. I spend most of my time at a library that's way too fancier and at least 80 years younger than the one I started at, but at times when I roam between shelves looking for nothing in particular, I get the same feeling I got that long time ago in Mostar. The dust and old paper feel like home and victory. Home because I can go anywhere just by opening a book. Victory because my father payed my registration and nobody ever asked those 10 German Marks back. I bought all the candy in the world with them.