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Searching for Walter

FOR THE FIRST TIME during my stay in Sarajevo, the sliding door to the guesthouse's kitchen was shut. I couldn't get to the refrigerator where I kept the yogurt and raspberries I usually ate for lunch. Behind the door, I could hear clattering and movement. I wondered if this was preparation for a special event, perhaps a family meal. One of the guesthouse owners, a wispy older Bosnian man named Mr. S, was typing on the computer at the nearby reception desk.

"When will the kitchen be free?" I inquired politely. The white-haired man had a speech impediment that made his voice sound like a music-less accordion. He was usually very friendly and chatted amiably with me and other guests in English. But he seethed with irritation as he wheezed his reply.

"The kitchen is open twenty-four hours. But this Chinese man," he flung his arm toward at the kitchen, "is cooking, and the smell is going through the whole house!" He turned back to the computer and stared at it sullenly.

So there was no special event going on. I took this as permission to enter, so I slid open the door and stepped into the long, narrow kitchen. Inside was an older Asian man of medium height and build. His head was shaved to a salt-and-pepper stubble. Square, silver-rimmed glasses perched on his gentle-looking face. He wore a white tank-top undershirt and a dish towel thrown over one shoulder. The man was busy cleaning up after cooking what smelled like cabbage soup.

As I rinsed my fresh raspberries under the faucet, the man assiduously wiped down the stove where some soup had spilled. Then he washed and dried all the utensils he had used and placed them back in the drawers. He moved unhurriedly and unselfconsciously, apparently oblivious to the consternation over the aroma of his cooking. I realized that Mr. S, the guesthouse owner, had shut the kitchen door to block out the smell—and the sight of this man making his lunch.

THE SARAJEVO GUESTHOUSE seemed like an elegant home because it was. The owners were an older Bosnian couple who had converted

their town house into a guesthouse for budget travelers. It was on two floors of a stone row house on a side street bumpy with cobblestones. The building was around the corner from a raucously noisy bar named for Nikola Tesla—the inventor of modern electricity, the Thomas Edison of former Yugoslavia—whom rival factions of the ex-country each claim as their own. Guests were not allowed to wear shoes inside on the plush carpet, so they lined them up near the tall front door. Sometimes the guesthouse staff put shoes in a cabinet, and guests had to ask for the whereabouts of their footwear.

The Bosnian couple lived in their own apartment one flight up a wide spiral staircase. Some days, laundered sheets hung to dry like pleasant phantoms from the balcony above. White cloth filled the cool, cavernous foyer with a scent of cleanliness and order that was welcome to budget travelers used to limited access to laundry and showers, and to uncomfortable conditions, like eight-hour bus rides in the Balkans.

On a whim, I had traveled to Bosnia by bus from Croatia, where I was visiting a Croatian friend who had emigrated to the United States more than two decades before.

“Why do you want to go there?” he asked incredulously, when I said I wanted to go to neighboring Bosnia. “Why do you always want to go to miserable places?” He had never been to this country that used to make up part of Yugoslavia, along with Croatia, Serbia, and other Balkan states, before the war. Since then, Bosnia’s economy lagged behind amid political fragmentation. Croatia had its share of problems too, such as corruption and high youth unemployment, though it was harder for one to tell in the summer when tourists lured by *Game of Thrones* packed its rocky beaches along the Adriatic Sea like basking seals.

But a Croatian friend in his early thirties, who had actually been to Bosnia recently, told me he loved Sarajevo. So I bought a ticket for the eight-hour bus ride from Baška Voda, a Croatian seaside town, to Bosnia.

The guesthouse’s living room had the air of a small museum. At first I sat gingerly on the sofa’s brown velvet upholstery, as though someone might tap me on the shoulder and whisper that sitting on the furniture was not allowed. There was a glossy baby grand piano in the corner and big wooden steamer trunks. Lace curtains hung from the tall windows like long tresses over shelves stocked with books. Propped against the wall were antique wooden skis, presumably once used during snowy winters in the mountains around Sarajevo.

A poster from the 1984 Winter Olympics in Sarajevo hung on one wall. Next to it was a large framed drawing of the city rendered in a cartoon that belied the gravity of what it portrayed. The city was surrounded by its idyllic mountains—as well as tanks, guns, and other artillery aimed at its center.

During the Siege of Sarajevo from 1992 to 1995, Serbian-led Yugoslav armed forces pummeled the city with mortars that fell like deadly rain from the surrounding hills. From their elevated perch, Bosnian Serb snipers picked off the city's denizens. During this infamous siege of the most recent Balkan Wars, almost 14,000 people—both Bosnians and Serbs—were killed. About 5,500 of them were civilians. Some were killed while buying food at the market or standing in line for bread rations.

For lunch I usually ate plain yogurt with fresh raspberries and bread from the city's plentiful bakeries. I bought the tart, juicy berries for one Bosnian mark (about fifty cents) a pint at an open-air market where sixty-eight people were killed in 1994 by a mortar shell as they shopped for food.

Another mortar attack in 1995 at the same market killed forty-three people with flesh-shredding shrapnel. The bloodshed during what was the longest siege in modern history was immortalized with hardened splatters of red resin embedded in the market's dented asphalt. Today, the vegetable and fruit market is tranquil and colorful. Without knowing what these "Sarajevo Roses" signified, a casual shopper might think the crimson splashes underfoot were pretty—and then move on to peruse the boxes of local raspberries, blackberries, and blueberries.

When I ate lunch, I usually had the living room to myself because the other guests were out sightseeing. It was July in Sarajevo, and there was a lot to do: city walking tours, museums, a book festival, lunching at cute cafés in the Old Town. I went on runs along the nearby Miljacka River, past quaint bridges, including the arched Latin Bridge. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria there in 1914 ignited World War One. There was a museum across from the Latin Bridge, along with a replica of Franz Ferdinand's old-fashioned car on the corner where his chauffeur took a fateful wrong turn. Tourists paid to dress up in period outfits worn by the slain duke and his wife, Sophie: a blue military uniform and a cylindrical cap; a frilly dress, parasol and wide-brimmed hat. For a few euros, they posed for photos in the open-top car and smiled at the camera.

I was pleasantly surprised that Sarajevo was so lively, picturesque, and bustling. Physical scars of the war remained if you looked for them: shelled, pockmarked buildings off the tourist routes, memorials to children killed, genocide museums, and an ironic sculpture of the EU canned beef rations that people ate during wartime.

In the mornings, I usually worked on my computer, then soaked up the quiet early afternoon when sun brightened the living room. This budget guesthouse—frequented by travelers who booked bunk beds in dormitories or affordable private rooms—was a wonder. I was grateful for the tattooed Asian American backpacker I'd met who recommended the place to me. "You will like it," he said confidently. I met him in Mostar, a city two hours away, my first stop in Bosnia.

The guesthouse was immaculately clean for a reason. The matron of the house, a sixty-something Bosnian woman named Mrs. N, put newly handwashed dishes in the dishwasher to be cleaned a second time. She wiped and rewiped already spotless counters. If I encountered her in the kitchen, she insisted on giving me a tray for my lunch, so I would not soil the forest-green tablecloth in the living room with errant drops of yogurt. Unlike her husband, Mrs. N had a serious and somewhat wary demeanor, as though she barely tolerated guests in her home. After I told her I was American and a journalist, she finally cracked a cool smile. She told me she was a former language professor at the university.

A LITTLE WHILE AFTER meeting the man in the kitchen, I returned to make a cup of tea. I heard Alem, the owner's middle-aged son, talking agitatedly. I poked my head into the hallway. The stout, black-haired son was now manning the reception desk. He was speaking to the guest in that too-loud voice used when people think talking louder will lead to comprehension. The Asian man had changed into a gray polo shirt and jeans. He was trying to pay for his room, but he and Alem didn't understand each other.

"Nine euros! Or eighteen marks!" shouted Alem, even though the guest apparently spoke no English.

I approached the Asian man. He held out an assortment of coins on his open palm.

"*Zhe shi ouyan?*" he asked me in Mandarin. *Is this euro?*

My Mandarin was rusty, but I could at least tell him his dorm bed cost nine euros. I helped him count out euro and Bosnian mark coins

in his hands. “These are marks,” I told him, holding up one of the coins.

He smiled slightly sheepishly and confessed in Mandarin, “I can’t tell.”

The Chinese man wanted to book a shared car from Sarajevo to Belgrade the next day, so I helped translate his request. Alem called the car company and reserved the taxi for the next morning. I didn’t even know that such a car service to Serbia’s capital, about six hours away, existed.

The Chinese man’s name was Mr. Wang, and he had returned to Sarajevo that morning after a few days in Mostar, a Bosnian city two hours away down breathtaking mountain roads. It was famed for the spectacular Stari Most, or Old Bridge. The arching sixteenth-century Ottoman-era treasure was destroyed in the war in 1993 by Croatian forces. In 2004, it was rebuilt to its former splendor and is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Mr. Wang had spent three days in Mostar after several days in Sarajevo, though you couldn’t tell, judging by his unfamiliarity with the currency and trouble paying for his room. He spoke and read no English. Mr. Wang used an app on his smartphone that involved shouting into it, then waiting for a garbled English translation to appear on the screen. The too-loud voice that tried to ram in comprehension across languages also applied to communicating with smartphones.

Mr. Wang intrigued me. Why would an older man who couldn’t speak English come all the way to Bosnia on his own? And how on earth did he get around? I had been in lovely Belgrade a few weeks before and found it challenging to navigate because many of the street signs were in Cyrillic. I didn’t have Internet on my smartphone, but at least I could ask Serbs for directions in English. I also used a paper map from my guesthouse, the old-fashioned way.

I returned to the kitchen to wash my teacup and Mr. Wang came in to boil water. He glanced at me. “*Ni zhongguoren ma?*” He asked if I were Chinese.

“*Wò meiji huaren.*” I told him I was a “Chinese-living-in-America-person,” a Chinese American, and had learned Mandarin in college in the United States. Where was he from?

“Harbin,” he replied.

“Harbin!” I exclaimed in surprise. Harbin is a northern Chinese city a couple of hundred miles from the Russia border. Years ago in San Francisco, I had interviewed the Chinese émigré author Ha Jin, who took his pseudonym from the first syllable of his home city. I remembered a short

story Ha Jin had written about the brutal experience of young Chinese Red Army soldiers patrolling the frigid China-Russian border.

I was puzzled. Why had Mr. Wang come to Bosnia, of all places?

He replied, but I couldn't understand. Mr. Wang repeated a phrase again and again with a word that sounded like *Wá-duh* (ascending second tone for *wá*, then the dip-and-rise of the third tone for *duh*). *Wá-duh. Wá-duh*, he repeated. I stared blankly, racking my brain for the meaning. Whatever part of the brain that controls language was unhelpfully kicking me back to Spanish, my other rusty foreign language. He took out his smartphone and yelled into it. I caught a word I understood: *Dianying. Movie*.

"A movie?" I asked. His face lit up and he nodded. Mr. Wang shouted into the phone again and the translation app blurted some garbled clues. I did a Google search on my phone and it came up with a title. "*Walter Defends Sarajevo*?" I said. Those English words he understood. Mr. Wang bobbed his head enthusiastically.

WALTER DEFENDS SARAJEVO, or *Váler Brani Sarajevo* in Serbo-Croatian, or *Wàertè Bao Wèi Sàlarèwo* in pinyin Mandarin, was a black-and-white movie released in the former Yugoslavia in 1972. It featured partisans, the Communist-led resistance fighters battling Nazis who invaded Sarajevo during World War Two.

I gleaned that Mr. Wang had seen this movie as a boy in Harbin during the 1970s. I was surprised he had seen any film from the West at all during that time. China was then under strict authoritarian Communist rule and isolated from the outside world.

The country was also reeling from years of turmoil. From 1958 to 1962, during the Great Leap Forward, at least 45 million people died during Chairman Mao Zedong's catastrophic attempt at collective agriculture and industrialization, far more deaths than during the Holocaust. Across China, people died en masse from widespread famine, as well as from political purging gone amok, torture, and executions. One tragic death included a father forced to bury his son alive for stealing a handful of grain; the father died a few weeks later of grief.

Then from 1966 to 1976, during the throes of China's Cultural Revolution, anything seen as bourgeois or traditional was banned, or simply ripped apart and destroyed. Grass was bourgeois and torn out of the ground by zealous student Red Guards. Books were burned and priceless art was ransacked. Religion was quashed under Communism.

I remember visiting the city of Suzhou in the late 1990s, wandering some back streets and stumbling across a temple. There, the faces of stone Buddhas had been smashed off, leaving eerily blank faces.

In the 1970s, China was closed off from the rest of world except for rare media approved by the Communist Party. *Walter Defends Sarajevo* passed the test because it aligned with the government's depiction of Communist forces as heroic, even if the Yugoslav partisans were in capitalist-dominated Europe.

After the Cultural Revolution, China's strict censors allowed screenings of *Walter Defends Sarajevo*. The pickings must have been scarce, because the film was screened continuously from 1976 to 1979, notably during Chinese New Year holidays when virtually the entire country takes rare time off from work.

The Yugoslav war movie became one of the most popular films in China during that media-starved era. And because of its viewership there, *Walter Defends Sarajevo* is one of the "most-watched war films of all time." One source claims that the movie was viewed statistically between eleven to thirteen times by every citizen of that generation.

Chinese people were hungry for glimpses of the outside world. Mr. Wang and his childhood friends were eager to see any movie at all. He begged for a few cents from his mother to see the film and saw it nine or ten times. Young Wang was thrilled by the film's exotic depictions of European cobblestone streets, grand buildings, arched bridges, bell towers, coppersmith shops, and most of all, noble fighters with integrity. The male actors in the film have chiseled features and thick, sculptural hair. They wear tweed blazers, vests, ties, thick 1970s turtleneck sweaters, and trench coats. They have meetings in houses with high ceilings, wooden furniture, and wall clocks that must have seemed exotic in the impoverished cultural wasteland of 1970s China.

For young Wang, the movie ignited longing, even if it was an idealized, propagandistic depiction of Yugoslavia. In the 1970s, China was wrecked by decades of turmoil, poverty, and oppression. Leisure travel was inconceivable for Chinese people. Ordinary citizens couldn't travel without government authorization, even domestically.

When China's economy began to open up in the 1980s, restrictions slowly began to loosen. Change accelerated in the 1990s, and China creaked open its doors to the world. Drab Maoist uniforms were replaced by colorful clothes sold in neon-lit department stores. I lived in Nanjing for two years in the late 1990s; expatriates share an

accurate but now clichéd memory that McDonald's was the gleaming, cool hangout spot. By the late 2000s, cities had modernized to unrecognizable levels.

In the past couple of decades, China has developed incredibly fast, but of course problems remain. Mr. Wang lost his job as a truck driver when the state-owned company he worked for closed down. However, he had saved money from his modest salary and pension.

In 2017, Mr. Wang read in a Chinese newspaper that Serbia and Bosnia would no longer require visas for Chinese nationals. That rekindled his childhood dream of seeing Sarajevo's cobblestone streets, grand buildings, and copper artisans.

He asked a friend in Harbin to help him book a flight online. The flight to Serbia was cheaper and more direct from Harbin. His friend also helped him book a budget hostel in Belgrade, and he wrote down the address on a piece of paper for Mr. Wang to carry. He emailed the hostel to request a taxi to pick up Mr. Wang from the airport.

The retired truck driver from Harbin could not speak or read English, but he was undaunted. Mr. Wang excitedly prepared for his first trip to Europe by packing a small backpack with one change of clothes and a washcloth.

I asked why he didn't travel in a tour group like most other Chinese travelers. Mr. Wang wrinkled his nose and said he didn't like groups; he liked to have his "freedom." So he set off for his first trip to Europe as a solo backpacker. He was sixty-one years old.

IN BELGRADE, Mr. Wang checked into his hostel and explored the streets on his own. He found a supermarket and cooked for himself in the hostel's kitchen both to save money and because he couldn't order in a restaurant without English. He explored the streets of Belgrade while trying to figure out how to get to his desired destination of Sarajevo.

There was a problem. Mr. Wang couldn't communicate with anyone; there was no Chinese speaker at his hostel. On Kneza Mihaila (or Prince Michael Street), the wide pedestrian promenade in Belgrade, big tour groups of Chinese tourists passed him, but they moved too quickly for him to approach anyone.

For seventeen days, Mr. Wang waited to find a Chinese-speaking person in Belgrade who could help him figure out how to get to Sarajevo. Finally, a Chinese man who spoke English checked into his

hostel and helped him book a shared taxi to Sarajevo. Those taxis were also more convenient than the bus because they could drop passengers off directly at their hotels—no English necessary.

“Seventeen days?” I exclaimed. Mr. Wang nodded.

And that’s how Mr. Wang at last arrived at our guesthouse in Sarajevo, a city he had fallen in love with as a boy riveted to images on a crackling movie screen in northern China.

In the kitchen of our guesthouse, Mr. Wang and I chatted. He excitedly said something I didn’t quite grasp though I did understand when he said, “*Women yiqi zou?*” *Let’s go together?*

I didn’t know where he wanted to go, but I replied, “Yes.”

WHEN I WAS TRAVELING in the Balkans in the summer of 2018, Chinese tourists flooded Bosnia and Serbia. Tour groups crowded the majestic Old Bridge in Mostar and swept through the luxe boulevards of Belgrade. Earlier that spring, Serbia and Bosnia lifted visa requirements for Chinese nationals and opened the floodgates to tourists from China.

In 2018, about 102,000 people from China visited Serbia, double the number from the previous year. And more than 121,000 Chinese tourists visited Bosnia, although that accounted for only the seven months after visa requirements were lifted in May. Many more from China are expected to travel to the Balkans, including people like Mr. Wang, who come to Sarajevo searching for Walter.

In April 2019, a small multimedia museum dedicated to the movie opened in Sarajevo in anticipation of more tourists from China. It features wax mannequins of the film’s actors, memorabilia, sets with props that depict critical scenes from the movie, like a rifle hidden in a stovepipe and a spy phone hidden in a dressmaker’s dummy. (I visited Sarajevo again later that summer, and the museum guide told me that mornings, when busloads of Chinese tourists arrive, tend to be busy.)

In 2014 a Chinese film company announced that it was filming a remake of the movie with the help of Bosnia’s ministry of culture. Bing Xiang, director of China Star Media, said, “Sarajevo has been in my heart for forty years, since the film was screened in China for the first time.” He added, “Some 1.3 billion people now live in China and half of them have seen *Walter Defends Sarajevo*. It is our goal to awaken the young generation with *Walter*, the same way it awoke us.”

MR. WANG AND I set out for Bašcaršija, the Old Town, a few minutes' walk from our guesthouse. We passed quaint stone buildings and magnificent domed mosques with towering minarets and heavy wooden doors befitting castles.

As we walked down a cobblestone street flanked with bustling cafés and shops, I thought it must be terribly frustrating and isolating for Mr. Wang to be unable to communicate with people. I had traveled to nearly sixty countries, most by myself. Yet I often still felt frustrated and overwhelmed with navigating a new place, even though English is spoken in most countries.

"Do you like traveling?" I probed tentatively.

Mr. Wang turned his head to me. A smile spread over his face. "Oh yes," he replied without hesitation.

That afternoon, he was on a mission to retrace scenes from *Walter Defends Sarajevo*. I was skeptical about what we would find as we walked through the Old Town thronged with tourists. I followed Mr. Wang down a narrow lane full of copper artisans selling souvenirs such as plaques, key chains, and decorative plates embossed with the city's skyline.

A Bosnian shopkeeper sat on a stool outside his store. Without hesitation, Mr. Wang approached him and spoke to him in Mandarin. "*Waertè. Waertè*," he repeated. The shopkeeper looked baffled.

I interjected. "Hi, do you know anything about the film *Walter Defends Sarajevo*?"

To my surprise, the shop owner perked up. "Yes, that way," he said and pointed decisively down the lane.

We walked past rows of copper shops. I was unsure of what we were searching for until it appeared before us. On our left side was a coppersmith's shop that looked much like the others except for two handwritten signs in Chinese taped to the doorframe. The large characters were written in black marker. The first sign read: "This is the screening site of the tin shop that appeared in the movie *Walter Defends Sarajevo*. The current owner is the son of the shop owner in the movie." The second read: "Welcome Chinese friends. This shop has protected the person who protected Sarajevo."

We entered the small shop, where a pale, balding, middle-aged man sat behind a table near the back working with some tools. He wasn't surprised to see us and welcomed us inside.

"Hello. Do you know anything about the film *Walter Defends Sarajevo*?" I asked.

The man smiled. “This is my father’s store and he was in the movie.”

The shop owner’s name was Adnan and he said one or two groups of Chinese tourists normally visited the store every day. So many people came that he had a clip from *Walter Defends Sarajevo* cued up on YouTube on his open laptop computer. He played it for us. In the scene, Nazis chase a man that might be Walter through the narrow lanes of the Old Town. To confuse and distract the Nazis, the cop-smiths start banging their small hammers on metal.

The camera pans to an artisan tapping on a copper plate as the actors bolt past.

Adnan pointed to the young artisan. “That’s my father.” He paused the clip and reached for a large framed black-and-white photo of an older man, his grandfather, hammering metal. The store was founded in 1938 and Adnan and his brothers were the third generations of cop-smiths. I translated for Mr. Wang, who smiled appreciatively.

I could see why so many Chinese people wanted to track down this shop and splice its legacy into their living memories of the film. What was it like to have so many Chinese tourists coming to the shop, I wondered. Was it a boon for business or a nuisance?

Adnan was sanguine. “We respect Chinese people and Chinese tourists,” he said. “We like people who respect this culture and try to understand it.” That was a contrast to the tourists from Gulf countries who weren’t respectful, Adnan explained. Those tourists were rude and acted superior. “They yell ‘Five euros, take it or leave it!’”

In recent years, tourists and investors from Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates had discovered Bosnia’s beautiful mountains, picturesque architecture, temperate summer climate—and its cheap prices. It was common to see women from Gulf countries covered completely in black burqas strolling in the Old Town with their families. A little more than half of Bosnia’s population is Muslim, though it is largely secular and relaxed, with few social restrictions.

This made it not only a good tourist destination but also an excellent place to buy property. Wealthy Gulf residents and investors had been snapping up homes and prime real estate, especially after the Arab Spring protests and uprisings in 2010 made typical holiday destinations like Egypt off limits. This displacement was a source of tension with Bosnians, who felt encroached upon in their own home.

As if on cue, a mustached tourist walked by Adnan’s store and picked up a trinket on display outside the shop. He looked likely to

be from a Gulf country.

“How much?” he shouted.

“It’s not for sale,” replied Adnan.

The man bristled. “How much?”

“It’s not for sale,” Adnan repeated.

This caused the man to erupt. “Who are you? Who are you?” he spluttered angrily. “You think you’re a big man?” The tourist let out a stream of expletives before storming off.

Adnan turned back to Mr. Wang and me with a resigned expression. “You see?” he said. He reiterated that he liked Chinese tourists because they were respectful. He didn’t care if they bought anything. They liked Bosnian culture and tried to understand it.

Adnan’s comments were a change from more typical reports of nouveau Chinese tourists who were loud and rude. I supposed that, though less-seasoned Chinese tourists committed cultural faux pas, they weren’t malicious and didn’t act superior to others.

In spite of us interrupting his work, Adnan continued to chat. He revealed he was trying to learn some Mandarin. On the wall he had taped a piece of paper with Chinese words and their English counterparts:

Tong – copper

Yin – silver

Qie [sic] – Tin

On another piece of paper he had written the Serbo-Croatian phonetic translations of numbers from 5 to 100 in Mandarin:

5 – OOOUU

10 – SSSS

20 – AARSSS

30 – SENSSS

Before we left the store, I took photos of Mr. Wang next to Adnan holding the framed photo of his grandfather.

“*Ni mayi ma?*” I asked Mr. Wang. *Are you satisfied?*

“*Hen mayi,*” he replied. He quietly glowed. *Very satisfied.*

WHEN WE FINALLY LEFT the shop, Mr. Wang wanted to find a plaza depicted in the movie. On a paper map I had picked up at the tourism

office, Adnan approximated where it might be. It was afternoon and Mr. Wang and I walked through the Old Town's main square, where a cooing cloud of pigeons pecked at bread scraps scattered on the ground. We took a road leading away from the square and passed a small pond, where some ducks paddled serenely.

"*Hen anjing,*" said Mr. Wang. *Very peaceful.* He observed that in China the water would be polluted and there wouldn't be any ducks because someone would have caught and eaten them. He liked nature and quiet. The environment was clean here, unlike in China where there was too much pollution.

After a while, I realized we had taken the wrong road so we retraced our steps back to the main square, near the landmark of my favorite *pekara* (bakery) that sold small loaves of pretzel bread for fifteen cents. From there we walked up a steep hill, and the streets grew quieter as we headed away from the Old Town. I wasn't prepared to walk so much and my feet ached. The cobblestones pressed their stony humps into the thin soles of my pastel aqua sandals purchased in Mostar. There were surprisingly nice and stylish shoe and clothing stores in Mostar and Sarajevo. From a trendy department store in Sarajevo, I bought a pair of strappy black heels that were completely impractical for a back-packer. I figured they might come in handy one day.

We passed a cemetery as we headed toward a white tower that turned out to be part of a nondescript building. Mr. Wang and I walked back down the hill and passed a museum dedicated to Alija Izetbegovic, Bosnia's president when the country became independent in 1992. We stepped briefly into the lobby decorated with framed photos of the balding leader.

"Who is this?" Mr. Wang asked me.

"I'm not sure," I replied. A few days later a young and seemingly knowledgeable Bosnian man told me that Izetbegovic fanned the flames of nationalism and ethnic conflict that led to genocide in Bosnia.

WHEN WE RETURNED to the busy main square lined with cafés, Mr. Wang "invited" me to an ice cream. I tried to pay for him, but he insisted on buying it. Many cafés had coolers filled with tubs of ice cream. Cones cost one Bosnian mark, so ice cream supplemented my diet of yogurt, berries, and pretzel bread during my time in Sarajevo.

We sat down at an al fresco table and licked our cones. I asked Mr. Wang if he liked Bosnian food, and he told me he hadn't tried any. He

hadn't eaten at a restaurant because he couldn't communicate with waiters or read a menu.

I was dumbstruck. "You have to try something! You traveled so far!" I went to the counter to look at desserts in a glass case and ordered a piece of baklava.

When I set the plate down in front of him, Mr. Wang looked puzzled. I showed him how to use a tiny fork to cut the syrupy, flaky layers of pastry to eat them. He chewed tentatively at first, then swallowed. "Do you like it?" I asked in Mandarin.

"I like it," he replied happily.

The waiter cast a bemused glance our way, though I presume he couldn't understand what we were saying.

THE NEXT MORNING, on the day of Mr. Wang's departure from Bosnia, the taxi was slightly late. We waited and chatted in the museum-like living room while perched on the brown velvet sofa, humped like a camel and covered with a lace doily. I noticed what looked like a couple of cigarette burn holes in the upholstery. In the words of the 1980s TV character Mr. T, I pitied the fool who had to suffer the wrath of the fastidious, matronly owner.

So what did he think of his trip? I asked. Mr. Wang had enjoyed his visit to Serbia and Bosnia; he liked a clean, unpolluted environment. He liked a simple life without noisy disturbance. In China, the environment was dirty, and it was bad for health, he said.

"Do you want to travel again?" I inquired. "Oh yes," he nodded. His wife had died a few years ago and his son was in his early thirties with a family of his own. He got along well with his son, who apparently wasn't worried about his father's solo backpacking trip in the Balkans.

Mr. Wang displayed some photos from his trip on his smartphone. There was a photo of himself, somber-faced, wearing a Mao-style, Communist-era cap outside a shop in Mostar. From Serbia, there were photos of an older couple whom he had befriended during a walk in the countryside. The husband and wife were farmers, and seventy-eight and seventy-two years old, respectively.

"*Ziran shenghuo*," he observed. *Natural life*. He used his phone's translation app to communicate with them. They invited him to eat at their home and he bought them groceries, including canned vegetables. Mr. Wang also took photos of them in their fields. I had no idea how he happened to be strolling in the countryside, but meeting

the couple was his favorite experience in Serbia.

When I later watched *Walter Defends Sarajevo*, I was surprised that so many Chinese people adored the film. It wasn't a typical war movie with nonstop action and blasting artillery, though plenty of Nazis were gunned down over the course of 133 minutes. There was a lot of dialogue, the story was confusing, and it was hard to follow who was who, and which character had double-crossed the others and why.

But at least for Mr. Wang, it was what Walter and Sarajevo represented that was so appealing. I asked him why he didn't travel in China or other parts of Asia. It was closer and surely easier for him than Europe. He wasn't interested in Asian countries, he said dismissively. In China people didn't have manners and cheated each other.

Europe was different. Mr. Wang sat up straight and swiveled his head regally. People had *zhengshi*, integrity, he said. They were gentlemen. China was "shabby" while Europe was "luxurious."

In *Walter Defends Sarajevo*, heroic guerrilla fighters shoot at Nazis on top of a moving train while grinning confidently. In the final scene (spoiler alert), a frustrated Nazi commander demands to know who Walter is. The camera pans over Sarajevo and its rolling hills, domed mosques, and red tile-roofed buildings. Triumphant music swells. Another Nazi flings his arm at the vista and cries, "Do you see this city? This is Walter."

Most Westerners associate Bosnia with genocide and Sarajevo with the bloody ethnic war of the 1990s. People occasionally remembered that the 1984 Olympics had been held, rather anachronistically, in Sarajevo. *Walter Defends Sarajevo* is Yugoslav Communist propaganda, but the noble spirit it depicted of people united in defending their city had captivated Mr. Wang. He didn't know and probably wouldn't care that Bosnia ranked 89th out of 180 countries for corruption (Serbia and Croatia ranked 87th and 60th, respectively). He probably didn't know that when Yugoslavia broke apart in 1991 some 133,000 people were killed in ensuing wars over the next decade. And Mr. Wang's beloved Sarajevo suffered the largest number of casualties, when nearly 14,000 men, women, and children died in sniper fire and mortar blasts in markets and playgrounds of the streets we leisurely explored.

For Mr. Wang and probably other Chinese tourists, Sarajevo was a paragon burnished during an era of repression and deprivation in China. He could finally witness what had once seemed like a dream. And I, admittedly, idealized Sarajevo as a tourist who could stroll its

streets, attend summer book festivals, run along the river, visit museums, sample cheese *burek*, and eat raspberries—without really living there and knowing I could leave anytime.

As with most tourists, Mr. Wang's travels only sparked more wanderlust even though he was in his 60s. After his trip to the Balkans, he wanted to see more of the world. There were other countries that intrigued him. Albania, for example.

I did a mental double take. "Albania?" I asked. "Why Albania?"

Communist Albania of the 1970s was one of China's few allies in the world at the time. The West knew the country as a totalitarian society akin to the North Korea of the Balkans. Its repressive president, Enver Hoxha, was known for authorizing soldiers to shoot any Albanians caught fleeing the country. But in Communist China, the country was extolled to people of Mr. Wang's generation. A couple of weeks later, when I arrived in Albania by bus, I met travelers planning to hike its mountains or explore the coastline it shares with Greece. I went to a museum in Albania that displayed unlikely black-and-white photos of Chinese premier Zhou Enlai visiting the country in the 1960s.

Mr. Wang had also grown up hearing about Josip Tito, the Communist president of the former Yugoslavia, and Nicolae Ceausescu, the authoritarian Communist dictator of Romania, and "Liening," otherwise known as Vladimir Lenin of Russia. It was a fascinating travel itinerary comprised of China's Communist-era allies.

There were other destinations on his list. Mr. Wang added that he wanted to go to Finland because of images he had seen of grand buildings. He spoke into his smartphone then showed me the translation that popped up: "*I yearn for the Baltic States.*"

At the end of our conversation, Mr. Wang beamed and said he was very happy to meet me. Then he took out a small gray pouch with a flourish. He extracted a folded pink selfie stick and presented it to me with two hands. I realized he wanted to gift it to me and gently shook my head. He tried to insist on giving it to me. I told him to keep it, that he would need it on his travels.

"*Wò bu haoyisi*," he sighed. That meant *I'm embarrassed*, but was also used to express a harder-to-define sentiment, something like a polite acquiescence. He slipped the pink selfie stick back into the pouch. "Young people like these things," he shrugged.

When his taxi finally arrived, the guesthouse owner alerted us. Mr.

S was in a better mood, now that no one was cooking cabbage soup in the kitchen. Mr. Wang gathered his few things, and we descended the spiral staircase. It was a sunny summer morning in Sarajevo, and pedestrians strolled on the street.

The taxi's other passengers were already in the car, and Mr. Wang placed his gray cloth backpack on top of other luggage that filled the trunk. It was absurdly little stuff for nearly a month of travel. He got into the car and wedged himself between two passengers.

Like a nagging mother, I checked again that the driver knew the name and address of the hostel where he would drop off his Chinese passenger. "Yes, yes," the driver said impatiently.

I was suddenly nervous about Mr. Wang's departure. How would he get to the airport in Belgrade? Would anyone help him? What if he had questions there? What if immigration officers asked why he had come to the Balkans? Would they understand him?

The car set off and picked up speed. Mr. Wang turned and waved to me through the back window. His silver glasses glinted in the sunlight. He had come all the way from China searching for Walter amid the panorama of minarets, domed mosques, and houses with red-tiled roofs. I waved at the car receding down the street. I supposed now that Mr. Wang had finally found Sarajevo, he could find his way back home too, and that he would keep yearning.