



**BOSNIA** In the Footsteps of Gavrilo Princip

TONY FABIJANČIĆ

so-Croatian letters used in this book (with pronunciations) are listed below:

- č*, as in cats
- ch*, as in church
- like *ch*, but softer, as in future
- dj*, as in jungle
- y*, as in yesterday
- sh*, as in ship
- zh*, as in treasure

## ★ PREFACE

IT WAS WHILE RESEARCHING another work—a historical fiction set in Bosnia-Herzegovina's deep past—that the idea came to me to follow the path of the infamous assassin who set the First World War in motion with his shots on June 28, 1914.

After finishing my first travel book about Croatia, I decided to continue with the complicated, ethnically fraught, former Yugoslavia as the main focus of my writing, partly out of fascination with the place, its people, and its history, and partly because I started to sense a much bigger project emerge, like a shape under the ocean's surface. I imagined that Yugoslavia—or, to use a broader, more complicated term, the Balkans—could potentially absorb some of my former academic interests: the importance of space in its different facets, an analysis of modernity, and the mentality of the rural outsider. At the same time, I thought that

focusing on the Balkans would allow me to get out into the "field" and write in a more creative, non-scholarly form.

So far, you might say, so good. But around that time, to supplement my knowledge of Bosnia-Herzegovina, I read Vladimir Dedijer's *The Road to Sarajevo*, a history of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand from the Bosnian perspective. The book shattered my preconceptions about the country and the assassination. *The Road to Sarajevo* is not just a great historical work, meticulously researched and relentlessly factual, but a work of great literary skill, too—carefully narrated and emotionally powerful. It begins with the assassination itself, which causes our sympathies to lie with the victims, but slowly, almost imperceptibly, it builds a different truth out of historical, cultural, political, economical, and personal information. Even though *The Road to Sarajevo* has its weaknesses, it convincingly recasts Gavrilo Princip's identity for me, a sign of the book's spell.

My Croatian friend Neven Kralj wondered about this new interest of mine, asking me what I really thought about Gavrilo Princip. With this question he got to the heart of a problem that dogged me throughout this project. Why should a Canadian of Croatian background be interested in writing about a Serbian hero? My answer to Neven is best appreciated by reading this book in its entirety, but it can be summed up thus: because the assassination of Franz Ferdinand is a significant event in Bosnian and world history (as opposed to a *good* or *bad* one), because it is another supposed expression of extreme Serbian nationalism in the eyes of many Bosnians, and, maybe most important, because it is a gripping story with a fascinating cast of characters, it serves as an excellent frame for a travel book about Bosnia-Herzegovina. Rather than sympathizing with Princip, the Serb assassin, I saw narrative potential in Princip, the symbol.

But my interest in Princip went deeper than I was letting on. In truth, not only had I become fascinated with the events that led up to the assassination, as well as the personalities of the

assassins themselves, but I had also come to understand these young men in a profound way, to walk step by step with them, and even to admire them for their convictions and, in some cases, their bravery. I saw more than narrative potential in Princip; I supported and empathized with this naïve, idealistic son of poor Bosnian peasants who believed he had struck a blow for his people.

The reason I felt as I did was shrouded in mystery, even to myself. There are, after all, less controversial historical figures I could have written about. Perhaps my tendency to back the underdog, which has been evident since my boyhood, was at the back of it. In any case, I felt I had been entrusted with a story that people no longer knew in truth, if they ever did, but that I felt they ought to know. In time, partly as a result of travelling through Bosnia-Herzegovina, my views about the assassination grew more complex, and my kinship with the assassins became more troubled.

Early on, however, the reality of the country itself had yet to impact my views on the assassination. Mine was a mainly theoretical knowledge. Besides Dedijer's book, I poured over hundreds of obscure sources, had my wife translate numerous works in Cyrillic, had long conversations with her and other members of my family, and in general lived and breathed many of my waking hours in 1914. I imagined crucial moments in the lives of the assassins, reconstructing the scenes, conversations, and atmosphere. For example, again and again I visited the room where Danilo Ilić and Gavrilo Princip spent hours arguing over the value of the assassination, and I felt the tension between them as Ilić's cautious reasoning foundered against the relentless will of his former protégé. I thought I had it in me to recreate such moments, the subtle human interactions, the gaps and silences of history. For a while, I toyed with the idea of writing a historical novel, but eventually I concluded that a travelogue would be the best approach, since no one had ever written about 1914 in this way,

and also because my talents as a writer and researcher seem to work best in travel narratives.

But even had I explained all this to Neven, he would have had other doubts about my project. "In dees moment of speaking, I think you take too big job. Bosnia is very complex, and you will fail."

True, writing about Bosnia-Herzegovina was daunting; its multi-ethnic and religious character (Greek Orthodox Serbs, Muslims, and Catholic Croats) makes its labyrinthine history especially complicated. But my intention was never to tell Bosnia's whole story, only to open a window onto one aspect of its past and character. So I ignored Neven's warnings and pressed ahead.

The choice of the travel genre to retell the story of Sarajevo, 1914, has the advantage of being commensurate with the lives of the Bosnian assassins. Most were wanderers who walked to the far ends of their country and back, went to Serbia and elsewhere in search of education, work, military glory, and revolution. They crossed geographical borders and also social ones (being on the edges, on the margins of society). When Vaso Čubrilović described Princip as a *stuha*, "a slightly satiric designation, signifying a restless spirit, who could never settle down, always wishing to roam around," he could have been describing most of the other assassins as well.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the history of Bosnia-Herzegovina is one of movement, from the transhumant Vlachs, who eventually settled in border territory between the Ottoman and Habsburgian Empires, to *Hajduci*, who practiced banditry in the narrow passages of the Dinaric Alps, and to countless wanderers, such as Gypsies, peddlers, masons, thieves, tinkers, and bards.

But one problem with travel writing was that as I tried to give life to inert facts and landscapes, I opened myself up to the accusation of inaccurately depicting or romanticizing people and events long lost to time (precisely the shortcoming I had found in fiction). How can a visit to a prison cell over ninety years after Princip was there tell you anything about him? The short answer is: it cannot. The longer answer is that it can help establish the

physical conditions of the place as it might have appeared in 1914, its more inaccessible ambience and, *potentially*, the nature of the doomed soul of the man who spent his last years there. Going to Theresienstadt was one occasion among many to peel away history's layers.

As the weeks went by, though, I knew the story I was telling was not only about the past but about the present, as well. In writing history, I was coming away with pictures of contemporary Bosnia, too, so I arrived at the decision to use the events of 1914 as a window onto the new Bosnia that emerged from the violent chaos of the 1990s. Gavrilo Princip in this new schema became a barometer for ethnic relations today. Ask the Serbs what they think of Princip and you will get a very different answer than if you ask a Bosnian Croat or Muslim.

My travel itinerary was loosely that of Princip's life: from his place of origin in the Krajina to Sarajevo, where he received part of his education, then east to Serbia, and back to Sarajevo, where he assassinated Franz Ferdinand. But I also went elsewhere to cover some important moments—through eastern Bosnia, where the assassins journeyed clandestinely with revolvers and bombs; to Doboј and Tuzla, where Danilo Ilić picked up the arms from Miško Jovanović; and also to Mostar in Herzegovina, where the political and intellectual life of students was especially vibrant, and where widespread student unrest had erupted before the assassination.

A warning to readers: the book I've written isn't a scholarly work in which every historical figure, event, or issue is treated exhaustively or systematically. Instead I attempted to tell the "true" story of the assassination and contemporary Bosnia-Herzegovina more impressionistically. In doing so, my chance experiences on the road and the beauties of the landscape also find a place in the book, as I shadowed the ghost of Gavrilo Princip.

Behind one of the twentieth century's most infamous events lies the forgotten story of Gavrilo Princip, Archduke Franz Ferdinand's assassin and unlikely catalyst of the Great War. Inspired by the idealism of the young Princip, Tony Fabijančić sets off on an unprecedented journey, shadowing the ghost of the assassin from the peasant village of his birth, across the rugged breadth of Bosnia-Herzegovina, to his fateful meeting in Sarajevo with the heir apparent to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A human portrait of Princip emerges as Fabijančić, accompanied by his father, plunges us into the rolling heart of Bosnia then and now. Two parallel journeys flow into one compelling story that takes readers interested in Balkan nationalism, political terrorism, and literary travel writing on a unique journey through a complex land.



JOŠIP FABIJANČIĆ

The son of a Croatian immigrant who escaped Yugoslavia in 1964, Tony Fabijančić was born in Edmonton, Alberta. He is an Associate Professor of English at Memorial University in Corner Brook, Newfoundland, and the author of *Croatia: Travels in Undiscovered Country*.

ISBN 978-0-88864-519-7



9 780888 645197

THE UNIVERSITY OF  
ALBERTA PRESS

Wayfarer, a literary travel series

Book design by Alan Brownhoff

Printed in Canada

\$29.95 in Canada

[www.ualberta.ca](http://www.ualberta.ca)

Cover image: Collage by Alan Brownhoff, cover photos by Tony Fabijančić.