

Revisiting a War Once Left Behind

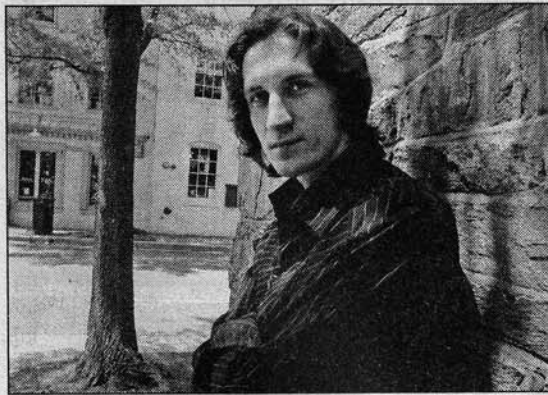
By TARA BHRAMPOUR
Washington Post Staff Writer

If Harun Mehmedinovic was a loner at his Northern Virginia high school, perhaps it was because for so many years he was alone.

War descended on his home city of Sarajevo when he was 9, and his family went into hiding for 3½ years in the 1990s as Serb forces besieged the Bosnian capital. His family members huddled in the cellar of their apartment building as gunshots and grenades whistled by and food grew scarce. Mehmedinovic missed four years of school.

Arriving in the United States in 1996 at 13, he found it hard to relate to kids who had spent their childhoods riding bikes and kicking soccer balls.

"They had no clue," he said of his classmates at Kilmier Middle School in Vienna and Marshall High School in Falls Church. "When you say 'war' to people, they don't know what to think. . . . If I tell them what the war's like, they're not going to sleep that night."



BY LOIS RAIMONDO — THE WASHINGTON POST

Harun Mehmedinovic, 24, won an American Film Institute award for "In the Name of the Son," a film based on his experiences growing up in wartime Bosnia.

Instead, Mehmedinovic turned to visual art, first through drawing comics and taking pictures, then through film. In June he graduated from the American Film Institute in Los Angeles, winning an award there for a short movie he wrote and directed about the war. His father, a poet-journalist, and his mother, who works with refugees, live in Alexandria.

Mehmedinovic was back in the Washington area this month for a gathering of recipients of Jack Kent Cooke Foundation scholarships. The foundation, based in Loudoun County, gives need-based awards to promising students from eighth grade to college.

The foundation's executive vice president, Joshua Wyner, said Mehmedinovic's application essay was strikingly genuine. "These experiences, when written down, can come across as trite, but they didn't with him," Wyner said. Mehmedinovic, 24, received two Jack Kent Cooke scholarships, one each for college and graduate school.

Sitting in a Thai restaurant in Old Town, amid streets he used to wander as a teenager, the lanky young man with deep-set blue eyes talked about his film. "In the Name of the Son" tells the story of a Bosnian Muslim named Tarik, a former prisoner of war living in Los Angeles. He is visited by a Serb officer who spared his life

during the war and who now, racked with guilt for killing his own son, wants Tarik to help him die.

The 25-minute film took a year and a half to complete, and Mehmedinovic is considering turning it into a full-length feature; the current version has been submitted to several festivals and will be shown at the Sarajevo Film Festival this month.

"I think it was on some level a masochistic exercise," Mehmedinovic said, "because you're going back and dwelling on things that are hard to deal with."

The film is not autobiographical, but it addresses the breakdown of normal societal ties that everyone in Bosnia witnessed and that Mehmedinovic said he could not have written about without experiencing.

"Here it's normal to go out and buy a hamburger," he said, gesturing toward King Street's bustling lunch crowd. In wartime Sarajevo, he said, it was "normal that a dog comes to your front door with a body part in its mouth or that you see people skinning a cat and eating it."

Or a father killing his son.

"You're going to find things out about yourself that you didn't think you were capable of," Mehmedinovic said. "There's a side of you that's reason, and there's a side of you that's animal." When order disappears and raw impulse takes over, he said, "you can decide to do something useful with it or something destructive."

His own father, Semezdin Mehmedinovic, wrote the highly acclaimed "Sarajevo Blues," published in the United States in 1998. But once the family members moved to Falls Church (via Phoenix and the District), they almost never discussed the war.

"He didn't want to talk about it," the elder Mehmedinovic said of his son. "He wanted in some way to forget. So it's strange, in a way, how he started to think about it. I think in some way he wants to solve these issues of the war . . . and I think he needs to do that, to go through that."

Mehmedinovic's father said he admired the way his son had taken on a sensitive subject in Bosnia, addressing ethnic strife without taking sides. "I'm proud of his moral stand, the way he decided to talk about personal lives and not about the ideological problems."

Meeting her son last week at an Old Town coffee shop, Sanja Mehmedinovic spoke of friends who died during the war and how it felt to see her child's hair go gray from stress.

"Children 8 to 12, they are just out and they see everything and they smell everything," she said. "He grew overnight into a man. He was never a child. He was never 13, 15, any of these things."

Mehmedinovic has not been back to Sarajevo, but he said many people he knows there have not fared well. "A lot of people I went to first, second and third grade with, they're pretty much, like, sniffing glue right now. A lot of Bosnian refugees I met in the U.S. are really crushed. They're mentally deteriorated."

For him, drawing comics as grenades exploded nearby helped deflect the war's horrors. His main character, a soldier whose name roughly translates to Old Cat, fought evil and triumphed every time. Like the Mehmedinovic, the soldier character moved to the United States after the war, retiring in Phoenix.

Filmmaking serves the same purpose as drawing, he said, giving the most painful memories a positive outlet.

"It's a need to testify," he said. "And it's a way of not being angry."

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