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A Little History of Life and Death: Six Photographs of Nermin Divović in *Sarajevo Under Siege*

Of the many news and personal photographs, international and local newspaper front pages, posters, and makeshift stoves and heaters that Sarajevans fashioned during the siege of Sarajevo—now displayed in the Historical Museum of Bosnia-Herzegovina’s permanent exhibition, *Sarajevo Under Siege*—one object stands out. It is a small blue-and-white striped handknit sweater that belonged to Nermin Divović, a Sarajevan killed by a sniper on November 18, 1994, when he was seven years old.¹

Donated to the museum by Divović’s family, it lies stretched out under a glass case with a matter-of-fact caption printed on a rectangle of white paper resting atop. “Nermin Divović was a boy killed in 1994 by sniper fire, in the street Zmaja od Bosne,” it reads. “The bullet first passed through the body of the boy’s mother and then shot him in the head. Nermin’s sister, who was with them, escaped the bullet, because she was just one step ahead of them. Nermin loved drawing, football and toy cars. He was a pupil at elementary school ‘Edhem Muladbdić.’” Exhibited nearby is a black-and-white photograph by Spanish photographer Gervasio Sánchez: a portrait of Nermin wearing the sweater, holding a snowball in one hand in December 1993, during the height of the almost four-year-long siege of Sarajevo (1992–96). The same caption that accompanies the sweater is posted on another white rectangle of paper underneath this photograph [Image 1].

Since 2016, visitors to the Historical Museum of Bosnia-Herzegovina, itself located just a hundred meters from where Nermin was killed, have been able to see this moving artifact that has inspired works of art such as Paul Coldwell’s *Seven Sweaters for Nermin Divović* (2018), a series of seven handknit sweaters in sizes 0–7, seven sweaters to commemorate each year of the boy’s short life. Just a few feet away from the sweater and Sánchez’s portrait is a small but potent exhibition of six recently acquired photographs by Sánchez and his colleague, AP photographer Enric Martí.

The series begins with a solemn photograph by Sánchez of Nermin wearing his blue-and-white sweater while with his mother, Dženana Sokolović, and sister (unnamed) as they wait

1. Tijana Krizanović, one of the curators at the Historical Museum of Bosnia-Herzegovina, explained the narrative of the complete exhibition: “The exhibit [*Sarajevo Under Siege*] does not have a special narrative (concerning the three official ones in Bosnia). The exhibition is formed in a context of people, citizens, and life under the siege, the captions are made in a passive form, and the exhibition tends to serve as the open platform with available information, photos, documents, and objects in order to let visitors make their own conclusions, or for experts to use the material for research. The story of Nermin is a contribution to a black room—a part of the exhibition about death during the war—but it also tells a story about childhood during the war.” Interview by author via email, June 7, 2019.



IMAGE 1. Nermin Divović's sweater, Historical Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, July 2018; photograph by Joscelyn Jurich.

for former French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in December 1993. The next three photographs, also taken in December 1993 by Sánchez, are jubilant scenes of Martí throwing snowballs and playing with Nermin on the street, followed by another portrait by Sánchez of Nermin playing with a snowball. The last photograph by Martí is the image of Nermin that was seen internationally.² He is lying in Zmaja od Bosne, the street known as “sniper alley,” eyes closed, a large puddle of blood streaming around his head. The UN firefighters who tried to help him are standing nearby, and in the version of the photograph that circulated most widely, the UN firefighters are shown in action, seemingly trying to block the area around Nermin. Martí took a series of photographs after Nermin's killing in addition to this one, including at Nermin's funeral on November 21, 1994—an image that foregrounds Nermin's father, Pašo Divović, covering his face, crouched next to Nermin's freshly dug grave. AP photographer Jacqueline Arzt took differently arresting photographs of Nermin: one with a blanket over his head and body as he is about to be taken away from the scene of his death, and another of Nermin in the morgue as a morgue worker looks at his body [Image 2].

The quietness of these five photographs, punctuated by the crushing violence of the last photograph and exhibited in a museum whose outside façade is punctured with the damage of sniper fire and whose steps are cracked with wear and disrepair, make the proximity of Nermin's life and death intimate; as a series, the photographs work together as *punctum*. It

2. Martí's photograph circulated widely and internationally; it was the subject, too, of op-eds such as Anthony Lewis's “Abroad at Home; Fanatical and Ruthless,” *New York Times*, March 10, 1995, about the failure of the West and the Clinton administration to seriously address Milošević and continuing war crimes in Bosnia. See www.nytimes.com/1995/03/10/opinion/abroad-at-home-fanatical-and-ruthless.html.



IMAGE 2. Exhibition of photographs of Nermin Divović by Enric Martí and Gervasio Sánchez, July 2018; photograph by Joscelyn Jurich.

is the narrative, rather than a singular detail, that pricks and wounds. And though news photographs, they are far from what Roland Barthes describes as characterizing the genre: capable of shocking only through “shouting” at the viewer.³ In the silent and secluded space of this exhibit, they become just as much mementos as *memento mori*.⁴ When the photograph of Nermin dead is made part of a narrative of a life, however short, it becomes much more than an “arresting” or “seizing” image; it is not war reduced to a photograph.⁵ Rather, it opens the viewer up to imagine the relationship—what Ariella Azoulay describes as the civil contract—between both of these photographers and Nermin, and between the photographers, Nermin, and spectator. Beyond the binding ties of a civil contract, one might work to imagine the connection between Martí and Nermin, and what Martí experienced realizing that the little boy he photographed shot dead by a sniper was the same little boy that he had been playing with just several months prior. While it is not unusual that this would be the case during a siege in which, by 1994, approximately sixteen hundred children and thirteen thousand adult civilians had already been killed, it does not lessen the imaginative shock. “There is a strong connection in their interaction,” said one of the curators of the exhibition, Tijana Krizanović. “Martí met Nermin in Sarajevo in completely opposite ways—one full of life, the other in death.”⁶

Just a couple of weeks before Nermin was killed, three children were shelled along with their teacher at school; the next day, five children playing outside of their school and four adults nearby were killed. A monument to all of the children killed stands about a twenty-minute walk from the Historical Museum. In 2005, a memorial in the form of a stone marker was erected near where Nermin was killed with the statement “To not forget and to not repeat” engraved at the top. Recently the children killed during the siege have also had a more “living” memorial created through the planting of sixteen hundred roses that are

3. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Random House, 1981), 41.

4. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 15.

5. Barbie Zelizer argues that during wartime, photojournalists privilege images that are memorable and familiar as well as newsworthy. See Barbie Zelizer, “When War is Reduced to a Photograph,” in *Reporting War: Journalism in Wartime*, ed. Stuart Allan (London: Taylor & Francis, 2004).

6. Krizanović, interview by author.



IMAGE 3. Memorial to Nermin Divović on Zmaja od Bosne, Sarajevo, July 2018; photograph by Joscelyn Jurich.

cared for by the parents of the slain children.⁷ In 2017, the War Childhood Museum opened in Sarajevo with an exhibition centered around three thousand personal objects—clothing, toys, notebooks—of children who survived the war [Image 3].⁸

“The dead and the survivors are not numbers, they are unfinished stories,” Sánchez recently said in an interview. “When I see a child, a teen or an adult that dies, I don’t think of that person as an unknown, I think of what their lives would have been like if they hadn’t been killed or wounded.”⁹ In his 2009 collection *Sarajevo: War and Peace* (1992–2008) Sánchez includes his photograph of Nermin playing with a snowball; one with his family; another of Nermin’s sweater; Martí’s photograph of his death; and a 2008 photograph of Nermin’s mother, brothers, and father sitting at his grave.

When Ratko Mladić’s trial for war crimes—including the siege of Sarajevo and the genocide at Srebrenica—began in 2012 at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague, lead prosecutor Dermot Groome echoed Sánchez’s words. At the center of his argument about how sniping created a regime of terror against

7. “Sarajevo Remembers Children Killed During Siege,” Mladen Lakić, *BIRN: Balkan Investigative Reporting Network*, April 3, 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/04/03/sarajevo-remembers-children-killed-during-siege-04-03-2018>.

8. See War Childhood Museum, www.warchildhood.org/museum.

9. Sara Acosta, “Photographer Gervasio Sánchez captures the stories behind conflicts,” *Agencia EFE*, May 14, 2019, www.efc.com/efe/english/life/photographer-gervasio-sanchez-captures-the-stories-behind-conflicts/50000263-3976121.

Sarajevans, Groome opened by reminding Mladić and the court of Nermin's story. "Today Nermin Divović would be 25," Groome stated, before detailing the circumstances of Nermin's killing.¹⁰

The constellation of the museum's location, Nermin's sweater, and Sánchez's and Martí's photographs work together to create an atmosphere countering and complicating the "that-has-been" that Barthes described as photography's *noème*. Rather, the series seen in this geographical context is closer to what John Berger describes as the necessary "radial system" that needs to be constructed around a photograph "so that it may be seen in terms which are simultaneously personal, political, economic, dramatic, everyday and historic."¹¹ As such, it represents a complex coalescing of "that-has-been" with that which "continues-to-be" and, potentially, that which "will-continue-to-be," making it impossible to watch these photographs ethically as postwar photographs. They are instead closer to what Azoulay has called "regime-made disasters" that demand and deserve a civil viewing, or what she has also called a "non-governmental viewing"—one that emphasizes the process by which individuals are made into victims and that includes and implicates the spectator as a vital participant.¹²

In her 2005 essay "The Ethics of the Spectator" in *Afterimage*, Azoulay writes that the spectator is capable of seizing hold of the "atrocities of the present" to "identify and forewarn others of the dangers that lie ahead."¹³ In this series by Sánchez and Martí, the blended and shifting temporalities of the past, the contemporary, and a looming potential future are fused into a most present and prescient emergency *énoncé*. ■

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10. International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, May 16, 2012, www.icty.org/x/cases/mladic/trans/en/120516IT.htm.

11. John Berger, "Uses of Photography" in *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 63.

12. Ariella Azoulay, "The Ethics of the Spectator: The Citizenry of Photography," *Afterimage: The Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism* 33, no. 2 (September/October 2005), 44.

13. Azoulay, "The Ethics of the Spectator," 44.

