

“Grief in Brief”

Ivan Ivanov 11/25/2018

Good morning. My grief is for my birth country, Yugoslavia, where I was born and raised.

It was May of 1991 in Croatia at the end of my sophomore year of high school. I was excited and also nervous, making plans to spend the next school year in America as an exchange student.

In the society around me, political disagreements, hatred, discrimination, and ethnic tensions were gaining steam. I got in a fight with a fellow student at school because he taunted me about my nationality. He would ask daily what my nationality was. When I would respond that I am a Yugoslav, the son of a Croatian mother and a Serbian father, he would say that there is no such thing as Yugoslavia.

Later on that summer, riots erupted in Zadar, Croatia where I lived. Many storefronts were destroyed and looted, just because the business owners were Serbian. Shortly after I departed for the U.S. in August of 1991, individual states of what we know now as the former Yugoslavia descended into civil war, one by one. This war engulfed Yugoslavia, broke it apart, and birthed new countries out of each of its former states.

But for me, this meant losing my country. Grief set in, although I did not recognize it for what it was. I was angry and homesick. I had a hard time adjusting to new life and culture in America. I missed my family and friends.

I was rejected by a childhood friend who wrote me a breakup letter saying we could not be friends because we were of different nationalities. I was bitter and mad at anyone who I felt actively worked on destroying Yugoslavia.

I felt sad that I could never go back to the same country and people I grew up with. I also did not understand that, unfortunately, a lot of people who stayed back there did not have a choice in how the war impacted their lives.

I know now that I was never alone in my grief. There were many that offered support through difficult times. People offered help, empathy, compassion, and charity along the way. I recognize now how helpful that was to me.

I am often reminded of many times when American friends, acquaintances, or people that met me for the very first time would tell me that they were praying for me, my family, and my country. You don't even know how much that means to me. Kind words, and an offer to listen and be there if I needed something helped me live through my grief. I will always be grateful for that.

The grief over the loss of my country is still a part of me, but it defines me differently now. I enjoy speaking the language and participating in various expressions of Yugoslav culture with my parents and my brothers who also immigrated here.

I don't want to forget Yugoslavia, even the painful events surrounding its breakup. It is fun seeing my children, Ana and Luka, learning about their heritage and the wider world that awaits them. It is comforting to know that my family and friends still remember that I am that "Yugoslavian kid," as the father of my good friend used to call me in high school.

Above all, I want my grief to remind me to advocate for more understanding, tolerance, and better communication and relationships because we are "all in this together."