

PROLOGUE

This story springs from many sources, but the most powerful one for me was a discovery I made at a street market in Sarajevo, back when the city was under siege in 1994. I was a young reporter sent by the *Daily Telegraph* to cover the Bosnian War, which had begun two years earlier in this land of mountain and myth. Shelling had often made it too dangerous for civilians to venture outside in their capital city, but during a lull in the firing I joined locals as they reclaimed the streets. One afternoon I walked into an open area busy with people reduced by the war to selling possessions laid out in piles across unswept pavements. Pickings were meagre: half-worn brake pads from cars that had not run in years, a set of taps unused because of no mains water. I took a photograph of an elderly man sitting under an umbrella, shaded from the July sun, as he sold cigarettes one by one.

And then I noticed people occasionally slipping away from the market to visit a stone building on the edge of a nearby cemetery. I went to explore.

It was about the size of an electricity substation, a modest structure with a box design, easy to overlook. It wore the livery of so many wartime buildings in Sarajevo: a cavity from what appeared to be an artillery strike, terracotta roof tiles rucked out of alignment, the door ripped from its hinges, its frame pock-marked by shrapnel. I followed the market-goers and, in the summer heat, my sense of smell told me from some distance what

was going on. They were using it as a makeshift lavatory. My diary recorded it in malodorous detail:

The graveyard was unkempt but I was not prepared for what I found . . . The floor was just a sea of turds. Amongst the mess were dozens of used sanitary towels, a bra and lots of rubbish. A tombstone lay smashed in two on the floor and the light hung wrecked from the ceiling which had a gaping hole in it.

But what made me curious was that the building was clearly some sort of chapel. A cross was visible above the doorway. Why be so disrespectful of a religious site?

I found the answer on a piece of black marble set into an external wall. It was a commemoration stone bearing the date 1914 and some Cyrillic text, including a list of names. At the top of the list, in the most prominent position, was one that jumped out at me: ГАВРИЛО ПРИНЦИП, Gavrilo Princip.

When I went to Sarajevo for the first time as a reporter, a single thought kept coming to me: this was where the event took place that triggered the First World War, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by Gavrilo Princip. As a schoolboy I remember struggling to pronounce the killer's name, but as I grew older my understanding of the crisis he precipitated became clearer – millions of lives lost in a clash so colossal it reshaped the world. Yet the Bosnian War of the 1990s seemed far removed from the fighting of the Great War, a localised, ethnic conflict in the Balkans, a region synonymous in Western eyes with impenetrability, backwardness and violence. For much of the twentieth century Bosnia had been one of the component parts of Yugoslavia, but when its leaders in Sarajevo sought to create their own separate country

they clashed with the Serbian authorities who dominated the Yugoslav nation and who opposed the break-up. Tens of thousands were to die in fighting that, if you took away the helicopters, wire-guided missiles and satellite navigation systems, seemed to belong to an earlier, more brutal age: deliberate attacks on civilians, torching of homes, systematic rape, genocide.

Sarajevo was where many of the Bosnian War's defining horrors took place. In early exchanges, forces commanded by Bosnian Serb hardliners had been able to secure only a few of Sarajevo's peripheral suburbs, so they withdrew to the high ground that presses in on this cupped hand of a city and set about imposing one of the cruellest sieges in modern warfare. The lights went out, taps ran dry and supplies dwindled to a trickle, condemning 400,000 Sarajevans to survive on the collapsing skeleton of their home town. Their tormentors suffered no such supply problems and were able to dictate the nature and pace of their assault.

With their soldiers on the frontlines unable to advance, Bosnian Serb commanders sought to wear down their enemy by pounding them with artillery dug in on the nearby hilltops. When they ran out of military targets they kept on firing, wantonly destroying religious buildings, assembly halls, hospitals, newspaper offices, libraries – anything that contributed, no matter how marginally, to Bosnia's nascent sense of national identity. And when they ran out of those, they kept up their barrage, firing with deliberate cruelty – actions that were later to be successfully prosecuted as war crimes – into residential areas. With grim inevitability, many of Sarajevo's bloodiest incidents took place as civilians were cut down by shells when they emerged from cover for essential supplies: queuing for bread, waiting at a standpipe for water, crowding market stalls whenever smugglers made it into the city.

As a foreign correspondent, peacock-proud to be covering my first full conflict, I was kept busy by a city that seemed to bookend

the bloodletting of the twentieth century. I was witness to a conflict that realigned the way the modern world fought. NATO would go to war in Bosnia, for the first time in its history, changing fundamentally the international community's willingness to intervene. And the Bosnian War would spill further into the future, its battlefields a training ground for jihadists who would take part in the 9/11 attacks on America.

Disturbed by what I was seeing, I read everything I could find about Bosnia's background to try and understand the source of the conflict. History seemed to loom over Sarajevo from the same heights held by the Bosnian Serb gunners, as I learned of complex colonial and religious influences that had pulled the local Slav population in different directions through the ages. Lying where Europe's south-eastern fringe comes up against influences from Asia Minor, Bosnia had a back-story dominated for hundreds of years by foreign occupation, first by the Ottoman Empire, then by Austria-Hungary (otherwise known as the Habsburg Empire). Although its people shared the same language and cultural roots, cleavages over the centuries had created three identifiable groups: Bosnian Serbs, Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Muslims. I read repeatedly how the era of foreign domination had been ended by the First World War when a new nation, Yugoslavia, emerged out of the fighting, one that allowed local Slavs to rule themselves for the first time in the modern era. In all my research the role of Gavrilo Princip appeared settled: the backwoodsman from the Bosnian hinterland who brought freedom to his people by sparking the war that finally swept away foreign control.

So why were Sarajevans now desecrating the tomb of someone who fought for their freedom? Gavrilo Princip was a Bosnian Serb – the same ethnicity as the extremists attacking the city – but spite alone could not explain what I had found. There had to be more to it.

In other wars more people have died, more nations been involved and the world brought closer to annihilation, but somehow the First World War retains a dread aura all of its own. The guns fell silent all those years ago, but like a refrain that stays with the audience long after the music stops, the First World War has a returning power. So monumental was the suffering, so far-reaching the influence on history that the war still generates reward not just for writers, academics and artists, but for people simply learning about themselves, their bloodlines, their place. The Great War's power lies with the suspicion that its impact has yet to be fully understood.

I was born in Britain half a century after the fighting ended, yet the First World War has always been thereabouts, a background presence shaping me and my setting, a founding sequence in my make-up. Often it was so faint it was difficult to discern: the whittling of one's own self through the loss of a distant ancestor. Occasionally it spiked: in my teens sitting with my mother as she wept through the Festival of Remembrance televised each year from the Royal Albert Hall in London. But a war from a hundred years ago remains relevant enough to intrude on our todays through a sense that closure has perhaps yet to be reached. The moral clarity that framed the Second World War's struggle against Nazi totalitarianism, or the Cold War's friction between right and left, seems to evade the earlier conflict. The question, 'Was it right to go to war in 1914?' can be answered in many ways, through bullet points or lengthy treatises, but I wonder if any answer is totally convincing.

This is what keeps the First World War so charged – the unease born of doubt as to whether the sacrifice was worthwhile. For me, this is what transforms so powerfully the words of Laurence Binyon, plain enough by themselves, but, when delivered on a raw November morning to a gathering of people wearing red paper poppies, they ache from what might have been: *We Will Remember Them*.

In the small Northamptonshire village where I grew up, the First World War was remembered in glass. Hellidon was too small to have shops, so the community revolved, as it had for centuries, around the church of St John the Baptist, a modest but stolid place of worship in keeping with the village's position at the middle of Middle England. Built of locally quarried ironstone, St John's was chilly-damp in winter, yet on summer nights the butterscotch masonry bled warmth from the day's baking in the sun. It was old enough to have known fighting; indeed, my childish imagination was fired by stories about the runnels that flute the stone arch in the portico. I was told they had been left by seventeenth-century noblemen sharpening their swords before battle in the Civil War.

As children, my friends and I would dare each other to climb the bell-tower, and for years I earned pocket money mowing the grass in the graveyard. At the village carol service one year I fought my first trembling battle with stage fright when I was called on to read the Advent message from the Archangel Gabriel. A box had to be placed in the pulpit so that I could see out as I wrestled with nerves and difficult words. The next generation of Butchers would themselves pass through St John's, with my firstborn niece being baptised there, while my own son would take snot-nosed delight in toddling up the lane to watch the bell-ringers at practice.

And each of these modest moments of a family's making were watched over by four figures immortalised in a stained-glass window that was set to catch the southern sun. Such windows are where biblical characters tend to be represented, but in the

Hellidon village church a group of decidedly unbiblical-looking male faces have stared out since their unveiling in 1920. Against a setting of rich green foliage and red petals, daylight can give the figures an authentically holy glow. They wear the pure-silver armour of chivalrous medieval knights; indeed, one is helmeted, but the other three have the pasted-down, centre-parted hairstyles of early twentieth-century England. They are portraits of the menfolk of the village who gave their lives in the First World War: two brothers, William and James Hedges, Fred Wells and John Buchanan.

It was this window that first brought me to think about the war, although my early grasp was childlike. Mostly I was interested in the sword that the helmeted figure leans on and in the stirringly heroic words of the memorial's swirling epitaph: 'The Noble Army of Martyrs Praise Thee.' These were men from my village, from my side. They died for us in a foreign place, in a cause that simply must have been noble. Now, back to the sword.

Mine was not a military family, but as I grew older it was impossible to avoid the martial osmosis that steadily gives structure to the imagery of 1914–18: troops, trenches, bayonets, barbed wire, cannon, craters, monuments, memorials. St John's held a remembrance service each year, an event that was choreographed around the symbols of the Great War and had the power to transform some of our older neighbours. I knew them as keen gardeners or dog-walkers, but for one morning each year a medal ribbon on their breasts spoke of something much more thrilling – combat that, in some way too complex for my young mind to understand, was rooted in the First World War.

The conflict would crop up more and more in my reading as the stories of Biggles landed on my bookshelves and history teachers began to fill in my understanding, one that was initially

framed in terms simplistic enough for a schoolboy to grasp: Us against Them, Good versus Evil. I was taught about a clash between Britain and Germany, one fought mostly from fortified holes in the ground separated by the ominously named ‘no-man’s-land’, a killing zone so dangerous that men would use periscopes to look out over it. Afternoons were spent playing with friends as we built earthworks of our own, dens concealed in hedgerows, underground hideouts where we too could be heroes. When my science teacher showed us how to construct a home-made periscope, it was immediately deployed on our imaginary battlefield.

At the age of twelve, I went to Rugby, a school whose alumni, they never tired of telling us, included Rupert Brooke, among the most celebrated of war poets. The school was so proud of this particular son that his great work, ‘The Soldier’, was read to us on every possible public occasion. It summed up perfectly any adolescent framing of the war:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there’s some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed.

The lines captured the proud early idealism stirred by the war and soon made Brooke a favourite of the Establishment. He was writing in the first months of the war, when patriotism had about it a purity yet to be corrupted by jingoism, and in his verse there was no sense of questioning the war and the way it was conducted. He died less than a year into the conflict, in April 1915, aboard a hospital ship en route to Gallipoli, and although ‘The Soldier’ had only just been published, Winston Churchill, in his last days as First Lord of the Admiralty, put his name to a fulsome tribute published in *The Times*:

The thoughts to which he gave expression in the very few incomparable war sonnets which he has left behind will be shared by many thousands of young men moving resolutely and blithely forward into this, the hardest, the cruellest and the least-rewarded of all the wars that men have fought.

As my schooling progressed it was the last part of this Churchillian flourish that I began to comprehend – the First World War's suicidal combination of medieval, muddy entrenchment tactics and modern, industrial-age weaponry. Entire units could be wiped out in a single engagement, dutiful infantrymen following orders not to run but to march, as they advanced against machine-gun fire; cohorts of chums churning through the slop, cringing, bleeding, drowning. Particularly haunting, for me, were the legions of soldiers who died without leaving a trace, their bodies atomised by high explosives, buried alive in artillery barrages. Could a war ever end for relatives troubled by the knowledge that the remains of a loved one had never been found? The epitaph on memorials that seeks to reassure us today, 'Known unto God', was composed by the author Rudyard Kipling, himself a father condemned to plough forlornly the post-war battlefields of the Western Front in search of his lost son, John. He never found him.

The more I read, the more I learned solemn reverence for the millions killed, disfigured and damaged, a feeling so powerful that it seeped through my young life. Hideouts that had been fun to escape to when I was younger lost their magic when I read of the vermin that infested the trenches in Flanders, the lice, the rotting corpses set into battlement walls, the gas, the shell-shocked men tormented by combat of a relentlessness never before endured. As my friends and I went through the teenage ritual of smoking cigarettes, we would lurk behind our figurative bike-shed at school and earnestly refuse a third light, a superstition we believed born

of trench warfare. The myth went that on the Western Front an enemy sniper would catch sight of a match lighting the first cigarette, take aim on the second and pull the trigger on the third.

Like wreckage that floats to the surface from a colossal ocean liner that went down long ago, so links to the events of the First World War can still emerge years later. For me this happened in 1981, when my mother hung a photograph in our home. Following the death of my maternal grandmother, a sepia portrait of a young airman passed to my mother and she made sure it was put on display, prominently positioned at eye-level opposite the bottom of the stairs. From there the portrait watched over the toing and froing of my teenage years.

It showed Alyn Reginald James, my grandmother's older brother, as a young man in his early twenties wearing an infantry officer's uniform from the First World War. Uncle Alyn, as he is known to us later generations, leans casually on a cane, the very vision of dashing, the winged badge of the Royal Flying Corps visible on his breast. Before the Royal Air Force had even been founded, he was one of the first combat pilots – something that, to my young mind, marked him out with greatness, a magnificent man in his flying machine. He flew sorties against Baron Manfred von Richthofen, the Red Baron, one of the most exotic figures of the First World War. This was the stuff of childish fantasy, and for a long time that is what the portrait signified to me.

Researching this book, I found pictures of Uncle Alyn that I had not seen, fresh flotsam from the deep that still had the power to move my mother to silence. They included a pair of official photographs of his unit, No 62 Squadron, taken in the same sitting on a wintry morning in Britain, one very formal and the other smiling. In the serious one I struggled to recognise him among the glum expressions, Sam Browne belts, handlebar moustaches and medley of pre-RAF uniforms. But in the more casual picture his features

stand out clearly, the same round cheeks hoisted above the wide smile I remember from the picture in Hellidon. Someone has captioned the smiling photograph with a title worthy of Biggles. It reads: 'The Cheery 62's'.

In the last image I found, he is now in France, standing alongside an informal group of airmen. The mood of the picture is different. It is cold. Several of the men have their hands in their pockets. One wears mittens. Uncle Alyn is smiling, but with not quite the same cheeky conviction as before. He stands on duckboards. The rich earth of Rupert Brooke has turned to the ruddy mud of the Western Front.

On 24 March 1918, days after this picture was taken, Uncle Alyn was lost while strafing German trenches. He was twenty-three. He has no known grave.

His parents had to endure months of uncertainty about whether he might have survived. He came down close to the Somme River during an intense German offensive and at a time when the British army was in pell-mell retreat. With thousands of casualties on both sides, the fate of a single enemy aircraft on land recently and bloodily fought over was hardly a priority for the advancing Germans. It would be months before British officialdom formally pronounced that Alyn was dead.

This is where the true power of the portrait lies: a means to earth the pain of a mother predeceased by a son, and of a sister who had lost an adored brother, an echo for those who came later of what might have been. Around the world, in picture frames, albums and scrapbooks, similar memorabilia contribute to this returning power of the Great War. As a young man I had thought of Alyn as extraordinary, someone who marked out our family in some special way. But I came to learn that, in essence, our family experience was no different from that endured by millions: a sense of loss still powerful enough to touch our contemporary world.

A few years ago my mother's brother was moved to make his own family pilgrimage to the battlefield where Alyn died. He wrote to me explaining that he wanted to see if it was possible to identify where his uncle might have been buried. 'By working out where he was probably shot down we searched a few cemeteries and did find the graves of two unidentified airmen which could easily have been Alyn and his observer. We liked to think so, anyway.'

As I matured, so did the sophistication of my understanding of the First World War. Like the trenches that started out as shell-scrapes but morphed into ever more complex military ecosystems with their own terminology – saps, berms, revetments and embrasures – so my mental imagery of the Great War began to fill out. I started to appreciate how its impact reached far beyond the battlefield, changing the course of the twentieth century. As my history teachers drilled into me, the First World War provided the preconditions for the Second World War and thereby the tension of the Cold War. The war of 1914–18 was Ground Zero for modern history, the end of an old order that had held sway for hundreds of years, the fiery forging of a new world.

Rupert Brooke's romantic imagery no longer felt so convincing when I learned more about the senseless stalemate of trench warfare, where lives were sacrificed on frontlines that scarcely moved in years. Generals who bloodily piled unsuccessful offensive onto unsuccessful offensive could be lampooned as 'donkeys leading lions'. The starker framing of war poets like Wilfred Owen and Edward Thomas rang truer, and so I came to share in their bitterness about the way the war was run. I could get the joke when the futility of the sacrifice was satirised in films like *Oh! What a Lovely War* and television series like *Blackadder Goes Forth*.

A far-sighted teacher opened up a broader perspective when he persuaded me to read *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich

Maria Remarque, a veteran of the fighting, but from the 'other side'. Germans were depicted as victims of fear and suffering, living and dying in flooded trenches, ordered to make suicidal stands by commanders aloof from reality. The novel hinted at the universality of the First World War's ongoing power, as there was none of the Nazi evil or communist megalomania that made it easy to compartmentalise later conflicts. In the First World War soldiers on all sides were barely discernible from each other, fodder caught in the same murderous morass, sharing the same attrition of bullet and barrage, disease and deprivation, torment and terror. Elsewhere I learned that Adolf Hitler's psychotic German nationalism was in part forged from his own experience of trench warfare and his fury at what he perceived as the betrayal of soldiers by politicians far away from the trenches. Blood might be spilled on the battlefield, but the Great War's impact was measured in the turmoil it created far beyond the frontline through strife, civil war and revolution that ousted regimes and realigned the social order. This the First World War achieved on an unparalleled scale.

In 1982 my family went on a package holiday to Yugoslavia, a country born out of this realignment, staying at a lake resort in the north, close to the modern border with Austria. The trip was memorable because it was the first time I flew (great excitement for a fourteen-year-old) and the first time I had a holiday romance (greater excitement still), but even there the First World War also barged its way in. Before that summer I had scarcely been aware of fighting beyond the Western Front, but in our lakeside hotel in the spa town of Bled we were just a short coach trip away from the Italian Front. This was where Italy led the Allied fight against Germany's great ally, Austria-Hungary, along a frontline that climbed high into the Julian Alps, one of the most brutal theatres of the First World War. Here soldiers had to endure not just artillery barrages and infantry

clashes, but winter conditions in the remote mountains. In December 1916 avalanches alone killed as many as 10,000 soldiers.

All I wanted to do on holiday was sit around the hotel pool staring at the girl I had fallen for, but my father insisted that we go on a military-history day trip. I grumbled, arguing that it would be enough for me to read Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, which draws on his time serving as an ambulance driver on the nearby front. But my father would not be deterred, dragging me one afternoon onto a bus that took us deep into the mountains, up a valley with sides that got ever steeper. Summer seemed shut out from the military graveyard that we finally reached in the late afternoon. The valley floor was chill, already in deep shadow, yet there were lit candles in small glass jars flickering next to gravestones from the First World War. It was more than six decades since the fighting ended, yet the war remained alive enough for flames to be kept alight.

My education took me to Oxford, where my study of political history taught me more about the First World War's global reach. The small nation of Serbia would lose 15 per cent of its population in the First World War – compared to the roughly 2 per cent figure for Britain, where the wounds on the national psyche remain livid enough – making it apparent how the conflict had the power to redraw maps and realign history. Fighting spread to sub-Saharan Africa, as European officers led colonial conscripts into battles that ranged from the Indian Ocean coastline to others over on the Atlantic side of the continent. The Arabian Peninsula and the wider Middle East would be changed for ever as local clans rose against the decaying imperial authority of the 'Sublime Porte', the elegant soubriquet for the Ottoman Empire.

Washington would eventually be drawn in, changing fundamentally the twentieth-century balance of power and propelling America towards superpower status. Britain's pre-eminent position before the First World War was never fully restored, a slow puncture that would

eventually cost Britain its empire. At Gallipoli, the theatre of war that Rupert Brooke was heading for when he died, soldiers from the other side of the world would die in such numbers that the national consciences of Australia and New Zealand would be redefined.

University studies brought home for me how the impact of 1914–18 was felt beyond the battlefield. It was a war of the masses that would change for ever how the masses viewed themselves and, crucially, how those masses were to be governed. The aloofness of assumed imperial power, the inherited *droit de seigneur* that had held sway for so long, could not survive. The Romanov, Ottoman, German and Habsburg Empires were all swept away by the First World War. For decades Europe's great dynasties had successfully fought off the rising tides of social democracy, nationalism and workers' rights that bloomed in the nineteenth century through the writings of Karl Marx, William Morris, Max Weber and so many others. From 1848, the year of Europe's failed revolutions, the *ancien régime* had prevailed because those demanding change, whether socially-minded democrats or revolutionary-minded anarchists, were outsiders. All this changed with the Great War, as insider turned on insider, empire against empire, bloc against bloc – a conflict so cataclysmic it would destroy the old order. It was out of this turbulent collapse that Bolshevism, socialism, fascism and other radical political currents took root.

I read about the origins of the First World War, a subject of such extensive academic focus over the years that Alan 'A.J.P.' Taylor, one of Britain's sharpest historians, called it 'a large-scale industry'. In the immediate aftermath of the fighting the victorious Allies laid the blame for the war solely on Germany, although later historians would develop a much wider causal kaleidoscope spreading responsibility across other combatant nations. For many researchers Luigi Albertini's magisterial opus, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, provides the mother lode with its three hefty volumes of documents,

correspondence and analysis. Sifting through more than 60,000 public papers from the build-up to the war, and interviewing as many of the protagonists as possible, consumed the last decades of Albertini's life. After carefully polishing and editing his book, he would die in 1941 before completing the final chapter, on where he believed blame for the fighting ultimately lay. And ever since Albertini's opus was published, archives in Vienna, Berlin, Istanbul and elsewhere have thrown up new material for experts dissecting the mutual suspicion between the Great Powers – Germany, France, Russia, Britain, Austria–Hungary – and the sequence of events that led to the collision on the battlefields of the Eastern and Western Fronts.

From all this analysis of the Great War's origins has emerged a tragic picture of self-destruction, one that was wilful, ignorant and inexorable: wilful, in that world leaders chose to leverage up a local crisis into a world war; ignorant, in that politicians, diplomats and generals failed to grasp the consequences; inexorable, in that once the process of militarisation began, there was no dissuading the old-world regimes. Arguments of historical interpretation still rage and analysis can disagree over subplots, such as the extent to which Germany was finessed into recklessly supporting Vienna by manipulative Austrian diplomats, or by what folly Britain drew Turkey into the war. But the consensus ultimately shared by many is that the complex deterrent system of diplomatic alliances designed to balance rivalries between the Great Powers was flawed, incapable of dispersing the storm clouds massing figuratively over early-twentieth-century Europe.

My favourite, if slightly off-piste, inexorability theory was put forward by Alan Taylor, a don at my old Oxford college, Magdalen, long before I studied there. In *War by Time-Table* he argues convincingly that fixed railway schedules worsened the rush to war in 1914, especially for Germany. Railways were then the only feasible way to deploy large numbers of soldiers and materiel, but what was

crucial, in Taylor's view, was that timetable rigidity made it effectively impossible to stop the escalation. For one side to avoid being overwhelmed by an enemy whose troops had already entrained, it could not hold back the full deployment of its own soldiers. Timetable rigidity contributed to mass murder in the trenches.

But the crisis still needed a spark to detonate the explosive mix of old-world superiority, diplomatic miscalculation, strategic paranoia and hubristic military overconfidence. And, like generations of young students before and since, I had been taught that the First World War began after the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was shot in Sarajevo by Gavrilo Princip. Academics still debate the diplomatic-political multiplier that transformed a Balkan assassination into a *casus belli* for the Great Powers, but none dispute that it was the shooting in Sarajevo that led the world to war a century ago. The assassination is so settled in the historical narrative that the exact details of Princip's actions are overlooked, even trivialised. We all smirked when Blackadder's numbskull sidekick Baldrick remembered it thus: 'I heard that it started when a bloke called Archie Duke shot an ostrich 'cause he was hungry.'

Going to Sarajevo to cover the Bosnian War brought the assassination to life for me. The street corner where Princip fired his pistol is a well-known local landmark; indeed, for years visitors used to be able to stand in two footprints sunk in the cement of the pavement, fanciful representations of where the assassin stood at his moment of destiny. But Princip's fouled tomb led me to think again. It dislodged in my mind a troubling piece of Great War flotsam: the thought that, in the eyes of some of his own people, Princip and his cause were not worth honouring. The filth I found in that memorial chapel polluted the purity of the sacrifice made by Uncle Alyn, the four men from Hellidon, the legions lost on the Western Front, the Italians buried in the snow and millions of others.

Princip was Bosnian Serb by ethnicity, but this alone could not explain what I had found. In spite of everything inflicted on them during the siege by Bosnian Serb forces, the people of Sarajevo had not given in to blanket hatred of all things Serb. During the war plenty of Bosnian Serbs had stayed in the city, bravely distancing themselves from the violent nationalism displayed by the more extreme elements of their own community, still committed to the multi-ethnic coexistence that had long been a characteristic of Sarajevo. The city's Serb Orthodox churches were largely left alone, as were Serb cultural centres and other buildings clearly linked to the Serb community. I had friends who endured the siege inside the city and who were treated no differently by their fellow Sarajevans, even though it was common knowledge they were ethnic Serbs. Through my work as a journalist I often came across a senior general defending the city from the Bosnian Serbs, a man called Jovan Divjak, who was himself Serbian.

To try to understand more about Princip, I turned to the history books. There was much to consider. There can be few turnkey moments so intensively written about as the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. In 1960 a bibliography was published that simply listed all books, articles and papers referencing the Sarajevo assassination. It was 547 pages long and had more than 1,200 entries. Like popcorn jumping from hot oil, writing about the incident has continued to emerge since that bibliography came out. But the analysis tended to focus on what happened next; on the actions of foreign powers presumed to have had influence over Princip; on who was or was not to blame for ramping up a minor political act in Sarajevo into global conflict; and on the falling-domino sequence of diplomatic blunders made by the Great Powers. None of it, to my mind, fully explained the fouled tomb.

References to Princip were common, although primary historical material connected to him is incredibly scarce. He left no

diary, and only a few passages of his own writing have ever been found. Austro-Hungarian legal records dating from after the 1914 assassination provide a source, with passages of Princip's own testimony recorded verbatim, although the original record of his trial was lost in the chaos of the war – a twist for conspiracy theorists who continue to pick at its origins. The paperwork, all 90 kg of it, was last recorded as being in the custody of the Habsburg imperial commandant in Vienna in around June 1915. It was kept in a chest, serial number IS 206-15, but exactly what then happened to it remains a mystery. Fortunately for historians, the two Sarajevan stenographers who covered the case had broken protocol by taking home their shorthand notes, scribbled in pencil on narrow strips of court recorders' paper, and in 1954 a transcript of the trial was published that is regarded as reliable.

In the years after the assassination a large number of friends and associates of Princip had given accounts of the young man they once knew. Some were fanciful, others frankly opportunistic, with some sources even presuming to re-create letters supposedly written by the young man. A book published in 1966 called *The Road to Sarajevo*, by a Yugoslav author, Vladimir Dedijer, does a fine job of sifting through all this hearsay to produce perhaps the most authoritative history of Princip.

Born in a village on the remote western edge of Bosnia, Princip had undergone a process of radicalisation at the schools he attended across the region, a journey that culminated in the assassination in Sarajevo. It was a deliberate revolutionary act, one that was intended to lead to the liberation of the Western Balkans. Centuries of occupation and foreign domination had drawn its Slav population in different directions, yet Princip was part of a growing cohort of locals who believed the moment was right for the locals to rule themselves. His thinking was idealistic, dreamy, woolly even – he certainly had no appreciation of how his actions might lead

to a world war – and he had no clear concept of what would come after the removal of the Archduke and the Austro-Hungarian Empire he represented. Kingdom, republic, federation – whatever emerged must be better than the tyranny of the outsider. But the key question, from the perspective of the 1990s war, was whether he fired his gun only for his Bosnian Serb kin, or for the higher purpose of helping all local Slavs.

The Slav lands of the Western Balkans reach far beyond Bosnia alone, and at the time of the assassination in 1914 they were a mosaic under varying degrees of occupation or liberation: for example, Croatia towards the north had for centuries been under the control of Austria–Hungary or its antecedents, and Serbia to the east had only recently and bloodily won independence after generations of Ottoman rule, while Bosnia itself had been carved off the Ottoman Empire in the 1870s and bolted onto the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The mosaic was complex and shifting, but one constant was that its people – from the Julian Alps bordering Italy in the north all the way down to the frontier with Greece in the south – predominantly shared the same Slav bloodline. Ethnographers categorise them as ‘south Slavs’ to distinguish them from other Slav peoples further north (Russians, Poles, Czechs and Slovaks), although from antiquity all Slavs have some common roots.

Before the assassination, Princip had received a few days of training and some weapons through renegade intelligence officers in Serbia. For some analysts this was enough to conclude that he had purely Serbian interests at heart. However, the freedom fighting group to which he was primarily loyal, Mlada Bosna, or Young Bosnia, had members who came from all three major Bosnian ethnic groups. One of Princip’s fellow conspirators on the day of the assassination, deployed with a weapon on the same mission to kill the Archduke, was a Bosnian Muslim, while another Muslim played a crucial role in acquiring the weapons used for

the assassination. A Bosnian Croat family in Sarajevo was entrusted that day with disposing of the weapons after the attack.

From my reading it became clear to me that historians were remarkably casual with details concerning Princip, in particular the central question of why he took part in the assassination. So monumental were the events and aftermath of the conflict resulting from his actions that Princip's own story has been overshadowed by the onrush of what happened next – his motivations misunderstood, muddled, even misrepresented. Nothing captures better this casualness than a photograph showing a man being arrested in Sarajevo moments after the shooting on 28 June 1914. Blurry with energy, it is a dramatic image of a prisoner being frogmarched through a melee, both arms pinned as he struggles, a gendarme with a sabre trying to stop men wearing fezzes from lunging at the prisoner. It fits so well the narrative of the desperate assassin that countless historians, reporters, broadcasters and film-makers have claimed that the subject of the photograph is Princip. It is not. The subject of the picture is actually an innocent bystander, a man called Ferdinand Behr, who was caught up in the sweep of arrests following the shooting.

After the war ended in Bosnia in 1995, I was appointed Defence Correspondent for the *Telegraph* and one of my regular duties was to cover Britain's annual remembrance service, which is held each November at the Cenotaph on Whitehall in central London. I would take my place on a wooden media platform erected adjacent to the understated, yet potent stone memorial designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens and watch as the capital's principal artery of government would steadily fill on a wintry Sunday morning with members of the public, then with cadets, bandsmen, airmen, soldiers, sailors and, finally, veterans. Britain 'does' set-piece commemoration so very well, and each year I remember the

immaculate timing and precision of a mass event that still managed to release an individual, private rush of solemnity.

The fallen of all wars would be commemorated, but for me the power of the service came in being drawn back to the epic sacrifice of the First World War. The poppies worn by us all were symbols born of the Western Front. Stanzas of Great War poetry would be read out by the officiating priests. Even the timing of the event kept alive the moment on Armistice Day in 1918 when the guns fell silent on the Western Front: the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. The image of Princip's filthy tomb would keep coming back to me. Had all these people died for a cause so fundamentally opaque that the person who initiated the whole catastrophe could be despised by his own countrymen?

The more I read, the less clear it became. The histories all seemed to cover the same ground, worrying at the same bone of diplomatic blunders and grand strategic plans that led to mass military deployment and bloody stalemate. None seemed to address fully the catalyst of it all – Princip and his Bosnian homeland, the wellspring for conflicts of such far-reaching importance.

To understand better not just the fouled tomb, but also the ongoing power of the First World War, I decided to return to Bosnia. I would follow Princip's life path, trekking where he trekked, from the village out west where he was born; I would explore the Balkan towns and cities where he studied, worked and travelled, and would piece together as far as possible the setting and detail of the assassination, his influences and his motivations. It was a journey that I hoped would fill out my vision of the man who ghosts sketchily into the received history of the First World War. And, by grounding him in his homeland, I hoped for a clearer understanding of a place that retains, as I witnessed through the war of the 1990s, a powerful hold over some of the twentieth century's most troubling events.