

GOODBYE Shakespeare

Arminka Helic had no interest in politics until war broke out in her homeland, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and she found her passion for English literature replaced by a desire to help stop the bloodshed.

It was never my plan to study at LSE. As a 21-year-old in socialist Yugoslavia, I had just graduated from the University of Sarajevo in English language and literature. I wanted to be a Shakespeare scholar. Politics did not interest me.

Then the war interfered. In May 1992 my homeland, Bosnia-Herzegovina, became the scene of the worst violence on European soil since the second world war – a place of rape camps, ethnic cleansing, genocide and mass displacement.

Five months later I was separated from my family, and found refuge in London. My passion for English literature was replaced by a passion for truth and survival – by my desire to see my family alive and my country safe. I would talk about the war to anyone who cared to listen, naively thinking that by telling the truth I could somehow help to stop the bloodshed.

During one of those truth-telling conversations, my interlocutor told me: “You might be right, but you sound like a communist apparatchik. You need a UK education if you want to be taken seriously. You need to learn how to present your arguments.”

It was true: Bosnia today is very different, but the environment I grew up in did not encourage differences of opinion or permit the questioning of authority, the lifeblood of any university in a democracy.

So a few days later I said farewell to Shakespeare and went to LSE. I found the International History department and knocked on the door of Dr Stevenson. I told him “My name is Arminka Helic. I am from Bosnia-Herzegovina. My country has been destroyed and no-one believes me when I say how or by whom. I am told I need to be educated in the UK at a good university. Please could I study here?”

He asked me to sit down. We talked, and that is how my relationship with LSE started.

I had no money for tuition fees, no proof that I had a BA from Sarajevo University, or that I was who I said I was. But somehow LSE decided to believe me and to open its doors to me, and for that I will always be grateful.

I had a job at Häagen-Dazs and secured some funding from the Soros Foundation. In the autumn of 1994 I was enrolled as a part-time MSc student in the Department of International History. I had time to work and time to study. A typical day involved talking Operation Barbarossa in the morning and serving Peanut-butter Burst in the evening after my lectures.

I loved every moment of being an LSE student. I remember my first essay being marked B minus minus, and my tutor Dr Boyce patiently explaining to me that an essay was not a stream of consciousness but a well-presented argument. He told me to imagine I was in a courtroom trying to persuade a judge and jury. I have never forgotten that advice.

So what did LSE do for me? It took me in, gave me a chance, gave me a voice and opened my mind. It gave me something to hold on to. When everything was falling apart around me, LSE stood by me, taught me to think, to present an argument, to listen to others and to believe in myself.

The war in Bosnia has long ended. I left LSE and set off on a journey of not only trying to better myself but trying to help others. Everything I learnt at LSE has served me well, either as an opposition adviser on defence and foreign policy or as a Special Adviser to the Foreign Secretary. I used my life experience and LSE’s critical way of thinking to probe, to examine, to argue and to present my ideas.

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Earlier this year I returned to LSE to watch William Hague and Angelina Jolie Pitt launch the UK’s first academic centre for Women, Peace and Security, part of a campaign against war-zone rape that we began in the Foreign Office and are now continuing. I am proud that my university will play a leading part in the worldwide effort to end conflict-related sexual violence, which has destroyed the lives of millions of people, including many in Bosnia.

A short while after, I made my maiden speech in the House of Lords. As I stood up to speak, I remembered LSE for giving me a chance, its staff for teaching me how to express myself, and the many other people in Britain who helped me on my way when it really mattered. ■



Baroness Helic (MSc International History 1996) was a British Special Adviser (SPAD) to former British Foreign Secretary William Hague until March this year and helped launch the UK’s Global Sexual Violence Initiative. She was created a Life Peer in September 2014.