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# Searching for Gavrilo Princip

*Eighty-six years ago the Serbian teenager shot an archduke  
and set Europe on the road to World War I. Today he is all but forgotten*

**By David DeVoss**

THE WANING LIGHT OF AUTUMN FLOWED THROUGH THE double-paned windows, enveloped the silvery mane of the aging historian, then puddled softly atop a pile of sepia prints strewn across his desk. “This is a picture of the monument Austria erected to the memory of Franz Ferdinand after the assassination,” said Sarajevo municipal councilman Borislav Spasojevic, carefully extracting a hand-painted postcard from the stack of fraying images. “Of course, it’s no longer there,” he smiled. “It was taken down about the time the museum commemorating Gavrilo Princip and the Young Bosnia movement opened across the street. Now that’s gone, too, replaced by...” Spasojevic sighed, allowing his silence to complete the thought.

“Sarajevo is the vortex of an accursed meridian that witnessed the death of three empires,” he concluded with a wave of his hand. “But you’ll find few tangible reminders here of the event that changed the world.”

I had arrived in Bosnia several months before, knowing little about Sarajevo except that it had hosted the 1984 Winter Olympics and had withstood a devastating 1992–95 siege involving Bosnian Serb besiegers and Bosnian Muslim defenders in which 10,000 citizens had died before the defenders, with help from Western Europe and the United States, prevailed over their mainly Serb enemies. War with forces from neighboring Croatia had further devastated the region. After excruciating negotiations, Bosnia and Herzegovina had been created out of part of what had been multiethnic Yugoslavia, with now mainly Muslim Sarajevo as its principal city and the remaining Serbs a beleaguered minority.

I also knew that these ethnic passions were nothing new in the Balkans, where such conflicts have been the rule for centuries. Sarajevo was the place where, on June 28, 1914, a 19-year-old Serb nationalist named Gavrilo Princip shot Austrian arch-

duke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then suzerain of all of what would later become Yugoslavia.



CORBIS/BETTMANN

Immediately after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Sophie (above), police arrest Ferdinand Behr, a bystander who assisted gunman Gavrilo Princip.

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One of my first priorities upon arriving in Sarajevo was to find the famous corner where the assassination had occurred, but after several false starts, I realized that Gavrilo Princip, a national hero prior to Yugoslavia's early 1990s' disintegration into warring factions, was now considered a criminal terrorist by Bosnia. Not only was the Princip museum closed but all traces of its name had been sandblasted from the exterior. Gone, too, were the concrete-embedded footprints marking the spot where Princip stood when he fired the fatal bullets. Even finding the site of the assassination was difficult, since officials had changed street names and removed all historical markers pertaining to the event. "The assassination is a very sensitive topic," advised Sarajevo University professor Kemal Bakarsic. "It will be difficult to find people willing to talk candidly about Gavrilo Princip."

The assassination was one of the defining moments of the 20th century. One month after Franz Ferdinand's death, Austria declared war on Serbia after the Serbs rejected an impossible Austrian ultimatum. The announcement prompted Russia's Czar Nicholas II to come to the aid of his fellow Slavs in Serbia. Two days later, Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm sent a "Dear Niki" memo to Moscow imploring him to recall his troops. If war breaks out, German diplomat Arthur Zimmerman told a worried British ambassador, it will be the fault of "this damned system of alliances... the curse of modern times."

But Europe's iron dice already had started to roll. When Russian ally France ordered a general mobilization the following day, Germany rallied to Austria's defense and declared war on Russia. Forty-eight hours later, Berlin declared war on France and set its troops into Belgium. This forced Britain, bound by treaty to defend Belgian neutrality, into the war and prompted anti-Russian Turkey to side with Austria and Germany.

The ensuing Great War cost the lives of 8.6 million combatants and 6.5 million civilians. By the end of 1918, more than a generation of Europe's best lay dead in the trenches. The Austrian Empire was in shambles, the Ottoman Turks had retreated to Anatolia and the last of the ruling Romanovs of Russia lay buried in an Ekaterinburg grave.

As I walked out of the faded colonial building where Spasojevic's office was located, the old man's last words echoed like a melancholy refrain: "In the Balkans, history often is destroyed, or hidden away pending further interpretation."

The muddy Miljacka River runs through the center of Sarajevo like a crimson scar. It was here on the quay, alongside a strand of belle epoque buildings, that the archduke and his Czech wife, Sophie Chotek von Chotkowa und Wognin, died. The question historians never have answered successfully, however, is why the royal couple tempted fate by coming to Sarajevo at this time. Yes, Franz Ferdinand was Inspector General

of the Austrian Army, and yes, he had been asked by Bosnia's colonial governor, Gen. Oskar Potiorek, to review a military exercise.

But why invite the Habsburg heir to the empire's most rebellious province? Especially when only the month before, Serbian Prime Minister Nikola Pasic had asked his minister in Vienna to warn Austria about the possibility of an assassination attempt. Even Franz Ferdinand's closest advisers said the trip was needlessly provocative. After all, June 28 was St. Vitus Day, Vidovdan, the Orthodox holiday during which Serbs paused to commemorate their 1389 defeat by the Ottoman Turks at Kosovo and celebrate the memory of Serb nobleman Milos Obilic, who, following the battle, crept into the sultan's tent and stabbed him to death before being hacked to bits by the Ottoman guards.

It had taken Serbia almost 500 years to regain full independence from the Turks, who left an enduring legacy in the Balkan's Muslim population. Freshly victorious in two Balkan wars, Serbia was on the rise. And all of the resentment engendered by centuries of Muslim occupation what directed at Vienna, seat of the Austro-Hungarian rulers, seen by Serbs as but the latest oppressors. Yet, despite the apparent danger, Franz Ferdinand accepted the invitation to visit the turbulent region German chancellor Otto von Bismarck had earlier proclaimed not worth "the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier."

## THE HABSBURG'S UNRULY EMPIRE

THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY WAS NOT A GOOD TIME FOR authority figures. During the first 13 years of the new century there had been some 40 political assassinations around the world.

Of all Europe's rulers, none were more vulnerable than the Habsburgs. Started by a minor German count who was elected Holy Roman Emperor in 1273, the family had ruled in Central Europe for more than six centuries. During that time, it had twice driven back Turkish invasions of Central Europe. The Holy Roman Empire had become the Austrian Empire, encompassing eight nationalities, 17 provinces, 20 parliamentary bodies and a variety of cultures that extended more than eight degrees of latitude across the map of Europe. But under the leadership of Emperor Franz Josef, the empire had suffered reverses and faced internal threats.

In 1867 Franz Josef saved the empire with a compromise, proposing that Austria and Hungary become separate sovereign states under one ruler who would be called Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary.

The real threat to Austrian hegemony in the region, however, came not from rivalries among the Central European and Balkan states but from dozens of secret societies, the most notorious of which was the Black Hand. A Serbian nationalist cult, the group was led by Maj. Dragutin Dimitrijevic, a rogue nationalist nicknamed Apis after the bull-god of ancient Egypt. Dimitrijevic developed a talent for assassination in 1903 when he helped plan and execute the murder of Serbia's King Alexander Obrenovic and Queen Draga. Now he was prepared to



ARCHIVE PHOTO

**Gavrilo Princip sits in the center of the first row in this photograph of the trial of the assassination plotters. Princip told the court he was sorry only for the death of Sophie.**

strike again, but instead of employing disgruntled army officers, this time his assassins would be idealistic schoolboys.

For decades the mountains of Bosnia had been a breeding ground for discontent. Serb peasants there were bound by a feudal system that forced them to surrender one-third of their harvest to Bosnian Muslim landlords. Abandoned to their poverty, Bosnia's embittered Serbs turned inward, seeking inspiration from the heroic songs of wandering balladeers called *guslas* and instruction from nationalistic Orthodox priests.

Young men flocked to secret societies. Drawn to Serbia in hopes of finding ways to support its causes in the Balkans, many found their way to the Black Hand. The group eventually recruited six Bosnians, one of them Gavrilo Princip, and sent them back home across the Drina River to Sarajevo, armed with bombs and revolvers.

On the morning of June 28, Franz Ferdinand and Sophie arrived early by train from the resort town of Ilidza, where they had spent the night in an ersatz Tyrolean spa called the Hotel Bosna. As they climbed into the Graef und Stift touring car that would carry them to Sarajevo's city hall, both were in a good mood.

Although Sophie's family, the Choteks, were one of the oldest aristocratic families in Bohemia, they were considered commoners under the Habsburg Family Law. After repeated entreaties, Franz Josef agreed in 1900 to allow the couple to marry, but only after Franz Ferdinand formally agreed to a morganatic union that would prevent Sophie from becoming Empress of Austria and forever bar their children from the throne. According to the terms of the renunciation, Sophie could not sit beside her husband in a court carriage, appear at his side in the

royal box at the opera or be buried in the Habsburg family crypt. Even after 14 years of marriage and three children, she ranked below the youngest archduchess when in Vienna. But outside Austria, in lands administered by the military, things were different. On this glorious summer day in Sarajevo, the Duchess of Hohenberg finally would receive all of the imperial honors due the wife of the heir apparent.

But first the royal couple had to pass through the gauntlet of six zealous assassins. Their car was only a third of the way down Appel Quay when Nedeljko Cabrinovic threw the first grenade. But the archduke's chauffeur sped up, and instead of landing in the car, the grenade bounced off and exploded under the trailing vehicle, wounding about 20 people. The archduke's car roared past Gavrilo Princip toward the faux Moorish city hall.

Transformed later into the national library, Sarajevo's old city hall today stands gutted and silent, a ghostly victim of Serb incendiary bombs fired in the spring of 1992. Behind its graffiti-covered walls lie the cinders of 700,000 books. But when the royal couple pulled in front of the crenellated structure 86 years ago, the municipal officials were oblivious to the attempted assassination. Sarajevo's Lord Mayor greeted Franz Ferdinand effusively with a prepared text. "Our hearts are full of happiness on the occasion of the most gracious visit with which your Highnesses have deigned to honor the capital of our land...."

"Herr Bürgermeister," the archduke interrupted, "what is the good of your speeches? I come to Sarajevo on a friendly visit and someone throws a bomb at me. This is outrageous."

The archduke's outrage should have been directed at Gen. Oskar Potiorek, who had taken almost no precautions. Despite

the rumblings of trouble, only 120 policemen were on duty that day.

Instead of asking Franz Ferdinand and his wife to remain inside the city hall until soldiers could arrive to escort them to safety, Potiorek's solution to the lapse in security was to change the motorcade's prearranged route. Instead of winding through the narrow streets of the Bascarsija Turkish quarter, he proposed the royal couple return the way they came, along the Quay road, a broader, straighter street where the car could travel more rapidly.

## DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHDUKE

AS THE ROYAL PARTY GOT BACK IN THE CAR, THE SITUATION seemed under control. Grenade thrower Cabrinovic was in custody. Four of the other would-be assassins, several of whom had no stomach for killing, had abandoned their posts. Only Gavrilo Princip remained. But he was positioned around a corner, along the route that had been published in the morning's papers.

Flanked by curious bystanders, the procession returned along the river, but instead of speeding through the Bascarsija intersection, the cars turned right. Potiorek had forgotten to tell the chauffeurs of the change in plans. When he realized what was happening, Potiorek ordered Franz Ferdinand's car to halt and back up. But the archduke now was only three steps from Princip, and while the driver fumbled with the car's cumbersome gears, Princip, the man considered too timid to be given a bomb, pulled a .38 Browning pistol from his pocket and stepped forward.

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*"I was only 11 when Gavrilo shot the archduke, but I knew his girlfriend."*

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The two men who faced each other were emblematic of the age; one a disdainful aristocrat with an inverted hussar's mustache and plumed hat, the other a romantic teenage nationalist hoping to gain immortality. Princip fired two shots. The first tore through the side of the car and penetrated Sophie's corset. The second pierced the neck of Franz Ferdinand's powder-blue tunic, severing the jugular vein before lodging against his spine.

What kind of man was Gavrilo Princip? The corner where the attack occurred reveals no clues. But four blocks away, up a grimy stairway in a small apartment behind the shuttered Serb Orthodox Cathedral, lives a woman with memories of the past.

"I was only 11 when Gavrilo shot the archduke, but I knew his girlfriend Jelena Milisic when we were both teachers at Sarajevo's primer gymnasium (academic high school) in 1946," smiles 97-year-old Lubica Tuta. "Jelena and the art history teacher, Borislav Mihacevic, were Young Bosnia revolutionaries with Gavrilo. Boro used to tease Jelena about spending the night with Gavrilo in the park across the river from where the attack occurred. Gavrilo desperately wanted to make love, but Jelena said no. Even when he told her he probably would die the

following morning, she wouldn't relent. Boro said Gavrilo was so angry the morning of June 28 that he would have shot God himself."

Today, despite two world wars, a half-century of socialism and a bloody siege lasting more than a thousand days, downtown Sarajevo still has the look of a small Austrian town. The bond between Vienna and its former colony remains strong, in part because for nearly a century every deserving Bosnian student could apply for a university scholarship in Austria. There even is talk of restoring the monument to Franz Ferdinand and Sophie that was demolished at the end of World War I. Until that day comes, however, Sarajevo's Austrian artifacts will stay locked in the basement of the National Art Gallery.

"Politicians believe these works are controversial, so we keep them hidden away," says gallery director Seid Hasanefendic, as he descends a narrow stairway into the clammy bowels of the building and unlocks a heavy door. Edging past jumbles of artifacts, his breath misting in the chill, he finally arrives at another door, which opens into a small chamber where the busts of forgotten monarchs peer through discolored tarpaulins.

In the corner is a life-size statue of Franz Josef, his imperious glare stone-cold and covered with dust. Resting on a stack of old newspapers is all that remains of Austria's assassination monument: a bas-relief bronze plaque bearing the profiles of Franz Ferdinand and Sophie.

"The Yugoslav Army declared war on history when it began shelling Sarajevo in 1992," says Hasanefendic. "They destroyed the national library and hit this building with 50 bombs, but we survived. The irony is that our politicians now are afraid to exhibit these faded symbols of power."

Outside the gallery still swathed in protective scaffolding, I walked across Zelenih Beretki Street to the public square where students from the nearby law faculty were enjoying the afternoon sun and tiny cups of Turkish coffee. Was it possible that the history of Gavrilo Princip and the event that sparked World War I was not lost or destroyed, but merely hidden away? I had heard stories of what transpired late in the summer of 1992 when Serb snipers and artillery began pounding Sarajevo. As the death toll mounted, citizens frustrated by their helplessness began attacking symbols of the former Yugoslavia. First on their list was the Princip museum. Though many items were stolen or smashed, the bulk of the collection was saved. I was told, by a courageous curator named Bajro Gec, who literally lived inside the battered museum for more than two years, protecting with his life the priceless photographs and period costumes from vandals and thieves.

But where was Gec? Finding a person can be difficult in Sarajevo, which has no money for telephone directories and a municipal government that considers everything an official secret. Fortunately, Austrian ambassador Valentin Insko had met Gec when the embassy had inquired about restoring the Franz Ferdinand memorial. "Try the Jewish Museum," Insko advised. "You may find him there."

Located on the western edge of Bascarsija, the Jewish Museum, now known as the Museum of Sarajevo, does not appear as a museum on any city map. Built as a synagogue in the 16th century, the building has no identifying markings and turns

away any tourist who might wander across its cobbled courtyard to bang on the rested metal door. "How can we open to the public when we have no money?" asked museum director Mevlida Serdarevic, with a hint of desperation.

"I can show you where the Princip collection is located, but only Bajro has the key to get inside," she says, walking down a wooden stairway into a vaulted chamber in which an enormous book containing the names of every Sarajevo Jew killed during World War II hangs suspended by a chain from the ceiling. Our arrival prompts a chorus of coughs from six people who sit shivering at their desks. "Every employee here has the flu, but the cold is good for the antiques because it keeps away the bugs," she explains. Walking down another flight of stairs, we arrive in what appears to be Europe's basement, a room filled with gilded sabers, Orthodox iconography, broken spinning wheels and oil portraits of Turkish pashas. It's as if every decade of the past century has deposited its fading grandeur here before embracing the next new fad.

## HIDDEN HISTORY

"THE PRINCIP EXHIBITS ARE OVER THERE, BUT WE MUSTN'T go closer without Bajro Gec," cautions Serdarevic. Why doesn't the director of a museum have access to all its exhibits, I wonder? "Can you imagine the bravery it took to transfer these items amid the chaos of a city under siege?" she responds. "Bajro Gec saved the history of Gavrilo Princip, and now it is his to show."

While waiting for Gec to return, I walked down Sarajevo's main boulevard, Marsala Tita, looking at the coffee bars and cake shops that were full even in the middle of the afternoon. There is no better metaphor for the Balkan's historical ambivalence than Marsala Tita. A century ago the street was called Cermalusa, after a Turkish feudal landlord. After World War I, when Bosnia was incorporated into the Yugoslavian monarchy, the name changed again to King Alexander Street. During the Nazi occupation, it was christened Adolf Hitler Street. When communist partisans finally liberated the city, the tree-lined avenue was renamed after their leader, Josip Broz Tito.

It was Tito who turned Gavrilo Princip into a national icon. In Gavrilo's anticolonialism, communist hagiographers detected the first stirrings of socialism. In 1953 the government opened the Princip museum in Sarajevo. Eleven years later it proclaimed the family's refurbished peasant shack a national landmark. If Bosnian Muslims or Croats objected to the deification of an Orthodox Serb, they wisely kept silent.

When I return to the shuttered museum, Bajro Gec escorts me down to the basement, where two large wooden trunks secured by enormous padlocks sit beneath barred windows. After opening the locks with an iron key, he slowly lifts one of the lids as the hinges shriek in protest. "Here are the clothes Princip wore when he was arrested," says Gec, holding up a black wool suit with tarnished metal buttons. Layered deeper in the trunk are Austrian military uniforms, a beaded corselette belonging to Princip's mother, Maria, and a dress identical to the one Sophie Chotek selected for St. Vitus Day. Strewn throughout the pile of

musty clothes are old shoes, tattered newspaper articles and black-and-white photographs curling with age in which young conspirators affect regal poses while staring stiffly at the camera.

The most famous photograph shows Princip and his fellow revolutionaries at their trial, staring indifferently at their inquisitors. There were 25 defendants in all. At the end of the trial the presiding judge asked all of the accused to stand up if they felt sorry for their act. All stood except Princip. When asked why he did not rise, Princip responded that he was sorry for the children who had lost their parents, and he was especially sorry for killing Duchess Sophie. The bullet that hit her was intended for Gen. Potiorek, he explained. "As far as suggestions are concerned that somebody talked us into committing the assassination that is not true," Princip said. "The idea for the assassination grew among us and we realized it. We loved our people."

Five days later the judges returned with their verdicts. Nine of the accused were set free, five were sentenced to be hanged, while the remainder received prison terms ranging from three years to life. Since Princip was 19 at the time of the assassination, he could not be hanged under Austrian law. He was sentenced to 20 years at hard labor with the proviso that every June 28 he remain in a darkened cell without food or a mattress.

## PROUD TO BE A PRINCIP

"POLITICIANS WANT TO FORGET PRINCIP BECAUSE HE WAS A Serb," says Gec. "I've always thought of Sarajevo as the Jerusalem of Europe, a place where different cultures can come together. But if we refuse to recognize our history and refuse to restore our monuments, it will be difficult to keep Sarajevo a multinational city."

A more immediate problem for Gec, however, is the rapid disintegration of the items he has been able to salvage. "The temperature and humidity make preservation almost impossible. Our staff managed to save these items from Belgrade artillery, but now we're losing them to mildew."

Not all of the history from 1914 has been lost or locked away. The Hotel Bosna where Franz Ferdinand and his wife spent their last night has survived two wars and the breakup of Yugoslavia, albeit in a form no Habsburg would recognize. Encircled by razor wire, microwave dishes and sandbag revetments, the former royal residence now serves as headquarters for the NATO-led forces in Bosnia. The building groans under the weight of too much history.

The respect that eluded the archduke and duchess in life also escaped them in death. Because Sophie was not a Habsburg, the funeral service in Vienna was perfunctory. Only the three children of the imperial family sent flowers. To minimize public expressions of sympathy, Franz Josef's chamberlain ordered their coffins transported only at night, and he would have succeeded in having them buried separately had not Franz Ferdinand left specific instructions that he was to be buried alongside his wife at their family home in Artstetten.

But Franz Ferdinand's death was more enviable than the life that faced Gavrilo Princip. He was taken to Theresienstadt, an old Bohemian fortress north of Prague that had been converted

into a military prison and later would serve as a Jewish concentration camp during World War II. Chained with shackles weighing 22 pounds, the 145-pound prisoner was kept in solitary confinement in an unheated cell. Tuberculosis consumed him, and on April 28, 1918, Princip died weighing 88 pounds.

Fearing his bones might become relics, Princip's Austrian jailers took the body in secret to an unmarked grave, but a Czech soldier assigned to the burial detail made a map, and in 1920 Princip and the other "Heroes of Vidovdan" were disinterred and brought to Sarajevo, where they were buried together beneath a chapel "built to commemorate for eternity our Serb Heroes" at St. Mark's Cemetery.

For the Heroes of Vidovdan, however, eternity ended with the breakup of Yugoslavia. St. Mark's today is in practice ignored by Sarajevo officialdom. Visitors are discouraged by a locked gate, weed-choked pathways and packs of scrofulous dogs that feed on the heads of sheep thrown at the chapel by butchers at a nearby market.

Shortly before his departure to Theresienstadt, Princip was told that the war he had started, to free all South Slavs, was, in fact, consuming them. Although Belgrade had fallen to Austrian troops, he remained positive. "Serbia may be invaded but not conquered," he told one of his German guards. "Serbia will one day create Yugoslavia, mother of all South Slavs."

Today Yugoslavia is a country in name only. Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia are independent states. The province of

Kosovo in a UN protectorate and Bosnia is, in fact if not officially, divided into two entities—one, Serb, the other Muslim—each with its own parliament, police and army. The Grahovo Valley home where Gavrilo grew up lies in ruins, destroyed by Croat troops in 1995, four months before the Dayton Peace Accords ended the war in Bosnia.

No longer are bridges, barracks and schools named after Gavrilo Princip. But his memory still is revered by Petar Princip, 61, the family's last direct descendant in Bosnia, who lives with his wife, Dusanka, in the Serb city of Banja Luka. Permanently dressed in black for their son Danilo, who died fighting the Croats, the Princip's have turned their apartment into a shrine, of sorts, dominated by a portrait of Gavrilo at age 18.

"People say he was a crazy terrorist, but Gavrilo was a schoolboy from an educated family," says Petar, a botanist who harvests herbs from the forest. "Mine was a respected family," he adds, as his wife lights a candle beneath the large portrait of Gavrilo. "My cousin was the liberator of the Slav people. But now I've lost my home, my son and the respect I once enjoyed. I'm proud to be a Princip, but I'm also sad to be part of a forgotten history."

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