



Premio Internazionale Carlo Scarpa per il Giardino

XXV, 2014

Osmače and Brežani

Srebrenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Osmače and Brežani

Jury report

The Jury of the International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens has decided unanimously to dedicate the twenty-fifth annual award to Osmače and Brežani, two villages in Podrinje, a region of eastern Bosnia, near the border with Serbia. We are on the plateau above Srebrenica, a place where the landscape is furrowed by watercourses and wrinkled like a walnut, enclosed by the deep cut gullies of a big loop of the Drina, a river which has played a crucial role in European history and culture, at once separating and connecting major civilizations in the Balkans; an area that inevitably prompts one to reflect on the contradiction between the beauty of nature and the still omnipresent signs of war. Osmače and Brežani together comprise one of the many places in Bosnia and Herzegovina where, two decades ago, the life was torn from a community, its long-established tradition of living together in a multi-cultural environment was destroyed and those who survived were dispersed. What makes these villages a witness to a supremely significant experience is the presence of a small group of families, farmers and stockbreeders, who for some years have been trying to find the road back to the texture of the life they remember, to construct new relationships between people, to renew the necessary ties binding space to be occupied, land to be tended, houses to be rebuilt, human dignity to be recovered.

“Before the troubles”, in 1991, Osmače had 942 inhabitants and Brežani 273. No-one lived there from 1993 to 2002. Today around a hundred people live in the districts comprising Osmače: Mahala, Hadrovići, Sedlari, Podstran, Prisoje, Mursalovići and Šećimići; and several families live in Primilac, Posolila, Gajić or Turija, all parts of the adjoining village of Brežani.

So the place is now a sort of archipelago of hamlets, settlement cells a few hundred metres from each other scattered over an area of around 20 square kilometres at an altitude of between 900 and 1,000 metres, a patchwork of meadows and woods scored by streams and rivers. Every hamlet in turn is made up of a varying number of houses far enough from each other to be called detached, but close enough to connote a settlement with a name.

The houses, buildings whose constructional simplicity is visibly derived from the basic nature of the means and materials available, are each surrounded by an open space allotted to a courtyard for domestic animals, a kitchen garden and an orchard; each property shares common boundaries with those of other houses on several sides and on one side gives onto the road, a layout that lends itself to interrelations, to neighbourliness, to the exchange of the fruits of the land and of the kitchen. The personal and family relationships that are developing from such beginnings, expressions of a common material culture and a collective care for the physical environment, seem capable, in time, of constructing a new integrated anthropological texture based on full respect for differences of culture, taste and devotional practice. The houses and their immediate environs are the intersections in a network which constitutes, at hamlet level, the foundation of community space and time. The way these hamlets relate to each other without hierarchy, without a centre, surprises us. But in fact, the archipelago of settlements that gives shape to a multicultural microcosm is developing within spaces that bear the marks of different memories, different hierophanies, the different religious buildings, the little cemetery, the little shrine with its list of the fallen, the crossroads with the fountain, a meeting-place for passers-by and grazing animals. Of striking symbolic importance is the school, which “before” had brought

together over 500 children from various surrounding villages in a fine “modern” school building constructed in the 1970s and now lies in ruins in the centre of a huge clearing in the woods between the hamlets making up of Brežani and Osmače.

The first steps along the road back were taken at the beginning of the new millennium against a background of painstaking preparation and small-scale experiments, at a time when everything – people, houses, ferns invading the fields – still showed the signs of severe shock and long absence.

The work of documenting and giving a historical perspective to the four-year period from 1992 to 1995, in particular to the atrocities committed in July 1995, is still far from finished. The remains of another 409 people were laid to rest in July 2013, bringing to 6,066 the overall number of those buried at the Potočari Memorial site. In Tuzla, the victim identification centre contains the human remains of 1,500 still without a name, and the official estimate is that their number will increase by at least a further 500. The task of finding the remaining victims to recompose and give them peace is complicated by the fact that after interment in mass graves their bodies were dismembered and scattered amongst so-called secondary mass graves, all over north-eastern Bosnia, with the deliberate intention of concealing the evidence.

After the end of the war and seven years as refugees, of diaspora and exile, the first people began to return in 2002. A similar pattern of events took place throughout Podrinje, an area administered by several municipalities, including Bratunac and Srebrenica, which in turn contain dozens of local communities; 19 of these, including Brežani and its component village of Osmače, lie within the municipal area of Srebrenica.

The small steps of the returnees, and their eagerness to find the energy to stay, found their efforts braced by relationships and expressions of support kindled back in the years and events of unspeakable horror and sustained ever since. And the scenario being played out in Bosnia draws strength from the thought of Alexander Langer (Vipiteno/Sterzing 1946-Florence 1995), whose work through the war years was of compelling maieutic impact. In particular with his 1994 work *Tentativo di decalogo per la convivenza inter-etnica* (A tentative decalogue for the art of inter-ethnic togetherness) he created the theoretical and practical basis for the quest for “the road back”, describing «mixed, inter-ethnic groups, however small they may be, as the pioneer plants of the culture of togetherness».

But it was latent endogenous energy, as it slowly and laboriously re-emerged, that gradually managed to appeal for and attract new initiatives and projects. Irfanka Pašagić, a psychiatrist who was awarded the 2005 International Alexander Langer Prize, who founded and directs the Tuzlanska Amica association in the Bosnian town of Tuzla, had been involved since 1992 in helping and caring for women and children from areas subjected to “ethnic cleansing”, including Srebrenica.

In 2005, with the concrete support of the Langer Foundation and of Tuzlanska Amica, a number of young people with different ethnic and national backgrounds and from different religious traditions (they were children in 1995) got together to organize an informal group which they called Adopt Srebrenica; their aim, to create a context in which they could talk about their future and about the prospects for their town.

In subsequent years some ten families first began to engage in dialogue and then, like real pioneer species, took the decisive step to return to the villages up on the plateau in order to take in hand the land of their fathers and mothers, to tend and cherish it. And this was the background, in 2010, to the experiment of sowing buckwheat in Osmače, one the many actions launched in several parts of Podrinje thanks to the exchange of knowledge and practical help involving operators and technical experts from many international bodies in various specialist sections of the agricultural, forestry and livestock economy, particularly those with expertise in growing cereals, fruit and soft fruit, and in rearing sheep and cattle.

In 2011, the Adopt Srebrenica group, with the help of the Historical Archives of Bolzano, planned a documentation centre to record the individual stories and collective history of the community; another step towards the reconciliation of different pasts, born of the conviction that any practicable proposal for the future must necessarily originate from a knowledge and preservation of the common historical heritage.

It is difficult to give an orderly account of all those providing direct and indirect support for this collective experiment in looking after the land which is being conducted in Srebrenica and of the families living and working in Osmače and Brežani, but as well as the already mentioned Langer Foundation and Tuzlanska Amica we must at least name Venice City Council's Centro Pace, the Agronomi e Forestali Senza Frontiere of Padua, the agricultural and biological cooperative El Tamiso and the Associazione di Cooperazione e Solidarietà of Padua. The ongoing project designed to improve the growing potential of buckwheat and other species suited to the environmental and soil conditions of the plateau bears the eloquent name *Seminando il ritorno/Sowing the return* and it is supported by the Tavola Valdese of the Methodist Church. In August 2013 an international solidarity network involving a number of cities and cultural centres was set up around the Adopt Srebrenica group.

The role the International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens aims to play in this immense framework of reflection and action, the contribution it wishes to make, lies in trying to achieve a more intimate understanding, and in ensuring wider awareness of the profound reasons that bind individuals or families or small community groupings to the place inhabited by their memories and informed with their plans. Reasons and ties that are so strong that, as demonstrated by the case of Osmače and Brežani, they can confront chasms that appear unassailable. Dialogue with those involved and their direct testimony help us to see the most suitable ways and the most useful equipment for taking on the care of the physical environment, starting with the task of working the ground; they also provide insights into what life is really like in an area in which the recent upheavals are the latest painful layer in the interminable series of geopolitical metamorphoses laid down throughout history and in the broad context of Euro-Mediterranean geography.

This place, these events, help us to understand the sense and the value of an experiment which is small in scale in socio-economic terms but of outstanding importance as a supremely civilized and tellingly symbolic example of the widespread phenomenon of the "return to the land". More immediately, they raise the urgent question of how best to construct a multi-cultural space, proceeding not from the distribution of places to the different elements but from a vision in which the different, together, inhabit a unitary place. The Jury has decided to entrust the Carlo Scarpa seal to two of the leading figures in this process, representatives and witnesses of their communities, their cultures and their villages – Muhamed Avdić and Velibor Rankić. In so doing, the Jury expresses its affectionate affinity and encouragement, reiterates its commitment to comprehend and communicate the difficulties and hopes that underlie their endeavours and thanks them for the life-enhancing lesson, as topical as it is universal, that comes from their tenacious resolve on the plateau above Srebrenica.