

## **Presentation for the Book Launch of**

Sabri Bajgora. *Destruction of Islamic Heritage in the Kosovo War, 1998-1999*. Edited by Robert Elsie and Petrit Selimi. ISBN 978-9951-595-02-5. Prishtina: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kosovo, 2014. 315 pp.

I am honoured and delighted to be able to attend the launch of our long-awaited album on the destruction of Islamic heritage in Kosovo.

The project got underway two years ago, in the spring of 2012, when Petrit Selimi contacted me and asked me if I would help prepare an album to catalogue the horrific damage done to Islamic cultural monuments during the Kosovo War of 1998-1999.

The basic work of cataloguing the destruction had been accomplished by the Islamic Community in the months following the war and the results were presented in an initial bilingual (Albanian-English) edition published in Prishtina in 2000 under the direction of Sabri Bajgora. While this was a fine book, it did have two major drawbacks: the English was not good and the book never got international distribution.

I accepted the work because I felt that there was still much need to make the international public aware of Kosovo and the many problems it has inherited from the sombre past. I also believed that significant improvements could be achieved in a second, expanded edition, and made several suggestions to this end, which my co-editor, Petrit Selimi, accepted without hesitation. One of these suggestions was to publish the book in English only, that is, as an edition designed solely for the international public. This seemed important to me because, while the people of Kosovo know what happened to their country in 1998 and 1999, the destruction wrought upon Islamic architecture and heritage has remained largely obscure on the international scene. It is curious and, for me, frustrating to note that when international discussions are held on war damage to Kosovo's monuments, mention is usually only made of Orthodox churches, whereas the destruction of Islamic cultural heritage, which was far greater, is still little known. We have calculated that about forty percent of all the mosques in this country were purposefully damaged or destroyed. This is a tragic statistic and it is important for the world to see and understand what happened.

The information and photos in this volume provide dramatic proof of the destruction wrought upon Islamic architecture and, indeed upon the Islamic community and Albanians in general by crazed Serbian paramilitaries, by the Serbian police and by the Serbian military of the Milošević period.

I would like to note at the outset, as the book's author, Sabri Bajgora, and as Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi have both stressed in their introductions, that this book is not, by any means, intended as an indictment of the Serbian people or of Serbia as a nation, even though the crimes were committed in its name. Every individual is responsible for his own acts and not for the acts of others, and I know, despite some continuing political rhetoric from Belgrade, that Serbs in Kosovo and in Serbia are equally horrified and saddened by the events that took place in this country fifteen years ago. All of the communities in Kosovo suffered during the war, and I am glad to hear that all are now working together, in various ways, to find common paths. But an account must nonetheless be given of the appalling damage done to Kosovo's cultural heritage, and I am confident that the present album will serve this end.

There are many people and institutions who contributed to this book and who need to be thanked. Among them are the Islamic Community of Kosovo, represented in particular by the

book's original author Sabri Bajgora, the Foreign Ministry of the Republic of Kosovo, represented by Deputy Foreign Minister Petrit Selimi and Foreign Minister Enver Hoxhaj, and the Government of Kosovo, represented by Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi who gave us his full support and encouragement.

Particular thanks go also to András Riedlmayer of the Fine Arts Library of Harvard University in the United States whom I managed to interest in the project. He is unfortunately not able to attend this launch due to a prior engagement. András Riedlmayer is associated with the Documentation Center of the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture and could certainly be regarded as a leading expert on Islamic art and architecture in Kosovo and Bosnia. Together with Andrew Herscher, he was the author of a detailed survey of the destruction of cultural heritage and, in particular, of Islamic architecture in Kosovo, published in 2001, and came to testify several times on the subject at International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague where I worked for ten years. As such, he was able to provide invaluable assistance on the history of many of the old mosques of Kosovo and the exact circumstances of their destruction. He also provided additional photo material which we have used in the book.

The aim of this volume is to make known what happened to the Islamic architecture of Kosovo, as a major component of the country's cultural heritage. Much of the damage is irreparable, but some buildings can certainly still be restored if funding can be found. Indeed, many mosques have already been finely renovated and returned to life. A secondary aim of this book is to make Kosovo itself better known in the international arena. In this connection, I would like to stress that much more remains to be done – in book publishing, in internet presentations, and in the field of tourism and cultural exchange – to make Kosovo, the beating heart of the Balkans, better known and better understood in Europe and the world.

Thank you for your attention.

Robert Elsie  
Prishtina, 27 May 2014

[Presented at the book launch of *Destruction of Islamic Heritage in the Kosovo War, 1998-1999*, at the National Library of Kosovo, Prishtina, 27 May 2014.]