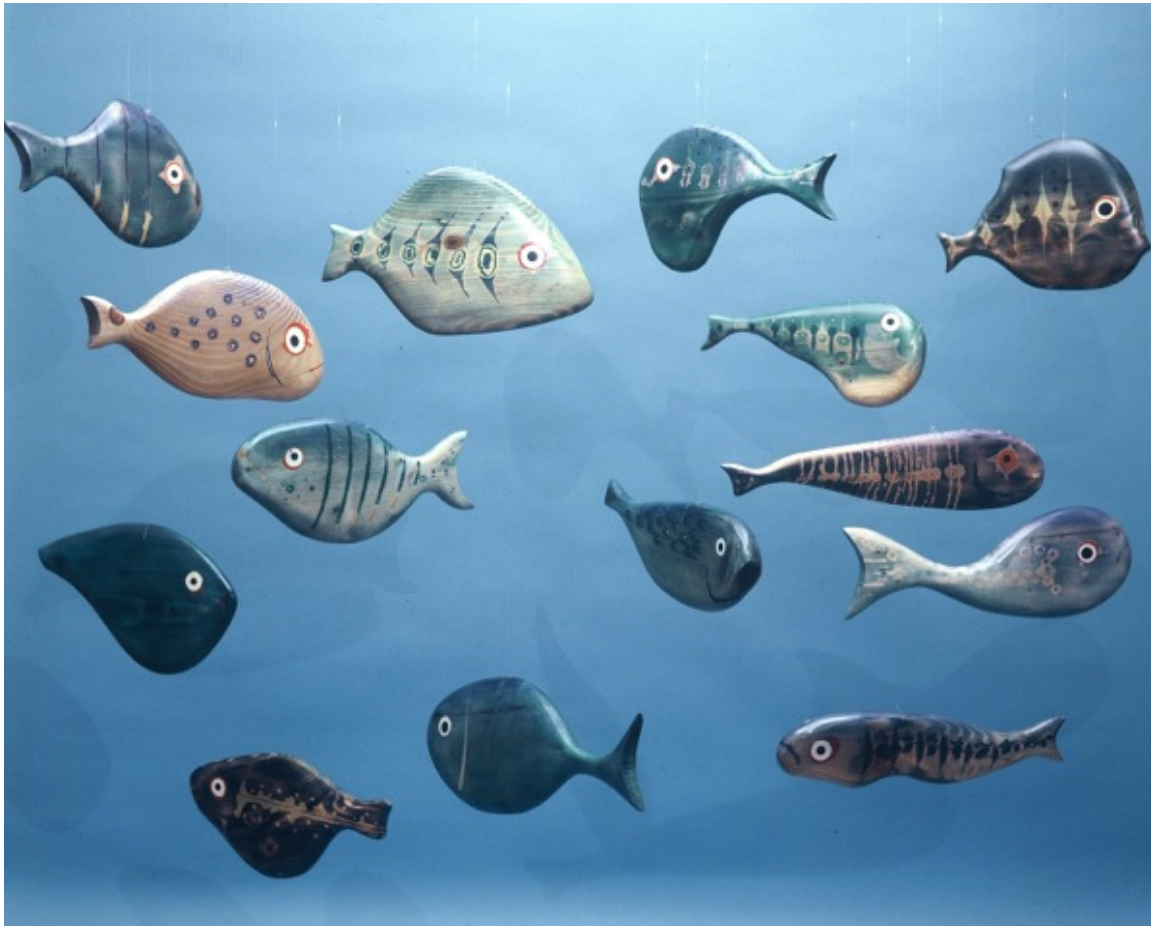


## **The Power of a Fish**

*Aida A. Hozic\**



Arfan S. Hozic, *School of Fish* (installation). Retrospective Exhibition at Art Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina, November-December 1988. Photograph by Gojko Sikimic.

This is a story about the power of a fish.

My father was a concentration camp survivor: Gross-Rosen and Buchenwald. As a fifteen-year-old boy, he was apprehended by the Germans because he served as a messenger boy for Tito's

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\* Aida A. Hozic teaches international politics at the University of Florida, Gainesville.

partisans in Northwestern Bosnia. Just two months earlier, his father – a Muslim merchant and a partisan – had died of typhus after being imprisoned by the Croatian Ustasha.

When my father was taken away, his mother wrote in a family diary:

“On the 19<sup>th</sup> of August, 1944, Arfan was arrested by the Germans. He was then taken to Banja Luka on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, I was also arrested and taken to a camp in Topola, where Arfan was held at the time. On the 27<sup>th</sup>, I was released but Arfan was taken to Germany, to a forced-labor camp. I have received no news about his fate to this date.”

My father returned to the family home in Kotor-Varoš in late summer of 1945. He had no teeth, he weighed about 19 kilograms, and he arrived on a horse carriage carrying a silver teapot in his hands. The teapot was a gift he received from the wife of a fellow prisoner in Buchenwald. On his way back from the camp, my father stopped in Prague to see her. Her husband had asked him to find her and tell her that he had loved her and thought of her until he died.

I grew up with my father’s stories and silences about the camps. He believed that our lives were governed by a combination of fate and contingencies. As a child he had miraculously survived a case of jaundice. When all the medications had failed, his mother called on an old Gypsy woman for help. The woman’s advice was that the child should look at a trout swimming in a bucket of clear cold water. And so the trout was fished out from the creek by the house and brought to the child in a bucket. The child watched the fish swimming and, after several hours, the red dots on the trout turned yellow. The trout stopped swimming and my father was cured.

My father also said that he had survived a renal bone disease in the camp by eating charcoal stolen from the fire, late at night. He did not understand why he had such cravings for coal. Much later, he would learn that charcoal was an essential part of the treatment for diseases caused by uremic toxins.

And then he would talk about soccer games in the camp. On weekends, the Nazis often organized soccer tournaments. Teams of prisoners would play, while the others watched. Everyone knew that the players on the losing team would not be allowed to live. The prisoners, malnourished and feeble, quite literally fought for their lives on the field. But the outcome was neither certain nor dependent on their game. SS officers were the referees and they changed the rules in the middle of the game: playing for a win could easily translate into a loss by penalties.

In 1991, my father was diagnosed with cancer. I was already in the United States, in graduate school. I went home to Sarajevo in the early summer and spent a month with him and my mother. I left in early June, on one of the last trains from Sarajevo to Belgrade – a few days later the bridges and the tracks on the crossroads of Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia would be blown up. The Yugoslav wars had already begun though no one as yet dared to say it.

Sometime later that summer, my passport was stolen in New York. Since I was born in Belgrade, but lived in Sarajevo, I was unable to get a replacement. The Yugoslav Embassy in Washington claimed that they only had passports with a Serbian code in front of a number. I refused to accept

it, knowing full well that if the country fell apart I would have difficulties proving that I was a Bosnian citizen. When my father died in December of 1991, I could not go home or attend his funeral.

When I last spoke with my father, he was going to have a surgery that seemed utterly unnecessary to me. I asked him why he needed it. He said that the surgery might not have been urgent but that he could not wait – soon, he said, it would be impossible to get into the hospital because there would be too many wounded people needing attention.

My father died because his body refused the stitches after the surgery. I think he died because he could not bear to be a witness to another war.

A month later, at the end of January 1992, my mother came to the United States. We were planning to go home in May, at the end of the semester. The siege of Sarajevo, started on April 6<sup>th</sup> – the day the city had been liberated from the Germans in 1945 – and my mother stayed in America.

My father was a sculptor, and he devoted a good part of his life to making fish. Often they had identical forms, but each seemed different because of the color or design on their simple, elegant, polished surfaces. Two had inscriptions on them. One fish had a text from the Qur'an: *We have made every living thing from water*. The second inscription was from Goya's print of executed soldiers in The Disasters of War series: *No se puede saber porque*. One can't tell why.

There is no logic to survival, my father would say. It is always a journey from Bukhara to Samarkand, with death waiting for us where we least expect it but always at the appointed time.

It is hard for me to think so – and my mother would have none of it – but I do believe that my father's death saved my mother's and my lives in the same way that the fish, swimming in the bucket, had saved his many years before.