

# GREEN CARD SOLDIER

*An Historic Adventure Novel*

by **Bruce E. Zielsdorf**

## Story Synopsis

*Green Card Soldier* chronicles the untamed adventures of Andro Babich – a naïve, but inquisitive teenage soccer star frustrated by his mundane life on the family farm. In the early '90s, Andro's sporting hopes are drowned as the former Yugoslavia is battered by thunderous storms of religious and nationalistic disgust that soon rip apart families, villages and the vast Balkan countryside.

The troubling tale is told by Heath Winslow – a cynical, yet self-deprecating, war correspondent who's seen much the same in other bizarre locations around the globe. Both characters challenge the reader with a fundamental question: Can life become richer – and people stronger – when we look beyond labels to appreciate one another for the unique individuals we really are?

The saga unfolds during a time of great turmoil. Warring factions of Serb Orthodox, Croat Christian and Bosnian Muslims accusing each other of genocide and ethnic cleansing during countless bloody flare-ups that cross-cross the region. In 1999, freelancer Heath travels back to Sarajevo – almost a decade after his first visit during the troubled times. His goal: See how people on all sides of the conflict are doing... four years after the guns supposedly went silent.

Once in town, Heath begins recalling Andro's escapades for his beer buddy, Eoghan. The bartender is enthralled by stories about the hard-charging lad who must watch in despair as his family and friends are drawn into the fray. As war breaks out, Andro asks Baba Sofija, his grandmother and the family matriarch, to make clear the madness. There are no simple answers, she explains. "It's nothing but a mishmash of glorified self-

interests,” Sofija declares. The Babich clan, like so many others, is soon being harassed, persecuted and eventually forced to flee their homeland.

The Bosnian-Serb rag-tag aggressor force is led by the diabolical Dragana Kowalchuk. From her mountain fortress high above the city of Konjic, she summons her thugs and uses tales of an ancient Kosovo battle to rally the troops. They’re soon charging like mad men into villages – raping, plundering and pillaging as they go. After the doors to a mosque are blasted and an imam shot, the carnage spills out of control.

As a result, the home of Andro’s childhood sidekick and teen heartthrob, Mara Cesarec, is attacked. Mara’s younger brother’s mortally wounded. Her father’s forced to flee. Andro must also leave – no more aware Mara’s pregnant with their child than the beasts that rape her that day. Finally – in a sadistic coup de grâce – the thugs shoot Mara’s mother. It’s a sick climax to a day of shame cast on the Cesarec family and abode.

While hold up in the family’s mountain cabin, the Babich clansmen fear militants will soon track them down. Andro's father and older brother rush off to join Croatian resistance fighters while Andro stays to protect his grandmother and two young cousins. As rebels approach, he too is forced by Sofija to flee, leaving the women behind. Forlorn and full of guilt, Andro struggles to reach his uncle’s restaurant in Mostar, then sails to sanctuary with his aunt’s family in Athens.

Meanwhile, the stoic Sofija shuttles her granddaughters back to the farm house, finds and consoles Mara, then sets off with them on a mountain trek to Sarajevo where they hope to find refuge with her son Franjo’s family.

In the rebel headquarters, Dragana goes into a rant over the inability of her troops to win a decisive battle. She even calls on the camp’s priest for guidance. It’s already apparent the conflict will be long, bloody and marginally successful.

Shortly after arriving in Greece, Andro befriends merchant mariner Jason Banks who helps secure a laborer's job for Andro on the Athens docks. He later signs on to crew a ship with Jason as his mentor. They sail to New York where Andro seeks political asylum. With Jason's help and connections, it's soon granted. Andro then meets and falls

in love with a high-maintenance, but dynamic vocalist and Broadway diva wannabe, Anita Antonucci.

Back in Belgrade, Heath attends a press briefing conducted by Adrijan Ackov, the puppet director of Serbian-run radio and TV. Their first office meeting ends in an explosive ethics argument which rages on throughout the war.

In the interim, Mara has her first encounter with CIA operative Jasna in a city park. Mara goes into training as a Gypsy fortune teller in order to spy on Dragana. Later, she meets Andro's Greek cousin Alcina with whom she has a romantic close encounter. As Heath tells Eoghan all these tales, the barkeep is challenged to keep the multitude of anecdotes untangled.

In a summer of '92 flashback, Heath recounts meeting Jason, who's being honored at an Intrepid Museum gala in New York. They hit it off and spend the night soaking up jazz sounds and the city's vibe.

Meanwhile, in Sarajevo, Baba Sofija and several others are arrested on Dragana's trumped-up charges of sedition and thrown in jail. Sofija summons her courage and begins acting as if she's under mental duress. It's all part of a clever scheme to secure her transfer to a sanatorium near home. Meanwhile, Dragana begins her spiritual sessions with Mirela the Gypsy (Mara) at her datja outside Belgrade.

Heath's aunt dies unexpectedly, leaving him a large inheritance. He returns to New York to settle accounts. Heath meets Army recruiting Sergeant Cashton Steel who introduces him to a madcap saloon called Barrymore's. Andro and Jason step into the bar shortly after Cashton's departure. He's left tickets to the Yankees/Mets game which Andro and Jason attend. Days later, Jason and Cashton reunite in Times Square while Andro takes a city bus tour to get his bearings.

While working the docks in the Borough of Queens and living above relatives in an Astoria flat, Andro's encouraged by Sergeant Steel to enlist in the Army – to become a *Green Card Soldier* – as a way to quickly earn his U.S. citizenship. His decision enrages Anita, who not only ends their love affair, but severs ties with most of their mutual friends. Upon graduation from Jump School, Andro returns to New York, working at the

Army Reserve unit's headquarters on Staten Island as a means of meeting his residency requirement.

Cashton rescues Jason's illegitimate daughter Denasha Rivera from thugs trying to attack her after a Spanish Harlem street fest. He motivates her to join the Army National Guard. Denasha and Andro eventually meet. Andro then pushes Jason to reconnect with his long-lost daughter. They soon do. Shortly thereafter, Denasha is gunned down during a bizarre drive-by shooting in front of the uptown armory where she works. At her memorial service on M.L. King, Jr. Day, Jason calls on residents to stand with him against gang violence. At the church service in Spanish Harlem, Anita vows to continue Denasha's aspiration by producing a Broadway-style show celebrating Puerto Rican folk music and dance.

Heath returns to Europe. For the next several months he files countless stories about the Balkan conflict. Cashton returns to active duty, assigned to Italy as a cavalry scout. His unit and Andro's are then sent to northern Africa as part of a peacekeeping mission. Cashton's seriously wounded during a night patrol, but Andro leads his safe rescue. As Cashton's transported to Walter Reed Medical Center, Andro returns to New York. He receives notice and takes part in a grand naturalization ceremony at Federal Hall in Lower Manhattan. He, Jason, Heath and several other friends later celebrate the joyous accomplishment at Barrymore's.

Andro and Jason visit Cashton in the Wash., D.C. hospital. Cashton says he's returning to Oklahoma at the request of tribal elders to take up the cause of wounded warriors and Native-American youth. Jason and Andro then visit the historic Old Ebbitt Grill where Andro's introduced to a U.S. AID recruiter. The next thing, Andro's a newly minted civil servant headed to Bosnia to help revive the country's news media operations.

Upon return, Andro faces the harsh reality that his family has been torn apart, friends scattered and his former homeland decimated. He identifies Serbian rebel conspirator Dragana Kowalchuk as the epicenter of this brutality. She becomes Andro's arch nemesis, against whom he's determined to seek revenge. He also dedicates himself to the implementation of social justice for those he loves.

Heath attends the peace accord signing in Paris while Dragana visits Adrijan in his Belgrade office. She tells him she's moving on to the conflict in Kosovo.

As the war ends, Andro and Mara get permission to take Baba Sofija home. Andro's Greek cousin, Alcina, arrives, moving in with Sofija and Mara. The three dynamic women develop plans to run a craft guild. Their goal: Aid war widows in regaining their self-worth while also making money for its members. Andro helps secure government financing. He also encourages Heath to write about the entrepreneurial endeavor. Subsequently, Heath and Andro pressure Adrijan to cover such renewal efforts as part of the state news media's reawakening. Confronted with equally intense pressure from Dragana, Adrijan succumbs to a massive heart attack during a train ride to Belgrade.

Andro presents Mara a condescending, farewell letter from her devout Muslim father. Outraged, she seeks solace by agreeing to be part of a TV series documenting how women were abused during the war. Mara then hikes to Sarajevo in an effort to clear her mind. Along the way, she has a traumatic reencounter with the man who raped her years earlier. They struggle on a suspension bridge; he falls to his death. Traumatized beyond reason, Mara swipes a handgun and later commits suicide in the park.

Soon after the tragic bridge incident, Heath attends a Babich clan reunion at the family farm house. Wine flows and stories of passion, anger, violence, awakening and forgiveness are told. Heath rededicates himself to writing these tales upon his return to New York.

Throughout this tumultuous journey, Andro – impacted by so many of the people he encounters – evolves into a genuine Renaissance man. Even though the Balkan countryside has stayed much the same during this tragic time, our hero is changed forever. Bosnia has – in a strange way – become a better place, in part, because it now has this reluctant champion back on its soil. Almost mystically, this passage has crowned Andro the master of two worlds – the mundane and the heroic.

His return, coupled with this realization, is the achievement of Andro's adult quest. It's what our hero went on his journey to find in the first place. All the steps and stops along the way served to prepare and purify him for this dynamic aspect of his life.

Does this mean Andro can finally achieve some sort of balance between the material and spiritual world that surrounds him? Can he now realize the whole of these experiences will liberate him from his fear of failure? Preliminary indicators show the answers to be yes. And as the reader will also come to realize, our hero – in the end – is able to better experience and appreciate living in the moment, while making real contributions to the radically changed world now surrounding him.

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