Archangel Gabriel's Namesake and Tyrannicide

The only picture we have of the guy makes him look like a criminal. His nose seems overlarge, as if swollen, as if he might have been beaten. If it weren’t for the thin moustache, he’d pass for a boy, a kid, someone more than slightly afraid of whoever held the camera. His hair is tousled, as if he’d not slept.

He doesn’t look like a criminal, although the picture itself looks like a mug shot, which it might have been.

He was one of his parents’ nine children, six of whom died in infancy, a tragic toll that suggests his family’s poverty. He was—they were—very poor, so poor, in fact, that the priest who baptized him suggested he be named after the angel Gabriel, which just might, the priest said, give him a leg up on mortality. This Gabriel’s life was, in no sense, angelic.

His father was a Christian, a farmer who worked a couple acres of land and paid over a third of whatever income he could take from that ground to a Muslim landowner. That fact may be important in understanding the kid in the picture, his son, as the fact that his father suffered more than his share of ridicule for his Christian beliefs.

Anyway, this kid, was smart, a whipper-snapper, even though the old man didn’t want him to go off to school. He didn’t, until he was nine. At first, he plodded along, but once he caught on to reading, he became the apple of his teacher’s eye, so proficient that history records remarkable success. His teacher gave him a collection of his region’s most famous and epic poetry, a kind of present, a prize.

An older brother took him to the city, where he intended to go to military school. He was only 13. But plans changed because his brother didn’t want him in training to kill his own people someday. For three years the young Gabriel went to tech school until he transferred to a more basic academic institution.

Where he got in trouble. Where politics bowled over any other interests. Gabriel was convinced that people like his parents were suffering under the burden of tyranny. He was a kid, smart, and radicalized—so radicalized, in fact, that he was booted from school after he threatened his classmates with his fists if they didn’t, as he did, join the rebel ranks.

He was only 18, so he went home to his native land and kissed the ground when he crossed the line, then joined real rebel forces fighting the tyrants. Or tried. Twice, those in charge told him he was too small, too weak to be of any good.

On the 28th of June, 1914, near a café on Franz Joseph Street in Sarajevo, young Gabriel, a kid named after an angel, was armed with an FN Model 1910 semi-automatic pistol. He and a half-dozen others were planning what they thought of as tyrannicide, the assassination of the Archduke of Austria.
Plans had been made for murder, but they’d been foiled by missteps and mishaps, so Gabriel had to have been surprised when suddenly, right before his eyes, the Archduke’s car rolled up beside him, stopped, and attempted to turn around. The driver had rolled right into his assassin’s sights. Not only that, but the engine stalled.

The kid named after an angel realized this was his chance. He walked up and shot just twice, killing both the Archduke and his wife. Tyrannicide.

His name was Gavrilo Princip, and what he did that day, unbeknownst to him, was cast the entire world into World War I.

Something of a chance meeting between an Archduke and his wife and a kid named after an angel, a kid with a gun on Franz Joseph Street in Sarajevo, started a bloody conflict that would conclude with 41 million casualties, 23 million wounded and 17 million—including seven million civilians—dead.

A hundred years ago, men lined up right here in Siouxland, anxious to go to war. In France, the trenches already overflowed with horror. It would be the war, people said, to end all wars.

And it started with tyrannicide, and a poor Christian kid named after an angel.