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# The Siege of Sarajevo

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*a cura di*

## *Women in Black – Belgrade*

In questo numero di DEP, dedicato alla violenza bellica sulle popolazioni civili, non poteva mancare una riflessione sulle guerre che negli anni '90 hanno insanguinato la regione dei Balcani. Pertanto anticipiamo qui una sezione del volume *Women's side of war*, pubblicato in traduzione inglese nel 2008, a cura dell'associazione *Women in Black*, di Belgrado.

Il libro, edito per la prima volta nel 2007 in lingua serbo-croata, con il titolo *Ženska strana rata*, offre una raccolta di testimonianze femminili sui conflitti balcanici. Lina Vušković, nell'introduzione (che riportiamo in traduzione italiana), illustra i motivi che hanno spinto l'associazione a dare voce alle donne coinvolte negli episodi bellici. È necessario, per Vuskovic, che le donne raccontino la loro versione del conflitto,

Thereby also continuing to add to a women's history which is still in significant contrast to the other: an undoubtedly men's-only history, dry and mercilessly impersonal, not allowing any individual voice to break through and attain its legitimate place<sup>1</sup>.

Come osserva Staša Zajović nel suo contributo introduttivo (riproposto qui in traduzione italiana), le esperienze femminili della guerra sono vissute e quindi narrate con particolare intensità, in una sintonia tra corpo e mente:

That which I can tell you passed through my body. This thought is corporal. Not only because for five years exhibiting my body in Belgrade's main square, together with friends, we have performed a visible resistance to the Serbian regime and war. Because I am a witness to the truth of Virginia Woolf: "women reflect through the experience of their own bodies"<sup>2</sup>.

Nei prossimi numeri di DEP dedicheremo ampio spazio alla pubblicazione ed alle sue autrici, proponendo un percorso tematico attraverso le numerose sezioni del volume. La parte che invece anticipiamo a continuazione è dedicata all'assedio della città di Sarajevo e si struttura in tre parti.

La prima è una raccolta di circa venti testimonianze, in cui alcuni cittadini raccontano la loro vita quotidiana sotto il fuoco dei cecchini. Le narrazioni sono particolarmente interessanti, vivide: i protagonisti, infatti, non si piegano alla violenza del conflitto, ma cercano modi innovativi di sopravvivere e di resistere, anche da un punto di vista psicologico. Scopriamo con loro l'importanza di

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<sup>1</sup> Lina Vuskovic, *A Letter (In Lieu of an Introduction)*, in *Women's Side of War*, a cura di *Women in Black-Belgrade*, 2008, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Staša Zajović, *In My Own Name*, in *Women's Side of War*, a cura di *Women in Black-Belgrade*, 2008, p. 11.

impegnarsi in attività pratiche per tenere occupata la mente, come trovare nuovi combustibili da bruciare per scaldarsi o piantare ortaggi nei balconi e nelle aiuole per potersene cibare. C'è chi scrive un diario per sfogare le proprie emozioni, chi ascolta musica, chi legge libri di letteratura per ridere delle proprie miserie quotidiane. La vita a Sarajevo continua, nonostante le difficoltà: una coppia si sposa, con abiti prestati dagli amici; una donna partorisce in ospedale, sotto i bombardamenti; una compagnia di attori continua a recitare a teatro, per offrire occasioni di svago ai cittadini. In una situazione di caos, nasce il bisogno di aggrapparsi a oggetti che diventano simboli di vita e di continuità: un gruppo di condomini si mobilita per impedire che la grande betulla del proprio cortile venga tagliata per fare legna; una donna si espone al tiro dei cecchini solo per cogliere alcune rose che, nel grigiore della città assediata, sono riuscite a fiorire.

La seconda parte della sezione propone alcune lettere scritte dagli abitanti della città ad amici e parenti lontani. Più della carenza di cibo, riscaldamento e acqua, infatti, ciò che manca loro, come notano, è poter essere vicino ai propri cari. In particolare risaltano le lettere di una donna, Inja, che racconta con umorismo la propria vita quotidiana ed i suoi piccoli riti: l'apertura dei pacchi di generi alimentari, a cui assiste tutta la famiglia; le passeggiate nel parco del centro di Sarajevo, l'unico rimasto intatto; la lotta domestica con topi e scarafaggi; i viaggi in bici per procurarsi scorte d'acqua alla fontana pubblica.

La terza parte riporta due testimonianze incentrate sul tema della nazionalità: una madre, che aveva sempre pensato a sé stessa come "jugoslava", racconta al figlio di essere musulmana, spiegandogli che non si tratta di un popolo inferiore agli altri. Una pianista comunica le emozioni per quanto accade alla sua città natale componendo musica, che suona durante i concerti.

Grazie alle diverse testimonianze proposte, *The Siege of Sarajevo* offre un ricco quadro della vita nella capitale durante la guerra, negli anni dal '92 al '96; una città viva, i cui abitanti soffrono ogni giorno di enormi privazioni, ma sanno anche come resistere alle difficoltà e sorridere di se stessi. Ringraziamo l'associazione "Donne in nero" di Padova per averci segnalato il volume e le curatrici dello stesso per averci dato il permesso pubblicare la sezione dedicata a Sarajevo e di tradurre le parti introduttive (pp. 9-13; 109-142). Presentazione e traduzioni dall'inglese sono di Marta Dalla Pozza<sup>3</sup>.

### **Una lettera (Al posto di un'introduzione)**

Care donne,

Questa lettera, la mia forma di comunicazione preferita, è rivolta in particolare ad ognuna di voi; a tutte quelle che scrissero o parlarono mentre altri registravano. La dedico anche a tutti coloro che leggeranno questo volume. Proprio come,

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<sup>3</sup> La traduzione dal serbo in inglese della *Lettera* è di Mirka Janković; quella del discorso di Staša Zajović è di Stanislava Lazarević.

mentre leggevo, vidi nella mia mente coloro le cui storie sono raccolte qui, allo stesso tempo vedo tutti quelli che le leggeranno.

La parola delle donne è stata usata spesso e frequentemente abusata, distorta e male interpretata. Da una parte, le donne furono le vittime reali di una specifica strategia di guerra, dall'altra, questa vittimizzazione venne spesso usata come un "caso": un'arma della propaganda bellica, che rese le donne vittime una seconda volta. Quelli che ascoltarono attentamente ciò che le donne avevano da dire, riportando con fedeltà le loro parole e promuovendole furono, comunque, pochi e lontani tra loro. Mi sembrava importante ottenere queste testimonianze: riunirle in un unico luogo, per dar loro nuova forza. Non mi sarei avventurata in ciò, se non mi fossi resa conto che le donne volevano sentire queste parole; che le ritenevano importanti, e che questa fame di conoscere e scambiare esperienze di guerra non ha mai fine. Concepisco questo libro come un incentivo per continuare a mettere insieme le vostre esperienze personali (nei modi che ritenete migliori). Continuando così ad accrescere una storia delle donne che è ancora in forte contrasto rispetto all'altra: una storia indubitabilmente per soli uomini, arida e spietatamente impersonale, che non permette a nessuna voce individuale di aprirsi un varco ed ottenere il posto che le spetta.

Dopo tutti questi anni, forse dovremmo dare importanza a tutto ciò che abbiamo dovuto affrontare. Dovremmo dare importanza all'enorme sforzo che abbiamo compiuto. Ciò ci permetterà di capire quanto forti siamo state e renderà possibile riconoscere la nostra vera forza, ricordandoci tutte le tragedie, le prove e le sofferenze che abbiamo superato. Questo è il proposito del libro: vedere quanto siano state importanti per noi le amicizie femminili, quanto ci aiutammo – o avremmo dovuto aiutarci – l'una con l'altra; renderci capaci di contare sulle nostre forze, come cittadini responsabili; rifiutare di essere sempre considerate delle vittime; rifiutare l'assegnazione di un ruolo insignificante ogni volta che vengono prese delle decisioni. E ancora, siamo messe di fronte alle nostre enormi aspettative quando di tratta di implementare decisioni non nostre e spesso pericolose per noi. Dobbiamo riesaminare le tradizioni che abbiamo trasmesso e mantenuto, e dobbiamo capire se quelle sono i nostri veri valori. Donne, a prescindere dalla nostra naturale conflittualità, dobbiamo stabilire nuovi valori di cooperazione e pace che significheranno – soprattutto – vivere senza paura.

Ho partecipato a numerosi convegni femminili e ho visto quanto importante sia per le donne parlare di ciò che è accaduto loro durante le guerre e, allo stesso tempo, ascoltare quello che è successo ad altri. Circondate da donne pronte ad ascoltarle attentamente, trovano il coraggio di parlare di argomenti dei quali avevano taciuto fino a quel momento. Erano rimaste in silenzio perchè non c'era stato nessuno desideroso di ascoltare le loro storie, o perchè era troppo doloroso per loro, o perchè ne temevano le conseguenze. Ma, durante quegli incontri, ogni storia era l'inizio di un'altra. Imparai ciò che non dovrebbe essere letto da nessuna parte, che non concorda con la "versione ufficiale". Fu dato peso alla conoscenza, le domande e le verifiche vennero riaperte, le opinioni cambiarono... Fu stabilita la responsabilità altrui e le responsabilità civili di ognuno. Fu creato un supporto.

Sono sicura che in questo libro troverete alcune risposte e forse imparerete anche qualcosa di nuovo. Soprattutto, spero troverete e sentirete compassione per

L'ALTRA DONNA – forse semplicemente riconoscendo la vostra personale esperienza nella sua. L'esperienza è sempre unica e perciò incomparabile. Ogni testimonianza di quest'antologia è personale, e una collezione di tali esperienze personali assume la forza dell'universale.

Il nostro potere può essere grande se riuniamo le nostre modeste forze. Attraverso uno sforzo unitario, possiamo rendere visibile quest'invisibile esperienza femminile della guerra. Nessuno sforzo è inutile se la nostra forte voce contro la guerra potrà vincere e prevenire guerre future.

Vostra Lina

Questo libro, un'antologia di testimonianze femminili sulle guerre condotte sul suolo dell'ex Jugoslavia dal 1991 al 1999, è il prodotto di un anno di ricerca in cooperazione con molte organizzazioni di donne, organizzazioni che si occupano di diritti umani, che lavorano sui temi del passato e della riconciliazione, e donne singole che diedero coraggiosamente voce alle loro esperienze, le registrarono e le promossero. Abbiamo compiuto la nostra selezione tra le fonti a nostra disposizione. Le fonti disponibili sono riportate nella bibliografia. Speriamo che questo libro non rimanga unico nel suo genere e che incoraggi ulteriori ricerche e libri.

Ad eccezione di alcuni inevitabili riduzioni indicate con il simbolo (...), abbiamo riprodotto tutti i testi fedelmente.

Condividete i vostri pensieri.

### **Letter, Happy New Year**

Sarajevo, 16 January '96

Dear women of Belgrade,

I have read your letter in which you say how sorry you are for us.

You sympathize with our pain, sorrow and grief, and I thank you for that. I am an old woman and I've been through a lot of hardship, but anyway, I am glad there are still some good people around. My dear women of Belgrade, Sarajevo is a sacred city. Come over and make a wish and all of them will come true.

Angels fly above Sarajevo and they will bring joy to everybody, and the fulfilment of their wishes.

They brought us courage.

With kindest regards

Mubera

## Nel mio nome

**Staša Zajović**

Discorso tenuto all'incontro *Women and the Politics of Peace*,  
Zagabria – Ottobre 1996

*(Women for Peace, 1997)*

Negli anni scorsi abbiamo imparato ad “esibirci” in diverse grandi città: Roma, Madrid, Berlino, New York... Abbiamo imparato a rilasciare dichiarazioni ai cosiddetti mass-media; abbiamo imparato ad ampliare la rete della controinformazione tra i media alternativi in Italia, Germania, Spagna; abbiamo imparato a tenere “discorsi” ad incontri internazionali dove le persone appena ci davano ascolto, o lo facevano soltanto per alleggerire le loro coscienze.

Qui, di fronte a voi, non posso “esibirmi”, “rilasciare una dichiarazione” o pronunciare un discorso. Come avevamo concordato, a questa riunione plenaria di donne dovrei “esibire” cos’abbiamo fatto nella fredda, glaciale Serbia in questi ultimi cinque anni. Volevo farlo, ma non ci riesco. Ho pensato, dopotutto, che ognuno di noi avesse seguito il lavoro dell’altro per tutti questi anni. Ma non so quanto siamo state capaci, invece, di seguire il viaggio interiore di ciascuna.

Nonostante il mio desiderio, nonostante il profondo rispetto per questo luogo e il tema, qui di fronte a voi non posso leggere il testo che queste occasioni richiedono. Qui di fronte a voi desidero rilasciare una dichiarazione di tenerezza e amore. Non so come farlo, tranne che chiedere consiglio alle mie amiche e compagne di viaggio durante le notti nella fredda, glaciale Serbia.

Soprattutto a Marina (Cvetajeva) e Ana (Ahmatova) e Cassandra. Lasciate che vi racconti cosa Sonječka, “piangendo a calde lacrime” disse a Marina, nell’inverno 1918/19, nella gelida Russia: “So che in altre città... Solo tu, Marina, non sei in altre città, ma loro...”. Perché non ci sono Nela, Biljana, Neva, Djurdja, mie amiche prima della guerra, in altre città. Perché non c’è Mirjana in altre città. Volevo vederla e farle vedere che noi “donne del Paese aggressore non abbiamo cambiato la nostra relazione”. Volevo, ma non posso. Perché Mirjana non è più a Zagabria o in altre città. In altre città non ci sono più Rada, Sandra, Slavica, Tanja... mie amiche “di guerra”. Vivono a Zagabria. E amo queste altre città perché lì vi sono altre persone che amo. “Ma loro...” – gli stupratori, i buoni a nulla, i guerrieri, gli assassini-patrioti, loro sono dappertutto, anche se soprattutto a Belgrado. Non perché Belgrado sia una città grande, piuttosto perché il grande male si è originato a Belgrado, perché la guerra è iniziata a Belgrado.

Ciò che posso raccontarvi è passato attraverso il mio corpo. Questo pensiero è fisico, corporale. Non solo perché per cinque anni, esibendo il mio corpo con altri amici nella piazza principale di Belgrado, abbiamo messo in scena una resistenza visibile al regime serbo e alla guerra. Piuttosto perché sono testimone della verità di Virginia Woolf: “le donne riflettono tramite l’esperienza dei loro stessi corpi” o

perchè Penelope, per bocca di Adriana Cavarero, ha lasciato come giuramento: “Mentre le filosofie separano, tagliano, Penelope non lo fa, si limita a intrecciare e cucire ciò che le filosofie hanno tagliato, separato (lo spirito dal corpo)”.

### **Il culto degli incontri**

“Quando andrò a Zagabria per la prima volta, le vedrò tutte di nuovo. Ancora”, dissi molto tempo fa ad Ana A., amica profonda, il mio rifugio spirituale da quando un’epoca glaciale era ritornata in questo luogo. Ma Ana A. incontrava raramente Marina C. anche se la avvisava: “Ti vedo, ti sento, ti percepisco...” E io sentivo e percepivo voi. Per tutta la Spagna ho portato con me la poesia “sensitiva” di Biljana, mandata ai gruppi femministi da Belgrado:

“When we think of one another  
Miles away from  
together  
We are not alone  
Imagine  
Outside the lines”.

Ho tradotto la poesia in spagnolo. Le mie amiche antimilitariste, Concha, Yolanda, Almudena portano le esibizioni delle “Donne in Nero” in giro per la Spagna, insieme alla mia traduzione della poesia di Biljana; il mio gentile amico Michele, un poeta di Madrid, ne “ha rifinito lo stile”. Ho portato dentro me stessa le reti di tenerezza e devozione sororale di Nela. Ho ricordato il provocante rifiuto della logica di classificazione espresso da Djurdja (“Non ci sono Serbi, Croati; c’è Staša di Belgrado, Biljana di Pančevo, le donne sono ciò che sono, e non appartengono ad una identità nazionale), ogni volta che qualcuno mi importunava chiedendomi in modo aggressivo e scortese: “E tu chi sei: serba, croata o...?”. Sono ciò che scelgo di essere. Sono la mia personale creazione, come direbbe Brodsky.

### **Non facciamoci sconfiggere da noi stessi**

Mentre scrivo questo, nella notte tra il 22 e il 23 aprile 1996, non sappiamo ancora se ci concederanno un visto. Una tattica per esaurirci. Pensano che ci stancheremo. Loro “tracciano linee e noi le oltrepassiamo”. Li conosciamo bene. Ho sentito per la prima volta sul mio corpo ciò che ci consigliava Cassandra: “Non fatevi sconfiggere da voi stessi” e noi più tardi abbiamo aggiunto “nè dagli altri”, trasformandolo in un principio politico: la disobbedienza ai “propri” governi e stati è infatti una forma di solidarietà tra donne.

Noi e loro – è un abisso che separa me da loro, è una “differenza” che crea un nodo nel mio stomaco. E non posso mantenere una promessa fatta ad Ana A., cioè che non voglio “vendetta” o sentire “amarezza”. E tu, Ana, ti sei chiesta quando “le stelle della morte” stavano sopra di noi “quando sarebbe avvenuta la punizione”? E mi chiedo, “quando avverrà la punizione” per i dispensatori di morte, chi, “con stivali coperti di sangue e rumorosi furgoni della polizia”, vive nel mio stesso

Paese? E stasera mi chiedo “quando avverrà la punizione”, forse per ragioni egoistiche Voglio vedervi tutti a Zagabira. E il personale è politico. E il personale è internazionale.

### **In un'altra lingua il dolore diminuisce...**

Non vi ho scritto così spesso come sentivo che avrei dovuto e voluto. Scrivevo e ricevevo soprattutto lettere in un'altra lingua (Sono altre lingue queste, provenienti da case spaziose del Mediterraneo, verso cui sento un legame spirituale ed emotivo?).

Testimoniavo il mio turbamento interiore in un'altra lingua, come Cassandra: “Voglio essere una testimone, non importa se nessuna persona vivente cercherà la mia testimonianza”. Espressa in un'altra lingua la disperazione mi sembrava meno orribile. In un'altra lingua condividevo il dolore con altri, perchè spesso le cause di dolore e disperazione di chi mi stava intorno erano molto più grandi e giustificate delle mie. Mi vergognavo di lamentarmi. In un'altra lingua Ana A. faceva scaturire “nera vergogna dal mio cuore”. Ma la esprimevo nella mia lingua, gridando nelle strade “Belgrado, svegliati! Belgrado, vergognati!”, come con Biljana Jovanović nel giugno 1992, quando salimmo su quel camion traballante e ci prendemmo gioco della polizia – e quello è il mio grido pubblico, quella è la mia scelta politica. E ora Ana A. continua a far sgorgare “nera vergogna dal mio cuore”.

Lo so, responsabilità e non colpa. E forse accuso persone innocenti perchè “tutto è diventato complicato in questo Paese”, uno non sa chi è un mostro e chi invece una persona. L'era glaciale continua, perchè molte “amicizie complicate” per me non sono ancora scongelate, perchè cammino per le strade o prendo l'autobus a Belgrado e mi chiedo: “Questa persona era a Vukovar? Quest'altra ha stuprato in Bosnia? Questa ancora ha terrorizzato e ucciso in Kosovo? Questa prendeva di mira Sarajevo da Pale?”

Michelle mi scriveva poesie di conforto nella sua lingua; nella sua lingua, il mio caro amico Alex (Langer) condivideva la mia/nostra speranza. E poi lo sconforto degli altri suscitò...un'impotenza insormontabile in Alex. Il suo suicidio è stato proprio “la sua scelta di solitudine definitiva”. Per mesi la scelta di Alex mi ha tormentato enormemente. E scrivevo di questo nella sua lingua. Nella nostra lingua, la lingua delle nostre madri, desidero condividere con voi tenerezza, dolore e speranza.

E desidero anche condividere le reti di disobbedienza a tutti i militaristi: padri delle nazioni, custodi di tradizioni, morali e nazioni, custodi di stati e confini. Disobbediamo a tutte le donne militariste, di ogni colore e nazione.

Amicizia e tenerezza ci salveranno da loro.

## **The Siege of Sarajevo March 1992 - March 1996**

### **Sniper Shoots at Crowd (Radmila Stojadinović, Translator)**

1992, April

On that day, the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 1992, I started off with the other citizens of Sarajevo who were in front of the National Parliament. A group of one hundred people at the most, I think, started walking towards the Vrbanja Bridge. And we got to the bridge; none of us had so much as a rock in our pockets, not to mention any kind of weapon. We wanted to cross the bridge, however, on the other side they were pointing guns at us by the Chimneysweeps building and by that gas station there, just across the Vrbanja Bridge. I had almost crossed the bridge, but they didn't, at that moment they were not shooting. One woman simply provoked them, opened up her coat and said, "Come on, shoot". I was out for a walk; I was dressed, you know, in my Sunday clothes. I had a navy-blue suit, glasses, a handbag, and high heels. In one instant over the barrier on the side of the bridge, I saw a group of people who were coming closer, who had already crossed the Brotherhood and Unity Bridge. I waved to them to come over to where we were. In that second, Serbs wearing masks started shooting. I heard some people screaming. And one man who was standing in front of me was staggering. I thought to myself, "Look, some of these people are drunk. However, the man fell; someone pulled him by his legs and behind him was a trail of blood. I was totally confused. Then I heard people saying, "Lie down, get down on the ground". I looked around and everybody was lying on the ground. I was the only one standing on the bridge. And I was so confused that I lay down on my back. After a while someone started shouting, "Retreat, retreat!" And again I looked around, and everybody else was running back over the bridge. I was almost the only person left in the middle of the bridge. Then I ran back, too. And right then I was slightly wounded in the back.

### **Advice for Survival, Semsma Mehmedović, Telecommunications Engineer**

1992, October

Everything that could be burned was put in our oven. At the beginning I had some wood to make fire. My family had a few planks. But this reserve went very fast and after that, I was forced to use my Imagination to solve this problem. I personally chopped wood; I learned how to do it. I would make briquettes out of coal dust. We all had our own techniques. We had to find a way to prepare wood so that it could be burned. It is hard to remember everything those fires were made from. We used all kinds of things that were not important to us. Books, for example. Plastic bottles and everything else made from plastic. Plastic was very good to make fire but it smelled badly. We burned pieces of carpet, or sheets. Some



people had to burn their wooden floors and furniture. Thank God, I was not as desperate. But once I burned a whole set of volumes by Sholokhov, I still remember, it was “The Quiet Don”. Nevertheless, whatever was burned, clothes or something else, sooner or later, it was gone. And we had to find something new. It was 95 and we had to organize heating during the whole summer, but we did not have anything to make fires with. It came to my mind that I could make fire from little branches. They were tiny, thin and small but I made little bundles wrapped together with old socks. I guess it was my original invention. But the result wasn’t great. It took a lot of work to make such a bundle and it would burn up in a second. I made lots of those bundles with my son. That effort was not only useful for heating but also it was healthy for my mind. Because when I was doing something useful, I was alright, I felt O.K. I believe that this manual work saved my sanity.

### **The Birch Spared from Destruction Zdravka Gutić**

1992, October

The birch tree had been planted 15 years ago, when we moved in. It was a small tree that we were all taking care of, as if it were a child. The birch tree had grown up to the sixth floor. The only nice thing was that we could look through the window and see the birch tree that gave us shade, and simply the leaves flickering meant something. It meant that there was a kind of life in the yard. Then one evening, when it was unusually quiet and we were just expecting the sound of shells or anti-aircraft guns or machine guns or whatnot, we heard the sound of a chain saw. And that was a sign that somebody had come to cut down our birch tree. Whether to burn it or to sell it, we knew that nobody would really get warm from it. It wasn’t much of a tree for heating. But for us, it was a symbol of life in that yard. We all ran out. I even took my husband’s pistol. I was prepared to shoot anybody who would cut down that tree of mine. And then we were even, I wasn’t alone. All the neighbours came out. Some with the Molotov cocktails that we had prepared in case the chetniks got to our building, so that we could at least defend our building by throwing those cocktails. We all got out, everybody who had something; there were guys who had returned from the front. One had a bomb; another, a pistol; another a cocktail. And the two young men who had come to cut down that birch tree got very scared, because they realized that we were defending a birch tree as if fighting a whole company of enemy troops.

### **Trščanska Street, Amina Begović, Actress**

1993, January

The 4<sup>th</sup> of January was important for me. It was one of those days when one says: “From now on, I will celebrate my second birth”. “I found myself right in the middle of that Trščanska Street, because I was crossing to the other side. I had to go to the *Unis* building – to the Children’s Embassy. And because it was foggy, I thought they wouldn’t see me on the street. And so I slowly went across and – what

happened? They started to shoot. And, of course, I didn't see them, they saw me. I hear shots and I see something ricocheting off the ground. And now, those are the things one experiences only in dreams. I suppose all of you have had that something when one dreams that one is running, but cannot move ones legs. They are terribly heavy. This happens in dreams and it used to happen to me often when I was little, much more often. But it happens in life, too. Suddenly you find yourself stuck in the middle of the street. You are aware of what that street is and suddenly somebody shoots and you cannot move. And this is it – just for one moment – and then you move and go. I mean, on the whole, throughout the war, people did not go into Tršćanska Street because they knew what it was. I also knew what it was. But nevertheless, there were several reasons why I went into that street. Because there was a system of getting out through the side door. We all went out through some side door. Fortunately we had an entrance into a yard and one could go through that yard. But those are old yards, with soil on the ground, and when it rained it was muddy. I clean my shoes and have to go out, have to do a performance or have to appear at a book promotion, and it is important to dress up, to look nice, we all wanted to look nice. So I clean my shoes and in Gods name, how am I to walk through that yard when it's muddy? Who cares that a sniper is shooting on the street? He won't hit me and I won't make my shoes dirty. And there was another reason. In my yard there were two dogs, the neighbour's dogs. And they let them run around. However, I'm terribly afraid of dogs, ever since I can remember, I've been terribly afraid of dogs. But ever since I can remember, I haven't been afraid of snipers because I didn't know what they were. This means that I don't go into the yard if Chichi and Riki are in the yard because I'm terribly afraid of dogs. And the sniper won't hit me, so I can go into Tršćanska Street.

### **How to Cross the Runway, Nermina Kapić, Flower Shop Owner**

1993, January

Moonlight; for days I couldn't sleep thinking how I couldn't get across the airport runway. I came to the runway on March 28, 1993 and I tried to cross, but no success. The first night there were 11 of us with children and we all went together, but we had no idea what the runway was like and that we wouldn't be able to cross. I tried the same night, but no success. The UNPROFOR brought me back. A soldier who crossed the runway several times came and told me; he saw I couldn't cross and he said: "Let's try together". And he took my child, who was 16 months old and told me: "Run after me". I went and took my sisters daughter who was 13 at the time with me. The soldier crossed; we were taken back by the UNPROFOR, so we stayed. They put us into a personnel carrier and took us to Kotorac. Then when I got back from Kotorac to the crossing from where we had tried to get across, he came back and said that he had given my child to a woman with a child. I didn't understand anything, I didn't know – only that night my sister-in-law had crossed. So I asked: to whom, how, what? He says: "I gave it to the woman with a child". I tried again that night; the UNPROFOR took us back again, and so again another three, four times that night, but no success. So we went back to the Colony,

now I don't know where my child is. The phones don't work – only one, actually, from Hrasnica, – but there was no chance, we would sooner reach some other city than Sarajevo. And then my husband managed to tell me on the radio that the child was safe, although the child didn't recognize his father. The little one had left, then come back – he had no idea who his father was. So we stayed that night in Hrasnica. We didn't sleep, we were just sitting there. So then, again, at some time in the night (it was two in the morning), we started from the Colony towards Butmir on foot, slowly, and there was moonlight again. We said, "We can't get across", because this is the worst: the moonlight is shining upon the whole runway, so that there was no chance. We tried again that night once, twice, three, four times, without success. We returned to the Colony again, and then I crossed the third night – that is, my husband sent a guy who was in the Army, who knew the runway by heart as they say, and then I went – that night he took me across, with my sister's daughter again. He literally dragged me, because I couldn't; I took off my coat, I took off everything: my shirt, so that it got easier, so that I could run. When I had crossed halfway, there were women sitting there lighting a cigarette. I couldn't understand what they were doing in the middle of the runway. "Do people get killed here?" I asked and then continued, "In what direction are you going to Sarajevo or Hrasnica?" They said Hrasnica. And then I rested for a while; I ran to a trench, then waited again, because it was the worst there – I mean the machine-gun shooting. So I rested there for about five or six minutes while the guy took my sister's daughter across, then me, then he said: "How much strength have you got now?" to run to the nearest buildings. And so I came to Sarajevo.

### **Water Line Massacre at the Brewery, Maja Tulić, citizen**

1993, January

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of January, my friend and I were on our way to the Brewery, just like every, any other day, to get water for the family. It was a very beautiful day and clear, and when we were half of the way there, she asked me, "Why didn't you put on your sunglasses? They look so good on you". When we reached the Old City Outpatient Department, I looked towards Trebević<sup>4</sup>, because there was an opening between the houses through which I could see all the way to Trebević. And I thought to myself, "If it's so clear that I can see every fir tree on the mountain, they can see me, too". We came to the first public fountain, which was about fifteen or twenty meters from the fountain at which six or seven other residents had been killed that day. It was my turn, and I had just put my 20-litre canister under the running water, when I heard a whizzing sound and I saw that shell; it was going down the street like a car, down that narrow, steep, narrow street. It occurred to me that I should lie down, crouch, or something. But I didn't manage to do anything. The shell hit a building. People fell to the ground. Everyone automatically started running into the large building of the Outpatient

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<sup>4</sup> One of the hills overlooking Sarajevo.

Department, which was concrete. Only I separated from them and ran to a traditional Bosnian house whose door was closed and locked. I banged and banged so hard on the door, until an old woman opened the door and led me to her storeroom, where she and her grandchild had taken cover. Because her son was on the lines at the moment and her daughter-in-law was at work, she sat in that storeroom with her grandson. And so I had been sitting with them in that storeroom for another 15-20 minutes when another shell fell from somewhere near by. I heard my friend calling me: "Maja, where are you?" But I just yelled back at her, (her name is also Maja) from that courtyard: "Maja, where are you?" When I went outside – how steep that street was – it was icy; water was running down it, washing the blood down with it. An ambulance had arrived already, and they were taking away the dead and the wounded. I knew that I mustn't go back for my cart and water canister. My friend did it for me. I just ran, ran with no reason. The shells had fallen, and there was no more reason to run, that was it. I ran home and into my apartment, I just ran in and for four months after that I never went outside. Not even out on the sidewalk in front of my own house. During those months I often dreamt of hearing that sound and seeing the shell, but in different locations in Sarajevo. I even dreamt once that I was driving my husband and children from the department store towards our home, because back then Marshal Tito Street used to be a two-way street, and then that same sound and that same shell came and slammed into the Old Town. And it has happened to me so many times, and for such a long time since that event, this dream has recurred with that sound. Those people, that blood, that street. And to this day, I still haven't walked down that street a single time.

**Sarajevans Write Diaries, Semsa Mehmedović,** Telecommunications Engineer

1993, May

I wrote a diary. I am one of those people who wrote a diary. Since the first day, when we left Dobrinja where the chetniks drove us out, I started to write a diary. I cannot explain why I was doing it, but it was like some kind of ultimate need: I had to write. It was a space where I was trying to make it easy for myself, where I expressed my feelings. It was very hard for me, but not harder than it was for the others. My husband fought in the war, and he kept coming and going back. Every time he left, there was a terrible emptiness that had to find its place on the paper. When I remember certain situations, I feel that I'm about to start to cry. I wrote my diary until one day in 1996. It was the beginning of 1996. And I gave birth to our daughter. I had waited for that moment for seven years. After we had a son, that miracle took place during the war. People were in despair, there was shooting all over the place, and I was the happiest person in the world. At the same time my husband got out of the army after four years of trenches, mud, and fear. My mother came back from Germany after three years and seven months. Until that day I was writing my diary every day, but then I had to destroy that witness. I wanted to forget everything and put it behind me, because the most beautiful things were

happening to me. We had no place to live, we were without material things, but I gave birth to my daughter and that was the most beautiful thing at that moment. I burned my diary. I wanted that, when the ship sank, the water would cover it and that no marks would be left on our souls. We will keep it in our memory, but we have to live on.

**Appeal to the Artists of the World, Iasna Diklić, Actress**

1993, May

We succeeded in that we were organized and in that the actors were able to come to the theatre between the shells and sniper fire. There weren't many of us. We made a point of going every day. I was one of those who went with great yearning, with great need, and with a certain amount of stubbornness. You know, I think that those people up in the mountains had an idea: a way in which they wanted to break that – and us – by taking away our human dignity. Theatre workers were fighting that very battle: the battle for human dignity. If we had chosen to not perform as a means of resistance, I believe that human dignity would have been in greater danger. We did the right thing; there was an oasis of illusion in the theatre, the illusion that normal life exists. I say illusion because it lasted for two hours.

**Advice for Survival, Jana Grebo, Student**

1993, July

I listened to music, rock. Took down the words and then sang them hundreds of times. That's how the days went by. When things got a bit quieter, I went out. But I didn't feel safe even then. But then you think again "it won't happen to me" and so you behave normally. Then, when it happened to someone I knew, then I'd begin to worry about myself and all those I love. So you start going to the cellar, then out again and so on. Then you think "it'll end and then I'll have something to talk about". But that fear of death that I tried so hard to hide could be seen. People who know me noticed it. But it was just that whatever was happening – that shooting and war – I was aware of it, but I tried, in every way I could, to not show it. Because the way I behaved affected my surroundings and my family. When something really terrible happened to someone, then I'd simply try to forget it, to go on. But somewhere subconsciously I was thinking about it. But I just had to try and go on.

**Hunger in Sarajevo, Minka Muftić, Actress**

1993, July

We went to find the costumes because we couldn't afford to make new ones. I picked one costume out from the wardrobe of that tailor shop and tried it on. I

turned sideways towards the mirror, and Kaća said, “Oh great, it’s good, well take it”. It only had one sleeve. When I turned around to the other side, the dress was so asymmetric, and I was so thin that I asked, “What we were going to do with this Biafra<sup>5</sup> design detail?” As absurd as it may sound, the war was one of the most beautiful parts of my life. It is horrible to be face to face with death all the time, with tragedies, with injuries. But there was another side as well: that purity of emotions which we shared with each other. Everything was clear, everything was simplified, and that made it human. Which was wonderful. When someone was scared, he would say that he was scared; when he loved someone, he would show that. If we wanted to help each other, we would act as if we did. As much as we could, under the circumstances.

**Hunger in Sarajevo, Gordana Šerić, Housewife**

1993, July

Every little bit of land – I don’t think there were any real garbage scraps – was in use. We planted all kinds of vegetables: parsley, celery, carrots, tomatoes. On the balconies, even down the middle of Tito Street beside Šipad, you could see rows of wonderful tomatoes that summer. People used to stop and look at them. Vegetables seemed to take the place of flowers. But we completely forgot about flowers. In all the flower beds and in the parks where there had been flowers, there were vegetables. We especially cooked sort of thick soup with chard (a leafy green vegetable) and a bit of parsley and a little potato – it was really a delicacy when you added a potato – it improved the taste and the smell. We all lost a lot of weight. Ten or fifteen kilos. We could only satisfy our most basic requirements to stay alive. We didn’t have any vitamins. They were lacking. Mainly vegetables, no hope of fruit, we couldn’t even dream of it. We cooked the vegetables using minimum energy. With, say, fifteen pages of a magazine – in my case *Burda* – you could make soup. My husband called them disgusting messes but they kept us alive.

**More Readers than Ever, Hatidža Demirović, Director of the City Library**

1993, August

Somehow we reorganized the books in the beginning of ‘93. And after that we worked every day in spite of the fact that we had lost 130,000 books. We were in operation with 150,000, but that was about 40% of the total fund of books. Readers came, found peace of mind in the library; they found their peace in our books, in old novels, in old newspapers. They read everything from *Doctor Zhivago* to contemporary novels and scientific books. We had the feeling that people really needed us. Another thing that happened was that our central building, or rather our

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<sup>5</sup> A reference to being overly thin due to hunger, such as the starvation stricken citizens of Biafra, a former secessionist state of south-eastern Nigeria

central book depot – where we kept scientific books, about 100,000 books at that one address – well, anyway, the building had to be evacuated so that one of the foreign embassies could move in. So in the middle of 94, when the war was going strong, when you couldn't pass because of the sniper fire, 20 or so women literally carried those 100,000 books across the Skenderija Bridge, moving them manually. True, we did receive a little bit of help from the Civil Defense, but those women evacuated and carried periodicals, sometimes 50 kilograms at a time. Large bound volumes of newspapers and so on and so forth. We had some wounded, and some were even killed, but that didn't stop us from coming to work every day and being there to help the children, the students, and the scholars. Whole books were written, you know that yourself, scholarly works, all on the basis of our book fund.

**Advice for Survival, Zlata Huseinčehajić, Owner of a Boutique**

1993, November

Before the war I used to make and sell bridal gowns. I thought that this business was a luxury, and that I probably wouldn't be able to make any money from it in times of crisis. At the beginning of the war, we spent the money that we had pretty quickly, everybody did. Then they started, and my boutique was on the front line, so we took everything out of there and stored it in an attic, just in case. And then we forgot all about those things. Until people started coming to me, some time in the end of '93 or in the middle of that year, let's say. My friends started coming around, asking, "Zlata, do you have any more of those things?" "Yes, I do". And that's how I started to literally earn our living. Bridal gowns, we sold bridal gowns, we sold less, but we sold more than, than we do today, because then war profiteers would come. For some people it wasn't expensive, and we would rent gowns to them. I started making – I had a little baby at that time. I don't know – I would make one flower at home; you know, like a hair decoration, something specific. And for that I was able to go out and buy a package of disposable diapers. Otherwise, at that time, there was no way that I could afford it, because diapers were really expensive then. But then again, my flower was expensive. Still, someone did buy it. Anyway, I love the work that I do, but I am especially happy because during the war I supported my family to a major extent by doing the work that I love, and it turned out not to be so unnecessary and silly after all.

**To Remain Normal in Bosnia, Nurdžhana Džojić, Editor in Chief of the Magazines *Koridor* and *Žena 21***

1993, December

By the morning I had sketched out a plan for a paper that's aim would be to help people retain their sanity. To help them stay normal in an un-normal situation. Barbara Smith said that nowhere in the world had she ever heard of a popular publication available to a wide readership on how to keep ones sanity. But she said – let's try, and if we succeed, then O.K. At first, people bought *Koridor* and came

to the first Mental Health Clinic with a certain amount of scepticism. But we worked in tandem and both were a success. We managed to break down peoples feeling of suspicion. In the first 6 months 130,000 people came to the clinic – so that after that, a second and a third clinic were started. In the end there were seven in different parts of the town. Their aim was to provide a place in busy parts of the town that people could easily get to and talk about what they were afraid of. People at that time were saying that we would all go mad. I lived on Dobrinja then. I moved about a lot and listened to people who were frightened of the shells landing all around us – of the shelling – of the fires – it was hell. Of course people couldn't feel normal, it wasn't a normal situation. One kept hearing the refrain: "We shall go mad, we shall go mad!" All in a popular style – and we used it in all kinds of situations, and people began to understand that it was all right to be afraid, that one should be afraid, should cry, scream – that those were all ways we could free ourselves from stress. That it was especially important that people should stick together, that what was happening to them was happening to others too. People would come kilometres and kilometres even when it was dangerous to walk about the town. Finding company, belonging to a group, kept them going. Going to the clinic where they could just talk about what they felt, what they thought. It was very important to people and it kept us up; there were so many people. A while ago I mentioned one number, now I remember another – 200,000. Two hundred thousand people came to the clinic just to talk about their troubles, their fear.

### **Massacre in the Market Place of Markale<sup>6</sup>, Vahida Tvico, Vendor**

1994, February

I was working at the market. Around noon, while we were working, I told my husband: "Let's go home". I got scared somehow and I said: "Let's go home". He says: "Lets finish our cigarettes". So we stayed. At that moment, the grenade fell. When the grenade fell, I was sitting on the table and because of the fear at that moment I wanted to hide underneath it. My husband caught me, and I didn't know anything after that. When I moved, when I got up, when I moved, I only saw that it all fell onto the market, and because of the fear, we started running. I don't know where or what. He took me to his cousin's coffee shop. I was shaking. I don't know what I was doing during that time and what was happening to me 'til I, 'til I got home. When I got home, the picture of the market place came back to me. I just heard them screaming, running. I have no idea what or how it was. Well, I remember that and the fear. I was pregnant at the time. I gave birth to my daughter, now the child is sick. She's got a high fever. The fear must have passed over to the child during pregnancy. And what will happen, well see. I keep taking her to see doctors.

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<sup>6</sup> The Markale (marketplace) massacres were two massacres committed by the Army of Republika Srpska on civilians during the siege of Sarajevo. The second attack was the stated reason for NATO air strikes against the Bosnian Serb forces that would eventually lead to the Dayton Peace Accords and the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.



**The Roses on Trščanska Street, Arnina Begović, Actress**

1994, September

On September 11, 1994 the snipers were again shooting at Trščanska Street as they had been doing every day before. That was the only light in the dark. That means that for a few seconds when the tracer bullet flies by, you can see what's in the room. And September is one of the most beautiful months in Sarajevo; it can be very beautiful. Everywhere around it was grey, the town was destroyed, everything burnt, the *Unis* building had been burnt; it looked very ugly. Suddenly in that greyness, on the other side of Trščanska Street, in front of the *Unis* building, I saw beautiful roses. Roses that somebody had planted when there was peace and when it was supposed to look like that. Those roses went somewhat wild during the war. Nobody cut them, or watered them or whatnot. However, they were there, then, in all that greyness. Meaning, at a time when nobody could clean up Trščanska Street. When nobody dared to go out, to take a broom and clean up all that glass, suddenly, the roses sprang up from the midst of all that. My feelings were that beauty couldn't be described, nor the happiness I felt. I dressed and went across Trščanska – you know, one sets ones teeth and runs as fast as one can, because it was a clear day. And I took some scissors and I cut those roses and brought them back into my room. Later, people asked me: Where did you get those roses?" I said: "From in front of the *Unis* building". They said it was impossible: "You didn't cross Trščanska Street because of the roses, did you?" "I did", I said.

**The Quest for Wood, Sabiha Nadarević, Housewife**

1994, September

It was terribly expensive. Nobody had the money to buy it. Personally, I would go looking for wood every day, both in the morning and in the afternoon. But I would wear brown pants, a green blouse, and a green kerchief over my hair so that the chetniks wouldn't be able to see me from Borije or Trebević. I would go up past Džavid Haverić, up past the school, every day. I would bring back five bags, two under my arms and three I would kick. But it wasn't hard wood. It was pine needles from fir trees. They were just pine needles, you understand. And when I took them home, then we had this little stove that I used for making coffee. It was just a miniature little thing, that stove. But whenever they felled a tree, I would get up in the morning, whenever I heard a chain saw being used up there, I would run up there in the woods, believe it or not, and try to get some of the wood. Whenever a big tree fell, a swarm of people would attack the tree. And I would take whatever little was left over. I was satisfied though. And if I got a branch, that would be like a bonus for me. Then I would tie it to my back with some cord and carry it back home so that we would survive.

**A Journey through the Tunnel, Gertruda Munitić, Prima Donna of the Sarajevo Opera**

1994, November

It was five in the morning when the car drove me to the entrance of the tunnel. The tunnel was so small that I hadn't even noticed it, all the time I continuously asked the driver where the tunnel was. "Its right here", he said, and I could not believe it. I said that it was a hole. How are we going to pass through that tunnel? And to be honest, I have a fear of closed spaces, some kind of phobia. I don't like small rooms and I don't like heights either. But I had no idea what was yet to come. So we stepped closer to that tunnel and waited for my luggage. The person that pushed the little wagon with my luggage on it advised me to sit on it because the tunnel was so narrow and small that it was impossible for two people to walk through it at the same time from opposite directions. And there were a bunch of people besides me: ten or twenty of them. It was an interesting situation – funny, I should say. As I'm always in a positive mood and I always want to make the best out of gloomy situations (and of course, I was afraid of that tunnel – more than I was afraid of the shells in Sarajevo), I sat on my suitcases and while that man pushed the wagon I started, "La la la la, O sole mio, la la la". It was still in a quiet voice, "Kore, kore, ingrato," and then, "haaaaaaaaa", and the people behind me said, "Please don't, Gertruda", but again, to give me some strength, I started, "Aaaaaaaa." They begged me to stop: "Please, Gertrucla, don't do that – this whole tunnel is going to collapse on us". And then we started to laugh and that hundred or more meters of tunnel just disappeared in a moment and we were on the other side. Outside, there was fighting. We kept our heads down, waiting, in the same mood, for things to get quiet. We went to Mrs. Fata to spend the night and she was very kind. But it all lasted for a long time. Not until the next day, four in the morning, could we continue on our way to Igman. Everyone was on foot. They had some kind of rope pathway there but people walked and it was very very high. When I saw how high it was, I said, "Mama mia, I can't climb this, no way. No way, I'm not going". But I got a wagon and I took my chances. I had a "feeling", a sixth sense. I always paid attention to what my instincts were telling me, to what my guardian angel was saying. Because we all have it, you only have to listen to it. And I developed that during the war. I said to my driver, "Don't worry. I can feel that not even one shell is going to fall while we are climbing Igman". And he said, "I don't think so, Mrs. Gertruda. I was here yesterday and a shell fell two meters from me". But I repeated that, today, it would not. So we started to climb. I watched people climbing from one side while we were making turns. I was very calm, but the driver was nervous. He did not know which way to choose where to go. He showed me all the positions from where we could be shot. Finally, we got to the top and he said: this can't be true, they haven't fired a shot and I can't believe it". And then the tire exploded.

**Wedding under Siege, Smilja Gavrić, Citizen**

1994, September

Well, that wedding of mine, the decision itself to get married in the middle of the war, was just normal to me at that time, regardless of everything else. I mean, the total poverty, how we would arrange the wedding, how we would entertain the people – our dear friends who would be there and so on, nothing could discourage us. Not even the fact that I had no wedding dress, nothing to wear, nor my husband who was also a refugee. But he got shoes from a dear friend of ours, a jacket from a relative of mine, and a pair of pants. And I say: “What am I going to do?” He says: “Well, look in your closet, you’ll find something”. And so it was, I found a little dress that I bought a long time ago somewhere in Athens and of course, I had to wash it. There was no dry-cleaners, nothing, but after all, after washing it, I couldn’t iron it, you know. So, dressed like that, in my crumpled dress, I received the wedding party and everything. I still remember to this day, how my husband’s best friend Goran said to me: “How can you go to your wedding in such a creased dress?” But I really didn’t mind, nor did that creased dress bother me or mean anything to me. We were still in all of that: we were so... (how shall I put it?) in that lovely atmosphere. And even as we were going we went on foot, you know, to the wedding – we didn’t even have a car, there was nothing, we all went on foot. And when we were coming back, unfortunately, they shelled, so that we had to, we ran in different directions just after we got out. We ran to separate from each other, and then we went to a little restaurant where my husbands company had organized a sort of luncheon for us, and there, we even had real meat.

**Giving Birth, Hatidža Demirović, Director of the City Library**

1995, June

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of June 1995, there was a massive attack on Sarajevo. Of course, I didn’t know that it was going to happen. I had made an appointment that day to give birth, for a caesarean section, and everything (from the medical standpoint) was over. I remember that the nurse woke me: “Natidža, you gave birth to a boy”. I knew that, and I remember that I was cold. I was half-conscious. Next to me I saw another woman who had given birth. She had a visitor. I kept on losing consciousness, and then it happened. At one point I heard shots, and then I was out again, and this kept on happening on and off until one moment when I opened my eyes and realized that something was wrong. My first thought was that it was a shell, because I had already had such an experience in ‘92, when I was wounded by a piece of shrapnel from a mortar shell. And just in case, I pulled my hand out from under the covers and saw that it was bloody. And I said to myself, “Yes, this is what happened in ‘92”. I look around the room and see that no ones there. I’m alone there and so I just call the nurse. She appears at the door and I say, “mortar shell”. And she says, “What are you talking about? There wasn’t any explosion”. I just show her my bloody hand like this, and she runs over to me to take a look. Then she goes out to call the doctor, and he takes a look and goes out again, and

then they all started running. They pulled out one of those – it wasn't a wheelchair, but a bed. They pulled the bed out into the hallway; I remember they were in the hallway. I found myself between two rows of men who had come to be on a medical committee. It was a military hospital, and from department to department I saw that those men were crying. I simply saw tears in the eyes of every other one. They were all sorry, all of them were afraid. But I just didn't feel scared at that point, because I was suddenly conscious that I had given birth and that the baby was safe, and that I had been wounded by either a bullet or shrapnel from a shell. But they'll patch me up because they patched up Marko, my neighbour, who lived next door and was wounded by a sniper bullet. If they patched him up, then they'll do the same to me. That was my first thought, and then we were wandering from laundry room to operating room, because they were all confused. They didn't know where to go next, or how to call the elevator. But I still wasn't afraid yet – up until Dr. Nakaš arrived and said to me, "What's wrong, Hatidža?" Well, then I remember that I took his hand in both of mine, and then I was afraid. But then he said to the nurse, "Give me the small kit". They probably have their own set of code-names, and then I knew that I wasn't badly wounded. Because if they were going to use a small kit on me, there must be some bigger kit also, which meant that I wasn't badly wounded. After that, I don't remember a thing, until when they brought me out to the hallway again. And that's when I felt the pain in my belly, because that's also when they explained to me what had happened. A bullet shot from a machine gun had come through the window of the hospital room where I lay, where I was being treated after the caesarean section. They explained to me that I was not badly wounded. After that, I liked to tell people that a bullet that had gotten twisted in the doctor's bulletin board grazed me. It went through the metal window frame, through some mattresses, the bulletin board, through my three blankets, through the cover that the nurse had put on me because I was cold and just grazed me. But my little Hamza was O.K., and I stayed in the hospital for eight more days. My baby came out alive and well. I left the hospital on my own two feet and went back to work. I was on maternity leave for 18 days and then I started to work.

*(Encyclopedia: The Siege of Sarajevo 1992-1996, 2005)*

### **Longing for Daybreak. Letters from Sarajevo**

My dearest,

Thank you a thousand times for the parcel you sent in March, which we collected a few days ago. Thank you, most of all, for the letter which always makes me rejoice the most. And thank you for the sugar that is being sold at 20-25 marks in the market place, while the humanitarian aid had given us 400 grams for two persons. That was quite a long time ago.

My hands are much better now. They only react to the change of temperature, so when I put them in water, they turn purple. That is a consequence of the winter cold. All my fingernails have a bulge growing towards their tip. But when there is

no water, and the water tank doesn't come – it is horrible. And when it comes, we have to pay five marks to fill every canister, no matter how much it can hold. We did not eat one kilo of vegetables altogether last year. Let there only be bread, which has not been available for days now; we have planted some tomatoes on the balcony and well be fine...

No one seems to be concerned with their weight any longer, but people have problems with loss of hair, splitting fingernails, skin cracking, etc... It seemed to me that nothing could be worse than last winter and this summer without water, but the worst thing is the ghetto atmosphere and the Gestapo mentality. I won't go into any details here. I believe that every single person here, no matter what ethnicity or religion they are, wants this to stop and to leave this ghostly city. If I was to be transferred to a normal city now, I would probably feel as if I'd arrived from another planet and it would probably take me a very long time to get used to a normal way of life again.

And when I – if I ever live to see my son again, who is so far away from me, it will be someone else: a grown up, a slightly estranged young man, and not my little son whom I last saw a year ago, when he was fourteen. I don't know how he is going to spend the holidays, or where, and with whom and how, and that makes me infinitely sad.

Dear Mother,

Erna wrote to us and said that she had spoken with you by telephone and that you were very sad and worried about us. I would like to tell you not to worry, but I am very well aware that's not possible. We would all like to live as we used to live and to have our children back. We haven't had any letters from you in Belgrade lately, nor did we get any from Zagreb or from Požega. My heart is so torn apart, but still, we hope for the best and that keeps us going. When they were making this survey the other day and asked us what the most difficult thing in this war was: the shortage of fuel, water or electricity, I replied that for me, the most difficult thing was the isolation and separation from those I love. Mother, I will come to you soon. You can be sure of that, just take care of yourself and wait for me. I love you all very much. Do write to me, please.

Dear everyone,

There has been no decent news from you for four months. Your five parcels have been a lifeline for us. The onion and potatoes we got from you made a whole world of difference to our diet. Now that spring has arrived, nettles, dandelions and other grasses have come out. We all have our little gardens on our balconies. We exchange seeds and various things that we get in our parcels and we help out one another this way. I feel terribly bad because of all of you there. Please, tell me this frankly: how is mother? Please...

Cherries must be ripening where you are. I can barely imagine how great that is. Mother's real condition is not completely clear to me, but I have a notion. There is nothing I can do, really. That's why I keep silent. Out of shame. I hope that I will

be able to leave for Belgrade on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June, at best. I can say that I live for that day.

The hardest part of this ghastly and dirty war where everyone cheats everyone else is not the meager food, or the cold, the mortar shells and the water and electricity shortages, but this hopelessness... Our nerves have cracked. We can no longer stand to see what we see and hear what we hear around us. We listen to the news from both sides, and it is all about evil things. You can rarely hear of somebody having helped someone else.

I wonder what my children will come back to, one day. I don't know what they think, or how they have changed over the past year. Hoping to see you again, I send you all my love.

*(The Age of Reason, 1994)*

Translated by Stanislava Lazarević

## **Inja**

Sarajevo, 24 July '93

Dear everyone,

If I am to talk about this city, I'd better start with notes about things we don't have and things you can live without.

Electricity is the least painful. Most of the city hasn't had a regular supply of this form of energy since '92. We were among the few lucky ones who were connected to some of the priority supply lines, so that we enjoyed that luxury throughout April and May. Then it was cut off again, so that since April, we've had electricity twice, from midnight till six o'clock in the morning. During those "lucky" nights you could hear all the appliances buzzing and tumbling – we were all up and about. Washing machines, irons and chargers were plugged in... All in all, electricity is not such a big problem. You see laundry can be hand-washed, rooms can be cleaned with a broom, the iron can be heated on a gas stove and we listened to the news at our neighbours who had charged their batteries... so, we were generally ok. However, when there was a power cut throughout the whole city, then the water supply was stopped, and the telephone lines were cut off. It has been like that for 45 days now. Fortunately, public fountains have been organized (our authorities bluntly call them WATERING PLACES) and we can fill our canisters there. Those did not exist last winter and we had to wait in the basements (where water reached the pipes) for five or six hours, in order to carry 20 or 30 liters of water home. The fountain is a couple of kilometers away from our apartment and I can tell you that water is by far the heaviest natural resource. You need at least 25 liters a day for the bare necessities. I was desperate until I learned to ride a bicycle, and since then, getting water supplies has almost been fun. I can carry five five-liter canisters on my bike, so that I can make two or three journeys a day, as they are considerably shorter and easier, so that I usually have some water

in stock. Actually, you have to have these stocks, because as soon as fighting begins, these journeys are out of the question and the only solution is collecting rainwater.

And, finally: gas. The shortage of this fuel is by far the hardest. The gas shortage means running up and down the parks, collecting twigs and paper (that have all been scooped up) and burning all that in stoves made of tins and having to blow at them all the time until a small loaf of brown bread, a handful of rice or one or two bowls of soup made of some grass blades come out of your pan. At the moment, we are out of electricity, water and gas. However, the most horrifying thing is the invasion of rodents. Our apartment is full of mice, like all the others. We can't get any deterrents against this pest, That's why I will be bold enough to ask you, if that is not too expensive, to send us some glue or any other product against these nasty creatures that keep me awake for nights (for fear that I might wake up with a mouse or rat on my hand, stomach or face...) Let alone the invasion of cockroaches – I've been sleeping with a slipper under my pillow for a year now.

In time, all these things become part of our everyday lives and this frightens me the most. Our individual potential to adapt seems boundless, and we are being overwhelmed by the Beirut syndrome: "Normal life under mortar shells and gunfire". Also, I am terribly scared of the growing number of people whose only occupation and source of income is war. When I say this is a drastic figure, I mean that next year this percentage will be 90 percent. War and war trafficking will be the only means of support for a vast majority of the people who stay in this area. All the normal occupations (except for doctors and fire-fighters) have become useless. For over a year, it hasn't made any sense to say that you are a lawyer, hairdresser or tailor, an economist or architect, a builder, miner, actor, painter or anything else. If you don't have one of these modern occupations (I am not going to catalogue them because, after all, I want this letter to reach you) you simply do not have a chance to survive.

Amid this pandemonium, some nice things also happen, which are pushed to the limit of absurdity. In a situation where garbage has not been collected from the streets for more than two months and where our stomachs are in no better state than the city – my friends form jazz bands in the basements and a perfect comic-strip library has been opened in our neighbourhood; we sunbathe and sprinkle ourselves with water and have never been reading so many good books in such quantities. You simply can't be bothered by "miserable", down-to-earth problems such as water, electricity and gas after Jung, Borghes or Kant, and it is much healthier to observe war from the angle of social pathology than through the screen of mortar shells – one of which has just slammed into my yard.

I do not see a way out of this. I keep in touch with my father with laconic phrases such as "we are alive and in good health", without going into details (and it would be dangerous to say more) but I really wonder where that endless inner energy is coming from. As I see it, all this can go on for decades and I would be very happy if this situation remained unchanged this time next year, because I believe it can only change for the worse.

I hope I have not been a drag going into all these details. I wanted you to get a notion of the atmosphere here. What just crossed my mind is that the people of this

city are trying to send cheerful, optimistic and humorous letters to their folks, and their recipients out there go to pieces when they read them. That is why I want to finish by saying that you must not be depressed by all this (I am not too depressed myself) because things are simply the way they are, this is our casual “daily routine”, our “normal circumstances”. Believe me – however unconvincing this may sound – it is easier to go through these things that to write about them and to read this, I am sure. Walk through the park for me and have a cold beer. Take care and everything will be ok.

I love you very much.

Your, Inja

Sarajevo, 3 March 1994

Dear everyone,

Saga brought us your letter. I have been sitting for two or three hours already, thinking about you and my father and about the relationship you have with him. The only thing I know about him is that I love him very much and that he is a wonderful person. I know why I’m saying this – it’s not like I was an infatuated child. Everything nice that I have, I got from him. This has especially been true in these war times, when everything is so filthy and miserable. Throughout my life, Dad has been instilling me discreetly with a serum against all this and has eventually worked a miracle of pedagogic genetics. That miracle is called - having no dilemma.

I am simply resistant to diseases such as – hate, envy, feeling miserable... Don’t get me wrong. I don’t think that I am at all perfect. Far from that! I am not saying my father is perfect, either. I only know that I am happy to be as I am and I am very grateful to him for that, because it is exclusively to his merit. Many people I know have fallen apart in this war, or will soon do so, and that explosion is louder than all the mortar shells in this world. But there are still many things I have to learn about this martial art called life, so tell him I need him, urgently, to continue my education. I won’t mind him retiring when he has finished the job, but as I am a dull child, he must count on many decades of hard work, without playing hooky. Having to exchange curt letters with him really hits me hard, but with the sword of censorship above my head, I cannot say any of these things to him.

The wonderful parcel Milica sent us arrived twenty days ago, but the envelope with a letter from her and Omer arrived only two or three days ago. These things are such a drag, so I take this opportunity, which I consider to be more reliable than the Humanitarian Aid, to send this letter for Milica. I hope you won’t mind sending it to her, since I am always asking you to forward some letters for me. In this letter, I tried to explain to Milica the phenomenon of parcels in this city. I think that it is a curiosity which you may also find interesting. Beba told me about the project you’ve been working on and I have been trying to reach you for days, without success. I have just given up (at 10 p.m.), having tried really hard. I invest so much effort in these things because every change is a gift for our senses that have been all ears these days. We have more or less neglected everything else. But we keep



listening for a whole range of sounds, day and night: from remote and close detonations, to the distinct exclamations from the neighbourhood. Through our nylon window panes, we get breaking news of major events in the city: “Water has arrived in the basement!”; “Edo, go get the humanitarian aid”; “Has bread arrived?”... That is why, trust me, you have a brilliant and discriminating audience in this city where we have been deprived of everything except that for our ears. During the long months without electricity, we live on the entertainment we obtain through half-empty batteries and adapted transistor radios to gratify our avid ears. Those ears will devour just about everything. On top of everything, comes the coarseness and vulgarity that floats in the ether. A specific form of entertainment is commenting on the news out loud - which its authors see as a very serious matter. That is one of the forms of collective entertainment that induces roars of laughter. For the most part, comments aren’t even necessary, as some radio stations keep us in hysterics all the time.

There is only one thing that most people find difficult to digest: pathetic comments that make me feel sick – for which, if you asked me, I would prescribe a life sentence in this area. There is nothing more humiliating and hurtful than a pathetic fool in front of the microphone, or with a pen in his hand. People here are very sensitive to it and take in only the smallest doses of it. That’s why I dread my own letters. Perhaps some things that are really part of our reality and happening to me or around me, can sound like trash somewhere else.

I am so happy for you, because you are where you are and doing what you are doing. We can watch the First Channel of TV Belgrade and I think that all those who want to be kind to their brains have to get away from there. People like you, particularly, don’t deserve to live in such a chaotic environment. I have been very worried about –you, and still am; about all the people there whom I hold dear. I wish all luck possible to those who have remained behind. I also wish that you could finally live a normal and dignified life. This will all be over one day. But until that time, we all need a lot of good and strong nerves. This is the first time I have written to you so openly and unreservedly. I have always feared that I could get you in trouble with some of my comments. There are so many maniacs everywhere. All this is contrary to nature – not human nature, but nature in the sense of the change of the seasons, the rising of the sun, gravity and everything that surrounds us. It really seems to me that this cannot last long. It will crash down to where it belongs and perish in its own absurdity. It is well worth waiting for that day. I do hope it will arrive in my lifetime. Until then, stay happy in the normal world. When I think about you, your suffering seems to be much more subtle and painful than ours, because you have the possibility to choose. Do not listen to the hollow stories about the Courageous citizens of Sarajevo and do not admire us. My courage is not my choice. I have developed it unintentionally and all I can say is that I am a mutant of this war. The fact that I (no longer) thrust myself on the floor when a mortar shell slams into my building or the neighbouring one, or that I run across the intersection where someone was killed three minutes ago, still under sniper fire – that is not courage. This is my life and the life of all the people here. I sincerely hope that one day I will be able to indulge in the luxury of being the

biggest coward in this world. I cannot be that now, because if I allow myself to chicken out, I simply won't survive. There is no fear, there is only HORROR.

That horror has penetrated some things that used to be casual. A line of cars speeding along the street and honking used to evoke images of a wedding. Nowadays, this is the sound of death. Following every massacre, a spectral orchestra of honking cars rushes through the streets. Those vehicles how instead of their mutilated passengers. That sound makes my stomach turn and I am sure it will, as long as I live. My brain has imposed some kind of censorship and simply stops taking in information beyond a certain point. But the sound I am talking about breaks that barrier. I viewed the death at Markale as something that had barged into my city from another dimension. I realized what was happening only when I heard the sound. The Death at Markale is something a normal human brain cannot fathom. No wonder those idiots from Pale say that those were puppets. But still, one of those puppets names was Zlatko Čosić, and wed been together at university. That market place did not belong to our dimension that day. That was pure sci-fi. Many other scenes and events could also be ascribed to this genre.

My Dad also lives in another dimension. Otherwise, how could I possibly live with the knowledge that he lives one kilometer from my window in a straight line and that I haven't even been able to find out whether he is alive for months now. As for myself, I am still idle and this has been very hard for me. In November, I will meet the requirements to enter the Lawyers Body and I hope that by then there will be some normal work to do. At the moment, even if I possessed a working license, most of the cases are criminal, which, in this war, are really heinous. From time to time, I draw up a power of attorney or a contract, predominantly for friends. On the other hand, I have learned to do a great deal of things that make my life easier. For example, I have learned to make thin layers of dough and to knit socks. So I am going to knit a multicoloured pair for each of you. I love you very much. You are the nicest surprise that happened in my life. I thought that all Dads friends had long forgotten that I existed. And then you came up.

Your, Inja

Sarajevo, 5 March 1994

My dear Milica,

It's been two weeks already since we received your wonderful parcel, and yet it is only now that I have found the time to thank you infinitely for it. Sarajevo has been a big mess for the past month. These two words – big mess – have a special meaning, because the notion of MESS has exceeded all the limits of normality for a very long time now. There was a lot of noise, pain and uncertainty. However, the shelling has stopped and that's the most important thing. Statistically, ten people a day were being killed in this city until recently. So it is not hard to figure out how many lives have been spared since 6 February. Everything is easier now.

You have really touched us with your attention. I know so little about you, barely a few details I heard from my father. I have read your beautiful letter to

many of my friends. This kind of support means so much to me. All of them send you their regards, because they feel reassured that the trust they have in human beings has not been in vain, however much they have been trying to convince us of the opposite.

I suppose that you are interested in knowing what trying to live in this city is like. I am afraid there are few things around me that you could possibly understand and it should stay that way. For our part, we also get a faded image of the horror you are going through. The most important thing is that we are on your side – you wonderful and normal people, who have not changed, which must have been extremely hard to achieve.

I would like to tell you how much joy your presents have brought to us. This was something special. I will try to explain the experience called a parcel: a cardboard box filled with food acquired a very special meaning here a long time ago. When I carry it home (i.e. drag it, usually on a sled or trolley cart), I have the feeling that I am taking a dear friend to my place for coffee. And then, when I manage to push it all the way to the kitchen (that is where the opening ritual usually begins) and when I open it, the first smell that comes out if it is that of attention and love that instantly begin fuelling your brain and soul with the knowledge that you are not alone, that there's someone on my side who loves me and cares about me, who understands me and wants me to survive. Then I also feel a surge of responsibility to pull out of this alive, healthy and sane. I want all of this just so as to not let down my dear friend and her great love packed up in a simple cardboard box. I also have to say how strange that feeling is – the feeling of receiving love in a brown cardboard box tied with rope. It (that love) flutters out of that parcel first and starts hopping around the house, touching every one of us and endearing us, making us happy. The opening of the parcel is, by all means, an act which is performed in front of the whole family. We all clap our hands, caper about, rejoice and cry a little. We invariably take everything out of the parcel first and dig in the bottom to check whether there is a small note we failed to see. Then, we take out things that are wrapped in newspapers and read the papers. After that, we leave everything lying around and imagine who bought that food and from where it came, what they were thinking at that moment, how they carried it home and packed a parcel and then went and queued to send it. I think how you must be wondering, just like I do, whether and when the parcel will ever reach us.

Eventually, when the parcel is completely unpacked, all the family members assemble. We engage in long and thorough discussions as to who will get what. I am describing a custom that is as old as the relief parcels, which I haven't mentioned to you so far. Namely, small items are taken out of every parcel (a package of soup, a few prunes or onions) and given away to the people we love (they do the same when they get a parcel or obtain food in some other way). Those are seemingly small things, but every such small thing means a great deal to us. In this way, one single parcel cheers up and makes at least five or six families happy. Once we have concluded our discussion, we take these goodies to our friends in the neighbourhood. We hand over the gifts and talk for hours about how the parcel arrived, from whom and through whom, and how we carried it home. They admire our generosity and we try to comfort them by saying that their parcel, which they

have been expecting for months, will surely arrive soon. And if they really get it, they come to us, and this goes in circles...

Let me tell you just one more thing: you will never know to what extent the parcel that reaches us is exploited. The final point in the fate of every parcel is that the entire packaging and wrapping (I mean, the wrapping of every single item in the parcel) goes to the stove and fuels the preparation of a rich and wonderful meal.

Please do not get this letter wrong. My intention was merely to convey to you part of the atmosphere around me; moreover, its bright side.

I hope that life is a bit easier for you, too, now. We've heard that prices are falling and that things are going back to normal in a way. Anyway, I wish you a lot of strength and courage. Madness is bound to come to its logical end. We will hold on until then, out of sheer curiosity, at least.

I send you all my love and a big THANK YOU for your cheerful guest in a cardboard box.

Your, Inja

Sarajevo, 9 August 1994

Dear everyone,

Yesterday I came across my friend who was supposed to send my last letter to you and I was astounded to see that he had not got out of the city yet. I hope that this mail will eventually leave tomorrow and that you'll be getting two of my letters at once. Had I known this, I would've found another way to get in touch with you. I visited Beba recently and we enjoyed ourselves on her balcony with a lavish, good breakfast and a lot of coffee (she had just received a parcel from Emir). We kept saying, "If only Omer could see us now". We had such a good time, that finally, it became embarrassing. So we decided to convince you that there is no need to worry about us.

The news is that Beba got this flat at Ali Pasha Field, which is on the front line. It's on the eleventh floor. The journey there is a real adventure: a two-hour game called "Be Rambo". The moment you get on the tram at Marindvor, you have to lie on the floor, because there are still many who would like to target their sniper guns at your head. If you survive this and if the traffic does not come to a standstill, (because someone gets hit every now and then, and it stops the traffic) this means of transport will take you to the Television building. Afterwards, you go hiking for about 45 minutes in strange landscapes. The high frequency of pedestrian circulation has resulted in burgeoning trade in this area. People are selling things all over the place, which is reminiscent of the all-too-familiar Oriental commotion: people pushing one another and bargaining, eating roast chicken wrapped in newspapers, merchants storming the passers-by shouting some rhymes (the refrains of which are often lewd). As every patch of earth in Sarajevo is being cultivated and something has been sown or grown on it, I make my way between the buildings and corn stalks, while some goats follow me all the time, watching me (I panic at the sight of a horned animal). But the worst thing is that it is unfamiliar terrain for me, which makes me feel totally insecure because I don't know where the snipers can "have me". Eventually, when I reach her skyscraper, I invariably

run into some persistent fool imploring me to enter the elevator. Because, “We can be sure that, if there is a power cut, Meho will get us out. He is such a reliable and conscientious person, why is everyone being so suspicious?” Anyway, I am not so easily taken in and stick to the stairs. When I knock on Beba’s door, I am in urgent need of a GP and a good shrink. Not long ago, I returned from there on a tractor because the trams were not running. Luckily, I was appropriately dressed – I was wearing a gray and green Italian ensemble, Italian shoes and a polished handbag (which served as an endless source of amusement for all the other passengers). All in all, the visit to Beba is a real tourist adventure with a remedial effect on any claustrophobic feelings you might have. There is another place I go to in order to feel better. That is the large park in the center of Sarajevo, where I can spend five or six hours. It is the only park in the city that has remained intact and it is really beautiful. I find a position from which I can see nothing but greenery and I perform my own photosynthesis for hours. I have an insatiable urge to be close to nature. So many abnormal things have entered our systems that I wonder whether we will ever go back again to our old selves. A friend of mine works in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and he has been urging me to visit my father. Needless to say, I would do this immediately, but Dad has sent me several messages insisting that I must not do that. I am waiting for someone I can trust to enquire about it again. If I could be sure that he was sending me these messages just because he is concerned about me, I would not hesitate to go, but I am afraid that I could get him in some kind of trouble. He still lives in an old movie. We recently got two messages from him through the Red Cross. Let me quote a few things from there. The message dated 23 June ‘94: “...If she is still in Sarajevo (referring to our secretary), you could start working together and I am sure I will be able to come and help you by the end of the summer”. The other message dated 10 July ‘94: “...Judging by the speed at which these messages travel, your letters full of concern will probably be arriving for another six months after the end of the war, which will be over any day now”.

This optimism of his drives me crazy, because there is nothing left to justify it. It occurred to me that he might be writing this way because my letters are all the more depressive, in order to encourage and help me. On the other hand, if this is not the reason, then his escapism is such that I simply can't see how a reasonable man, who has always been motivated by just and realistic aims, could have embraced this utopia. He has been repeating these and similar ideas for two years, allowing himself to do nothing, because things will be resolved automatically anyway. I am afraid of this condition of his, because I don't think it is natural. I do hope this letter won't get lost on the way and that it will reach you alright. If, by some miracle, this came to an end, it would be so great if you could live in Sarajevo. One day, when this is over, I think that this city stands the biggest chance of going back to what it used to be. Although atrocities have happened here, only a relatively small number of people have been infected with hideous hatred. I might be wrong, but I am not at odds with this city.

Do send me a short note.

I love you.

Inja

Sarajevo, 30 November 1994

I have just read my unsent letter and I don't want to throw it away. I am going to send it along with this one.

Good God, is it possible that I have lived to be relieved and happy?! I am writing this some ten minutes after I spoke to Dad and Omer. My head is still buzzing. Only now that we have finished talking have I realized that everything is true, and that no one will awaken me from this wonderful dream. When I look in the direction of Dads house, I feel pain. It is that type of physical pain you feel when you suddenly let go of a terribly heavy burden you've been carrying (only this time, the pain is not in the small of the back, but also in the head). Then you need a few minutes to straighten up, to realize that the burden is no longer there; the pain goes away and you can relax. Nevertheless, the fear is still present. It has become chronic and difficult to get rid of, like any disease of this kind. I have to fight against it. Omer, when you told me that you would put me through to Dad<sup>7</sup> the first thought that crossed my mind was: I must not faint and I must not start crying because I could lose my voice. I still can't understand that I could have been struck with so much luck without paying a price for it (this is an incurable fear). His voice... My Goodness!!! His normal, unchanged voice, his intonation and sentence rhythm... everything sounded so natural. I would never have imagined that simply hearing my Dads voice over the phone could make me so happy. Everything else was contained in that voice: his face, his smile...

Old boy, you have no idea what a good deed you have just performed!

Kisses to all of you, Inja

Inja Pašalić

*(Letters from Two Sarajevos, 1996)*

Translated by Stanislava Lazarević

### **My First Admission**

Many of us who feel like Yugoslavs deep down – large numbers of us – have been driven into such a position that we don't dare say what we are and how we feel. We have been forced to declare ourselves on the basis of the origin of our names. It was a terrible experience having to “confess” to my five-year-old son - confession is such an ugly term for a situation when, for the first time in my life, I admitted that I was a Muslim woman. It was on the occasion of my sons fifth birthday: I had to explain to him that the Muslims are not inferior or dirtier than the others, or an uglier people. This is how it happened.

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<sup>7</sup> Her father had arrived in Belgrade, having gotten out of the part of Sarajevo called Grbavica.

My son was going to have a birthday party and I recounted the names of the children that should be invited. When I came to "Muhamed" my son said: "No, mother, we won't invite Muhamed". Surprised, I asked him why we shouldn't invite Muhamed (I thought that they might've had a quarrel). He answered: "We won't invite Muhamed because everybody says that he is a Muslim."

"What of it?" I asked.

My son said: "Muslims are dirty. I am not going to play with Muhamed anymore and I don't want to invite him to my birthday party".

That was terrible. When I tried to explain to my son that his grandmother was Muslim, that his dear aunt was Muslim and that his own mother was Muslim... he began to cry...

That was terrible. He told me: "All other people can be Muslims, but not you, I embraced him and kissed him, and then tried to give him an explanation. I drew a map of Yugoslavia and told him which nations lived in which republics. I told him that it was not important what ethnic group someone belonged to and that there was no reason to hate anyone just because of their ethnicity. That was terrible... For the first time in my life I was forced to declare myself as Muslim, although to this day, three years after the incident, I still genuinely feel like a Yugoslav.

It is, however, no longer possible to declare oneself as a Yugoslav. It first began in Bosnia: your name was enough for a permanent ethnic ID. People were being told: "No, That's not what you are. You belong to that people". And then, when I escaped to Germany because of the war in Sarajevo, I soon found out that the Germans had accepted this model. If you declared yourself as a Yugoslav, you were automatically labelled like someone from "the bad new Yugoslavia, from terrible Serbia". If you insisted on being a Yugoslav, you ran the risk of losing your residence permit. Or else, without even asking you, they would infer: "Oh, you were born in Sarajevo – that means you are Bosnian". And that would seal it. I come from Sarajevo, from an old Muslim family, which was religious, but never nationalistic. My husband is from an Orthodox Montenegrin family, who, under the pressure of vicious political games, had to declare themselves as Serbs. There was no place where my husband and I could live in peace. They are a decent, good and homely people. So, my husband and I were driven to such a crazy situation, not only because the war broke out in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but because we simply did not have a place where we could go on living normally, we no longer had a space for us. Whose army should we have joined? Whom should we have shot at? From Sarajevo we could shoot at our relatives (the dear grandparents of my children) and friends in Pale, or, from Pale and the surrounding mountains, at my mother, my sister and our friends. The only solution we could think of was to leave the country.

Only a few days after the outbreak of the war in Sarajevo – the Muslim militia (the so called "Green Berets") ransacked my parent's apartment just because their son-in-law was a Serb from Pale. A month after that, a neighbour said to my dear mother-in-law: "Dear God, what have you lived to see: your daughter-in-law is your greatest enemy now".

My family is still in Sarajevo: my mother, my sister. My husband's family is, of course, still in Pale. Pale is just eight miles from Sarajevo. This is terrible, those are

two incompatible worlds... and it is difficult to imagine that within such a short period of time an impenetrable wall has been erected between people who used to be friends, who loved each other...

Here in German exile, we get letters both from Sarajevo and from Pale... They send greetings to each other via Germany.

*(The Age of Reason, 1994)*

Translated by Stanislava Lazarević

### **A Musician by Nationality. A Suite for my Native City of Sarajevo**

My name is Violeta Smajlović. I was born in Sarajevo and I am a musician by profession – more precisely, I am a pianist. I currently live in Dallas, where I am doing some professional training. My family is scattered. I often say that, fortunately, my parents died before the war. My brother has remained in Sarajevo and what he is doing is a very nice gesture, indeed. He is fighting, but that is not an armed fight: he fights with music. He is a cellist and he expresses all his sorrow and all his anger that way. On the other hand, I have three sisters who are in Ljubljana now. Two of them have been living there for a very long time, and the third one fled there from Sarajevo in November last year. Among other things, she weighed forty-four kilos when she arrived...

What happens when I think about Sarajevo? I often find streets I never used to notice when I was there. However, in my thoughts I find some hidden places, inconspicuous corners and streets on Bakargija... I try to nourish them in my head. The thought of them not being the same any more makes me sad, of course. However, I am aware of the fact that there is nothing I can do about it, so I am trying to do my best at my job and to express all my pain and all my sorrow and after all, my anger.

I believe this is the only contribution I can make. I have seen several types of reactions: some cry, others grieve, then there are those who fight: for example, by talking, but none of these can save the people who have stayed there. And although I am certain that my music cannot do that, it is still the biggest contribution I can make. First of all, I think that music is a very powerful means of communication. Let me give you an example: an English composer, David Wild, who was deeply moved by what has been going on in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and particularly in Sarajevo itself, and who was touched by my brother's gesture (to play for all the victims and express his outrage that way) dedicated one of his pieces first, to my brother and then another to me. This suite is called Bosnia and Herzegovina Weeps. When I first played it in Paris, it happened that the audience cried and I cried on stage. Having played the piece, I actually stood there crying, which had never happened to me before... I could hear people sobbing literally... its not like you saw them wiping away tears, but weeping... Those were the French. It was then that I realized the power of music and the amplitude of emotions it can convey... Therefore, there is so much music can do and that is why I think I have



chosen to express my views that way: it is extremely difficult to risk being engaged in some political debates and to broach some nationality issues I have nothing to do with. When people ask me what nationality I am, I answer “I am a musician by nationality”.

*(The Age of Reason, 1994)*

Translated by Stanislava Lazarević