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## Costretti a crescere

Testimonianze dal volume *Women's Side of War*, a cura di  
Women in Black- Belgrade

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a cura di

Marta Dalla Pozza

In questo numero di Dep, proseguiamo il nostro percorso all'interno del volume *Women's Side of War*<sup>1</sup>, pubblicato in lingua inglese a Belgrado nel 2008 (e in lingua serbo-croata nel 1997, col titolo *Ženska strana rata*), a cura dell'associazione pacifista Donne in nero, di Belgrado. Il libro è una raccolta di testimonianze, soprattutto femminili, sulle esperienze vissute durante i recenti conflitti balcanici. La selezione che proponiamo a continuazione offre spazio ad alcune tra le voci più toccanti proposte dalle Donne in Nero.

Il primo gruppo di testi riporta memorie di madri costrette a fuggire con i propri figli, oppure di adolescenti coinvolti, loro malgrado, negli episodi bellici. *Forced to grow up*, ad esempio, è la storia di una ragazza vissuta nella cittadina di Pakrac fino a diciassette anni, quando è costretta a lasciarla perchè si trova sotto attacco. *More bags than hands*, invece, narra l'esodo di una madre bosniaca, di religione musulmana, con i suoi tre bambini e le loro povere valigie; *Run, move the children* è il drammatico resoconto di una madre, che cerca di mettere in salvo i propri figli sotto il fuoco armato dei cecchini. Concludono la prima parte della selezione *A Child's Story*, dove una ragazzina quattordicenne ricorda le sue fatiche per rifornire la famiglia di cibo, e *The Nightmare*.

Il secondo gruppo di testi, invece, rievoca una delle conseguenze più drammatiche della guerra: gli stupri perpetrati da militari nei confronti di donne appartenenti alla popolazione "nemica". Sono le stesse protagoniste a parlare: Enisa, insegnante bosniaca rapita e stuprata da militari serbi, tra cui suoi ex allievi; Selma, musulmana, derubata e violentata nel suo appartamento a Banja Luka, in Bosnia; Saida, rapita e stuprata da soldati serbi insieme alle sorelle; le due ragazze protagoniste dei racconti *Sanski Most* e *Prijedor*.

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<sup>1</sup> Per una più ampia introduzione al volume cfr. *Dep*, numero 13-14.

Principale filo conduttore dell'insieme dei testi proposti è senza dubbio la violenza: quella vissuta dalle madri, sradicate dai luoghi d'origine insieme ai propri figli; quella subita dalle donne aggredite dai militari, nell'illusoria sicurezza delle proprie case; quella respirata dai più giovani, quando escono a cercare qualcosa da mangiare. Ha il volto dei soldati che irrompono nelle abitazioni, per minacciare, rubare e stuprare; dei cecchini, appostati in luoghi strategici e pronti a far fuoco su cittadini inermi. È frutto del nazionalismo esasperato, dell'odio, che ha reso nemici antichi compagni di scuola, vicini di casa.

Un secondo filo comune è lo spaesamento che coglie molte di coloro che sono state costrette dal conflitto ad interrompere bruscamente la propria abituale esistenza:

In 1991 I lived in a town which for me was the only place where I could be completely happy. My home, my parents and my friends all around me. [...] To whom could it even occur that we would have to part? And then that August, fatal for all of us, came<sup>2</sup>.

Il senso di estraneità, spesso, le accompagna anche quando, una volta terminato il conflitto, tornano nei loro luoghi d'origine: “now I am a stranger in my town. Some new people have come there, some new kids and the town has lost its soul. And to the other part of the town, where I grew up, I cannot go. The enemies are there”<sup>3</sup>.

Un terzo motivo ricorrente, segnale di speranza, è l'aiuto, inaspettato, che le madri in fuga, le donne violate, riescono ad ottenere da altre donne. Ad esempio, nel racconto *Selma* la protagonista, vittima di violenza sessuale, viene nascosta da una vicina, con la quale fino a quel momento era stata in cattivi rapporti:

I couldn't believe my eyes – she was the most unlikely person to come to my aid as she hadn't spoken to me since they had moved in three years earlier because, due to my negligence, her newly acquired flat had been completely flooded. [...] “Please hurry – they may return”, she said helping me back to my feet. She led me to her flat – actually, she dragged me there as I was in no shape to walk<sup>4</sup>.

Altre volte, invece, l'aiuto giunge da alcuni militari, mossi a pietà dalle conseguenze del loro stesso agire, come ricorda Saida:

A Serb soldier approached us, by the way he spoke I'd say he was from Montenegro, and promised to help us. We were happy because we'd already been raped. He kept his promise. The others were not so lucky – they were all tortured and raped<sup>5</sup>.

Nel mezzo di tanta devastazione, materiale e morale, rimane una piccola dose di umanità. È questa la scintilla che consente ai più fortunati di continuare a vivere, nonostante gli orrori della guerra in corso. Come accade alla giovane protagonista di *Forced to Grow Up*, la cui città natale è stata in parte distrutta: “I have to move forward. Life is ahead of me. [...] I've begun a new life and I defy it with my

<sup>2</sup> *Women's Side of War*, a cura di Women in Black- Belgrade, 2008, p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ivi*, p. 53.

<sup>5</sup> *Ivi*, p. 70.

behaviour and my persistence. I move through it turning towards my future and forgetting the past”<sup>6</sup>.

Spesso, per poter sopravvivere ad esperienze traumatiche come quelle raccolte in *Women's Side of War*, l'unica soluzione è tentare di costruirsi una nuova vita, senza rimanere prigionieri del passato.

Ringraziamo l'associazione “Donne in nero” di Padova per averci segnalato il volume e le curatrici dello stesso per averci consentito di pubblicarne alcune parti.

### **Forced to Grow Up**

In 1991 I lived in a town which for me was the only place where I could be completely happy. My home, my parents and my friends all around me. We were all equal. We listened to the same music, read the same books; we were young people without a care in the world. We lived from one day to the next. Although one could feel war in the air in Pakrac since March 1991, we paid no attention. How could you feel the war in a town of unity, a town full of harmony? To whom could it even occur that we would have to part? And then that August, fatal for all of us, came. We are leaving the town not realising that we shall never meet again. We did not even say good-byes. “We'll be back”. That was the last sentence we uttered, unaware that we were wrong.

I was leaving the town looking at all those buildings, streets, parks and they seemed to be telling me that I would never come back. The war has started. Shooting all around me, the noise of planes, blood, fear. I felt I had to help those people although I was only 17 years old. As I had completed two years of the secondary medical school I went to the hospital to help. I didn't realise that I had become a part of them, that in a way I had become a part of history written there. They, however, sent me to a village right next to Pakrac.

It was the frontline and I was a nurse on that frontline. Night fell. I went up the hill and watched Pakrac. Pakrac was ablaze. Imagine the feeling as you watch while the town in which you spent the best moments of your life disappear. As if a part of you is disappearing. Watching the town, I realised that this was not a bad dream and that it was reality. That moment I grew up. I was forced to grow up.

Two months later I arrived in Belgrade; a new environment, new people. I was a stranger to them. Different speech, different mindset. I did not belong in that milieu but I had nowhere else to go.

Three years have passed since then. I am still a stranger but now I am a stranger in my town. Some new people have come there, some new kids and the town has lost its soul. And to the other part of the town, where I grew up, I cannot go. The enemies are there. And I am an adult. I've jumped over that boundary between childhood, serenity and the real, sombre and hard life. I've jumped across the wall. I left happiness, serenity, lightness of life behind me. I found myself in an environment ridden with worries. I am expected to be independent and take life seriously.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ivi*, p. 98.

I cannot go back. I cannot go back across the wall. I have to move forward. Life is ahead of me. I knew I had to suppress my emotions and forget the past. I've begun a new life and I defy it with my behaviour and my persistence. I move through it turning towards my future and forgetting the past.

Romana Romanić  
(*Feminist Notebooks 2/1994*)

### **More Bags than Hands**

My neighbour drove me as far as Tilave and left me there. Leaving, he whispered to me, "Don't tell anything to anyone, no one needs to know who you are". Those words upset me, but I looked around silently. My two children held on to my trousers and I held my ten-month-old baby in my arms. Armed men wearing different uniforms with different symbols stood around me. A helicopter landed on a nearby field and coffins were being slid into it. I shivered, and stood there, hopelessly waiting for some means of transport. My first destination was Pale, where I was to stay the night. I nervously crumpled a piece of paper with the name of the man who could put me up. I had never seen him before. All I knew about him was that he was my neighbour's father. A van finally stopped and we managed to get in. There were no seats inside. I put my baby's blanket on the dusty floor so the children could sit down; I sat in the dust.

The journey to Pale lasted for two hours, because we used the long way. We finally reached our destination and got out of the van, white with dust. I turned around, everyone seemed to have somewhere to go and I just stood there confused, not having anywhere to go. A little frightened, I entered a restaurant and politely asked for the telephone. A young man pushed the phone toward me, not asking any questions. I dialled the number and waited. The phone rang but no one answered. I wondered if my host was spending the nice spring day outdoors. Disappointed, I put the phone down and gathered my children and my bags. I had a lot of things because of the children; I could not pick up all the bags with my two hands so I tied them together and began dragging them. We proceeded slowly, but still we moved on. I had walked a hundred meters when a car stopped in front of me. I saw a uniformed man and I winced, stepping back. I quickly recovered, thinking: "This man does not know who I am". I got in the car with my children and the man drove me to my destination with no questions asked. My host stood in his yard watching us without interest. In order to get out of an embarrassing situation, I ran up to him and said, "Uncle Duško, you have guests". The man looked at us in disbelief, because he saw a person he had never seen before. I quickly explained who I was and why I was there, quietly, so the soldier who was approaching would not notice anything. Our host took our bags and put them under a tree. Green grass spread like a carpet and the spring sun blinded me because I had spent the last forty days in a cellar. I refused the host's offer to go into the house, wanting to breathe the fresh air as long as possible. He gave us a room and nice clean sheets. I took my clothes off for the first time in a month. At home, I had slept fully dressed, never knowing when the shooting would start and when I would need to rush down to the damp cellar with my children. The quiet and safety of the room were so alluring and we fell asleep.

At about six o'clock we were awakened by a gentle knocking on the door. Our hostess had made coffee and invited me to drink it with her. The good woman insisted on seeing us off despite my protests. When departing, I cried and kissed her as if she were my mother, and as the bus left for Belgrade, she waved with tears in her eyes.

The journey was filled with constant police and military checks. No one asked us women anything. A group of people waited for us in Vlasenica, where I was born and through which we passed. I expected to see my only sister in the crowd; she was to give me some money. The driver just rushed by the people, but I saw my sister. My children and I instinctively started shouting to the driver to stop, and a hundred meters later he stopped. My sister ran to the bus and gave me the money and a bag full of home-made cakes. My sister (together with her husband) was later arrested in Vlasenica and taken to a camp, and I still don't know what has happened to them. I will always regret that I did not take her with me that day. People around me on the bus talked about the horrors of war; everyone had his own point of view. I sat, confused, watching the places I had once loved so much, now wishing to go away from them as far as possible. I listened to unfamiliar music on the radio. Chetnik songs, I knew, but I had no comment. We had been brought up differently. We had read many books about the chetniks, ustashas and other name-smearing low-life of our people. My God, I wondered where I had come from. I wanted to cry, but I didn't dare; tears glistened in the corners of my eyes.

A few hours later, the bus stopped on the highway and the driver indifferently warned the passengers going to Šabac that they had to get out then because the bus would not stop in the center of the town. We got out; the same problem again: too many bags for just my two hands. I stood there for some time and again I tied the bags together and started dragging them over the dirty and bumpy pavement. People walked by and silently watched, but no one wanted to help. I had very little money so I was not able to pay for a taxi to the bus station. It was a two-kilometres journey and we made it, but I still don't know how I did it.

Tired and sad, we reached the station and I sat down to relax a little. I didn't hurry, all my buses and trains had departed a long time ago had it been April 3 or 4? When I had pulled myself together a little, I went up to buy a ticket for Sremska Mitrovica, The bus was leaving in a few minutes. People pushed each-other in a hurry to get a seat, and I was left with my bags at the end of the line. I had to sit on the dirty and half-torn bags because there were no more seats. People glared at me and I started crying.

Nobody asked anything. A younger man approached me and asked me if I was a refugee. I just nodded; I didn't have the courage to look at him. I felt as if I would start to scream. He pushed a crumpled banknote into my hand and told me to buy juice for the children. This made me even sadder and I started wailing loudly. I was not able to control myself.

The journey to Sremska Mitrovica was very short, or so it seemed. At the bus station, we immediately got on another bus to take us to the village which was our final destination. It was a rich village in Srem at the foot of Fruška Gora. The corn had just started to grow, the sunflowers and other crops were bending under the gentle touch of wind. Full-grown wheat looked like waves on the restless sea. The

blood-red sun, far away to the west, began to set. I watched this site through the windows of the bus, a site that could not be seen in Bosnia. There, the still-yellow sun sets behind the big mountains. My soul was empty, my eyes dry because I had no more tears.

The house in which I was to live was at the very beginning of the village. My two friends who had left Sarajevo earlier were sitting there while their children were playing in the yard. The driver stopped the bus in front of the house at my request, although it was not the bus stop, and we jumped out immediately. My friends were not surprised to see me because when we had parted in Sarajevo, I had promised them that I would leave the city if the situation deteriorated. We did not need to tell each other anything – our tears said everything.

The arrival of a Muslim woman in a village which was 100 percent Serbian did not pass unnoticed. The men watched me with curiosity and the women with suspicion. My first and only task was to convince them that I had come there with good intentions and that I had nothing to do with the war that raged in Bosnia. I began to work diligently. For the first time in my life, I worked with a hoe and I learned quickly as if I had done it all my life. I learned about what it means to work for a wage although I had only read about it and seen it in films before.

In the village, some people began to like me and I returned the emotion willingly. I helped older women work in their gardens, wash clothes, slaughter pigs and so on. In return, they gave me food and clothes. Life went on, I thought, trying to pretend like it was alright. But it was not alright. People who had come from Bosnia in the 1960's still lived in the village. They threatened the owner of the house in which I was staying and other people who were friends with me that they would kill them. My friends did not pay much attention to them. But when I realized that I was creating an embarrassing situation for my host, I tried to find another house in the village where I could live. People in that village are rich and they all have two houses: an old one and a new one. But not one of them wanted to let me live on their property – even in the worst, oldest house with no electricity or water. They all found an excuse not to accept me. I saw many old women cry while searching for new accommodations. When I finally realized what the problem was, I stopped searching for a house; I stopped torturing myself and the villagers, too.

The more time passed, the clearer it became that I would have to leave. During the summer and fall, I could earn enough for my basic needs along with the Red Cross packet (which, alone, was not enough). I was far away from the city and thus, far away from what the Red Cross gave to some others (school supplies, clothes, etc.). Winter came and there was not much work. I could not allow others to pay for my needs (milk for the baby and other necessities), so I decided to leave. But where to go? I had no idea that refugee holds where I could get accommodation and food for free had been organized. I decided to return to Bosnia. The destination was Fojnica, the house of my friend's parents. But for that journey I needed a passport, because I had to travel through Hungary and Croatia. My Bosnian passport lay in my bag, valid until 1990, and this was 1992. How could I extend the validity when I had no money and did not want to borrow it from others? I decided to sell my husband's wedding ring, the one he had given me when we had parted. I didn't have my own wedding ring because we had gotten

married without one for me, but that's a completely different story. The passport pictures cost nine Deutsch Marks and I could sell the wedding ring for eight Marks, but I still had to cover other costs.

I entered a photo studio and asked the photographer to take my picture for the cheapest price. I explained my situation and he, having thought it over for a few seconds, decided to charge me half the usual price. Good people still exist, I thought. That one act of kindness suddenly encouraged me.

The next day, I took the children to the city centre to have their photos taken. Like in any other town, the usual temptations were everywhere. My younger son asked for a pretzel, but I couldn't afford it. I had the exact amount I needed for the passports. I, too, craved a nice, hot, crispy pretzel but to no avail. I tried to explain to my son that it would be better to forget about the pretzel, but he childishly went on crying: "Please mommy, just one bite".

After a month of extensive interrogation by the Ministry of the Interior about my arrival and my husband's whereabouts, I was granted a passport valid until 1995. I was happy. I had to pack my things again and decide what to take and what to leave behind. The things were all old, but we still needed them. After I had thought about it for a long time, I packed three bags and was ready for the journey.

On April 16 – what a coincidence – we left exactly one year after I had left my home before, neighbours waved goodbye and we all cried.

Our first destination was Novi Sad. From Novi Sad, we were to go to Baja, a town in Hungary, and then to Zagreb and Fojnica. We waited at the Yugoslav border for a long time, but we passed through without problems. Then came the Hungarian border and the Hungarian customs officer came and inspected the passports. He asked me where I was going. After I explained our situation to him, he demanded a certificate, three hundred Deutsch Marks, and a letter of guarantee (for financial support) before letting us into Croatia. How was I, who barely managed to scrape together the money for the trip, supposed to have three hundred Marks? And I didn't have anyone in Croatia who could send me a letter to vouch for me. I was a former sportswoman who had travelled abroad a lot, yet I couldn't understand what was being demanded from me now. I was dumbfounded. The officer left, but he soon came back ordering those of us with red passports to leave the bus and take our things. The Hungarians didn't like red, but I could not believe that they would not let us continue our journey. At that moment I hated the Hungarians; I watched their blank faces, but not one of them wanted to talk. I gathered my children and my bags again and headed back for Yugoslavia.

All four of us sat helplessly on a bench and cried. Where now? I did not want to go back to the village. People stopped and asked us questions. They all wanted to help. Our stupid Balkan people. In one part of this wretched country they fight and in another part they want to help. Nobody asked me who or what I was. They only all asked what they could do to help us. An expensive-looking bus with foreign license plates stopped in front of us and a beautiful lady got out of it. I hadn't seen such a nicely dressed woman for a long time. She approached us and explained in Serbian that they were from Vojvodina and that they worked in Austria and were going to visit relatives for the Easter holidays. She offered to take us with that bus anywhere we wanted to go. I accepted the offer. People looked at me with curiosity

and pity as we got on the bus. They all offered sandwiches, juice, and chocolate. The lady next to me cried, saying that she had no children, but that she sympathized with all the victims of this war, especially the children. My children happily unwrapped and ate the chocolate. Their faces were covered in chocolate. Let it be, I thought. I didn't even attempt to wipe it off them. I let them eat. They hadn't seen chocolate for more than a year.

I was thinking of where to go: Sombor, Subotica, or somewhere else? I chose Subotica, not knowing why. When parting, the woman gave me a few banknotes and some change. I glanced at the money and smiled. They were Deutschmarks. Not much, but enough to help.

Night fell. I didn't know where to find accommodations. A man offered to take us to the Red Cross for a fee of five Marks. We arrived in front of an old building in the center of Subotica. The windows were lit, which meant they were still working. A man was sitting in a big room, reading something. I knocked softly and entered, my boys stained with chocolate coming in after me. When I explained everything that had happened to me, he phoned someone. I heard him say: "I have a hopeless case, accept them even if it's for one night only". The man told us that we would spend that night in an orphanage called the Cradle. We went there on the public transport and were received by a kind nurse. A wing had been designated for refugee mothers with small children. Everyone wanted to know who we were and where we had come from. Having exchanged the basic information, we took a shower and hit the bed. The children fell asleep immediately but I lay awake worrying about what lay ahead of us. But, thanks to the Commissariat for Refugees, we were granted the right to stay at that establishment.

We spent an unforgettable five months there. The lake of Pak brought us peace and safety, and we felt as if we were at the seaside. We forgot who we were and why we were there. We walked the city streets because we were eager for that long-awaited experience and it excited us. I spent all my free time with abandoned children. I was especially fond of one year-old babies. I couldn't decide whose fate was worse – theirs or ours. Tragedy was our mutual bond.

But happiness is always short-lived. The director of the orphanage decided that refugees could no longer stay there, and we had to go again. New farewells and new tears. My eldest son had to leave school and his newly found friends, again. The question "where now?" arose once more. The answer to that question was easier now that the UN High Commission for Refugees was taking care of us. The bus came to pick us up in front of the Cradle and four of us with children got in and left. The others stayed in Subotica looking for private accommodation.

While riding on that comfortable bus, I remembered my youth and the days when I was care-free, travelling through our beautiful country from Triglav to Djevdjelija. I felt as if I was travelling to a basketball game or a tournament. The excited voice of my son brought me back to reality: "Mom, look – a forest!" I was in disbelief – this was Banat, Vojvodina – there were no forests except on Fruška Gora. But I looked out of the window and, indeed, there was a forest. Checking on my geographic knowledge, I remembered that these could be the woods of Deliblatska Peščara.



We quickly came to a refugee settlement built in the forest. A group of children brimming with curiosity met us. We got off and took out our baggage. The driver was in a hurry, not giving us time to change our minds and go back to Subotica. My friends were disappointed with the place and protested loudly. I had no choice; I had to stay there. I tried to discover everything that was nice about those surroundings: sports grounds, forests, peace, and the nostalgic sunset. But I was afraid of the people. I was curious to find out what nationality they were. My God, what times these were! Never before had I paid attention to such things. I had been married to a man of a different ethnicity and I had never considered it a disadvantage. The director of the camp explained that there were people of different nationalities there and that no one should tolerate discrimination. I soon discovered that the people working in the settlement never did discriminate, but the refugees who lived there did.

My arrival at The Danube tent was commented on with the following words: "A balija has arrived – but why in our house?". My boys didn't leave our room because they faced constant fights with other children. The kids, like their parents, used bad words: "balija", "Ustasha". I was sorry for my children; they were not strong enough to defend themselves. But, also, I could not resent the children and what they said. The first distribution of clothing for children up to two years of age brought me discomfort and sadness – my youngest son only got house slippers, because we supposedly did not need other clothes. But my child was happy because the slippers had bunnies on them.

One day, during lunch, a woman came up to me and spat at me in front of fifty other people. I heard her say, "You got slippers, you balija, and my grandson didn't. What are you doing here? Your children should be going around naked and barefoot". She said some other things but I did not hear her. I felt a buzzing in my head and my whole body began to shake. I thought I would faint; I left the half-eaten lunch and ran out of the cafeteria. The tears came by themselves. I felt as if most of the people in the cafeteria approved of this evil woman and her behaviour.

I felt terrible in those days. I wanted to die, but then what would my three small children do? With the help of my new friends, I managed to overcome the situation. I used to cry often at night, and during the day I would wander aimlessly, holding my youngest child's hand. Just when everything had passed and people had begun to forget, a friend whom I saw every day came up to me all upset. She told me that a professor from Sarajevo (another refugee at the camp) had threatened her because she was my friend. I had also heard him threatening that all Muslims – balijas – would be banished from Serbia the moment the Radical party came to power. I knew that the Radicals didn't stand a chance – at least for the time being – to win an election, but this sounded ominous and brought about another round of sorrow and tears. Many nights, I used to wonder what I had done to make people behave toward me in such a way. I knew that my desperation came from the fact that I was not capable of getting used to it. I had lived for so long in a city of love with the greatest possible mix of ethnicities.

A parcel arrived from the village where I had been staying before the New Year. It was sent to me by the people who loved me and who still love me. My

happiness was infinite, not because of what was in the parcel, but because I was reminded again that there are people capable of loving regardless of nationality.

Merima Nosić

*(Feminist Notebooks 1/1994; The Suitcase: refugee voices from Bosnia and Croatia, 1997)*

Translated by Dubravka Radanov

### **Run, Move the Children<sup>7</sup>**

You know, they brought me to the hospital in a body bag. Ah, if the Lord didn't take me then – then God, He must be choosy. Maybe it's better. Who'd be looking after my Janko now? He's only fifteen and a very good child, he is. In the hospital then, it wouldn't sink in that my Mira had been killed.

I live in Biošća. It's a village near Ilijaš. Ilijaš is at the foot of the hill, and on the hill are the Serbian lines. On 28 December 1992 the balijas set off from Visoko and broke the lines. The shooting went on all through the night. We didn't know that balijas had taken the position. Well, in the morning, around half past six, I stepped out on the terrace. I see shooting going on, children asleep, daddy on the position. In front of me – the terrace strewn with bullets. Mother got up, says: "Get away from that terrace, it'll hit you". I look across the street and what do I see – Muslims. They have the same uniforms, but with lilies on their sleeves. They shout, they yell and beat something. They always do it when conquering, motherfuckers. And my aunt was there, too. She says: "Pack up. Get the children up and let's flee". When I roused my Mira, Janko, oh dear, I say: "Dress well, son, help your sis, warm clothes, we've got to flee".

My Mira doesn't understand a thing. What does a child know about war? Oh, dear, when I only think of it. Mira was crying all the time. She couldn't even eat. I would ask her: "Darling, shall mommy prepare something?". "Never mind, mommy. Just be here with me, be here". We set off to my aunt's house. Everybody was on the run. The whole village towards the shelter by the same road. Fuck him who made it down there. As if we couldn't have dug it in our village. All columns managed to get away, except ours, the last one, and we got it bad. Mother, myself, my Mira, Janko, my aunt, all running. You run and run, then crouch and look around. You can't run just like that, there were shells and bursts of fire. Failing in front of you, and behind you, and we on the road. My aunt took shelter in a ditch by the road. I tell her: "I can't, what'll I do with the children?" And she says: "I'll help you".

No sooner did she say that, Mother was hit. She wailed: "Rada, run, move the children! They'll get us all, I've been hit". My aunt jumped to help her and a burst of fire mowed her down. She died less than three days later. I don't know where to turn. There's blood all around us. All I knew was that I had to hide the children at all cost. So I envelop them in my arms and make them crawl in front of me when something hits me in the legs. I didn't feel pain, only my legs turned numb. I felt

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<sup>7</sup> Title – Ed.

something warm and saw blood spilling red like a rose. Blood smelling, heavy and sticky as it is...

I try to pull my wits together, to move the children. I shout to Janko: "Janko, son, take care of your sis". And my Mira saw it: "Mother, you're bleeding!" And she started to turn, didn't lift her head more than 20 centimetres, just to see where I'd been wounded, when a bullet hit her in the back of her head and her little head fell onto Janko's chest. Everything danced before my eyes and froze suddenly. I still see her little head and Janko's bloody jacket, as if somebody sprinkled blood on it. I try to shut the eyes. I open them again, I think this is not real, but every time that same picture – her little head blown to pieces on his chest. I don't know how long I just stared and blinked.

Janko's scream brought me back: "Mommy, they killed my sis!". "No, sonny, no, just keep crawling". "They did, Mother, look!" Oh, Lord, what do I do now? If I could only pull Janko out, but I can't, I'm wounded. Shells are falling, bullets whizzing around. I say to Janko: "Put your sister's head down, son, get out slowly and run, but don't stand up, just crawl". "No, Mom, if they kill you, I'll jump up so they kill me too". "They won't, son, just crawl" I persuaded him, but he still stood up and set off running. I'd call out to him, but I'm too weak. While he was running there was no fire or I didn't hear it. Maybe they'd run out of ammunition, who knows; anyway, I hear him shout: "I'm alive, Mom, I'm hiding!". Thank God. And now, I, woe to me, worry about my Mira. I keep thinking she's alive, but her little head is shattered. I hear an armoured vehicle coming. I said, now they'll flatten my child in the middle of the road, I have to move her. I'll move her just a little bit to the side, but I can't stand up – my legs are wounded. Somehow I made it crawling, got her under the chest and legs and slowly made it to my knees, nothing hurts, I feel nothing. I don't know how long it took. But I barely made it to the edge of the road when something hit me in the stomach, oh my God. But I don't leave my Mira. I push her to a side, turn and see that my guts are beginning to come out. With a hand, I pressed down and lie on the asphalt. I say, fuck it, I'll kick the bucket, so what.

I also remember that the armoured vehicle pulled up and picked us up. I didn't know it was ours. They took my Mira to the morgue. Me they took to the hospital in Ilijaš, then to Pale where they operated me the first time. There I suffered clinical death and a nervous breakdown, all in one night. Afterwards they took me by helicopter to the Military Medical Academy, then to *Dragiša Migović*<sup>8</sup> where they did six operations and I survived.

I'm telling you, God won't take just anyone. If only my child hadn't been killed. My mother was wounded, the bullet went just through, she recovered quickly but now moves slower. My father then freaked out completely. I was lucky, God looked after Janko. All I want is for the blasted war to end and God to preserve my Janko.

(April 1996)

(*The Age of Reason 2, 1998*)

Translated by Mirka Janković

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<sup>8</sup> Hospital in Belgrad.

### A Child's Story

I was only 14 then. It was 1994. I remember well... it was a beautiful winter. January... I liked best the twilights of that beautiful winter I always looked forward to seeing my friends. Somehow, we all loved each other more then. It helped us to go through the war easier. And we had to go through it...

Shells, killings, woundings, flights, nights in the cellar, no contact with the close relatives living less than 5 kilometres away, waiting for the father from the line, concern for my mother and brother in my own way... these are all the things I grew up with. My serene disposition kept me up and helped me to survive. As it does to this day.

Of all the evil that happened to me and around me I remember that winter the most. We were hungry. The distribution of humanitarian aid stopped suddenly, all the stocks were exhausted; there was nowhere to take anything from any more. There was no grass either, it had disappeared under the snow; it was a harsh and severe winter.

My father was on the frontline; he had been sent to Treskavica and somehow just at that time, he was absent longer than usually. In the house, or rather in the cellar, there remained, with other women and children, my brother, my mother and I. My brother was 12. For seven days non-stop we ate only boiled rice. I don't remember where we boiled it; I think that many did it on melted snow. And why should we be different?

The only thing we still had in store was the popular *Kabbash* soap. But how can one eat that?

Quite by accident a friend, not particularly close, asked my mother, thin, emaciated as she was but brave: "Your boy is still small; would you let the girl come with me?"

"Where to?" – Mother asked.

"I have a brother there and they have potatoes, but no soap. You can get a kilo of potatoes for a cake of soap. How many of them do you have?"

Mother gathered the soap cakes around the house and managed to find 10. She had no other choice but to send me, hungry as I was, to cross Mount Igman on foot on the way to Pazarić.

We set off early and we climbed and climbed and climbed. I was excited, scared, and I also worried how I would manage several days without my place, my mother, brother and pals. It was the first time since the beginning of the war that I was going somewhere. Rather different from sitting in a cellar. We put the soap in a small army backpack and set off. I remember I even did up my curly hair as if I was about to go out with my girl friends rather than on such a long journey. I even dressed up a little, I didn't find the climb too difficult although every bit of my body ached and every step up the mountain was a struggle.

We had to hurry all the time because they could see us from the surrounding hills and fire at us. I understood then that the survival instinct can beat all fears. We walked without a rest. It seemed to me that we would never arrive. When we finally did arrive at night time, I was welcomed by the best food in the world at the brother's of Mother's friend. I ate like crazy and was sorry that my mother and my

brother were not there. We were to move on the next day. I remember I could barely get up, I was so sore all over I knew there was a long journey ahead of us and also that there was no knowing that we'd be successful in swapping the merchandise we had. I merely asked myself: "Have I become a smuggler? I don't want that" And then I comforted myself by saying to myself that I wasn't a smuggler but somebody who was helping her mother and brother to survive. It kept me going.

I was very lucky and already in the first house where an old man lived, I managed to swap the soap. The old man took pity on me and instead of 10 gave me 16 kg of potatoes. I begged him to give me less because it was too heavy for me to carry. He cried and begged me to take it. I did not know then why he cried, but I also felt like crying as I begged him to reduce the burden.

I finished my part of the business straightaway. These people were not all that happy so that we spent the next four days walking. I carried my all too heavy backpack all the time. It tore at my shoulders and I suffered more than can be endured. I hid my tears, cried but kept carrying it. The pride would not let me allow anyone to help even though people asked. "No, I can do it", I would say and that is how I still behave.

The happiest moment in my life was when I turned back home. It seems to me somehow that the return took less time. I wasn't afraid of anything. Not even going down that same mountain.

"Let them see me, let them fire, at least my mother and brother will get the potatoes. Somebody will take it to them if something happens to me".

They awaited me at the window, even thinner and weaker somehow. They were very happy to see me. Full of pride, I turned over the potatoes (for which we later got a lot of flour) and that same evening, heedless of the aching muscles and fatigue, I went out and met with my friends as if nothing had ever happened.

I lived in Hrasnica near Sarajevo throughout the war. I was 12 when it started and 16 when it ended. Fortunately I did not lose any member of my family during the war, but, like everybody else, I lost a great deal.

Tamara Mišković, 2007.  
(published for the first time)  
Translated by Mirka Janković

### **The Nightmare**

When I decided to write about my wartime experience, I believed that I'd be focusing on some specific events. Now, as I've sat down to write, memories spill over. They are so vivid and so painful. Fear emerges, that fear which forced me to be on the move all the time during the war. Fear, hatred, helplessness. It was all in me, like a time-bomb. I feared and hated at one and the same time. I was afraid of, and hated, all those I did not see, all those who were leaving Zenica because every departure left me ever lonelier and more insecure. It took me long time to realise that my hatred was not aimed at any one in particular, that it was an expression of my helplessness, disbelief that this was happening, disbelief that they were fitting us into some ethnic frames, that they were killing each other because of that, that

somebody could hate me and that somebody could be afraid of me only because I was Naira –

a Muslim.

When I realised that, my hatred turned into support to other people and thereby to myself.

During the war I lived in a part of the town that was mostly shelled. It was an old building, unsafe and inadvisable under wartime conditions. No cellar, no concrete slab, no double wall. It all intensified my feeling of helplessness. The shelling was not intensive, but it happened almost daily. Just a few shells, just so that we lived in uncertainty, and uncertainty drives one crazy. It was the game of nerves. My daughter Meliha was 6. Like very child of that age, she needed to play. Where? The unanswerable question! To let her out or keep her in the house? Whichever decision I made, I felt unhappy.

1993. The year of blockade. Without electricity, without water, without food. My daughter is about to start school. It was the saddest day in my life. I suppose it is natural to want that one's children have better conditions than one had. My daughter was far from having the conditions even similar to those I had. I remember my first day at school. Mother put on a new, green suit. I was decked up, new clothes, braids. My teacher had a wonderful haircut. I remember that solemn atmosphere. I was so proud to have started school. I was so happy. It was one of the important days in my life. I remember it gladly.

Meliha's, first day at school filled me with sadness. I cried. Instead of a festive atmosphere – cramps in the stomach. Will the danger alarm sound? Meliha's bag was bought on the green market. And we were lucky to find it! The child is going to school and has no shoes. The shops are spookily empty, only an item or two here and there. I spent a whole day walking from one shoe shop to another, looking for size 33. At long last in Beograd Shoe Shop (what irony!) I found rubber boots without lining, size 34. It doesn't matter that there is no lining, she can wear woollen socks. I was so happy to have found them. When I gave the money to the sales lady and she said she could not take it because she didn't have any change, I was seized with panic. What if somebody comes and buys that one and only pair of boots?! How will Meliha go to school? I sat down and waited until a salesman appeared and brought small change. At long last I held in my hands those rubber boots size 34 and was happy! That year was totally crazy. They spent more time in the cellar than in the classroom, but, most importantly, they survived.

Spring 1994. The blockade is finally lifted off Zenica; end of the conflict between the BiH Army and the CCD. We have friends in Žepče, some 40 km from Zenica. The BiH Army was in Zenica and the CCD in Žepče. We are Muslims, they are Croats. When the clashes started, the telephone connection was broken and we could receive no news from them. And then, one day, at the peak of the conflict, a message through radio amateurs. They inform us that they are alive. They want to know how we are doing. I was so happy that they'd communicated, that they thought about us. It was the confirmation of our friendship.

When the conflict ended the first convoy set off from Žepče to Zenica under the umbrella of the Catholic Church. It was headed by Brother Stipan. That man had done a lot for Zenica. People loved him and respected him. They nicknamed him

Brother Suljo. Parcels arrived from Žepče. Friends and relations had prepared them. In the evening, around 9 o'clock, as we were sitting as we were, without electricity and breathing the smell of the tallow candle, we received a call from the District Office. They said that there was a parcel from Žepče for us too. I received it as the most normal news in the world. I went to bed, but I couldn't sleep. I tossed and turned and then I said aloud that I was thinking about that parcel. The parcel was a sign that I, that we were in somebody's thoughts. So many times I had the impression that we'd been forgotten by everybody, that nobody cared about us any more. And then, when you get any kind of confirmation that you matter to somebody, that he thinks of you, it prompts you to look for the meaning of life, especially in war.

We went to the District Office at half past eight although we'd been told to come around 11. We simply could not wait. We took the parcel and hurried home where our daughter was awaiting us. When she opened the parcel, on the top we saw pâtés tins and chocolate. One chocolate had been opened. Afterwards my friend told me that they'd found out about the convoy suddenly and had only a couple of hours to hand in the parcel so that they just crammed in what they had in the house, including that opened chocolate. When Meliha saw the pâtés and the chocolate, and she'd long forgotten that they ever existed, she began to cry. She sobbed. It defies description. Even as I'm writing about it, I can hear her sobbing and crying.

Flour, vegetable oil, sugar, lentils, rice and occasionally cheese were the staple during the war, all the rest one could only dream about.

That year I managed to get to them, for Easter. The trip which normally takes 40 minutes lasted several hours. Checks, papers... A part of the way by bus, a part of the way on foot... But when I saw her! Incredible! As if we'd parted only yesterday, not a whole year ago. We sat in her kitchen and, sipping coffee as we used to do, we talked. At some point I realised that nothing had changed between us, except that we talked about different things. Our stories were different but our relationship had remained the same. It made me happy. We no longer talked about children, the faculty, things we did to our houses; we talked about what we'd been through during the war. It confirmed to me that nothing could destroy the true friendship. I felt immensely happy. I had the impression of freedom because I could go and see my friends.

During the war I worked at the NPA Centre for Women. I worked with children of pre-school age and at the same time underwent training for psycho-social support. The fall of Žepa and Srebrenica marked 1995. Some of those who were fortunate enough to leave Srebrenica, were to come to Zenica, temporarily. At the entrance to the town a reception centre was set up, or rather, tents were pitched there. They were fenced off to protect people from journalists and other inquisitive individuals. The journalists crowded on all sides and waited for the buses. Our group from the Centre for Women was to help with the accommodation in the tents and lend initial psychological help.

We arrived at the reception centre around noon. I thought I'd take some tranquiliser but a colleague said she wanted to experience it all. I thought that she was right. One had to experience it indeed.

I was quite jittery at first, but then we started making little jokes. It was dark humour, it couldn't be darker. It was our defence. We waited. Hours passed by. Night fell and there was not a trace of the buses. We had received suggestions as to what we should and should not do when they arrived. We were told to be ready for all possible reactions of those people. Fear began to surface. Each one of us was to enter a bus, help people to accommodate and talk with them. Enter the bus? Tell them what? Welcome to Zenica! How ironic! So, what is one to say? That question drummed in my head. Exhausted, frightened, lost, I fell asleep for a brief moment. I was woken up. It was past midnight, the buses were arriving. One could see cameras around the entrance to the reception centre.

I was to enter the first bus. I did not realise that I was trembling. A colleague of mine told me that the next day. She said I'd been shaking all over. I asked somebody, I've no idea whom, to enter with me and stand behind my back to give me some feeling of security. I entered and looked at them. They looked so lost, harrowed, lifeless. Only old people, children and women. As if there was no life in them. I said salaam to them. That is what occurred to me. They only looked at me and bent their heads. I said I'd help them with accommodation. Again nothing. Strange – the bus was full, yet spooky silence reigned in it.

People were quickly taken to their tents. Some asked for tranquilising sweets. Some performed *abdest*<sup>99</sup> to pray. Some sat in front of the tents and stared wordless. An old man had lost his wife and we looked for her. A man felt a chest pain and developed spasms. I ran to get the doctor. On our way back I saw four men carrying him. One holding him by one arm, another one by the other arm, one holding his one leg, another the other leg. As if carrying a bag, not a man. He had contractions. They lowered him on the ground. The man expired. He had come to Zenica to die! That was my first meeting with death. Face to face.

I moved on to check, from one tent to the other. I heard silence. Eerie silence. So many people in one place and such silence. Horrible, unbearable, fearful. I hope I'll never experience it again. The silence which breaks, maddens, hurts.

That morning I arrived home around half past four. With me I carried telephone numbers, the numbers of their relatives and friends in Sarajevo. I arrived home and started to call. I didn't care about the time because I knew that people were waiting for information, that they wanted to know whether their relatives and friends were alive or not. I called and talked. Those were moving conversations. The relatives, barely believing that they had reached Zenica alive, cried, talked and I listened. I remember a conversation: a lady, after hearing that her daughter-in-law was alive, all flustered as she was, started to speak: "Just let her come... Not to worry... We have everything we need to eat and dress... Tell her to pass through the tunnel carefully, to bend her head down so she doesn't get hurt..."

We visited the camp regularly during the following days. Little by little, people began to talk. I met a ten-year-old girl who had been on a visit with her Granny for holidays and stayed there. Her mother had stayed in Sarajevo and given birth there. They haven't heard from each other for a long time. It dawned on me that I could take her home and that she could call her mother from there. Her grandmother

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<sup>99</sup> Religious ablution



approved. When we were in the car and on the way home, panic began to seize me. What if her mother was killed? What should I do? I decided that I'd call her mother first and then, depending on the situation, decide what to do next. When we entered the apartment, her behaviour and her reactions were touching.

Oh, look, it's a bed... You've got TV too... Look, the table..." she said delighted, going from one room to the next. It only then dawned on me that they had retreated to the woods and lived like that for months. To her, my apartment was something she had lost a long time ago: security, cosiness, simply – home.

I called her mother. Fortunately, the woman was alive. The conversation between a ten-year-old and her mother could leave nobody indifferent. What is it, Mother? I'm fine, don't cry. We had enough food. How's my brother. "What w are you? Don't cry. What's the matter, Mother? Don't cry..." Those were the words of an old woman and she was only ten.

Memories keep coming back. The war separated us from people we loved. Some we may never see again and some we manage to find after all. I found my friend after 14 years. She is a Serb and my daughter's godmother. When the war started, she was in Banja Luka. When the war ended, I tried to get her but the telephone number had been changed. She had changed her place of work, she had changed her surname. Whenever I met somebody from Banja Luka, I begged them to help me find some information about her. And nothing. For years on end. And then, by some miracle of God, in 2006 I went to Banja Luka again to a seminar and happened to see a man who looked familiar. We began to talk trying to find out where we'd met before. And so we came up with the Bjelava Student Hostel in Sarajevo where we lived as students. This gentleman knew us both. He told me that he had been talking with my friend about me a few days earlier. She was in Banja Luka! We called her right away. The first thing she said: "Woman, d'you know how long I've been looking for you!" And I had been her. I never stopped. After 14 years we were together again. My daughter had finally found her "kuma" (godmother) from Banja Luka as she used to call her when she was little. And again, that feeling that there never was this interruption in our relationship. We just continued, true, a little more mature and a little older. Friendship will always be friendship.

This war made me feel helpless, become familiar with the most intense forms of fear, when you fear for your own life, your child's life, your parents' life, your friends... This war showed me how unendurable was incertitude... how silence could be horrifying... I'd like to never, ever live through it again I or anyone else. I'd like nobody to experience that silence, that incertitude that helplessness and that fear.

This war made me assess myself, my values, my friends. It was a major test. I am proud and glad that my values were not shaken and that my friendships were confirmed.

I'd like as many people as possible to experience that pleasure, to be proud of themselves, to be proud that they are humans. Only people who are content, can build peace; the discontented ones can only lead to violence, to war.

To assess oneself and one's values, to get confirmation for one's friendships, one only needs the will and the courage.

Naira Hodžić, 2007.  
(NGO Sezam, Zenica)  
(published for the first time)  
Translated by Mirka Janković

### **Enisa**

They took me away from my apartment on the evening of April 30. They had taken my husband earlier in the morning. I don't know the names of the people who came that day – two of them were wearing police uniforms and the third was in plain clothes. I'm not sure whether they were from Prijedor at all. During the several months since we had moved from Banjaluka, I hadn't got to know that many people from Prijedor. We had been a newlywed couple and we had been spending a lot of our time enjoying each other's company.

But we did have friends – a somewhat older couple whom my husband had known since childhood. They had found me a job in Prijedor and that's why we moved there in the first place. Being a school teacher, we had hoped I would have no problem finding a job in a suburban school or in one of the surrounding villages. These friends had fled Prijedor two months prior to our arrest. It had been a sudden decision and they had advised us to do the same. Unfortunately, we didn't listen.

We thought the war wouldn't break out. We believed that the Serbian louts would eventually calm down. They hadn't been threatened either in Prijedor or in Bosnia – Serbs had always ridden the crest in everything.

When they came to take my husband away, they said that it was only for a routine interview and that they would give him a ride from the police station to his workplace. We were unaware of the fact that during the previous night, Serb military police had taken control of Prijedor and had started arresting people. My husband didn't struggle – he went with them peacefully. He never showed at work that day and I have never seen him since.

I was picked up by the same person in plain clothes and one of the policemen who had taken my husband away. They said that I only had to confirm his statement that he hadn't been politically involved with the PDA<sup>10</sup> and that in a couple of hours I would be enjoying a warm manly embrace. I realized I was in trouble only when I was blindfolded in a car which did not have any police markings.

They drove for what seemed like half an hour, maybe a whole hour, and then they took me out and put me in a room. I know it was on the ground floor because we didn't climb stairs. Someone pushed me into a room and I fell down on the concrete floor. When the door slammed shut I took off the blindfold but couldn't see a thing. It was pitch dark. I sensed someone breathing and mumbling in the room and assumed I wasn't alone in there. I didn't have time to find out who it was because the door opened suddenly and let in some light from the corridor. In the doorway, I saw a figure in the military uniform and it was only when that person

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<sup>10</sup> The PDA = The Party of Democratic Action or Stranka Demokratske Akcije = SDA, was the major Muslim party.

bawled at me for taking of the blindfold that I realized it was a woman. She slammed the door abruptly so I couldn't see who else was there in the room.

She returned almost instantly with a new blindfold which she then put over my eyes and tied it with a piece of string. It was actually a dirty men's sock, the stench of which almost made me throw up. She then took me to another room and told me to take off my clothes and shoes. She took off my bracelet, my watch and my wedding ring, and then she ripped off my earrings. I had nothing on but for the blindfold which I didn't dare take off even when, for a brief moment, they left me alone in the room.

Soon after, my warden returned with another person and I heard her say: "The stinky bitch is all yours – do whatever you want with her". This other person was a man – I knew that the moment he grabbed me by my arm and pushed me onto a bed. "You really stink, you filthy bitch", he yelled in my ear pressing my breasts with both his hands. I don't know where I found the courage to retort that it wasn't me but the sock. I must have blurted it spontaneously as had never been so scared in my entire life.

"Aaah, you would want that blindfold off, wouldn't you teacher?! You'd like to look at me? Oh well, have a look at your Novica, but try not to forget that Serbian socks don't stink. You should be honoured that a Serb wants to fuck you... You remember Novica from Form 4A?" he enquired taking the blindfold off my eyes.

For a moment I couldn't see anything although the light was on. When my eyes adapted to the light, I saw his face but I didn't recognise it. I still find it hard to believe that he had been my student – that my former student raped me. Judging by his age, he could have been from that first generation I had taught. He looked younger than twenty which means he could have been in the fourth form when I started teaching. Yet, his face was unfamiliar and I couldn't remember anyone with that name.

During that first night of my captivity seven more men raped me but I couldn't see their faces since Novica – if that was his real name at all – put that blindfold back on my face. He tied me to the bed before he left. Tied to the bed-frame with my legs spread and my arms fastened above my head, I was an object of abuse for seven young men – the seven Jugović – as that woman warden called them. She would occasionally enter the room to see if I needed a "wash". Later I was to find out that the "wash" was a splash of cold water to bring me around when I lost consciousness.

The next day I was transported in a truck to another location together with other women-prisoners who were also blindfolded with their hands tied behind their back. After a long drive, we were left in a barracks without windows where the light got in only when the door opened. I don't know where that place was – it might have been near Bosanska Gradiška, as one of the wardens mentioned to another he had to go to Gradiška to have a tyre patched.

I cannot say how long I stayed there as, in the dark, I completely lost the sense of time, but it seemed like an eternity to me. While I was kept there, the wardens battered me several times. They usually did that to pass the time having raped their prisoner first. One of the wardens, whom I heard they called the Skeleton (although he was rather corpulent), hit me with a raffle butt injuring my jaw and knocked out

all my teeth on the left side. This scar on my face is a “souvenir” from the Skeleton. He was the one we feared most as he was a true sadist – he would thrust a beer bottle into a woman’s... and forced each one of us to give him a “blow job”. He tried to thrust a gun muzzle into my... but I instinctively kicked him with the loosely tied foot (convinced that I wouldn’t dare resist he hadn’t fastened it properly). Caught by surprise and dismayed at my bravery he hit me with the butt-end of his rifle. I cannot recollect the blow itself – the last thing I remember was him turning towards the chair to grab the gun. I believe I was unconscious for a very long time.

When I came round, I was still in the room where the wardens used to rape us (they called the rape – a “pastime”). My jaw was bandaged with a piece of cloth, a taste of blood in my mouth and I had a splitting headache. The first thing I noticed was that I didn’t have the blindfold. The Skeleton would always take off our blindfold bragging that he feared no one. Needless to say, he made sure we had it back on before he let us go back into the barracks.

Being all alone in that room, I had a chance to examine it carefully: it was pretty small – about fifteen square metres, maybe less. The walls were extremely dirty with visible blood stains on them. Some stains were very dark while others were bright red and fresh. Except for the bed and two chairs, the room was empty. There were no curtains or blinds on the window but the pane was covered with an old, partly torn newspaper. That small window tempted me to look out even for a brief moment but I was too frail to move. Lying on the bed I was only perceptive to the sounds and I could hear the wardens outside the room. I shut my eyes as I had a feeling my head hurt less if I didn’t look around.

At one point, someone entered the room; I pretended I was unconscious. Just as I thought they had found me out, I heard a man’s voice shouting to someone to tell Kosta I was still unconscious. The other shouted back: “Why is Kosta so interested in the Turk – he can’t have fallen for her, can he?”. The one in the room replied that Kosta had studied together with my husband way back in the secondary technical in Banjaluka and added that Kosta had wanted to be the first but the kid had outstripped him.

Then he ordered them to bring some water and then to take me back to the “pigsty”. There was no point in pretending to be unconscious any More and I opened my eyes in order to avoid the “wash”. However, this didn’t stop them from pouring out a large container of water onto me – it was easier for them to carry it back empty. Dragging me on the floor and then the ground, they took me back to the barracks having blindfolded me first, of course.

So, I was back in that dark stuffy place with cramps in my stomach that would go on for days (since I could not eat anything) – not even the sporadic, meagre corn-pudding meals that they fed us with. Yet, more difficult than pain and hunger, even more difficult than the mind-numbing humiliation we suffered continually, was the knowledge that I was not going to see my husband again. Although I occasionally tried to sooth myself thinking that the fact that Kosta knew him did not necessarily mean that he was dead, something told me he was not alive any more. It was then that I made the decision to do something – either to get out of

that inferno or – die. I knew that if I didn't succeed, they would kill me – and death I did not fear.

As I was spared the guards' sadistic routine for a while, I had time to think and look around a bit, better say – feel around, as the pitch dark we lived in made us change our eyes for our hands. I knew that none of the prisoners, who were all in the equally sorry, exhausted condition – molested and battered like me, could not put up any resistance to those bastards. Yet, worse than their physical state was the despair that absorbed them – I heard many of them whispering prayers to dear God to take them.

At first I thought that just listening to them muttering the death wishes would drive me insane; then, somehow, it occurred to me that it wouldn't be such a bad idea at all; and thus I decided to “go mad”, to act insanity. Yet, I didn't know how to and I haven't got much of an acting talent. Singing sprang to my mind as the only resort.

As soon as I felt a bit better and could move my lips, I started singing a little and the woman sitting next to me, whose face I had never been able to see clearly – a Hatidža J. – moved swiftly away from me and shouted: “This one's cracked – she's gone bonkers”.

I felt the other prisoners gather around me. They touched my face, my hands and asked me various questions. Nihada, a fourteen-year-old and the youngest among them, burst into tears, but for me, there was no going back now. I went on to sing the songs I had sung with the children at school. The women around me started commenting that I had gone berserk because of the Skeleton's blow to the head. One of them, I don't know which one, said it could be because I'd learnt the Serbs had slain my husband and instead of screaming, I started singing even louder.

Can you guess whose song I remembered? – A Serbian's! I started singing an old Serbian love song. I had never liked it very much, although, at parties, we would sing Serbian folk songs along with the Muslim ones.

At this, one of the wardens rushed in, the others following close behind. They dragged me out. They must have been completely baffled by my singing as they had forgotten to blindfold me. They yelled at me to stop and I, blinded by the sun, squinted and sang as loudly as I could. Like through a haze, I started discerning things around me. From the outside, our barracks looked like a prefab service hall – it could have easily been a warehouse, a small factory or a workshop. The windows were boarded on the outside. Further down, there was a cottage and a tractor with a trailer parked in of it. I concluded that it was the house where they raped us.

The wardens, still baffled by my singing, dragged me to the house dumped me by the side wall. The younger one pointed his gun at me I kept on singing. Then the older one pulled out a knife from his boot put the blade to my throat. That was the Skeleton who I recognised as ad seen him before. I froze and fell silent. In actuality, I just could not hear own voice as I desperately mouthed the lyrics.

I fretted that I wouldn't be able to keep it up; I wasn't so afraid of gun, but the notion that the Skeleton might slaughter me, fazed me completely – I knew he was capable of it. I still cannot figure out how I managed to pluck up the courage to go on singing. I can't remember which tune I sang only know I sang it as loudly as I

could and my jaw hurt terribly. I reckon the noise made all the others come out of the house. One of them, the one who looked neat and tidy – the “suave” one – asked what was going and why I was not blindfolded. The Skeleton replied: “Looks, Kosta, like ‘sweetheart’ of yours won’t be needing it anymore – she’s definitely gone off deep end!”

I carried on and Kosta – the one who “knew” my husband – ordered to “wash” me. They “washed” me several times, slapped me across the held the knife to my throat and then, finally, gave up. Encouraged by I started jumping around pretending to dance. At one point, I even ted to reach out for Kosta and dance with him. That was the person who have slain my husband. I know this sounds incredible to you, but I really wanted to convince them I was insane. Before I could grab him, Kosta red them to take me back to the barracks.

From then on, they tried me for days; they would take me to that house, beat me and splashed me with water, but they didn’t rape me. At first, they kept blindfolding me whenever they would take me out of the barracks, but they eventually stopped. Unfortunately, I could not confide in other women about my fake insanity. I still feel a pang of remorse when I remember how I used to drive them crazy with my yelling but I was afraid that one or another could tip them off just to save her own skin or to her suffering a little.

They were all taken in by my “insanity”; as for myself – I, too, sometimes doubted I was still in my right mind. For, not only did I sing in my waking life, but I had ‘singing’ dreams as well. That delivered me right out of hell survived.

Zagreb, 16 July, 1992

### **Selma**

Around mid 1991, the Serbs I had known seemed to have changed somehow and in them I could no longer recognize the people I had been ends with for years. I’m not saying they were all war-mongers but they suddenly all started speaking of how threatened they felt, saying that we couldn’t go on living together in the same community and that we should all our separate ways. Some, who were more outspoken and claimed that the slims should move away from Banja Luka, I tried to keep away from to steer clear of any disputes. I went about my daily routine as if I didn’t notice anything unusual, as if I could not hear the ominous, Muslim-threatening rhyme<sup>11</sup> they were chanting day and night,

In December of the same year, I took on a Serb woman, even though Muslim woman had applied for the same job as well. Two years earlier, I was given my shop as a part of the divorce settlement. My ex-husband – whom I had met on a school excursion to Serbia – had remarried. I heard that just before the war started, he sold all his property and returned to Serbia.

When the war broke out, I knew that I, too, would have to move ay from Banja Luka soon. The Serbs, who had seized complete power, had started harassing the

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<sup>11</sup> The rhyme in Serbian can loosely be translated as: “You devil Muslims, your days are numbered”.

Muslims, placing bombs in their houses, demolishing their shops, and offices and cafés. They also started arresting Muslims and oats and firing them from their jobs.

I had saved about 15 thousand Deutsch Marks, but I happened to put my trust in the wrong person who had promised (for a 3.000 DM fee) to take me a contact with a Yugoslav Army officer who would make arrangements for me to fly to Belgrade in a military plane and from there to any destination I chose. I was planning to go to a friend in Munich. Some people said my 'contact' used the money to fly his own family from Banja Luka, but others claimed he had been arrested. All in all, I didn't have the time to investigate further – I had to find another solution.

Sometime later, a Serbian woman – my school friend – promised me at her brother would help me get out of Banja Luka – this was otherwise possible without a special permit. One afternoon, she visited me in my flat which I hadn't left for days since I had been prohibited from working. She promised that in two-day's time, she and her brother would come to pick me. She didn't ask for any money in advance but told me to pack the money I had, all of my documents and only the most necessary of my persona belongings. She kept her promise – two days later she turned up on my doorstep only to find that I was no longer there. At that time, I was staying on the floor below, in my neighbours' flat. I don't know what the new 'tenants' told her because she rushed out of the building and into her brother's car waiting outside, which left immediately.

I was watching it all through the curtain. I didn't dare show up to go with her. No one was to know that I was there or that I was alive. And alive I was: a battered, raped and disfigured heap of flesh and bones.

I had been raped the day before, on 21 August. It was early in the morning when they broke into my flat. They neither rang nor knocked on the door – they simply forced it open.

I don't know what time it was. I only remember that a crushing noise woke me up. I was about to jump out of bed when they burst into the bedroom. First I saw two of them in uniforms without any rank markings and with those Serbian military caps on. "On your feet, you whore, and give us your money", one of them said calmly, grinning menacingly. I stood up and the other one tore my nightdress. I tried to reach for my dressing gown but the first one said it wasn't a fashion show and to give him all the money I had, right away.

I said the money was in the living room and started for the door but he stepped in front of me and grabbed me by the breasts. His grip was so tight that I screamed. He slapped me on the face and the other one told him to be patient until I handed over the money. He let go of me and I went into the living room where I saw another two in uniforms. I recognised one of them – he had been a regular in the café opposite my shop. He had worn plain clothes then. I didn't know his name but I remembered his face.

He had already found my purse. In it, I had some dinars and the 3.000 DM that my friend had told me to prepare, together with my passport and a few photographs. The other one was searching through the wardrobe but he couldn't find any more money since I had hidden about 5,000 DM in the lining of the dress I had intended to wear on the trip. The rest – 4,000 DM was in my shoe. They went on searching, collecting my gold jewellery along the way (I didn't have much of it,

but among other things there was a very valuable ring – a gift from my father, and a bracelet).

My “acquaintance” lost his patience and hit me, demanding the rest of the money, and then he put a gun to my temple. I told him about the money in the shoe and explained that the rest of the money I had had, I had given to a Yugoslav Army officer for the flight to Belgrade. “What Yugoslav Army? There’s no Yugoslav Army anymore, we’re Serbian troops now”, he shouted, cursing.

He was the one to rape me afterwards. He did it on the floor having tied my wrists with a belt first. Actually, he tied them fast and fastened them to the table leg. The other one slouched in the armchair watching it all and shouting vulgar remarks. I tried to scream but the rapist hit me hard in the mouth with his hand. I almost choked from the blood dripping down my throat.

The other two who had burst into my bedroom raped me next. One of them beat me as well, but the other one didn’t. When the fourth one’s turn came – the one that had been watching it all along – he first whipped me with his belt and then, having untied my hands first, made me kneel in front of him. He unbuttoned his trousers and shouted: “Suck it, you whore!”

Afterwards, he kicked me several times with his boots, but the other three had already left. He had stayed behind, probably hoping to find more money. I remember this only vaguely – I lay there on the living-room floor in a pool of blood yet feeling no pain, the heavy boot-stepping echoing in the hall. Then the thumping sound died away and everything became quiet.

When I tried to get up, I felt the slight pressure of a hand on my shoulder. I gasped, fearing it was him, but it was a neighbour from the flat below. I couldn’t believe my eyes – she was the most unlikely person to come to my aid as she hadn’t spoken to me since they had moved in three years earlier because, due to my negligence, her newly-acquired flat had been completely flooded. She had been so profoundly persistent in staying away from me that she wouldn’t even accept the compensation we had offered for the damage made or the help my husband had offered in refurbishing the flat. Her husband had followed suit and when he couldn’t avoid me on the staircase in the hall, he would avert his gaze and look down.

So that very neighbour was the only person in our block of flats to come to my rescue. “Please, hurry – they may return”, she said helping me back to my feet. She led me to her flat – actually, she dragged me there as I was in no shape to walk. She crammed me into a wardrobe which soon started feeling airless and stuffy. The last thing I remember was the swishing sound of a mop on the floor outside (later the neighbour told me that in order to cover my tracks, they had had to very quickly clean the blood stains on the hall floor from my flat to theirs, as well as the floor inside their flat).

A painful and cold sensation on my face woke me up. At first I couldn’t see anything, but when my blurry sight cleared a little, I could make out the face of my neighbour who was kneeling beside me and wiping my face with a wet cloth. Everything became dark once more and when I came round again, I was lying on the floor. My body was stiff but I felt no pain – only a mind-numbing buzz in my head. I managed to raise my hand to my face on the third attempt and I felt the



rough surface of a bandage under my fingers. Raising my hand, I noticed a blue and greyish striped sleeve on my arm someone had dressed me in men's pyjamas.

I lay motionless except for trying to move my toes. The fact that I wasn't paralysed didn't mean much to me at that moment. In fact, I was completely indifferent – my mind was numb. After a while, the neighbour entered the room and when she saw that I was awake, she bent down close to me and whispered: "Don't be alarmed; I'll give you a pain-killer". She brought in a glass with some white liquid in it and a straw. To drink through the straw was a strenuous feat and took what seemed like an eternity; the content of the glass had a bitter, retched taste.

I don't know whether I fell asleep at once, but that bitter taste is the last thing I remember. The next time I woke up, the room was completely dark. My whole body ached, but the buzzing in my head was gone. I started remembering the events of the previous day: my flat had been broken into and I had been raped and battered... For hours, I just lay motionless in the dark, and it was almost dawn when I fell asleep again. I had slept for what seemed like only a moment when a baby-cry woke me up.

I remembered that the neighbour had had a baby in March. Soon I heard a woman's and then a man's voice blending in with the baby's cry. I heard a woman say perhaps you could call in and say you won't be coming today. You'd better stay here in case those scumbags decide to return". It was already daylight when she came in with a glass in her hand. I thought she'd brought that liquid again, but it was milk: the tastiest, most scrumptious glass of milk I had ever drunk, despite the pain that the straw drinking provoked. She asked if I could move and I mumbled in confirmation.

"Look what they've done to you – the beasts", she said leaving the room.

Later, while she was taking the terribly stinky bandage off my face, I managed to ask her what day and hour it was and she said it was August 22 and that it was almost noon. She put raw meat (a beef steak) compress on my face again, explaining that the raw meat would draw out the pain and the swelling. She added that she would help me onto the bed as soon as her husband returned from the shops. (Fearing I might have had spinal injuries, they had left me lying on the floor). While talking, she bandaged my face skilfully, like a real nurse.

Later in the day, with her help, I managed to make a few steps: an achievement equal to a summit climb from my point of view. She caught me looking at the pyjamas and explained that they were her husband's because she couldn't find her own. "I haven't had the time to bring anything from your flat except for this dress which I should have already soaked in the suds although I doubt these blood stains will be removed that easily", she said recovering a bundle from under the bed. It was the dress I had planned to leave Banja Luka in. I remembered the Deutsch Marks and the friend who had promised to pick me up. But I couldn't recall whether I had broken down and admitted to the louts where I had hidden the 5,000 Deutsch Marks. I asked her or, rather, mimed to her to unfold the dress and pull out the thread from the seam. When she pulled out the first banknote she smiled and said that it was a tiny bit of justice done. When she had pulled out all of them, she asked me whether I had been planning to flee from Banja Luka. I nodded and

somehow managed to explain about my friend and the plan to fly on the plane to Belgrade. She eyed me for a few seconds and then uttered her suspicion: "She may have had her fingers in all this. If she doesn't show up again today as planned, she's in it".

At half past eight, actually a few moments earlier, my neighbour came into the room and helped me move to the window. She held me while I peered through the curtain onto the street. When my friend's brother's car pulled up looking for me, I felt enormously relieved. "I'm glad for you", she said to me.

I stayed in that flat for seventy-six days and no one ever found out. They concealed it even from their closest friends. All that time, my life depended on them. Had it leaked out that they were hiding me, they could have both gotten killed even though they were Serbs. I hope you now understand why I am so reluctant to reveal their names although they deserve (and have) all my gratitude. Rare are such people who would risk their own and their child's lives to save a person whom they had been at odds with.

A fortnight later, I felt much better although I was still bruised a lot. I could walk. One day, the neighbour told me what had happened that day after they had dragged me into their flat. Those scumbags, the rapists, had returned to my flat an hour later. This had given my neighbour and her husband enough time to clean the blood traces in the hall and their flat. Expectedly, the louts had asked around, even searched a few flats, but luckily, had trusted my neighbour completely when she said I was the last person she would ever hide considering she hadn't spoken to me ever since she had moved in.

The life of a fugitive was difficult to get accustomed to. I had to hide my existence perfectly, down to the smallest detail – even a tiny bit of cigarette smoke would have been tell-tale. Not only did I quit smoking, but I also learnt to stay still for hours on end. When they had friends visiting them and staying late, I would squeeze under the bed in "my" room and sweat under there until they were gone. When I was alone in the flat, I never moved around, switched the light on or, indeed, used the toilet.

I never suspected anything when I missed my period: I reckoned it was a post-traumatic reaction. Any pregnancy was out of the question since I had been a long-standing fertility patient of many clinics in Sarajevo, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Lipik (I have heard that it has been completely razed by Serbs) and Daruvar. I had had a problem getting pregnant. My husband had left me because of that: his parents had wanted a grand-child.

I began to have an idea something was amiss when the morning sickness started occurring regularly, and when all of a sudden I became queasy from smells. I confided in my neighbour and she turned pale. That was the first time I saw her really frightened. Yet she collected herself and told me not to worry and that we would get out of it somehow. She then admitted that her husband had already tried to ask his brother – an army officer in Serbia – to get me out of Banja Luka, but that he had refused. I felt miserable, but worse than that feeling of helplessness was the knowledge that after all I had done to try to get pregnant, I was now carrying an unwanted child. I thought...

*At this point Selma fell silent. Then the tape first recorded faint sobs which gradually became louder and she ended up weeping desolately. I turned off the tape-recorder at which point she reacted almost hysterically: “We have to finish this, “she cried and pressed the “record” button.*

How could I have born it? That child would have been marked for ever, and that only because I wished so much to be a mother. My neighbour suggested that I could give it up for adoption, but I wasn't brave enough do that. If I had born a baby I would have never been able to give it away. Did I have any other choice except that blasted abortion? If it could has been done there, in Banja Luka, I would have had it done without a moment's hesitation.

For the next few days, my neighbour was very reserved and I knew she was apprehensive – she didn't know how to help me. One day, her husband came into my room (this was somewhat unexpected since he had never done it before). Don't be weary, please, and don't despair – we'll find a solution to all this. I'll get you out of Banja Luka even if that is the last thing I'd do”, he said trying to comfort me.

After a few days more, she brought me the money I had left with her, saying that I would need it soon. Then she brought me a pair of shoes – they were not new, but the size was good. She never filled me in with any details, but her cheerful mood suggested that there was still some hope that things might go well after all.

My spirits lifted when she asked me if I could sew a jacket and a skirt which would look like a uniform. I replied that if I had a sewing machine. It could whip up something for a whole unit to wear. She left the room, only to return a minute later carrying a bolt of grey fabric and said that it was for me.

That very same evening her husband brought in a second-hand sewing machine which looked almost new. He had bought it from a street vendor in Gospodska Street for a mere 50 Deutsch Marks. He advised me to set to it immediately since I needed to get completely ready in two days. I was dumbfounded.

That evening found me cutting out the shape of my latest design with pretty blunt scissors. The next day, my hostess cut the buttons off of her raincoat since they perfectly matched the colour of the uniform material. I had almost finished sewing them on, when her husband returned from work. He could not believe his eyes: “You aren't just one of the best, but the very best seamstress I have ever seen”, he said approvingly and turned to his wife suggesting that she could find me a matching blouse in her wardrobe. However, she didn't have any light blue ones and finally he searched among his shirts and managed to find an appropriate one. He then explained that my transfer to Croatia had been unofficially arranged with some of the UNPROFOR<sup>12</sup> staff – but for a certain fee, of course. And I was supposed to look like a member of the staff.

I could hardly wait to set off. That night and all the next day I was elated but also apprehensive that something might go wrong. Luckily, as you can see,

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<sup>12</sup> UNPROFOR: The United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR), was the first UN peacekeeping force in Croatia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Yugoslav wars. It existed between the beginning of UN involvement in February 1992, and it's restructuring into other forces in March 1995.

everything turned out well. I left the flat – my hideout – at 2:45 a.m. on November, 5, my neighbour, that dear friend, all in tears. I wept, too. Her husband drove me to a house in Nurije Pozderca Street where a person who was my liaison with the people from UNPROFOR was to take over. While still in the car, my neighbour instructed me on when and how I was to pay the UNPROFOR people their fee (there were four sets of them: two in Bosnia and two in Croatia).

At three o'clock on the dot, we arrived at the meeting point. In an attempt to make the parting less dramatic, my neighbour asked me to take good care of his shirt since it was his favourite one. As I was about to open the car door and get out, he thrust a piece of paper into my hand – it was a Vienna-based telephone number which I was supposed to ring and say that “The Petrović are in Zagreb and they are all well”, meaning that I had arrived safely.

In an UNPROFOR jeep and wearing a blue army hat, I left the outskirts of Banja Luka at seven o'clock in the morning. The ride went smoothly and without a problem even when we drove through the territory occupied by the Serbian forces and when we crossed from Bosnia to Croatia. The only complication we met was a two-hour delay when a set of UNPROFOR staff arrived late. I arrived in Zagreb early in the afternoon. I was lucky that the first person I talked to in Zagreb was Mrs V. – she took care of everything. I will forever be indebted to this wonderful person.

Three weeks ago, she found me a job. I am moonlighting in a designer boutique. I will be paid less than my work is really worth, but I'm not complaining. As soon as I recover completely, I will sit down to work. I am still 1,800 DM short for an illegal transfer to Germany. Yes – illegal; how else could I go? I am a person without an identity.

Zagreb, 5 December 1992

### **Saida**

It was the night of 28 June 1992 when the Serb troops called Arkan's Tigers came to Brezovo Polje. They were looking for ten young women to clean apartments for them in Brčko. They claimed they would not harm US and said not to worry. They took me, my sister and a friend of ours. As we stood no chance if we tried to resist, we boarded the car with them. However, when they brought us to an abandoned Bosnian apartment in Brčko, they said that we would never again return to our mothers and they would think about whether to let us live. They threatened us like that for an hour and then started taking us away one by one.

My sister was taken out by a young man called Nenad. He was from Brčko. He said he wanted to take revenge on the Muslim women, to disgrace them and destroy their youth. I was taken out by a young man I knew by sight. His mother worked in the Irma boutique in Brčko. His name was Saga. He was born in 1971, big, tall, chestnut hair. He wore glasses with big dioptr. He approached me and said: “The day has come when I can choose which ‘balinka’<sup>13</sup> it'll be, because they

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<sup>13</sup> A derogatory term for a Bosniak woman (Bosnian woman of Muslim faith).

cannot refuse the Serbs now". He took me to another room. He asked me about my father and mother and promised he would save me if I voluntarily agreed to what he was asking of me. He wanted to know if I had a boyfriend and where he was. I said nothing. He said it would be better for me to talk as killing me presented no problem for him, especially since he had been ordered to do it and that, in fact, we did not deserve any better. I cried all the time and implored him to return me and my sister to our mother. He asked if I was a virgin. I said I was. He was glad because as my first male he would leave a mark on my life. I still cried, begged and implored him not to do it to me. He slapped me in the face and ordered me to undress. I did not do it. He threatened that, unless I did it, he would bring five of them to rape me. I undressed and surrendered to my fate.

He was brutal, disgusting and all the worst imaginable. Weeping and screams reached me from the neighbouring rooms where they'd taken my sister and my friend. The sounds of beating could also be heard. I was further devastated by the thought of my sister who was only 14 although I wasn't much older either. After Saša did it to me and after I recovered a little, I went to see how my sister was. Nenad who had raped her, stopped in front of me. He was thin, tall, fair-haired. He said my sister had nearly died and to help her if I could because he wasn't going to do it as he'd done what he wanted to do. My sister was lying on the bed and weeping. Through the tears she asked me what had happened to me and was I all right. After me Saga went to my friend Alma and raped her. They kept us there for two days. They gave us drinks laced with some drug.

The next day, around six o'clock in the afternoon, their superior Goran Petrović came and asked them if they wanted to keep us any longer. They said they didn't and asked to have other girls brought to them. Goran took us back to Brezovo Polje. Our mother was ill; she fainted when they took us away and was in a critical condition all that time. She survived but just. I shall never forget her happy tears when she saw that we were both alive. She told us not to worry and not to suffer, that what had happened simply had to happen, that it was important that we were alive, that we were young and that life was ahead of us. I knew she was merely comforting us and that she was suffering as much as we were.

We had no peace in Brezovo Polje either. Serb soldiers broke in and ill-treated us every night. They said that our fate depended on Captain Dragan (Dragan Vasiljković – ed.) and that he would decide what would be done with us. Some ten days later they said we would be transferred to Bijeljina. They advised us to leave the money, jewellery and other valuables with them as they could present a danger to us on our way. In fact, they wanted to be the ones rather than Bijeljina Serbs who would plunder us. They put us in nine buses. When we arrived in Bijeljina, Serb soldiers irrputed into the buses and demanded that all the young women get off as they needed them for work in coffee shops and taverns. Those escorting us prevented that. They said they were taking us to Caparde where there were Serb troops. They warned us not to rejoice that they'd saved us because there was nothing nice in store for us in the place they were taking us to, that we were at their disposal and that they could do with us as they liked.

When we arrived in Caparde, there were several hundred Serb troops waiting for us. They brought us into a big hall. Before that they seized what little money and jewellery we'd managed to keep until then. In that hall they put at least a thousand women, girls and children. There wasn't a single adult male there. They said they would keep the girls and that mothers with children would continue towards the territory controlled by the BiH<sup>14</sup> Army. They singled out one hundred fifty girls. There were young women among them, and three pregnant women too. They broadcast over the loudspeakers a recording of a woman's scream. They intended to frighten us, to make us think they were killing our mothers.

I stepped aside with my sister and three other girls. A Serb soldier approached us, by the way he spoke I'd say he was from Montenegro, and promised to help us. We were happy because we'd already been raped. He kept his promise. The others were not so lucky – they were all tortured and raped.

(Brčko: Genocide and Testimonies, 1998)

### **Sanski Most**

In May 1992, somewhere around one o'clock, somebody knocked forcefully on the front door of our house. We heard a rifle fire twice, and then unknown voices demanded that we open the door. They did not say who they were, and we did not recognise these unexpected visitors. We dared not open the front door which was locked that evening. They broke the front door of our house by force and forced their entry into the house. Five young men entered, they could not be more than 25 years old. Four were in civilian clothes, and the fifth one wore the camouflage uniform and had a green sock over his face, with slits for the mouth, eyes and nose. They were all armed. The one with the sock over his head talked rather oddly as if he was speaking a foreign language.

Of them all, I recognised two. The name of the first one was M.G. from the neighbouring village. This M.G. went to the same school in our village, which I had completed. He was a year or two my senior. That I. G. had to know me, too. Before the aggression he was prone to fighting and didn't work anywhere. After the aggression on BiH the Serbs referred to him as the greatest combatant; the Muslims, however, were afraid of him. He plundered villages, beat our people and killed them. With other young men from his village G. dispersed the inhabitants of the villages of Modra, Skucani Vakuf and Gorica, all in the Sanski Most municipality.

The second among these unexpected visitors in our house was 3. M. M. was born in 1972 and went to the same elementary school as I did; before the aggression he was not a problem and no bad things were said about him as about M.G. The other two young men I saw well that evening and committed their faces to memory although it was the first time I saw them.

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<sup>14</sup> Bosnia and Hercegovina.

As soon as they broke the door of our house, they entered the living room on the ground floor where we were. One of these young men hit my brother in the stomach area with his rifle, without any reason whatsoever. Z. lost his breath and fell on the floor. My father said: "Let my children be and do to me as you please". After these Father's words, one of the young men hit my father in the head area with a pistol. I cannot state now who did that. After that blow blood poured over my father's face area. I stood closer to my mother when M.G. approached me, caught me by the shoulder and took me a little further in that same room and put me against the wall. As soon as he put me against the wall so that I faced him, M. G. started to touch me in my chest and face area. I started to move away and cry. And my mother shouted then: "Don't touch my child!". As soon as he heard Mother's words, M. G. took me from that room in which we were ail in and pushed me into another room on the ground floor. He placed me in a narrow part of the wall between the wall unit and the adjoining wall. There he literally wedged me in so that I still faced him and my arms were lowered. In that room we were alone, I and that young man with blond curly hair down to his shoulders, with a red bandana around his forehead. I was not aware at all of this curly-haired young man entering the room. As soon as he took me into that room and put me against the wall M. left the room.

The door of the room remained open. Through the entrance door one could easily see the place where I was leaning against the wall, that is where M. put me. I saw that behind the door leading into this room where I'd been taken, they beat my father who was in the kitchen. All the young men who had come to our house that evening were beating him. I gleaned that my father was all bloody from those blows; he could blows and was crouching on the floor and they kept hitting him. From the place where I was I could not see my brothers and my mother. At some point I heard my brother Z.'s voice who said: "Mother, I can't stand this any longer, I'll jump through the window" He uttered those words when he heard me cry in the next room. I cried then because I knew what would happen to me and because I knew what would happen to me and because they'd already ordered to undress. That Young man with curly hair first asked my how old I was. I answered that I was born in 1974, he did not believe me. He said he was born in school together. He claimed that I was older and 1973 and that we went to that I deliberately said I was younger. I could not remember even then that this young man really went to school with me.

In my room I suddenly saw four of the young men and only the one with the green sock over his head was not there. They kept ordering me to undress but I did not obey. Then two of them grabbed my legs and arms and the other two undressed me forcibly. For a little while I was on my feet and then they pushed me to the ground and I was lying on my back.

The first to rape me was J. and in the presence of his three friends, too. At the time of this I was slightly over 18. I had never had a sexual intercourse with a man before. Before they raped me, some of them even asked me if I had already had sexual intercourse with men. I answered that I had not. They said they did not believe me and that they were about to check that. As they raped me one by one, at times the light was on and at times they switched it off. In about an hour, which is

how long they stayed in the room, I was raped by all four young men except that fifth one who was masked with the green sock pulled over his head and in the camouflage uniform. These young men did not take off their clothes, they only pulled their trousers a little down and the underwear. I tried to defend myself from the young men and avoid the rape. I tried to wrestle away from them but I did not succeed because there were four of them in the room and I was on my own. They helped each other in overcoming my resistance, They held me by my legs and arms whilst one of them raped me. During that time I lay on the floor of our room without a shred of clothes on me. Some of them even, while one of them raped me, tickled me on the soles of my feet.

As they raped me they demanded that I give sign that I was also enjoying it. They bit different parts of my body, hit me when I tried to wiggle out, slapped me in the face when I cried, and turned me as it suited them. I felt terrible about what was happening to me, it hurt me badly and I was very embarrassed because my parents and brothers who were in other rooms, could at least guess at all this and may have even seen some of all this. I suppose that my father even saw a major part of this ordeal because he was lying injured right in front of the door of the room in which they raped me.

As I was being raped by that young man with curly hair and the red bandana over his forehead, one of the young man addressed him saying: "Stop, R., no more, what do you think would happen if this was done to our sister, what we are doing to her". Hearing the name R., this curly-haired young man with the red bandana, swore at his mother and said: "Don't mention my name".

During this whole incident, J. M. treated me the worst of all. In fact, this was the first young man who raped me and deflowered me. After more than an hour one of the young men warned the others: "Leave this house or I'll shoot". He repeated it after a time, after which they all left the room in which they had raped me. As they were leaving the room in which they had raped me, that young man who warned them to go or else he would shoot, said to me: "Don't stand up and look in which direction we're going because otherwise we'll kill you". This was said by that tall, thin young man with short hair, combed to one side, dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt.

As they raped me the young men swore at my "balija mother", demanded that I be more active in what they were doing to me by force, but I could not accept it. They hit me on all parts of my body, but mostly on the head, right at the beginning of the rape while I still had enough strength to resist them. Afterwards they did it when I moaned because I could not endure the pain they were inflicting on me. They were all brutal, did not spare me, bit different parts of my body and in this way left traces in the shape of bruises and dark patches. I observed the largest number of dark patches and bruises in my neck area.

These young men left me naked in the room. After they left the house, I got up from the floor, approached the wall unit which was in the room, got a house frock and put it on. I was so exhausted by the rough treatment those young men gave me that I could barely move. I was ashamed to look for the members of the household although I was not responsible for what had happened to me. In the living room I found my brothers standing over our unconscious mother. I think my mother



fainted because she was aware of what was happening to me although she was also ill-treated before they raped me. I began to pat my mother's face and call to her through tears. At some point, Mother opened her eyes and realised I was standing above her. The first words I heard then from Mother were: "Woe, daughter, you've been raped". I only cried louder because I lacked the strength to say anything to Mother.

The next day my father and I were taken for examination to Sanski Most. We were taken by the Serb police although we had not reported the incident. I realised that because of the multiple rape I had also suffered some internal injuries which I could not see with my own eyes. After all that, I felt horrible and my nerves gave in. I had frequent crises. Fortunately, I did not get pregnant and didn't have to perform the interruption of pregnancy. After everything that happened to me, I again saw only M. and J., that is persons whose particulars I know well and who I know with certainty participated in the rape.

I came across J. more often because as a policeman he was assigned, together with some other policemen, to allegedly guard our village in which I went on living. When I would accidentally pass by J. I could feel well that he was embarrassed to see me because he turned his head away from me and pretended not to see me. He wouldn't show with the slightest gesture that the two of us had met, and in a way horrible for me at that. Because of the situation I was in, I did not dare let J. know in any way whatsoever that I knew well that he had been with that group of three other young men who had raped me in the evening of 1 May 1993 in my house. I saw J. for the last time in August 1994 when we were about to leave the place in which we had lived until then.

I often saw by chance M.G. also, in passing, but I did not talk with him. On such occasions I would be seized with great fear which paralysed me every time. I continued being afraid of that person. Every time I came to the conclusion that M.G. recognised me too, but he always turned his head away and avoided to see me. The remaining three young men I never saw again.

*(The Sin of Silence - the Risk of Speech, 2000)*

### **Prijedor**

After the attack on my village I witnessed the massacre of civilians as the worst possible tragedy. I did not know that anything worse than death could happen. My sister gave birth in the cellar where we hid during the attack on the village. After the village of Rizvanovići and after the chetniks arrived, I saw dead children aged three to eight near my house. I saw the destroyed mosque and a man who had been taken away. Some more prominent men were taken away and simply shot in the head. They fell and lay in grotesque positions. My grandfather was accused of killing Serbs and they killed him. We hid in the cellar of a destroyed house. Our house was intact.

Several chetniks arrived that day. They were looking for a man hiding in the nearby woods. One of the chetniks, about 30 years old, ordered me to come with him into the house. I had to. I was scared and didn't know what was in store for

me. I knew that if I refused, my whole family would be in danger. When we entered the house he demanded money, gold and other valuables. He could take whatever he liked. He demanded from me to admit where the man was hiding. I did not answer. He ordered me to undress, I was scared stiff.

I took off my clothes and suddenly everything split in me. Under my bare skin I thought I was dying. I closed my eyes. I could not look at him. He hit me and I fell. Then he jumped on me. He raped me. I cried and screamed and there was a lot of blood. It was my first time with a man. He ordered me to get up. I wanted to collect my clothes and cover myself but he told me to leave the clothes alone. He ordered me to remain standing and wait. He told me I'd better be careful because I was responsible for the fate of my family. He went out, looked around to check that nobody had seen him and then invited two other chetniks to come in. I felt lost. I didn't feel anything when they left.

I don't know how long I remained lying on the floor. My mother entered and found me lying down. Her look, as I was in such a humiliating state, was even worse than everything that had happened to me. Suddenly I realised what had happened. I realised I was perverted, raped and deformed for life. My mother knew what was going on inside me. It was the saddest moment of our lives. We both cried, screamed. She covered me. Together we went back to the cellar. I remember what happened afterwards as if through a fog, a distorted dream.

We were transported to Trnopolje and from there, on foot, to Travnik, over Vlasić some 30 km away. In Travnik I recovered from that dream, the confused condition. Now, I sometimes ask myself if it all had happened to me. To me – of all people. My mother was of very great help. I want to be a mother some day. But – how? To me, a man is a horrifying force of violence and pain. I know that they are not all like that image I have, but the fear I feel is stronger than a rational feeling. I can't help myself.

(Source: Croatian Information Centre, Zagreb)  
(*The Sin of Silence – the Risk of Speech*, 2000)

All stories in this chapter were translated by Mirka Janković, except the story *I Begged Them To Kill Me*