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Hell Breaks Loose

NURDZIHANA: *Serbs who left their flats just before the war gave us their keys and asked us to water their flowers and feed their fish. No one said anything about the horror to come.*

RADA: *We were like calves grazing by an active volcano.*

The story of vulnerable women has already been written.¹ The untold tale is women's extraordinary ability to survive the eruption, transform suffering into savvy, and challenge assumptions about why their worlds were torn apart. From these accounts emerges a wisdom that will startle those who believe Balkan people will always be fighting.

I didn't want to compile a book of war stories. But even though the bulk of our interviews took place after the war, and my interviewees knew my focus was on how they are rebuilding their country, the women talking with me couldn't describe their current activities without recounting memories that spilled messily across whatever else was our topic at hand. The stories weren't told chronologically: A word from me or idea from them might uncork a sequence whose logic was only in the living. Nor was the telling optional. The women's postconflict work was built on the foundation of their war experience: not just physical losses or emotional travails, but courage that emerged from the wounds of war and energy that was summoned as they responded to the violence.

The episodes the women related are burdened with desperation, terror, confusion, loss. For all our sympathy about the plight of refugees or the trauma inflicted on those who survived years of siege, those who are able to tell what happened are the lucky ones. They know they must bear witness for those who can't speak. When refugees' accounts began to trickle out, such as those gathered by my embassy staff from the tens of thousands who fled to Austria, the UN tri-

bunal was created in The Hague to bring war criminals to justice. We policy-makers spawned a host of conferences, scores of publications, and mounds of resolutions. That process of bringing the stories to light was both necessary and hurtful. Extracting testimony from victims creates a struggle between private and public worlds. Atrocity is a necessary subject of human rights advocates and international lawyers, but even putting the experience into words can deepen the wounds of the sufferer.

Still, the pain that punctuates these pages is not the final word for any of these women. Their wartime stories are included to help give the reader firsthand accounts underlying their assessment of the reasons for the war and their motivation to transform and heal their society. The reader needs to know their stories to understand their work. But the telling was also important to the women, who are anxious to have their voices heard. Many traveled a full day to our meetings in Sarajevo. They were ready to talk—and not, it should be added, inclined to complain. Each of these women had not only survived but had taken the madness of her experience and let it live inside her, work on her, gnaw at her, energize her. In the process she'd refashioned her values to reflect a harsher reality. She'd kept her balance and remained standing in the wake of sudden aggression. Maintaining her bearings, she'd daily made the terrible decision to pack her bags, or risk putting herself and her loved ones in harm's way. The women's stories of onslaught, chaos, flight, and atrocities are told in this chapter.

Onslaught

DANICA: *We were sitting around chatting, and the next day was war.*

KRISTINA: *You learn to feel in your gut when to go hide.*

IRMA: *We couldn't . . . It was like, "Oh God, who wants to hurt us?" [She begins to cry.] What's happening?"*

The effect of violence in Bosnia was magnified by the shock of the onslaught. Stepping back from the women's narratives, an outsider can trace a perverse order in the acts that led to hostile conflict. But those simply trying to maintain a normal life as the world around them was warping couldn't imagine that events would develop as they did. Like much of the rest of Eastern Europe in 1989 and 1990, Bosnians were hopeful at the prospect of democracy in their country. In-

stead, they became enmeshed in the nationalist politics that presaged the breakup of Yugoslavia. In 1991, when Slovenia and Croatia declared independence, alarm spread among the non-Serb majority in Bosnia that they would be left as a disadvantaged minority in a rump Yugoslavia fashioned as Greater Serbia. A referendum over February 29 to March 1, 1992, on whether Bosnia too should secede from Yugoslavia, yielded a 99 percent favorable response; though the nationalist Serb political party (SDS) and much of the Serb population boycotted the vote, leaving the decisions to 63.4 percent of the eligible voting population.² Bosnia declared independence from Yugoslavia on March 3, as Serb forces set up barricades and sniper positions around Sarajevo.

Fighting erupted in the capital and across the country. Ethnic cleansing began in early April, when the notorious Serb thug called Arkan and his paramilitaries entered Bijeljina and Zvornik (on the Serb border of northeastern Bosnia) and began expelling or killing the Bosniak residents. With the invasion of Vukovar, Croatia, the year before, Arkan had pioneered the technique of terrorizing civilians into fleeing.³ In Bijeljina, his “Tigers” set up sniper positions to terrorize the citizens. They hunted and shot Bosniak leaders on the spot and went through the streets indiscriminately firing their machine guns.⁴ Meanwhile, in the capital, Serb snipers fired into a peace demonstration on April 6. As Serb troops encircled the city, the three-and-a-half year siege of Sarajevo began.

Then, all of a sudden—at least to me it seemed sudden—something happened. FAHRIJA was shocked when her politician husband urged her to leave Bosnia, convinced that an outbreak of violence was just around the corner. Demagogues surfaced, making bizarre claims and promoting notions of ethnic differentiation. The trouble originated in Serbia. Strange political meetings were held. There was a lot of talk about history, and accusations about terrors during the Ottoman Empire. The theories put forward were ludicrous to us. We didn’t take them seriously. I thought we, as a people, were so strongly connected that nothing could destroy that bond. My husband said I should take the children somewhere awhile, so he would be free to join the political scene and fight for Yugoslavia. Ejup knew the war was starting that day, but he didn’t tell me. He knew I wouldn’t leave. Arriving in Belgrade, we immediately received news that Serb forces had attacked Sarajevo. I knew they wouldn’t let us come back.

Fahrija is a sophisticated, Chicago-trained dermatologist, raised in Serbia in a wealthy Albanian Muslim family. She and her husband, Ejup, a former professor of engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, had returned to Bosnia with their two small children. As the trouble erupted, she decided to go to her father’s home about 150 miles from Belgrade. Given Ejup’s high profile as

a political leader, she decided to go by bus, hoping she and her two children could pass incognito. *I saw strange things during the journey. There seemed to be something everybody else had known for a long time, something I was just realizing. Groups of soldiers were at every checkpoint. The bus driver would simply wave a three-finger salute in political solidarity, and we were allowed to pass. Each time my heart would stop, fearing a soldier would board and check our papers. They'd realize that I was the wife of—and these were the children of—Ejup Ganic. We were in the middle of Serbia, and they were blaming Ejup and our president, Izetbegovic, for the war. I was trembling.*

TANJA was also politically involved, a member of the prewar Bosnian Parliament, who eventually moved into the multiperson presidency (a typical Balkan political construct). Before and after her political work, she was a professor of landscape architecture. Tanja is active, forceful, and intelligent; still, like Fahrija, she was caught completely off guard by the eruption of hostilities: *Even in the Parliament, none of us could imagine war was coming. Many of my political colleagues were thinking about what seemed to me to be an abstract idea—the division of the country—and all my being welled up against the notion. When the shelling started, I thought it must be some drunks. When we discovered it was serious, and it was ethnic Serbs attacking the city, even though I'm a Serb I decided to stay in Sarajevo and not go to the mountains—not shoot down from the hills on my friends and colleagues.*

Tanja's words challenge credulity. Surely she must have known war was brewing. But disbelief among professionals and common citizens was widespread. SUZANA's account corroborates Tanja's. She too is a Bosnian Serb, an identity that allowed this delicate young woman entrée into the sphere of the Serb military as a journalist during the conflict: *One day before the shooting broke out in Sarajevo, a friend of mine from the Yugoslav army told me I should leave immediately, because the next day the fighting would start. I was shocked. He knew the exact day war would break out! But of course I stayed. As the onslaught started, twenty-three-year-old Suzana went to pick up some food from her parents, who lived a two-hour drive northwest of the capital. I was naïve to believe the war would be over in a couple of days, so I was trapped there in Serb territory. I was a journalist for what some considered a Muslim magazine. The Serbs came to my father and tried, at gunpoint, to mobilize me for civil defense, to make me prove my loyalty. My father managed to get me transferred to the medical corps, where I was active only once—helping with a violent psychotic woman from the emptied mental hospitals. After three months, I escaped my parents' town on the first bus allowed to leave Bosnia and go to Serbia.*

Another media professional caught completely unaware was RADA, living unwittingly on the front line with her radio director husband, seventeen-year-old

daughter, and eight-year-old son. Rada embodies the mixed demographics of Bosnians: from a rural family, transplanted to Sarajevo, married to a Bosnian Croat, and with ethnic Serb parents. With the onset of war, the radio station was in disarray as programming began to be politicized by the SDA, the prominent Bosniak party. Although she was in the heart of the news industry, Rada felt outside the information loop. *Nationalist leaders were appearing on TV, but I don't think anyone thought war was possible. Maybe when you're too close, you can't feel it. There were lots of nationalist Serb and Croat political party members, as well as Serbs in upscale apartments owned by the army. They left in February. Jeeps and cars picked them up, so they must have already had some warning that something was going to happen. We saw them leave but didn't attach any importance to it, because the war had started in Slovenia and Croatia, and antiarmy feelings were increasing. We thought the army people were afraid of the animosity, and that was why they were leaving for a while. They didn't move their furniture. They just left with suitcases, so we weren't alarmed. We accepted it as normal.*

From her sixth-floor apartment, Rada looked out over a peaceful, quiet neighborhood, filled with a large number of Bosniaks, as well as Serbs. *Then one evening in early March '92, trucks arrived with armed men—some in camouflage, some in blue, some with bands around their sleeves with white eagles,⁵ which were the only sign that they were extremists. There was nothing strategically essential about our neighborhood. Although the Yugoslav army was all around, we didn't feel threatened. Near our area there was a water supply plant, and they took it over; but we thought that it was for some public purpose: to guard it—maybe prevent someone from poisoning us. [She laughs sardonically.] Almost overnight, the modern residential neighborhood in which Rada lived was transformed into the front line for Serbs attempting to take over Sarajevo. From my flat I watched armed people come in and out. Telephone lines were cut; I had no contact with Pale [Karadzic's newly declared Bosnian Serb capital fifteen miles from Sarajevo].⁶ No communication whatsoever. We were trying to figure out what was going on. But war? No way. [Rada laughs again.]*

Rada went out to her balcony to watch the soldiers. *They started shooting at our windows, thinking we were Bosniaks or their sympathizers. At the beginning it was sort of a warning. That's what we believed—rather innocently. We weren't supposed to watch, but we didn't know that. [She leans forward, laughing again, her hands moving constantly as she paints the scene.] We had a fantastic view, right in front of our eyes, like a movie screen. Every day they were shooting, not over the buildings, but into our windows. After that, the military issued orders for us to put blankets over the windows—for security reasons, they said. Sometimes, out of curiosity, we tried to*

peep out and see what was going on. They'd shoot directly into our windows if they saw us. One morning, a sniper fired at me seven times. If I hadn't dropped to the floor, I'd be dead. My flat was completely destroyed early in May '92. It was hit by so many shells that it looked like an arsenal.

In May or June, and even after, most journalists just wanted to get out of Sarajevo. It was mass confusion. Nobody knew what was going on or how long it would last. Everybody thought it would be just one or two months—at worst until winter, then everything would be over. Some of my Serb colleagues felt ashamed, so they either stayed at home, waiting for the fighting to stop, or they left for Serb territory or Zagreb.⁷ The Bosniaks mainly remained, although the ones who had relatives abroad went to be with them. We were left—patriots who had no idea what we were fighting for, just a compulsion to do something.

As other journalists were leaving, Rada stayed and recorded stories of refugees expelled from their homes. My brother and mother in Pale didn't want to accept reality; but I interviewed Bosniaks from Pale I'd known all my life. That was awful, listening to people who were living with their friends one day, and the next day had to flee. Their expulsion, we realized later, was lucky, because in the spring of 1992 an enormous number of soldiers from Serbia moved in, most of them wearing the white eagles insignia. Executions followed.

The aggression led by Milosevic-backed forces was stunning. Repeatedly, the women expressed their amazement, shock, and disbelief that this nightmare could be descending on their stable, modern country.⁸ ALMA, a young engineer, had been raised in Mostar, a couple of hours' drive south of Sarajevo.⁹ One of two children, with a gutsy spirit, she had been a talented high school athlete. In April 1992, Alma was visiting her parents in Sarajevo for Bajram, a three-day Muslim holiday. Though fighting had started in the capital, she imagined it would be fleeting. She was concerned about missing work in Mostar, so she boarded a train to go back home. That trip changed her life forever. The track had been blown up, and she found herself trapped. *I was stuck midway, in some town where I had no friends or family.* Like any person trying to make rational decisions in crazy times, she was disoriented. *I just couldn't believe this was happening. There was still electricity. On tv I saw Sarajevo being shelled. My parents were there! I kept thinking the track would be repaired. I wanted to go back to Sarajevo or on to Mostar, but I couldn't get to either.*

Over the next weeks the war escalated. *To survive, I joined the army trying to protect Bosnia, working as a medic.* Women in the army had no training and no one directing them. *As a girl, it was hard; women had to prove themselves more and*



Along the main road from the airport to Sarajevo. December 1995.

had to protect themselves, psychologically as well as physically. We were on our own—defending our people.

Some scenes were almost ludicrous, as citizens tried to protect themselves from the violent assault. KAROLINA was in her early fifties when the fighting started in Sarajevo. She handled finances for a local business—a no-nonsense sort of job. Although Catholic, she lived in the old Muslim section of town. *When blockades were put up in the streets, my son and his friend, eighteen and fourteen years old, guarded us with two small axes. They put sandbags around the house. We were so naïve, thinking that could protect us. The Chetniks were running up and down our street, throwing bombs into our yards. During the night we'd hear footsteps [she slaps the table with her palms, making the sound of steps] and then an explosion. We only had those hatchets—garden tools. We were trapped by snipers with infrared equipment, shooting at us like pigeons or rabbits. We put pillows, blankets, and mattresses against the windows. They were using bullets that exploded into fire, but the bullets would get caught in the wool, and we thought maybe the fibers stopped them from exploding. It was*

a psychological attack as well. During the shelling, I didn't have the strength to run. As time went on, I developed a sixth sense; I knew exactly where a shell would land. You can't explain that to someone who hasn't gone through it. You just learn; it's instinctive. Just like animals in the woods—that was how we lived.

As the tapes from my recorder piled up, so did the dramatic scenes: Fahrija, incognito on a Serbian bus, two young children in tow; Tanja, parliamentarian caught unaware as the shelling began; Suzana, trapped in Serb territory when she went to get some food; Rada, hanging blankets over her plate-glass window; Alma, leaving the blocked train and joining up with troops in the hills; Karolina's children with hatchets to protect against shelling. In the women's stories, such tales of onslaught quickly devolved into chaos.

Chaos

DANICA: *In just five hours, lifetimes were turned upside down.*

ALMA: *We'd be sitting and talking, and suddenly a shell would explode and five or six people would be dead. They'd be different ages, male and female, different ethnic groups. You see, a shell can't choose whom to hit.*

GRETA: *With bomber planes in World War II there was a warning siren, and everyone ran to a shelter. But in this war we never knew when to expect an explosion.*

Despite a pattern obvious in hindsight, Bosnians couldn't believe that the brutality they'd watched in Croatia would be repeated in their country. President Izetbegovic insisted that it takes two to fight, and his government would simply not engage. He prepared no armed defense. His unwillingness to descend to the pugilism of Croatian President Tudjman or Serbian President Milosevic left Bosnians vulnerable.¹⁰ Tudjman and Milosevic had discussed dividing Bosnia into two parts, to be annexed into their newly defined countries. The plan assumed the forced migration of hundreds of thousands of non-Croats out of the western half of Bosnia into the Serb-dominated east, and similarly, the moving of non-Serbs out of the eastern half into the Croat-dominated west. But the swap provided no haven for two million Bosniaks scattered throughout Bosnia. They should simply leave, willingly or not.

To encourage their departure, Serb as well as Croat troops destroyed mosques and Muslim graves. Soldiers—or neighbors in the cover of night—looted, then burned homes of Bosniaks to discourage their return. But a local Bosnian army was eventually pieced together to mount a defense. Their sporadic success resulted in a continuous shifting of front lines, so that control over a community might change hands several times.

The images the women described made our interviews grueling: Bicycle wheels spinning to generate light in the cellar. Jam jars made into explosives. City buses on their sides turned into barricades. Parents in bunk beds as human shields against snipers aiming at hospitalized children. A mahogany wardrobe converted into coffins. A clock ticking on the wall next to splattered brains. The Olympic soccer field appropriated as a makeshift graveyard. Body parts collected from the market between the vegetable stalls. Park trees burned as fuel. Porch rails burned as fuel. Books burned as fuel. Running shoes burned as fuel.

War perverted the materials of everyday life into materials of everyday death. That twisted betrayal of purpose bred disorientation and trauma. Unlike Bosnian men serving in the army with some semblance of a plan, women were left behind with only their instinct as they tried to save their homes, protect their children, and, ultimately keep their own bodies and souls together. The cost of confusion was added to the toll of wartime loss. Change became the constant. No calendar was wise enough to predict how long shells would keep pounding, electricity would be off, the exile would last, hope would endure.

IRMA is the only child of architect parents of different religious traditions, both born in Sarajevo. She inherited not only their talent for drawing but also their sensitivity. *One morning I woke up and got ready for school. We heard on tv that Sarajevo was totally surrounded. My first reaction was, "Yea! I don't have to go to school!" I didn't know that was the last time we'd go that year; the teachers just handed out grades. As time passed, shelling started. [She shakes her head at her naïveté.] It was like what you'd hear on tv or in a movie. Danger all around, but somehow you couldn't accept it. It was so scary. Finally we started to understand what was really happening. We heard the first tanks attacking Sarajevo. . . .*

From the time I was born, I lived in a four-story building with trees all around. That was home to me, and I wouldn't trade that place for anywhere. The basement had storage spaces about six by nine feet, one for each of the eleven families in the building. In that warren, for the first six or seven months of the war, and sporadically thereafter, some seventy people set up life together. Irma's own family

threesome swelled to six as they were joined by family members whose home had been destroyed. At night, with no room in the storage space, her parents slept on the floor of the corridor. When it was dark, refuse, including human waste, was gathered in newspapers and taken out and buried in the orchard behind the building. For four years no garbage was collected in the city.

Irma's adolescent recollections of the pandemonium have a comical edge. *Everyone was crowded around the radio. That was our only communication with the world. It seems funny now. And all those old people saying things like, "Oh, this is going to end soon." "Oh, my friend told me this and that and this and that." Everyone was talking, but nobody really knew anything. The panic affected people more than the shelling. Old people, young people, were grabbing their kitchen knives and saying things like, "We'll defend ourselves!" An old lady came to our cellar with her husband. She was, like, ninety. They were so sweet, you know, dressed with all these coats on. [She starts laughing.] They had their kitchen knives, too. God, they were clueless! I remember their faces. We were kids, just running around the cellar, making everybody nervous, and everybody was yelling at us. Then there was one woman who kept going upstairs, and when she came back, she always had a story: [Irma mimics her high-pitched voice.] "Oh! I saw a man with a gun!" "Oh! I saw tanks in the streets!"*

Soon enough, the war was all too real. Within weeks, Irma's family heard an explosion a few blocks away that left several people dead. Then one night, a shell hit the home of Irma's best friend. His arm was blown off. In the dark, his parents couldn't find the limb, so the hospital doctors couldn't attempt to sew it back on. Irma was devastated.

Weeks, then months, passed in the cramped quarters, and tensions in the cellar were aggravated. *It was very, very hard. As time went by there were fights, lots of fights, because people were all fed up with everything. People were . . . I don't know . . . maybe it was someone's turn to make bread, and the other lady wanted to make bread before her. . . . Finally, Irma's family decided to take their chances upstairs in their apartment, despite the risk. After all, there was no real way to know how long the fighting would last. The plan was for everyone to rush down to the cellar when shelling resumed, but Irma's father sometimes had to forcibly pull her. I guess the worst was when we thought we didn't have to go to the cellar anymore. Then suddenly, bombing would start early in the morning, or something like that, and you just ran down again, and you were miserable and everybody was so . . . you never knew. . . . That was actually worse than when the shelling was constant. Just when you thought you were starting to live a normal life. . . .*

The indiscriminate shelling was powerful mental torture on the part of the

Bosnian Serbs, whose president, Radovan Karadzic, was a psychiatrist. Over time, Irma's father was able, by listening, to track projectiles in the air, analyzing several seconds of sound to anticipate the arc and calculate whether his family might be blown up. With the explosion came relief. Disaster averted, at least for the moment.

For Irma, the internal stress was as troubling as the external danger. *The shelling might start at 5:00 A.M. My mom and dad could sleep through it, but I'd take my pillow and blanket and go to the bathroom—an ugly bathroom, with white walls, and dark yellow and orange tiles. I'd curl up on the toilet, 'cause that was a place where you couldn't hear it so loud . . . all those sounds of the shells coming at us, flying over our house. We were always thinking, like, "Oh, God, this one is going to hit us. This one. . . ." I spent lots of mornings in that bathroom. If there hadn't been that sound of them in the air, just a bomb, okay. But that sound . . .*

Irma found solace in letting life roll on: *A bunch of my friends would come over, and we'd all sit in front of my building. Some of the boys played guitars. We wouldn't stop, even when the shelling would start. We sang songs like "Stairway to Heaven," but also Bosnian songs: "Anywhere I Go, I'm Dreaming of You." "All Roads Lead to You, Sarajevo, My Love." During the war, that song became really popular again, because it was sentimental. There were tons of songs. [She laughs.] We were actually happy. I mean we had to be.*

A year into the war, Irma's friends came to celebrate her birthday. *I made this goofy pizza [she laughs] with whatever we had: bread and sardines in a tomato sauce. It was actually great! We were playing the guitar. Suddenly we heard this BANG! Then a flash of light. It was like a thunderbolt, so loud and so close. We all fell on the floor. People were running. Someone was crawling. We thought it had hit our building. We ran to the exit, then downstairs. After a few minutes, we realized the shell had fallen where we usually sat outside singing. We thought, "Oh, my God!" Everybody thanked me for inviting them to my birthday, because my party saved us.*

At the beginning of the war, the boys said, "Oh, great!" The only fighting they'd ever seen was on TV.¹¹ They didn't even know how to hold a gun. They didn't know why they were fighting. I asked our sixteen-year-old neighbor what he was trying to prove. He had his mother and father and brother. He should be happy making them happy by being alive. Why fight? Lots of girls tried to tell the boys they were doing wrong—that fighting wasn't the solution—but they were determined. Once they'd tasted war, they understood it wasn't like the movies. Everybody said, "This is never going to end! I'm not stupid. My friends are all dead. What the heck am I doing?" A lot of them ran away from the city when they could. As soldiers, they could go through the tunnel, and they just didn't

come back. Irma sees the issue in terms of social learning. *When I was playing with Barbie dolls, the boys were playing war and shooting and something like that, because they saw it in the movies.*

In the war, women were more [she pauses] calm. Yeah, they faced it: Okay, we're in a war now. We have to survive. We have to eat. We have to find water. We have to figure this out. My mom was much tougher than my dad. During the war I really got to know him — every little detail. He was so afraid—for me, for my mom, for everybody. I know he was doing right when he made me go to the shelter, but he made me panic because he was so upset all the time. He'd say, "Oh God, it's a shell!" He just kept drumming it in. He was angry and always yelling at us. You know, he didn't mean any harm. He just wanted us to survive. But it was exhausting to go through.

I don't remember all the things I did in the cellar, but I remember the feeling, because war brought us together, whether we wanted to be or not. We were living on top of each other. I mean, it wasn't awful, 'cause we made it comfortable, with beds, carpets, chairs and everything. And cards! Oh, my God! We played lots of cards. Then when the grown-ups went to sleep, we started kissing—my first kiss on the mouth. Before that, we'd put a cherry in a glass and play with it with our tongues, to learn how to kiss.

Meanwhile, "the grown-ups," as Irma calls them, were constantly thinking about how to protect their children, who might bring hot shrapnel in from the street as a novelty, or go swimming in the river in easy range of the snipers—as Irma and her schoolmates did. After all, kids cope with war with the skills they have, which includes imagination and play. For the grown-ups, on the other hand, as months stretched into years and turmoil became a way of life, all sorts of assumptions—regarding education, for example—were now uncertain. Principals had to decide whether to hold school, teachers had to decide whether to stay in Sarajevo or try to leave, parents had to decide whether to let (or make) their children thread their way across the besieged town to the school, students had to decide if their fear outside would be greater than their boredom inside. *When the war started, we quit going to school for maybe three months. Then it was September—time for classes. My primary school was near where I lived, but high school was across town, half an hour on foot. It was crazy, but what the hell? We had to do something. Our teachers just told us, "When your mom and dad think it's okay for you to come, then it's okay. If not, don't come."* For Irma's parents, the worst moment of every day was when she'd leave for school. Her father urged her to run, so she'd at least be a fast-moving target. When shelling began at midday, the children sometimes stayed in the school basement. For parents across Sarajevo, those times were nerve-wracking. Still, the teachers assigned heavy homework, even though

there were no new schoolbooks. Irma hand-copied old texts by candlelight at home, determined not to let war have the last word.

At least Irma could run through the city to get to school. Farther out, NURDZIHANA, an accomplished journalist in her forties, was cut off from the city as she dealt with the devastation in her neighborhood near the airport. Dobrinja was a relatively new neighborhood, built as the 1984 Winter Olympic Village, a fifteen-minute drive out from the middle of Sarajevo. *From the beginning, we were completely encircled by Chetniks. Our "line of defense" was a ridiculous notion, because we didn't have weapons. One day, people were panicking, running here and there. I didn't know what to do and didn't want to run.* Meanwhile, Serb troops were advancing across Dobrinja, taking control block by block. Nurdzihana started to run to a building about 300 yards away, set up as a makeshift headquarters. *Someone yelled, "Sniper! Sniper!" I said, "So what?" I didn't know what a "sniper" was — much less that there was one around.*

I found our "neighborhood commander," who hadn't slept for two nights. He had a band around his head. I yelled, "People are stampeding! They say you don't have anything to defend us with! What should we do?" He looked right through me and didn't answer. I shouted again, "What should we do? I don't think people should run away. Is it true you don't have any weapons?" He looked at me and asked, "Do you want me to show you?" I thought he meant he had an arsenal. It turned out there was just an empty apartment building.

Back among our neighbors, a man who had gone with me shouted to the people, "Do you think you can hide? Don't run away!" The woman next to me muttered, "Damn it!" But the people stayed. I telephoned the Interior Ministry, looking for my friend, the minister. I told him, "People are panicking! What should I do?" He shouted over and over, "Organize the people! Don't run away! Defend yourselves! Throw flowerpots on them! Make explosives with hot water and gasoline!"

For months, even years, most people from Dobrinja couldn't reach the center of Sarajevo. When the shelling and bombing started, we lost connection with many neighbors and friends, because if you stepped out of your building, you could be shot, and the telephone lines were cut. Before, I'd been in contact, trying to find out what was happening with others. Now, I was afraid for everyone I knew, and I had to take care of my mother and my brother's son, who accidentally found himself at my place when the war started.

Most people didn't stay because of patriotism. They stayed to defend their homes, their basic way of life. Although it was summer, Nurdzihana stayed dressed, round-the-clock, in pants and boots. A month into the war, Nurdzihana and her family

abandoned their apartment, which was directly in the line of the snipers and shelling. They found space across the street, but Nurdzihana often ran back to her home through trenches and behind barricades. Many people were wounded trying to cross. *We were naïve, wanting to water our flowers and plants, or maybe feed our fish. I went back to try to protect my books, afraid some thugs would break in and take my things.*

My library was very important—even essential—to me. I imagined how in five minutes a lifetime collection of books—mine, or some child’s, or maybe a family’s photo albums—could be reduced to ashes. Nurdzihana thought she might protect her books by covering them with a blanket; eventually, she hid them under a futon in another room. That was my greatest fear—that my books would burn. That’s why I went back, although less and less frequently, because it grew more dangerous.

I was in my old flat, with a friend, in my library. Suddenly there was an explosion, then another. Everything happened within seconds. I reached out and touched him to check if he—or I—was still alive. We were scared. After a few seconds we saw a bullet go through the lamp over my head. Another whizzed by, grazing my back, then went through the door and into the hall. They were big bullets, still hot. She returned again—in defiance, really. We couldn’t just flee—leave our homes and wait for someone to save us. Nobody knew what would happen next. If we’d known what was ahead . . . She left her sentence unfinished. Looking back, events at least have a known sequence. It’s more difficult looking forward, not knowing if the struggle will last five hours, five months, or five years.

Many sharing the uncertainty became intimate friends, because they understood the risk, the commitment, and the price. Only one man was in my old apartment building all the time. His wife and daughter were in the other part of town with some relatives. He’d stayed behind to look after the flat. In the evening, I’d be working in the building opposite, and I could always see him from my window.

We were using free-burning natural gas as makeshift heaters or lamps—a really dangerous, stupid thing to do. (I wondered why I was sleeping so soundly all the time. We were being asphyxiated!) Once when I was sleeping, drugged by that gas, I woke to someone yelling my name. I went to the window but of course didn’t dare stand there looking. The man who had stayed behind was calling me. Then I saw my apartment building in flames. At that moment someone pounded on my door, shouting, “Your flat’s on fire!” Through the window I hollered at my neighbor across the street, “Break my door, my bathtub is full of water!” (I’d been keeping water there to put out the fires that kept starting because of the shelling.)

It was after midnight. I threw something on and ran out. There was a trench crossing

the street. We crouched down going across so the Chetniks couldn't see us, and we had to be quiet so they couldn't hear us. At my building I couldn't get in through the main entrance. We ran around to the other side, through some mazes someone had made. Debris from the roof was falling on my head. When I reached the building, I thought if I went upstairs I'd never come out alive. My flat was on the third floor. Windows were burning. I was dodging burning pieces that came crashing down. When I got to my entrance, it was full of smoke. I thought, "Oh my God, I'll never get out of here!"

As I made my way up, the smoke-filled stairwell suddenly became bright. She could see enormous flames pouring out of the middle apartment on her floor. I was terrified—a strange feeling for me. Somehow I managed to get up to the third floor. At the door of my flat was the man who had called me, shirtless, with a plastic dish and a small glass, tossing water onto my neighbor's door, which was covered with flames. I started laughing at him. He was happy to see me, but frightened. I said, facetiously, "So, are you a fire-fighting expert?" He looked at me, scared: "Don't laugh. Everything else I've tried to use has been devoured by the fire! We can't put it out, but I'm trying to stop it from spreading." We stayed together, trying to save the rest of the building. It was horrible—the noise of crashing doors and windows, burning couches and cupboards. I brought some more water, but the fire was falling down on other flats—four were already ablaze. The fire spread down to the first floor through the balcony.

When I'd run over, I'd asked people around me to call the fire brigade, even though I knew there wasn't any such thing! I just thought somehow others could help us if we all worked together. But that man said "If they come, they'll spoil our work." [Nurdzihana is laughing.] Some old men actually managed—an hour-and-a-half later—to bring a vehicle with some hoses. They were amateurs and couldn't possibly put out the fires, but they drenched everything else. Amazingly, my books survived, and many of my papers.

As it turned out, conflagrations like the one that drew Nurdzihana out into the night had an even more sinister purpose. In the meantime, the Chetniks were shooting. Serb troops would start a fire, then target those trying to put it out. The fire provided light so snipers could do their work. A few days before my fire, a young man I knew—a nineteen-year-old redhead—was shot putting out a fire; we buried him the next night in the park.

Snipers weren't exclusive to Sarajevo. Like Alma, the unintended army recruit, MAJA lived in Mostar, south of the capital. Middle-aged, married to an electrical engineer, Maja was an orthodontic surgeon working as general manager of a large medical center. As such, she was in a position of authority. In a conversation in which she had been talking about her own two teenaged sons, she recounted to me how she rescued another young man being drafted into the

army. *I told the soldiers, "I'm a doctor, and this boy is insane. But if you want to risk it, I'll let you come in." They said, "No, no. Thanks anyway. Goodbye." Today that boy is in the United States. He was about twenty-one, twenty-two, just the age for the army—but he was so afraid of weapons.*

Let me tell you something. I understand fear. We have to respect fear. To get to her Mostar office, she had to cross two roads, in range of sharpshooters. I was scared, but I kept telling myself, "You may save a life at work. You've got to go." I wasn't really surprised that some of my colleagues didn't dare. There were some moments, I must say, when I was dragging my feet, thinking: "Well, shoot me! If you want me, here I am. Just shoot!" But when she thought of giving up, Maja also remembered that others were depending on her. Abandoning them wasn't an option.

In addition to taking care of patients or employees, in their role of primary—or sole—family caregiver, Bosnian women had to cut through the chaos to tend to parents and grandparents as well as children. BILJANA grew up in Sarajevo and emigrated as a young woman to Sweden, then the United States. In 1993, she left her affluent and stable Colorado Springs world to plunge into the war zone of Croatia, in order to be by the side of her mother, who was dying of liver failure. *The possibility of losing my mother, combined with being in a war-torn country, was shockingly difficult. Everything around me was so unfamiliar. In the past, I'd spent summers with my children in Yugoslavia. We'd always felt safe and happy. The beauty, the aromas of nature, and the sweet smell of the ocean would fill my heart as soon as I'd get out of the airplane. But not so that time in Croatia. UN helicopters, trucks, police, soldiers, horrible graffiti—"Go Home Slobbering Idiots," referring to the Muslims. My heart was ripped apart. I was scared. I didn't know what to expect.*

From the moment I'd arrived in Split, on the Croatian coast,¹² I'd been intensely aware of the military environment, which seemed very hostile. And of course I met refugees, women at my mother's home and then on the beach. At first the refugees streaming out of Bosnia were put up in the empty hotels normally filled with tourists vacationing on the Adriatic coast. Then male refugees were taken to fight in the Croatian army, leaving behind women, children, and the elderly. Nationalist Croats intent on annexing part of Bosnia forced the refugees into the streets—on a night, Biljana adds, of driving rain and fierce winds.

From among the refugees, Biljana got to know the woman who cared for her dying mother. Fadila came from eastern Bosnia. She was in her mid-forties but looked like she was seventy. Her hair had turned gray overnight. Her family was like any one of us Americans living a middle-class life: two parents, two children, a TV. Just everyday Bosnians, happy with what they were doing. She and her husband were engineers.



Exodus of Serbs from Sarajevo, alongside trenches used to avoid snipers.
December 1995.

They had a vacation home in the mountains an hour-and-a-half from the town where they lived.

Hearing that Serb troops were advancing, Fadila's husband drove up to their mountain place. *He wanted to save a few stupid things like the VCR, because he figured by the time he returned home his cabin would be destroyed. That night, he didn't come back home, and she got a message that he was killed. She sobbed as she told me how the Serb soldier said he didn't want to waste a bullet on her husband, so he split his skull open with a garden hoe. She fled with her two teenage boys—got onto a bus with just her purse, no documents, nothing, and came to Croatia.*

Biljana's Yugoslavia, a serene summer resort, had devolved into chaos: children dodging sniper fire as they ran to school; neighbors rushing into burning buildings to save each other's apartments; young men feigning insanity to escape the front lines; refugees with tales of barbarity and cruelty. Adding to the mental stress was the need constantly to guess whether it was more dangerous to stay or go, calculating the toll of flight against the danger of the present situation.

Flight

MIRHUNISA: *Many died in their own homes, simply because they didn't want to leave—so they were carried out.*

SABIHA: *Losing your country is losing your core.*

On the opposite side of the front lines from Biljana's Fadila was KRISTINA school-teacher and mother of two daughters. After her husband was drafted into the Yugoslav army (which had essentially become the Serb army), she was caught up in an exodus with other Bosnian Serbs tossed in the tides of war. Kristina's home region in northwest Bosnia was mostly Serb, with 17 percent Bosniaks and virtually no Croats. At the start of war most of the non-Serbs living there had asked to be transported to an area controlled by the Bosniak army and were allowed to leave. When Croat forces took over, the non-Croats fled. Kristina was among them.

As I listened to individuals from every ethnic group tell their stories of hardship, it was easy to understand how some outsiders could say that all sides of the conflict were equally culpable. Yet Kristina's displacement and loss were caused by a counterthrust of the Croat army, as it claimed territory that had been "cleansed" by Serbs in a scorching sweep across the land. Kristina well may not have been aware of the crimes committed in that campaign; she was focused on finding refuge in Banja Luka, which by now had been transformed from a multicultural city to a Serb stronghold.

The weight of war fell not only on political strategists, army generals, and foot soldiers but also citizens like Kristina as her town, Sipovo, became a battleground: *No matter their ethnicity, all men had to go to the front lines. Only those who managed to run away abroad saved themselves from the fighting. My husband, even though he was forty-eight, had to join the army. He was stationed on the border with Croatia. With him on the front line, I had nobody to help me, nobody to protect us. Croatian forces attacked, and the population fled. No one stayed.*

It was complete pandemonium. By the time we started packing, most families had already left. Shells were falling everywhere. My daughter and I hooked up the trailer and threw some things into the car. I got behind the wheel and just took off. Lots of people had no transportation. Everyone was looking for family members. As we were leaving, my neighbor asked me to take her children, so we had two other little ones in the car; you

can imagine how that added to the situation. They were so afraid, and I didn't know what to tell them.

Kristina made it about 300 feet, to an intersection of roads from around her town. Cars and horse-drawn carts had come to a standstill. *But the shelling continued. It was complete bedlam. All around us, women were screaming and little children crying. Utter madness. Those were the toughest moments of my life. I've never felt so helpless. Cars were everywhere, blocking each other. The river of people couldn't move. We waited the whole day. It seemed like an eternity. I was sure a shell would hit us, or there would be a massacre. "They're going to kill us right now," I thought. People were exhausted. My whole body was in shock. A friend came up, begging me to clear a way. His father was in his car, dead. At last the road cleared somewhat, and Kristina was able to move forward. With my car and trailer, I started passing others. Shells were falling all around, and people were being killed. I remember thinking that every single meter we moved forward was going to save us.*

Like thousands of others, Kristina and her daughters made their way to Banja Luka, where they wandered from place to place, looking for refuge. Someone suggested they head for Sanski Most, a smaller town nearby. *But we knew how bad it was there too. Shortly after that, Sanski Most was occupied. We barely managed to stay in Banja Luka; my younger daughter begged and cried, convincing a police officer to let us stay. The enemy was only one day's distance away—and we didn't have anywhere else to go. Life was unimaginably strained. The word "refugee" says it all—how dependent we were, the kind of life we had waiting for food and clothes to be handed out, just trying to make it to the next day. People from thirteen towns flooded into that city. You can imagine the bedlam, the fear. People were shoulder-to-shoulder, all panicked. Shelters for refugees were full to the brim.*

There wasn't much of a life as a refugee. All those days were like one day—the same thing over and over. The most troubling sight for Kristina was the children and elderly. They were tired, sick, and didn't have a place to sleep. We'd go around and try to visit them in the shelters. They were collapsing, dead, right in front of us. I was a refugee too, staying with my sister. We two families were living in a one-room apartment; still, I was lucky, because I knew where I was sleeping. We were so happy that she took us in. We had no income, of course, and no way of earning anything.

Day after day I searched until I found the Kolo Srpskih Sestara [Association of Serb Sisters, a Belgrade-based organization]. They were wonderful. They suggested I bring together the people from Sipovo as a group within the Banja Luka organization. In every situation there are good people—and we found some who let us use their space. The people from Sipovo were suffering terribly. We distributed food and clothes to them.

Kristina stayed in Banja Luka until September 1996. The lines drawn during the Dayton peace talks positioned Sipovo in the new Republika Srpska, so Kristina and her children returned home. *Other problems started then.*

Over the months, then years, of war, the exodus of people fleeing their homes had reached biblical proportions, as over two million people made the weary progression from living in fear, to flight, to life as a refugee, to a return to ruins. Individuals agonized over the decision to move from one stage to the next. When was it better to leave behind home and memory-rich possessions to be trampled through or burned by the enemy? Bosnian identity was tied to ancestral agrarian homesteads, jobs, familial roles, community positions, and a network of friends; to flee would mean starting up again in a new place from within a crowd of other refugees, with "VICTIMS" pasted across every signpost of the psychological landscape.¹³ There was little chance the refugees would find encouragement for their slow, gradual healing process. Thus leaving their homes only replaced a worse situation with a very bad one. The adversity of war was more than death or destruction of property or one-time terrible events. It also brought exhausting upheaval that, month after month, year after year, would not let up. The decision to flee meant a sudden perverse transformation, as respected, stalwart citizens found themselves begging for shelter in a mass of panicked strangers.

Suffering wasn't limited to victims of the attempted genocide; Bosnian Serb families I visited in 1996 in "collective centers" (a euphemism for refugee camps) of the new Republika Srpska were angry and bitter, blaming their own Serb officials for destroying their lives, leaving them uprooted and stripped of meaningful activity. The hardship of displacement was oblivious to ethnic differences—creating an ironically tragic common bond. The Bosnian women who added their stories to Kristina's represent a range of backgrounds: a Bosniak dermatologist, a Croat florist, a Serb pediatrician, a small-town Croat seamstress, and a school-girl who vehemently eschewed ethnic labels. Now all six could be described with one label: refugee.

Listening to FAHRIJA describe her trek to Turkey, who would guess that she was the great-granddaughter of the king of Albania and a U.S.-trained physician? Instead, she was a refugee fleeing Bosnia at the insistence of her politician husband, who recognized the approaching aggression: *I stayed in my father's house for about twenty days. Even though we never went out, one day my father came to me and said that everyone in town had figured out that we were there. "I can't hide you. The soldiers could come and take you. They'll just claim you did something wrong or name your husband, and I won't be able to help you. I can kill three or four of them,*

but I can't stop them. They'll take you and kill us." Fahrija's father was beloved—and too well known—in Novi Pasar, in the Muslim-populated Sandzak area of Serbia. His daughter had no choice but to keep moving.

Fahrija's physical challenge was compounded by emotional disorientation. *I had to leave the second town I called home, and I knew there was no other. I had nowhere to go, but my children and I could have been killed or imprisoned. My husband couldn't help me from Sarajevo. I had to resist telling him how scared I was. I was trying to be rational, but I was in denial. I thought: "This can't be happening, or at least it can't last. I don't deserve this. We're in the middle of Europe, and it's the twentieth century. We're educated people—the world will stop this nonsense." But reality is cruel.*

Fahrija decided her best bet would be to travel by bus to Turkey, where she had relatives. The plane from Belgrade was too dangerous—their passports would give them away—and driving by car would mean no witnesses should they simply disappear. It was a twenty-hour ride to Istanbul. *We were in a crowded bus, in May with no air conditioning and no circulation. Most of the passengers were peasants. I had nothing against them, but when sixty people in thirty-five seats took out their meat and pies, I thought I would die from the smell and heat and never reach Istanbul alive. I vowed that if I survived, I would never step into a bus, any bus, even the best bus in the world, for as long as I live. I could write a book about that trip.* Fahrija's mother, who had been on the run in past times of political upheaval, had told her to never leave behind her most valuable possessions. *So I had all my jewels with me, which made traveling all the more dangerous, because some guy who didn't even care about politics might care about money. I took them, because I had a hunch that I was going away for a long time, not just a week. I also took my diplomas, and my children's school records. I felt, or perhaps feared, that something terrible would happen.*

At the first border, between Serbia and Bulgaria, Fahrija was worried about being detained or robbed by the border guards. *I couldn't have stood that, not when I'd left behind just about everything in the world that reminded me of who I was. So I asked the people on the bus to put my jewels on their necks and hands and pretend they belonged to them, since I couldn't wear all the pieces. Some were afraid to help me, because it was obvious the jewelry wasn't theirs. But some of the women did help, and the driver was very kind. [Fahrija's voice adopts a reverential tone.] He carried my money and told me not to worry. He said if they tried anything, he wouldn't abandon us. "The whole bus will go back. We won't cross the border. I promised your father I wouldn't leave you."*

I tried to hide my fear from my children. Emir was only six and a half. He was so scared that he was shaking. Looking at him, I wanted to cry. As we came near the border,

all I could do was pray to God, "If I ever did anything good in my life, let us go through safely." Two men were checking passports. My mind was racing, trying to decide which to approach. One was quite young. Maybe just like me, I thought: raised in communism and not passionate about religion, war, or politics. I went up to him. He didn't hide his surprise when he saw my passport. "What are you doing on this bus? Why didn't you fly?" he asked. I said: "A cousin of my aunt in Istanbul suddenly decided to get married, and I couldn't get a ticket yesterday, so I'm going by bus." He looked at me intensely then said, "Take this passport before those two men see you. Just run. Behind that line is neutral territory. Go!" I looked at him, grabbed my children, and ran. We made it, and the bus crossed safely. I felt like I took a breath for the first time in hours. I told my children we were safe now and promised them coffee and breakfast in Bulgaria.

When we crossed the Bulgarian-Turkish border, my little son clutched my blouse, asking, "Mommy, do they have Chetniks here?" I wanted to cry at his words. I thought, "God, he's too young to know such fear." But what could I do? How could I erase such monsters from his head? I just said, "No, baby, there're no Chetniks here. We're safe." Our lives weren't in immediate danger now—but my husband was back in Sarajevo, miles behind us, and who could say what the future held?

Arriving at her destination as a refugee didn't end Fahrija's ordeal. Uncertainty made it impossible to plan, or to start a new life. In Turkey, every day I waited for someone to stop this madness so I could go home and resume my life. Sometimes I'd wake in the middle of the night and, for a moment, not know where I was. All I'd see was a strange room; then I'd feel a sick pain in the pit of my stomach. "Oh, God, I'm not home . . . I'm here." [Fahrija rolls her eyes.] Our room was small; two couches barely fit. My young teenaged daughter, Emina, slept on one, and Emir and I on the other. I don't think I'll ever forget the heat, the terrible, oppressive heat that wants to drown you in itself, negating all that you are, all that's human. With the heat came the flies. Their buzzing, and the dry breathing from my children's mouths—those sounds were my only company during the long, restless nights.

There was a water shortage in this suburb of Istanbul, so we couldn't shower when we wanted. Even drinking water was a problem. Water was collected on house roofs in cases of emergency. When nothing else was available, we had to drink that unfiltered, dirty water. You can imagine how I felt as a medical doctor, and with my son so small. He would play with children on the street and then come running to me for money because a man was selling ice cream on the corner. But the man would be so dirty and the ice cream pots even dirtier, so I would try to explain to my little boy that he could get very, very sick. He didn't listen, because all he knew was that he wanted ice cream. So he would go behind my back and buy it along with other sweets sold on the street. Then

one night he had a terrible fever. I thought I'd lose him. The hospital didn't know what to do. It was just a little town, and the doctors either lacked education or perhaps failed to take his condition seriously. Or maybe I was just too scared and wanted them to do so many things for my son—test his blood, his urine, take a throat culture, take a stool culture—when all they could do was give me an antibiotic and a few pills for fever, then send us home. He was delirious. I thought God must have been punishing me for some reason. I felt so helpless.

Emir recovered, but the enervating sense of helplessness lingered, a feeling experienced by not only Kristina and Fahrija, but almost all the women who shared their stories. Sadness flowed particularly freely from DANICA, who was living as a refugee in Croatia when we began our interviews. The daughter of a mixed marriage, she was a florist near retirement age, a gentle mother of two, and grandmother as well. Her home was in the picturesque town of Bosanski Samac in the northeast. *As 1991 was coming to an end, everything was going along with blessing and peace, and we were happy thinking of spring's coming. We in Bosnia were afraid of the war in Croatia, only a hundred kilometers away. But we said, "That can't happen to us. We're united."*¹⁴ *Warplanes targeting Croatia from the Yugoslav National Army [by now essentially the Serb army] were flying that summer over our city, shattering our sense of safety and our hope that war wouldn't come to us.*

Danica had many people to worry about: her younger daughter, who lived across the border in Croatia with her family; her elderly mother, who insisted she would die in her own home; her older daughter, who refused to think of leaving the town in which she'd grown up. *I went to my Tanja's and said, "Give me your kids, I'm going to take them away." She answered, "That's ridiculous, I'm not giving you my children. Look. It's peaceful all around us. Are you crazy?" So I decided to stay, although my bags were packed. Danica converted her basement into a shelter, with first aid supplies, just in case.*

The deciding moment for Danica came when a friend's brother appeared at her door. *He was trembling all over and asked if he could make a few phone calls. He was Bosnian but was going to join the Serb fighters. I asked, "Why are you doing this? Where are you going? I was thinking of leaving; should I?" He just looked at me—that was his only calm moment, when he looked at me—and said, "Go. You have to. You gotta get out of here." I called my daughter to come over to my house, because I was too weak to go to her place, I was so shocked. As we looked at that young man in such a state, my Tanja changed her mind and went to pack for her children.*

Danica led me on through the thought processes of a middle-class merchant, deciding whether and how to become a refugee. *That night I packed. The next day*

I worked, came home at seven, and sat down for a cup of coffee in my kitchen. I decided I'd go in the morning. I thought I should call my mom and tell her to get ready. But then I thought, "She won't sleep if I worry her like that, and she'll be tired for the trip." I thought all night about who and what would fit into my car: my mother, my five- and ten-year-old grandkids, their things. I'd tell my mom to pack a small bag. I looked around my living room and took a little thing from here and a little thing from there: souvenirs from my cupboards I thought would give me a sense of home.

As a businesswoman, Danica was also thinking practically. She would need money to keep going. Anticipating inflation, devaluation, and difficulties in foreign exchange, she packed up some valuables, including a fur coat. *I opened one closet that had my nicest things and just took all I could carry, with the coat hangers: a few coats, a few skirts. I put them on the bottom of the trunk of my car. I needed shoes; I took a pair of boots because I knew I'd be cold. The trunk was full. I was so afraid. I had my rings on, and people could get their ears cut off just for an earring. She decided to separate her resources, to be safe. I thought, "If I have my money, what will happen at the checkpoint, if they stop me and take everything? I wouldn't have anything left."* She would leave her money at home, to come back for later. *But I never came back.*

It was a cold, rainy day. I picked up my mother. We crossed the bridge in the nick of time. The next day, the Serbs took it, and it stayed closed for years. When I called to say I couldn't get back over, my daughter, who had stayed in the town, said: "Don't come back; there's nobody here." I said I still had a delivery of flowers at the train station to pick up. She said, "Mum, we won't need anything." I begged her, "If that's the situation, please, Tanja, call for the boat and cross the river. Don't spend the night in the town." "I don't believe it's as bad as that," was the last thing she said.

Tanja did escape that night—on the last boat before the town fell. Danica's husband escaped over a different bridge; he managed to pick up his eight- and thirteen-year-old nephews, staying just ahead of the Serb troops as one town after another fell. I asked her what happened to those who didn't get away? *Accounts seeped out. Our town was occupied by Arkan's paramilitary forces from Belgrade. They entered our houses, arresting people and bringing them to the primary school for interrogation, taking over our police station and radio station. [Danica sketches out a map of the town to orient me.] One of our citizens was killed that first night for resisting, and others were wounded. People were taken to concentration camps near the city. Paramilitaries, with help from some townspeople and supported by the Yugoslav National Army, humiliated and terrorized those who stayed. That's how the town in which I'd lived for thirty-five years was occupied. Other towns in the region fell after only a few hours or*

days.¹⁵ Before the war, we had the same number of Muslim, Croat, and Serb citizens. Of five to six thousand inhabitants, only thirty-three Croats and three hundred Muslims remained.

Danica was suddenly a refugee across the border in Croatia, a country itself at war. *I've learned that the world falls apart when you tell someone you're a refugee. It's a terrible burden—as if you told them that you have AIDS.* [Danica's eyes are cast down as she speaks.] *You're treated as if you're guilty for the war, for hunger, for evil. People act like you asked for it somehow, like it didn't have to be that way, and it's your fault that it happened to you. There are lots of questions and sometimes accusations. "Why didn't you defend yourselves?" "Why didn't you stay?" "Why didn't you organize?" "Why didn't you do this or that?"*

In Croatia, Danica's daughter felt ostracized as a refugee, so she managed to cross further into Austria and create a new life working low-paying jobs that preserved her dignity. *She wanted her children to be spared the treatment she'd received and not have kids in the schoolyard saying, "Those are Bosnian refugees—they don't belong here." The refugees lived in centers and received relief payments. She refused all that, establishing herself instead as a normal citizen. It's a good thing, because now refugees are being forced out of Austria, even though their Bosnian houses haven't been returned.*¹⁶

Danica goes on to talk about her possessions, a reflection of more than simple materialism. Possessions represent home, a base, as she probes the internal dimension of refugee life. *I can't put into words how it feels to have absolutely nothing—to lose your youth, your entire existence, your successes, everything you've built for yourself. I was fulfilled. I had three expensive cars: a Ford, a Citroen wagon, and an Opel Vectra. But if somebody asked me today, "If you had to, what would you give up: all your cars and possessions, or your telephone?" I'd say, "Take the cars." My existence was organized around people. With one phone call, I could solve any problem. I felt at home in my community. I'd achieved a certain status. Then overnight, I had nothing . . . no one to call . . . just this big book with the addresses and phone numbers of all the people I know. I could never again be in touch with them. Everybody disappeared in one day, without a trace. People lost a lot of material things—a lot of property. All that can be made up for, but lives cannot.*

Danica wept easily as she told me about new life in Croatia. *As a refugee, I had others to care for: my mother, my little grandchildren. Still there are the long hours—with her thoughts and memories. Every night I think of my house . . . my curtains, my windows. "I'll wash them. I'll do some cleaning." I dream of how I'll make it so pretty again. Then I wake up in the morning, realize where I am . . . and I'm so sad.* [She begins to cry.] *When you're fifty and broken, how do you start again? Who's going to*

hire a grandmother? Who's going to take her seriously, help her start her life again, with no record, no reputation, no friends, no money? Everything I'd earned I left behind. It's terrible. Not what I lost; that's not terrible. It's terrible that I can't continue to make anything of myself.

As the Serb army and paramilitaries continued their push from the east across Bosnia, killing and driving out citizens with non-Serb backgrounds, Croatia's President Tudjman seized the moment to pursue his design to take over the western part of Bosnia. NADA, a Bosnian Serb, found herself in danger as a member of a small minority of Serbs when the struggle began between the Croat army and the ragtag Bosnian defenders. In addition to being a beauty, she was a hometown girl made good. The daughter of divorced working-class parents, Nada was a valuable member of her community, having just completed her specialty in pediatrics. She stayed on in Kakanj, thirty miles from Sarajevo, after the town's other Serbs (except five or six doctors) had left. *I was provided an apartment, and I wasn't discriminated against. My friends tried to convince me to be patient, to hang in. There was some psychological pressure, but I wasn't at all maltreated. I postponed leaving from day to day. If it hadn't been for the fighting between the Croats and Muslims, I probably would have stayed.*

Eventually, professional and community status were not enough to ensure her safety. *Until mid-1993, I was the head of the medical center on the outskirts of Kakanj. There were about seventy people employed there, from all ethnic groups; it was like a community center. Our population was 60 percent Muslim, 30 percent Croats. The few Serbs lived mostly in the villages surrounding the town. When the Croats made their land grab, Nada's clinic was in the middle of the fray. We had come to work, just like every other day. Suddenly the grenades and shooting started; we couldn't leave. Almost none of the Muslim employees from the town were there that day, probably because they knew about the attack. Every night we just washed out our underwear and slept on the examination tables in the offices. My director was a Muslim, and we were on the phone every day through that time. Two of my colleagues were Serbs, and there were two girls, nurses, who were Muslims from the nearby villages. The rest were Croats. We had no conflict among us; it was just tense. We were all scared.*

Wounded Croat soldiers and civilians were brought to the clinic. *We treated lots of ugly wounds from bullets that burst inside the flesh. You have to remove individual bits of the bullet. We were doing basic first aid, just trying to stop the bleeding. The more complicated wounds, like stomach or chest . . . those patients just died. I, a pediatrician, had to amputate the arm of a young soldier with only a local anesthetic. One of our staff, who was just starting a surgery specialty, telephoned a colleague to ask how to do it.*

Every clinic had a “war kit” packaged in wax, to use in such a time. Inside were little saws for amputations. We had to cut through the bone, just below the elbow. The soldier asked us for a cigarette, and drank a little alcohol. As we cut through his arm, he kept joking about the sound, saying he hadn’t realized he was made of wood.

When the Bosnian army finally prevailed, Nada fled with other clinic staff further into territory dominated by the Croat army. We weren’t fleeing the Croats or Muslims. We were fleeing the guns. For about ten days, I was cut off from all my relatives—my mother, my deaf and mute brother, and his family. The roads were blocked, so we couldn’t return to Kakanj, and we had no telephones. There were rumors we’d been killed. Nada was able to get a ride in an ambulance with some patients to a clinic in a nearby town. “I need a phone,” I said. “You can call from my house,” said one of the doctors. That’s how I reached my mother. She started crying. [Nada is crying now as well.] She was so scared, and so happy that I was still alive. I asked her if she wanted to stay or come with me. She wanted to come. Back at that clinic, I found a refugee whose baby I had examined at my office. Now he was working for the Red Cross, so he and a colleague took two Red Cross cars and picked up my mother, brother, and his family. That’s how my family joined me in Croat territory, and we took taxis to the border of Serb territory. Anything with wheels was used to evacuate civilians fleeing the fighting. There we got on a truck organized for Serb refugees.

Like Danica, Nada had to decide if flight would be safer or more costly than hunkering down and staying put. In the context of other wartime losses, possessions took on meaning far beyond market value. I had no suitcase, just makeshift bags I sewed from tablecloths, which I had kept packed with a few necessities, like winter clothes. It was difficult to leave anything behind, but I couldn’t pack everything. When my mother left, in her panic and fear [Nada is wiping away tears] she took with her some foolish things like handcrafts, some small porcelain pieces. More important things she didn’t take with her.

As it turned out, Nada didn’t even end up with the things she’d packed, since her life as a refugee started from her office rather than her home. I fled with just my white clinic jacket, and some pants—just summer clothes. It was June, but incredibly cold and rainy. The wife of the doctor whose phone I called from (he was Muslim, and she was Serb) gave me some underwear and a couple of sweaters. But at least Nada has the photo album that was in her desk at her clinic. I’m so happy I had the sense to take it. I love those pictures dearly. She brings the album from another room of her home. It’s blue, with a sunny cover picture of the Dalmatian coast. The album was a birthday gift. Nada’s eyes crinkle as she laughs, pointing to pictures of herself as a baby, her mother and father on a sofa, boisterous friends with waving arms,

medical colleagues posed for a group photo, her prewar boyfriend (a Muslim doctor, she notes). She adds ruefully: *But I have nothing from my home.*

Ultimately, the task for refugees is to try to become acclimated, if not reconciled, to a new environment. That task was steep, even for a young, energetic, intelligent, professionally trained woman like Nada. Adjusting to refugee status may present a greater challenge when the drop into the identity abyss is from a place of comfort and accomplishment. The educated person may be better equipped to handle loss, but the loss is much greater. *I don't like to think back on that wartime. We spent lovely years in Kakanj. We had quite a high standard of living. As a doctor, I had a good salary and traveled a lot. Then all of a sudden I had nothing. We were in a tent in a refugee center—six of us: my mother, my brother, his wife and two kids, with no income, no employment, no home. I had to start from scratch. My mother was sixty-one. The children were ten and seven. My brother was, and still is, unemployed. I had to take care of everybody in the family. Several months later I left for Derventa [a couple hours drive north] where I started to put together a normal life.*

Like Danica, Nada, and every other refugee, VALENTINA'S story is a mix of poignant personal detail and political import. Valentina insisted to me that, apart from observing Catholic tradition, until the war she never thought there was anything significant about being an ethnic Croat. From a rural family, with a husband from a rural family, her words are uncomplicated: *In the war, our village of Podlugovi, about fifteen minutes by car from Sarajevo, was controlled by Serbs; and Visoko, the larger town nearby, was controlled by Muslims. In both places, the fighting was terrible. But who was doing the shelling? We couldn't say. All we knew was that we were afraid. In Podlugovi, in Visoko, the only thing we had in common was fear.*

Valentina and her sister were given free bus tickets by the Red Cross to escape the fighting. They arrived in Belgrade. *Suddenly I was a refugee. I started to cry—not because I was surrounded by Serbs, but because I didn't know anyone. I didn't know where places were, or who to turn to for help. I had nowhere to go. I was seventeen, with my twenty-four-year-old sister and her two-year-old daughter. The little money we had was spent.*

The Red Cross was terrific. They found a Serb couple who took us in, who really accepted us. [Smiling, she describes each of them.] We stayed there a long time, like part of their family. We ate together, watched television, talked. As we got to know them it was less difficult. At least I had a roof over my head; I had someone to comfort me. In those two or three months before our mother and father could contact us, they actually replaced my parents. After six months, Valentina made a visit home but then returned to Serbia. They were really good to us. They knew we were Croats, but they

didn't care. Refugee experiences don't usually have a clean, clear end. First there was a phone line, and then regular bus lines so we could go see our family and they could visit us. Gradually, there was less war activity, and every day was a bit easier. Easier, perhaps, but the passing time brought a profound weariness. At the beginning, we thought the war would last for ten days—or maybe a month. As it went on and on, we stopped thinking about an end. We took for granted our new way of life. We had no choice. Before the final end of the war, we had no hope that life could be better. That's how it was: a lot of sorrow . . . and then it ended.

Only three years younger than Valentina, IRMA, sick of the sounds of war, was not lucky enough to have the Red Cross bus her out of besieged Sarajevo. Life had become increasingly difficult. There was no fruit or vegetables, and a kilogram of sugar cost about \$40. People sold jewelry to buy oil. After years of shelling and shelters, she couldn't take the mental pounding anymore. *In August '95, when I was fifteen, I didn't think things were going to be better. I just couldn't stand it anymore. I went to my parents and said, "I've gotta get out! I've waited three years, and nothing has changed. What's wrong with you? Why can't you get me out of this place? How come so many others are leaving, but not me?" One day, my mom came to me and said, "Do you wanna go in two days?" Relatives in Austria had invited me. I said good-bye to all my friends.*

In a Sarajevo suburb, a tunnel had been dug in early 1993, running under the airport. One end was apartment #25 of the former Olympic Village, a unit with nothing to distinguish it from the rest of the shell-pocked neighborhood. The other end was a private house next to a field that stretched to the base of Mount Igman, a long, flat, tree-covered mountain. Eight hundred people had been killed trying to cross the airport to escape the city before the tunnel was constructed—in four months, using wheelbarrows to remove the dirt from five meters underground. Inside, a track ran along the base, and steel supports lined the sides. Once completed, the tunnel was used to bring in military personnel, transport the wounded, or provide a channel for some small bit of supplies for the 200,000 people in the city.

My mom brought me to the apartment building near the tunnel entrance, then stood in the street, waving. A soldier took me with him. I thought it was arranged that he would go with me. But he just brought me to the tunnel and said, "You go through here." I was in there, all alone—a child, with all those soldiers around me. I was scared. I didn't know when I would see my mom again. So many things were going on in my head. There was no real light, only little lamps every ten meters. It had started raining, and water was dripping down. People were all around, stooped over as they passed through, and on

every face you could see pain and suffering. The passage took twenty minutes when the tunnel was empty; but it was more like two hours with the crowd sometimes stopping and sometimes crawling though the space, which averaged four feet but was lower in some places.

Irma's father, because he was working for the UN, had managed to get transportation through the front lines to meet her at the other end of the tunnel, just below Mount Igman. Regulations forbade his bringing his daughter with him, but he had her suitcase and had been waiting for her all day. *I came out at an open trench, about a hundred meters. I didn't have an umbrella, so I was soaking wet. At the end of that stretch I saw my dad, waiting for me. Oh, I was so happy to see somebody I knew! Then Mount Igman. For two hours we climbed in the dark on the steep road. There were no cars, no buses. Then at 3 A.M. a big truck came by with soldiers, and we climbed in.* Irma and her father tried unsuccessfully to hitch a ride to the town where her mother's sister lived. The next day they heard that that town had been heavily shelled. Azra, Irma's mother, was distressed to hear from her sister that they never arrived. They stayed instead with a stranger who took them in. *I don't know what that nice man was doing out at 5 A.M., but he said, "You can sleep at our place," so we went with him, slept a little bit, then went on to Split.* After two days, Irma and her father took a ship to Italy, then spent fifteen days trying to get a visa for Austria. In Florence, they were told they needed to return to Sarajevo and get the document from the Austrian Embassy in the Holiday Inn—as if that were possible. Eventually, their Austrian relative drove down to Italy, hid Irma in the trunk of his car and smuggled her back across the border.

From there I was going . . . I didn't know where. I didn't know those relatives. I sat there in the car, looking at the people I was going to spend I didn't know how many years with. When I first saw them, it was a shock. I was happy that I was out of Sarajevo, but they were two old people. He was eighty-five, she was seventy-five. He had a big nose, gray hair, and lots of wrinkles. She was really sweet. I liked her from the first moment, because she was, like, "Oh, Irma [in a caressing voice] Hello! Grüss Gott!" She didn't know any other language, so she was talking to me in German. I knew hardly any German when I got there. So I was saying "Ja, ja, ja." It was, like, the only word I knew.

I was happy in Austria, but I didn't feel totally comfortable, because they were old, and I felt I always had to smile, whether I was angry or sad or something like that. They gave me money. They gave me a place to live. I felt I shouldn't bother them with my problems. But they were very nice to me. And, of course, I helped this old lady. Her name is Frieda and his name is Hano. I helped her with cooking and cleaning.

Back on Mount Igman I'd asked my dad, "Oh God! Am I ever coming back here

again?" When the war ended, months after her flight, Irma could go back for visits to Sarajevo. She wanted to earn the more highly respected Austrian degree but missed her parents tremendously. Phone lines were undependable. Visits were many months apart. *Finally I decided, "I'm going back. It doesn't matter what happens to me . . . what kind of school there is. I'm going back!"*

Atrocities

ALMA: *We'd seen the traumatized refugees. Those girls were . . . My God, if we had been caught . . .*

GRETA: *It's one thing to hunt wild beasts, but the snipers were hunting people. Every day we lived in fear.*

KRISTINA: *I don't like remembering this; now as I'm telling you, I feel like something's choking me.*

As in many conflicts worldwide, the civilian population, particularly women, suffered most from the barbarity allowed by violent conflict.¹⁷ In our interviews, the women sometimes whispered, sometimes blurted out, accounts of the horror they experienced. Their voices were usually calm, but tears often welled up in their eyes. Even as it was hard for them to articulate, it's difficult for me to write about the sadism let loose in the Bosnian war. But to ignore it is impossible.

There are many reasons not to write, or read, this section of the book. Words fall far short of the pain and terror the women experienced. At least one of the women I interviewed is being treated for post-traumatic stress disorder. That being said, journalists seeking a gripping opening paragraph for their war coverage have created an abundance of harrowing images, enough to cause that mental glazing-over known by aid workers and politicians as "compassion fatigue." As well, passionate descriptions of gore and cruelty may feed a prurient appetite in the writer or reader. Perhaps such base acts ought not see the light of day. Laying them out before the public may be a profane exercise. Their destructive nature may be so profound that even the telling should only happen in a protected place.

It was nonetheless important to the women to watch me tape and type their narratives. The one thing worse than having too much attention focused on their experience may be for their suffering, and its causes, to be ignored. But it's hard,

in an interview, to step into such personal space. For example, I didn't ask any of the women if she'd been raped. It's doubtful, given the lack of anonymity in this book, a woman would have volunteered that information. But my purpose was to learn about the women's postwar work, so I didn't push for descriptions of traumas. That's the reason I include only skeletal accounts of atrocities from five women. Two worked with victims and absorbed their stories; three are first-hand witnesses. In each case, the speakers only touch on the atrocities, almost as if to say, "This experience must be referenced, but should not be reopened." But each delivered her story with passion and, it seemed, a hope that the telling itself could help prevent such evil from ever again being unleashed.

NURDZIHANA speaks with the detail one would expect from an accomplished journalist describing the events she witnessed in May 1992, on the outskirts of Sarajevo, as the Olympic Village complex of Dobrinja was encircled: *We were hiding like mice, watching Serbs moving around with their armored personnel carriers — APCs — screaming, shooting. After tanks rolled by, we organized guards at the entrances of our apartment buildings. We looked after our buildings in shifts, thinking we were somehow safe by doing that.*

Then, one day — a quite peaceful day — the explosions started. We didn't know what the shooting was, but it was horrible. Everyone ran up the stairways, or wherever there was a close place to hide. I ran into my flat. My mother was already in the hall, which seemed safe. My brother's son, Jasmin, was with us. Our neighbors Nada and Delveta joined us with Delveta's son, Sasa. It was a long, narrow hall. At first we didn't know what was going on except the shooting. Bullets went through my kitchen. There was glass all over us. I tried to protect everyone with a red wool blanket we'd been using as we slept in the hallway on sofa cushions. Sasa was eighteen and Jasmin nineteen. I thought it was most important to protect the two of them, but of course I wanted to shield everyone.

The shooting went on for maybe half an hour, but it seemed like an eternity. Then somebody knocked on our door. It was our neighbor Sveto: "Everyone has to get out! If we don't, they're going to kill us all!" We heard muffled voices on the stairs. Somebody said, "They're in!" Someone had pulled the bar out of the makeshift barricade across the door. Young men in camouflage were coming up the stairs, rifles pointed. They reeked of alcohol. They were forcing people out, using their guns.

I didn't know what to do with Sasa and Jasmin because the soldiers were taking the men away. It was all very, very fast, like lightning. I tried to hide them. I had a deep wardrobe with two doors. I pushed Sasa into one side, Jasmin into the other. I thought I'd cover them with some clothes, to save them. They were completely confused and just turned themselves over to me. I started to go out with Mother and the others. But at the

stairway I turned back, saying, "This is really stupid." The boys wouldn't have a chance. "If they find you, they'll kill you." Better to lead them by the hand, Nurdzihana decided, and stay together. Meanwhile, the thugs were running up and down, pounding on doors, screaming for people to go outside. We made our way down the stairs. Mother said to one young Chetnik, in a soft and gentle voice, "My sons, what are you doing?" He raised his rifle butt as if he were going to hit her. I glowered at him, even though I knew if I so much as lifted my hand, I would die right there and then. Seeing my eyes, he lowered his rifle and said, "Get out, Granny!"

As shooting continued from the two APCs, Nurdzihana joined the crowd in front of her apartment house. Buildings and cars were ablaze, and people were herded into a corner. Three hundred people, standing there like cattle. I came closer to my mother and took her hand. She was only worried about what would happen to Jasmin. Jasmin and Sasa were trembling. We were all quiet. We could hear shooting. People were pouring out from other buildings. Then a woman started screaming, "Where's my child?" Her daughter had been with us in the hall, but I didn't know what had happened to her. For a moment, there was consternation and confusion. A few minutes later, we heard the Chetniks laughing terribly, saying, "Look at this girl." Elvira was a young woman of twenty-five, beautiful, with blond hair. "Pretty kid!" they said, and started walking toward her. Who knows what would have happened to her . . . but something distracted them. They said, "Quick, separate the men from the women. Men come with us. The women can go home." That meant Jasmin and Sasa would be taken. As we started toward the entrance, Jasmin tried to come with us, but they were physically pulling the men away. Then Elvira tapped my back and said, "Jasmin . . ." She motioned for Jasmin, who was almost six feet tall, to crouch down. He bent down and hugged my mother tightly, walking with her as if he were a child. Sasa did the same, and we made it into the building.

The Serb paramilitaries left hurriedly, with some 150 men, most of whom were not seen again. After several hours we found out why they hadn't killed all of us. While we were all outside and Elvira was hiding in the flat, she managed to make several phone calls. She reached some young men from other parts of Dobrinja. None had guns, but they started shouting behind the buildings, banging on garbage containers. They pretended to have weapons saying, "Shoot them, now!" Later we saw where those young men had written "MINED" on one of the nearby garbage containers. The Chetniks were scared.

Of course, we were all distraught as the men were taken away—we didn't know where. A few days later, we got horrible news from the Aerodrom neighborhood, just across from the airport. A young man came often to our cellar, to see a girl he fancied a

lot. They were young, but he liked to take care of her, and he wanted to show her how brave he was. He said he would tell us everything that was happening. If we needed to run away, he'd tell us in time. One day, he came in very upset and said he had vomited on the way. He'd seen several men butchered by Chetniks—and he said the slaughter had just started. It was the infamous Aerodrom massacre, in which over a hundred people were killed. I know a family that hid for forty days in an attic, from which they witnessed the horror.

The impact exceeded the terrible loss of human life. *The war was such humiliation for us. Encircled, under constant attack, butchered. We buried people in the parks, using our wooden wardrobes for coffins.* Death, once again, was the great equalizer. *It didn't matter who they were—Bosniaks, or Serbs who had stayed behind in Sarajevo. They were killed indiscriminately.*

About three hours northwest of Sarajevo, on the opposite side of the front lines, was GALINA, an energetic organizer who put aside teaching deaf students to instead address the overwhelming needs of Serb refugees streaming into Banja Luka. Although hardship in the Bosnian Serb community was severe, international human rights organizations have attributed the overwhelming majority of atrocities to Serb perpetrators. Thus it was hard not to flinch when Galina told me of Serbs “liberating” Bosnian towns and when she explained that the Serb military action was in response to the destruction of Serb churches and the victimization of Serb people. Indeed the Serb press flagrantly fabricated tales of atrocities committed against Serbs, sometimes even taking an actual situation (such as rape camps or the massacre of Srebrenica) and reversing the protagonists and antagonists.¹⁸ On the other hand, Galina denies that Banja Luka experienced ethnic cleansing, despite these published statistics: According to the prewar census of 1991, the population of Banja Luka (195,000) was approximately 30,000 (Muslim) Bosniaks and the same number of Croats. After the war, the international community estimated a population of about 220,000, with 3,000 Bosniaks and 2,000 Croats.¹⁹ All sixteen mosques were razed.²⁰

Still, at an individual level the suffering of the women was comparable, even though across ethnic groups it was not. *In '92, Odzak—an ethnically mixed town—was under the control of Croat forces (before being liberated by the Serb army). The men were either at the front line or in camps, so in the village all the peasants were women. They were under occupation for three months, imprisoned in their homes with the children, and they suffered awful trauma. They were raped in front of their children. Old women, even little girls, were raped. They killed grandmothers.* The war raged on. Extreme situations worsened. *When I asked them about these crimes, these women*

would pause. “There were so many,” they often said. Every day of the three-year war, they lived a new story of fear, of heroism, of betrayal, and, yes, atrocity.

The Bosnian government calculated that 50,000 women were raped in the war. Between 1993 and 1997, the German-sponsored Medica Women’s Therapy Centre in Zenica examined 28,000 women for rape and other sexual abuse. Firm numbers are impossible to gather. Victims were likely not to report the crime since enormous cultural shame is attached to rape and victims are often considered unmarriageable.²¹ As well, many of the women had been raped repeatedly—some for months, in bondage. Statistics couldn’t do justice to their experience. Political explanations shouldn’t blur the fact that men were doing violence to women.²² But more important is the effect of war in allowing acts that otherwise are held at bay by civil order.²³

However, most of the rapes in the Bosnian conflict were neither side effects of war, sexual aggression, nor acts of revenge. They were planned within the strategy of ethnic cleansing. Those who organized the rapes forced others to join in. Forced impregnation was the ultimate ethnic cleansing, and Serb rapists taunted their victims, telling them that now they would give birth to a Serb baby. Rape was a crucial tactic of the political-military strategy—not the aggressive manifestation of sexuality, but rather the sexual manifestation of aggression.²⁴ In addition, rapes served other military objectives, such as bolstering masculinity. Raping women was a way of attacking men as their protectors, humiliating them. War provided man-to-man communication via the violation of women. It was, in effect, symbolic rape of the community. Rape promoted ethnic cleansing when a woman who had been repeatedly assaulted or a witness to the raping was set free to tell the story. The remaining inhabitants in the area were more likely to flee, the women out of fear, the men out of humiliation that they were not able to protect their women.²⁵

It’s easy to see why many recoiled in fear or repulsion from this aspect of the war, but MIRHUNISA did the opposite, leaving academia to try to ease the suffering of the women she encountered. That choice was not obvious for a professor of accounting at the University of Sarajevo, who had written academic textbooks, had a successful ski equipment business with her husband, and was raising two children. But her life turned upside down early in the war; and, in addition to gathering data from victims seeking refuge in the capital, she began to orient her time toward aiding refugees, much like Galina on the Serb side of the conflict. *Every single day I listened to accounts from raped women. I gathered about 570 statements from children, women of all ages, even men. The most specific rape information*

came from eastern Bosnia, where schools had been turned into rape camps. I received a call from a mother who had been in one of those camps with her two daughters, fifteen and sixteen years old. She had made it to Sarajevo, and she wanted to tell someone that other women were still in captivity. She was probably in shock when she talked to me so openly, so matter-of-factly, because later she completely closed up. You know, most women were ashamed. They couldn't talk about this, especially if their daughters were also in the camp. They wanted to hide it, to protect their daughters. Mothers were afraid that . . . if tomorrow her girl found a boyfriend and he learned that she'd been in a rape camp, she'd never . . . you know. I was with these women every day. The most difficult was when I'd take the girls to the hospital to get an abortion. When I brought them back, I couldn't even give them a cup of real milk — just powdered.

Mirhunisa concludes by putting a personal face on the abstraction of atrocity, with her description of an eleven-year-old whose testimony was duly taken by the UN war crimes investigators and human rights groups, before the girl left to be with her mother. She had been brought to the Sarajevo hospital by UN forces from a village near Foca, where she had been held in a rape camp with her mother and baby sister. *When men would come to take the girl and her mother to rape them, the baby would be crying. Can you imagine what the mother felt — being led out with her daughter and leaving the baby behind? At the clinic, they removed all the girl's reproductive organs because of a terrible infection. I met her at the hospital after she was operated on. She had shaggy brown hair and was extremely pale. She looked lost, traumatized. Her clothes were rags. She seemed in a state of complete desolation, of depression, as if she didn't care. When I interviewed her, she described carefully how and why things happened to her. She talked about her mother and others at the camp. She kept focusing on details — like how the baby was crying, and how difficult it was for her to listen to the baby cry. I was thinking that maybe I should be steering the conversation toward things like: How did she manage? When did they take her to this brothel? What happened to her? But she just wanted to talk about how happy she was that the baby had been spared from the same horrors. She didn't seem interested in talking about herself.*

Her eyes were penetrating. Every time she looked at me, even without saying anything, I felt as if she was asking for help, unwittingly perhaps. My daughter was about her age, so I would tell her about my daughter. She would ask me, "Was your daughter in the camp, too?" "No, she wasn't in the camp, but we went through some horrible things," I answered, trying to make it seem like it's a normal thing, just to make what happened to her seem a little bit less.

Her greatest wish was that I should bring her one particular folk singer, because her father — she had been forced to watch as his throat was slit — her father loved that singer.

So I found the singer and explained what had happened to this girl, and she came to visit. Since the girl was so poorly dressed, we brought her several pretty things to wear, but she didn't even look at them. She just stared at the singer . . . and said, "My father loved you most."

EMSUDA, meanwhile, was enduring the devastation of Prijedor, in western Bosnia, where she was incarcerated in one of 200 concentration camps that sprang up across the country. The camps were used for torture, rape, forced labor, and extermination of non-Serbs.²⁶ They also served as collection points as people were being expelled. In Emsuda's area, a school had been converted into a makeshift concentration camp: *In the summer of '92, we knew something terrible was brewing. My husband and I, along with the children, decided our best bet was to split into two groups. I'd go to my brother's on the outskirts of town; my husband would stay home. We asked the children who would go with whom. Our son chose me, and our daughter chose my husband. That split was a good thing. I'm sure if I'd stayed home, I'd have been killed, or something else terrible.*

A day before the shelling started, I went to my brother's. The people who lived around him weren't prepared for the war. In one day, we managed to construct shelters in the woods. We gathered the women and children. Everyone who made it to the shelters survived. Of those who didn't come with us, only a very small number stayed alive. Some were killed in the fighting, others taken to the camp and killed there. We didn't think we'd survive. Shells were exploding right in front of us. Our shelters were behind the military line, where nobody suspected they could be, and that's why we were safe. I felt good that the people had listened to me and taken refuge. The rest of my family was there, along with about thirty other families. . . . My parents lived with my brother, so we were together. We watched what was happening; we could see quite clearly that horrible sight and we thought no one had survived. Still, we didn't realize what was in store for us.

*In the lunacy of that time, with people being taken to camps, everyone thought I'd been killed when my house was destroyed. Though Emsuda was alive, she had no idea of the fate of her daughter and husband. They were ecstatic when they found one another, three days later, imprisoned in the camp. As she gave me a few details from her incarceration from May 26 to July 1, I had the feeling I was in a private, sacred place in her psyche. I was reluctant to ask probing questions that would evoke memories I couldn't heal, or even bandage. But Emsuda was patient with me as I pieced together some semblance of her experience: *Some were lucky to be killed in the shelling, because later . . . children had to watch their parents being murdered, and parents had to watch their kids being killed. A brother, father, and mother had to watch their daughter being raped. Sons had to watch their mothers being raped.**

or murdered. Or the mother and the sister would be forced to watch the brother and son being killed.

I was trying to save as many young people as I could from being killed or tortured. We couldn't save everyone, not even most. Women were giving birth without any medical help, without any anesthetic, outdoors. In addition to the school, there was a youth center with a movie theater, and a large yard in which a few thousand people fit. Cold, hard rains fell all day long. Conditions were terrible. The yard was packed: old, young, people dying and being born in the mud, one right next to the other, without food or water. I was one of five women friends. One other and I survived—she wasn't considered dangerous enough, so she managed to make it. I personally knew twenty-nine women who were taken to the camp, but there may have been a great many more. It's hard to remember. People were in such shock, they completely forgot who they were.

There were so many rapes. Sometimes at night, the soldiers would go through the crowd, shining flashlights on faces, looking for young women. One night they took away twelve girls. Kids . . . babies . . . they were so young. They piled them onto trucks, took them a little ways, and started raping them. Only five or six came back. They were scarred physically and emotionally. We had a well-known doctor there, and also a midwife. The two tried as best they could to help these women. They put in some stitches, trying to patch them up. But then the doctor was taken to a different camp, and he never returned.

The homeroom teacher of Emsuda's daughter was tortured to death, with her students watching. They took one woman while she was breastfeeding her baby. The soldiers came and grabbed her and gave her baby to her mother-in-law. Often women taken by soldiers never returned. The most horrible acts simply disappeared—they were never recorded. The witnesses were killed. We saw only a tiny fraction of what was perpetrated.

I had thirteen family members in the camp. My brother-in-law had been a student in that school, so he knew every nook and cranny. During the day, when Serb soldiers were looking for familiar faces, we'd whisper to each other and slip off to hide in the physics lab. At night, all thirteen of us would meet there. My brother-in-law knew the door to the lab didn't work right. You had to push really hard to open it. Otherwise it seemed to be locked. When the soldiers came at night looking for people to torture and rape, they'd try the door and think it was locked, with no one in the room. That's what saved us. We were lucky. Others were outside, in the wind and weather. Serb police and soldiers surrounded the camp, which was filled with Bosniaks . . . also Bosnian Croats, who comprised just seven percent of the area's population. Romani [Gypsies] were there, too—anyone who was non-Serb. They kept bringing new people into the camp, until there was no more room. Then they allowed very old women and those with small children to go outside

the barbed wire to nearby houses under the control of the soldiers. My seventy-year-old mother took my nineteen-year-old daughter, who is exceptionally beautiful. Fortunately, she wasn't good with makeup; so casual observers didn't notice her too much.

My sister left with another old woman. Then came my turn. I wanted to check on my mother and daughter. I was terrified my daughter would be taken. They wouldn't let me go because they said my twelve-year-old son could handle a gun and go to war. I said we only wanted to see my mother and daughter—with their permission, of course—and that we'd come back. That's what we did. I checked on my mother and daughter then came back to the camp with my son. I built some trust. The soldier I'd talked to before said yes another day when I asked him to let me go see them. Then I didn't come back, and we hid. We tried to find a house with some food, but we couldn't. We didn't have anything to eat. We went to my niece's house, but two soldiers discovered us. One, I realized from his accent, was from the camp. He seemed different from the others, more calm and settled—around my age, in his forties, medium height, brown hair, blue eyes. After I started talking to him, he realized who I was. They had lists of people they were to round up, and he remembered I was on the list. Then I mentioned his cousin. He told me not to leave the house and to hide. He promised to return within an hour . . . then went back and talked to his cousin. The cousin, from a poor Serb family, had been hired by Emsuda to design clothes for export to France, Germany, and Italy, after Emsuda convinced her husband to invest their savings in a cottage industry that allowed pensioners, jobless women, and single mothers to work from home, sewing.²⁷ The job had allowed the young woman to continue her studies in medicine. She explained that I'd helped the poor—among others, her. She begged him to look after us, to save us. That soldier became her protector as she waited for a chance to take her family and escape the area.

When she didn't return, the camp leaders were determined to find her. I was targeted because I had a business, and they knew I have a lot of money—or I had a lot of money—and they didn't know what I'd done with it. They also knew I carried a lot of weight in the community, and they didn't like that, of course, because I always fought against violence and injustice. They knew I'd stand up to them, no matter what. They accused me of arming the green berets—our defense—buying uniforms and weapons for them. A few months earlier, I'd organized a demonstration against the war in Croatia, so they considered me Enemy Number One of the Serb people, opposing the creation of the Serb state.²⁸

I wasn't around when the camp leaders started looking for me. The Serb soldiers took all the women outside into the schoolyard, separating them from the men. They called my name. There were about twenty-five hundred there, and most of them knew me really

well. Not one admitted she did, or that she'd seen me just a couple of hours earlier. My husband, brothers, and father all stood on the other side, with a lot more of my family. For two hours those women stood in the sun as the soldiers constantly repeated my name, describing me so they'd remember. At last one woman, who couldn't take it anymore, said, "Her sisters are here." They took my two older sisters [Emsuda's voice is wavering] and kept asking, over and over, "Is she your sister?" One sister just kept repeating yes until they realized she was in shock, and they couldn't find out anything from her. So they released her. She got word to me, through a friend with a Serb name, that I mustn't show my face.

We were so lucky to meet that soldier. He risked his life to rescue us. I thank God, and him, that we didn't go through what many other women did. The whole region was a concentration camp. Every house was watched at every moment. As we waited for the right time to make our escape, we slept in the same house every night, but we couldn't turn on a light. In the middle of the night, somebody might grab your arm and take you away. During the day we switched houses to confuse the soldiers. We'd fix food and try to organize things to survive and keep each other informed. One day I was in a village close to the camp, with about thirty women and a few older men. It was like an information center. They'd know, from word of mouth, where the soldiers were going. The soldier who had saved me came to warn me about a friend of mine who lived in a house across the road. She had three girls, one who was eleven, although she already looked like a young woman — she was so developed and she had a certain air. She was to be taken that night, with her mother. They were sleeping in a different house than ours, but I managed to get the message to her. The soldiers came that night. They made a racket, banging on windows and doors. The houses just echoed. We knew they assumed the mother and daughter would be hiding in a big house, so they hid in a small one that was barely standing. In the end, the soldiers just set fire to the house they thought this woman and her daughter were sleeping in, but because of the message we managed to get to her, the two had already left. That girl was saved, but most of them weren't. The ones they took away never came back. Where are they? What happened to them? [Her voice trails off.] There are no witnesses.

After twenty-four days, the soldier who had befriended us told us we had to trust him. He took us to the Serb military camp, pretending we were visiting someone. Then he told people he was going to see us off to the railway station. That's how we escaped. He knew all the checkpoints. With him at our side, we got on the train and made it out of Bosnia.

Stories like Emsuda's were revealed to the world as reporters discovered concentration camps in western Bosnia. The international community could no

longer claim ignorance. Although the ultimate responsibility for the aggression rests on leaders in Pale and Belgrade, the rest of the world was complicit, by commission and omission, in the Balkan disaster. Even with hindsight, however, it's difficult to judge which political acts were helpful, which harmful. Germany's highly controversial push in December 1991 for the European Community's recognition of the independence of Croatia and Slovenia—five months before UN admission—was one step in the geopolitical square dance, as various world leaders took their positions, then turned, moved backward, forward, or sideways—even switching partners occasionally, while their domestic constituencies called the steps. The problem was, no agreement on the choreography was ever reached. Some leaders were determined to contribute to, others to remain disengaged from, a comprehensive solution to the conflict—at least until they changed their minds. As Milosevic and Karadzic fiddled, international figures were constantly bumping up against each other.²⁹

Still, how could such atrocities be allowed, given the existence of the UN—itsself created, after all, out of the madness of World War II to prevent just such catastrophes? The member states, including the United States, bear the greatest burden of blame for not giving the United Nations a mandate to stop the killing. But in an irony lost on few of the women to whom I spoke, the presence of UN humanitarian personnel officials precluded or excused individual countries from action. In 1991 Alija Izetbegovic urged the UN to send peacekeepers to prevent bloodshed. The UN refused. Despite encouragement from U.S. Ambassador Warren Zimmermann, the U.S. government didn't push.³⁰ In early 1992 the Security Council sent "peacekeeping" troops into the former Yugoslavia, where there was no peace to keep. The lightly armed soldiers were assigned to areas being shelled by tanks. Their mandate was extremely limited. For example, they could protect a specific international aid convoy or the distribution of relief packages.³¹ Meanwhile, they watched civilians they had just supplied with food be shelled and massacred.³² Intervention was deemed as "taking sides." To make matters even worse, those troops, prevented from dealing with the exigency of the situation, were nonetheless available to be taken hostage by the aggressors—most notably in 1995, providing CNN footage of humiliated UN soldiers handcuffed to telephone poles. That embarrassment led to shameful deals with the Serbs, including a purported French agreement to block the use of air power against the Serb army if they promised not to harm UN soldiers. The international protectors were thus manipulated by Milosevic through his Bosnian Serb henchmen, Mladic and Karadzic. That distortion was masked by the bravado of some UN

and NATO military who parroted Milosevic's propaganda—for example, at a confidential briefing in which high-level officers informed me that Muslims were indeed firing on themselves in Sarajevo to attract sympathy.

In one of its many failed attempts to manage the situation, in April 1993 the United Nations declared several of the remaining pockets of Muslims (Bosniaks) in eastern Bosnia “safe areas,” ostensibly protected by UN monitors and supplied by scant deliveries from international humanitarian organizations. In fact, these “safe areas” were some of the most dangerous places in the world.³³ The enclave of Srebrenica was swollen with refugees as Serbs overran the surrounding countryside. The prewar town of 12,000 had become refuge to around 40,000 by July 1995, surrounded by Serb forces on all sides and defended by an ad-hoc militia. Karadzic had warned the United States and United Nations that he would take Srebrenica and other “eastern enclaves” if Croat and Bosnian offensives continued. On July 6, when Serbs attacked the UN positions in the area, repeated urgent radio requests by the Dutch commander for protective air strikes were virtually ignored. The UN “forward observers” were easily overwhelmed by the Serb army. In the following days, the worst atrocity in Europe since World War II shocked the world in its scope and depravity. For the survivors, the tragedy was not political. It was pointedly individual.

Like the concentric circles in Dante's *Inferno*, scenes of war are closer or farther from pure evil. None was nearer the dark center than Srebrenica, where KADA lived with her husband, son, and daughter. Kada had grown up with the scars of war. Her father disappeared in World War II just a few months before she was born. She worked in a textile factory and was particularly proud of her husband's university degree in sociology. During the years of siege, she focused on keeping her family alive. *A long time will pass before some people are able to talk about these things, to admit reality*, she observes.

Meanwhile she was ready to tell me her story. The calmness of her words belies turbulent emotions she carries. For those who care about the victims in this war, asking women like Kada to repeat their stories one more time seems an obscene intrusion. But even as she wept, Kada insisted that I listen, that I know what happened, and that I tell others. Her account has been verified by hundreds of others, in explicit detail.³⁴ *We all went through hard times in Srebrenica. We were hungry. We were shelled. We didn't know what was happening. I had to walk twenty kilometers, carrying twenty-five kilograms of corn seed, to feed my family. I couldn't let my son go do it. He could've been taken by the Chetniks and killed, or he could have stepped on a land mine. I risked my life, because to me, mine was worth less than his.*

Nineteen times during the war, I went out to find food in the fields of villagers who'd come into town for safety. We went at night and gathered corn and potatoes, even though Chetniks were all around us. They set mines for us. Lots of people died. Once I almost froze. I was stiff from cold. It had started snowing and the corn was still in the fields. I went in the morning and was gone till night, walking the whole time. I was proud of what I could do—inhuman strength, really. The first year, we suffered like that, until we started receiving packages dropped by parachutes.

The Serb commanders called the bluff of the international community, advancing, without opposition, on the “safe area.” When even the relative security of the safe zone was violated in July 1995, and Serb forces moved into Srebrenica, the refugees—disarmed by the UN protectors—were terrified. *We decided we'd go with the crowd from Srebrenica to the UN headquarters at Potocari, ten kilometers up the road, where we'd be safer. We were all being herded by the soldiers. But a bunch of young men figured they'd be killed if they stayed with the group. When we got to the gas station on the edge of town, they decided to make a run for it. My Samir, who was twenty-nine, was with them. When he'd gone about thirty feet, I realized I hadn't said goodbye. “Samir!” I called. [Kada is wiping away tears.] He turned his head. “Good luck, my son.” He raised his hand goodbye. That was the last time I saw him.*

Then terror—two nights and days. When the Dutch UN battalion told us through their translators that Serb soldiers would come into the camp to get some information, my legs suddenly felt full of lead. I don't know why—fear or shock. Then suddenly I didn't care any longer. No dread, no joy, no sadness. I felt nothing. I was empty. I can't explain it. I just sat there. The sun was shining. I was there with my husband. So was one of my brothers, with his wife and children. We kept looking around us, silently, wondering what would happen. Everything was somehow bearable until the afternoon, when the Chetniks started taking men, one by one, out of the group. They went behind a house nearby. Some of our women, who were out collecting water, returned with faces white as sheets. They whispered, “Ten bodies here . . . ten bodies there. . . . Some here . . . more there. . . .” With night, horrible screaming started. I can't describe the voices that came out of people. A woman said, “UN soldiers are killing our children!” Chetniks were dressed in UN uniforms. But we knew those men—they were our neighbors. During the day, they had had a good look at who was sitting where. They were taking girls and young women out of the group. Women screamed as they were being raped. They killed mothers and children. There were twenty premature births that night. Next to me sat an old man. They took away his son. He'd call out, “Edib, my son!” The blood would freeze in our veins. I couldn't wait for morning.

Then they started transporting people to Tuzla. There were lots of trucks and buses

parked in a line about two or three kilometers long. We had to get into one; I didn't care where it was going. I said to my husband, "I can't live another night like this. I'd rather be slaughtered than go through another night here. Let's push our way through." There was a crowd. Everyone wanted to get out of there as quick as they could. We spent two or three hours in this group of people who were pushing. There was a ramp with UN soldiers. They let us go through, and I felt a bit easier. Then as soon as we got past, a group of Chetniks took my husband. I watched him go. He didn't even look at me. We didn't say goodbye. I didn't expect them to take him. No one told us this would happen. The UN soldiers could've told us, but they probably didn't want to create hysteria. They wanted people to believe in something.

After the women were sent to Tuzla, in Bosniak-controlled territory, the men and boys were executed. For years after, mass graves were excavated in Srebrenica. An estimated 8,000 were killed during those few days. *I got on the bus with my brother's wife and daughters. I still had hope. I thought they'd send the men later . . . but they never came. A few made it through the ambushes set up in the forest to kill the males who tried to run. I kept hoping my son would manage to get through, but he never came. For two months I walked up and down the streets of Tuzla. I asked everyone who knew my son and had come through the woods, "Have you seen my Samir?"*