

Epilogue





Commerce shattered under siege. December 1995.

The Courage to Hope

GRETA: *Why should I be afraid? I never went to the cellar when there was shelling. Even in Auschwitz I was confident. I don't know why. I'd lost everybody. But even when my strength was gone, when I was nothing but bones, I still didn't want to die.*

ALENKA: *This is a country you have to love and hate at the same time. . . . On one side such hope, and on the other side so much hopelessness.*

NADA: *Things will get better. After all, they can't be worse. Do you know what my name means in English? "Hope."*

KADA: *If nothing else, we can at least try to be sure that all we experienced in Srebrenica isn't forgotten.*

SWANEE: *Well, Amna, thank you for telling me all this.*

AMNA: *I hope you make something happen with it.*

I have two confessions. First, I'm one of those Americans who paid attention sporadically to the Balkan people over the past years. When I had the time or the inclination, I focused on their plight and gave them support. But most of the time I was an observer, a spectator, a voyeur even, curled up with a book, coffee, and cushions as I watched war correspondents on tv or read through political reports of the unfolding horror these twenty-six women were encountering. I didn't do all I could have done, and what bit I did isn't nearly enough to assuage my sense of responsibility. The truth is, I was close enough to them and to world leaders to know how to help. I should have done more.

The second confession is about real limitations I'm not able to overcome. Writing to give voice to women whose paths have crossed mine, to share their wisdom with the wider world, I can relay only a sliver of their experience. I edit or shape their words with no illusion that I do them justice. This simple book cannot embrace such complicated women. They aren't pacifists, but they hate war. They aren't sentimentalists, but they passionately love their families, their homes, their country. Their views are as thoughtful and complex as their experiences are dense. I'm daunted by the notion of speaking for them. Still, to let my inadequacy block me from trying to do what Amna asks seems a worse choice. So it's with apologies all around that I offer this insufficient rendition of the wealth of spirit I've witnessed in the vibrant lives of Bosnian women.

This book is more than a collection of their stories. It's a calling to account that grabs hold of our excuses and refuses to let go. What are the lessons for people like me, sitting behind a grand mahogany desk in Vienna, or a less-than-grand metal desk at Harvard? The Bosnian war made mush of the hopes that heralded the collapse of communism. Ronald Reagan was wrong. Empires, it turns out, are not evil. Actions are. We'd do well to weave relationships within the webs of empires around the world, especially relationships with the women, who could play a powerful role in averting violent conflict.

In the decade since the start of the war, the United States has spent more than \$24 billion to secure peace in the Balkans.¹ After I began working on this book, the United States intervened to quell the conflict in Kosovo. Macedonia heated up. Milosevic ended up at The Hague—of this development the last U.S. ambassador to Yugoslavia says, "I could not have imagined [it], even in my wildest dreams."² As cargo planes load up for relief missions to the next Iraq, Liberia, or Afghanistan, will policymakers strapping themselves between giant bags of flour wonder about the women on the ground who've been organizing, with heart and soul, to try to avert war? Will they spend time on that plane planning ways to funnel support to the women's activities traditionally outside the power mainstream? Will they send embassy political officers to report on the women's work across conflict lines, or make sure government aid programs send the women a "request for proposals" precisely because, as second-class citizens, the women aren't considered so threatening that their initiatives must be suppressed by the warmongers?³ Will the embassy public affairs officers suggest to news reporters that they talk with a Jelka, Rada, or Alenka—women who know the nuanced inner workings of their communities?

Our work and our world would be different if we saw it through the eyes

of women who haven't stared at reality through the sights of rifles. We need a new vision. Bosnia, at the time of this writing, hasn't returned to the solid multicultural society some envisioned at the Dayton peace talks.⁴ Although that much-heralded agreement silenced the guns, it has largely failed in many of its other objectives, succeeding instead in dividing the country geographically along nationalist lines, all the while declaring an end to nationalist ideals. The impunity with which indicted war criminals still roam free has prohibited many refugees from returning home. Local political leaders have thwarted the multicultural goals expressed not only at Dayton but also by the women who speak here.

In light of those failures, what to make of the assertion by Haris Silajdzic (former Bosnian foreign minister and prime minister) that "if women had been in charge, there would never have been a war"?⁵ The international community hasn't grappled with his statement. World leaders and global funders have done little to support women's voices for reconciliation in Bosnian society, and Balkan political leaders haven't stepped forward to share power voluntarily with women.⁶ On their part, Bosnian women's declaration that this was not their war has cut both ways: distancing them from the root causes but also from the power center.

Two questions present themselves to policymakers. First, if women are particularly effective in conflict situations, what obstacles keep their work from being supported? And second, after decades in a highly restricted political system followed by years of war, what sort of external support do women need as they step forward to help mold a new Bosnia out of the postconflict mud and morass?

The answers remain for policymakers to codify. Meanwhile, as prototypes of new possibility, the characters in this book are chock full of ideas, energy, and a determination to restore their country. They're smart and savvy—a remarkably good bet for outsiders looking for inside partners to move an agenda for stabilization. The women's expertise spans multiple spheres. Their aptitude is matched by attitude. Irma insists on a first kiss in the cellar, defiant innocence in a perverse reality. Likewise, Greta, sixty years Irma's senior, insists on changing into pajamas and sleeping in her own bed, popping a sedative to block out the exploding mortars, and declaring that she will not be moved.

Such women are the bearers of a hope that endures on a personal level—and therefore on political levels as well; for we can take heart as long as individuals like Mediha continue to insist: *In the end, good will prevail.* Balkan demagogues may lead their people into disaster, pilfering precious resources, sacrificing lives,

and squandering opportunities. We outsiders may compound the madness with our multiple conflicting agendas, our dawdling foreign policy, our broken promises. But at the ground level, where hope meets history, Mediha understands, and she reminds us: *Life goes on, and life wins.*