

No Home Like Your Own

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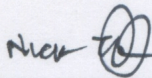
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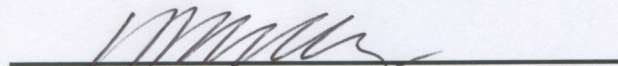
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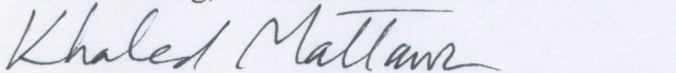
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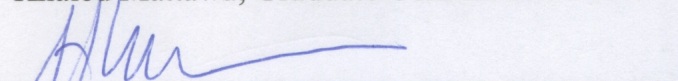
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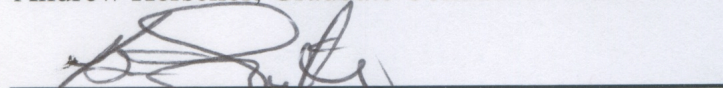
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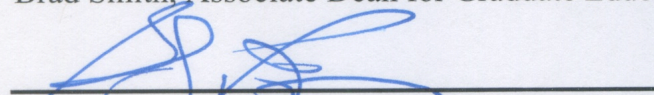
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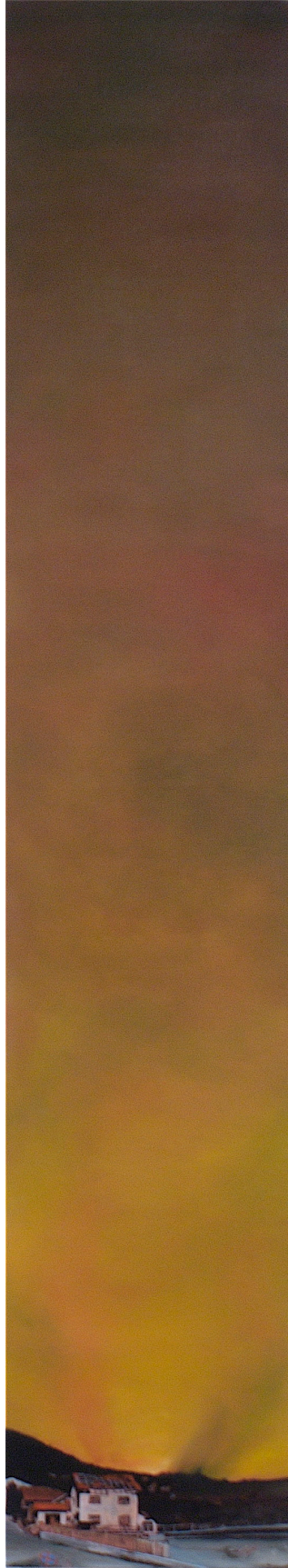


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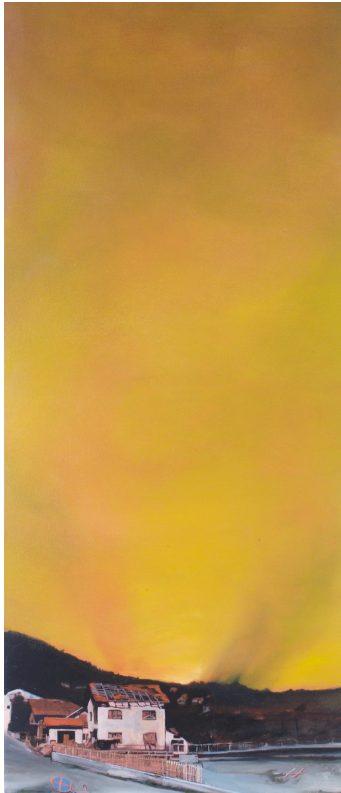
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Abstract:

No Home Like Your Own is a journey through my childhood memories of pre-war Socialist Yugoslavia and the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina that followed the break up of the six republics that constituted Yugoslavia. These memories are transferred onto the canvas as landscape paintings that accompany the following stories.



Acknowledgments:

I would like to thank my family for the love and support they have given me over the years. My lovely wife Muradija, thank you for putting up with my late night studio hours and for the many papers you have read over the years.

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Special thanks for the wonderful guidance goes to committee chair, Nick Tobier and committee members David Chung, Khaled Mattawa and Andrew Herscher.

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Table of Contents:

Ševarlije -----6-13

Observation -----14-20

Winter in Ševarlije -----21

Forced Departure -----22-24

First Attack -----25-29

Refuge -----30

Close Calls, Maglaj 1992 – 95 -----31-40

Collectibles-----41-42

From Concentration Camp into the Siege -----43-45

Siege of Maglaj, 1993 – 94 -----46-47

Besieged Winter, 1993 -----48-52

Black Market-----53

War Police-----54-55

Letter to Ms. Smajić-----56

First UN Convoy After the Siege Ended, 1994 -----57-59

The Dayton Peace Agreement, 1995 -----60-62

History -----63-64

Notes -----66-67

Index of Artwork -----68

Bibliography -----69-70

Glossary of Terms -----71-72

Ševarije



Ševarlije is a small place near the River Bosna, with beautiful green hills, houses with red clay roofs filled with young and old, a village brimful with life. It's the only place I knew and grew up in. I was nine years old at the time. I played with my friends and rode my five-speed bicycle that my dad bought for me after I had begged him for countless months. I was proud of that bike and I proudly displayed it.

My only thought after homework was to go outside and play with my friends. Sometimes we would hop on our bikes, even before we would finish our homework. Ermin, my cousin and my closest buddy was a year older. Since he had a 10-speed bicycle that was hard to find in Yugoslavia, he was the oldest and coolest kid among us. We looked up to him to come up with the plan for our next mischief.

Dino was my schoolmate, we attended the same class and had the same teacher named Zora. Her name means, "dawn." On the contrary, she was anything but the dawn. When you wake up at dawn, the first thing you look up to is the rising sun, emerging from the distant horizon, kicking off a new day, filled with new explorations. Dawn is life in front of us unfolding with a new bright beginning. That wasn't the case with Zora. She was not something to look forward to in the morning. Zora would punish us for forgetting how to recite a verse of communist propaganda

songs. In her old worn out desk drawer she kept her wooden stick, it was so brittle that every time someone was punished, it was painful to watch. She asked students to stretch their arms out, with palms facing up, then she would give them a smashing three or four hits. I personally hated the sound of it and afterwards I hated going to school. Occasionally, I was in that same row of students waiting to get their daily dose of the brittle wooden stick or ruler if the wood of any kind wasn't available.

Every morning my mom would wake me up to get ready for school while my dad got ready for work. My daily ritual was faking sickness. Every day my parents had to drag me out of the bed to go to school for I knew what was awaiting me. Just the thought of Zora made me sick, especially when another recitation of the communist song or the Yugoslav hymn was on the repertoire for the day. I can still hear the chorus of children to this day.

Družo Tito mi se kunemo da sa tvoga puta ne skrenemo.

Comrade Tito, we swear to you that we will not stray from your path.

Marshall J. B. Tito was a Yugoslav communist leader for thirty-five years and people loved him; well, most of them did. Everyone claimed that it was nice to live in Yugoslavia during his reign. Unfortunately, he died in the 1980's and I was born one year after his death. I experienced some of that nice living after he passed away. My family had it made. Every year my dad would take us to the coast where we would spend a month of enjoyment in the sizzling Mediterranean sun. Sometimes we would go to Montenegro's coastline. I was too young to remember Budva, a small touristy place

hidden in Montenegro, but I do remember Makarska and Baške Vode. These are all small coastal towns surrounded by the mountain peaks touching the sky, greenish blue sea and its lavender smelling coastline, tropical air filled with the sea-ozone, roads covered with pine needles. As we approached the sea, the smells grew even stronger, especially from the coconut lotions streaming from German tourists. I could not wait to go into the water and feel the breeze. Stepping on the sand was impossible. The Mediterranean hot scorching sun would hurt badly if one wasn't careful. It was visible on the tourists' fried bodies. Finally, after we settled and carefully arranged our towels on the beach, I was allowed to go into the water. As I entered the shallows, my body shivered until it adjusted to the temperature of the cold sea. I played in the water for hours and I occasionally waved to my parents so they could see me. When it was time to eat, they shouted for me to come out.

Merchants on their white small fishing boats delivered fresh fruit to us. We rested on the sandy beach and looked at the topless German and Czechoslovakian tourist girls around us. My father's friend Asim, a tall middle aged man with a ridiculous German looking mustache and oversized belly was always quick to point out which one of the girls had bigger bosoms. He worked in Germany while his family lived in Bosnia. The only time he would see them is for a month upon his return to his homeland. I always hated our last day at the sea, because I couldn't get enough of it. In the early morning, we set out for our house in Ševarlije.

My dad drove a small red Volkswagen bug, imported from Germany. Taxes on any foreign goods were ridiculously high, but that did not stop him from importing three VW bugs: orange, black and red. He sold one and gave away the orange one to my

cousin. Even Marshall Tito did not like Yugoslav cars. He would stroll in his Mercedes and wave back at the crowd that adored him. My dad wanted something safer and better for his family, not a heap of Yugoslav cardboard on four wheels, called a car. At the time Yugoslavia was exporting cars, but they stood no chance in the foreign market.

Once, I heard a story about Yugo¹ in Michigan. It flew off of the Mackinaw Island Bridge while going across it. I guess Yugoslavian engineers did not take strong winds into account. A widely held belief in my country about free flowing air is, if you go outside with your hair damp, you will get sick or worse, you will get a brain inflammation. If the car's windows are rolled down while driving, you will certainly get sick or end up with ear inflammation. If windows were open on both sides, free flowing air could kill you. How come when they built Yugo, Yugoslav engineers couldn't take free flowing air into account? Till this day, it remains a mystery.

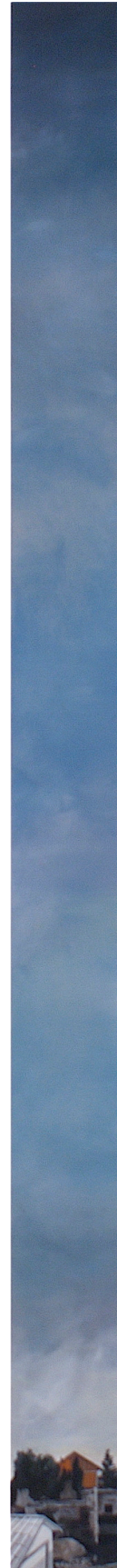
My older brothers Haris and Venso and I sat in the back of VW bug admiring the last sight of the blue sea while descending into the clusters of mountains covered only with pine trees and dried out cracking wood. Grass sporadically forced its way from the rocks. We waved and said goodbye to the sea. I was already envisioning our return next year and those *Švabice i Čehinje*, (German & Czechoslovakian girls), savoring the sunny day at the beach. I did not know it would be our last visit to the coast for a very long time.

We arrived safely to Ševarilje and along the way, we stopped at the various locations to visit friends and family. I personally could not wait to get home to ride my bicycle in Ševarilje and to see my friends. Once we arrived, I ran out as fast as I could to see my grandparents, who lived one house away from us in the same *avlija*. Exaggeratedly, I told them tales from *Jadran* while they admired my tan line. “*Što si pocrnio,*” my friends would say. It was important to have a tan when returning from the coast, otherwise no one would believe that I vacationed at the *Jadran*. As if the pictures weren’t enough evidence.

My red bicycle seemed a bit tall for my height and age. Month at the sea healed all the previous bruises and I needed to improve my collection. My cousin and I competed in races down the small, asphalted road that led to *Donji Fetići* where my neighbor Omer was never happy to see us. We secretly snuck into his yard and successfully climbed onto his cherry trees and ate till our stomachs could not take any more. Sometimes I imagined turning into one big cherry. He would come out of the house to yell at us and often chase us away. We always had our bikes near us for quick getaways. It was important to have a cool bicycle.

I was satisfied with my five-speed bicycle from which I fell off constantly. My body was a riddle filled with different bruised spots, every one of them filled with an unsolved mystery of different falls.

After playing all day and riding my bike to the various locations without my parent’s permission, I went back to my house when night fell. I



was not thinking anymore about the coastline, now, I was in my world. People I knew were here and they noticed when we were gone. Home is when someone notices that you are gone.

At night my parents watched Radio Television Sarajevo. I did not understand much of the political situation but I do recall footage of massacred innocent civilians from *Vukovar*², a small town in neighboring Croatia. My parents were saying, that they won't touch us, they cannot. We lived together for so many years. At the time, I did not know the meaning of they. Who are they? Those pictures from Vukovar were imbedded in my head. I could not get them out.

Next day, I went out to play with my friend. We rode our bikes and we saw tanks moving slowly in our direction. Tanks crumbled the asphalted road, leaving the indents behind. These lines were getting deeper as more tanks passed by. We carefully watched their every movement. It was the first time we saw real tanks. Soldiers waved their three fingers at us as they laughed. We smiled at them. As the JNA, (Yugoslav National Army) passed by, we thought they would protect us from atrocities that happened in Vukovar. We, the Yugoslav people, had the fourth largest army in the world to protect us from evil, foreign and domestic. Now I sound like a proper American, for those were also Tito's words.

The next night on the national television they showed new footage, more massacred innocent civilians from Vukovar. I also saw pictures of the soldiers, with long beards and black pointy hats raising three fingers in the air. "*Pogledaj Četnika*" my dad said. They held a red, white and blue flag. Four C's surrounded an Orthodox looking cross. C is the S in Cyrillic, which means: *Samo Sloga Srbe Spašava*, (Only Unity Saves

the Serbs). Why would unity save the Serbs? From whom did they need to be saved? I did not understand any of this, since we lived in peace, had friends that were Serbian, went to the same school together and had the same teacher named Zora, who was also Serbian. That night I recalled the soldiers on the top of their tank's displaying three fingers in the air. To this day I do not know what that means, all I know is, it has something to do with Chetniks³ as we Bosnians refer to Serbo-fascist. I was unaware of the distinctions between Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks in my childhood. We spoke the same language, with the exception of different dialects. When we visited some people who had a Christmas tree, I always wondered why we didn't have one in our house. I was mesmerized by the blinking lights and shiny objects displayed. Our Serbian friends brought painted Easter eggs to our house.



Observation

We celebrated *Bajram*, a Muslim holiday, celebrated after the fast during the month of Ramadan. I was attired in an elaborate holiday suit nicely coordinated with newly polished shoes and we visited my grandparents and every family member near us. For a kid, it's a day to look forward to. Everyone gave away money and candy. Cakes were served in every household, especially baklava. Everyone had a different recipe for baklava. Some served it free from moisture of any kind, some very watery, some served none for they had different cakes lined up. At dusk we gathered to count the candy and the money we had gotten. After we shared more sweets we fantasized of buying a new BMX - a small bicycle with unstoppable rubber threads that could go on any terrain, mud, sand, asphalt and grass. It also had absorbable shocks made for jumping. While everyone fantasized about BMX, I was thinking of throwing up, because I felt sick after eating so many baklavas and the endless selection of cakes, pies, different sizes and shapes of candies.

These simple and joyful things in life came to an abrupt halt in the springtime that had never seen so much rain. The land below the heavy skies appeared green and fresh, and the month of June seemed mystically beautiful, a brilliant color for the year 1992. Local village residents said that the rain mirrored tears from heaven. Rumors were that the tears were from all of the innocent people who had died since the beginning of the war. Many had died since the Serbs started taking village-by-village, town-by-town.

The news on the television, radio, and in the papers brimmed with coverage of dead civilians on the streets, refugee camps in the fields and in the forests, and of trains of pain taking innocents to their final destination. The men, husbands and sons, were

taken away quietly with no trace left behind. Women and children were separated like cattle and sent to unknown cities. The trains were sent off from their hometowns into the Bosnian controlled areas, filled with children and women. They were beaten, tortured, raped and then kicked out of their homes by their Serb neighbors and their army friends from Serbia. All of their belongings were taken from them.

Watching the scenes of civilians being killed and begging for their lives on the television made me angry and scared. This was different than *The Fly* movie I had seen that year. I was curled up in my blanket, occasionally turning my head away from the television when they showed mutilated bodies and rotten flesh. I wished those corpses transformed into the giant fly and then back to human form like in the movie. I couldn't sleep after nightly news. Re-runs of images flashed in front of my eyes while the clock was tirelessly ticking away into the night. "Tick- tack little one," the clock spoke to me while I turned to the side where light peaked through the door from the living room. Light saved me from the darkness. It helped me to fall a sleep, only to bring another venture of a recurrent dream. A giant fly with human head came out of the clock to get me. I ran but somehow it seemed that I did not moved an inch.

Morning was lethargic and rainy like any other morning that year. Morning brought the sounds of heavy fighting from behind the hills. Each day it seemed that the sounds of shelling grew closer. Our Serb neighbors were preparing to ethnically cleanse another city, another village of any other ethnic, religious, or national group that was not Serbian. It was our turn to be kicked out from our house because we did not belong to their group. Serbs who refused to participate were also kicked out.

The city of Dobo, a small town near River Bosna has already been occupied. The old town burned down. I saw the smoke as the mosques and the Catholic churches burned down. My grandpa was an *imam*, a leader of a Mosque, who was a religious and respected man. Every time he saw another *minaret*⁴ blown into pieces, his eyes shrunk and closed in prayer. The world was falling apart and my grandpa said that someday those who committed such sins would be punished. I've always believed my grandpa's prayers had secret powers and that they would stop any harm from coming to me.

Not long after, I saw houses on the other side of the river disappearing from sight. Heavy smoke slowly took over each house and turned them into ashes. The rising smoke slowly swallowed the beautiful green hill that was covered with heavy trees. The dark and grey beast reached the sky covering the sun from setting its light down onto us.

Fear slowly moved through my heart and tore me apart. Even though I saw the smoke and tanks with my own eyes, I still wasn't sure whether the war was just on TV or if it was reality. Hardly able to put the words together as I spoke to my father, "Dad, we should leave, all of my friends have already gone to some safer place. I have no one left to play with." He spoke loudly, without looking at me, "Don't worry. Nothing will happen. Your friends will be back, my son. This will all go away!" I was not convinced and I turned to my mom hoping she heard my words. But, my mom did not have the last word in this matter.



My father made it difficult for all of us. My brothers got really frustrated trying to understand why dad was behaving so strangely. He had been tending to other people's animals and pets left behind. My dad was getting older and had been ready to settle down to reap the fruits of his hard work, while now, his whole world crumbled into pieces. He wasn't prepared for those losses. My father had everything, and now it happened, he was going to lose it all in one day. He always had a word of wisdom for everyone except for himself.

My two brothers were the only ones who knew what was going on around us, and I only felt safe when they were around. My oldest brother, Haris, was very interested in politics and suspected the war would happen long before it really did. He was very realistic and knew that the Bosnians could not defend the country without outside help. Venso a year younger than Haris was a very pragmatic person. He constantly kept pressuring dad to leave our village. Haris said, "It's time to leave and mom and Emir should go. I'm taking them to the other side." I held a plastic lunch bag in my left hand while my right one held my mom's hand.

My mom, a gentle and worried person, was scared of what will come tomorrow. She wanted to protect us by confronting my father. She tried to convince him that leaving was the best decision for the family. But my father wouldn't listen to anyone's advice even when his father spoke to him.

Venso was edgy. He yelled at everyone, especially at my father. He said: "We should all leave! There is no discussion about that. As soon as we can, and by that, I mean now." "No," my father said. "I'm staying here. I was born here and I have lived

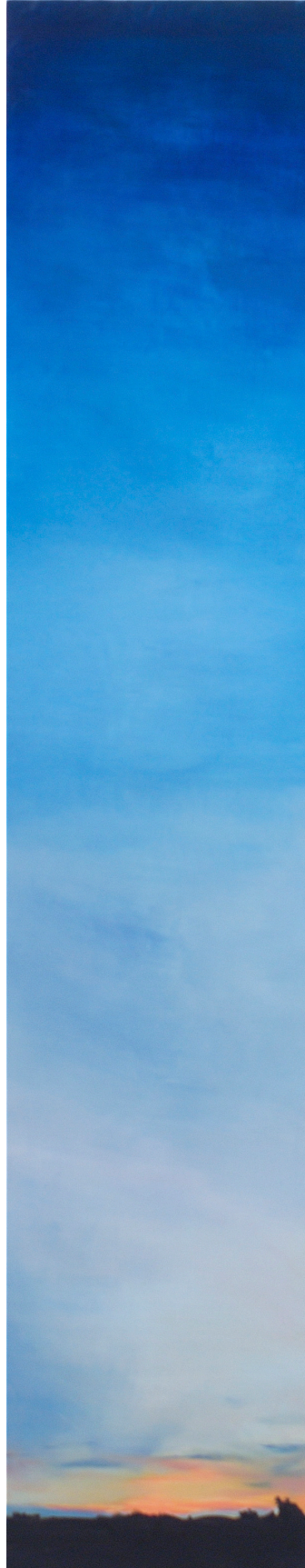
here for the last forty years. I will not run away from what I've built with my own bare hands. This is my life. You should all go if you want, just leave me here."

Ibro, my cousin, a very hard-working man, came over and tried to convince my father as well. Ibro could beat anyone who tried to fight, but he never fought. "It's time to go," Ibro said to my father, "I have already sent my wife and my children over the river to Tešanj. They should be safe there for a while. Bosnian T.O.⁵ can defend that place for a long time. I am leaving soon. You see, Dževad, I love this place as much as you do, but we are losing this war and Serbs kill everyone they find. This is madness. Your children and you are not safe here." My father just waved his hand in disagreement, mumbling something to himself.

Ibro turned around and smiled at me and said: "Don't you worry. Nerko is on the other side waiting for you to play together." Nerko and I always fought. He was always the first one to pick fights and to provoke me. I was already missing my friends and I just realized how close Nerko and I were. There wasn't anyone to play soccer with, or to ride the bicycle around the house. I was the last kid who stayed in the village, amongst the last ones to go away to the other side of the river where we could be called by our names, and where there was no fear for our lives other than a few shells occasionally exploding near us.

Ibro failed to convince my father to leave and he disappeared down the road. Time was running out and the longer we stayed, the closer we were to real danger and fatal consequences. Pictures from the old days ran through my head. When people used to live together in their little homes, coming from their daily jobs and eating their lunches

and dinners outside. I remembered all the other kids that I used to play with and some of them I have not seen to this day.



Winter in Ševarlije

That village was beautiful in the wintertime. I used to ski together with my friends down the hills. The neighbor would chase us down if we would run into his property. It was always so much fun trying to provoke him to yell. We used to make snowballs and threw them at my grandpa's windows just to get him out of the house, or just get his attention. My grandpa would look at us with a smile from his warm room as we played in the front yard. When he was done watching, he left his French hat on a stick by the window to make us think he was still looking at us. After a day of playing we snuck inside the house to steal some cakes that grandma made for the never-ending guests in their house. Grandma always yelled: "*Ispanite iz kuće, ispan te, lopovi jedni*" and we did, we ran away like little thieves from my yelling grandma and from the house to play outside, where our winter clothes soaked up melting snow and until our toes could no longer feel the ground. Then, we returned to my grandma to tend to us.

In their room, my grandparents had a wood-burning stove and would put so much wood in it that it was unbearable to breathe in the room. She always cooked. Even if there were no guests for dinner she always had something ready. If one were to refuse to eat, she would take it as an insult. "Take it, take just a little bit," she would say. "*Uzmite, hajd, hajde, samo malo.*" On the stove she always had something warm and ready, everything homemade, warm bread, rice pudding and endless selections of meat. We ate everything that was served to us, while my grandpa peeped through his reading glasses and pretended to hide behind a crossword puzzle magazine.

His heart was filled with joy. Everything we asked of him we had. He loved his *unuci* more than anything and we loved him back, as well as our strict grandma.

Forced Departure

While I waved goodbye to my dad, tears filled my eyes. I couldn't hide my emotions. I held my mom's hand and I saw her eyes watering too. My dad went back into the house. Soon after, he came down the hills trying to convince us to stay. "There is no need to go. I'll protect you from the Chetniks." He spoke to my mother and me. He pressed his hands together tightly and looked at us, uncertain what to say. My dad feared that if he left, there would be no other life for him. My brothers told him to either join us, or not to say anything. They followed us down the hill and took mom and I to a small boat. A boatman took us to the other side of the river. My dad followed us all the way down trying to convince my brothers that there is no need for it, because his Serb friends will protect his family.

The other side of the river was the only place to hide and feel safe. Bosnian T.O controlled the left side of the river Bosna. We knew we could be safe on that side.

No one was safe any more in Bosnia and Croatia. Chetniks would not stop before they conquer each oasis where other ethnic groups lived. Their motto was, "a greater Serbia for unified Serbs." The river Bosna separated the sides controlled by Bosnian T.O. and irregular Serb troops from Serbia, Bosnia and Russia. It was a matter of time for Chetniks to attack and occupy our village. Later, Chetnik troops tried to take over the west side of the river where the village of Šije was protected by lightly armed Bosnian men and women. The Serbs continued this attempt for three years.

The small boat crossed the river, packed with a handful of kids and woman. My brothers went back one more time to convince my father and my grandpa to abandon their homes. My grandpa didn't want to leave his place either. I was afraid for my

brothers but my mom and I couldn't stop them from going. The small boat turned and disappeared into the heavy fog back to my home.

I felt relieved when I saw Bosnian T.O. on the other side. My father clenched his teeth, his brow furrowed and his lips pressed together while he suppressed his tears from coming. That look on my father's face and his hand waving good by to us was tearing me apart. At that time, we didn't know how much time would pass before we would see each other again.

I spent a night on the other side of the river in the home of my mom's friend, Svila. In the early morning I woke up to the sound of firearms and the smell of smoke in the air. I went up a small hill near our friend's house. On the other side was a terrifying sight. My heart pounded faster than ever, and I started crying, as I saw houses in my village on fire. My home was burning in flames too. There was a new fire every minute. It was only a matter of time when the next house would burst into flames.

Chetniks, mostly made up of local Serbs, driven by the ideological idea of Greater Serbia finally decided to take over my village. They found no resistance at all, as my fellow neighbors were unarmed. The Serbs had all the artillery and all the weaponry needed for mass destruction and killings. Some of my father's best friends, Serbs, like Miloš, lead the attack. Miloš was a very good friend. He knew everyone in the village. That empowered him to lead the Chetniks into the village to tell them who needed to be liquidated. He also knew the wealthiest villagers and he hated my dad because he called him a Chetnik at my uncle's wedding long time ago. My dad was right.

I didn't care about the house or any other material things we left behind. I knew that my dad was there, and my two brothers. Luckily my grandma had left with my uncles two days before.

My dad believed that his close Serb friends wouldn't harm us. It proved to be very wrong. A close friend of my father burned our house down.. My childhood slipped away as I watched the flames from my house rise ever higher.

First Attack



I ran into the house, screamed, “Mom! Where is dad, grandpa? Where are my brothers?” Her responses were cut off by the sounds of grenades exploding. The Serbs were launching an attack on both sides now. Heavy shells ripped the skies. She did not say anything, but ran down the hill towards the river. My heart was beating very fast as I followed her. Our hosts yelled behind us, telling us to come back. Bullets flew over us. Tears rolled down my cheeks. The early July morning with sun and blue skies turned into black clouds of smoke. People ran into the shelters to save themselves. The bullets and sounds of grenades did not stop my mom. I had a hard time keeping up with her. Only when we stopped right next to the place where the boats were operating, did I realize that I had never seen my mother so scared and worried. She gazed to the other side while the Bosnian T.O. soldiers yelled at us to hide into trenches, dug out on the previous night. It wasn’t until one of the soldiers said, “Hey, little one get into the trench, keep your head down,” that my mom realized I was there.

Fire from every weapon imaginable seemed to come from everywhere. Forty years of investment in a Yugoslav Army had paid off for the Serbs, the only benefactors of that investment. Shells were getting dangerously close to where we

hid. Soon, villagers left behind on the other side started to regroup. They were trying to get to the Bosnian safe side under heavy shelling. The shells were missing the boat only by a few meters. People who desperately tried crossing to our side were getting killed. Some of them swam across and the water got faster and deeper, as raindrops began hitting the ground. It seemed as if the sky was trying to put the fire out.

My mom's face looked brighter for a brief moment, as the boat was now carrying my grandpa. He was still in shock, afraid to look back, at his burning house. He was in his seventies, with grey hair, and a lot of wisdom. A few days earlier he did not think the Serbs would act. His view of the world changed when his house vanished in a second with the flick of a match right in front of his eyes. He was shaken, but firm and said to my mom not to worry, but to look for the swimmers because my brothers were among them. People were still getting across the wild river, while some of those who swam disappeared under the waves.

My heart bounced when I saw my brothers, who swam across while grenades and bullets flew over their heads and into the water. They kept helping each other. The river took many lives that day. Serb's bullets were finishing those who were still swimming for their freedom.

Now, it was difficult to get to the shelter. The minutes were like millenniums, seconds like years. Explosions burst closer and closer. I counted fifteen of them. They were not far away from where our shelter was. Through impenetrable smoke, bullets zoomed through the air like the flies in a closed room. I could not see my brothers, and could not tell where they were. Screams were heard all over.

When the smoke broke away, a scene from hell was in front of my eyes. Pieces and parts of bodies were in the trees and on the walls. The wounded called for help, and blood was running down on the earth mixed with rain. I jumped out of the shelter. Mom and grandpa yelled after me. I did not stop. I had to find my brothers.

“Emire!” I heard the familiar voice. Haris waved from behind the trees, near the water. “Get down. Get down, now!” He screamed. I immediately fell down to the ground, and as soon as I did, the swoosh sound flew over my head. I started counting, one, two, three, four, and five and then thud in the ground followed by the blast. It’s always the same, sound of crashed windows and shrapnels seeking its casualties. This shell exploded near me and killed my grandma’s cousin and wounded two people. My brothers ran very fast, grabbed me and took me into their arms. They ran with me thinking I was wounded. Soon, we were together with my mom and grandpa in the same trench. We kissed and hugged each other, happy to be there, safe together, at least for a second.

We ran into Svila’s house. My mom asked her for some dry clothes. She came back with clothes and two warm blankets to put around our shoulders. Still in tears mom asked about dad. Everyone in the small room was quiet for some time. My mom asked again “Where is dad?” Venso responded with tears in his eyes. I would never forget his words and the expression on his face when he told us that, “Dad was nowhere to be found.” Haris also added, “I heard the soldiers in grandpa’s garden. They were so close. I grabbed grandpa by his arm and took him out. There was nothing I could do to find dad.” His voice began to fade. A year later we heard that dad was captured and held in a concentration camp.

That day I became homeless, a refugee among millions of others. Life has never been the same after. This was my first night knowing there was no home to come back to and it wasn't the last one we would have to leave. My grandpa and my brothers had another difficult task in front of them. They had to find the rest of the family and a place to sleep in. That night we stayed at our friend's house, and in the morning we walked to another city. Without a car, we had to walk thirty miles through hills and muddy roads. It was the only safe route to lead us into the small town of Maglaj, which stood in the small valley surrounded by mountains along the river of Bosna.



Refuge

Maglaj accepted thousands and thousands of children, women and elderly who became refugees of Serbian ethnic cleansing. As a part of the psychological pressure on people who stayed in town to leave and surrender, the Serbian Army cut all supplies of food, water and electricity to the town. Even so, Maglaj did not fall into the enemy's hands. It was there that we found a place to stay, and where we found the rest of the family.

The Bosnian-Serb neighbors and the supporting Serbian army burned down every single house I knew by heart. Many innocent civilians were killed, some of them were my close friends.

Ten years after that day I was able to visit my home, or what remained of it. I realized then, that though houses may be rebuilt, the scars of this experience will always remain, as a warning and a reminder.

Druže Tito skrenu smo sa tvoga puta, poslije svega možda je I bio uklet.

Comrade Tito we have strayed from your path, perhaps, it was doomed after all.

Close Calls, Maglaj 1992-1995



My brother and I immediately hit the ground when a lost bullet found a way into our living room. It was just a stray bullet that came from someplace out there. Luckily for us, this one lost speed and didn't enter our window directly. Still hot from impact, the bullet made a hole in the wooden window frame and burned a hole in the carpet. Was it a bullet from the nearby front lines or was it from someone who decided to fire into the air, as was the custom during that time. Even before the war, especially during weddings, the Bosnian custom was to fire guns and rifles into the air to celebrate the union of two people.

I could not imagine anyone wanting to get married during the war. Nobody left the city in a long time, except the ambulance and hungry people on foot searching for food. Our only escape was the city of Tešanj. It was the only place where we could go freely, the only place to visit during the siege of Maglaj. If someone went there, it was because they needed food or they were in the black market business or were heading to the hospital to treat a shrapnel or bullet wound.

Maglaj had a hospital too, but it was very close to the front lines and Chetniks from the nearby hills pounded it with shells constantly. The hospital's electricity was generated from the river paddle-wheel generators and electric wire, which brought a modest current into the hospital so they could use it to patch up the wounded. Hospital workers carried water from the nearby hand-held water pump.

The sun was out, and sporadic fire from the *Kalašnjikova* could be heard in the nearby hills. Even some birds sang. It was a nicer day than the previous one, after heavy shells had fallen all over the city. Since the heavy artillery had stopped, I went up from the basement of the building into my room to take some clothes from the closet. As I entered my room to open a wooden closet door, one of the Chetniks from the hills decided to continue to torment the city and its predominantly Muslims citizens. Although there were some Croats and Serbs living in my building, their decision had been not to join the Chetniks in the nearby hills.

An anti aircraft bullet from a *Bov-3* armored vehicle armed with three-barrel gun came through the nylon on our window generously donated by the UNHCR. I was fortunate enough to close the wooden door fast enough to catch the bullet inside as I was ducked down, expecting more bullets to come my way. The bullet came directly through

the left corner of our window, and went through the closet door to find it's way in my clothes where it dispersed into tiny metal pieces. This bullet, a *dum-dum* was designed to go through a couple of layers before releasing its deadly clusters. The use of dum-dum bullets was outlawed by Hague convention, which did not stop Chetniks from firing illegal bullets on the civilians. That bullet hole was still visible the last time I visited Bosnia in 2008. I used a Basement Jaxx sticker as a band-aid to cover up the scars that the bullet left on the door and to make my closet presentable again.

It was an unusually quite day, the sun was stuck in the middle of the bright blue sky, birds happily sang their tunes and some passerby's occasionally passed our building, some walked fast while others ran. I do not recall anyone walking slowly during the war. We had to get from one point to another as fast as possible, not to get caught in the shelling spree or sniper fire. We were like rats, crawling from the moldy basements that we made into our wartime homes. Going out was a necessity that became a luxury one could not afford.

Since it was a quiet a day, I decided to go to the balcony to look at the outdoors. I imagined riding a bicycle down the road, which was scarred with shells and bullets, forming rose-like shapes. For a moment I forgot the war. I rode my bike all the way up to the High School, where it was impossible to ride one, since it was a known sniper alley. I rode my bike all around the city while I stopped at the bakery to buy some bread. My next stop was an ice cream shop. While I was imagining all of this I heard a loud thud in the nearby hills and I quickly hit the ground. Then, I heard a loud explosion nearby, metal clunking, walls crumbling, left over windows smashed into tiny pieces. Metal shell fragments flew to find their next kill. Metals tore everything in their path. I saw a few

heated metal pieces zoom by me. I stayed on the ground, and after every one of the hits found its intended target, I ran into the house. Sometimes it felt like a game, every day something new. We waited for the bad news. Who was killed, where and how? People I saw one day would disappear the next one.

Bofors, at nighttime, approximately 10pm, I was sitting with my family in the hallway of the apartment, the safest place where we conducted our daily business. There we found shelter from the small firearms. Only one concrete wall protected us from the outside danger. We were sitting ducks, waiting to be shot at any minute by the unknown drunk Chetnik from the surrounding hills. One concrete wall could not provide necessary protection from the heavy artillery that could force its way through two walls before exploding. That's the risk we had to take. It was a lottery draw of the winning combination of numbers, except in our case numbers were shells, a winning combination that no one wanted to receive.

That night as the *kandilo* was slowly burning away, filling our lungs with the heavy black smoke, lighting only one part of the hallway, the only sound heard was from the cracking oil burning away. I stood up and went to kitchen to bring more oil, in order to reduce crackling oil sound while it started to mix with water. The building shook and my ears were filled with high-pitched sound. Second shell exploded and mom and I ran into the main lobby of the building where everyone gathered finding temporary shelter. We thought our apartment had been hit. Spaho, our neighbor, who lived one floor above us came out into the main lobby. When the two *bofors* shells exploded, debris showered his body from all sides. We quickly ran up to him, inspected his body to see if he was injured. He was in shock. Spaho could not believe that he survived. He went back into his

apartment to inspect the damage and so did we. All of us had agreed that they were probably done with the shelling for the night. As the drunken enemy went to sleep, the rest of the night went on quietly

Next to our apartment, on the same floor, lived another refugee family from the nearby village called Jablanica. Their house was in-between front lines, the so-called no man's land. Frequently they called us for coffee, because we had something in common. We were refugees in our own country and always had good stories to share. We went over to their apartment and sat in the living room, waited for the coffee to brew on the stove. Out of nowhere on the balcony we heard a loud thud. Six of us in the room immediately charged towards the floor. No explosion followed. Ferid my neighbor peaked through the balcony door only to find out unexploded mortar shell on his balcony. He told us to quickly run into the main lobby of the building. Incoming shell took a good portion of the balcony concrete wall and ricocheted and fell on its belly. The fuse was untouched. Over the coffee we talked about that the unexploded shell and the angle it fell on, while two guys from the Bosnian Army were defusing it. The solid concrete block building style saved us once again.

The Chetniks became more effective in drawing people out of their shelters as the war went on. Instead of shells, sunrays were hitting the ground, reflecting the rays of light and hope on worn out faces. When the sun moved to the zenith, we went outside and pulled out two raggedy metal goals from underneath the stairs. We dragged them to the opposite sides of the concrete in front of the building and made up two teams.

One team was Manchester United, with famous players from S-2 building: Elvis, the striker, Anes played in the midfield and I played right-winger. The opposite team was

Real Sociedad consisting of the three brothers who had Real Sociedad jerseys, Orhan, Mensur and Edin. Every kid wanted to play in the Spanish league and be Meho Kodro, a famous Bosnian soccer player who scored twenty-three goals in one season and later on moved to play for Barcelona. We played soccer for three hours while girls watched us from the first floor balcony. That was Safet's balcony, another refugee from Jablanica. He was also watching us and giving us helpful ball dribbling and passing advices. He was resting at home, a half-day break from the trenches that surrounded the city.

When Elvis scored everyone clapped from the balcony and at that moment a hissing sound was rushing our way. We ran toward the building, but it was too late. Mortar shell arrived too early and surprised all of us. It exploded on the roof of a building a few feet away from where we played soccer. Windows shattered, my ears filled with high-pitched noise from the detonating shell. We kept running into the building while sharpnels made their way around our bodies. Finally, I jumped on the floor, my body laid flat as I turned my head around to look who made it inside the building. All of us where there, our moms yelled from different floors: "Emire, Emire" I heard my moms voice. Other moms followed: "Anese, Elvise, Mensure." I looked on my right side and saw Erna, Alisa and her sister run out of an apartment with Safet following them. He was holding his stomach, while the blood was gushing out through his hands. Another lady was yelling on the second floor, sharpnel found a way into her room and into her right arm. My mom and other ladies helped her while Safet's brother Ferid and two other people were helping Safet who could not stand on his own anymore. His body was limp, eyes closed and his right arm fell from the wound.

The Chetniks fired a mortar shell from a smoothbore gun at high angle. For the civilians in the city of Maglaj and everywhere else in Bosnia, it was the deadliest weapon since the war started. The name should be changed to mortal, rather than mortar. One could only hear a mortar shell when it was really close. The roof of the building saved most of the lives that day.

After the ambulance arrived we helplessly watched two wounded people being taken away to the hospital in Tešanj, the only hospital equipped for surgical procedures. The town of Tešanj could only be reached by heavy artillery while the sniper worked day and night in Maglaj. That same night we heard that Safet bled to death on the way to the hospital. He was severely wounded and the trip to Tešanj hospital was only reachable through mountain dirt roads. The trip usually took two hours, which was too long for the severely wounded.

Safet saved three little girls that day. While he went into the room to rest, the shell was already coming our way and he heard it. He quickly ran onto the balcony where the three little girls played and when the shell exploded, he protected three innocent lives with his body. The metal shell fragment sliced into his stomach damaging internal organs. He was still able to walk and to push the girls in the apartment and into the main lobby where I last saw him.

That night my neighbor Ferid was mourning the loss of his brother together with *rahmetli* Safet's wife and two of his daughters, seven and nine years old. Every day incoming shells took more lives.

Soliter, twelve floors tall, a red brick building, was the only one of its kind in the city. It was a practice target for the Chetniks. Patterns of bullets and different shell holes were leaving bee nest traces on the building. At least bees lived in their beehives, but people in that building would have taken a huge risk staying in their apartments. It was the most dangerous building to live in due to its size compared to the rest of the buildings in the city of Maglaj. However, that did not stop its inhabitants from living there.

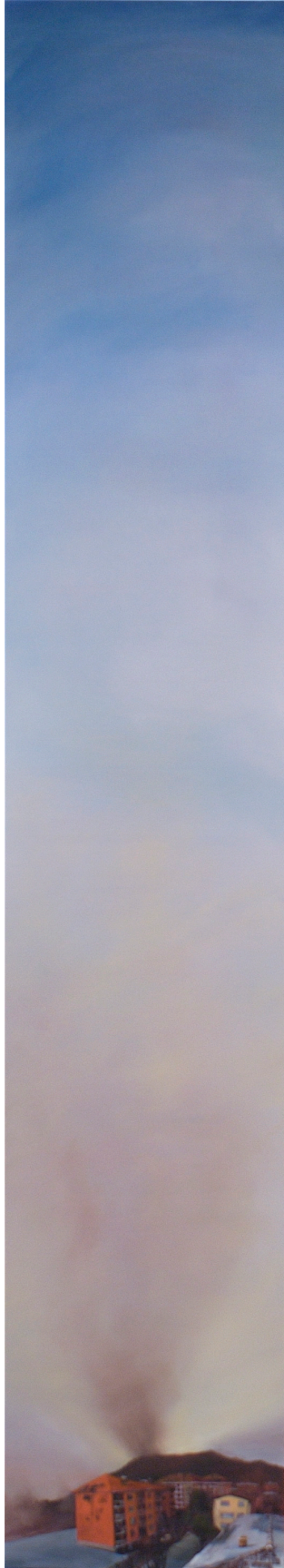
We needed water in the house so I took two white canisters with me and went to the pump. I waited in line for five minutes while an elderly couple pumped water in front of me. They reminded me of my grandparents. A man in his seventies was wearing a French pointy hat, dressy black pants and a white striped shirt covered with black vest. Sleeves were rolled up to his elbows. An elderly woman, *nena*, wore a headscarf with a hand-knitted *polover* covering her body and *dimije*. Since they were struggling with the pump, I took over to help them out. I was pumping hard, but the water was running slowly into their canisters. After a few minutes I was done with theirs and moved over to mine. I placed the canister onto the cement in front of the pump trying to find a center of the water flow. I started and the stream was better than usual and the water was exceptionally cold. Now, that the canisters were filled, I closed them carefully not to spill any water or get any dust inside. I looked to the left side, and saw kids playing soccer in front of the *Soliter*. I was contemplating going over there to join them. I decided not to since my mom told me to come home quickly. I turned around and grabbed my two heavy canisters and started walking slowly towards my building. As I was getting closer to the stairs I procrastinated just to stay outside a little more. My friend from the balcony yelled out to me: “*Emire hoćeš li ti ostati napolju?*” I said to him “No, I cannot, I have to

drop of these two canisters and then we can play later.” A familiar sound was coming our way. I only had a few seconds to duck, and decided to hide behind the concrete wall. The shell exploded and I heard screaming voices. I stayed there for a few seconds to wait out flying shell fragments. I saw heated metals passing by the stairs and into the windows on my left side. After everything had settled, I ran up the stairs and into the building. As I was going up, I saw gray and black smoke in front of the Soliter. I heard more screams. I went into the building and a second shell exploded close by. Again, I peaked through the shelter window and saw the smoke cloud was coming from the same area. I was hoping that the shell did not land directly in front of the building. Screams were heard now even louder, people calling out their loved ones.

A few minutes later my older brother, his face red from running,. informed us of what he had seen. He passed the street where the two shells fell and it was right in front of the building where the kids played. He said that body parts were still scattered around and that the blood covered the entrance of the building.

I carefully listened and hoped that my friend who lived there was not in front of the building that day. However, grim news reached us fast. I overheard a man speaking in the hallway. He said that seven people lost their lives and five were lightly or severely wounded. Most of them were kids.

Next day I heard that Armin Kamarić and his grandpa Ibrahim lost their lives that day. His grandpa watched him as he play soccer with rest of the kids. They were refugees from Ševarlije, finding a temporary place to stay, in Maglaj.



Collectibles

I collected many shells, bullets and grenades fragments and empty casings including the one that nearly killed me near the UNHCR nylon window.

I found metal shell parts on the roof of the S-2 building. The defiant piece of communist architecture made out of yellow and white bricks had been hit many times. On the roof I found a shell's propeller. Due to the heavy shelling, not a single glass pane survived. Every window had its own nylon, sporting a blue UN logo.

A heavy-duty metal wood-burning stove donated by the UN agency devoured everything, including, but not limited to, shoes, old clothes, randomly found objects outside of the building and sometimes wood, once the shelling had stopped. Old worn out shoes and the communist propaganda manifestos provided the longest burning and heating time. It gave us an hour to quickly cook something on the stove. *Gusana peč*, a metal stove was heavy to carry to the third floor apartment where we resided. In the winter, I spent countless hours next to that stove, only when the shelling of the city was on the light side.

Mortar shells could not be heard when fired, unless they passed close by, which was never good. As the shells approached, the most important thing was to hit the ground. Once the shell explodes, it releases its deadly metal clusters in all directions, always upward from the impact. The best would be to dig out a personal trench and stay in it at all times. I had collected many metal shell fragments, in all shapes and sizes. Most of them had been gathered from around and inside of the S-2 building. By the end of the war I could have opened a scrap metal shop with the collection I had. My mother did not like *moju kolekciju gelera, granata, metaka I ostalih raznih granatnih metala*, and who

could blame her. She did not want to be reminded of how her son could have been killed by metal that was lying on the non-functional spare bathroom floor. She told me to throw it away and I did with great resentment. Bosnian moms had always something to say, except this time it was not about *promaha*. It was about how my collection would bring me bad luck. My mother had a point - some of those shells could have been unexploded.

The Chetniks had JNA weapon arsenal to choose from when they tormented the city. They had used Praga, a twin 30mm anti aircraft gun on the civilians, a Bofors 40mm also anti aircraft gun, T-55 tanks, M-84 tanks and guided missiles. When the war started, the Chetniks used JNA MIG planes with cluster bombs releasing another set of cluster bombs, killing everything its path, they were also forbidden by the Geneva Convention. It was impossible to find shelter from cluster bombs.

The Chetniks used planes in the beginning of the war to destroy most of the Bosnian infrastructure and bridges, like the one in Maglaj across the river of Bosna, which was destroyed 1992. As the war continued, NATO⁶ introduced the no flying zone over Bosnia and Herzegovina. This meant that any plane that was sighted in the air would be shot down. However, that did not stop Serbs to modify aircraft air-ground missiles and fire them from the military trucks onto Bosnian towns.

Few of them were used on Maglaj, especially from 1993-1994, when the Serbs launched the biggest offensive to take over the city of Maglaj.

From Concentration Camp into the Siege

My family had established a contact with the Red Cross and found out that my father was being held in a concentration camp in Modriča. My mother used all possible sources to get him out. She went to the Red Cross numerous times. My father was exchanged for Serbian prisoners of war.

I remember waiting in the hallway of our building. I knew he was coming and I was afraid I would not be able to recognize him. Appearing on the corner of the building I saw his face. He was skinnier than the last time I saw him. I ran as fast as I could toward him and he grabbed me in his arms and carried me up to the third floor. Everyone in the building applauded his return. My mom was right on his side and my brothers were also there. He thanked everyone that day.

My family gathered to see him and also to hear the stories of the concentration camp. My dad was not talking much, his eyes filled with joy from seeing us even in the harshest of times. He said that there wasn't a day where he was not thinking about us. My dad did not know what happened to us. He never talked about the concentration camp to me, but I overheard the conversation that he was having with my uncle.

Dželale: "For few days I was hiding in the village from the Chetniks. I hid in the cave for a day. I saw when they burned my house. I saw them lining up and killing people they found in the village. In front of the store in Ševarlije they lined up a group of people and killed them all." He was naming the victims, one by one. He knew them by heart. Most of them worked for his company in Doboj. "After they were done, they burned piles of corpses. I was hiding and I went from one house to another to find food. I saw more

corpses next to the houses” He knew the owners well. They were our neighbors. My dad made a list of people that were killed and explained where and how.

The Chetniks were preoccupied with stealing the valuables from the houses that had not been burned, while I was trying to find food to survive. Finally, after two weeks in hiding I went to the house right next to the river Bosna. I found tractor *šlauf* in the garage and I inflated it. I waited for the night to fall so no one could see me going across the river. I left the pistol hidden in the house. As I was getting ready to come out of the first floor windows, two Chetniks soldiers with AK-47 captured me. They started beating me with the end of their guns, I blacked out for a moment after receiving several hits in the back of my head.

My uncle listened carefully and my dad showed him a large indentation on the back of his head. My dad continued: “One guy put the pistol in my mouth, I grabbed his hand and told him, shoot, shoot me now...you filthy Chetniks. He pulled the gun out of my mouth, breaking and chipping my teeth and they started beating me again. They dragged me to the nearby school facility where they kept other captured civilians, primarily men.”

My uncle asked: “What happened in the concentration camp in Ševarlije?” My dad followed: “I was kept there for a month, first two weeks I was dragged out and beaten every day.” Then he stopped for a moment and said: “We slept on the bare concrete floor in *Kasarna* in Ševarlije. Ibrahim was taking care of my wounds at night when the Chetniks were not there. I did not care about the pain, all of my thoughts were concentrated on my family. I wonder where they were and if they were alive. That killed me more than any punches they threw at me.”

“Where did they take you next?” my uncle asked.

“I was kept in Kasarna in Dobož for a short time and they transported us to Modriča where I labored. I was kept in a concentration camp with others and then they would pick us up with trucks every day to go to the Muslim houses and to take out appliances and furniture. We usually had one soldier guarding us while we took out washers, dryers, television sets and furniture.” My dad nodded his head, while puffing another cigarette.

Siege of Maglaj, 1993-1994

My father was exchanged on August 19, 1993. He did not know he was going into the besieged town. Our only escape route had been through the city of Zepče, where Croatian forces held their posts and defended the city side to side with Bosnian forces. Ambulances drove the heavily wounded through Zepče from Maglaj into the city of Zenica.

For territorial reasons, Croatian forces decided to join with the Serbian forces and close the only route where Red Cross convoys with food could reach the city. The combined Serb and Croatian forces launched a massive attack on the small town of Maglaj with its 50, 000 inhabitants and they used everything in their arsenal to cross the Bosnian defense lines.

In the beginning of July, 1993 the road to Zenica was closed. Supplies were cut off for the city of Maglaj. A newly formed alliance between the Serbs and the Croats was another stab in the back for the Bosnian government. Bosnian troops were forced to defend the city of Maglaj on two fronts, and they were stretched thinly.

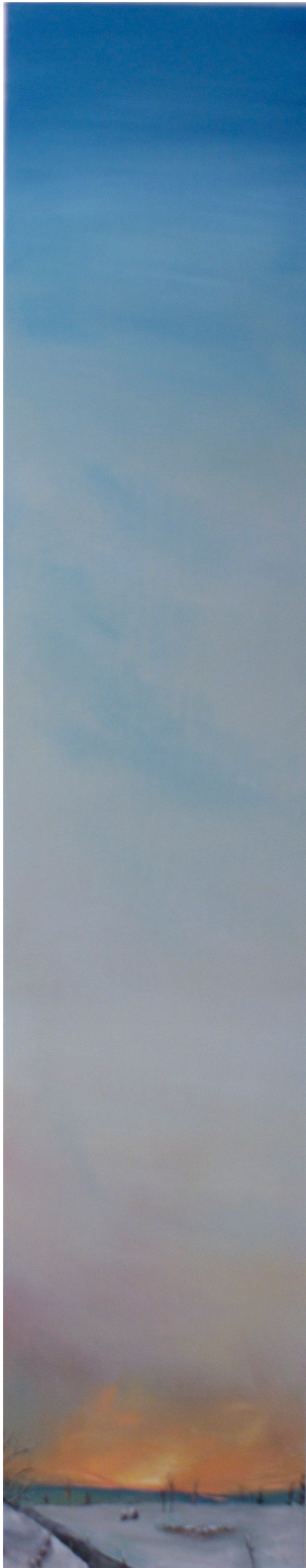
July 2, 1993 the Serbian and Croatian offensive started. The ground shook from the incoming shells from both sides. We found shelter in the moldy basement, where we gathered all the blankets we had and laid them on the concrete floor. Serbian and Croatian forces unleashed an intense artillery attack, they barraged the city with tanks, howitzers, mortar shells, multiple rocket launchers, guided missiles, anti aircraft guns and everything else that the Yugoslav National Army possessed.

Since the front lines were very close, we heard everything. At one point we heard small firearms coming from one direction. At that time, I did not know what was going to happen to us. It sounded very close. Someone had said that Chetniks had breached the front lines and that they are coming into the town. It was very common to hear the stories like that during the war. Everyone was afraid of the future, including me. I wanted to stay optimistic but incoming shells killed that for me.

In the basement news circulated fast and everyone was afraid that Chetniks were already in the city. Someone said that Chetniks made a gap in *Simanov Grob* line and that the Bosnian fighters were running for their lives. Later on when the shelling stopped we learned that Chetniks did breach a line of defense, but it was also overtaken again by brave Bosnian troops.

The Chetniks also tried to attack from the front side. They loaded a train with weapons and they shielded it with extra metal and sand bags. That was another desperate try from Chetniks to reach the town. The train was not captured but it was severely damaged by Bosnian Army that it had to retreat back where it came from. At least it was a short victory, but now psychological pressure was upon us. Food would run out, water and electricity was cut off and since the newly joined forces failed to reach the city they would do anything in their power to make our lives miserable.

Besieged winter, 1993



Once the bitterest of enemies, the Serbian and Croatian forces attacked the city of Maglaj in an effort to cut off a region controlled by Bosnian forces along a 20-mile section and they succeeded. They kept the city surrounded for two years.

Constant shelling wasn't the worst part anymore, but the hunger was. When the first winter came we were rationing flour that we had, which was 10 kg. My mom would make us bread and that was all we would eat in three days. Sometimes we would stretch it to four days depending on the size of the bread. We were all malnourished at the time, not worried about the calorie intake, since we had none. Haris' health was constantly deteriorating. He was closed off in the room on bed rest, getting worse and worse every day. My mom made tea for him, with herbs that she found in the woods during the summer time. We covered my brother with three UNHCR blankets. He was shaking. My mom constantly checked on him. Sometimes he would not move at all so she had to check if he was breathing. She did all she could, trying all of the home remedies she knew, including putting a brick on the stove and then taking it to his room and putting it on his chest. She sold some of her jewelry my dad had gotten for her over the years

in order to buy medicine and food. After a month of battling with the illness, he finally started walking. Even though his face was showed sings of color, he was even skinnier now. I could have picked him up and carried him at that time. I was happy to see my brother. He went to the middle room and saw the flour that we had was almost gone. We only had maybe half a kilo left and no convoy with food was coming from any direction.

Venso and my dad went to nearby hills to wait for the airdrops and packets to fall from the skies, but they had no luck. It was hard to predict where they would drop the food. It also depended on the weather. If the winds were strong, the parachuted food would be blown away between enemy lines and into the minefields. They went every night to gather some food. Sometimes planes would not even fly over our territory, and when they would drop the food, organized mobs where so effective in getting the food that no one could gather anything after them. Food shortages brought out the worst in people. Some of them came with the weapons to guard the food from anyone else coming to it.



Food drops would usually happen at night when the airplanes flew over Maglaj. Aid airplanes would change the sound when parachuted packages were thrown out. It was easy to spot them since every package had a glow light stick attached to it. Except this wasn't a rave party gathering. One night my dad brought me a parachute and a glow-stick. I played with the glow-stick, pretending to be listening to music. Prodigy blasting in my head and I was raving in the dark. The Glow-stick was our only source of electricity for that night so my dad asked me to lay off the rave scenery. My mother sewed a nice pair of pants for me from the parachute material. I was proud of those pants.

While we gathered parachutes, ropes, glow-sticks and wood from the air dropped packages food was harder to come by. Our supply of flour was at zero. When my mom was making our last bread for us, I vividly remember her in the kitchen, putting wood in the stove and flour into the plastic bowl. She was carefully pouring, savoring every moment, carefully constructing the dough, and shaping it so we could split it in equal parts. My brother was observing and so did I. We knew that was the last loaf of bread. Haris grabbed his backpack, and Venso followed to wait for the airplanes in the hills.

They said their good-byes. "Good luck" I said, "Be careful" my mom added. They descended into the dark lobby and

out in the snow. I went after them. They told me to go back inside, because it was cold. And I did. I watched them disappearing into the darkness, while the snowflakes were getting heavier following their footsteps. After a few minutes, snow erased their footsteps and I went inside.

My dad went to the hills before them. It was eleven at night when I heard the airplanes. Three hours after that my mom and I were still awake. Someone was coming up the stairs, and we hoped that it was them. Haris came in carrying a half a bag of flour. We jumped with joy. He said that he found a food pallet with another man who was also searching for flour. They split the bag in the half. We were so grateful and excited that we could not sleep till four in the morning.

Now we had supplies to last us for a long time if we rationed it properly. In the morning we ate bread that my mom had made. It was the best bread in the whole wide world. I kissed my portion before I took the first bite.

Next day, as the snow was getting heavier, we had no more oil, no sugar or anything except for the newly caught flour. My dad and I decided to go on foot to the village next to Tešanj called Oraš Planje to see if we can find some food. We packed a piece of leftover bread and walked across many hills through deep snow. I was also carrying a backpack, while my dad was constantly asking me if I was OK. We could not afford to take so many as it was getting colder outside.

Night was approaching faster and we still had many miles to go before reaching our destination. We did not know if my dad's friend was going to recognize us or if he was going to let us stay at his house. As we approached his property, I was freezing. My

dad said: “Just a little bit longer just a little bit, we are almost there. See that second white house on the left? That’s his.”

We knocked on the door, my dad explained why we had come all this way, and they welcomed us into their home. They were getting ready for dinner and asked us to join them. The lady asked my dad: “Does your son like potato pie? Does he want something else?” My dad answered with tears in his eyes: “Yes, he does like it, *jelde sine*, he has not seen a potato in two years.”

While my father was catching up with his friends, I focused on food. My stomach hurt from all the food I ate. It was also because I had not eaten a real potato since the war began. For this family, it was easier to survive. They had two cows, a couple of chickens outside and their own land to harvest food. Plus, they had not heard a shell exploding anywhere near them.

We stayed the night there. In the morning Osman gave my dad two pieces of home dried meet, *suho meso* and *sudžuka*, and dried animal fat, substitute for oil. We were so grateful that my dad thanked him far too many times. I had never seen my dad happier. When it was time for us too leave to go back to Maglaj, across the many mountains, the many hills and through the deep snow, the walk back was a breeze with real food in our bellies and some food in our backpacks for the family.

Black Market

People in Maglaj went into local villages, trying to buy food. Some villagers took advantage of desperate hungry people, willing to give anything to provide food for their families. For one golden ring they could get only four eggs. Depending on the carat sizes, necklaces, bracelets, gold was the biggest trading currency and people gave up their wedding bands and rings in order to get some food, including my mother. That was a dirty business. Prices were set high. One ring equaled four eggs and depending on the carats some other food could be included into that price.

You could buy everything on the market, but the biggest trading goods were cigarettes. People were addicted to them. One or two cigarettes would go for four dollars. Oil, coffee, flour was on the high side. Anything and everything went. *Ratni profiteri*⁷ is the term used in Bosnia for the people that benefited from the war. Nowadays, they own the biggest construction and transportation companies.

War Police

In the beginning of the war we lived with my uncle, but his apartment was too small for all of us including my mom's parents. My uncle sought out a temporary apartment for us. In 1992 we moved into the three-bedroom apartment previously owned by the Chetnik who fled the city, knowing what was coming.

It was a temporary stay for us, a place to call home away from home. My grandparents occupied the middle room, while three of us were in one room and my mom in one.

In the beginning of the siege my grandparents moved back to an uncle's apartment because his family left for Germany. He had more rooms and he needed someone to be with him as well. It worked out for all of us, except for Aida Smajić. She was a political figure in the city of Maglaj and she wanted the apartment that we lived in for her brother.

One night as we laid on the hallway floor during the siege of Maglaj, Aida sent out the police. Seven officers stood in front of our apartment telling us that we needed to leave. "Leave where, on the street?" my mom asked. "It's seven of you against us, aren't you ashamed that you are coming at one o'clock in the morning to force us out of the apartment." My mother and my brother argued with them. They left after an hour of argument. The second night they came at the odd hour again. This time they were not ready to negotiate. The officers were ready to throw us out of the apartment. They grabbed my mother first, then me. I was crying and resisting with all of the power I had. My brothers were not at home. They tried and they failed to evict us. Ferid across the hall, yelled out "Aren't you guys ashamed? What is wrong with you picking on the

woman and the child? Why don't you pick on me?" More neighbors came out to support us. This time eight of them left with their Kalashnikovs down the stairs. Some were there for the ride. They were following orders, while three of them were really forceful and ready to do anything to throw us on the street. I remember one guy who was eager to do anything. His last name was Nalić. They tried again but this time all the soldiers from the building that were fighting for the existence of the city came to our aid armed with Kalashnikovs. They told the police if they come again that they will shoot. I had never seen the police return so quickly to their cars. They never bothered us again. Aida Smajić did not get an apartment for her brother. I heard that she wanted the apartment because she wanted revenge against my uncle who was also politically active in the city.

Letter to Ms. Smajić

Dear Ms. Smajić,

I could have gone without the additional stress during the siege of Maglaj. Did you really need that apartment for your brother or was it a statement of power? Was it directed against my uncle? Why us, why at that time? The police force could have been utilized to create order in the city. They could have been at front to defend it, instead of attacking us and trying to force us out of the apartment. Aida, I cannot understand your motivation after all these years. What did my family and I ever do to you, to throw us on the streets at the worst of times, when people worried how to survive another day. I wish that I could forget you, but I never will, nor will I ever understand your ill-mannered motives. I just wanted to let you know that we moved out of the apartment when the war ended to go back to our own home that was burned by Chetniks. Now you can have it, it's yours. I never wanted to stay there anyway.

Sincerely,

Emir Alibašić

First UN Convoy After the Siege Ended, 1994

The first UN tanks came into the town after the siege ended. News on the local radio station reported that all the sides declared a cease-fire for two days because the UN was coming into the town. I went outside to play with an empty bazooka not knowing that the UN forces would pass right by me. I saw a white armored vehicle approaching me, with a blue helmet sticking out of the turret. I turned an empty bazooka toward the tank, playing with them. They were a little bit uneasy about me doing that. Somehow I wanted to scare them. I realized what I did was wrong and then I dropped the bazooka to the ground, showing the UN soldier that it was empty. I forgot to play with regular toys because I had none. Since the war started weapons were the only available toys. A lot of the arms came from Yugoslavia, USSR, and even from the United States of America. My toys were empty bullets and shell casings, used *OSA* - a tank destroyer and metal shells fragments. I was glad that they came to our rescue. But also I knew that they should have been in Maglaj a year ago or two years when the war started. Why now?

If they showed up a little earlier, they could have saved my friend Haris and his grandpa, as well as Safet, Fadil, Selma and many others.

After the UN tanks and armored vehicles, the convoy with food followed. I ran on the street and heard that the UN was giving away something from their trucks. Yes, they were giving away jackets and shoes to all the children who were waiting behind their trucks. I went there expecting to receive a gift from them when all of the sudden they started throwing jackets and shoes at children while one UN soldier started taking pictures. I ducked and I ran away from the scene. I was hurt that they threw shoes at us

and took pictures. They could have made a line and handed us shoes without throwing anything. I felt humiliated that I even went there.

I felt like a dog waiting for the piece of bone to be thrown in my direction. I ran home and I ran some more. I told my mom what happened. She could not believe it either. Later on, I saw some kids walking with the new shoes, two or three sizes to big. They were sporting basketball jackets, bearing Magic Orlando logos.

As I was observing those kids, I looked up at the UN jeeps that were coming out of *Sikola* tunnel. Two shells followed toward that direction. I ducked, after everything had settled and I looked again in that direction. I saw black smoke rising at the end of the *Sikola* tunnel. An hour later I heard on the radio that cease-fire had been broken and that the Chetniks fired two shells and destroyed one UN vehicle. Two UN soldiers died that day. I was expecting exchange of firearms, war between UN and Chetniks and was disappointed that it did not happen. After a couple of months it became history that was quickly forgotten, along with other news from the city and from the country.

Haris got a job as a translator with the UN. On his first workday at UN, the general of the British contingent asked if he could come to our house. My mom made a really good cake with the resources she had. General David went to my mom's kitchen and what he saw surprised him. He could not believe that she made such a good cake with the limited resources. He left and a few hours later returned with sugar, flour, oil and many other things. He also brought ice cream, but we did not have electricity, so we summoned all of the children from our building to bring their bowls for some ice cream. For all of us it was the first ice cream we had in four years and it was vanilla flavor. I ate a whole bowl and afterward I was sick. My body rejected the sugar intake that I craved

for four years. Also my tooth was hurting from all the sweets I ate. After not having had toothpaste for two years during the siege, and by not going to the dentist for four years, my teeth had deteriorated quickly.

Since the UN was in town, the Chetniks sporadically fired a shell or two into the city. The UN carefully observed the fighting. They would drive with their UN trucks to the nearby hills and watch with their binoculars--a British Royal contingent.

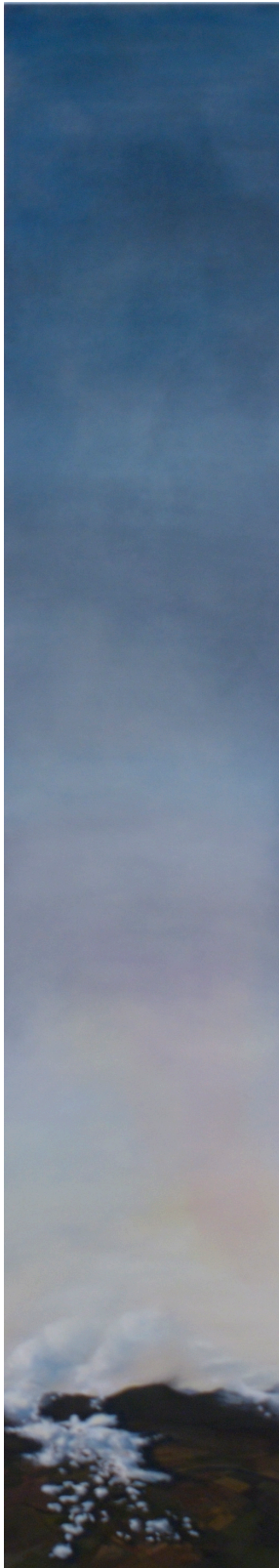
“See George these vile people fighting each other, I can’t understand their logic. Why can’t they live in piece? George give me my sun tan lotion, this Bosnian sun is killing me.” Have you seen how Manchester performed yesterday, terrible, what a tragic game, a massive loss on the home turf.”

“Yes, sire, that was horrid performance by the Red Devils,” the soldier replied while reaching for the sun tan lotion. They continued observing the fighting.

It was all observing for the UN soldiers until the Chetniks decided to shell out UN established base in the pre-war High School in Maglaj.

I saw two UN tanks going up to the hill and soon after, the retaliation followed. Two UN tanks destroyed a Serbian bunker. I watched the exchange of the fire from the window of my living room. I wished I had a camera. Like fireflies, bullets and small shells were lighting up a sky, while the sun was hiding behind the hill witnessing the historic moment. This was the first time they took any part in the war and became attackers instead of passive observers. For the first time I was really proud of the UN soldiers.

The Dayton Peace Agreement, 1995



The second cease-fire was negotiated and was meant to last for four months, until all the sides signed the Dayton agreement and split the country along ethnic lines. Before the cease-fire had expired, the fighting erupted again. The United States decided to use force against the Chetniks because no one wanted to see the UN leave Bosnia yet.

I watched the air strikes on Serbia on TV. But some strikes happened on the hills around me. I saw the NATO planes flying over our building and shortly after, they sent off two rockets and blasted the Chetnik bunkers. Shortly after, black smoke billowed from the site of impact.

In effort to stop the war political pressure increased on all parties involved, especially on the Serbian president Slobodan Milošević. He met with the Bosnian president Alija Izetbegović and the Croatian president Franjo Tuđman. All three of them signed the Dayton agreement in Ohio. The war stopped and a fragile peace started. NATO peacekeepers replaced the UN in order to make sure that all parties complied with the Dayton agreement. Office of the High Representatives moved to govern Bosnia and Herzegovina. Haris worked for them in the city of Brčko.

Fighting had stopped, and brought all sides to come to an

agreement. I was happy that the chaos, violence and killing had stopped but I was not thrilled when I saw the Dayton agreement map. The territory where my house was, now belonged to the so-called *Republika Srpska*⁸. I was able to return home three years later after the Dayton agreement was signed, but it was never the same. It was hard to accept living under the enemy's government, controlled by the people who pounded the city of Maglaj, burned my house and kept my father in concentration camp. Some of my friends and neighbors were gone forever. Some had been brutally killed and many were displaced.⁹

Right before the war ended, we heard more grim news. Our cousin Ibro had been killed by a mortar shell. The news was devastating. My father and my grandpa went to his funeral.

Ideological and religious clashes have taken a toll on the small country of Bosnia and Herzegovina, nationalism and separatism still exists but hope for better future still lingers among the people. Comrade Tito, did you envision this kind of an ending?

Al' život pred nama još bitaka skriva
i prijeti nam, prijeti, k'o duboki vir.
Ja znam da nas čeka još sto ofanziva,
jer moramo čuvati mir.

Računajte na nas.

Life ahead of us hides more battles, and threatens us, like a deep maelstrom.
I know another hundred offensives await us, because we have to save the peace.

You can count on us.

U nama je sudbina budućih dana
i neki se možda i plaše za nju.
Kroz vene nam protiče krv partizana,
i mi znamo zašto smo tu.

Računajte na nas.

The fate of our future days is on us and some are maybe afraid for it.
Through our veins flows Partisan's blood, and we know why we are here.

You can count on us.¹⁰

History

The political dissolution of Eastern Europe at the end of 1980s exposed military disputes and caused long-term social, political, and economic upheaval. The greatest fallout is evidence by the political collapse of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). Socialist Yugoslavia (1945-91) was a federation of six republics: Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Slovenia, Macedonia, and Montenegro. In June 1991 after referendum in both republics Croatia and Slovenia declared their independence, war broke out shortly thereafter. Bosnia and Herzegovina followed suit in March of 1992 and war broke out one month later. (Olujic 32).

Two Serb members of the presidency, Radovan Karadžić and Momčilo Krajišnik, had convinced most of Bosnia's Serbs to boycott the vote for the Bosnian independence, even though 99.4 percent of voters decided to withdraw from Yugoslavia. "Backed by Milošević in Belgrade, both Serb nationalists in the presidency resigned and declared their own separate Bosnian Serb state within the borders of old Bosnia." (Powers 249).

An embargo on importing the weapons was imposed in September 1991 for all Yugoslavian Republics (Behdzet 155). The only problem was that Serbia had all the weapons needed, left from Yugoslav National Army and president Slobodan Milošević used it. As Haris Silajdžić, a Bosniak politician and academic said:

“What is going on is genocide. In the West, many people choose to call it war. But it’s not war, it’s a slaughter” (Rieff 17).

In order to expand their territory during 1995, the Chetniks executed over 8000 Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica. A small town in Eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina was regarded as a ‘safe area’ protected by the United Nations. “Officially, according to UN Security Council Resolution 819 of April 16th 1993, the town of Srebrenica and its surrounding area constituted a ‘safe area’, which meant that it “should be free from any armed attack or any other hostile act’.” (Honig and Both 5). Apparently it was not safe enough. Srebrenica was the site of the worst-case massacre in Europe since World War II. Maglaj was regarded as a safe area, which did not stop the shelling of the city even when the UN moved in.

“In early November 1995 a peace was agreed to in Ohio” (Sacco 32). News on the radio and television showed three presidents slicing up the territories. That’s how Republic of Srpska came into being, an ethnically cleansed portion of the country within the borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina. To this day this creates more problems and political tension. The Dayton agreement was a temporary solution to stop further blood shedding and it needs to be revised so that Bosnia and Herzegovina can be a country without ethnic borders.



No Home Like Your Own, A&D MFA thesis exhibition 2010, group shot from the Slusser gallery.

Notes

¹ Yugo is a small car, technically a hatchback, made in Yugoslavia by Zastava Corporation. This is what Zastava had to say about their car:

The arrival of the Yugo in America, in the '80s, marked an economic shift of global importance in the small-car market, as the *USA Today* readily acknowledged in September 2007, naming the Yugo one of the 25 Most Influential Cars of the past 25 years. Recall that the Yugo forced General Motors to sell the Suzuki Swift as the Chevrolet Sprint, while Ford responded by creating the Festiva from a Korean variant of the Mazda 121. The Yugo opened the door for Korean Hyundai and Kia, which had in 1985 looked on keenly as Kragujevac's smallest car ventured Stateside.

Through 1991, Zastava could claim that its Yugo cars were in high demand on the world market. Seeking an increase in yearly output of 50%, the firm hoped to introduce a completely new family of products, beginning with the 1988 Florida, at the forefront of its class.

Yet, after 145,511 Yugos had found homes in the United States, the Yugoslav Civil War dashed Zastava's hopes of developing its image and market.

The Fall of Yugoslavia changed everything. A difficult fifteen years would follow. (Pacic and Romcevic)

Was the Yugo influential in a world market in a good way? It is up to you to decide.

² The Economist web site contains an article "Twelve years on; Remembering Yugoslavia's war," packed with useful information about the break up of Yugoslavia. Vukovar was called Croatia's Stalingrad, due to the devastation and human loss caused by the Yugoslav army and Serbian paramilitaries. Vukovar fell on November 18th 1991.

³ Joe Sacco author of the *Safe Area Gorazde* described the Chetniks as "Somewhat loose alliance of groups of Serbs nationalists and royalists who typically sought the establishment of a Greater Serbia cleanse of non-Serbs" During the WWII before Socialist Yugoslavia "The Chetniks waged a ruthless war against Bosnia's Croat and Muslim citizenry." (21).

⁴ Minarets are towers for muezzin (crier) to call the faithful to prayer. (364).

⁵ *Teritorijalna Odbrana*, later called Bosnian Army was an organized defense unit made up from people who were ready to defend their homes with all they had: hunting guns, home made guns and home made explosives materials that ended up exploding in their hands causing severe injuries and in some cases death. These were ordinary people standing up for their freedom. Certainly T.O. was not a match to far superior JNA army, whose equipment was in Serb's hands.

⁶ See Bourg and Shop, chapters seven and eight for an insightful analysis. Imposing the Dayton agreement and dilemmas of intervention. (317-418).

⁷ See Sacco's *The Fixer* story from Sarajevo .

⁸ See Bourg and Shop chapter seven, the Bosnian (Muslim-Croat) federation and Republika Srpska, May 1996. (376).

⁹ See Senad Agić, chapter on the homeland, a brief history of Bosnia and Herzegovina. (59-77).

¹⁰ See Tadic's web site and read the biography about Đorđe Balašević.

Index of Artwork

Pgs. 1, 2 - Nedostupno, Oil and photo transfer on canvas, 18" x 96"

Pgs. 6, 10 – Ševarlije, Oil and photo transfer on canvas, 18" x 96"

Pg. 13 – Šije 1992, Oil on canvas, 36" x 96"

Pg. 16 – Van vremena, Oil on canvas, 9" x 96"

Pg. 20 – Nedodirljivo, Oil on wood, 18" x 8"

Pg. 25 – Pod zaštitom, Oil & photo transfer on canvas, 18" x 96"

Pg. 29 – Karuše, 1993 – Oil, stencils and photo transfer on canvas, 36" x 96"

Pgs. 31, 40 – Maglajske ruže, Oil & photo transfer on canvas, 18" x 96"

Pg. 48 – Iznošeni udarci bola, Oil on wood, 18" x 88"

Pg. 50 – Teret, Oil & photo transfer and stencils on canvas, 18" x 96"

Pg. 60 – Odvojenost, Oil on canvas, 18" x 96"

Pg. 63 – Otvorensot, Oil on canvas, 3" x 96"

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Glossary of Terms

1. *Avlija*- an old Bosnian word for a backyard. It can also mean the area close where one lives.
2. BOV-3-a self-propelled Anti-Aircraft gun on the mounted on the 4x4 wheeled armored vehicle with a triple mounted 20mm cannon with optical sights in a cupola. This was originally designed in Yugoslavia for anti-aircraft applications, but during the war in Bosnia BOV-3 was used for ground targets, primarily civilians.
3. Bofors- medium weight anti aircraft system with 40mm gun, widely used against ground targets in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
4. Donji Fetići- Ševarlije's subdivision, usually named after resident's surname.
5. Dimije- an old traditional Bosnian wide dress brought into Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Ottoman rule.
6. Gusana peć- steel wood burning stove
7. Jadran- Abbreviation of Jadransko More also called Adriatic Sea named after Adria port located in Italy.
8. Kalasnjikov-also know as AK-47 most widely used automatic rifle.
9. Kandilo- an oil burning lamp. One part water mixture, one part oil and wick inserted through the lid.
10. Kasarna- The Yugoslav National Army (JNA) military base.
11. M-84- Second generations of tanks manufactured in Ex-Yugoslavia.

-
12. MIG- Russian design aircraft used and purchased by JNA. MIG stands for Mikoyan and Gurevich.
 13. NATO-North Atlantic Treaty Organization, where the United State, Canada and European countries can discuss security issues, concerns and take joint actions in addressing them.
 14. Nena, nana, baka-grandmother
 15. Praga-The Praga is an armored truck with a twin mounted 30-mm anti-aircraft cannons, built in Poland and purchased by Yugoslav National Army.
 16. Promaha-free flowing air.
 17. Rahmetli-death, pass to the after life.
 18. Simanov Grob- line of defense, held by Bosnian Army near old town in the city of Maglaj.
 19. Suho Meso- smoked meat
 20. Sudžuka- also smoked meat made into sausages.
 21. Šlauf – the inside of the tire, inner tube.
 22. T-55- a battle tanks design in former USSR
 23. Unuci- grandkids