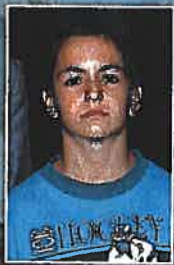


Please don't forget
the children
of Bosnia



Bosnia's brutal conflict is now in its third year and, tragically, it sometimes seems as if civilians have been the main targets. The Bosnian government estimates that more than 200,000 people have been killed since war broke out and, according to UNICEF, close to 17,000 were children.

Some – the lucky ones – have escaped from their war-ravaged towns. But many have ended up alone, sent off by themselves on buses by frightened parents. Others have fled with mothers and siblings to be housed privately, or in refugee camps throughout Europe or in other former Yugoslav republics. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees estimates that about two million people have been displaced by the war, 600,000 of them children. Both the United Nations and London-based Save the Children Fund are currently launching a programme aimed at tracking down children who have been separated from their parents. But the nightmare for these children will not end as a result of family reunions or life in a new land. They have been scarred, mentally if not physically. They feel scared, lonely, isolated and confused. And, even if the storm eventually blows over in Bosnia, its impact on the children who've lived through it will last for the rest of their lives. Here, three child survivors tell their stories...

Lilja was living in Croatia with her mother, father, teenage brother and sister when war broke out. Lilja's mother is a Croat, but because her father is a Serb her family was considered Serbian. When the Croatian Army seized her home town in 1991, the family was forced to flee to Bosnia. But the war followed them there.

Lilja ended up at a refugee camp in the northern Bosnian town of Tuzla with her mother, brother and sister. Her father, an alcoholic, joined them a year later only to disappear one day after he'd gone out for a walk. Lilja has no idea what happened to him. Lilja says she felt lonely in the camp, where her mother worked in a military kitchen all day. She was eventually befriended by Drazenko Zec, a 20-year-old military policeman who worked at the camp. He became her best friend.

On May 15 1992, Lilja, her family and Drazenko left the camp on a convoy packed

with hundreds of refugees bound for Serb-held territory. Their journey ended in horror when the tarpaulin-covered trucks they were travelling in came under fire. Bullets ripped through the fabric, killing Drazenko and seriously wounding Lilja's brother.

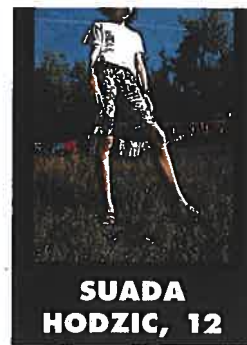
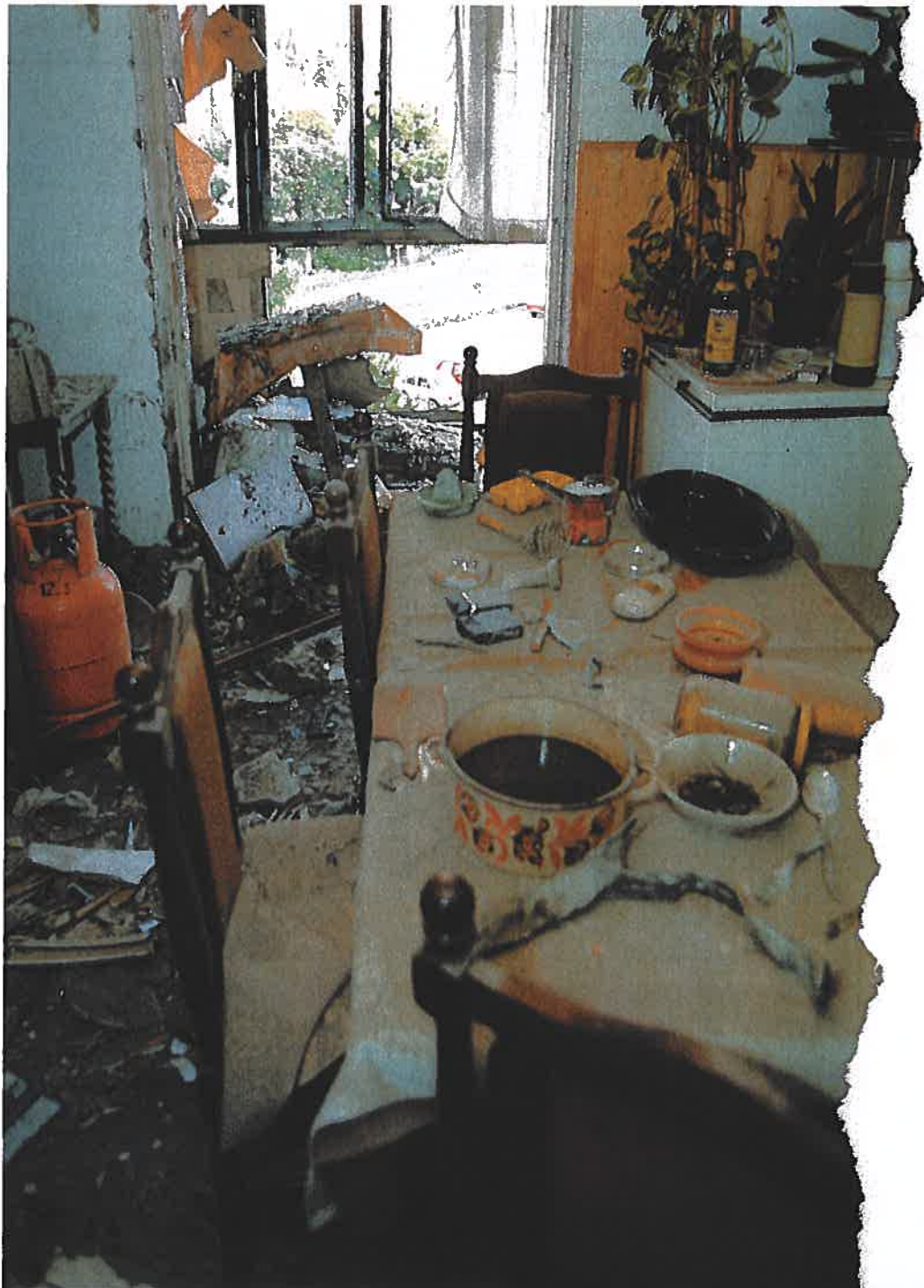
"I felt like a little baby because I was totally helpless," says Lilja. "I didn't know if my brother was going to live or die, my best friend had been killed, and I had no idea where my father was."

Lilja, who'd been shot in the leg, was taken to hospital where her wound was scraped clean without an anaesthetic. Her brother was flown to the Serbian capital, Belgrade, for treatment. It was a month before Lilja could walk again.

The family settled at Kovilovo, a dreary refugee complex outside Belgrade, where they lived for two years. Lilja has recovered from her physical wounds and now lives in ▶



By Stephanie Vuckovic



**SUADA
HODZIC, 12**

Tearfully, Suada describes the outbreak of war in Foca, eastern Bosnia: “There was shooting everywhere, houses were burning, people were leaving town, sirens were going off. Then they came to our house to search it for weapons. Why did they keep coming back when they saw that we didn’t have any?”

Suada and her ten-year-old sister Azra are Muslims. They escaped from Foca with their parents in June 1992. Some of the earliest Serb “ethnic cleansings” of Muslims took place in this small town, about 15 miles south of Gorazde.

In a chillingly calm voice, Suada describes the horrors of life in a war zone: “A café near us was burned down. The whole town smelled of plastic. I thought they were going to set fire to all the houses, including ours.

“We stopped going to school and Dad wouldn’t let us play outside because it was so dangerous. But he and Mum couldn’t go to the store, so I was always sent. He would watch me from the window, but I was terrified. Our Serb neighbour would leave food out on our back porch for us to pick up. He gave us pies, soup, beans and cakes, and sometimes coffee and cigarettes for Dad.

“Bad things happened to us, like the time Mum lost her eye. We were playing cards at Grandpa’s when we heard shells falling and pieces of metal came crashing into the room. Suddenly, Mum ran in holding her eye.

◀ a private apartment in a Belgrade suburb, with her mother, sister, her sister’s husband and their new baby. But her psychological wounds have yet to heal: “I sometimes dream about Drazenko and keep expecting to see him. Then I remember and feel sad.

“My experiences have changed me. Before, I could never hate anyone. After this I hated everything around me – and myself because I didn’t save him. I knew I couldn’t, but I still felt guilty.

“I don’t have anything to hope for. I sometimes think about having new friends or moving, but I have nowhere to move to. The only thing I

“They took Dad to a shooting range by the river and pointed a machine gun at him”

want is someone who really loves me and a son who looks like Drazenko, with black hair and light eyes.

“This war is the worst thing in the world. It wasn’t necessary. Before, no-one cared whether you were Serb, Croat or Muslim. We are all the same, we’re all flesh and blood – whatever nationality we happen to be.”



Then Dad got beaten up. We were hiding at our neighbour's house when they [members of a Serb paramilitary group] came looking for us. They beat Dad until he was red and swollen. Azra and I didn't sleep that night because we thought they would come back for us.

"Another time, they took Dad to the shooting range by the river and pointed a machine gun at him in front of me. I cried and cried. The men told me to get back so they wouldn't have to shoot me, but I refused. Then, from a nearby building, an old woman started begging them not to shoot, and eventually they let Dad go.

"We never knew why they picked on us, but when they took Dad to the shooting range we realised that it was because we are Muslim. After that, Dad told us never to tell anyone who we were. In the past, he'd always said that, regardless of whether you were a gypsy or a Muslim, it was important to get on with everyone and not bring politics into it."

Sitting in the room she shares with her parents and sister at a refugee camp in central Serbia, Suada leafs through a photograph album she managed to bring with her. "I feel so sad when I look at these pictures and remember," she says. "When I close my eyes, I can't believe it all happened."



BORIS MITROVIC, 13

Boris and his grandfather Ilija are Serbs from Sarajevo. When war broke out in April 1992, they were living in a mainly Muslim neighbourhood — one of the first areas to be pounded by Serb shells. They were forced to seek shelter in the basement of their building from the guns fired by fellow Serbs. Fifteen people in Boris's building were killed; one was hit by a shell in front of his eyes.

Boris's only companion during most of his time in Sarajevo was his grandfather. His parents were divorced and his father, with whom he lived, had been arrested in May and accused of spying for the Serbs. His mother lived in a nearby suburb and visited Boris shortly after his father was jailed. Boris hasn't seen her since. He used to visit his father every month at Sarajevo's Central Prison, where he is serving a six-year sentence. "It was so strange," says Boris. "I didn't understand what was going on and why they were holding him." He hasn't seen his father for about two years, and last received a letter from him in April.

Most of Boris's Serbian friends left Sarajevo at the start of the war. Left behind, Boris relied on his grandfather, who would cook rice or macaroni in their apartment and take it down to the basement to eat.

"One day in September, Bosnian police came to the apartment and said they needed Grandpa to be some kind of witness," says Boris. "I didn't think anything of it. I thought he would be back later, but a few days went by and he still hadn't returned. I was staying with a neighbour when we found out that he was in prison. I thought that he would never come back and I fell apart." To Boris's joy, Ilija turned up 20 days later.

In December, Ilija and Boris managed to leave Sarajevo on a long-awaited convoy and were taken to a refugee camp about 80 miles from Belgrade, where they have been living for the past two years. Most of the other residents have hot-plates or extra food and chocolate they buy from money saved or sent by relatives, but Boris and 73-year-old Ilija, who washes all their laundry by hand, have to manage on their own.

Boris finds it difficult to concentrate on his schoolwork. "I think of other things," he says. "I think of my dad." According to his grandfather, Boris has been changed by his experiences: "He's nervous, irritable and restless. He seems constantly disappointed."

Ilija also thinks that other children at the camp are a bad influence: "They offer him cigarettes and sometimes mistreat him. Boris has marks which he says were caused by falling while playing football. In fact, they are cigarette burns inflicted by older boys."

ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED IN HELPING REFUGEE CHILDREN

- **SAVE THE CHILDREN FUND** Distributes maternity kits, supports childcare institutions and works with the governments in the former Yugoslavian republics to encourage reintegration of refugee children into the community. In conjunction with the UNHCR, it launched Operation Reunite, registering refugee children separated from their parents and trying to reunite them. Call 0171-703 5400 for information/donations.

- **UNICEF** Sets up assistance programmes for children, involving sanitation assistance (medicines, vaccines), nutrition (milk for babies) and education (peace education, writing materials). Gives assistance to children's institutions and collective refugee centres. For information, tel: 0171-405 5592. Credit card donations can be made on 0345 312312.

- **UNHCR** Provides wide-ranging humanitarian assistance for refugees, and co-runs Operation Reunite with Save the Children. The London office can be contacted on 0171-222 3065.

- **IFRC** (International Federation of the Red Cross) and **ICRC** (International Committee of the Red Cross), **Oxfam** and others have humanitarian assistance programmes for victims of the war in Bosnia, providing food, clothing and medical assistance for the population.

Boris hates the war that has separated him from his parents: "It's crazy. It's not right when people kill each other and you could have solved things another way." He yearns to see his parents and "to go anywhere else except Yugoslavia...some place where there is no war and no talk of Serb against Muslim."

Many refugee children share Boris's wishes, but the chances of them coming true are slim. Most will spend at least their adolescent years in camps isolated from the rest of society. Will they ever get the chance to attend college, get jobs and have families of their own? If they do, will they be able to rejoin society while carrying emotional debris from the traumas they have experienced? Their futures are anything but clear. ■



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