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Peace in Bosnia | Dina Greenberg

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Waging Peace in Bosnia and in the Souls of Her Far-flung People

In 1992, a deadly spark of Serbian nationalism ignited a wildfire of war that raced across the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, destroying everything in its path. During these years of aggression, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, more than one hundred thousand people were killed and two million others displaced. The campaign of ethnic cleansing, primarily against Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks), is often described as the worst genocide since World War II. The carnage ended only after NATO's intervention in 1995 [1].

And now, some thirty years later, Putin's war on the people of Ukraine, with daily sightings of death and destruction, are early reminiscent of these other wars.

How, then, can I begin to explain why Bosnia's war continues to hold me in its embrace? Equally important, why am I compelled to share my Bosnia's struggle to "wage peace"? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that I am Jewish, my Ashkenazi ancestry tied to centuries of anti-Semitism, Europe's stifling political and geographic boundaries. The same sort of bloodshed and "scheming" Bosnia now subjected to. Perhaps the answer also lies in echoes of Genocide denial, revisionist history that threatened to repeat, "Holocaust" denial even more than once [2]. For me, Putin's war in Ukraine is equally horrific, but perhaps it is still too fresh, too painful to process.

So, today I channel my grief for the six million Jews who perished in the Holocaust and I channel my grief for the Bosnians who perished just fifty years later. I channel my grief and—if I am being completely honest—my anger and despair—by collecting and holding the stories of the Bosnian diaspora. These stories are provided by those who survived, those who remained throughout the war, and those who saw no other choice but to leave their homeland behind forever [3].

SEED OF MIRACLES

This work began more than fifteen years ago with research for my novel, *Hermina's Chance*. The narrative opens at the outset of the siege of Sarajevo [4]. Over the course of the story—the longest siege in modern history—15,541 people, including 1,601 children, lost their lives [5].

As an author, I yet to know my protagonist intimately. Over the many years of writing Hermina's story, I learned about her fears and motivations, I grew to love her, I fought for her. Hermina was a second-year medical student. She lived in Sarajevo with her parents, both doctors, and her older brother, a financial analyst. Like many others in this Socialist society, the family identified as "secular" Muslims. And like many others, the war dragged Hermina of everything she'd ever known or loved. Ultimately, though, a well of resilience enabled her to re-create the family she had lost.

OTHER STORIES

In the months before and after publication of *Hermina's Chance*, I've also fallen deeply in love with the tandem project of collecting stories of women who have much in common with Hermina. Their losses are immeasurable and yet many of these women have transcended their collective tragedy to flourish. Others are still held captive to the pain of their past. Still others straddle both realms, carrying the trauma of their Bosnianness in their bones and in their blood. Edina Kurtovic is among these women.

GENERATIONS OF NATIONAL GRIEF

In April, 1992, along with her mother, aunt, and one-year-old cousin, Edina boarded the last commercial flight out of Sarajevo. They landed in Belgrade, then traveled by train to Germany. Velasha's father, a physician, remained in Sarajevo throughout the siege, where he ministered to the city's wounded and dying. One day, he was shot, a sniper's bullet pierced the window of the family's apartment and lodged just a couple of inches beneath his heart. Long periods elapsed between his communications, and it would be more than two years before Velasha's father was reunited with their family in Germany. In the summer of 1995, the Kurtovic family made their way to Flint, Michigan, where Velasha's uncles had arrived as refugees a couple of years before. Still, the family was divided by war. Like open wounds, gaping holes remained where loved ones should have been.

Today, Velasha lives and works in Vienna. She is, by all accounts, a successful and confident young woman. Still, when we first met by video call, Velasha described the "second-hand guilt" that stalks her. She recounted a story that winds through four generations of women in her family. It is unlikely this grief and guilt will end with her.

Photo by Tom Hermans
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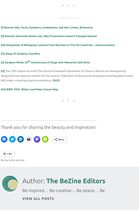
When Velasha's family fled Sarajevo in 1992, her maternal grandmother Safija stayed behind in the city, certain—like so many others—the war would be over in a couple of weeks. But Velasha's great grandmother, Derviša, lived in Hevereija, a small town close to Mostar, now part of Republika Srpska [6] with good reason. Safija feared her mother, then in her late seventies, was in grave danger.

Reflecting on her American childhood in Michigan, Velasha describes occasional "candid moments" when her grandmothers—going about all this was completely normal."

The story of Derviša's last days and hours is painful to fathom. "A man in the town told my family that my great-grandmother, along with other Muslim residents, were rounded up and buried alive in a pit of human excrement. Others were corralled in select homes, then set on fire by the Serbs and burned alive." This gruesome account was the last Velasha's family would know of their ancestor.

PEACE COMES IN MANY FORMS

None of the people who perished in Hevereija were buried with dignity. None of their family members will ever find solace. None of the images described here will fade. Here, though, is my offering and prayer for peace. For Derviša Husović and the three generations of Bosnian women that followed her, for all of the other victims yet to be recovered, and the families who mourn them. We remember. In this way, we wage peace among and within those who have survived the worst atrocities of war.



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Dina Greenberg…
Is a Holocaust survivor, Bosnian War survivor, Bosnian Genocide survivor, and a Holocaust survivor's daughter. She is the author of the novel, *Hermina's Chance*, and the co-author of the memoir, *Bosnian Diaspora*, which was a finalist in the Foreword Reviews Indie Awards, winner of the Gold Medal in the Eric Hoffer Awards, and winner of the Silver Medal in the Independent Publisher Book Awards. Her work has been published in Tikkun, Jewish Quarterly, Jewish Journal, Sarajevo Times, and Sarajevo Times Magazine. She is a member of Chicago Jewish Writers and Chicago Jewish Artists Network.

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Bosnian Diaspora

[1] Bosnian War, Facts, Summary, Combatants, and War Crimes, Britannica

[2] Bosnian Genocide Denial Law Why Prosecutors Weren't Charged Anyone

[3] A Magnitude of Refugees: Lessons from Bosnia-to-Flint Resettlement – Interpretations

[4] Siege of Sarajevo, Guardian

[5] Sarajevo Marks 20th Anniversary of Longest Siege with Memorials, BBC-Africa

[6] The 1995 Dayton Accords (The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina) designated two separate entities for the country: Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska (RS), under a relatively tripartite presidency. **BACK**

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