

# Sarajevo Rose: A Tribute to Survival

Text and photography by Jeff Warner

**SARAJEVO (Bosnia)** – Bosnians, over a decade after one of the most atrocious wars in modern history, are still trapped amid social conditions that render many helpless, distraught and struggling for survival.

Although postwar Bosnia is recovering, its current socio-economic and political structure provides residents with few opportunities for personal prosperity or reasons to hope for the future. Most are confined to their country's borders. They must hope that continued foreign aid and private investment will stimulate an economic future and repair a fractured society that still has not recovered from four years of violent upheaval.

Furthermore, mainstream mass media coverage regarding Bosnia, at least from the United States, has been nearly non-existent since the 1995 signing of the Dayton Accords that formally stopped the war. This has created a skewed worldview that Bosnia remains a dangerous war zone, rather than an area of geographic beauty and rich culture that is recovering from a former war.

Just because snipers no longer murder people from perches above a starving and shell-shocked Sarajevo doesn't mean the duty to inform and protect the public is complete. And a great world justice would be complete if the true societal after-effects of armed conflict were revealed – how war creates wounds deeper than any shrapnel can penetrate, permanently altering societies – and how the battle is far from over once the bullets stop flying.

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Djovani – now a social services professional in Sarajevo but barely out of college at the war's 1992 onset – was literally forced to "trade in books for guns." He, as a sniper during the war, snuffed out lit cigarettes at night using the infrared scope mounted on a rifle. Although he is uncomfortable while in quiet social situations and has trouble sleeping, he maintains that he is "not guilty" for his actions.

War has altered his perceptions. When a raindrop plops into a water puddle, creating circular ripples, he envisions a shock wave "from the grenade." He shudders at a thunderclap, and he physically buckled while we were scaling a mountain trail amid a sign-marked minefield. He trudges forward with life but says he "hate(s) that war."

Each Bosnian appears to experience a different version of a distorted internal world, revealing deep inner wounds stemming from living for years amid carnage.

I've met Sarajevans who had friends and family members die before their eyes and in their arms. I know others who lived abroad during the war and, when they returned, were scorned for failing to defend the city and share in the misery of those who stayed.

Many of Bosnia's youths – their childhoods drastically altered by the war – remain deeply affected, and use social activism and theater work as platforms to speak out against the



**A Muslim woman prays amid a long-unused graveyard that was reopened during Sarajevo's siege. Although much reconstruction has taken place in Bosnia since 1995, the inner wounds of war live on.**



**Exploded mortar ("grenade"), discovered in a graveyard where every headstone was toppled: Many thousands of these rained down on Bosnians.**



**Apartment complex memorial: “I knew many people whose names are on this list,” said a Sarajevan.**



**A man shovels away at the former military headquarters in Sarajevo. Little of the infrastructure destroyed in the war has been rebuilt, a failure that limits economic opportunity.**



**This is an apartment complex pockmarked with holes left by artillery shells – remnants of mass destruction that the world watched from afar.**



**Most Bosnians returned postwar to find their homes occupied, destroyed or heavily damaged. And most still live amid this wreckage.**

ethnic separation in schools, homelessness, drug abuse, and other rampant social problems that weren't nearly as prevalent during the country's prewar era.

In 2007, I worked with employees and volunteers of a newly-constructed drug treatment center in the mountains near Sarajevo. Three million dollars was invested in this campus-like facility initially designed to treat 10 heroin addicts at a time. Patients were to be treated by professionals who had lived through similar war-related conditions, then released into a postwar culture that provides few means for a prosperous and healthy life. The unemployment rate is around 70 percent in Sarajevo, and little besides decaying carcasses remain of industrial infrastructure that once provided a livelihood for people.

As of September 2009, this drug treatment facility was filled. Is this an indicator of forward progress toward putting the city's tortured past behind, or the realities of an ongoing humanitarian disaster?

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Many Bosnians know, or at least believe, that many people outside their country regard Bosnia as an inherently war-ridden and barbaric place where people kill each other over religious beliefs.

Much of the way the world perceives Bosnia was molded during the war by graphic images of homes, office and apartment buildings being hammered by artillery shells, as well as people scampering about the streets, dodging sniper fire and doing whatever necessary to survive.

Although there was media created to stimulate world public outcry regarding the war, many Bosnians say some journalists paid people to run across sniper-watched streets in hopes of a “trophy shot” that would pad their journalistic credentials. Whether or not staged wartime situations heightened the world's perceptions of the Bosnian War's undeniable atrocities, once the war ended and coverage ceased, media consumers' emotions and views regarding Bosnia appear to have remained distorted. And they have since solidified into a profoundly false image of Bosnian life.

Most people outside Bosnia whom I have talked with don't know exactly where the country is, let alone how its society functions or what has taken place there. All have had a similar appalled reaction when the topic of Bosnia is mentioned. Imagine how Bosnians feel when talking with foreigners and receive a similar reaction.

For example, Adilija, a Bosnian woman in her 20s who was wounded as a young girl during the war by a bomb and later lived as a refugee in neighboring Italy, harbors unpleasant memories of living abroad. Beyond feelings of being judged and treated like she was dirty, she's been asked if Bosnia is located in Africa, if Sarajevo can be reached by boat; how Bosnians live, what they eat, whether they eat each other, if they have running water and use toilets, if she has ever used a tram, telephone, watched television; if she knows how to turn on a light switch.

She was in a classroom when an Italian said in his own

language – unaware that she could understand him – that all Bosnians are crazy and live like animals. She told me, “Well, like any other animal, I just want to survive.”

Serif, a Bosnian man with ‘Muhammad’ tattooed on his forearm – a citizen who fought in the war, later lived in America and recently returned to his homeland – summed up the war as he experienced it, the Serbian propaganda-induced ethnic nationalism that fueled it and the world’s seeming belief that Bosnians, who had previously lived together peacefully for generations, kill each other over religion.

“I didn’t know I was a Muslim until someone told me I wasn’t going to be one anymore,” he said, meaning he’d be killed if he didn’t defend his ethnicity. “Then, I fought.”

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Bosnians are forthright and live passionately. They are inherently warm, generous and gregarious (once they trust you). And a foreigner could be struck by their strong handshakes, initially calculating and wise eyes, the life-forged lines in their skin and warm smiles amid latently long faces. However, the collective trauma they suffered in wartime also makes them emotionally unavailable, at least outwardly. They are helpful when others are in need. But most are highly independent, loose with adhering to planned engagements and appear to care very little about how their actions affect others. Their attitude toward life can be summed up as: “If you lived through the war, you can live through anything.” The related sentiment: “Live each day as if it were your last” isn’t a positive-sounding cliché in Bosnia. It is still a literal way of life.

Sarajevo is a large village that stretches across a mountain-encircled valley. In March 1992, after Bosnians voted almost unanimously for independence from Yugoslavia, Serb military forces, whose ultimate goal was to create a “Greater Serbia,” surrounded the city, blockaded roads, set up tank, artillery and sniper positions, and systematically destroyed infrastructure – factories, hospitals, apartment buildings and utilities. They continued to shell and shoot residents for the following four years. It was the longest siege in modern warfare, and citizens’ terror never ceased.

Sarajevans had little or no food, water, electricity or heat. Not a window in the city remained unbroken, and most people were forced to live in basements. The thousands of newly dead were being buried in ancient, long-unused cemeteries and in the playing fields of sports complexes where mourners were often attacked during services.

Much of the international food aid being consumed by the beleaguered population consisted of military rations. Many Bosnians claim some of this food was so old and unpalatable that dogs wouldn’t eat it. Some supplemented their meat intake with pigeons and other local wildlife. People lived for months or years without access to fresh fruits or vegetables.

Daniella, a Sarajevo woman in her mid-30s, pinched a small white onion between her fingers and hoisted it to eye level. With tears flowing, anger and passion in her voice, she at-



**This view overlooks a section of Sarajevo, located at a former Serb tank, artillery and sniper post.**



**Bosnians relied heavily on international food aid for survival during the war. Health issues related to malnutrition are becoming ever more apparent. High cancer rates and stomach-related ailments are prevalent.**



**Bosnians still rely on international food aid for survival - supplementing their meager incomes.**



**This man sat daily amid the Turkish Quarter in Sarajevo, attempting to sell trinkets in order to make a living. Many Sarajevans do such jobs for a living.**



**Street beggars are common in postwar Sarajevo. This woman was holding a talking apparatus to her throat in order to attract attention from passersby.**

tempted to explain the elation she once felt when an onion like this was divided among the members of her family.

Djovani, a large man, lost nearly half his weight during the war; he had "a sunken face." Malnutrition was common among Bosnians, and its effects are still evident in the population's rampant internal health and dental problems.

Fetching water from a local spring or brewery was a matter of life and death, and many were shelled or shot while doing so. One cup of lamp oil had to last a month. Gasoline was either unobtainable or outrageously expensive. Black market profiteers – mirroring the army surrounding the city – controlled everything, and citizens were at their mercy.

Yet, Sarajevans somehow endured. Possessing little more than makeshift weapons at the onset of fighting, they banded together a citizens' army and staved off a well-equipped besieging force for as long as the war lasted.

But their achievements came at a heavy personal and collective price. The culture now functions like a large, creaky machine, with almost everyone collectively working toward reparation and in response to the same overall stimulus – the war. It has become their reality, creating this special, semi-silent bond among them.

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Hints of camaraderie flicker through Bosnians' everyday interactions, the topics they discuss (beyond joking and laughing) – the mafia, corrupt politicians, how "nobody cares" about them, how they just want a better life.

Sarajevans seem connected in a profound but eerily silent way, yet alone at the same time. It's as if everyone knows almost everyone else in Sarajevo; yet paradoxically, miscommunication reigns.

Government bureaucracy, corruption and poor communication between state government and non-government organizations (which currently operate many of the social services programs) slow social progress to a snail's pace. State funds intended for public services programs and reconstruction are often misallocated. For example, although much rebuilding has taken place in Sarajevo, there are buildings, such as the Parliament Building, where their planned reconstruction have apparently been funded several times. Patience from governments supplying international aid is running thin, while pressure for Bosnia and the greater region to meet entry requirements for the European Union continues to increase.

Partial reasoning for this stalemate and waste of funding (beyond corruption) is that Bosnia is divided into two entities: Republika Srpska (meaning, Republic of the Serbs) and the Bosniak-Croat Federation.

The Federation is sub-divided into 10 cantons; Sarajevo is one of them. Each of Bosnia's three primary ethnic groups (Bosniaks, Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Serbs) has its respectively staffed government within each canton, resulting in over 250 government ministries. And sixty-five percent or more of government funds pay for this system, leaving little for their intended purposes – such as social services programs.

Meanwhile, common citizens remain profoundly mistrustful of their elected officials. They look to their own shaky social networks, rather than the government, to ensure their survival. Many feel that, as far as the government is concerned, their human rights are either non-existent or determined by how much money is in their pockets.

“Everything that a human being should have (regarding human rights), we don’t have,” said a Sarajevan and social services worker.

The war poisoned relations across ethnic lines in ways that make communication difficult. Before the war, almost everyone lived together harmoniously. Inter-marriage between ethnic groups was common. The war began, and many ethnically mixed families were separated. Some family members were indirectly forced to side against each other. In many cases, men (especially Muslims) were murdered or sent to camps, and women were systematically raped and tortured.

The war formally ceased, and people tried to resume their prewar lives (if they still had a home that wasn't destroyed, occupied or open to the sky because the roof had been stolen and used for firewood). Most had little left and nothing to build with. Trust has been shaken on a societal level – whether between family members, friends, acquaintances or public leaders.

No matter who, what, where, when, why or how, everyone (at least the common citizen) lost something or someone special during that war, and all have different ways to cope with this loss – whether through self-destructive behavior such as incessant smoking, frenetic busyness, bursts of anger, heavy drinking or other chemical addictions; or through more constructive endeavors, such as the creative arts.

One merely needs to walk the streets of Sarajevo to glimpse how many people were physically dismembered during the war. However, the wounds of many thousands more fester at a level far deeper than the physical realm.

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I sauntered down a popular street in Sarajevo that runs parallel to the mud-colored Miljacka River weaving throughout the city’s entire length. In the evening, the boulevard is closed to traffic and illuminated by globe lamps that emit a comforting yellow glow.

People were playing street games, rollerblading, riding bikes, walking dogs and strolling together along the narrow and earthen path beside the river. Watching this scene of people seemingly free to enjoy themselves, I pondered how it contrasted with what I knew to be an underlying truth: Most Bosnians are social prisoners of a select few people in political power, and of other countries that have funneled money into the country for the past 14 years. They are stuck.

Bosnian citizens have no concrete way of arming or defending themselves, aside from taking care of one another as much as they can. They have minuscule amounts of material or financial resources. They are forced to work (if they can get a job) for barely enough money to squeak by (some



**Many Sarajevans must utilize a local charity organization for medical services, as “a lifeline.” This boy, Ajdin, has debilitating health problems stemming from issues during delivery at a state-run hospital. His grandparents, Hamo and Hanifa, talked about how troubling it is to survive in a postwar Bosnia, where previously their health care was provided for, and of high quality.**



**Street chess: Although Bosnians live amid an apparent facade of freedom, most contemplate and talk of a better life elsewhere.**

volunteer their time for long periods in hopes of being hired).

Many have material possessions (mostly purchased with credit) similar to others in capitalist countries. However, most have little or no choice beyond this aesthetic fix other than to care for someone, start (or rebuild) a family and make the best of whatever life has provided. Most Bosnians, especially men, cannot leave the country due to financial and visa issues. And most would leave if given the opportunity.

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Ivona and Jelena – both are college educated, in their 20s and work at Sarajevo’s primary social services organization. They differ in their views on the current state of their country, in their ways of coping and in how they feel about their future.

Jelena was a refugee in Germany during the war and looked forward to returning home to Bosnia. She is motivated by Bosnians’ reconciliation, and will stay in Bosnia to dedicate her life toward this goal. She says people consider her crazy for not wanting to live elsewhere.

“I really want to be from Sarajevo, to be from Bosnia,” she said. “I don’t want to live anywhere else. But if I live here, I need peace. To receive this peace, I need to be doing something.

“And I have complete faith that if we work with the people, we have a chance that we can live in peace.”

Jelena said every country has its unique set of problems. And questions the logic regarding her living in a foreign country where she doesn’t have the legal rights necessary to effectively fight for social change.

“There is no country in the world where everything is perfect,” she said. “There will always be problems, but these are my problems. Why should I go somewhere to help them with their problems?”

Ivona says each day for her consists of a varying internal battle. Some days she is excited about life. Other times, she feels that she can no longer live and work in a depressed postwar Bosnia, that the situation is hopeless. She then finds motivation in comparing her life to the lives of other Bosnians.

“There is always worse from worst,” she said. “I place myself in the lower worse, where people are living worse than me, and this is how I go on.”

A bomb blast during the war cost her father his legs and left him dependent on Ivona and her mother for care. Ivona said people are sympathetic about the family’s situation, but she thinks little of it.

“I think about the mother from Srebrenica, who lost every single person in her life, all her sons, brothers, husband, everybody,” she said. “How does she go on? My father is in a wheelchair, but he is still here. I can still talk to him.”

Ivona said that people learn to live in regimes where life is difficult and they have to fight for survival. She knows Bosnia has been ruled by many empires over the course of its history, each with its unique set of social challenges. However, she doesn’t want to continue living amid this tradition.

### Concerned parents: Living amid postwar conditions, what opportunities exist for Bosnian families?





**This is the side of a heavily damaged Sarajevo apartment complex, in 2007. The front side is pitted with bullet holes and craters from artillery shells.**



**This is the same apartment building as above, in 2009. The front side remains heavily damaged. Many homes and other buildings in Sarajevo have been either repaired or built, especially since 2007.**



**A woman makes Burek, a traditional fried Bosnian pastry, at one of Sarajevo's two heavily used public kitchens.**

“Change has to happen here and quickly,” said Ivona. She favors restructuring the government and eliminating the Dayton Accords, and says cross-cultural understanding, as well as international cooperation, is the key to success.

“If this situation goes on and on, I don’t know if I’m ready or willing to let my children live here in this situation and go through the same things I have to,” she said.

“I want to go somewhere else where I can be who I want to be, where I can have my chances. I have so much energy, so much knowledge. I want to do so much, but I just can’t in Bosnia.”

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All Bosnians wanted when they voted in 1992 was to be independent and free. What they received was their near destruction. What they have now, beyond a sense of tattered community, is the pulsating memory of a healthy and prosperous life and society that was stolen from them. Now, they simply do what they must to survive. Have social conditions really improved since 1995?

One may claim the amount of reconstruction that has taken place in Sarajevo (especially since 2007) signifies progress. In many respects, it perhaps does.

Revamped or newly built shopping malls, apartment complexes, businesses and government buildings now stand where, two years prior, existed a bomb-damaged apartment complex, parking ramp or factory; or a hole where a building once stood, surrounded by a metal fence bedecked with banners denouncing war crimes. Typically at that time, construction workers would be toiling away at these sites, using shovels and equipment barely sufficient to supply cement for securing a basketball hoop, let alone for the retail store that now stands there.

A construction worker in Sarajevo claims that although these new buildings were built with local labor, many who worked on them, including him, have yet to be paid. Most local residents can't afford the products being sold in these newly built mall spaces. Given that neither workers nor the common local citizen seem to benefit from these capitalistic monstrosities, who does?

The average income of a working Sarajevan is about \$500 USD per month. These are barely enough resources to survive, while Sarajevans witness glistening new buildings and a select few zooming around in luxury sports cars. There is a Porsche dealership in Sarajevo, of all places.

Many Sarajevans appear to despise the replacement of the communist socio-economic structure that reigned before the war, with the current democracy that now governs them. The previous system, they feel, worked for them by supplying functioning industry, well-paying jobs and nationalized health care. They look skeptically at the retail capitalism and inadequately funded social programs they have today. In this new system, they appear to envision empty promises of a brighter future, coupled with their own continued dependence on those who seek to exploit them.

Thousands of Sarajevans still rely on the city’s two public

kitchens for food. These facilities were established at the war's onset, and are still funded by foreign aid and managed by a local non-governmental charity organization.

Tanya, for whom food from the public kitchen is delivered daily, lives with her 7-year-old daughter, Tamara, amid the upper hills surrounding Sarajevo. Tamara was stricken with debilitating health problems because of a bad vaccination in 2003. She was temporarily paralyzed and has since been diagnosed with epilepsy. Her eyes flutter open and closed while Tanya uses a syringe to squirt medicine into her mouth twice daily. Tamara, who no longer has contact with her father (living in neighboring Serbia), is leery of others, especially men, and doesn't speak much.

Tanya, coupled with her own oncoming health problems, is struggling to provide her daughter with food, medicine, safe and effective health care and formal education because there is no local school for disabled children, and no public school transportation available. Resourceful, Tanya conjured a ride for her daughter's first day at public school. She stayed at the school to help Tamara, who has impaired motor skills, with writing and coloring.

Tamara may now be developing heart problems, but Tanya can't afford to take her to a cardiologist. Distraught and desperate, Tanya is seeking alternative forms of health care for her daughter but is experiencing fleeting hope. "Nobody can help me," she said.

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Bosnia formerly had a thriving economy and a physically healthy population, but it has been permanently altered by armed conflict, political and economic exploitation. Although it takes many years (and generations) to reconstruct a country after a war (if it can ever truly be repaired), an aesthetic mask to Bosnia's true social conditions still reigns.

Many Bosnians, particularly those who fought in the war, claim the war was stopped – utilizing military strikes by American aircraft, authorized under the umbrella of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) – once the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina had gained enough strength and morale to defeat the Serbs. They claim a few more weeks are all that would have been needed, and the country's current situation would be drastically different.

Why did it take over four years, and hundreds of thousands of innocent people dying – countless others tortured, maimed and raped – before a 21-day-long airstrike against Serbia was executed, stopping the war? Was it a last resort effort to stop the bloodshed, or was the delay designed to ensure that not a smoldering ember of a former communist country – its infrastructure and sociological functioning – remained intact? Regardless, Bosnians are still living amid the aftermath.

Above everything, these people are living examples of the human spirit's profound ability to continue on, for life to prosper, for people to heal and forgive one another, for a society to literally rise from the ashes – to rebuild, against all odds, what could not be taken, what was possibly never really lost.



**Tanya, a single mother, gives her daughter medicine for epilepsy. The child is suffering from major health problems after a vaccination that left her temporarily paralyzed. Tanya has little to no access to health care, education or income and is reliant on local non-government charity organizations for survival.**

