

Praise for *The Siege of Sarajevo*

“In a world facing the worst refugee crisis in history, this is an important and timely book, a compelling reminder of the heartrending dilemma of escaping terrible violence and leaving loved ones behind. Remarkably, the book is written entirely by Bosnian refugees and their families, and captures the Sarajevo experience better than anything else I’ve ever seen.”

—John Zaritsky, Oscar-winning filmmaker

“A powerful, well-written account of a loving family torn apart by one of the longest sieges in modern history. Compelling and heartbreaking story but ultimately a testament to human spirit, kindness and resilience.”

—Atka Reid, author of *Goodbye Sarajevo*

“By reading personal letters sent from Sarajevo during the siege, you become part of the story, too. ... The raw account and description of the events is striking, explosive, and often reads as a movie screenplay, forcing you to turn page after page, letter after letter—as you become Sarajevan yourself.”

—Zoran Stevanovic, UNHCR, Central Europe

# THE SIEGE OF SARAJEVO

One Family's Story  
of Separation, Struggle,  
and Strength

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SANJA KULENOVIC

THIS IS AN UNCORRECTED PROOF

It should not be quoted without comparison with the finished book.

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To my daughters,  
Nadia and Leila

In loving memory of Margaret Lambert and Ruth Hughes

*“Today, I am a citizen of the world. It seems a long time ago that I was a citizen of a proud, beautiful city, known as a symbol of peace, a ‘little Jerusalem of Europe.’ It was a place where East and West met, where churches, mosques, and synagogues stood side by side for centuries, and where people lived in harmony for generations. “Yes, I come from Sarajevo.”*

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Opening of my speech given at a United Nations fundraising event sponsored by the then-President of the General Assembly of the United Nations, Mr. Stoyan Ganev, to benefit Bosnian women and children during the war.  
Held in Beverly Hills, California, July 1993.

PART I

1992

The siege of Sarajevo started on April 6, 1992. Not long before that, in some distant and unreal life, we were tourists in California enjoying our honeymoon on the Malibu beaches, thinking the world was a perfect place and that things could not be any better. Then, with the morning's first cup of coffee in hand, we turned on the television. The face of the earth blackened in a second and our lives, as we had always known them, ceased to exist.

"Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia, was pounded with thousands of bombs from positions situated in the hills above the city," CNN morning news reported, interrupted by the sound of bomb detonations and footage of burning buildings and black smoke in the background. "Local authorities report that ten civilians were killed in the attack, and at least twice as many were injured and transported to the city's main hospital..."

First I felt confusion, then in a furious crescendo came disbelief, rage, worry, and fear—as if all of the orchestras in the world were united in announcing the huge and powerful Theme of Fate knocking on my door and entering my life, *molto ritardando*, like an omen. Three short notes and a long, deeper one, each of them as strong, loud, and frightening as the detonations I heard pounding in my ears. Even though my heart was hoping this was all a terrible mistake, the reality of the news was so harsh that it struck me like a bullet. I could barely comprehend all my feelings. They crashed onto me like an avalanche and I was losing solid ground by the second. *Why? What have we done? What have my parents done—retired people, who worked their whole life loving that city and country? What is happening in Sarajevo?*

In the following weeks, I learned what it means to physically hurt from worrying. I began to understand that "hopeless" is not an abstract term. The news was beyond comprehension: familiar picturesque sights smoldering; reporters' voices competing with exploding shells; tanks full of bearded, sinister, heavily armed men roaming the streets; high-rise apartment buildings ablaze, with people hanging from windows and balconies, frantically trying to escape. Thousands of shells slammed into homes, centuries-old buildings, museums, schools, and parks. The maternity ward of the hospital was hit. There were seventy women

and 173 babies inside. They even shelled people gathered at funerals for three newborns who were killed.

For Djeno and me, watching all of this from 7,000 miles away, it was a time when we had to use all our mental strength and self-discipline to battle the surge of emotions and frustration, to calm down enough to try to learn the facts. We were in a state of shock. Even after a couple of weeks, we could not fully grasp what was going on. We could see on the faces of Sarajevans on TV that they did not understand either. They ran through the streets in panic, faces contorted with fear, bodies bent, and heads hunched. All of their reactions were so fast, almost uncontrollable, and their yelling and screaming so loud, so spine-chilling, that later I would see and hear it in my sleep. Hours after watching the news, Djeno and I would still be walking around the room in circles, sweating and fuming, kicking things from rage and hopelessness, swearing as loudly as we could. At other times, we were so exhausted, all we could do was sit in one spot and cry our hearts out.

The world watched as our beloved city was destroyed, day after day. The world was counting the dead and wounded:

“Over the past twenty-four hours, forty-three people were killed and seventy-nine wounded. Terrible.”

“Seven killed, fifteen wounded: a relatively quiet day in Sarajevo.”

This was no ordinary war. And why should they speak of it as a war anyway? This was an attack on civilians, not a war between armies. These victims were not against anything or anybody. Their only wrongdoing was to be living in Sarajevo in spring of 1992. Was that such a horrible mistake? Why wasn't anything being done to stop the madness? What if it had happened to Paris or London? Would anyone have stepped in to save a fancy city in Europe and its people? Of course. The world would not have allowed the Eiffel Tower or Tower Bridge to go down. But why was Sarajevo any different? Did people elsewhere not realize that this could happen to them, too? Could they not understand that one day they could be going to work, kissing their kids before school, and enjoying afternoon coffee at a street cafe, and the next day they could be running into shelters for their lives? There might not have been the Louvre or Buckingham Palace here, there might not have been any queens or kings around, but there were people. There were my parents, my only brother, my in-laws, and my friends. Six hundred thousand citizens of Sarajevo were surrounded, trapped in the valley 7,000 feet below heavily wooded mountains packed with heavy artillery. There was

indiscriminate killing in the heart of old, “civilized” Europe, a few hours’ driving distance from Vienna, Budapest, and Rome. I asked again, *Why?* The question stayed with me like deep, heavy music, changing a little bit but always there—raw and unharmonized—incorporated into every variation of life, every day and night of the year.

It was May 27, 1992.

“Please be advised that the following program contains graphic material and scenes rarely seen on television,” the news anchor warned. “This footage was filmed in the center of Sarajevo, after two mortar shells, an 82mm and a 120mm, slammed into a group of people in line for bread outside a downtown bakery. Twenty-two of them were killed, and more than 160 wounded.”

My heart started pounding like a drum. I remember thinking, *Please, God, do not let me see my mom or dad or anybody I know...* The bakery was in my parents’ neighborhood, about five minutes’ walk from their house, on one of the prettiest streets in downtown’s pedestrian area. It was always full of people strolling and was lined with cafes, shops, and restaurants, vibrant and lively.

I heard frantic screams, then saw a pile of dead bodies mingled with the injured, lying in pools of blood, moaning. Heads, limbs, and other body parts were scattered all over, yards away. Human flesh stuck to the walls of the surrounding buildings. Blood flowed slowly down the street.

Djeno and I were turned into frozen statues. We stared at the images in silence, sickened. Suddenly, Djeno jumped up:

“Oh, my God! Is that Professor Djikic? Remember him? That is him, Sanja, look!”

Yes, it was Mr. Djikic, one of Djeno’s college professors, father of two sons, a charismatic and funny fellow. The last time Djeno had seen him was when he stood in front of a whiteboard explaining the principles of mechanics. He was now lying in his own blood, his lower body completely saturated. He was screaming in sheer panic, trying to crawl, extending his blood-covered arms toward the cameras. He had just lost both of his legs.

Guilty of waiting in line for bread.

The next day, something extraordinary happened outside the bakery. Bloodstains strewn with flowers were still fresh on the asphalt when a man in a tuxedo emerged from one of the shattered buildings. He slowly walked

toward the bomb site. He was Vedran Smailovic, principal cellist of the Sarajevo Philharmonic Orchestra. He brought his cello and a small stool, which he placed in the crater. He quietly positioned himself and began to play. The sound of “Adagio” filled the air. It flowed through the devastated streets of Sarajevo, above the screams, bombs, and bullets that still echoed in everyone’s minds, transporting the city to a time and place where nothing existed but harmony and peace. People stopped running and listened, not thinking about the snipers still aiming at them. Others brought flowers to his feet. Foreign reporters in bulletproof vests took pictures. And he played the “Adagio” twenty-two consecutive days—once for each person killed.<sup>3</sup>

The media called it “The Breadline Massacre.” Overnight, all TV and radio news stations became interested in the Balkan city of Sarajevo. The picture of Professor Djikic appeared on the front of major newspapers and magazines. The United Nations met. Officials began their endless speeches and empty promises. In the real world, away from the façade of politicians’ suits and the media’s hunger for sensations, life became steadily worse for the people of Sarajevo. They lost water and power. Railway and bus stations were shelled and burned to the ground. The only airport in the city was shut down to all traffic. Our letters were returned with a stamp: “Due to war, impossible to deliver. Please return to sender.”

And then, as if this were not enough, what we had feared most happened. One night, after hours of dialing, we discovered the international phone lines to Bosnia were dead. People in the city were cut off from the rest of the world. We lost communication with our families for months to come. Sarajevo was under total siege.

From then on, we had no way of knowing if our relatives were alive or dead. Every morning we read the papers praying we would not recognize any names. Every evening we watched the news fearful we might again see somebody we knew. Even when we did not, there was no relief. At the rate of one bomb per several minutes, coupled with the persistence of countless snipers, how could we sleep knowing that any second, our parents, relatives, or friends could be gone—even sitting in their own homes? We now understood there was no place to hide in Sarajevo. Your bedroom could be your death chamber. Your backyard could be your last resting place.

Often, I would wake in the middle of the night, sweating, thinking maybe Mom and Dad had been dead for weeks and I did not know. *Where were*

*they buried; who was there? What if they were badly wounded and had become invalids? Who had helped them? What had happened to my brother, Zoran? Was he alive any longer? Did I have anybody?*

I relived each day's events from the news in my dreams, with my family and friends in them. I noticed I was using the word "God" more than ever before.

When I look back at that time, it seems like a big blur in my mind, a mass of feelings and emotions, tumbling over one another. This was the only time in my life when I did not know the exact dates of events and could not put them in order. Days and nights in turmoil, mingling with each other, all fought for a place in my memory, but nothing stood out. Nothing except the same ominous theme in the background of my mind, the same old forte phrase ripping through my ears, warning of more to come. I felt lost in translation, floating somewhere between Bosnia and America, waiting for something significant to happen and not really belonging anywhere. My heart was in Sarajevo, but my realistic mind was here. These two worlds never seemed to touch each other, and for me, it was impossible to think of America as home. Yet, it was the only home I had.

The first letter came from London, carried out from Sarajevo by a British journalist. On the other side of the envelope, only three words were written: *Chile, Sarajevo, 1992*. I stared at it in disbelief for a few seconds, then ripped the envelope apart, hands shaking. Chile was one of Djeno's best friends. He had been a journalist for a popular radio station before the war. He and Selma, his wife, had returned from a trip to the United States just before the siege began. They flew into Sarajevo on the last plane to land in the city.

Chile's letter read:

*Situation in Sarajevo is unbelievable. You need to thank God every single day that you are not here. Think of the worst possible scenario, and then double it, at least. It's total madness to live in an atmosphere where you are in constant fear for your life.*

*I am working for VIS NEWS/WTN pool. We have been shot at more than a dozen times already. I am lucky to still be in one piece. You don't hear a bomb that's coming directly toward you. Screw them. I have seen so much—if I make it alive, I'll be haunted by these images for years. I know it. But, this isn't a movie, man, it is REAL HORROR.*

*Remember Loza? He got killed doing the same job I do. Jordi, a Spanish photographer, was killed—a day before, he and I drank together. I have seen people cut in half in front of my eyes; I have heard news of many friends gone forever. I think of them for a moment, but there is no time for grief. The battle for survival keeps you going. This is one horrible nightmare that lasts twenty-four hours a day.*

*I am not afraid of instant death. It comes and you are gone. But I am scared of, God forbid, becoming an invalid or something like that. I don't know why I am even trying to explain all this here, 'cause you are not gonna get it anyway... Maybe one day, I can tell you all the stories. You'll probably have questions I won't have answers to, but the good thing is that you will NEVER know what it was like to be in Sarajevo in 1992. Thank God for that. Seriously, thank God.*

*I've cried two times since the war began—once when Loza was killed and second while reading Sanela's letter. Only then, I realized the depth of her simple words: "I have never in my life known how much my friends mean to me and how*

*much I miss you guys.” Sanela is now in Croatia, after a horrendous escape (one day you will hear the story). Krilla is still here—he joined the defenders’ forces, special unit. He is fighting at the first front lines and is somehow convinced that bullets can’t do anything to him. He has already been wounded and has a piece of shrapnel in his elbow. Thank God, it was not serious.*

*Every night when I go to bed, I hope to dream of the four of us sitting together, laughing. Oh well, what happens, happens. It’s all fate.*

*All our folks are still alive. Houses are not badly damaged; some, but not to worry. Except for Selma’s parents’ house—only the walls remain. They’ve lost everything and moved several times from place to place...But, no lives lost so far.*

*The only thing I can hang onto is the memories from the past—everything else is somehow taken away. Man, we have to get together again to play a round of cards. We just have to, or else my life will never have meaning again.*

*I dream of sending Selma to some other country, anywhere...don’t really care.*

*Gotta go back to my world of horror now. Hopefully, the sun will shine in this city again someday.*

*Sorry for a confused letter. Trust me when I say that I have never wanted to see anybody more than I want to see you guys now.*

Selma added:

*I remember you guys asking me if I could ever live in America. I remember my answer, too. Now I can tell you that I would rather live at the end of the world than here. Sarajevo will never be the same, even if this ends tomorrow. We were lucky to have lived here before, because people who didn’t will never know how beautiful life in this city was. Those days are gone forever. Take care, keep your fingers crossed for us, and we hope that we will see you one day again. If not, just know that you have been the best of friends.*

Then came the call.

“Djeno? It’s Chile.”

“Chile? You? Man, where are you? How are you? Are you all alive there?” Djeno yelled into the receiver and started walking fast around the room.

“Listen, I can’t talk much on this phone. This is a satellite phone...Yes, yes, everybody is still alive and okay. Listen, Amila and the kids are out, just wanted to tell you that. They should be in Croatia by now. Try calling her on this

number; not sure that it'll work though. Ask these people to call her; she is registered as a refugee. I've got to go now; I'll call you again if I have a chance."

He hung up as soon as Djeno wrote down the number.

Djeno was holding the phone in his hand, still trying to make sense of the words he had heard. His sister Amila and her two boys, seven-year-old Adi and three-year-old Dino, were apparently out of Sarajevo. Where was her husband, Jasko? Refugees? Where? Djeno dialed the number with trembling hands.

Everything Chile said was true.

About two weeks after the call came a letter from Amila:

*Dear Sanja and Djeno,*

*I am writing to you from Split, Croatia, where we arrived three days ago and are now officially called "Bosnian refugees." God, how hard it is even to say it. I can't stop crying... Trust me when I say I didn't want to leave Sarajevo and that I am here against my will. But, Mom, Dad, and Jasko all convinced me that it would be wise, to say the least, to leave while I still could. Because of the kids, of course. I am not sure how much, if anything, you know about the Children's Embassy in Sarajevo. To tell you briefly, it's an organization that tries to get as many women and small children out of the city as possible. The first couple of attempts to get us out failed for different reasons. Just when I thought that it was no longer possible (because they had about 1,500 children on their waiting list, plus they ran out of vehicles and out of gas), Jasko and three other men from our building found an abandoned, bullet-riddled van that looked as if it came straight from an Alan Ford cartoon. It didn't even have windows, just newspapers and some plastic instead. It had no gas. Jasko and the others somehow pulled out all the gas they had in their cars (can't use them anyway), and Adi, Dino, and I, along with three other women from our building and their six children, were put on a convoy to take us out. I was allowed to take only one bag of clothes for Adi and Dino and my purse with our documents. Now, you know that Split is only about a six-hour drive from Sarajevo—well, it took us two days and two nights to get there. We took side roads, even some dirt roads I didn't know existed. We stopped in little villages along the way. I don't even know their names.*

*During this trip, and especially when leaving Sarajevo, my eyes have opened up to what the situation really is—nothing and nobody can enter or exit the city without going through criminals' check points and controls. I don't even know how the people from the embassy got us through. Not too many convoys have made*

*it. Sarajevo is a huge prison. They want to destroy it, intentionally, systematically. They are shelling all parts of the city, especially residential areas. Hundreds and hundreds of bombs fall on people's homes every single day. I don't think there is a single piece of glass remaining on the windows in Titova Street.<sup>4</sup> It's beyond belief. Snipers are another story. You have no idea how dangerous they are. You cannot hide from them. They are everywhere around the city, aiming at people who try to cross intersections to get water, or food, or whatever. Tell me, how is this called a "civil" war? Because one side is civilians, with no guns, no power, no intentions to kill anybody—is that what makes it "civil"? I am sorry I am just pouring out my frustrations to you, but first, I don't have anybody else to talk to, and second, it's better to write than to scream.*

*When we first got here, they put us all into the gymnasium at a local school. I couldn't think of sleeping there. There were hundreds of women and kids in a huge hall. When I saw worms crawling out of Dino's mattress, I took the kids out and decided to stay in the van. Luckily, the weather was nice.*

*Split is overcrowded with Bosnian refugees. It's hard to find housing. Our group of twelve (four women with eight kids) was extremely lucky. We met a man who had a house in Solin, which he was planning to rent out. I guess he just felt too sorry for us and he is letting us use the house for free until we can find something more permanent. We still think we will not need anything, as we hope to go back to Sarajevo as soon as all this ends, and that can't be very long.*

*Solin is about ten miles from Split, and as refugees, we have free public transportation and are also entitled to some help from the local church group (in terms of food).*

*Believe me that I don't even know what is happening to me. A few months ago, I was going to work every morning defending my clients, the kids were in day-care, we went on a ski trip, bought a new painting, planned our next trip... What happened to me? Was that a dream or is this a dream? I have no idea how long we will stay here. I hope not more than about ten days or so...but, how will we go back? What is life going to be like? Will I still have a job?*

*Please write to me. In case you have an opportunity to call, you can call the neighbors here. I will give you their number, and they can call me to come and talk to you. They are nice people, and they want to help us. They will take messages for us from our husbands and families in Sarajevo, if we get any. We'll try to send notes through the Red Cross.*

*I just want to go home soon. I can't think of anything else right now.*

We read the letter over and over for days. It was in some strange way a turning point, a harsh reality check. Proof of a new life emerging in front of us. One we had to face with our minds cleared from the past, as though it never existed. We were no longer a honeymooning couple. Period. We were two people stranded in a foreign country. Fact of life. The war was raging in our homeland.

As I tossed and turned these thoughts in my mind, I slowly began accepting them as truths. I gathered my scattered, disturbed emotions like little pieces of broken glass and glued them together into a compact mosaic—a mind-set of logic and reason. Part of me that had been stubbornly clinging to the past, shouting from deep inside that nothing had changed, was now silent.

At times, I felt utterly powerless and desperate, but I fought hard to dismiss these feelings quickly, before they had a chance to get the better of me and drag my soul into misery. I told myself that if the people of Sarajevo had enough strength to go through this, I must have it, too. I should not complain—instead, I should consider myself extremely lucky. If Amila could cope as a refugee with two small children, was there any reason why I should not be able to cope with my life here? Despite everything, it was still my life and I had to *live* it.