THE RIVER OF HUMANITY:
The Life and Work of
Sabiha Husic of Bosnia-Herzegovina

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JOAN B. KROC
SCHOOL OF PEACE STUDIES
Institute for Peace and Justice

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A NOTE TO THE READER

In the following pages, you will find narrative stories about a Woman PeaceMaker, along with additional information to provide a deep understanding of a contemporary conflict and one person's journey within it. These complementary components include a brief biography of the peacemaker, a historical summary of the conflict, a timeline integrating political developments in the country with personal history of the peacemaker, and a question-and-answer transcript of select interviews during her time at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice.

The document is not intended necessarily to be read straight through, from beginning to end. Instead, you can use the historical summary or timeline as mere references or guides as you read the narrative stories. You can move straight to the question-and-answer transcript if you want to read commentary in the peacemaker's own words. The goal of this format is to reach audiences through multiple channels, providing access to the peacemaker's work, vision, lives and impact in their communities.

ABOUT THE WOMEN PEACEMAKERS PROGRAM

The Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice's (IPJ) Women PeaceMakers Program annually hosts four women from around the world who have been involved in human rights and peacemaking efforts in their countries.

Women on the frontline of efforts to end violence and secure a just peace seldom record their experiences, activities and insights — as generally there is no time or, perhaps, they do not have formal education that would help them record their stories. The Women PeaceMakers Program is a selective program for leaders who want to document, share and build upon their unique peacemaking stories.

Women PeaceMakers are paired with a Peace Writer to document in written form their story of living in conflict and building peace in their communities and nations. While in residence at the institute, Women PeaceMakers give presentations on their work and the situation in their home countries to the university and San Diego communities.

The IPJ believes that women's stories go beyond headlines to capture the nuance of complex situations and expose the realities of gender-based violence, thus providing an understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation. The narrative stories of Women PeaceMakers not only provide this understanding, but also show the myriad ways women construct peace in the midst of and after violence and war. For the realization of peace with justice, the voices of women — those severely affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from the devastation — must be recorded, disseminated and spotlighted.[1]

BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER — Sabiha Husic

Sabiha Husic, a psychotherapist, Islamic theologian and interreligious peacebuilder, is the director of the nongovernmental organization Medica Zenica in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Medica provides psychosocial and medical support to women and children victims of war and post-war violence, including rape and sexual violence, domestic violence, torture and human trafficking.

Husic first learned of the organization while displaced from her hometown of Vitez to the city of Zenica, where she and her family had walked over 13 nights in 1993 during the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Medica was working in the refugee camps, and Husic recalls that "the approach toward women which I saw there gave me the reason to live, and my willingness to help other people was even bigger." She became a volunteer, working directly with women survivors in areas where rape was used as a deliberate tactic in the war — oftentimes at great personal risk. Husic eventually became a staff member and then director of Medica in 2007. In 2010 she established the first institutionalized network of psychological support for victims and witnesses testifying in war crimes cases.

Before the conflict, Bosnians, Serbs and Croats were "very good neighbors, friends, and celebrated religious holidays together. The war divided them overnight." In this post-war climate, Husic urges reconciliation, bringing together women from all communities for workshops on stress and trauma, dialogue and conflict resolution. Along with two women from Switzerland, she leads the European Project for Interreligious Learning, which gathers Christian and Muslim women from five countries to promote understanding and tolerance. In Bosnia, this includes Serbian Orthodox Christians, Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosnians.

In 2009 Husic was recognized by Volonteurope with the Active Citizen of Europe Award for voluntary activism and professional work with Medica Zenica, and was a featured speaker at the 2013 World Justice Forum — recognition that affirms her life's motto: "I believe that small steps bring significant changes, no matter how small they seem to others."

CONFLICT HISTORY—
Bosnia-Herzegovina

The complex history of Bosnia and Herzegovina is inextricable from the geographic, political and cultural pluralism of the Balkan Peninsula. Situated in southeastern Europe, the settlement of the South Slavs in the 6th century made the region what it is today: a synthesis of cultures and traditions. The subsequent federations of Yugoslavia, the "Land of the South Slavs," have always been a bridge between West and East. Interdependence and inter-religious marriages were common, but foreign rule and nationhood over the centuries have divided and complicated the region's peaceful, heterogeneous existence.

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina began in 1992 and was marked by various phases, alliance shifts, and blurred lines between victims, observers and perpetrators. Widely considered the most devastating conflict in Europe since World War II, the international community's delayed response was itself historic. The Bosnian war reinforced the moral imperative to intervene and protect innocent civilians. Due to the rampant use of sexual and gender-based violence, it was also the first time in judicial history that systematic rape was declared a crime against humanity, second to genocide. Because of the varied accounts of the conflict's dynamics and actors, as well as the misuse of history to incite animosity and violence by political leaders of the time, a brief overview of the region's history is necessary to truly understand the Bosnian war.

History of the Balkans

The Balkan Peninsula, or simply the Balkans, covers the strategic territories between the Adriatic and the Black Sea from Hungary to Greece. Although there are different interpretations of how to define the region, whether in geographic, cultural or historical terms, it is largely regarded as containing Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia, Albania, Bulgaria, Romania and Moldova.

According to archaeological evidence, the Balkans was populated before the Neolithic Period, about 10,000 years ago.[2] The region saw numerous inhabitants and invaders but the first settlers were the South Slavs in the 6th century, descendants of the same ancestors who spoke a common language. Religious influences and regional developments separated the South Slavs into five main groups: Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, Macedonians and Bulgarians. The Austrian Hapsburg Empire brought Roman Catholicism to the western part of the region. The Byzantine Empire introduced Eastern Orthodox Christianity to the east. And the Ottoman Empire brought Islam to the south.[3] Catholic South Slavs were then called Croats, Orthodox South Slavs Serbs, and Muslim South Slavs Bosniaks. The Balkan Peninsula is also home to several non-Slavic groups, including Hungarians in the north and Albanians in the southern area of Kosovo. Although the South Slavs separated themselves, these different groups were culturally, linguistically and geographically integrated. Ethnic mixing and Slav unification warded off foreign powers.

The Federations of Yugoslavia

This South Slav unity paved the way for the formation of a single state. The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was formed in 1918 after the Balkan Wars ended Ottoman rule and Austria-Hungary was defeated in World War I.[4] This highly centralized and multinational state consisted of the former kingdoms of Serbia and Montenegro, Macedonia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Slovenia, as well as Hungarian land north of the Danube River. In 1929, the Kingdom's name was changed to Yugoslavia or "The Land of the South Slavs." The creation of Yugoslavia fulfilled the dreams of many South Slavic intellectuals who disregarded fundamental differences among the new country's 12 million people. But questions of centralization versus federalism plagued the new state, and the influence of Italian Fascism at the onset of World War II divided the Serbs and Croats, with Bosniaks caught in the middle.[5] The first Yugoslavia was brought to an end by the Axis Powers' invasion.

On April 6, 1941, German troops invaded Yugoslavia; Germany, Italy, Hungary and Bulgaria divided the conquered territory. It was the first instance of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, with more than 1 million people killed throughout Yugoslavia due to fighting among Ustashas (the fascist-influenced Croatian regime), Chetniks (the royalist Serb supporters), and Partisans (the communist resisters).[6] Many Croat nationalists sided with the Nazis during World War II, hoping that it would help them win independence from Serbia; the Ustashas conducted an extermination campaign, murdering Serbs, Jews and Roma living in Croatia.

Soviet forces under Josip Broz Tito led the communist Partisans to victory in 1944. The second Yugoslav federation, or the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, was established in 1945 under Tito. It was made up of six republics, each with its own parliament and president: Croatia (mostly Catholic Croats), Slovenia (mostly Catholic Slovenes), Serbia (mostly Orthodox Christian Serbs), Bosnia-Herzegovina (mostly Bosniak Muslims, but with very large Croat and Serb populations), Montenegro (mostly Serb-like Montenegrins), Macedonia (25 percent Albanians and 75 percent Macedonians), and two autonomous regions (Vojvodina and Kosovo).[7] An embodiment of Yugoslavia's diversity, with a Slovene mother and Croat father, Tito was well known for striking a delicate balance not only in Yugoslavia's internal politics but also between East and West.

Tito's highly centralized rule proclaimed an ideology of "brotherhood and unity," but his death in 1980 paved the way for the union's ruin and eventual downfall. With the economy's decline, the rotating power-sharing of the republics fell prey to nationalist politicians. Slobodan Milosevic, for instance, was a Belgrade politician who used official Serb media to stir up nationalistic sentiment and division.

Other republics, especially Slovenia, tried to avoid warfare by suggesting a plan for a loosely united Yugoslavia, based on the Swiss model of independent yet confederated cantons. But other republics that wanted complete autonomy, like Croatia under Franjo Tudjman, refused. Over the next decade, Yugoslavia broke apart, with much bloodshed.

Slovenia held free elections in 1991 with the intention of separating from Yugoslavia. Fighting broke out between resident Slovenians and the Yugoslav National Army (JNA), a composition of soldiers from all of the republics. Hundreds of civilians were killed, but the fighting was brief because of

Slovenia's homogenous composition. Public demonstrations led by mothers of soldiers spread throughout Belgrade, Sarajevo and Ljubljana, urging their sons to be discharged.[8] On June 25, 1991, Slovenia closed its borders and declared independence from Yugoslavia.

Croatia's plea for autonomy under Tudjman came soon after. Due to Croatia's sizable heterogeneity and Serb minority, the JNA refused to let it go and a 7-month war broke out.[9] Armed clashes spread throughout Serb enclaves in Croatia and the Serb army overtook about one-third of Croatian territory.[10] The Serbs began a campaign of ethnic cleansing, systematically removing Croats from their territory and killing over 10,000 people. By early 1992, both Croatia and the Republic of Serbian Krajina had established their borders, and a tense ceasefire fell over the region.[11]

Two factors influenced Bosnia-Herzegovina's vulnerability during this time. The first was its ethnic heterogeneity (43 percent Bosniak Muslim, 35 percent Orthodox Serb and 18 percent Catholic Croat), and the second was its geographic position between Serbia and Croatia and their nationalist territorial aspirations. Partitioning Bosnia-Herzegovina between Croatia and Serbia had been discussed during talks between Tudjman and Milosevic earlier in the year.[12] In 1992, the seven-member presidency of Bosnia decided to hold a referendum on independence from February 29 to March 1. The referendum was boycotted by many Bosnian Serbs, but of the nearly two-thirds of the electorate that voted, almost all voted for independence, which President Alija Izetbegovic officially proclaimed on March 3, 1992.[13]

Bosniak Identity

After the two world wars, Slavic Muslims found themselves torn between Serbian and Croatian national ideologies.[14] Muslim Slavs lived in every Yugoslav republic and province, but by far the largest concentration was in Bosnia-Herzegovina (39.5 percent of the population). Bosnian Muslims were therefore compelled to safeguard their identity and socioeconomic status. Identity in Yugoslavia had contradictory meanings. *Nacija* (nation) and *vjera* (religion) were often used synonymously, making it challenging for Bosnian Muslims to have a distinct ethno-religious identity. This concept among the three main ethnic groups living in Bosnia and Herzegovina is considered a legacy of the Ottoman millet system, an administrative structure dividing Bosnian people on the basis of religion rather than common language, a clearly defined territory or a common origin.[15]

In 1968, under Tito's rule, Bosnian-Muslims were declared a distinct nation, and in 1971 Muslims were given the opportunity to express their identity as Muslims with a capital 'M,' signifying the inclusion of nation and religion. The category of Muslim was intended to distinguish Bosnian Muslims from Bosnian Croats or Bosnian Serbs, but also to distinguish them from other Muslim communities within and outside of Yugoslavia.[16]

In September 1990, secular Bosnian Muslim intellectuals proposed replacing the rather ambiguous national name Muslim with *Bosnjak*, or Bosniak, primarily intended to represent ethnic Muslims. The term Bosnjak was first mentioned in documents from the 12th century to refer to all inhabitants of the Bosnian province, and sometimes only to Bosnian Muslims. On September 27, 1993, the national name Bosniak was adopted by the first Bosniak Convention with the aim "to give back to our nation its historical and national name Bosniaks in order to bind us tightly to our land Bosnia and its traditional statehood, to our Bosnian language and to the entire spiritual tradition of our

history."[17] The national name "Bosniak"[18] was then introduced in the constitution of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1994 as a clear counterpart to the national name "Croat," officially making it a national name for Bosnian Muslims only. It was a significant development because it both protected Bosnian Muslims' distinct ethno-religious identity and respected them as a historical entity with territorial claims.

War in Bosnia-Herzegovina

On April 6, 1992, Bosnia-Herzegovina was recognized as an independent state by both the European Community and the United States. Serb paramilitary forces reacted by firing on innocent civilians in the city of Sarajevo and bombing surrounding towns.[19] With the siege of Sarajevo, the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina had begun. Subsequently many of the towns in eastern Bosnia-Herzegovina with large Bosniak populations were attacked by a combination of paramilitary forces and Yugoslav army units. The local Bosniak population was expelled from these areas through a process of ethnic cleansing, which included the destruction of cultural and religious sites. Bosnian Muslims were especially vulnerable and defenseless because they didn't have a parent protector in the region like the Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats had. Within six weeks a coordinated offensive by the Yugoslav army, paramilitary groups from Serbia and local Bosnian Serb forces brought roughly two-thirds of Bosnian territory under Serb control.[20]

In the summer of 1992, reporters broke the first stories about rape and concentration camps, where Muslim women and girls were repeatedly sexually violated.[21] News of these atrocities spread around the world. The same strategies that were used by the Nazis during the Holocaust were being applied in Bosnia to establish fear and create enemies: dividing the men from the women, killing the men first, genocide by attrition, ethnic cleansing, forced labor, and sexually abusing women in rape and concentration camps.

Because of historical interactions and intermarriages, as well as the previous era of brotherhood and unity, many Bosnians were slow to believe the gravity of the war. Because of society's intermingled nature, the line between victim and perpetrator was blurred. Although Bosniaks were the primary victims and Serbs the primary perpetrators, Croats were also among the victims and largely became perpetrators.

One of the largest massacres of the early part of the war took place at a gymnasium in the village of Bratunac in April 1992: an estimated 350 Bosnian Muslim men were tortured and massacred by Serb paramilitaries and special police.[22] Bosniaks believed that the international or European community would intervene when entire towns were massacred and annihilated. In July of 1995, the Bosnian silver-mining town of Srebrenica suffered one of the most notorious acts of genocide, while the international community and UN peacekeepers looked on. When General Ratko Mladic and his forces entered Srebrenica to take over the territory, buses arrived to deport 23,000 women and children, while Serb forces began separating out men between the ages of 12 and 77 to be executed. In the five days that Bosnian Serb forces overran Srebrenica, more than 8,000 people were killed and thousands of women and children were subjected to systemized rape and torture.

Several peace proposals during the war failed, largely because the Bosnian Serbs — who controlled about 70 percent of the land by 1994 — refused to concede any territory.[23] The Washington Agreement, between the warring Croats from Bosnia-Herzegovina and the formal representatives of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, was signed in Washington and Vienna on March 18, 1994. The peace agreement established a constitutional framework for Bosnia and Herzegovina, ending the Croatian-Bosniak conflict and forming the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was signed almost two years before the Dayton Peace Accord, an agreement between the presidents of Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia that officially ended the war in December 1995 and divided Bosnia and Herzegovina into two entities — the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska — and one district, Brcko.

Shifting Alliances

The armed conflict took a drastic turn on October 23, 1992 when the Croatian Defense Council (HVO) started attacking central and western Bosnia. Fighting broke out between the Army of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the HVO forces. Intending to conquer parts of Bosnia to join with Croatia, the HVO forces occupied areas where majority Bosniaks lived and systematically pillaged and raped the population. Towns and villages where Croat and Bosniak neighbors previously lived peacefully together were being ethnically cleansed of Bosniaks.

Most of the raided towns held strategic positions joining roads to central Bosnia. Shelling by the Croat forces reduced much of the historical town of Gornji Vakuf to rubble, and from there the HVO went on to attack other central Bosnian towns, some of the worst violence occurring in Vitez and its surrounding areas, including the villages of Kruscica, Donja Veceriska, Gacice and Ahmici.

The massacre of Vitez and its surrounding villages began early on the morning of April 16, 1993. HVO soldiers appeared in camouflaged uniforms with full artillery equipment, arresting, expelling and killing Bosniaks in their houses. Homes were attacked with grenades and burned. In Vitez municipality, 172 Bosniaks were killed, 5,000 forcibly displaced, and 1,200 imprisoned in concentration camps. There were also 420 buildings demolished, including three mosques and two schools.[24]

The most horrific massacre of that day took place in the village of Ahmici, which consisted of only civilians and no military units. Croats placed the Croatian flag on the windows of Bosniak houses to establish their territory. All roads were blocked, trapping Bosniaks. HVO forces killed 116 civilians, including 32 women and 11 children under the age of 18. Two hundred Bosniak houses were burned, and all religious buildings were destroyed.

Rape as a Weapon of War

Rape has been used as a weapon of war to terrorize, punish and degrade populations for centuries. During the war, from 1992 to 1995, sexual abuse and rape were used to degrade women and girls of a specific ethno-religious group, and by extension attack the men of the households, the family, and the wider community. Since ethnicity in Bosnia is usually derived from the father's side, Bosnian Serbs deliberately set out to impregnate Muslim women to "dilute" the Bosniak identity.[25] Soldiers

and policemen used sexual abuse to demonstrate superiority and victory. Estimates of the number of survivors of wartime rape and sexual abuse are close to 50,000.

While the conflict left great trauma in its wake, the Bosnian war did lead to a revolutionary step toward codifying laws against sexual and gender-based violence during war. For the first time in history, rape was included as a crime against humanity in the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. Previously, wartime rape had been defined as a crime but was never prosecuted. In July 1996, as part of their charges of genocide, prosecutors pursued allegations that rape was a weapon of war, with tribunal investigations testifying that the rape of Bosnian Muslim women was part of the Serb strategy of ethnic cleansing.[26]

Despite advances in awareness of their rights, survivors rarely speak up about their painful experiences. Many women in Bosnian society feel a sense of shame, guilt and stigmatization from their families and communities. They live with fear even after they've spoken about their experience with their husbands and other family members. Some women decide to speak up to help themselves, but also to encourage other women to talk about their experiences. Activists and NGOs like Medica Zenica have supported survivors and raised awareness among citizens, increasing the respect and concern for survivors of rape and sexual abuse.

INTEGRATED TIMELINE

Political Developments in Bosnia-Herzegovina and
Personal History of Sabiha Husic

1914 World War I is sparked when a Bosnian Serb student assassinates Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo.

1918 Bosnia-Herzegovina becomes part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes at the end of World War I.

1929 The kingdom's name is changed to Yugoslavia or "Land of the South Slavs."

1941 Germany and Italy invade Yugoslavia. The Independent State of Croatia, a Nazi puppet state that includes Bosnia-Herzegovina, is established by Croat Ustashas (a fascist movement) as both a communist Partisan resistance, led by Josip Broz Tito, and a Serbian royalist movement are formed.

Sabiha's father, Omer, is born in Donja Veceriska, Vitez, where his entire family resides.

1944-5 Tito's Partisan army and Soviet troops liberate Yugoslavia and establish the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia.

1946 The loose union is divided into six republics (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia) and two autonomous entities.

1949 **Sabiha's mother, Hanifa, is born in Brajkovici, near Travnik.**

1963 Yugoslavia is renamed the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

1967 **Mujo, Sabiha's older brother, is born in Donja Veceriska, in Vitez.**

1969 **Habiba, Sabiha's older sister, is born in Donja Veceriska.**

1971 **July 1 — Sabiha is born in Donja Veceriska.**

1974 Muslims are recognized as a nationality with the new confederate form of government.

Omer (Dilbur), Sabiha's younger brother, is born in Donja Veceriska.

1978 **Sabiha begins her elementary school education in Vitez.**

1980 The delicate union of Yugoslavia begins to unravel with the death of Tito.

1986 **Sabiha begins secondary school at Gazi Husrevbegova Medresa in Sarajevo.**

1990 **Sabiha enrolls in university at the Faculty of Islamic Study in Sarajevo.**

1991 Slovenia and Croatia declare independence from Yugoslavia.

1992 January — Macedonia declares independence.

February-March — A referendum on independence is held in Bosnia, with the majority of Bosniaks and Croats in favor and Serbs boycotting.

March — For the month of Ramadan, Sabiha goes to Montenegro for practical work related to her studies.

April — Serb paramilitaries massacre Bosniaks in eastern Bosnian towns as the U.S. and Europe recognize Bosnia's independence. Bosnian Serbs begin their siege of Sarajevo on April 6. Serbia and Montenegro form the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, with Slobodan Milosevic as its leader. The Assembly of the Serbian Nation of Bosnia-Herzegovina proclaims an independent Bosnian Serb Republic, named Republika Srpska. Ethnic cleansing campaigns occur in eastern, northern and northwestern Bosnia.

September-October — With the war ongoing, Sabiha travels a long, circuitous route from Montenegro to her hometown of Vitez to reach her family.

1993 April 16 — The Croatian Defense Council (HVO) attacks central Bosnia-Herzegovina.

For the first time in Sabiha's family's history, they are forced to leave their home village of Vitez. They find shelter in Zenica, where Sabiha begins meeting with refugees and working with the Islamic community and Medica Zenica, one of the first NGOs in Bosnia to work with women survivors of sexual and gender-based violence and war trauma.

1995 July — The worst massacre of the war takes place in Srebrenica, where 8,000 Bosniaks, mostly men and boys, are slaughtered and 23,000 women are displaced and/or sexually abused by units of the Army of Republika Srpska under the command of Serb General Ratko Mladic.

September — Sabiha travels through the "Tunnel of Hope" into Sarajevo to visit friends and her university.

November — The Dayton Peace Accord is signed, which divides Bosnia-Herzegovina into three partitioned entities to end the war

1996 **Sabiha and her family visit their home in Vitez for the first time since the war and learn that Croats are occupying it.**

1998 **After five years of displacement, Sabiha's family returns to Vitez.**

2001 **Sabiha stops working for the Islamic community in Zenica to devote herself full time to Medica Zenica.**

2003 **Sabiha marries Aladin Husic.**

2006 Slobodan Milosevic, president of the former Yugoslavia during the war, dies in prison while awaiting trial in the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

Sabiha and Medica Zenica, along with 23 other NGOs, coordinate the Campaign for Dignity of Survivors and collect more than 50,000 signatures to amend the Law on Social Protection in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina to include survivors of war trauma and sexual violence as beneficiaries.

Sabiha's daughter, Nedzma, is born in Zenica.

2007 **Sabiha becomes the director of Medica Zenica.**

2010 **Sabiha's son, Afan, is born in Zenica.**

2011 Ratko Mladic, former Bosnian Serb military general wanted for war crimes in connection with the Srebrenica genocide, is arrested by Serb authorities.

Sabiha and Medica Zenica organize the first institutional Network for Victims and Witnesses, established to monitor the individual needs of women survivors of rape and other forms of sexual violence. After much lobbying, the Law on Social Protection Against Domestic Violence is adopted in the country.

2012 Mladic's war crimes trial begins at The Hague.

2013 **August — Sabiha travels to the United States to participate in the Women PeaceMakers Program at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice.**

NARRATIVE STORIES OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF SABIHA HUSIC

Rising Star

Charts of children's anatomy adorned the walls of the doctor's office, where Sabiha and her daughter sat patiently filling out the paperwork for Nedzma's health examination. They may have appeared relaxed, waiting to see the doctor, but they shared a tingling excitement. Nedzma would begin elementary school next week. Everything was prepared — her first day of school outfit, her school bag and notebooks — and Sabiha was eager to send her off into the world.

But while she was confident in the values she'd passed down to her daughter, and even hopeful that things were changing in her country, Sabiha worried she wouldn't be able to protect Nedzma from the ills that still plagued their society.

"Mama," Nedzma looked up with her big curious eyes, "did you have to go to the doctor before attending school?"

"Yes, my star, every child gets a physical exam to make sure they're healthy for school," Sabiha smiled.

"Did you read the same books? What games did you play?" Nedzma asked, suddenly brimming with questions.

Sabiha laughed, admiring her daughter and remembering the endless questions she'd asked her own mother when she was Nedzma's age.

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Sabiha never waited for the mountains to emerge from night's darkness. Every morning she would wake with the sunrise, as the ginger and rose hues played on the horizon, wrestling the dark purple mountain ranges from their slumber. She would sprint to her parents' room and her mother would smile sleepily, "I named you correctly, Sabiha. My beautiful early riser."

As her mother prepared breakfast, Sabiha would shower her with questions: "Where did you go to school, Mama? Did girls and boys learn the same things? What does God say about girls and boys? Are we the same?"

Turning from the stove to her bright-eyed young daughter, Hanifa would try to satisfy Sabiha's endless curiosity. "When I was your age, my Sabiha, I loved learning and was a very good student like you. But my mother didn't allow me to finish school. My brothers were encouraged to continue, but my sister and I had to stop after elementary school."

"Why couldn't you continue, Mama?"

"Girls were supposed to do housework, find a husband, fulfill our roles as women. My mother could see my love for school but was afraid she would lose control over me. But I don't want that for you, my Biha, or your sister." It was a serious subject, especially before breakfast, but Hanifa wanted her daughter to know she was free to study and learn as much as she desired. She had vowed that when she had her own children, whether sons or daughters, she would give them equal opportunities.

Her mother's words stuck to Sabiha like syrupy *pekmez,*[27] motivation to continue studying as much as — and even more than — her two brothers. But she didn't see it as competition. Though she was just a child, something elemental inside her wanted to reform the past. Other Muslim families were not like hers and Sabiha wondered: *Why are boys favored over girls? Why do we have different roles?* She didn't understand how her religion, a faith that preached equality, could divide men and women.

So Sabiha asked her mother to enroll her in *maktab*, where she went twice a week after school, to learn more about her religion. When she reached the end of primary school, she made another unusual decision for a girl of her age. She chose to go to an Islamic secondary school, the only one in Yugoslavia, Sarajevo's Gazi Husrevbegova Medresa.

Her parents were strong believers, but they knew the limitations Sabiha would face in a communist country if she narrowed her education to religious studies. "Why don't you study something else, Sabiha?" they would ask. "There are plenty more fields of study."

"I want to answer my questions about our religion," she replied, her hazel eyes deep with resolve. "I want to interpret it for myself."

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As she finished answering the questions in Nedzma's doctor's forms, Sabiha thought about her own questions, how her decision to study Allah's words of truth and equality had helped her answer them — and to teach other women about their rights and position in society.

"Oh, Mama!" Nedzma's sudden exclamation interrupted Sabiha's thoughts. "What shall we do? Look at this, you only wrote on these papers the name of my father. Where is the name of my mother?"

Sabiha was astonished, these words coming from a mouth full of the gaps of fallen baby teeth. "When the doctor comes in you can ask him about it, OK my star?"

Nedzma nodded and sat on the edge of her chair, eager to share her disapproval.

A jolly, grey-haired doctor entered the room. "So, little one, what is your name?"

"My name is Nedzma."

As the doctor scribbled notes on his clipboard, Nedzma tugged on her mother's blouse. "Mama," she whispered, "when will I ask about it?"

"What is it, Nedzma?" the doctor asked warmly, easily overhearing her excited whisper. "You can ask me anything."

"Why do you only have the name of the father here? Where will I put my mother's name?"

The doctor raised an eyebrow. "You are right, Nedzma!" he exclaimed. "In all these years, nobody has noticed that. I will tell my staff to change it immediately!"

Even if her young mind didn't fully comprehend what it meant to recognize only the father's name, she'd seen what others had grown blind to. Like her mother, Nedzma was already questioning the way things were, her curiosity rising like the sun at dawn, illuminating the darkness. Sabiha pulled her 6-year-old star up onto her lap, planting kisses on her soft face.

The Journey of a Lifetime

The Praksa

The two young women strolled arm-in-arm through the familiar hilly streets of Sarajevo, a cheery bounce in their steps as they meandered down the narrow stone paths, remnants of the Ottomans.

"We're almost done with our second year, and Ramadan[28] is near!" Almasa, Sabiha's best friend from university, squealed. Then she paused and turned to look at Sabiha. "Are you going on the *praksa* to Pljevlja this year?"

"Maybe," Sabiha grinned, her eyes sparkling at the idea of spending the month of Ramadan in a different part of Yugoslavia. The practicum would be more than a chance to gain practical work experience; she could finally fulfill her dream of teaching girls and women. After secondary school, Sabiha had been granted the title of *Mollima,* meaning she had achieved both the knowledge and the authority to teach the holy words of the Quran.

"Oh, but that means I'm not going to see you for an entire month," Almasa murmured. They had grown accustomed to spending every waking moment together — studying, cooking, going to concerts, exploring Sarajevo's streets.

"Don't worry, Masa. Before you know it we'll be sitting in Morica Han drinking coffee together!" It was their favorite café, in Bas Carsija, Sarajevo's old downtown. Sabiha hugged her friend, as if to seal the promise. The familiar scent of spring lilies danced on the breeze.

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Sabiha had been on the bus to Montenegro for three hours, along with her two classmates Jakub and Mirnes, when the slowly passing scenery came to an abrupt halt. The Dinaric Alps stood completely still through her square of window.

A towering soldier stomped onto the bus. When he got close enough, Sabiha could make out the gold outline of the scorpion patch on his uniform. She glanced out the window again, and this time a sea of tanks, rifles and military personnel had replaced the serene backdrop of the mountain range.

"Maybe we made the wrong decision to travel," Jakub whispered nervously. "We should have taken our professor's warnings more seriously." Their professor had spoken of President Slobodon Milosevic's political rampages, his desire for more Serbian land, but Sabiha had not been worried. And she wasn't worried now.

"This is just a standard military exercise," Sabiha told her friend. "There will be no war. It's not possible. We are not like Slovenia or Croatia — we live in diversity and peace."

A few hours later, they arrived in the quaint Montenegrin town of Pljevlja, decorated by shops and blossoming parks, the grand mosque sitting next to a lovely church. As Sabiha entered the Islamic Community Center with her classmates, the encounter with the paramilitary forces faded. This wasn't the time to think about the plunders and plans of soldiers and politicians. It was the first day of Ramadan, a time for worship and contemplation, for family and community.

Sabiha blinked twice, recognizing the good-looking young man from Gazi Husrevbegova Medresa. Could it really be him? She tried to conceal her surprise when their eyes met. And as he stood from his office chair, she remembered his charming, relaxed smile. "I didn't know you were coming here," Aladin said. "How are you?"

They were equals now; his eight years on her no longer mattered. Sabiha spent the coming days with Aladin and her two classmates, praying with the community, giving thanks and reveling in the spring warmth. Butterflies fluttered through garden shades of emerald, rose and violet — the budding season after winter's harsh snow. They would wake for *Fajr* prayer, right before dawn seeped into the homes of the Muslim, Catholic and Orthodox townspeople. At noon they would again go for prayer before tending to their daily tasks: organizing lectures, presenting Quran workshops for men, women and children, practicing charity. By late afternoon, they would wrap up the day's lessons and prepare to break the fast together. The days were so delightful that Sabiha never thought of her hunger pangs.

And every night, the four of them gathered at different family homes for *Iftar*, to break their fast with Pljevlja's multicultural community. As they shared the country's delicacies — the stuffed cabbage *sarma*, the c*evapcici* sausage, stuffed pepper *paprike*, the delicious *pita-burek* pastries, and always coffee — they would talk and laugh for hours, Sabiha tucking herself comfortably into the camaraderie.

As night edged deeper into darkness, the townsfolk would trickle away, but the four friends stayed up late, preparing the next day's lessons and waiting for *Suhur,* the pre-dawn meal. Day and night became nearly indistinguishable, their differences blurred just like the people of Pljevlja, still uncolored by the nationalistic hues of political leaders trying to incite mistrust between neighbors.

Phase One

It was the second day of *Eid*. Sabiha had completed a month's worth of assiduous fasting and praying with the friends she had grown to love as her own kin. She had packed all of her things and was about to bid a bittersweet farewell to her Pljevlja host family.

As Sabiha kissed the three children — half-Bosniak, half-Serb — Butko and Sanja called to her from the family room. The urgency in their voices alarmed her, and she found them frozen in front of the television set. Her gaze shifted to the screen, where she saw a blockade of tanks and artillery surrounding Sarajevo, mortar bombs and rocket launchers at the ready. Thirteen thousand Bosnian Serb paramilitary forces encircled her city, snipers positioned on every corner, replacing the artists and intellectuals who usually inhabited them.

"We've just started," a stark senior Serb army official announced. "This is only Phase One." Sabiha's mind couldn't hold on to everything she was seeing and hearing, only snippets. *What is a siege?* she wondered, the questions piling up in her mind. *Why are they blocking all access to Sarajevo? Does this mean war has started? Does this mean we are all stuck now? That I am stuck?*

Sabiha tried to push the possibility of war away, but the dogmatic rants of politicians, their manipulations of history and thirst for nationhood over the past few months flooded her thoughts. She tried to block the horror, hatred and fear they were trying to inject into the peaceful, integrated citizens of her country. As she watched the soldiers teeming on the TV screen, she thought back to the encounter with the soldiers on the bus. Bits and pieces of debates with her classmates echoed in her head. And then, following the path worn by Slovenia and Croatia, there was the recent referendum for Bosnian independence.

Deep in her heart, Sabiha still refused to believe that her country could ever devolve into a war of citizen against citizen. Watching Butko, a Bosnian Muslim, embrace his Serbian-Bosniak wife, such a war was inconceivable. *We all speak the same language,* Sabiha thought. *We celebrate our birthdays and holidays together, spend hours in each other's homes drinking coffee.* Sabiha had broken fast with Butko and Sanja's Serb and Croat neighbors all throughout Ramadan — neighbors she knew would knock at the door if they didn't see one another for a few days, just to make sure everything was OK.

Sabiha glanced at her packed bags waiting by the door. It would all blow over quickly, she told herself. She would go home as planned. Home — she needed to call. The line was busy, but she kept at it until there was a tolerable connection.

"Babo? Hello, *kako si?*[29] What is happening?" Though Sabiha kept telling herself all would be well, a sob escaped her at the sound of her parents breathing over the poor connection. More than 200 kilometers separated her from her family, and just about halfway between them, on the invisible straight line drawn between Pljevlja and Vitez, was Sarajevo.

"Don't worry, my Biha, everything is OK here," her mother said. "War has started, but it will be finished very soon. The worst of it is in Sarajevo and eastern Bosnia. Just wait there. You are safe there."

"OK," Sabiha said, calming herself, "but when do you …" She was cut off by a loud beep, followed by cold silence. Her heart turned to ice. Frantically, she dialed again. Nothing. When would she hear her parents' voices again? As if to answer her question, the television flickered off too.

While her heart felt frozen in her chest, it wasn't numb. It ached with fear and sorrow as she thought of her friends, classmates and professors back in Sarajevo. At times the images of her beloved second home ambushed, scorched and sucked dry of food, water and medicine made it hard to breathe.

The listless, lingering days were nearly unbearable, but anything was better than going to sleep. She frequently woke to nightmares of Almasa screaming. She dreaded shutting her eyes and imagining her own fate if she hadn't come to Pljevlja. But her gratitude for God's providence was

quickly dampened by her overwhelming fear for those caught in the fighting. *What about Almasa and all my friends? What about the thousands stuck in Sarajevo?*

Most days she was awake when the sun crested the horizon, splitting open night's darkness and temporarily dispelling her nightmares. Even in the midst of chaos, heaven and earth followed their usual affairs. Dawn still arrived. Sabiha continued to be her mother's early riser.

They can take away our security, our lifeline, our dignity, but they can't take away the sun. Sabiha bowed down in prayer, reminded of the love of God, another day of hope.

Escape Plans

The first month wore on, then the second. By the third month, it was clear that Sabiha was stuck in Pljevlja. Butko and Sanja kept her safe, their adopted fourth daughter, and they all tried as best they could to disregard the "victories" broadcasted on Serb radio.

Two rivers now cut through Pljevlja: hordes of paramilitary forces passing through, with tanks and weaponry, and swarms of refugees from Bosnia seeking safer havens. The defense flowed one way, the defenseless another, and Sabiha understood that the war would not end any time soon.

One muggy night, a thunderous fist banged on the door. Police stormed the hallway, knocking down delicate brass-framed family pictures. Their dogged, calculated steps went straight for Butko, his religious background and wealth making him a prime target. Sabiha clung to the three children, trying to cover their eyes as Sanja lunged toward the police, crying and begging. But they easily pushed past the women and children, out the front door and into the night.

Sabiha stood helplessly next to Sanja, surrounded by the shattered portraits, now the only trace of Butko.

"You need to help me!" Sanja shouted into the telephone to her father, an army general in Belgrade, Serbia, even further away than Sabiha's own father. "I don't know what they have done with my husband. I don't know what to do." But nothing could be done — Butko was gone.

The days dragged on, one after another. The children would scramble to the door, calling out *Babo! Babo!* at any hint of noise outside. Desolate days accumulated into weeks of crippling uncertainty — until one summer night a man walked clumsily through the door he was once dragged out of.

His body was covered, head to toe, in black. Black bruises, black gashes, black dirt — all black but his eyes, swollen and scarlet. His wraithlike frame was unrecognizable. His family couldn't bear to look into his blank face. Their Butko had returned, but he was not the same Butko.

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"Our lives are not safe here anymore, Sabiha. We need to leave," Aladin said with urgent resolve.

"Don't you see the soldiers every day?" Jakub chimed in.

"People vanish to who knows where," Mirnes added. "We are not going to wait around to be arrested — or worse." His voice trailed off at the thought of disappearing. Their young lives previously filled with joy and late-night gatherings had been replaced by fear, despair and insecurity.

"This is a friendly town," Sabiha argued. "The bonds between Muslims, Orthodox and Catholics cannot be severed by what is happening in Sarajevo." She still refused to believe that the people of Plejvlja would kill each other when just a few months ago they'd feasted on shawarma and cevapcici together.

"And images of mass executions are being shown on international news every day," she continued. "The world saw the hospital that was raided, the newborn babies killed alongside their mothers. The UN knows that Sarajevo's parliament building has been burnt to ash." Her voice cracked as she asked half to herself, half to her friends, "Don't they know people are deliberately being starved to death?"

"No one knows why nobody is doing anything," Aladin said gently. They all knew who he meant by nobody: the UN, but also Europe, NATO and the United States. "But we can't wait around for them, Sabiha, hoping they will do something. Come with us to Turkey. It is safe there. We will wait there to see what happens."

None of them had passports or the documents to travel. "Are you crazy?" Sabiha asked. "How can I travel with three men? Where will we stay? What will I tell my parents?"

The four of them sat around the mahogany table, pondering the future while their cold coffee sat untouched. Aladin slowly got up and moved toward Sabiha. He looked into her somber but still hopeful hazel eyes, desperate to break through her stubborn independence.

"I have a solution for all of this," he said. Sabiha said nothing, waiting for him to continue. "We can solve this very easily, don't worry, Sabiha. I have these people as witnesses here."

Aladin paused, glancing at Jakub and Mirnes. He wished to take her in his arms and whisk her away. "I ask you to marry me."

Sabiha chuckled. She couldn't help it, but she tried to swallow the fit of laughter that rolled out of her.

"This is a very serious proposal, Sabiha," Aladin said, offended by her residual giggles.

"Thank you for including me in your plans," she replied, "but my wish is to return to Bosnia. I want to go back to my family. No matter what happens."

"But do you want to marry me?" Aladin asked again, this time with heartbreaking sincerity.

Sabiha looked down. She had grown fond of this attractive, intelligent, caring man. Who wouldn't? But they were different; she was boisterous while he was demure. She thought of all the evenings he would sit in the corner of a room with the community elders, calmly discussing history and religion. Their interactions never moved beyond group gatherings and causal glances. Thoughts of a relationship, let alone marriage, had never crossed her mind.

"Maybe if it was a different time, not during war." Sabiha had finally conceded — the war was real.

Almasa

The only time the telephone worked after calling her parents, Sabiha finally reached her best friend in Sarajevo.

"Almasa! Masa! *Kako si, sta radis?* Please tell me you are OK. How is your family? Your mom, your sisters?" Sabiha broke down over the phone.

"The situation is terrible here, Sabiha, but don't worry. I will go to your place and collect all your clothes, books and photo albums and keep them safe for you."

"Almasa, of all the things to talk about in this moment, my clothes and books are worthless." Sabiha could tell Almasa was trying hard to avoid sharing the details of her life. "Please don't risk your life on my account. Your safety is the most important thing. Is it possible for you to come here? It is a little safer here."

"Oh Sabiha, no, it is not possible. We cannot even leave our homes." Almasa stopped trying to choke back her grief. "You know how much I like eggs, but can you imagine, we haven't had milk or eggs for months. There is nothing. Even the water — we have to wait for a moment to dodge the snipers to fetch a few canisters."

And then Almasa began to laugh, as if speaking the words aloud made it all even more unbelievable. "But never mind that. When we see each other again, we will have hundreds of eggs to eat together!"

Sabiha brushed away a tear and struggled to smile, even though Almasa couldn't see her. That was just like Almasa, trying to bring a touch of levity to the most humorless situation. She was so selfless and cheerful that way, being optimistic for herself, but also for her family and her best friend. Sabiha wanted to be strong for her in return, to tell her that everything was going to be fine and they'd be together again soon.

"Please take care of yourself and hug your family," was all she could muster. She wanted to pull Almasa through the phone and hold her close. She wished they could go back in time — to last

year when they were sitting in class, talking about the next Bijelo Dugme[30] concert and complaining about the upcoming exam. They were more than best friends. They were sisters.

Not long after that phone call, the cracks in Sabiha's universe gave way. On the day her universe shattered, a father lost his entire family. Almasa — along with her mother, two sisters, and 2-year-old niece — had been in line for water when the bombing started. They were waiting for life's most basic need, nature's most neutral substance, when their lives were lost to a war they did not choose.

Strangers on the Road

Olive groves twisted with pine trees and a cool Mediterranean breeze greeted Sabiha when she stepped off the bus after the four-hour ride. The clacking of the rare Dalmatian pelican indicated that she was near Lake Skadar, on the border between Montenegro and Albania.

"My Sabiha, it is wonderful to see you again. I've missed you and your family so much! How is everyone?" A familiar, kind face appeared at her side, showering her with greetings and questions. "Ah, what did you pack in these bags? They're so heavy!" Badema joked as she lifted Sabiha's luggage.

Even if it had been pitch dark, Sabiha would have instantly recognized the sweet scent of sage and home-cooked veal on her beloved aunt. They laughed as they walked together, delighted by their reunion.

"When was the last time we saw each other?" Sabiha asked. She regretted the question as soon as it escaped her mouth. Badema sighed.

Sabiha remembered going to her cousin Rafik's house in Vitez every day after elementary school. She and Badema would sit and talk together, Sabiha about her school lessons and Badema about her customers at the clothing shop. Badema would cook Sabiha's favorite meals, tending and grilling the meat for hours while her two children and Sabiha finished their homework and played together. Sabiha looked up to her cousin's warm, jovial wife. She loved spending time with her — everyone did. But from time to time, the cheery days were disrupted by Rafik's fiery temper, his violent outbursts. Sabiha's parents tried talking to Rafik, but after a week the weary cycle would repeat itself. After countless second chances, threats and pardons, Badema finally left Rafik, but she was also forced to leave her young son and daughter behind with their father. None of her tears, pleadings or prayers swayed Rafik. Badema moved back to her hometown of Tuzi in Montenegro.

"Come on, I made cevapcici and sweets for you," Badema said, tearing them both away from the bleak past. Sabiha could only imagine how much Badema missed her children, and she hoped to be a distraction for the few days of her visit.

Five days later, they found themselves back at the bus station. Her visit had been too short, not enough time for Badema to convince her niece to stay in Tuzi. Sabiha was determined to

continue on toward Macedonia, and deep down Badema understood the unstoppable drive to be with family.

"I know how many times your parents tried to help me when I was in Vitez," Badema said, forcing a smile as she handed over the carefully packaged sack of sandwiches, peaches, figs and apples. "I have told my sister and her husband that you're coming to Skopje. They know your journey details and will pick you up at the station."

"Badema, thank you for everything. But I have never met your sister — how will we recognize each other?" Sabiha asked.

"Don't worry. Just take care of yourself and God will be with you. I wish you the best and pray you reach your family safely," Badema assured her, kissing her goodbye.

Sabiha held her favorite aunt in a long embrace, feeling at once the sorrow of leaving and the anxious energy of embarking. It was time to begin her journey home.

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"Sorry, *gospodjo*,[31] you need to exit the bus," the policeman at the border crossing station declared as he studied Sabiha's ID card, looked back at her, then again at the ID.

"What is it, *gospodine*?[32] What's the problem?" Sabiha asked.

"I'm sorry, but we just issued a new law that prohibits any Bosnians from entering Macedonia."

"But I am from Yugoslavia. It says on my ID like everyone else's. Please let me cross," Sabiha pleaded.

The policeman shook his head. "Sorry, it is not possible," he repeated, polite for a policeman but still firm. "You need a passport if you want to cross."

She'd never needed a passport before — nobody did. "But this is one country," Sabiha urged helplessly. "We travel freely between the republics."

The other passengers were growing impatient and irritated. Sabiha had no choice but to exit the bus. She stood in the whirlwind of dust left in the bus's wake, the repercussions of politics swirling in the air around her.

What now? she thought. This was the most important part of her journey. She needed to get to Macedonia to get the right paperwork to keep traveling. As she began walking back to the station, she noticed another passenger: a woman struggling to juggle her baby and suitcase.

"Please," Sabiha broke the silence between them, "let me help you."

"*Hvala*!" the woman thanked her.

"What do you think we should do?" Sabiha asked, carrying the woman's suitcase. Back at the bus station, under the roasting afternoon sun, they contemplated their options. The station buzzed with other travelers, taxis and policemen. When the woman suggested they take a taxi across the border, Sabiha agreed it was the next best solution. Wiping beads of sweat off her face, Sabiha said a small prayer that they would cross successfully this time.

They found a taxi driver, told him their destination and negotiated the price. As they set off toward the border, Sabiha silently urged the taxi to speed up. If he stopped, it would all be over. But of course he had to stop for the border police. He recognized the two women the moment he leaned into the taxi.

"Where do you think you're going?" he said, less polite this time. "Just 10 minutes ago I refused you entry. Why are you trying so hard to enter Macedonia?"

"We are only trying to pass through," Sabiha pleaded. "I don't intend to stay in Macedonia — I just want to reach Bosnia. Please let us cross."

"Are you crazy? Everyone is trying to flee Bosnia and you want to return? That is absurd," the policeman scoffed, refusing their entry for a second — and last — time.

Parched by the sun and beaten by their circumstances, the two desperate women waited at the crossing station — for what, they weren't sure. The snacks they had shared were now crumbs in their laps. Everything was in motion around them: buses filling with refugees, travelers trying to outrun the violence chasing them. Even the leaves were going somewhere, leisurely falling to the ground, ushering in autumn. Everything was moving except them.

As the sun sank behind the mountains, a middle-aged man approached them. "What is the matter?" he asked in a thick Albanian accent. "May I be of help to you?"

"We are trying to cross the border to Macedonia. We've tried the bus and a taxi. Is there any other way to get across?" Sabiha asked, mustering her last burst of hope.

"There are barricades and checkpoints every few kilometers, and as you know they are very strict at the border." The man paused. "But I might have a solution for you. There is another route, a dirt path through the mountains and forest that we can pass. If you have 50 Deutsche Marks each, I can organize an overnight crossing," he whispered cautiously. "But you have to wait until midnight — then a truck will come for you."

The man slowly walked away. Sabiha and the woman waited. The mountains turned purple and then disappeared in the darkness. They kept waiting.

After what seemed an eternity, a small truck, the type used to transport animals, edged toward the station, clunking and hissing.

A driver with salt and pepper hair piled almost 15 women and children into the cramped, covered truck. Sabiha hadn't even noticed the others waiting in the darkness with them. "If you hear any gunfire, do not panic," he warned. "The border police might shoot at us, but if we are lucky they won't see us and we can cross."

There were no windows. The air was thick and still inside the truck as it rattled over the rugged path. Simultaneously exhausted and restless, Sabiha let her thoughts jump and meander. *I can't move my hip. What does he mean they'll shoot at us? I wish this kid would move off my leg. Are we there yet?*

A few hours later, Sabiha stumbled out of the truck. Her legs were numb, and it was still dark and hot, but before she could look around to orient herself, a stranger tapped her shoulder.

"Sabiha! *Hvala Bogu,*[33] finally you have come," the man said. "We were so worried. Badema called us several times and we didn't know what had happened to you."

"You must be Badema's brother-in-law," Sabiha said, taking a huge breath of fresh night air.

"Yes, of course," he replied, taking Sabiha's luggage. "I have been going back and forth between the Skopje bus station and here. This is where drivers drop people they have taken across the border illegally."

Illegal? Sabiha was in a stupor, still half asleep and barely able to move her limbs. Somehow she had not processed that she was crossing illegally. She'd put all her faith in a stranger, thinking of nothing besides her goal of returning home.

The next thing she knew, Sabiha was sitting at a wooden dining table, an assortment of dishes adorning the placemats. The perfectly red tomatoes triggered her taste buds, reminding her of her empty stomach.

"I wanted the food to be hot when you arrived, but we didn't know when you would come, my dear," Badema's sister smiled as she sat next to her. "You are with us now, and we will help you with anything you need. You can stay as long as you want." She squeezed Sabiha's hand.

Steam rose from the feast, warming Sabiha and bringing a mist to her eyes. Kindness erased the thin lines — of background, religion, kinship — between stranger and friend.

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Sabiha's looping and cumbersome tour of the Balkan Peninsula had come to a predictable stop at the Hungarian border crossing. She had traveled successfully through Macedonia, Bulgaria and Romania, and was about halfway through her counter-clockwise route home, one she had strategically mapped to circumscribe the black hole that Serbia had become over the course of the war. If her map was a clock, then she had started at 6 o'clock, in Pljevlja. Her family was in Vitez, at 8 o'clock, but Sarajevo was at 7 o'clock, so she could not take the short, logical, clockwise path home. She'd had no choice but to travel backwards, around the entire clock.

If the obstacles at every border crossing throughout her now 20-day journey were any indication of what lay ahead, then she would once again have to spend several hours tediously justifying her desire to return to Bosnia.

"We don't understand you," people she'd met along the way would implore. "Why are you trying to go back? People in Bosnia and Herzegovina only have one wish — to leave and save their lives — but you want to return?"

Sabiha answered the same questions so many times that her response became a mantra: "I want to return to my home. I have not seen my family in six months. Sarajevo is under siege, but I know that nothing can happen in my hometown because we live in peace and mutual friendship with our Catholic and Orthodox neighbors." Each time she repeated herself, she was filled with more fervor, more determination. A few compassionate souls seemed to understand but others would say she was crazy.

Sabiha's youthful perseverance had brought her all the way to Hungary. But now she would have to leave behind the blue-patterned bus upholstery and the comforting Bulgarian and Romanian melodies of her 50 fellow passengers. She handed her ambiguous papers over to the Hungarian border official.

"You have two choices," the official said after a brief glance at her papers. "You can go back to Romania or go to Hungary, but if you decide to stay in Hungary, you must go to the refugee camp."

"What is a refugee camp?" Sabiha asked. She had never heard that strange combination of words.

Again Sabiha found herself stuck at a border crossing station brainstorming the next step with a stranger. The woman she was with now proposed purchasing train tickets to Zagreb, where her husband would pick them up. It was a good plan, Sabiha thought.

"Ladies, you cannot pass," the policeman stated when they showed him their tickets. "You can stay at the train station for 24 hours, but after that I have no choice but to send you to the refugee camp."

With quick improvisation, Sabiha's travel companion offered a new solution: "We can call my husband in Croatia and have him pick us up here. All we need is a phone." She found the police officer and returned with his phone.

Mustuluk

Sabiha's journey had cost every last coin that she had. After the woman's husband drove them to Zagreb — 9 o'clock on Sabiha's clock — the couple bought Sabiha a ticket to the Croatian coastal town of Split. Passing the pristine, azure beaches of the Mediterranean coastline, now a hub for refugees and wounded civilians, Sabiha wondered how she would find her hometown.

From Split, Sabiha successfully crossed the border into Bosnia-Herzegovina. She now looked longingly at the taxicabs basking in the October sun. She was so close to home she could taste it.

"Excuse me, gospodine, do you know where the village of Donja Veceriska is?" Sabiha asked one of the drivers leaning against his taxi.

"Of course," he said, "it's only 10 minutes away."

"Yes, I know, but I want to pass very quickly. Can you take me?" she asked, knowing that her family would pay him.

They passed the chemical weapon factory, Slobodan Princip-Seljo, the towering landmark where most of the village men worked, including her father. As they approached her village, Sabiha sighed to herself, "Ah, thank God, I made it!"

The surprised taxi driver caught her eyes from the corner of his rearview mirror and asked, "You know this place?"

"Yes," Sabiha whispered, lost in prayer and anticipation.

His eyes flashed with realization as he studied her face again. "Wait! Are you Omer's daughter?"

"Yes, how did you know?" Sabiha asked with surprise.

"Everyone knows about you!" The man's face broke into a smile. "Your father has spoken to everyone in the nearby towns and villages, asking if they have any information about his missing daughter. They thought maybe you were killed or vanished. You don't need to pay me anything — just give me the chance to tell your father that you have come. I want to be the first to inform my friend!"

As the taxi approached Sabiha's cream-colored home, the home she'd grown up in with her three siblings, she thought of all the obstacles she'd overcome to reach this moment. How she'd grown up overnight, how she'd mapped out and traveled the entire region just to be back in her parents' arms. It had been 6 months and 23 days since she last saw them.

Sabiha stayed in the taxi while the driver got out to knock on the door. She looked out the window at the endless blue sky with a prayer of gratitude. From the taxi she watched as her older brother, Mujo, opened the door. Her father was close behind.

"Omer, how are you?" the driver greeted them. "Listen, I want you to give me a *mustuluk*."[34]

"Hello," Omer said, his face twisted in a question mark. "I will give you one, but tell me why? What has happened?"

On cue, the driver stepped aside, revealing his surprise: the young girl in the back of his taxi, windows down listening to the conversation. "Here is your daughter, Sabiha!" he exclaimed.

"Oh my God! You are joking!" Omer gasped in disbelief. "It has been nearly seven months! My sweet child."

They stood in the garden of fruit trees and dark red roses, weeping and embracing, until Omer turned to his son. "Mujo! Go call your mother from the neighbor's house."

The commotion drew attention from the neighbors in the shop downstairs. "What's going on?" they asked as Mujo ran for his mother.

"My sister has come!" he shouted. Relatives and neighbors joined the growing crowd in the garden, and when Hanifa arrived, she collapsed to the ground, intoxicated by the vision of her daughter before her. Relatives fanned her and fed her sugar cubes, and after several minutes Hanifa finally looked into her youngest daughter's eyes. "This is a dream," she murmured. "But how did you get here, my child? What happened?" she asked, now frantic.

"Mama, what matters is that I am here." Sabiha knelt beside her. "Many people helped me along the way."

The kind faces of all the strangers she had met throughout her journey, now friends, flashed through her mind: the caring family of mixed religions who gave her a home and money for her travels; the classmates who tried to include her in their flight to safety; Aunt Badema and her gracious Albanian family; the driver that risked his life to help her cross into Macedonia; the bus passengers who shared their tea and snacks; the strangers who offered up solutions; the generosity of the family that paid for a leg of her journey; and the understanding policeman who lent his phone.

Each had their own concerning circumstance, their own sense to make of a senseless war, but they'd all had enough left over to help a young Bosnian girl make it home. However difficult it was to remain honest and helpful in those harsh times, Sabiha knew she'd survived because of the goodness of humanity.

Sitting in her home, Sabiha took in the familiar faces, her family, but also her neighbors — Catholic Croats, Orthodox Serbs, Muslim Bosniaks — drinking coffee together, just as she remembered them.

A War Between Neighbors

Six months after Sabiha's homecoming, the war shifted gears. It was April 16, 1993, a calm spring morning, the day that Bosnian Croatian forces arrived in central Bosnia. Sabiha was fast asleep, along with her older sister and younger brother, when the bombs shattered the sunrise. Omer had just tied up his boots to leave for work when shooting erupted from different parts of the village.

"Wake up, wake up!" Sabiha's mother shouted. She was trying to lead her family to the basement door right outside the house, but just as she slipped outside, soldiers advanced toward the house. The bullets were instantaneous, and Hanifa managed to squeeze behind the open front door and cover her head.

"Don't move! The soldiers are everywhere!" she cried to her family. She'd counted 20 already, surrounding the house. "Wherever you are, don't move!"

Inside, Sabiha and her father, sister and brother burrowed beneath the table, pressing themselves against the carpet. But nothing could hide their terror.

As if sensing the fear inside the walls, the soldiers moved in on the house. Their bullets punctured the cream-colored walls. The family lay paralyzed beneath the table as the soldiers trampled through the shop. "This is Omer's shop!" they sneered as they looted.

For more than two hours, Sabiha and her family listened as windows shattered and walls fell, the home in which they'd planted the seeds of their lives crumbling to pieces around them. Their shallow breathing synchronized. They lost all sense of time. They lay flat, trying to make themselves one with the floor.

A shrill, distraught wail cut through the ringing gunfire. "Please help! My father is hurt. Please help him!" Time suddenly returned. A young neighbor girl struggling to lug her wounded father through a curtain of fire bewildered the soldiers, commanding their humanity for a split second. Her courageous interruption inadvertently opened a door — a door through which to escape.

Bono, a Bosnian Croat neighbor, used it to approach the entrance of the family's garden. He was dressed in full military gear. "Hanifa, it is me, Bono," he said when he saw her crouched in the doorway. "Please come out. Bring your family and I will escort you to safety. This is the best time to leave. We cannot prevent what will happen if you stay. At the edge of town, near Brdo, there is a fort where all the Muslims are taking refuge."

The neighbors saw their chance too, the temporary vortex that had opened to them. They exited their homes one by one, hands raised in surrender. Even with her hands over her head, her parents' lessons echoed in Sabiha's mind: *If something ever happens, the first person that will help you is your neighbor.*

Their lives were all in the hands of this neighbor now — a neighbor they'd celebrated birthdays and holidays with, a neighbor who was now a soldier. As they left their garden of lilies and roses and stepped onto the main road, the stench of metal and panic suffocated Sabiha. Columns of black and green lined the street, kicking in doors, pointing rifles at anyone who bore a Muslim name.

Sabiha's home was flanked by the houses of two Croat neighbors, Bono on one side and Dragana on the other. Sabiha watched a knot of soldiers emerge from Dragana's house, where just a few hours earlier, Sabiha and her sister had sat, drinking coffee and chatting with Dragana in her living room. Outrage and suspicion flooded Sabiha's veins, warming her skin. Trapped in Sabiha's gaze and standing in her doorway, Dragana must have known what her friend was thinking: *Why didn't you say anything? How could you not warn us? Why didn't any of our neighbors alert us?*

They walked with their neighbors in a single-file line, Bono escorting them through a tunnel of snipers and soldiers. Only then did Sabiha notice that her sister was barefoot. Sabiha had managed to put a jacket on over her cotton pajamas and grab her opium perfume, the one reserved for special occasions. But now she winced, realizing she had forgotten her glasses. Everything — their property passed down through generations, their belongings, basic necessities — had been left behind, most likely plundered.

"What is your name?" a soldier barked up ahead. Sabiha heard feet shuffling loudly and recognized the slim outline of her cousin.

"Meho," her cousin replied coolly, letting out a drag of his cigarette. A deafening shot rang out. His name had betrayed him.

"What are you staring at?" the soldiers bellowed at Sabiha's family. "Keep walking! Go, go!" The shot still ringing in their ears, they had no choice but to continue walking. They left Meho's body behind, but the deep red of that scarlet soil was branded into Sabiha's memory.

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As they continued toward the safe haven at the edge of town, they passed by the only mosque in Donja Veceriska, its turquoise dome now draped in ash. Years earlier, Bosnian Orthodox and Catholics had donated their sweat and money to build this place of worship for their Muslim brothers and sisters, a cherished event for the community. Everyone had come to celebrate. But the differences — erased previously by all the friendly exchanges and intermarriages — had instantly returned during war. The systematic destruction of ethno-religious symbols was just one more element of a carefully planned declaration of war.

They had almost reached Brdo when a single, silent pellet of lead penetrated Omer's chest. He looked down at the crimson rapidly saturating his shirt and, for a brief moment, wondered if he'd helped manufacture the bullet at the weapon factory.

"You crazy idiots!" Bono shouted at the soldier. "Stop!" He rushed to Omer's side and carried him into the fortress, where the majority of the village's Muslims were now gathered.

Sabiha watched as a nurse cleaned her father's wound. She couldn't cry, couldn't express a single one of the emotions expanding in her chest. All that escaped her were these words: "Thank God you survived, Babo. Everything will be OK." She looked around the dark, damp, crowded basement at more than 100 of her neighbors, heads bowed in despair. They were all waiting, together, for the inevitable. Nobody said it, but it thickened the air: *We are going to die*.

Sabiha wanted to staunch the tears, dry the wet cheeks of her neighbors' faces. She wanted to return a glimmer of hope to their empty eyes. Her hand brushed the treasure in her pocket, and she pulled it from her jacket.

"I have perfume," she announced. "Let's spray ourselves, so if we die we can at least smell sweet."

Her neighbors looked at her blankly, then at the small bottle of opium perfume she was holding up. Smiles tugged at a few lips as Sabiha shared small puffs. Soft notes of laughter mingled with a hint of warm cinnamon. For a moment, amber and jasmine overpowered the lingering scent of burning homes, fear for abducted husbands and sons, grief for lost loved ones. In that fortress at least, there was no odor of hate, of fear, of violence.

Recognizing Humanity

They spent a few sleepless nights in the fortress. Then the 106 Muslims of Donja Veceriska, including Sabiha and her family, entered the towering pine and oak forests to find food and shelter. Some decided to stay behind. They didn't believe their Croat neighbors would kill them, even though town after town was being cleansed of Bosniak Muslims. They'd heard about the massacres in Ahmici, Novi Travnik and Vitez, so the 106 villagers trekked through the mountains when the moon was low, blasts of gunpowder echoing through the trees from another village.

By the sixth night, some of the women and children could no longer go on. Their wounds had consumed both their willpower and ability to walk. But there was a UN base ahead near Divljak, where they knew they would get some assistance, so they forced themselves to continue.

"Sir," a member of their group approached one of the peacekeepers when they arrived at the sanctuary. "We have a few wounded women and children who are suffering. Can you please help us?"

"No, I'm sorry, we cannot," the peacekeeper replied. "It is not under our mandate." The group erupted. The most vocal shouted their questions and pleas.

"What do you mean? Your responsibility is to protect and prevent!"

"How can the world's ruling body on peace and security ignore our obvious suffering?"

"Please! At least take the children to the hospital!"

But the peacekeepers were unmoved and the group continued on, without assistance. As they approached another village, a 10-year-old boy from Ahmici joined the group. His body was a riot of dark colors, half black and blue, a coat of dried crimson covering much of his skin. Sabiha came up beside him and took his small, icy hand in hers, holding it as they walked in silence. A few hours later, when they reached a point from which they could estimate the location of the bombing by its echo, the boy told Sabiha what had happened.

He'd been in the house with his brother when they came. The soldiers ordered them to climb to the roof and jump off while they shot at them. "My older brother went first and I watched his body thud to the earth," he said numbly. "Then it was my turn. I fell right near him. I didn't know if the pool of blood was his or mine. I lay motionless, fooling even myself." The boy didn't know what else to do, but the soldiers eventually left, pleased with their victory.

"God helped me," he told Sabiha. "God helped me live by helping me act dead."

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Over the course of their exodus through the mountains and the woods, Sabiha's family was torn in separate directions. Muho branched off in search of his wife and 18-month-old daughter. Sabiha's younger brother, Dilbur, was recruited into the loosely equipped Army of the Republic of

Bosnia and Herzegovina, leaving Sabiha and her sister with the responsibility of caring for their wounded father.

Sabiha led her family and 50 others to the village of Lupac. With each village they came to, they never knew how they'd be greeted. In Preocica, when the bombs went off and everyone ran for cover, the townspeople shouted, "Why are you here? Go somewhere else! We do not have enough room or supplies for you people." But when they entered Lupac, people rushed to help them, sharing what little potatoes and beans they had with the famished refugees.

How could two villages with the same cultural and religious backgrounds be so different? Sabiha had never seen such a contrast. It was humanity, she decided. Humanity was what set people apart.

"Oh, Sabiha! Hanifa and Omer! Hvala Bogu, you are safe!" The exclamations shook Sabiha from her thoughts. The family of one of her classmates from secondary school in Sarajevo had recognized her. "What a wonderful coincidence! Come, you are going to stay with us!"

A few years back, Sabiha had tutored their daughter Dzenana in Sarajevo. The girl had some difficulty in school, and when one of the professors asked Sabiha to help, she jumped at the opportunity — and even invited the girl to live with her. She'd taken care of her like a little sister and Dzenana's mother had always wanted to repay Sabiha for her assistance.

The two families, 10 people in all, lived together in the cramped but welcoming home for 15 days. Dzenana's family took care of Sabiha's family as if they were relatives. The men tilled the garden together. The mothers taught the daughters how to make special Bosnian cheese and potato pie. They did their best to pass the long, uncertain days around the *sofra*,[35] sharing soup and bread, stories and prayers.

A New Home

Though she embraced the hospitality and clean showers, Sabiha couldn't take living somewhere with nothing to do and no end in sight.

"We can't stay here forever, Babo," she told her father the day she could no longer stand it. "Look how we are all struggling to live. We cannot stay year and year here, even though we help them work. It is not enough. We need to find another solution."

"What do you suppose we do, Sabiha?" he asked. "We lost all of our belongings and property, but I thank God every day that my wife and children survived."

"Yes Babo, but our original plan was to go to Zenica. Maybe we will find our relatives and friends there. Plus it's safer in Zenica, with the Bosnian army base there. Let me just go and see," she insisted. "I will be back by sunset."

Sabiha was not asking permission, and he knew it. "OK, my Sabiha," he said slowly. He paused. "But be careful and take the shorter dirt path."

Sabiha had no fear as she hiked the five hours to Zenica through the dense forest. Zenica meant safety. Freedom. The chance to regain a normal life. As she emerged from the trees and approached the town, she didn't recognize the once large and busy city. Now Zenica was lifeless. The shops were closed. There were no cars in the streets, nobody going to and from the steel factory that employed half the city's citizens.

As she walked through the deserted downtown, Sabiha came to an elementary school. A few people were huddled outside — and in the crowd she spotted a friend.

"Murisa!" Sabiha exclaimed. "It's you!" She knew she would find a familiar face in Zenica.

Murisa turned her head in surprise. "What happened to you, Sabiha? Where have you been? We thought you and your family were coming here!"

"We ran into some difficulties and decided to stay with some friends in Lupac," Sabiha told her friend. "But even there the situation is not so good."

"Don't worry, my dear, there are some options in Zenica," Murisa said. "One of the biggest refugee camps is here at this school. Let's register you and your family and then we'll figure out a plan."

A plan. This was exactly what Sabiha needed. Relieved, she followed Murisa into the school. When she registered her family, the municipality in charge of refugees gave her a list of what they were entitled to: *We will help you with what we can. Every day you may receive bread, powdered milk, and hygienic supplies. You may find accommodations in an abandoned house, but you must first register it here.*

"Let's go find you a house," Murisa said. She knew that one of Sabiha's relatives was already living in a previously owned Bosnian Serb house at the top of a hill some 30 minutes away. The two set out, poking through the streets for deserted houses, and Sabiha wondered what had happened to her family's home back in Donja Veceriska. Was it still standing? Had someone taken it up as their own?

It didn't take long before they found one, a wreck of a house cloaked in mud and ash and filled with rubble. Sabiha and Murisa spent four straight days cleaning. They mopped the floors with a discarded broom. They rubbed the stained walls with the little bar of soap they were given for showering. And as Sabiha washed the curtains, she had an idea. "Oh Murisa, the material of this curtain is so nice!" She held it out for her friend to see. "I want to make trousers from it."

Her own pants, a gift from a compassionate family, were two sizes too small. But it wasn't just about sewing herself a new pair of pants. She wanted to sew her family's lives back together piece by piece — starting with this house.

Five days later, Sabiha stood before her father back in Lupac. "Babo, I have found us a home," she announced. "Murisa and I, we organized and cleaned everything. All you and Mama need to do is come with me."

"Sabiha, are you serious? How did you do that? You mean that we have a place to stay?" He looked at her in disbelief. Sabiha nodded proudly.

"But how can I go with you when I have no way to support us?" he asked. "We don't have money, work or food. How will we survive in Zenica?"

"Trust me, Babo, we have a place to live and we will find food. This war is not going to be over as soon as we thought. We need to carry on with our lives. Just come and see. If you decide you can't live there, you can come back here." The war had reversed so many things. The meaning of home and neighbors and strangers. Of children and parents.

"OK," he said to his daughter, "we will go."

Moving Forward

Each day, Sabiha watched hundreds of people from Bosnia's eastern towns stumble off buses, weary and battered. They crowded into the already overcrowded makeshift refugee camp, miraculously finding another small space to lie down on the white laminate floors of the elementary school. In the morning, she would visit the section of flooring where 300 displaced Bosniaks stayed, seeking information about her friends and relatives. And in the afternoon, she would return to share bread and powdered milk with the friends she had made.

She preferred to be with the other refugees, listening to their stories in the confined compound that reeked of unwashed bodies, over staying in her new, spacious house on top of Zenica's hill. The house didn't feel like home, with her mother, father and sister sitting for hours, lifeless and depressed. Sabiha needed to be active — she wanted to do something for her downcast family and the hundreds of refugees in the elementary school.

After four days of this new routine, Sabiha and Murisa ran into their secondary school professor at the Islamic community center. "Sabiha!" he exclaimed, recognizing her at once. "Thank God! How are you? How is your family? Please tell me if you need anything."

"Professor Zijad," Sabiha greeted him. "Thank you, but everything is fine. We live in a house and get some rations from my uncle and the refugee center."

He frowned. "Oh, you cannot survive on just powdered milk and bread." He tried to sneak 50 Deutsche Marks into her pocket but Sabiha refused.

"No, professor, you are too kind," she said, handing the money back. "Thank you, but I cannot accept this."

"Sabiha, just keep it. Go buy yourself some chocolate," he chuckled.

Sabiha smiled at Murisa as their professor walked away. They took the money to town and found an improvised shop on the street, where they bought salt, sugar, flour, rice, beans, coffee and cake. They split the 25 kilograms of flour and food between them, an armful each, and carried it 40 minutes uphill to the house.

"Who gave this to you?" Hanifa asked with surprise when she saw Sabiha's arms full of supplies.

"I bought it myself," Sabiha said proudly.

Hanifa examined her daughter suspiciously. "You don't have money to buy all these things. Where did you get money?"

"God is my witness, Mama, I bought it thanks to Professor Zijad. He gave me some money."

Thrilled to have some ingredients to prepare a meal for her family, Hanifa's mouthwatering pie and sweet coffee wafted through the house, waking Sabiha and her sister's famished senses. Hanifa called her nephews, cousins and surrounding neighbors to join them for lunch. "We will serve them first," she told her daughters, "and if there is any food left over, you can have some."

They sat around the table, plates and stomachs full for the first time in weeks. Sabiha's dispirited family, however, still sat with their heads bowed down. She looked at them, but they did not look up. "We cannot sit here anymore like this, hopeless and depressed," she said at last. "We need to accept what has happened and normalize our lives. This house may not be ours, but come see how hundreds of people are living in the refugee camp. We must organize our life."

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A few days later, Sabiha decided to try to motivate the women at the refugee camp too. Many were her old friends and classmates, and she listened to them wonder when they would return to their homes, what happened to this relative or that friend, how they would survive after all their cows had been killed.

"What will we do now?" they asked. "Our men are gone or fighting in the army. We have to be both man and woman, but we have no means of survival."

"Shall we go upstairs for a little bit?" Sabiha asked the girls and women, who were the majority of the refugee camp. They followed her to the quiet second floor of the elementary school, where Sabiha gathered them into a circle.

"We are refugees now," she began. "We are all in the same shoes. You are alive but want to die. But we cannot stay like this, so let's think of what we can do to continue our lives."

Nobody said a word, so she made a suggestion: "Look at this as an opportunity to learn something you never had a chance to before."

Slowly, a few women opened up, sharing their stories of survival and what they wished for. They had all walked through the unimaginable, but somehow they had each held onto their wishes. Gradually, the women realized that normal lives might be possible again.

"We could teach each other recipes for different ways of cooking meals out of these rations," one woman suggested.

"Can we pray together?" another asked. "I want to learn more about my faith since I didn't practice much before."

"Yes," someone else spoke up, looking at Sabiha. "Can you teach us Arabic and how to read the Quran?"

"Maybe we can organize visits to the hospital and prepare some food for the wounded," another woman proposed.

After that gathering on the second floor, the women met every day, learning and praying together. Being there for one another. When others in Zenica heard what the women were doing, they wanted to join. One woman, Enisa, would come by every day to bring the group gloves and coats — and some days she would surprise the women with assortments of cakes in exchange for learning how to read the Quran.

When the Islamic community saw how well Sabiha organized people, they began supporting her work. The main imam, Ejub ef. Dautovic, offered her a job coordinating programs for girls and women, but especially refugees. She was paid in packages of food. It didn't take long for Sabiha to realize that women's perspectives — the opinions and experiences she heard every day — needed to be heard more widely. She took her idea to the local media.

"It would be very helpful to focus on women and their rights, religion and education," she proposed. "We could also bring in refugees as guests to hear their experiences and perspectives." That year, Zenica's first-ever radio show for women launched. It was called "Women's Voice" — and Sabiha was its host and editor.

A few months after the first show aired, an old colleague visited Sabiha at the refugee camp. She had heard about the radio show and Sabiha's work with refugees. "You are doing exactly what we do in Medica Zenica!"

"But what is Medica Zenica?" Sabiha asked. "What do you do?"

"We are the first organization in Bosnia helping women and girls who have survived sexual violence," the woman explained. "We have a safe house where women can stay and get a medical examination, psychological counseling and support." She invited Sabiha to come visit the next day to explain her work with refugees.

When Sabiha arrived at the safe house, the first thing she noticed was how beautifully women from different religious backgrounds were working together. In that moment, something was returned to her. The positive picture of humanity she'd tried to pretend she'd never lost. Sabiha kept going back.

A few women from Germany, including Medica Zenica's founder Dr. Monika Hauser, started training the women on psychological trauma and the strategies they could use to deal with it. But as Sabiha learned the various methods and coping mechanisms, the official concepts and definitions, she realized that somehow she already knew what they were talking about. The German women had the knowledge and theoretical background to help the women and girls who had experienced violence, but the Bosnian women had practical experience. It was the perfect union.

After Sabiha found support for herself through individual therapy, she began helping other women and girls work through their own traumas and emotions that, for some, had been repressed for decades. So when Medica Zenica was officially established in 1993, Sabiha went from a girl with only one responsibility — attending university — to a 21-year-old woman who volunteered, worked and studied, who was trying to help herself, her family and others. She worked from 7:30 in the

morning to 3 in the afternoon at the Islamic Center, then from 3:30 to 8 p.m. at Medica Zenica. Perhaps this wasn't normal life either, but she was happy.

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Rape had terrorized everything. Their bodies, their spirits, their men, their families, their communities. More than any weapon ever could, rape had a particularly cruel and effective way of unraveling the fabric of society.

As the war trudged on, Sabiha became a psychotherapist for Medica Zenica, a permanent staff member. She heard story after story, of both agony and survival. Women who'd been sexually abused felt ashamed, too guilty to speak up about their experiences. Their families would ostracize them. They'd be left as nobodies on the streets.

The healing methods helped, but more than anything, it was the support of other women — finding a long-sought solidarity — that led many of the women to the path of strength and empowerment. One of the women who Sabiha met with was especially resistant to divulging what had happened to her, but after several therapy sessions, she slowly began to recount the story of her survival, little by little revealing the details she'd so carefully covered up until Sabiha could see the whole heartbreaking picture.

"It was a kind of slow murder," the woman began. "They bludgeoned their way into town and divided the men and women." Sabiha knew who the woman meant by "they" — the Croatian Defense Council. After everyone had been forced into a school, where they would be imprisoned, the children were shoved into the group of women. The men were lined up against a wall. She had been one of the women chosen to cook for the soldiers, and when the soldiers came, they would take more than their food.

"They would violate me sexually," she finally told Sabiha. "Numerous times. I lost track throughout the day if it was my screams of useless resistance or someone else's. In the other room I could hear sounds of rhythmic breathing and laughing. Every room sounded like that." No woman was left untouched. The soldiers took turns with children, young girls and elderly women.

"I just prayed they would kill me. I was ready for them to do anything to me to prevent them going near my 12-year-old daughter. They could cut me into pieces as long as they didn't touch her." The woman paused, choking on her tears. "Why couldn't I protect her?" she asked, her voice trailing off into sobs.

Sabiha had heard this story too many times, but there was never a good answer to that haunting question. *Why?*

"We're not always in control of what others do," Sabiha counseled. "But you are here now, sharing your story, and finding a way to take control."

Another day, during another therapy session, the woman continued her story. One day, UN

forces came to patrol the area with some journalists, and when they arrived at the concentration camp, the woman was determined to talk to them. "I didn't think twice about telling them our situation," she told Sabiha. "I knew that we would all be killed if I opened my mouth, but I also had faith that once they heard what was happening to us, they would put a stop to it and take us away." And so she told them everything. They said they would see how they could help — and then they left.

A few hours later, the Croatian soldiers returned. They knew what she had done — what she'd said and to whom — and they started shooting at her. She was holding her 7-year-old son, and he screamed at the sight of her blood. Some time after the soldiers left, her daughter emerged from the darkness, her face clouded with an indescribable expression that her mother knew too well.

"What happened to you?" she'd asked her 12-year-old daughter. "Did the soldiers rape you?"

"No, nothing happened," the girl told her mother. "I just don't feel good. Just don't ask me any more questions."

The UN forces came back a few days later and took them all to a refugee camp near Zenica, but they'd taken too long. "We never spoke about what happened in that concentration camp," the woman said, looking up at Sabiha. "I didn't want to push her to speak because I didn't know what I would do, how I would react, if I would want to kill all Croats."

"I understand how painful and traumatic this was for you and your daughter," Sabiha said gently. "But you survived. You are here now seeking help, and we will work through all of it together. You have the innate ability to heal and recover." There was nothing Sabiha could say to change what had happened to this woman — to any of the women and girls whose stories she heard. But she could help them learn how to heal.

"Can you point to where you feel *strah*, *tuga*, *ljutnja*, *radost* in your body?" Sabiha asked, walking the woman through an exercise meant to help her connect with and work through her fear, sadness, anger and even happiness. "What situations do you think caused those emotions? And how have you dealt with some of those emotions?"

As the woman pointed to different parts of her body, locating her traumatic emotions, she realized that praying and listening to music always relaxed her. She recognized that the support of her husband and family encouraged her, reminded her she was not alone. "That is why I like listening to other women and exchanging our stories together," she told Sabiha. "We dress up and put on makeup and it makes us feel a sense of normalcy and sisterhood."

After they'd completed the exercise, Sabiha asked the woman how she felt.

"I have tools that can help me move forward with my life, and I want to motivate other women, like my daughter, to talk about their experiences and move forward," the woman said, a new, clear tone in her voice. "I recognize that I am strong. I am a survivor."

The Tunnel of Hope

Sabiha had heard about the tunnel the army of Bosnia and Herzegovina had constructed a few years back, carving out tons of stone to link Sarajevo with the outside world. The *Tunel Spasa,* or Tunnel of Hope, gave thousands of Sarajevo's besieged citizens access to food, water, electricity and humanitarian aid. But while it allowed people to move in and out of the city, the passage was very risky. Swarms of Serb forces waited just above the entrance and exit.

This was all the information Sabiha had. She didn't know what the tunnel looked like, how sturdy it was, or how to travel through it. She only knew that she wanted to go to Sarajevo. And so she arranged a written travel request to pass through the tunnel. She told just three people: her supervisor at the Islamic Community Center, her professor in Sarajevo, and her sister.

"Sabiha, you should wait until the war stops," Habiba insited. "What is your hurry? Why do you want to go to Sarajevo?"

Perhaps it had not been a good idea to tell her sister. "I want to see Sarajevo and find my friends. And I need to go back and continue my studies at the university," Sabiha explained. It was September, the start of the school year. And it was now 1995, three years since her praksa in Pljevlja and the siege of Sarajevo. "Don't worry, there are some students who are going to the Gazi Husrevbegova Medresa secondary school. I can go with them."

At dawn, two buses arrived in Zenica. Sabiha had promised to escort safely the children to the secondary school, but she had no idea what to expect. They reached Hrasnica, the entrance to the tunnel, after a few hours.

"There's the tunnel," the driver said flatly. He pointed to a dark cellar where Bosnian soldiers stood guard. "Wait for the soldiers to give you instructions and inform you about the security measures."

To Sabiha's relief, there was a tunnel guide. He explained that only 10 people could pass at a time, even though there were 60 of them. "I will be your eyes and ears," the guide assured them, but they must adapt to the darkness and poor ventilation. He suggested covering their heads with plastic because of the water and falling rocks and mud.

"Only one side at a time can pass," he added. "If I see people coming, we all have to back up and reposition our bodies. Otherwise we will all get stuck."

One by one, Sabiha and the students in her care entered the Tunnel of Hope. With her first step, Sabiha was shocked to see how short and narrow the tunnel actually was. Standing up straight was not an option; she had to bend over to crawl through the dark cavern. As they edged further away from the entrance and deeper into the earth, her eyes struggled to adjust to the absolute blackness. She could feel the sweat emanating from the person in front of her, whose footsteps she followed blindly. Together, they formed a sightless snake. Moisture dripped from the earthen ceiling above them. The guide's shouts echoed through the tunnel, warning them of unstable stones tumbling from the walls.

Sabiha could not think about the passage, only the final goal. The fresh air waiting on the other side, inside the city. After 30 minutes of hunched backs and dilated pupils, they reached the boundary between daylight and darkness.

"We are almost at the end," the guide announced. "Security personnel have already been informed about your arrival, but it is very important that you wait for their signal to exit the tunnel. Once you are out, run to the barricades. There, your next departure will be organized."

Sabiha waited her turn. It was sunny. *Finally, there is light*, Sabiha smiled. Only when she stood up did she notice she was drenched in mud up to her knees. There were soldiers everywhere — and even more, Sabiha knew, that she couldn't see. She watched them watching her as she came out. They had known about the tunnel for some time now and had positioned themselves to shoot anything that moved. Under the crossfire of snipers, she darted to the barricades, where they waited until a bus came to pick them up — Sabiha and all 60 students.

The bus could only travel through one part of downtown and a nearby neighborhood. As they passed through the ruins, Sabiha did not recognize the city in which she had spent six formative years. Everything was destroyed: buildings burned, homes demolished, streets lifeless. It reminded her of a ruined town of the Roman Empire. A few stragglers were stretched out beside the street, but it was impossible to decipher if they were wounded or bartering black market goods.

More difficult than the visual reality around her was the knowledge that her friends, classmates and professors were all gone. Still, she searched the streets for them constantly, expecting to run into Almasa any minute. But there were only embers and smoke. Sabiha felt empty and silent inside, her spirit mirroring her wounded city.

Mujo's Ghost

Winter had come early. It was only the end of October, but already the leaves had fallen and turned to frost on the ground. Three years of brutal warfare had passed while Sabiha and her family tried to stay active and establish some semblance of normalcy in their lives. Her two brothers were in the army, trying to help end the conflict. Her sister, like Sabiha, was working for an humanitarian NGO. Their parents had gone to Brajkovici to farm and produce food for the family. They were all carrying on with life as best they could.

Her brother Mujo had just returned to fight on the frontline after a few days back home to rest, change his clothes, and spend time was with his wife and 2-year-old daughter. He held Mediha's tiny fingers as they took a stroll in the garden. Her infectious giggles always tricked him into thinking the war was just a bad dream. He wished he could wake up every morning, holding her in his arms — but he knew he was fighting for her future. He prayed for the day when his daughter could eat a banana, a tomorrow where she could play outside without fear.

Not long after, he left for his standard 10-day shift at the frontlines. But he had not returned home. November came and a large blizzard dropped two meters of snow in the mountains. Two weeks after he should have returned, his family went to the commander of his unit. Perhaps he had decided to stay on the frontline longer, Sabiha suggested.

The commander shook his head. "Mujo should have returned a few weeks ago, ma'am."

My beloved brother, where is he?

The commander organized a search party. For two days, soldiers dug through the accumulating snow banks. They called everyone they knew. But Mujo seemed to have vanished without a trace. This was the second time he had gone missing, the second time his family had felt this nauseating ache of helplessness and worry. The first time, HVO forces had snatched him as a prisoner of war on his way to see his wife.

Sabiha decided to go to the Red Cross — she knew they usually had additional access or communication with the other side. But they knew nothing. Every turn was a dead end. Hours passed in agony, slowing almost to a halt.

Relatives and friends visited the family to pay their respects. *Why are you here?* Sabiha would never say it to them, so she said it to herself each time a visitor knocked at the door. *He will be home soon. He will walk through the door and grin at everyone, cheering the room with his bright smile.*

Soon, Mujo's wife and daughter, along with Sabiha's parents, came to Zenica so everyone could be together. As the oldest child, Mujo had been the family's beacon of light. But as empty days fluttered by in a blur of torment, the dullness in each of their eyes said the same thing: *We need to accept that he is gone.*

A month disappeared. Their lives had stopped. One night at midnight, the telephone rang. Sabiha picked up. "Don't ask me for my name. Don't ask me anything," a strange voice whispered.

"I only called to inform you that Mujo is alive. He is in the hands of Serb forces. They arrested him and have taken him to a prison near Siprage. Listen carefully: Call the army commander and tell them this information. Then call Red Cross to register him for the exchange."

Before Sabiha could find any words, the line was cut off. She didn't wait a breath, not even to tell Mujo's wife what had happened. She dialed the army commander, and then the Red Cross, who conducted their own investigation and discovered that it was true. He was being held at a Serb prison, they reported. The family must remain patient and wait for the date of exchange.

Sabiha and her family waited, and waited, for the day when soldiers would be traded for soldiers, civilians for civilians. Finally, they received the phone call. "We know Mujo was arrested near the mountains of Ricice and spent some days in that prison," the caller explained. After the Red Cross registered him, they had transferred him to Banja Luka, where the exchange would take place that day. "We don't know when exactly. They will line up the two armies and call out the soldiers' names to trade off. Just wait where you are and we will escort him home."

Within hours, Mujo stepped through the door. After two months of being a ghost, he was home.

He never spoke about his experience, not directly. Sometimes, when his daughter wouldn't finish her plate, he would joke, "When I was in solitary confinement, I realized the value of life — how even poor-tasting food is good food. Eat your soup."

He never spoke of revenge or anger. All he ever said was, "It was a difficult time, but we deal with it how we know and thank God we survived."

And he never blamed his captors, Serb or Croat. Never.

The First Step

In December, the war came to an end. The warring factions and heads of state signed a peace agreement, dividing the state of Bosnia-Herzegovina into two entities — the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska. But the suffering, fear and insecurity did not stop the instant ink touched paper. Rebuilding relationships, restoring the social fabric, had not reached the negotiation table.

Immediately after the ceasefire, Sabiha and three other psychotherapists from Medica Zenica set off to different parts of their divided country to bring people together and identify the needs of the survivors. They traveled a few hours northwest into what was now Republika Srpska, an area intended to be an ethnically pure Serb state where non-Serbs had not been welcome during the war. It was risky for Sabiha to be there so soon after the war, but she and her colleagues were working for peace, work that had no place for loyalties or religious affiliations. They were driven by their desire to help any civilian who had survived war trauma, specifically sexual or gender-based violence.

Sabiha and her colleagues had been in contact with a Serbian NGO from Belgrade that organized participants for them at the Public Health Institute. As Sabiha walked through the wooden doors of the institute, something felt amiss, slightly off-kilter. The majority of the participants inside were male. She exchanged glances with her companions, all four of them thinking the same thing: *Where are the women?*

And then a second thought came to Sabiha. These were not just men. They were soldiers — male soldiers from the Serb forces. As two Bosniak Muslims and two Croat women, they were the men's trained targets. They couldn't leave; that would look suspicious. Hastily, Sabiha pulled off her headscarf. They walked into the room and separated the participants into groups of 25. Before Sabiha could open her mouth to introduce the project, someone shouted, "Who are you? Where are you from? Who organized this?"

"Hello," Sabiha replied, trying to diffuse the man's obvious suspicion. "This project was organized by an organization from Belgrade. We are here to …"

"You are from Belgrade?" he interrupted. He glared at her, studying her carefully.

Sabiha squirmed under his scowling inquisition. "Yes," she said, with all the courage and confidence she could gather. "I am from Belgrade."

"Do you know I am the first volunteer who decided to fight with the Serb forces?" the man snapped back. "I worked in Slovenia but when I heard about the war in Bosnia, I came to kill Muslims," he declared.

His smug words shook her. She could not pretend they didn't. Here she was, face to face with a killer who had no shame for his crimes. But Sabiha's anxiety quickly subsided into an aching sadness as she imagined all the lives he had proudly taken. And then the last few years of her life flashed through her mind, a series of quick slides: the soldiers attacking her home, the relatives killed

right in front of her, her best friend shelled fetching water, everything her family had lost, their last five years living as refugees.

And then, just as quickly, her sadness morphed back to anxiety. *It's all over now!* her mind screamed. *What will happen if he finds out where we're really from? Why did I decide to come here? I wanted to help people but instead I came here to be killed.*

"OK," Sabiha said, composing herself. "It's OK if you don't want us to continue. It's fine. It's your decision. I don't want to decide for you."

"No, I recognize your intentions. I want to continue," the man said.

And so they did. As Sabiha recorded the man's responses to the baseline survey and noted his symptoms, she could see he was suffering deeply. It could not be easy to go to the frontline, to spend every waking hour slaughtering innocent lives. This man was now dealing with the aftermath of his choices.

War knows no bounds, Sabiha was learning. The innocent and guilty, the survivors and deceased, soldiers and civilians, men, women and children — no one is left untouched.

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"We are all one people. We speak the same language. We share similar customs," Sabiha's colleague said. This time, the four of them were honest about their identities. They had gathered 40 Bosniak, Serb and Croat women for a workshop — to help women as women, not as Muslim, Orthodox or Catholic.

From the Public Health Institute, they had traveled a few hours west to the town of Glamoc, in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The town had been hit hard by the war: first, Serbs attacking Croats and Bosniaks. Then, Croats attacking Bosniaks. Glamoc had been cleansed of all cultural and historic heritage early on.

In the first group session, the women — who used to be friendly neighbors — were encouraged to speak openly about their experiences, to listen, and to respect one another. Sabiha hoped they would rebuild their old connections, remember their friendships. But the group was silent. And after the silence, each woman went her separate way back home.

The silence broke at the next session.

"I don't even want to look at you I'm so angry," one Bosniak woman told her Serb neighbor. "You were my best friend. You knew everything about me and my family. You knew where I put my keys, which kind of gold I had. Our children played together every day. We cooked for our husbands with each other. But when the soldiers came into my house, you saw them beat me, my husband, my children. When they took everything, you didn't say or do anything to protect me. Your best friend."

Tears were rolling down the Serb neighbor's cheeks. "You are right," she said, wiping her face. "Everything you said is true, but please listen to what happened that morning. When the soldiers came to your house, I first tried to protect you. I begged them not to touch your family. 'This family is wonderful, they are my friends,' I said. The soldier looked at me and shouted, 'If you want to protect them, I will kill you first, then your son, then your daughter. You want to protect a Muslim woman? She is the enemy!' So I was torn. I wanted to protect you but I also needed to protect my family," the woman murmured, looking down at her hands. "It was a very difficult decision."

The Bosnian woman rose from her seat. She knelt beside her friend and grabbed her hand. "This is the first time I heard that you tried to protect me. I didn't know you spoke with the soldiers or that your life was threatened."

War, the two women finally understood, had put everyone in painful, impossible situations. How do you remain neighbors when forced to choose between your own life and the woman's next door? Between your family and hers?

But peace was not like war. They could want it for themselves and for others. In fact, peace required it. If they wanted to protect themselves, they had to protect others.

As the other women watched, the two neighbors hugged. This step, the first toward reconciliation, was the hardest. The next steps would be easier.

Dignity for Survivors

By 2003, Sabiha's work with sexually traumatized women had taken her around the world — and now she would bring women from around the world to her. Thirty women were on their way to Bosnia from Lebanon, Austria, Switzerland, Germany and Spain.

Sabiha wanted to build peaceful religious communities, to create mutual respect and cooperation, and women were central to that project. She called it the European Project for Inter-religious Learning, and with the help of two colleagues she had organized the first training workshop. They would spend a week together, traveling around Bosnia, learning what happened during the war, and what was happening now.

But she needed help creating a presentation on the history of the war. Sabiha had lived it, certainly, but she immediately thought of Aladin. He'd returned to Bosnia after the war and visited her at work from time to time — and he was now working on his PhD in history. When she told him about the project and asked for his help, he agreed at once and joined her in Sarajevo, the first stop in the women's tour of Bosnia.

Somewhere between the workshops and the presentations, Aladin finally found a moment alone with Sabiha. "I want to be honest," he began, looking into her hazel eyes. "I want to ask you something."

"OK then, ask me," Sabiha replied.

"You know that I'm in love with you," he said. "I want to know, what do you think about it?" Sabiha couldn't help herself. She started to laugh, just as she'd laughed so many years ago when Aladin had revealed his plan for them to marry and escape to Turkey.

"Look at you, always laughing when I ask you this question. When we were in Pljevlja, you laughed the same way. I have decided. Now you must think it over and tell me."

She did think. A few months passed. Aladin finished his PhD And when Sabiha asked him to marry her, he did not laugh. He said yes.

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"I will never forget one of the first girls I met at Medica Zenica," Sabiha began. "She was far into her pregnancy, almost eight months."

She looked out at the delegation seated before her: government representatives, civil society members, survivors, NGO staff, women's rights activists. Judicial proceedings had paved the way to declare rape a crime against humanity, but despite the international protocols and conventions, the consequences of wartime rape had not been dealt with. That's why she was standing in front of these people: to present on the obstacles survivors of sexual and gender-based violence continued to face on a daily basis in Bosnia — the trauma, the stigmatization, the helplessness. She continued with her story.

"But the woman didn't want to keep the child. Her pregnancy was a product of the countless rapes she had suffered during the war. It was a reminder of powerlessness, hate and shame. She stayed in our safe house and received medical treatment and counseling. We supported her decision, but after the child's birth she changed her mind. She wanted to keep her newborn son but she knew her parents would never accept it."

Sabiha didn't have to tell the delegation about the pain the young girl suffered, or how her family and community had rejected her child. They knew that most women lived on the margins of society — and that a raped woman lived on an even more isolated margin where she was left to blame herself. They were aware that perpetrators walked freely without punishment for their crimes and that there were no legal frameworks to serve the needs of survivors. Now it was a matter of acknowledging the neglect and committing to solutions.

"After seven days, we organized the traditional Islamic naming ceremony. The girl invited her parents, hoping it would be a new beginning for all of them. When they walked through Medica's doors, they embraced their daughter. The child was passed around the circle, each of us holding him in our arms and praying for him, his health, his future — and his mother. The imam whispered the customary prayer in the child's ear. The child was named."

This young woman's story was unique. Very few had happy endings. Thousands of other women suffered in silence and never found support or acceptance, which was why these influential members of Bosnian society had been gathered: to amend the Law of Basic Social Protection to include survivors of wartime rape. Activists voiced the need to protect survivors with special support, enabling them to lead normal lives. They called on government officials to provide healthcare, psychosocial and financial support, and to protect the women's right to live where they choose.

"Women have a very important role," Sabiha told the delegation in closing. "Sexual violence is an attack on the individual, the family, the community, and our entire society. We need to rebuild our social fabric, starting with the dignity of survivors. Their memories should be our memories; their sacrifices, our sacrifices."

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That meeting was historic. For the first time, the needs and rights of women survivors in Bosnia were brought to light. But once again, there had been no concrete results. Three years later, women still lived precariously, teetering on the margins and surrounded by their traumatic memories. For those three years, Sabiha and 23 other NGOs had been planning and preparing for their "Dignity for Survivors" campaign.

The team of women's rights activists and NGOs took to the streets of Bosnia, advocating for the needs of survivors and collecting signatures door-to-door. Every day, Sabiha was in a different part of Bosnia trying to pull the issues that had been swept under the rug of convenience back into the light. She worked day and night. Nobody could believe she was nine months pregnant with her first child.

One day of the campaign, Sabiha and her colleague Ida were on their way to the town of Tesanj when they came upon a car accident on the highway. All the roads were blocked. As they sat in traffic wondering what to do, the driver suggested an alternative route through the mountains. But, he warned, it would be very bumpy.

"Never mind," he said, looking at Sabiha's plump belly. "We should wait until the road clears."

"No, no," Sabiha interrupted, shaking her head. "I don't want to lose a whole day of collecting signatures. I can handle it. Let's go!"

The driver looked at Ida, who shrugged. Reluctantly, he started the engine, turned off the highway, and started up the unpaved path. For two hours, Ida glanced at Sabiha with every jolt, nervous the baby would pop out at any moment. Sabiha just smiled, one hand resting on her belly and the other holding onto the door handle. She wasn't worried. The sun was approaching the horizon when they finally reached Tesanj, but Sabiha and Ida still collected hundreds of signatures and met with the local women's organization.

Five days later, back home in Zenica, Sabiha gave birth to a beautiful little girl. She named her Nedzma.

Her colleagues called to congratulate her, but they also called because parliament had passed the Law on Social Protection, which included women survivors of war trauma. "Did you hear the news?" they shouted gleefully over the phone. "It's all over the media!"

Together with the other women's groups, they had collected more than 50,000 signatures — and placed them on the parliament's table. Thirteen years after the war began, survivors could at last apply for the status of civil victims of war, entitling them to benefits to regain control over their lives. Violence, the law recognized, was not private — it was criminal.

My daughter's future is going to be bright, Sabiha thought as she looked into her tiny newborn's eyes. *She will carry on the legacy of women's dignity.*

Ida and the driver came to visit Sabiha and her daughter a few days later. Holding her coffee, Ida looked at Sabiha. "I will never forget the day we went to Tesanj. I was so worried. I didn't know what I would do if you went into labor during that car ride."

Sabiha smiled down at her daughter. "Their sacrifices are our sacrifices."

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The following year, Sabiha became the director of Medica Zenica, just in time to fight for the organization's survival. Bosnia was now a post-conflict country. Its era of humanitarian relief had ended, and most of Medica's donors had left to support countries with more dire needs. As director, it was Sabiha's job to preserve the organization. She decided to approach the government — first her municipality, then the canton, and then the state if she had to. The government had

adopted the law to support survivors, but it was not enough. The law had no budget, so there was nothing to show for it.

There were six safe houses in Zenica-Doboj Canton and they were all overcrowded with women and children who needed food, hygienic supplies, doctors, nurses, psychotherapists and support staff. Sabiha organized 23 meetings in two months with the municipal authorities of Zenica. "We don't just need verbal support," she said at each meeting. "We request your full commitment to the most vulnerable members of our society. We cannot expect donors from other countries to support us forever. The government needs to take responsibility for its citizens. We need concrete solutions to ensure women are and will always be protected."

But every official had the same response: "We want to support safe houses and survivors, but we don't have any influence over the budget."

If that was the problem, Sabiha decided, she would amend the whole system. She developed a model: Each of the 12 municipalities in the canton would dedicate a percentage of their budget to social services for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

Sahiba knew that if Medica Zenica closed its doors, survivors would have no safe place to go, no protection, nobody advocating for their rights. *Their sacrifices are our sacrifices,* she told herself. And so, while the canton endlessly debated her proposed budget model, Sabiha and her colleague worked without salaries for eight months. At the end of the year, the canton adopted Sabiha's proposal. They would help to protect their most vulnerable citizens, the dignity of women, with words as well as money.

But Sabiha would give up her salary again if she had to. Medica Zenica had saved her when she was a refugee, and she would stand forever in solidarity with the organization that had given her life meaning.

The River

One balmy autumn day, a woman came to Medica with her children, a timid daughter the youngest of the three. Sabiha greeted her, gesturing for the woman to sit down across from her. The woman began to tell her story almost before she was seated. How up to this very day, she didn't know what happened to her husband. How the day he vanished had changed everything.

When the soldiers entered their village near Banja Luka, it was as if a tornado had touched down. The soldiers stormed into her home, a strange gleam in their eyes that even the dogs didn't recognize. As her two small sons watched the soldiers drag their father out of the house, her daughter ran to hide in the bedroom, where she found soldiers shoving her mother to the ground. The soldiers didn't see the little girl, an invisible 4-year-old at the edge of the scene, but she could see the dull gaze of her mother's almond-shaped eyes — the eyes that always soothed her. While the five soldiers took turns with her mother, the little girl recited a prayer her grandmother had taught her.

"All I could think in that moment was why is God allowing this to happen? Why is he letting my 4-year-old daughter watch me be raped?" But this woman was not asking Sabiha to answer her impossible questions of why. She had already come up with her own. "Then I looked into her precious eyes and knew that God was there, all around us. He was in my daughter's heart, holding our gaze. It was the solace of her prayer that gave me strength and faith to breathe during that horrific time."

She had since moved back to her native town, in what was now Republika Srpska. But every day was a struggle. Her home had once been a mix of people from all different backgrounds who lived together in coexistence, but now Serbs dominated the village. She couldn't find a job to support her children because every job was first offered to Serbs. And her children were trying to adapt, but at school their Serb classmates would shout, "This is not your land! Go to the Federation, where Muslims are supposed to live!" On the school bus, her daughter had learned to wait for all the Serb children to sit before she did. Sometimes there were no seats left, so she would stand.

"It is very tough, I know. We still have many problems," Sabiha said, sensing the woman had finished and was waiting to be comforted. "Trauma destroys three pillars of life: One is the picture of yourself, the second is your picture of others, and the third is belief in natural things, the universe, or God. Your pillar of faith has not been destroyed, and it is easier to repair the other pillars. You are a strong woman. We will get you support. We will work together to heal."

As she sat across from this woman, Sabiha realized she was also looking at herself and all women whom she had met since the war. Their lives were like a river. It is shallow and narrow, then deep and wide. At certain points, it bends and curves where it collides with the stones of war, but the river is ever moving. The river is all of its parts integrated into one — cloud droplets, waterfalls, snowflakes all merge and flow back into the main source.

Those who hold their burdens and remain heavy sink into the abyss. But those who let go — and help others do the same — float upon the magnificent buoyancy of the river of humanity.

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Sixteen years after the war, Sabiha strolls through her beloved city with her two children. Nedzma walks next to her, holding her hand. In her other arm she holds her 1-year-old son, Afan. This is not the Sarajevo she once knew.

"Look Nedzma," she points, "there used to be a beautiful park with a playground here, where I would play with my secondary school classmates every day."

The Gazi Husrevbegova Mosque would have been a few steps into the heart of Old Market. And just a few steps from there, the Old Serbian Church. The cathedral had been nearby too, the synagogue just over the River Miljacka. Sabiha tries to reconstruct her Sarajevo for her children, to conjure those old, beautiful buildings from the ashes of history.

"And there," Sabiha says as they wander through the town center. "That's where I would meet my friends for coffee. We would go to the cinema or watch concerts together — there was always something to do because the city was so alive!"

A newly reconstructed downtown towers over the historic cobbled streets of Old Town. The romantic flavors of the city have been swept away with the rubble, and only a few traces are left of the old downtown — the epicenter of ideas, renowned artwork, Latin, Greek and Roman poets. Metal skyscrapers cast a literal shadow over Sabiha's memories.

"It doesn't matter what structures are here now," Sabiha tells Nedzma. "We can rebuild buildings, but the lives lost to the war can never be restored." Sabiha watches her daughter, full of curious awe, and looks down at her son, so innocent. Her memories of friends and favorite cafés will always stay with her, but she hopes for a new Sarajevo for them.

"But we do have some very nice shops now after the war," Sabiha says, trying to sound hopeful.

"What is war, Mama?" Nedzma asks.

"My daughter, war is when beautiful things are destroyed," Sabiha says, searching for a definition fit for a child. "War is when you would once run into 10 familiar faces and chat away your afternoon but now aimlessly search every corner for a trace of their memory. War is when everything is emptied — streets, homes and people's hearts."

"But why Mama, why?" she asks.

Why? That haunting, impossible question asked by so many since the war, this time from the mouth of her own daughter.

"I don't know, my star. But sharing the memories of goodness can change people's thinking. It encourages us to prevent horrible things from happening again. We can learn — and we can carry on with life." Like the river of humanity, the current rushing onward.

A CONVERSATION WITH SABIHA HUSIC

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The following is an edited compilation of interviews conducted by Maryam Rokhideh.

Q: What values guide your life and work?

A: From an early age, my parents taught me and my siblings that the most important thing was to be a good human being and help others. Before the war I had different thinking about all this, but during the war I recognized the importance of those values. When we were refugees, my father said that no matter how much property you have, overnight you can lose it all, but it is important what you have in your mind, soul and heart.

Each person during the war showed his or her true face. I believe that even in the hard times of war, it is important to remain good and helpful to people. Throughout my journey, kind people helped me. I never felt any fear; I didn't even think about it. That is why I want to speak about the war. Yes, there were very horrible things that happened and people in Bosnia and Herzegovina suffered a lot, but it is very important to speak about the good things to motivate others. However horrible the war was, we can also find some positive examples. In most countries, including my country, people speak only about the negative things. But I believe that positive things can help us move toward a future of reconciliation and peace. I think those good examples of humanity can change people's thinking and lead them to contribute to a better society.

Today it is not easy to find those values in Bosnia because a lot changed after the war. We did not see immediately the effects of war. Many refugees tried to get humanitarian aid, and some people decided not to work and became very lazy and passive. Then people tried to measure and compare their material properties and that divided people. They lost compassion and sensitivity for others. Before the war, people thought about their neighbors and tried to help people, but that is lost now in most places. We need to develop those values again — the values that bring us together in understanding and peace.

Q: What is the role of religion in Bosnian society and how has it influenced your work?

A: During the ex-Yugoslavia time, religion was hidden because we were a communist state. But after the first elections, it was important that we could be free and speak about religion. More and more, people are recognizing the values of religion. If women recognize religion as an important coping mechanism, it is important that we help them be free to express their beliefs. We know that trauma destroys three pillars: One is the picture about myself, the second is the picture about others, and the third is the belief in natural powers, the universe, or God. If we see that a woman has an undestroyed pillar in God or natural powers, then it is easy to repair the other pillars.

We actively work with the Islamic community to help women who suffered rape during the war heal their wounds. Guided by this goal, we visited the authority within the Islamic community and asked him to issue a *fatwa*[36] regarding women victims of wartime rape. The fatwa sent a very important message to Bosnian society, especially to Muslims, about the need to respect women and girls who survived sexual violence and support them and their children. It gave survivors the status of *Shahid*,

meaning they did not have equipment to fight with their life but they were forced to fight with their body. The goal of the fatwa was to enable women to enter the process of healing without neglect, fear, stigmatization or guilt. The fatwa was spread to all media networks and published in *Takvim*, an annual magazine that is a part of the literature of a Muslim believer.

Q: To what extent do you think there has been reconciliation in Bosnia?

A: There has only been reconciliation among ordinary people. Most Bosnians prefer to live together, to break our boundaries and integrate. Before the war, we all lived together in peace and our children went to the same school, but now cantons or territories are divided along ethno-religious lines. Regardless of how much we have suffered, people want to integrate. But the problem is that political leaders try to manipulate people and create an atmosphere of division. They fight for their own interests, not their citizens. Political leaders are not ready to reconcile. That is why I like my job so much. I have the opportunity to communicate with all citizens — especially women and children — about building trust and working together. Perhaps political leaders will recognize us as models.

Now in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we have strong women who know what they want and are motivated to teach other women to identify and advocate for their needs. At Medica we developed projects for women in rural areas to train and educate them for political life: how to recognize violence, advocate for their rights, and choose their political position.

From 1991 to 2012, when we had our last election, women told us that they never went to vote; they would give their husbands or sons their ID cards to vote for them. So we started organizing trainings for them about political participation. We have worked with women from more than 20 villages and they have started to think and change their behaviors. It is very important that they recognize for themselves why it is important to change their behaviors.

Q: What does justice look like for survivors in Bosnia's legal system?

A: The legal system is very complex and can be disenfranchising due to the administrative bureaucracy of the entities, Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Brcko District. Women still must deal with different rights in each territory, canton and entity, making it extremely challenging to navigate the legal system.

If we speak about justice and reconciliation, we need to work on different levels. First, we need to support survivors and their needs, and then we need to create a safe atmosphere for them to give their testimony without fear. The other level is that we need to talk to political leaders and have them listen to people about their needs. Very often, I hear from women that for them, justice means perpetrators apologizing or acknowledging the suffering they inflicted.

In 2011, we institutionalized the Network for Victims and Witnesses to monitor individual needs of survivors of rape and other forms of sexual violence. We established these networks to create a safe and supporting atmosphere for survivors and help them before their testimonies. Before a woman goes to court, she needs to be aware of her rights or get psychological or financial support, so we provide resources, support and contacts. We also go with the survivors to court. The first of these institutional support networks for victims in cases of war crimes and sexual violence were

established in Zenica-Doboj Canton, Central Bosnia Canton and Una-Sana Canton. The network is a team of police officers, judges, prosecutors, social workers and psychologists.

Q: Will you talk about your work on domestic violence?

A: In the post-war period, women also started to speak up about violence at home — family and domestic violence. My team at Medica Zenica, along with many other NGOs, made a huge effort to have domestic violence recognized as a criminal act rather than a private act. The first Law on Protection Against Domestic Violence was adopted in 2011 in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 2011 and 2012, there were 1,065 interventions provided for victims of violence in Zenica Municipality.

In June of 2013, our country signed and ratified the Council of Europe Convention on preventing domestic violence and violence against women. I am so happy because the convention mentioned all of the recommendations and results we wanted from our government, like safe houses, economic empowerment, counseling and working with survivors and perpetrators. It is also important that we monitor how we will implement that convention so our citizens receive some benefits after ratification.

Human trafficking is also related to increased violence and the difficulty of protecting women's rights. This issue is especially concerning when it comes to underage girls of Roma nationality, because according to Roma customs and beliefs it is acceptable to sell a child or a young woman. Another common form of trafficking is labor exploitation of children; the number of children living and working on the street is increasing.

Q: Is the situation the same in the other entity, Republika Srpska?

A: Each entity has its own constitution and administration, but we have a good relationship with NGOs from Republika Srpska and we support each other. If we cannot get the same law at the state level, we try to lobby together to have similar laws in both entities so that survivors have equal rights. They have a law similar to our Law on Social Protection, but their administration is different. We will see how we can continue to ensure equal rights for all citizens no matter where they live.

Q: What do you think is one of the greatest challenges Bosnia faces today?

A: I feel fear regarding the political situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina. It's been almost 18 years since the war ended, but the situation is bad because sometimes our political leaders intend to divide people. They don't necessarily want to create a better society and circumstances for their citizens. Some people do not have the basic things they need to lead a normal life and most do not have jobs or enough financial support to send their children to school. How can we speak about social justice if some people don't even have money or health insurance to go to the hospital? Meanwhile, the children of some political leaders don't work or attend university and have more than they need.

When politicians recognize that they can't succeed with their own interests then they start to manipulate people. They say, "We will give you a job and a flat, but you need to vote for our political party." But after the election, nothing changes.

When I think about the global situation, I think of all the wars happening. I see and read about how much people are suffering. When the war stopped in Bosnia, I really thought the world heard the message from our experiences. But after us came the Rwandan genocide and now there are still countries going through the same thing. I am so sad and fearful about war happening again. That is my big fear. How can we prevent violence and war?

Q: Do you have any hope for change?

A: What I have hope for is that we need to work more with ordinary people about their rights. We need to demand from political leaders and government institutions that no matter what political party they're affiliated with or what entity they live in, all citizens need to have equal rights and opportunities for education and jobs. We also need to encourage our government to work for people's interests and the betterment of our society.

What is very good is that women are so active in the political sphere and are ready to listen to ordinary people's voices. In the past three years, we have started to collaborate with all the women from the different political parties and hold dialogues about the situation in our country. We have recognized that women leaders are ready to make some changes.

In October 2012 there were local elections. While women still did not get enough positions in the municipal councils or mayoral positions, in Zenica-Doboj Canton, Medica Zenica conducted a "Vote for Women" campaign and had the best results of elected women in all of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Out of five women who were elected for mayors, two were in Zenica-Doboj Canton. And 49 of the 273 municipal council seats were won by women, an increase from 2008 when there were 37 women in the municipal council and no female mayors elected. However, there is still a lot of work to be done to reach the Gender Equality Law's minimum of 40 percent representation.[37]

BIOGRAPHY OF A PEACE WRITER — Maryam Rokhideh

Maryam Rokhideh is a peacebuilding consultant, most recently working with International Alert in Uganda and the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa. In addition to Uganda, she has worked or conducted research in Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Cameroon. Rokhideh's varied experiences with nongovernmental organizations and research institutions have focused on sexual and gender-based violence, mediation and capacity-building. She holds a master's degree in conflict resolution from the University of Bradford in England, where she worked with the John and Elnora Ferguson Centre for African Studies. She received her bachelor's degree in international studies, with minors in conflict resolution and comparative literature, from the University of California, Irvine. During her undergraduate tenure, she conducted two research projects under Rotary International and the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program.

JOAN B. KROC INSTITUTE FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE
at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies

The mission of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (IPJ), based at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies, is to foster peace, cultivate justice and create a safer world. The IPJ was established in 2000 through a generous gift from the late Joan B. Kroc to the university to create an institute for the study and practice of peace and justice.

The institute strives, in Joan B. Kroc's words, to not only talk about peace, but also make peace. In its peacebuilding initiatives in places like Nepal and Kenya, the IPJ works with local partners to help strengthen their efforts to consolidate peace with justice in the communities in which they live. In addition to the Women PeaceMakers Program, the institute is home to the Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series and WorldLink Program, and produces several publications in the fields of peace and justice.

ENDNOTES

[1] A version of this paragraph first appeared in the article "'Women Cannot Cry Anymore': Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict," by Emiko Noma in *Critical Half*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007). Copyright 2007 Women for Women International.

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[5] "Kingdom of Yugoslavia." Global Security. www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/serbia/history-kingdom.htm

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[17] Deklaracija prvog Bosnjackog sabora (Declaration of the First Bosniak Convention), quoted in Vijece kongresa bosnjackih intelektualaca, Almanah 1992-2002, Sarajevo: VKBI, 2002, p. 161.

[18] The narrative that follows will use the term Bosniak to refer to Bosnian Muslims.

[19] "History of Bosnia and Herzegovina from the origins to 1992." NATO-led Stabilisation Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

[20] "Bosnia and Herzegovina." Encyclopedia Britannica. Encyclopedia Britannica Online Academic Edition. www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/700826/Bosnia-and-Herzegovina

[21] Neuffer, Elizabeth (2002). *The Key to My Neighbor's House: Seeking Justice in Bosnia and Rwanda.* New York: Picador USA.

[22] "Case Study: The Srebrenica Massacre, July 1995" Gendercide Watch. www.gendercide.org/case_srebrenica.html

[23] "Bosnia and Herzegovina." Encyclopedia Britannica Online Academic Edition. www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/700826/Bosnia-and-Herzegovina

[24] According to the Center for Human Rights in Zenica, Human Rights Commission report dated on the May 19, 1993.

[25] Neuffer, Elizabeth (2002 *The Key to My Neighbor's House: Seeking Justice in Bosnia and Rwanda.* New York: Picador, USA. p. 275.

[26] *ibid*

[27] A Bosnian delicacy, the molasses-like jam of condensed juice (usually plum, grape, fig or mulberry) is used as a syrup for breakfast.

[28] An Islamic holiday in which one fasts for an entire month to fulfill one of the five pillars of Islam. It is observed on the ninth month of the Islamic calendar.

[29] Greeting in Bosnian language, translates to "How are you?"

[30] Bijelo Dugme ("White Button") was the most popular rock band from Sarajevo and is regarded as one of the most important acts of the former Yugoslav rock scene.

[31] Translates to "miss" or "young lady" in Bosnian.

[32] Translates to "sir" in Bosnian.

[33] Translates to "Thank God" in Bosnian.

[34] A Bosnian expression: the treat or gift that should be given to the deliverer of good news.

[35] A traditional mat on the floor or table where people gather to eat.

[36] A fatwa is an Islamic legal pronouncement issued by an expert in religious law (mufti), pertaining to a specific issue, usually at the request of an individual or judge to resolve an issue in cases not covered by Islamic jurisprudence.

[37] The Election Law was published in the Official Gazette of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina on March 11, 2013.