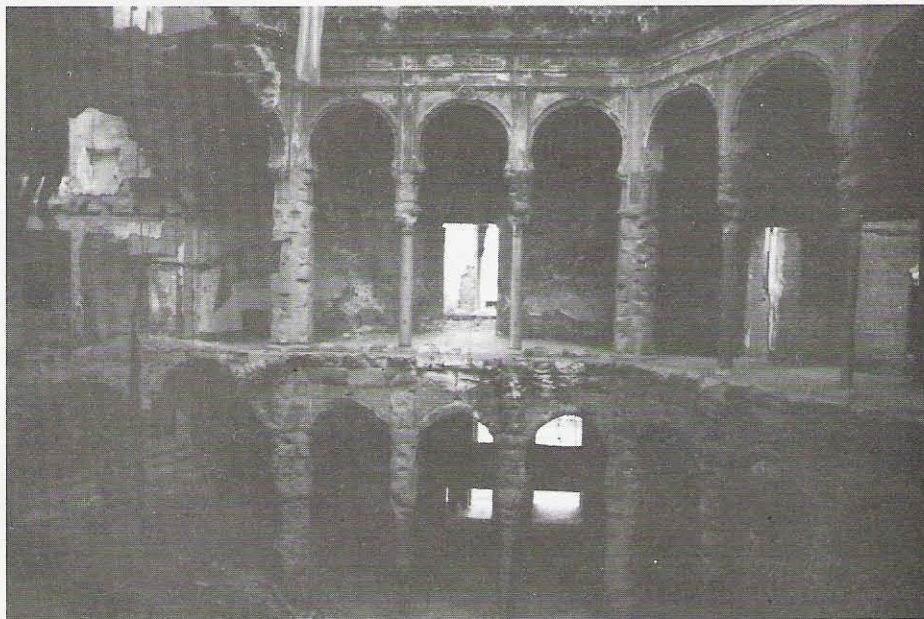


Sarajevo,

City
of

Many Faiths

Story
and photographs
by Doug Hostetter



The National Library of Sarajevo

In July of 1996, the FOR organized two interfaith Work Camps in Bosnia. One was in Bihać, where members lived and worked for almost two weeks (see Jan/Feb. Fellowship); the second group traveled to Sarajevo and other major cities. The author was the leader of the second group, in which participants made a conscious effort to interview people from each ethnic background in the areas where they visited. The group met with the leaders of the Orthodox, Catholic, and Muslim communities in Sarajevo. —Editor.

Sarajevo was built as a multicultural city, and the Old Orthodox Church is the oldest religious institution in town. It was burned and rebuilt many times over the centuries: the columns in the current structure date from the twelfth century, and the rest of the existing building is from the eighteenth century. Within a 200-yard radius of the Old Church, you will find the oldest synagogue, the oldest mosque, and the Catholic Cathedral. Most Sarajevans are proud of the fact that when the Christian rulers of Spain expelled the Spanish Jews in the fifteenth century, the Muslim rulers of Sarajevo welcomed them. When the war began, the religious leaders who believed in the creation of a country of only one religion left the city—some blessing the very military units which were shelling their former home town. But the religious leaders who chose to stay represent the best of Sarajevo's religious tradition.



Fr. Krstan Bijeljic speaks:

"The main road from Constantinople [Istanbul] to Rome passed through Sarajevo, and so this is the oldest religious center in Sarajevo, dating from the sixth century. Over the centuries the church has been burned several times. During the war the church was hit by hundreds of shells, just like all of the buildings in Old Sarajevo, but because of its thick walls and heavy vaulted roof, it sustained little damage. I never had any trouble with the Bosnian authorities. Sarajevans respect each other's houses of worship. Ordinary people do not destroy churches and mosques. God never condones the destruction of houses of worship. Despite the horrors of war, we had no problems here.

"Before the war there were seven Orthodox priests in Sarajevo. When the war broke out, six of the priests left, but I stayed and was assisted by three retired priests, two of whom died during the war. I stayed because my congregation needed me. I never felt threatened, or I would have left. In fact I have been welcomed and cared for.

"I was separated from my family by the war. My son and I live in Sarajevo. I also have sons in the Serb Republic part of Bosnia, another child in Slovenia, a grandson in Belgrade and another in Paris. I have seen none of my family except for my son for the last five years.

"During the war there were two main goals: save our life and find something to eat. Yet, we gave mass at eight every morning throughout the war, with special masses on Sundays and holidays. I needed wine for the mass, and the Catholic church sent me some. When the Jewish community received wine from Israel, they shared it with me. During the war there was only one bakery, and the owner is a Muslim. Everyone had to stand in line to buy bread. I explained to the owner that I needed bread for mass every morning. Each day he set aside bread for me—and I was never charged.

"We did not have a religious war in Sarajevo. Twice the Orthodox bishop visited Sarajevo. Each time he was welcomed also by Catholic and Muslim religious leaders of this city."

The Rev. Dr. Mato Zovki speaks:

"There had been 500,000 Catholics (Bosnian Croats) in the Sarajevo dioceses before the war started, but now there are only 170,000 (25,000 in Sarajevo proper). All of the Catholic churches in Sarajevo remained open throughout the war. Mass was given by seventeen young priests who chose to remain in the city. In Pale, Banja Luka, and other Serb-controlled cities, the Catholic churches were closed by the authorities and in most cases destroyed. The Archbishop visited Sarajevo numerous times during the war, going in and

out over Mt. Igman in his effort to support the priests and parishioners who remained in the city.

"Cardinal Puljic has complained that Sarajevo is becoming Islamicized. Non-Muslims often lose their jobs and apartments to Muslim refugees who were expelled by the Serbs from their towns and villages in eastern Bosnia. We need space to heal as a multicultural society. We are interested in a Bosnian state with three peoples with equal rights—we mean really equal, not just in words.

"At the beginning of the war, Catholics and Muslims had good relations. But in 1993, when the break came between Croatia and Bosnia, we were pushed apart. All Catholics are being blamed for the crimes of the Croats in Mostar. I was in Mostar a few weeks ago. I was afraid at the depth of the hatred in the hearts of these simple Catholics. For people who have suffered too much, it is too early for reconciliation—they need time to heal. Now Muslim leaders ask for public repentance before dialogue.

"I am not afraid of Bosnian Muslims. The Islam of Bosnia originated from Turkey and is very tolerant and often quite secular. I do not believe that the Iranian fundamentalists will make much headway in Bosnia. The leaders from each religion must educate their congregations in tolerance. We need people like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr."

Dr. Mustafa E.F. Cerić speaks:

"Karadzic has made Bosnia more Muslim. When the people saw that no one on earth was going to help them, they turned to God as their only hope.

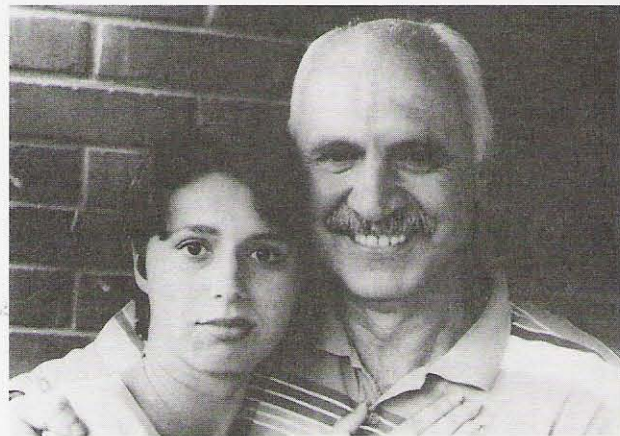
"As a young nation, the US is free from much of the baggage of the older countries. You have great responsibility as the only major world power. You are a multi-ethnic country. Europe doesn't know multi-ethnic societies; you must not fail as a multicultural society. I strongly believe in a multi-ethnic society. The Qur'an says, 'If God had wanted you to be one, he would have created only one people.' All religious leaders must teach tolerance, and recognition of other religious faiths.

"I cannot hate the Serbs—I have too much to do. I also don't love them. I have a rational approach: I know that they are here. It is too early to speak of reconciliation. Reconciliation is a natural process that takes time, it cannot be forced. Be careful not to allow reconciliation merely to be manipulation. My duty is to take into my heart all of the suffering people, so that there is no room in my heart for hatred for Serbs.

"You could do a real service to humanity if you would open an international, interfaith 'Sarajevo Institute for Religion and Culture.' This institute would be open to people from all faiths and nations to come here and study, to learn from what happened here.

"Sarajevo has always been an open city. My grandfather allowed the Cathedral to be built only a hundred yards from here. We will always fight to keep this city open to people of all faiths and all nationalities. Recognition of people's differences is the guarantee of a livable world.

"We don't need to prove our good will by meeting together with other religious leaders every day. I used to



Work camp translator reunited with her father in Sarajevo. This family, like many others, was divided by war. The father, who had stayed in Sarajevo, had been captured, tortured, and nearly killed in a Serb prison. His escape was arranged by a Serb friend. He has since died of complications from his wartime torture. The daughter attends Cornell University through the Bosnian Student Project.

ask things of the Serbian leaders in Pale—now I mainly do my work. We need not speak to those who have tried to kill us. I don't owe anything to Serbs or Croats, but I need a multicultural society for my own good. A monocultural society would kill my own soul. I believe that the biggest evils are fascism and nationalism.

"We believe that God does not allow injustice to prevail. Injustice always puts the universe out of balance. We think that we won because we survived when they were trying to eliminate us. I will forgive them. It is better to be in the position to forgive rather than to be in a place where you must ask for forgiveness. But first the criminals must come and say that they were wrong and that they are sorry. The Sarajevo Institute for Religion and Culture could start by looking for the truth about what happened in this war."



The media have sometimes portrayed the war in Bosnia as a struggle between Eastern Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, and Muslims. In reality, as these interviews illustrate, the war has been between Bosnians of all ethnic groups who would like to see the state continue as a diverse and rich multi-ethnic society, and those who would like to transform Bosnia into an "ethnically pure," "Christian" state, killing or expelling those of other religious traditions. The struggle between pluralism and religious nationalism is still continuing in Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia and much of Eastern and Western Europe. Bosnian groups struggling for pluralism suggested that in addition to assisting Bosnian students, we could assist their efforts by pressuring the US and NATO to allow refugees to return to their homes and to arrest indicted war criminals. If the refugees are not allowed to return and the war criminals are not arrested, the Dayton Accords will have actually assisted in the "ethnic cleansing" of Bosnia, leaving the war criminals who fostered this genocide still in power. □

Doug Hostetter is director of FOR's Bosnian Student Project.



The old Sarajevo City Hall was built in 1894, during the Austro-Hungarian rule of Bosnia. In 1945, this building, regarded by many as the most beautiful in Sarajevo, was turned into the National Library. It housed concrete evidence of more than 500 years of a successful multicultural society in Bosnia. Its collection included more than a million books by Bosnian Serbs, Muslims, Croats, Jews and others, written in Cyrillic, Arabic, Hebrew, and Serbo-Croatian as well as English, German, Russian, and other languages. On August 25, 1992 the Serb Army, using artillery positioned in the surrounding mountains, shelled the National Library. Hit over fifty times, the Library burned for three days. In the midst of the shelling, scores of students, faculty, and others formed a book brigade to try to rescue their intellectual heritage. One graduate student was killed in this heroic effort. Although thousands of rare books and manuscripts were saved, most of the books and hundreds of thousands of manuscripts went up in flames.

The three persons standing in the ruins of the National Library are a Serb, a Croat, and a Muslim. During the war each was directly involved with the Bosnian Student Project effort to assist talented Bosnian students of every ethnic tradition to continue their education in the US. They are proof that multicultural societies cannot be destroyed by shells and bombs. They are the hope for the future.