



# ROSES OF SARAJEVO

## A Bosnian Refugee's Story

Huddled in the elevator shaft in the basement of her Sarajevo apartment building, Rabija Hasic could hear mortar shells striking buildings outside, gunfire, and breaking glass. The siege of Sarajevo had been going on for months. The call, Pazite, snajper! (“Beware, sniper!”) had become all too familiar. To get to their civil service jobs, she and her husband rode in armored cars past “sniper alleys.” Food and medicine had been in short supply since May 2, 1992, when the Bosnian Serbs had blocked roads into the city and cut off all utilities such as water, electricity, and heat. To get water she had to go up to the roof and risk being bombed.

Rabija thought of her two young sons. She had sent them and her mother to stay with her brother's family near the Adriatic Sea shortly after the siege began. While they were safer there, it was only a temporary solution. In her mind's eye she could see the shattered shells of Sarajevo's once beautiful buildings. She shuddered when she imagined the damage her mother's rose garden—her most prized possession—must be suffering. Rabija had no idea how much longer the siege would last, but she did know that when it ended, the task of rebuilding Bosnia and Sarajevo's strained social relationships would take a very long

time. This occasioned deep questions for her. How much longer before the war was over? Suppose the siege ended and she brought her sons back to Sarajevo. How long would it be before their education could be resumed? More importantly, what kind of future would they have in a place recovering from the ravages of war?

The dark-haired woman crouching against the cold cement walls of the elevator shaft knew about life beyond the borders of former Yugoslavia, having traveled on tours to Italy and China. At work she had heard about United Nations convoys taking people to Croatia and also about a tunnel being built to bring in weapons and supplies. Although the convoys were supposed to be protected, they were often attacked: people were taken and never seen again. While the Serbs were blocking and bombing people who tried to leave Sarajevo, the Bosnian government was trying to keep people in the city so they could claim that Sarajevo still existed. Everyone wanted to leave but the only options were a convoy or the tunnel currently under construction.

As she listened to the ongoing cacophony of chaos and destruction, Rabija made a

decision that would affect not only herself but her family and friends. She resolved to talk with her husband about going to Croatia, getting their sons and fleeing to a country outside the boundaries of former Yugoslavia.

Samir shared Rabija's sense of urgency regarding their sons' future and agreed with her decision to leave Bosnia. But he felt it would be best if he stayed in Sarajevo. He reasoned that with the difficulty of getting housing and work in the city he should remain at his government post and continue to occupy their apartment. When the siege ended, at least one of them would have a job; and they would have a place to live.

The atrocities that occurred during the second half of 1992 confirmed Rabija's decision to leave her homeland. Through connections, she learned of a convoy that would take sick children and pregnant mothers out of the besieged city. The convoy would take a thousand people and there was a waiting list. Rabija had a friend who was a doctor working for the Red Cross. Her friend had connections with the hospital organizing the convoy and managed to get papers declaring each of them pregnant. Using money she and Samir had saved, Rabija arranged for herself and her friend to get into the convoy. She disliked furthering the crime that was rife throughout Bosnia, but at the same time she was grateful that, as a professional, she had the money and connections that made escape possible.

**She reminded herself,  
"Every day you can die."**

Departure of the convoy was delayed several times. Finally, at the end of November 1992, it left Sarajevo. Rabija knew that earlier convoys had been bombed as they left the city. As the buses started to move, her stomach was hard with fear. In going with the convoy

she could be bombed. On the other hand, if she stayed in Sarajevo she could be killed as she collected water or went to work. She reminded herself, "Every day you can die."

The journey to the Croatian border took two and a half days. They were stopped three times for soldiers to search the buses. When they reached the border, Rabija was shocked to find that the paper she had from her brother was not the document she needed. Croatia was refusing to take any more refugees. They would only let you in if you had a paper, such as her doctor friend had, saying you were going on to Germany or some other country.

The convoy had to wait at the border for twelve hours because of quarantines. At the end of that time those people without the right papers would be turned back. The night she learned this, Rabija could not sleep. Over and over a refrain ran through her head, "What can I do? What can I do?"

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Around and around her thoughts went as she tried to find a solution to her dilemma. Her brother lived near the border but he did not know she was with the convoy and no one in it was allowed to make calls. Through the window of the bus, Rabija saw a car parked at a distance from the convoy. Inside was a journalist talking on a cell phone, posting his report. This time when the refrain, "What can I do?" made its way through the circuitry of her mind, she had an answer.

Knowing she could be shot, she crept down the aisle of the bus, got off, and walked nervously to the car. “Please, can I have a call to my brother? No news has gotten through. He doesn’t know I’m coming.”

“I’m not allowed. They know people come and secretly take others across the border. They can arrest me.”

Rabija stood with her beseeching eyes fixed on the cell phone resting in the hand of the journalist. Then a miracle happened. The reporter opened the door and said, “I’ll take a risk. You get in the car and I’ll get out. Make your call quickly.”

Rabija’s hands shook as she punched in the numbers. She saw on the phone that it was 4:00 in the morning. She was afraid her brother would not hear the phone ring. Sometimes the family simply forgot to answer it. Fortunately, she reached her brother and asked anxiously, “What can I do? I have no papers to get across the border.”

“I will come. Take your bag and go away from the convoy.”

Rabija thanked the journalist and returned to the bus. She gave money to the driver in order to get her suitcase and then, dodging through shadows, walked away from the convoy.

The morning air was mild, warmed by Mediterranean breezes from the sea, yet she was sweating profusely and also shivering as if it were freezing cold. She waited apprehensively until she saw a car coming from far away. Her breath came fast as she realized that the soldiers around the convoy must also be able to see the approaching car.

As he drove up, her brother said, “Get in the back and lie down. If we’re lucky they won’t

stop us.”

He knew of a crossing farther away from the convoy. When he reached it, soldiers there could tell from his license plate that he was Croatian and must have known he had come for someone. Lying face down and motionless on the back seat, Rabija held her breath and thought of her sons. She had left all that she had known for forty-one years for the sake of giving them a better future. Would she ever see them again? She felt the car move slowly forward, then speed up. Were they through? Had she made it?

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In a few seconds, she heard her brother whisper, “Always remember this, Rabija. This is your lucky night.” She began to breathe again. She had risked her life and, thankfully, luck had been on her side.

After Rabija left Sarajevo, the siege—the longest in the history of modern warfare—continued for nearly three more years. Finally, mass killings and two massacres in the Markale marketplace turned world opinion against the Serbs; and with international pressure, the siege was brought to an end on February 29, 1996. By that time Rabija’s family had established a new life near Stuttgart, Germany. She and the boys had quickly learned the language, and she had transitioned from being a social worker in Sarajevo to being nanny to two little girls. Her sons were doing well in school. Their sponsoring family had arranged, with diffi-

culty, to have Samir join them in 1995 and had found him a job as well.

Despite the ease with which the Hasic family fit into life in Stuttgart, they were not destined to be German citizens. The country that had offered them asylum during the war would not allow them to become permanent residents when it ended. They were to return to Bosnia or find another country that would accept them as refugees. Samir was adamant: he would never return to Sarajevo. They applied to the United States and to Canada. Their German host family had friends and relatives in Toronto, and eventually found a sponsor so the Hasics could immigrate to Canada.

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With great reluctance and a heavy heart, Rabija pulled up the new roots she had established in Germany. The woman in their host family had become like a second mother to her and a grandmother to her boys. Five years earlier it had been heartbreaking to leave her parents, husband, and brother; but she had known that the safety and education of her sons were at stake. It was doubly hard to leave Europe altogether, not knowing whether she would ever see her birth family or her new German family again.

Still committed to creating opportunities for her sons, now she must leave what had become her new homeland for political reasons that she could not fully comprehend. She felt strongly that with this move she was permanently closing the door on the country of her birth. She might never again see the hills and mountains surrounding the Miljacka River valley where she had grown up. She would leave behind the mother who had curled her hair, made her fashionable clothes, and given her roses from the garden. As she said good-bye

to her new friends in Stuttgart, she wondered if she was making the right choice.

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English lessons began in earnest as soon as their Canadian sponsor had settled them into a crowded two-bedroom apartment in an old four-story house in a Polish neighborhood of west Toronto. The Hasics found that, whereas German had come easily to them, English was another matter. Once in school, the boys learned fastest, picking up vocabulary daily.

Rabija studied hard, wanting to learn as quickly as she could so she could get work. She listened carefully to the immigration counselors when they talked about positions for which she might be eligible: not the professional positions for which her university education had prepared her, but entry-level jobs involving physical labor. She didn't like to think that all her education had gone to waste, but she was determined to do whatever was necessary to fit into Canadian society and earn a living. Almost immediately, she took a job doing housecleaning for a friend of her sponsor.

One afternoon their Canadian benefactor arrived at the apartment, obviously excited. In his hand was an ad torn from a community newspaper. He had seen the scrap of paper on the sidewalk as he was walking to their apartment. It was for a part-time nanny and he was sure that Rabija was qualified for the job. "The first step is to write a letter

of introduction,” he said, and offered to help her get the English correct.

“And look at the address for the letter, Rabija. It’s just three blocks down this same street. You could walk to work.” Rabija and her sponsor sat down and drafted a letter.

A week later, Rabija knocked on the door of a newer four-story house. A lovely, fine-boned blond woman answered with an eight-month-old baby on her hip. As the two women settled in the living room, Rabija smiled and reached for the baby. The girl came immediately into her embrace.

The young woman was an artist who wanted to go back to art school. She needed some-one three days a week to watch the baby, Claire, and pick up her four-year-old daughter from preschool. The school was a few blocks from the house, so the nanny could put the baby in the stroller, walk to school to get Anna, and bring them both back home. Rabija explained in her hesitant and broken English that she had been a social worker in her home country of Bosnia and a nanny for five years in Germany. Although her English wasn’t very good yet, she was studying and it would improve. They agreed upon a trial period.

It was a shaky beginning. Anna was as cold and suspicious as Claire was welcoming and trusting. When Rabija tried to overcome persistent cries of “I want my mommy” with candy treats, the preschool teachers complained to Anna’s mother. They were afraid this would teach Anna that it was okay to take candy from strangers. Eventually, after her parents explained the situation to Anna, she allowed Rabija to bring her home from school, but Anna was still distant and resentful. She wanted her mommy.

At the same time, Rabija was being counseled to think long range about her job future. She

was beginning to see that she loved working with young children and one of the ideas that emerged was for her to train as an early childhood specialist. Perhaps she could become director of a preschool. She saw a connection between needing new skills for her current position as a nanny and studying for a long-term career in child development. She began taking night classes.

## Whenever he talked about Sarajevo, he cried.

About a year after the Hasics’ arrival in Canada, Rabija began to notice changes in Samir. After his initial excitement about learning English and studying the computer, he lost interest in everything. At first it appeared to Rabija that he just wanted to play rather than get serious about finding a job. The more she urged him to think about the future, the more he withdrew. Disagreements became a daily occurrence as Rabija saw him giving up his fight for life and closing himself away from her and the boys. Whenever he talked about Sarajevo, he cried.

Rabia used all her experience as a social worker to try to help him. She called health professionals and counselors. She studied tapes and books from the library to try to understand what was happening to him. Thinking he might have post-traumatic stress

syndrome from his three years alone in Sarajevo, she arranged doctor appointments. He started medications and seemed to get better but then he stopped. She tried to set up family counseling sessions, but he refused to go. He said there was nothing wrong. He still did not have a job. There were periods of time when he would sit in the apartment listening to music and drinking while Rabija and the boys were out. Scenes

of the carnage he had witnessed in Sarajevo haunted him. Generous doses of alcohol brought his underlying anger to a boiling point.

In her new job as a nanny, Rabija and Ardith, the young mother for whom she was working, had become friends and Rabija confided that she was struggling to get her driver's license. She had paid for some training but could not afford additional practice sessions. Ardith immediately said, "I'll tell you what. We'll take our car; I'll sit on the passenger's side and you drive." Off they went. As Rabija drove, Ardith gave no instruction. Instead she shared what she knew about their neighborhood.

When Ardith's husband, Jon, learned what they were doing, he was surprised. He knew Ardith wasn't a good driver and didn't like to drive in Toronto. The two women kept up with practice sessions and, continually encouraged by Ardith, Rabija got her license. A deep bond began to grow between the two of them. The more Ardith trusted her, the more Rabija blossomed. She applied everything she learned in her child development classes to working with Anna and Claire. The girls nicknamed her "Rabi" because they found it hard to pronounce her name.

One morning she arrived at work to find Ardith holding the phone, sobbing, and screaming for Jon. Claire was crying in her high chair—Rabija lifted the baby and held her close as Jon flew down the stairs. When Ardith told him what the doctor had just said, he began to cry. Then he bundled them both into coats and they left for a walk.

Although no one had told her that Ardith was ill, Rabija understood the word "metast-sized." With that one word, she not only knew that Ardith was sick but that she had a life-threatening illness and was getting worse.

Her heart ached for Ardith and also for herself: Ardith was now her closest friend in the strange world of Canada.

## A year and a half later, her best friend was dead.

A year and a half later, her best friend was dead. Then Samir walked out and left the family. Rabija found herself alone with two sons to raise in a country where she barely knew the language and with a job where two children desperately needed her love and attention.

Throughout all these setbacks, Rabija continued to learn English and take night classes toward a certificate in child development. But when it came time for her to do a practicum to complete her two-year certificate program, she found it both financially and emotionally impossible to leave her job as nanny. Her oldest son had won a scholarship to university and her youngest was doing well in high school—she refused to interrupt their education. Nor could she leave the two girls who clung to her for affection and feminine support. She decided to keep taking classes and go for a four-year degree instead.

Under pressure from acquaintances and his sons, Samir returned to the family. He got a job doing pizza delivery for a while, then quit. Next he took a job in a warehouse where he did well until there was a misunderstanding and he quit. He began drinking heavily. When Rabija's oldest son went away to college, Samir began manifesting a bi-polar personality. When he was down, he became surly and physically aggressive in his drunken disagreements with Rabija.

On a Saturday when Rabija was in the apartment studying, Samir returned home

drunk and began to argue with her. When she tried to get away from him, he pushed her and said, "If you don't leave me alone, I'll smash your head in." Her younger son heard the commotion and rushed into the room, allowing Rabija to escape to the bedroom, where she locked the door.

From her son's perspective, Samir had crossed the line into the unforgivable. After telling Samir he would have to leave, the adolescent son packed a suitcase for his father and sent him away. Samir left, still yelling and waving his arms. Rabija and her son called the police to place a restraining order on Samir. They were instructed to change their locks.

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In succeeding weeks, Rabia tried to get doctors and counselors to work with Samir. They said they could not force him to take medications or attend counseling sessions. It was against the law to force treatment on those who refused it. Finally, Rabia realized she could not help Samir. He was not aware of reality and she was afraid of what he might do to her when he was in one of his black periods. It was as if his life had ended in Sarajevo and he did not have the strength to begin it anew. She could never have imagined that this would happen.

With help and counsel from social workers—finding herself in need of the very kind of help she had been trained to offer—Rabija came to the decision that she needed to divorce Samir. She had left Sarajevo in search of safety for herself and her sons; and now, as inconceivable as it seemed to her, she had to leave her

husband for the same reason. She hated what war had done to Samir, and now she knew with certainty that she had made the right choice when she removed her sons from its negative effects.

This was a very depressing time for Rabija. All of her previous losses troubled her: leaving her professional job and family in Sarajevo because of the war, leaving her new home and friends in Germany, saying goodbye forever to Europe and Bosnia, and then the death of her best friend in Canada. Now she was letting go of the man she had once loved, ending a marriage of twenty years. It felt like too much: why had life demanded so much of her?

**... why had life demanded so much of her?**

Despite her troubles, Rabija never stopped studying and working. She is now in her mid-fifties. Her older son has graduated from college and the younger one is nearly finished as well. Both of her parents are dead. Though their deaths were hard to bear, she is grateful that she was able to go back to Sarajevo and visit them twice before they died. She continues in her job as a nanny and is nearing completion of her degree.

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Rabija is like the finest rosebush in her mother's Sarajevo garden. Just as her mother's rosebushes garnered energy during the dark days of winter year after year and blossomed again each spring, Rabija has endured many hardships and periods of darkness and uncertainty. But after each loss she has bounced back stronger, more resilient, and more beautiful than before.

# Sitting with the Story

In Rabija's story we find upheaval, painful choices, and great reservoirs of inner strength. Rabija emerges whole and beautiful, having grown in the face of heartrending challenges. She has experienced terrible loss but has emerged intact: she has not lost herself. Time and again as the terrain she stands upon shifts, literally and figuratively, she makes decisions that honor and manifest her vision for herself and her sons.

While some of Rabija's challenges are more extreme than many of us will face, her responses to each new situation are somehow familiar. We have encountered archetypal turning points ourselves.

- What painful choices have you had to make?
- When have you felt that life was demanding too much of you?
- How have you moved forward in your life despite losses and setbacks?

At each point in her life, Rabija took stock of where she was and what needed to happen next. When life feels difficult and out of balance, each of us can refocus as Rabija did.