

## A Journey to Hope

*We are inspired by this account of one town's ability to maintain cohesion in light of the attacks on their diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds.*

by Nancy Ayer

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Remember...don't smile when we go through the controls, if they see you smile, they will stop us," said Ensar as we approached the Sarejevo Airport. For a year I'd been Ensar's host and advocate in the U.S.; now he was my host and guide to his beloved Bosnia. I could not stop smiling. In minutes, I would be meeting Ensar's mother and father, the people I had thought about daily for the last year, parents who had the courage, perseverance, and selflessness to find a way to get their son out of Bosnia and protect him from the madness that had taken over their country. As our plane descended, I saw buildings riddled with shells from the war, military airplanes, helicopters, and soldiers.

As we entered the airport, we passed through a line of police on either side of us. I was following Ensar's lead. After we moved through the control and our passports were examined, we saw a crowd of people being held back by the police. Suddenly a man and woman pushed through the line; it was Katarina and Mirza, Ensar's mother and father. They ran toward us, arms stretched out. Katarina threw her arms around me; we hugged tight and cried and laughed at the same time. She kept saying, "Thank you, Nancy." Then we switched and Mirza and I hugged while we both talked in our own lan-

guages, he not understanding my English and me not understanding his Bosnian. But our faces and eyes and hugs said it all, especially the bond we had developed through our love and commitment to their son, Ensar.

The ride home to Tuzla was unforgettable. Ensar and his Mom sat snuggled in the back of their car, lots of laughter and hugging and catching up, with Mirza and myself joining in. I became aware of what an extraordinarily beautiful country Bosnia is. I could not imagine the ugliness of this war forever scarring this beautiful land and people. Seeing home after home burned out, riddled with bullets, still surrounded by yellow plastic tape with large black letters warning of land mines, provided a sharp contrast to the beauty of Bosnia that the war could not eliminate. As I passed scene after scene like this, I could not hold back my tears, feeling or at least acknowledging horrors truly beyond my comprehension that I imagined occurred in these homes.

The drive from Sarajevo took about two hours. We arrived in Tuzla around 6 p.m. and drove directly to the tennis court where Emir, Ensar's only sibling, was playing in a big tennis tournament. "We are a sports family," Katarina said proudly. Her husband was the captain of Bosnia's national futbol (soccer) team 25 years ago and quite fa-



mous in his country, sort of the Larry Bird of football. I never went anywhere during my visit with Mirza that at least one person didn't stop and salute him. Ensar follows his father's love and talent for football and is an accomplished soccer player both in Bosnia and in the U.S, which is one of the ways he contributes to his college education here in the U.S.

Emir is a tennis player, who, at age 15 currently holds the title of the 6th best tennis player in Bosnia. We were all eager to see him and maybe catch the last of his tournament. When we arrived at the courts, we learned Emir had won. This was my first time meeting Emir, who spoke excellent English but was too shy to speak directly to me. I felt like I already knew each member of the family since Ensar had told me a year's worth of fond stories. Ensar was in his glory saying hello to many friends he had not seen in a long time and having us all together.

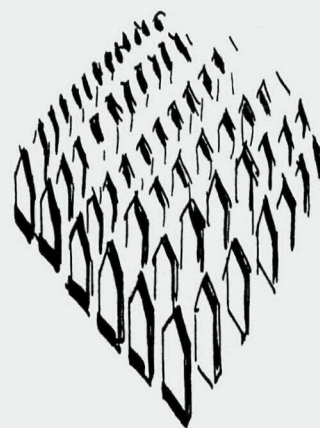
After some delicious Bosnian coffee, Katarina asked me if I wanted to take a walk in the banyan, a park nearby. What I did not understand was we were going to visit the memorial where 78 young people who were killed in Tuzla's city center on May 25, 1995 were buried. I knew the story as Ensar had told it to me many times during his first year in the U.S. Tuzla is known for its long standing commitment to multiculturalism, where Muslims, Croats, and Serbs have lived peacefully together for decades. Tuzla sits in a valley and during the war, the Bosnian Serbs surrounded the

city and used snipers and grenades to try and bring the city down. The grenade attack on May 25th was one of the Bosnian Serb's attempts to pull multicultural Tuzla apart by purposely killing the innocent—the children of Tuzla. A grenade attack was timed and aimed at youth attending a handball tournament in the city's center. Ensar had planned to go to the tournament that night, but at the last minute his buddies asked him to play soccer at a field near his home. I think soccer saved his life that night.

At that point in the war, Ensar and his friends had developed the skill of predicting which part of the city was under attack by the sound of the missile. As the grenades whistled into the city that night, they knew immediately that they were aimed at the city's center. They immediately ran into the bomb zone to help their friends. It was chaos and horror beyond belief: rubble, body parts, smoke, screaming, and crying. Ensar was with two friends, specifically hunting for three friends they knew had been in the city's center. Three makeshift morgues were set up near the hospitals. Ensar and his friends went first to the hospitals and then to the morgues looking for their friends. One friend was found in the hospital, still alive although he would later lose his leg. The other two friends' bodies were found in the morgue. The boys identified them by looking for the shoes as their feet hung outside the sheets covering the many bodies. Ensar told me this story many times. Each time he told the story, he shared more

details and each time, his painful silences grew longer as he gathered himself with his head in his hands and his eyes filled with tears.

As Katarina and I approached the memorial, we stopped talking and just walked together, slowly. Again, the contrast of the beauty and the ugliness was present. Each grave was truly sacred ground designed and cared for by the fami-



lies of the murdered children. The bodies are buried above ground and each grave had a marker with the child's name, age, and picture. Beautiful flowers surrounded each burial site, along with a bench at each grave site. Many people were visiting the memorial; some people were sitting in silence, some crying, some talking to their lost child, while some were hard at work gardening and pruning the plants around the graves. Katarina and I continued to walk together in silence and tears. After we systematically visited each grave we quietly walked back and joined the family. There was nothing to say to one another, it was an opportunity to join together and feel and



experience the memorial paying respect to the innocents.

The next day, I joined Mirza and Katarina for a picnic with their dearest friends. They were all about my age and they were getting together to celebrate one of their children's 18th birthday. We drove out of the city and parked the car and then walked about 25 minutes into the woods to the picnic. There was a lamb roasting on a wood fire and endless delicious dishes, salads, breads, desserts—a feast. Everyone seemed to know who I was and rushed to shake my hand and welcome me. As people introduced themselves, Katarina translated and Mirza, who towers over both of us, looked on with a broad, warm smile. "I am Damir and I was a soldier in the war and I am a Croat; I am Adnan and I am a metal worker and I fought in the war and protected our city and I am a Muslim; and I am Igor I am a Serb and I fought in the war to protect Tuzla." One by one they welcomed me. Katarina translated and said, "We were friends before the war, during the war, and after the war, and that is very important to us. They did not succeed in pulling us apart."

Then Katarina talked for a while in Bosnian with her friends and I watched their faces as she talked and then they looked at me and hugged me. Katarina then turned to me and said, "I told them I took you to the banyan yesterday and you cried and they said, 'You are one of us.' We all hugged and then we ate, drank, talked, and sang for the rest of the afternoon. I felt like an old friend, like I be-

longed.

That night when I went to sleep, I thought about my first full day in Bosnia. I peeked out my window and gazed at the field where Ensar chose to play soccer on May 25th instead of going to the city center with his friends and reflected on how amazing it was to finally be here. Just think, only 13 months ago the war in Bosnia was just another horrible news event.

I remember being about 12 years old and learning about Hitler's terror for the first time. I asked my mother why she and her family didn't do something about it. I just couldn't understand how 6 million Jews could be exterminated while the world went on with its business. She seemed to struggle with her answer, trying to explain to me that it isn't easy to know what to do when something so big is happening so far away. I remember thinking to myself, "Well... I would have tried to do something." My memory of our conversation came back to me 34 years later.

The war in Bosnia was approaching its second year, people were under siege in Sarajevo, and over 200,000 people were missing and feared dead. Mass graves were being discovered daily. Another extermination of people was underway and here I sat, a 46 year old social worker in my safe condo, feeling bad about the war and wanting to do something more than call my Congressperson. I could hear my mother's words: "It's not easy to know what you can do when it is so big and so far away." Then I saw Edin, a

young high school student from Tuzla, being interviewed by my local news network. He was finishing his high school degree in Maine, just a half hour from my home. He was talking about how grateful he was to have a break from the war and how important it was to him and his family to have the opportunity to complete his education and not be stopped by the enemy.

Suddenly, I realized I had an opportunity to do something. I remember feeling an adrenaline rush pour through my body. I immediately picked up the phone and called a social worker I knew in that school system and found out whom to contact to find out more. With a few more calls the next day, I was in contact with a student exchange organization that was successful in getting a few young people out of Bosnia to the U.S. as part of an exchange program. My next obstacle was whether they wanted host families. I am a single person. Would the organization consider using a single person without children as a host? I was so relieved when I learned that they would consider me. I had an extra bedroom and lived only ¼ mile from the high school. My enthusiasm was high, until I learned that they couldn't get any more kids out because the war had intensified. About six weeks later, I got a phone call from the organization saying they had a high school senior from Tuzla that was able to get out of the country and was I still interested. Within 48 hours, I had his entire application packet and they had mine and I was accepted as a host.



Four weeks later, I was on my way to Portland's Airport to pick up Ensar. When I arrived at the airport, I met another family who was there to host a second boy from Tuzla. Fortunately, the boys knew one another and had been friends since their elementary school days. Minutes later, two very tall, nice looking young men approached us, Ensar and Omer. Their English was excellent. I was struck by how thin and weary they looked. It had been a long and dangerous trip. This was their first time away from home. I can't imagine how they must have felt to leave their family for the first time, while their country is at war and their city is under attack. I had a letter from Ensar's mother, thanking me for helping them save their son. At that point in the war, young Muslim men were the primary target of the enemy. The Bosnian Serbs were rounding up young Muslim men and killing them en masse. She explained how to support him if he became sad and weary and invited me to visit their beautiful Bosnia when the ugliness was over.

Ensar and Omer remained especially close to each other for their first year while they were finishing high school. Omer's original host family rejected him six weeks after he arrived. I came home late one evening to find Omer and all his belongings at our home. Omer was terrified he would be sent back to Bosnia after he and his family had made enormous sacrifices to get him to safety in the U.S. Immediately we invited Omer to live with us until we

could work things out through the exchange organization. The three of us lived together for about three months until I found another host family for Omer. We found a family close to us; Omer remained a part of our new family and came to our house on weekends and vacations. Both Ensar and Omer excelled in high school and graduated the following May on the Dean's list. Both boys wanted very much to complete their college education in the U.S., which had been their dream before the war. Returning to Bosnia directly after finishing their high school degree also meant immediate enlistment into the Bosnia Army. This prospect frightened and worried all of us, since we were not confident the war was over and the boys did not want any part of learning how to kill or be soldiers. Omer's host family found a very generous benefactor who funded his entire college education. He went on to college in Massachusetts and graduated in May 2000.

I began raising money for Ensar to attend college in the Spring of 1996, realizing too late that scholarship opportunities had passed. The pressure was heavy because of the required enlistment into the army if and when he returned to his country. I think most people I knew didn't believe we would meet our goal and figured we would have to give up. I went into overdrive. As a social worker, I had written grants and held fundraising events before, but this was a very different kind of fundraising. I raised \$17,000 in about 3 ½ months, averaging about \$1000

per week. We had enough money for his first year of college with less than a week to spare to meet our deadline. I remember this moment vividly. The last chunk of money came in and we made it.

Ensar sat very quietly in a rocking chair in the living room. He looked sad and lost. When I asked him what was going on, he responded, "I think they got me. I should be happy about being able to go to college and I don't feel anything. I think they got me. I don't feel anything. This isn't right." We sat together and he talked and I listened. Finally I suggested, "It might be that your heart is quite healthy and doing the right thing for you." He looked surprised and interested. "You found ways to protect yourself during the war, right? Well, I suppose your heart also needed to protect itself, maybe put up some walls as the ugliness increased so you could get through it. You are a survivor. I believe as you experience being safe again and can start looking towards a future, your heart will begin to thaw and it will take down the walls it needed when it was under attack and you will begin to feel again. Please trust me on this one and give yourself some time."

Ensar and I continued to move ahead on the practical, while we routinely talked about his heart. He was accepted to several colleges and eventually chose a school in Maryland. They wanted him for both his academic and athletic excellence. They promised us a full scholarship for his last three years if we could find the money for his first



year since we had missed their scholarship deadlines. We thought our struggles were over. School began and Ensar excelled in the classroom and on the field. He made the varsity soccer team and was a starter for his team.

Ensar's soccer team traveled to Boston to play a few games in the fall of 1996. Of course, I went to see him play. I hadn't seen him for about eight weeks. I remember approaching the field while the team was warming up. I watched Ensar playing for awhile before he saw me. His body moved in a relaxed and confident way that I had not seen before. He had a beautiful broad smile and enthusiasm as he played with his teammates. As soon as he saw me, he ran over to greet us and I thought how much this young man had healed and how grateful I was that he was moving on with his dreams. Finally he was able to exhale, relax, and think about a future. I took him out to dinner before he had to leave and he told me how happy he was and how much he loved his coach.

Three days later Ensar called me and I knew something was wrong. He and two other European students and teammates, all starters on the team and all on the Dean's list, were kicked off the team. His coach demanded they say they were Christian and that they believed in Jesus Christ. Ensar is a non-practicing Muslim. Ensar and his friends refused and they were all cut from the team. Ethnic cleansing strikes this boy again, but this time it was on the soccer field in Maryland, USA.

Ensar was devastated.

He was not willing to enter another battle, understandably, considering the trauma he experienced during the war. At his request we did not file a discrimination complaint. We were strengthened by the crisis and decided the best response was to find a way to succeed and once again for him, this was an opportunity not to be stopped by ignorance and hate. Ensar taught me a lot with this incident. I wanted to go after this coach, but Ensar kept focused on the parts of the coach he loved and talked about how sorry he was that the coach was so limited in his thinking and beliefs and would use his power in this way. He saw him as a small person. In many ways, the war provided Ensar with great wisdom and strength. Ensar maintained his 4.0 grade point and finished his first year of college in Maryland. I immediately began fundraising again. Ensar transferred to a small university in Missouri, where he has excelled and succeeded both on the field and in the classroom and graduated in May 2000.

As a social worker, I purposefully wanted and needed to get involved in the war. I believe that as social workers, we have a responsibility to respond, to be activists. I wanted to put a face on the oppression and the horror we all were tuning into on the news each night and many of us tuning out. I wanted the opportunity to demonstrate to myself that I could do something, even when "things are so big and far away." When Ensar and Omer joined my life and my community and became a part of the lives of my family, friends, col-

leagues, and neighbors, it changed their lives too and made the war in Bosnia personal.

As a social work educator, I want to inspire my students to be passionate, to get involved and make a difference. Asking Ensar and Omer to be a part of my life has changed all of our lives forever. I am humbled by the support of friends and strangers who wanted to support them. As much as I hated asking for money, it was worth the discomfort and the knot in my stomach to meet these amazing people who were just waiting for someone to ask them to get involved.

For Ensar and Omer, the generosity of new friends and strangers were concrete reminders that the world still has people who are kind and loving, at a time in their lives when it seemed to them their world had gone mad. Their new-found hope defied the memories that haunted them of those who tried to cleanse their beloved Bosnia of some of its people.

Today, Ensar sometimes talks about the war and how he uses his terrifying experiences to give him strength and courage to move ahead. He explains, "When I get scared or nervous about something, I just think about what I went through in the war and that cuts the new problem down to size and I can move ahead." Recently, Ensar said to me, "There was one very good thing that came out of the war—I met you." □

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