

Siege of Sarajevo

Survival in Sarajevo: Jews, Bosnia, and the Lessons of the Past



Although I photographed several of the revolutions of 1989, I had only been in danger for one night, and that had been in Romania during the Securitate counterattack in Arad. And that is how I liked things: I was no war reporter; I had no intention of going into the besieged city of Sarajevo even though I had many close friends in the Jewish community, and I knew they were doing something remarkable — helping save an entire city with their humanitarian aid agency.

Somehow, I worked up the courage to fly in on a UN transport plane and between November, 1993 and February, 1994 I spent forty-four days under fire in Sarajevo. I then returned the city afterwards but I spent those forty-four days directed at one theme: how the people volunteering in the Jewish community center were all working together. Every day, Jews and Muslims, Serbian Orthodox and Croatian Catholics, worked side by side in an organization they called La Benevolencija, doling out food, medicine and hope in equal measure — all while preparing and executing rescue convoys for those who could muster up the paperwork and visas to get out.

*The photograph above was taken during the rescue convoy of 4 February, 1994, when six buses loaded with 294 Sarajevans made its way out of the besieged city and down the Croatian coast — and safety. I then followed several Sarajevans to Israel in the months afterwards, spent the summer writing it up and in November, 1994, the Christian Brandstaedter Verlag and DAP in New York published *Survival in Sarajevo: Jews, Bosnia and the Lessons of the Past*. The Spielberg Foundation funded an exhibition of my work that saw 11 cities over three years and in Europe, the Austrian Culture Ministry and the Berlin Jewish Museum both sponsored separate traveling exhibitions of the work that traveled to Israel, Spain, Germany and Austria.*

I have categorized my work in Sarajevo — and this includes my work there before the war as well as after the siege was lifted, into separate sections, which are detailed below.

A city under siege



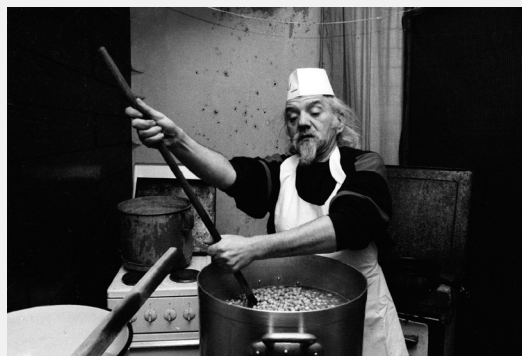
The Bosnian Serbs cut off the water, electricity and gas to the city in the summer of 1992. Sarajevo sits in a bowl, so snipers simply took their places on the surrounding hills and began killing the city's residents while mortars also went to work. 11,000 people would be gunned down or blown up between May, 1992 and February, 1996. Above we see a man running across a street exposed to sniper fire. He has a sack of food and a plastic jug of water in his wheelbarrow. He is hoping to make it home alive.

If I had come to Sarajevo to record how a Jewish community had come to the aid of its city, then I needed

to document just how bad things were. The siege of Sarajevo was, literally, a siege on the level of the medieval sieges of yore. Recording how people coped was one of my goals.



Left picture: Mrs Wagenstein burning books in a homemade stove in her living room. Next: with water cut off, people filled jugs in central locations. Next picture: the sign reads "warning sniper!" Right picture: people crossing a destroyed bridge in the city center.



A community goes to work: communications, soup kitchen

Tzitzko Abinun owned a snack bar in Sarajevo, but as a member of the Jewish community, he came to set up a soup kitchen once the siege set in. You will see he has three stoves: one for electricity, which he rarely had; another for gas, which depended on the propane tanks that were delivered, and a third was a wooden stove.



Left picture: La Benevolencija set up two two-way radio stations and anyone could use them. Next image: the post was also cut off to the city so La Benevolencija set up a logistics office in Split and in Zagreb and asked journalists coming in to Sarajevo to bring the post. La Benevolencija also had a white panel delivery truck that was allowed to cross the front lines and they also brought in the post. Right picture: bringing in goods from the outside to La Benevolencija.



A community goes to work: medical, women's club, children's club

Pictured on the left is 93-year-old Donka Nikolic receiving an injection from Miki, a Serb who chose to stay in Sarajevo. Miki worked for La Benevolencija's medical team and made house calls every day, and every one of them was under fire.



Left picture: we see Dr Srdjan Gorjakovic, head of the medical team, in his clinic that was set up next to the synagogue. Srdjan was from a mixed Serbian and Croatian family and chose to remain in mostly Muslim Sarajevo to work for the Jewish community. Next we see a Sunday morning gathering of children from the neighborhood. On the next one is the woman's club, where its members helped out in all community activities.



Convoy

Between 1992 and 1995, La Benevolencija arranged 11 rescue convoys out of the city. The first two were carried out by air in April, 1992, even before the city was cut off. Smaller bus convoys followed; the largest was on 4 February, 1994 and as mentioned above, 294 Sarajevans of every religion were taken out of the city, all of which I documented as I accompanied the convoy. Leica used the photo above as poster to promote my book and exhibition.



In the four photos above we see people bidding goodbye to family members who could leave, along with a shot I took in no man's land by the Sarajevo airport. A Bosnian Serb soldier confiscated my cameras but I had slipped one Leica M-6 into my overcoat, which is how I'm able to share this image with you.

Muslims and Jews



Denis Karalic was 14-years-old in 1994. His father worked for the Jewish community, which is where I met Denis. Zeyneba Hardaga was the first Muslim to be given a Righteous Gentile award in 1985, for having saved a Jewish neighbor during the Second World War. The problem was: now the hero and her family needed to be rescued. She was invited to come to Israel. Her family was not. I wrote an op-ed piece for The Washington Post called "A Hero Abandoned," and it can be found in my press clippings. That article pushed the Israeli government to invite the entire family.



Denis did not want to leave Sarajevo but he was slightly wounded in a mortar attack in January, 1994. His father put him on the February convoy. Below left is Denis reaching the coast of Croatia, where, for the first time in 22 months, no one was shooting at him. The right photos below are of Zeyneba Hardaga leaving Sarajevo on that same rescue convoy. She is being greeted by Milton Wolf, president of the Joint Distribution Committee, which flew her entire family to Israel.



Those who helped

One day in January, 1993, there was particularly heavy shelling and I did not venture out from the Jewish community center. On a lark, I asked the volunteers working there to stand in front of a white wall and bring with them a tool of their job. I have nearly 30 such portraits.

