

Roses of Sarajevo

Wounds of Remembrance in the Streets of Bosnia

By [Peter Korchnak](#) - December 15, 2014

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For the rest of the world, the four-year-long Siege of Sarajevo, which began in 1992, has been relegated to the pages of history books. But on the streets of the Bosnia and Herzegovina capital, small craters left from mortar damage are now filled with red resin and act as constant reminders of the horror and tragedy of what became the longest siege of a city in the history of modern

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warfare. Journalist, [Peter Korchnak](#), explores the streets of the former Yugoslavian constituent and discovers what the Roses of Sarajevo really mean to the people who live there.

In the 1941 travelogue, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey Through Yugoslavia*, Rebecca West observed that to be in Sarajevo was like “walking inside an opening flower.” I carry the image in my mind as the coach from Belgrade winds its way along the Miljacka River until, at last, the city blossoms out of the Sarajevo Valley. West was right: with some imagination, Stari Grad (Sarajevo’s Old Town), sits in a bowl-shaped calyx beneath undulating petals of several mountain slopes. Minarets, which in West’s time would have been the town’s tallest structures, point to the heavens like holy stamens and today are overshadowed by glass high-rises of the Marijin Dvor business district that is gleaming in the September afternoon.

A dozen years ago, in the spring of 2001, I traveled to the countries of former Yugoslavia in search of memories. As part of my graduate thesis research into the dissolution of federal states, including my native Czechoslovakia, I wanted to know what people (and libraries) remembered about Yugoslavia’s 1991 disintegration. Back then I wasn’t interested in the ensuing armed conflicts — the protracted Bosnian war had been analyzed to death — and the research grant I received from Central

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European University was small. So I skipped Bosnia and Herzegovina.

I settle into my rented studio apartment located on Sepetarevac, a street so small the taxi driver found it only after consulting with a colleague over the radio and then with another one at a traffic light. I take my first steps in the city, walking cautiously down a steep hill to the center. A rose bush from someone's yard is climbing over a tall brick wall, next to spent buds and hips ready to be harvested. Late-blooming red roses shoot toward the sun. I feel a strange sense of nostalgia, as though I were finally returning to a place I've never been.

Life in Bosnia today is divided into “before” and “after” the war following the breakup of former Yugoslavia in 1992. As I cross the Marshall Tito Street, named after Yugoslavia's longtime leader, I recount the country's “before” from my thesis. From 1948 to 1980 Tito's policies elevated Bosnia's economy through intensive economic development that aimed to equalize Yugoslavia's republics and establish “brotherhood and unity” among its constituent nations. To this day, Tito has a special place in

Bosniaks' hearts: later I spot a crude graffito, "TITO ♥", sprayed in red over crumbling wall plaster, and I drink coffee at a bustling Tito-themed café beneath a vintage banner that reads "Tito Is Ours."

The remains of the Stari-Most Bridge in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Over 400 years old, the landmark bridge was destroyed during the Bosnian War in 1993. Photo by Edward Serotta

The afternoon call to prayer carries me to the promenade along the Miljacka river. The nonchalant shallow stream flows between the stone walls of a canal. A plastic Coke bottle and a basket ball churn under a cascade. To West, the Arabic invocation held "an ultimate sadness, like the hooting of owls and the barking of foxes in night time." In At Mejdani Park, a terrier howls at a nearby minaret while at the other end of the leash its master is

reading a newspaper on a bench. I circle a darkened carousel and find myself on streets during rush hour, dodging pedestrians, rickety Czechoslovak-made trams and stray dogs that all have seemingly more important places to be.

Past the synagogue and the Serbian Orthodox Church, I arrive in front of the Sacred Heart Cathedral. The city used to be a showcase of ethnic, religious and cultural diversity. Since the war, however, it's been divided into Sarajevo proper, where Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) greatly outnumber Croats, and the Serbian-majority suburb of East Sarajevo, the de jure capital of the autonomous Republika Srpska. The bells toll six when I find the first Sarajevo Rose.

Back when I was in Belgrade, I had asked my old friend Mira, whom I saw for the first time since my research trip, what I shouldn't miss in her favorite Balkan city. "*Sarajevske ruže*," she said without thinking twice: the Sarajevo Roses. After Bosnia and Herzegovina declared independence from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, a 13,000-strong Bosnian Serb Army encircled the new state's capital city, stationing assorted artillery

and sniper nests in the surrounding hills to rain down death on the residents below. An estimated 120,000 bombshells fell on the city during 1,425 days between April 5, 1992, and February 29, 1996. The Siege of Sarajevo remains the longest siege of a capital city in modern military history. Afterward, the craters where mortar shells had hit tarmac and had killed three or more people were filled with red resin, creating unusual rose-like memorials on the ground.

Small cobble stones form a square around the resin-filled Rose. There are no signs, explanations or messages anywhere. Flush with the pavement, the central blob radiates disjointed shrapnel scars like discarded petals. The red stains resemble the crudeness one might find in a young child's drawing. A few people climb the stone stairs of the cathedral for the evening mass while I imagine blood trickling into the craters from bodies that would have been strewn about. From the direction of the petals, I surmise the shot came from behind where I'm standing. I swing around, gaze at the forested hilltops and shudder from a sudden chill.

According to Mira, her local friend, Saida, would tell me everything I wanted to know about the roses. We arranged to meet over coffee one morning. Cheerful Bosnian folk-music and cigarette smoke swirl around me while I wait at an outdoor patio, sipping an espresso and watching people go by on Ferhadija, the city's main pedestrian promenade. A foursome of old men in

white shirts beneath black suits kiss one another on the cheek and point their canes in various directions. A young woman, perhaps just starting college, covers her mouth with a corner of her pink *hijab* while chuckling at something and whispers to her girlfriend who is wearing a short skirt. A youngster who is wearing a striped polo shirt and tight jeans, his arm slung around his sweetheart, throws a few coins into the hat of a one-legged woman who has propped herself up on a pair of crutches. Vendors at the annual Honey Fair are smoking in their stalls, ignoring the wasps that are zipping around their heads.

Saida apologizes for being held up at work — she is a reporter for a global news network and is also a trained sociologist. She researches the history of Sarajevo's streets for her own short stories. Her neat bob frames her face that is imprinted with exhaustion. As we chat, I periodically glance between the buildings at one of the many Muslim cemeteries that blanket the foothills, the white obelisk-shaped tombstones punctuate the land like exclamation marks. Reflecting the organization of Muslim life into *ummas* (communities), every old neighborhood has its own mosque and cemetery. Earlier today I visited the Martyrs' Memorial Cemetery Kovači, where blossoming rose bushes caressed the marble columnar headstones that overlook Baščaršija, a historic bazaar district. The alive and the dead are always in close proximity in Sarajevo. Already, West had noticed “the Muslim tendency to be truthful about death, to admit that

what it leaves of our kind might just as well be abandoned to the process of the Earth.” In unpracticed, measured English, Saida declares the cemeteries are “a daily reminder that today I am here but tomorrow I can be dead.”

One of the many Sarajevo Roses around the city

The Roses, however, present a moral dilemma. “I get an awful feeling looking at them. It isn’t pleasant to walk by and think, *Someone died here*. I’m not sure if it’s alright for these reminders of terrible deaths to be so close to where we live. People don’t like to think about their traumas. But in the end I decide we must keep some of them. We have to remember what happened, because what will happen if we forget?”

She pauses, and I detect in her both a reluctance to continue and a desire that I learn everything about the painful subject. I notice

this with everyone else I speak to: Sarajevans are tired of talking about the war. They've moved on — or at least they want to — yet they also want to make their stories known.

As we bid our farewells, Saida says she wants to show me something. She leads me down a maze of alleyways, past craft stores and restaurants that serve the local specialties, *ćevapi* and *burek*, to an open square where she points at the Trebević Mountain to the southeast. “From there they were shooting at us,” she says. I nod and blurt out, “I know.” She shakes her head and points again. “I just wanted you to *really* see.”

From then on, whenever I walk down from the apartment I stare across the valley at countless barrels of sniper rifles and mortar cannons that are hidden in the hills, enveloped in the late-summer haze and still full of unexploded landmines.

Like most locals, Saida has no clue how many Sarajevo Roses remain embedded in the city's streets. I only find out when I meet with Alma Mašić and Nina Šeremet, executive director and program coordinator, respectively, of the Youth Initiative for

Human Rights Bosnia and Herzegovina (YIHR). They greet me in the organization's downtown office on the top floor of a converted apartment building. Their outfits match my stereotype of a human rights activist: Mašić in a Trinity College sweatshirt, Šeremet in a plain white tee, both clad in jeans with an air of readiness about them. Through an open window, street clamor enters the otherwise deserted space.

Since 2010, YIHR volunteer crews have been repainting the Sarajevo Roses around the city. Early in the morning on the anniversary of the siege every year, they tape the area around each Rose and, careful not to go over the lines, paint over the resin using a durable glossy red finish. Explaining the background of their initiative, Mašić tells me, "The main purpose is to never forget what happened so the war isn't repeated again in the future."

As of the last repainting, twenty-eight Roses remain in Sarajevo, down from forty-four in 2011. "Many, perhaps hundreds, of Roses existed all over the city after the war," Mašić says. "Most of them disappeared during postwar reconstruction. People failed to realize their true value."

Throughout the conversation I get the sense that echoes Saida's sentiments: the remembrance of the war has taken over the war itself in the city's consciousness. As the senior executive, Mašić

does most of the talking but it is Šeremet who leads the annual effort on the ground and whose energy fills the airy conference room. In early 2013, a construction company was about to jackhammer two Roses into pieces during a repaving project when the foreman saw the YIHR volunteers at work. “He was surprised to learn about the Roses,” Šeremet says. “YIHR’s efforts had paid off,” she continues with pride, “the construction company partnered with the Stari Grad municipality to reconstruct and preserve the two Roses.” The first is the one I saw earlier on the cathedral plaza, the other abuts the cathedral’s west wall.

When I ask for the name of an official who could talk to me about the project, Mašić and Šeremet exchange an amused look and admit they don’t know. No one ever claimed responsibility for creating the Roses. When YIHR sought a permit for the repainting project, they could not figure out who to ask for permission, so they proceeded with their “semi-legal action” anyway. Šeremet says, “Only once, in 2010, did the police stop us saying we were destroying public property. But nothing came of it.” Mašić adds, “The Roses belong to no one, which only helped them get erased.”

The covered Merkale Market buzzes with midday activity. On February 5, 1994, a bomb blast killed sixty-eight and wounded 144 people in the market in perhaps the most notorious massacre of the siege (a similar attack took place the following year). Today, a handful of Sarajevans shop for fruits and vegetables. A vendor sings into his mustache while he rearranges grapes on a folding table against the backdrop of a long red wall that bears the names of the slain.

Between an apple stand and a table that is heaving under pyramids of cabbages, stands a white stone memorial tablet with a large inscription that declares, “On this spot, on 2/5/1994, Serbian evil-doers killed 67 Sarajevo residents.” Below it, an invocation in smaller script reads, “Let the dead rest in peace, recite Al-Fatiha and say a prayer, remember and warn.” Finally, the “Citizens of Sarajevo” are marked as the plaque’s signatories at the bottom.

The now out-of-use Bosnian coat of arms, the old symbol of the Bosnian medieval kingdom, runs along the side of the memorial as the only source of decoration. This is the only memorial that stands on its own — dozens of plaques hang on buildings around the city center — both existing to honour those who were killed by “Serbian criminals” (the Bosnian-language word *zločinci* literally translates as “evil doers” but its meaning is closer to “criminals”).

In a paper titled “Silent vs. Rhetorical Memorials: Sarajevo Roses and Commemorative Plaques”, Dr. Mirjana Ristic, a Serbian-born scholar at the University of Melbourne, compares the two memorials. The white plaques, the official project of the Committee for Marking Historic People and Events of the City of Sarajevo, “operate as conventional rhetorical monuments which

articulate and stabilize a selective version of Sarajevo's wartime history based on a particular ethnicity. As a consequence, the plaques extend the ethnic conflict from the past to the present and maintain collective ethnic trauma." The plaques tell passersby what to think about what happened. Every time I look at one, the analyst of recent Balkan history in me wants to scream in protest: *Not all Serbs fought in the war, not all Serbs are guilty!*

The white plaques shout at me at eye-level from everywhere I look, but finding the Roses requires a laborious search unaided by maps, a contemplation with downcast eyes. This is their inherent quality. Ristic writes that Sarajevo Roses "do not have fixed meanings but rather are open to multiple interpretations of symbolism, thus resisting appropriation by ethnic ideologies. They are silent places of memory which allow passersby to construct their own personal versions and narratives about the city's history. They allow multiple versions of memory and history to co-exist, and thus they open up the possibility of reconciliation." By saying nothing, the Roses equalize all human beings in death; by maintaining silence they let everyone think whatever they want. In conversation after conversation, on the record and off, everyone I speak with expresses appreciation for the symbolic power of the Roses. In an unreleased video Mašić and Šeremet showed me, a middle-aged woman said, "The Roses allow people to be on their own with their thoughts."

Storm clouds gather into dark bouquets as I set out in quest for Azra Junuzović's 2006 book, *Sarajevo Roses: Towards the Politics of Remembering*, to find out the Roses' origins. In bookstore after bookstore, staff give me directions for other stores or call their colleagues to check their stocks. There is distant thunder when I find another Rose, unmarked and unnoticed, at the foot of the Grand Park by the Memorial of Murdered Children, a fountain with green glass sculptures symbolizing mother and child on a circular platform, cast from melted bombshells and weapons. Nearby, two girls sit on benches, bookended by shopping bags. Behind them, turbaned headstones of a forgotten Ottoman cemetery tilt this way and that. The old trees sway in the surging wind.

My treasure hunt ends in an alley behind the BBI Center shopping mall. The mustachioed proprietor extracts the book from a stack next to the counter. The first rain drops splatter against the asphalt. I imagine I am holding the last copy of the book in the entire city, if not the country, and feel as though I, too, rescued a piece of history.

I wait the storm out at a café off Marshall Tito. On the street corner, a woman with a large black umbrella holds up a smartphone against her ear and waves down a taxi while holding sunflowers wrapped in white paper. The sounds of punishing rainfall and the call to prayer mingle with Whitney Houston belting out, “I’m your baby tonight,” on the café’s stereo.

A Sarajevo Rose

Junuzović tracks the Roses’ origins down to Nedžad Kurto, a professor of architecture at the University of Sarajevo, who conceived of the memorials following the Markale Massacre. He intended for the Roses to commemorate both those who died and those who suffered throughout the siege, and he “wanted to avoid any personalization of any particular sites.” Kurto is vague, if not evasive, about the rest of the story. With the exception of a statement by the Sarajevo Canton Office for Urban Planning and

Development that confirmed approval of the project “after being approached by a group of citizens” Junuzović found it almost impossible to obtain information about the creation of the Roses from the local authorities. No one could point her to any pertinent documents either. “A mystery,” she writes.

Similarly, the residents Junuzović interviewed also had no clear idea — some guessed local government, others survivors — and she also found Sarajevans’ memories blurry as to when the Roses first appeared except that it was some time after the war. Perhaps, as several respondents pointed out, it doesn’t matter who created the Roses or when — what matters is that they exist. Perhaps memory has no discernible beginning.

In her conclusion, Junuzović recommends the Roses be continually repainted and appropriated in order to be remembered. I think of the YIHR activists and decide everything is going to work out.

Outside, the storm is subsiding. A sun ray breaks through the clouds, vanishes, then reappears again as the clouds begin to break up with astonishing speed. Within a couple of hours the streets are dry beneath the fallow sky, the storm wiped away as though it never happened. The swollen Miljacka river rages through its confines with a muddy, reddish torrent.

Heather Johnson, an American traveler who repainted the Roses with YIHR in 2012, calls herself in her short film, *Sarajevo Roses*, “a trespasser through a wound that had not properly healed.” From Rose to Rose to Rose, I trace only a scar running deep across the local memory. The unreconstructed buildings that dot the city seem like afterthoughts hovering over a spirited, if a bit rundown, European capital. The Siege exhibit in the Sarajevo History Museum gathers dust. The Memorial to the International Community — a one-meter replica of a golden can of beef included in wartime humanitarian aid packages — is missing a few letters. It reads only: C NNED EE. The wind blows petals of dried carnations from a commemorative plaque erected above the railing on the Suada and Olga Bridge, named after the Bosniak and Serbian teenage girls who were the city’s first victims of the war.

The Rose on Ferhadija promenade

Back on the Ferhadija promenade, I locate another Rose. I crouch over the red splotches. Sarajevans skirt me as they would a film camera and my soul hurts the way the Bosnian expression goes: “*Boli me duša.*” I ache for something just beyond the horizon of present possibility, something I never had and now have lost forever. Bosnians manifest the sensation in *sevdah* songs, in which Alexandar Hemon, the local son who got stranded in the U.S. while visiting when the siege began and whose reading in town I missed the previous night, heard “the spirit of calm realization that life would pass like spring bloom and that there was nothing but infinite darkness in the end.” I turn the yearning

over and over like a spade of dirt until it crumbles and becomes a permanent part of me.

Tourists in Bašćaršija admire filigree flower designs on copper platters, jugs and *džezva* pots. Mašić told me she was pleasantly surprised by the interest in the Roses from abroad. In fact, she said, “foreigners are more interested in the Roses than the locals are.” In the early aughts, European press reported on a spike in war tourism here. The Tunnel of Hope Museum, located over the underground passage that provided the city’s sole connection to the outside world during the siege, is a top attraction.

During my visit, two separate tours of Americans come through, each with an enthusiastic guide announcing he was a child during the siege and can’t remember much. The Sarajevo Siege Tour promises to “cover everything one should know and see about the suffering of this great city during the siege” including the tunnel, siege lines on Trebević Mountain, destroyed facilities and bunkers, minefields, shrapnel and “many, many other interesting sites of destruction.” In 2010, reports emerged of the

new wave of war tourists flocking to the city from former Yugoslav countries.

I mention this to an old CEU friend, Bergin “Beca” Kulenović, a Sarajevo native who is in town for a vacation from a defence contractor job in Afghanistan. “We Bosnians get tired of our own history,” she tells me, “but we don’t remind ourselves enough of it, of how cruel and stupid people can be. If tourists come to see the war’s legacy, it helps us remember and learn from our past, to overcome it and not live in it.”

I meet Beca at Kibe Mahala, an upscale hillside restaurant with a panoramic view of the city. Following a massive meal of Bosnian specialties — *Begova čorba* chicken-and-vegetable soup, a hot *meze* platter, and a sampling of *rakija* spirits — the waiter chuckles behind his goatee when he delivers a large tray of spit-roasted lamb we forgot we had ordered. With the relish of someone perfecting a story with each telling, he brags about having once persuaded an Italian vegetarian gentleman to try the lamb by comparing it to a Ferrari: “Like Ferrari is not just car, lamb is not just meat. It’s a way of life.” Leaving the restaurant we find that the fallen night has transformed the valley into a meadow of lights. West wrote that “because of the intricate contours of its hills, [Sarajevo] is forever presenting a new picture, and the mind runs away from life to its setting.”

Whereas Bosnian politicians continue to interpret the war through their respective ethnic lenses — Bosniaks continue to call the war a genocide against Muslims; Croats a Serbian aggression; Bosnian Serbs a civil war — and their constant bickering grinds national institutions to a halt (the National Museum closed earlier this year due to the lack of funding) one other thing unites Sarajevans: all were equal victims of the shelling during the siege.

Beca spent the war in the U.S. and Canada. She returns to Sarajevo — “our little village,” she calls it — often from her home in Toronto. But as she jets between continents, the past drags behind her like a shadow. “People still criticize me for leaving. They say I betrayed my country by not being here. It looms in conversations even if it isn’t said out loud anymore. When I returned I felt guilty like many of those who returned from abroad after the war. But I stopped apologizing long ago.”

Citizens take cover during the siege of 1992

Many residents who fled the siege never returned, but carried the city with them. The day before we leave, I receive an email response to my earlier query from Nina Rupena, a Sarajevo-born painter living in Melbourne, who authored a series of paintings titled Sarajevo Roses. The city was the foundation of Rupena's identity as a child. "With every bullet and explosion I heard," she wrote about her twelve-year-old self, "I would imagine another hole in the city and another person dying. My whole world was crumbling."

After a sniper's bullet narrowly missed her, Rupena remembers sitting in the basement of her building, her jaw trembling out of fear. With her mother and sister, she fled the city in the last

convoy allowed to leave. The trio was later held up for four days by the notorious Serbian militia group Arkan's Tigers. She spent five years living as a refugee in Croatia, feeling guilty for leaving, for "having it easy as a refugee." After her family moved to Australia, Rupena lost her identity once again and suffered from nightmares and post-traumatic stress disorder. Then, in 2009, while researching her Master's thesis on the notion of belonging, she became overwhelmed with emotions bottled up inside her.

"The first Sarajevo Roses paintings were inspired by the image of an open wound. They represented a rapture in my emotional state and also wounds on the city of Sarajevo. I was not trying to ignore and escape the trauma as before, but instead I delved into it, poked it, tried to visualize it, understand it, and accept it. I felt the need to find meaning in it and accept human nature with its dark sides, finding the sublime beauty of the human spirit, to desensitize myself to the experiences from my past, integrate them in my life, and to look at them objectively. As I healed, my Sarajevo Roses changed from raw open wounds to explosive but gentle roses, just like scars, which are painful in the beginning but then they heal and become a visual reminder of an experience, a part of life, proof."

On my final day in Sarajevo, I walk one last time along Marshall Tito Street where, on the 20th anniversary of the siege, Sarajevans placed 11,541 red chairs: one for each resident killed, some of the 645 small chairs representing children. These chairs have been buried under piles of flowers, teddy bears and photographs. Thinking of the Sarajevo Red Line, the name given to the installation of the chairs, sends chills down my spine until I spot one of Mister Cat's graffiti of a grinning feline with angel wings surrounded by red roses. The image has spread from New Orleans to many cities around the world. From balconies of apartment buildings, geraniums cascade over walls strewn with bullet holes like seeds scattered in plaster earth. Two gruff men in faded green uniforms sweep the sidewalks with birch brooms in long, slow curves that scatter fallen geranium petals — white, red, purple — into the breeze and gutters. Gawkers step on the Rose at the foot of the Cathedral steps as they admire the wares the craft fair vendors have spread across folding tables that are arranged in a semi-circle. I skirt the logo, inlaid in the pavement, of the 1984 Olympic Games. The abstraction of four people with arms in the air forming a symmetrical snowflake that resembles a flower (“snowflake,” it turns out, is a synonym for the plant

known as the Loddon lily). Though during my days in Sarajevo I've failed to recapture West's sensation, it seems everything does circle back to flowers after all.

The taxi driver taking me to the bus station is a jovial, chatty Bosniak who tests my language skills with fast delivery and an unfamiliar accent. He's from the East Bosnian town of Višegrad, which he fled in 1992 after Bosnian Serb troops gave him and his neighbors an ultimatum: leave in twenty-four hours or be killed. "And you came here?" I ask, incredulous. He tells me that despite the siege, Sarajevo was the only place that offered treatment for a leg wound that he had suffered during his flight. As we enter East Sarajevo, in Republika Srpska, he buckles his seat belt. "In my home town, I would have been killed for sure. Here, at least I had a chance of life."

The bus back to Belgrade clambers up Highway E761, twining up the hillside. I look at the city below basked in late summer light. In *Sarajevo Roses*, Junuzović writes, "There is no memory if there is no one to remember it." There is also no memory without the experience that births it, I add. As the flower of Sarajevo closes behind me, I remember the man I was when I bypassed the city all those years ago. Staring into the rising sun I remember the man I've become. I now remember Sarajevo.

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Peter Korchnak

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