



Introduction

I have lived three lives.

In my first life, I lived happily with my parents and brother — a conventional middle-class family. We owned a comfortable fourteenth-floor apartment in Sarajevo and a cottage in the countryside, where we spent our weekends. My mother, Jasmina, was a business manager at the National Bank. My father, Sandi, worked for a large book company. At the end of my first life, my brother, Sanel, was graduating from high school, and I was a cheerful sixth grader.

My country, Bosnia and Herzegovina, was a part of Yugoslavia, located between Italy and Greece. The capital,

Sarajevo, was a beautiful, modern European city, ringed by breathtaking mountains. In 1984 it hosted a very memorable and magnificent Winter Olympics.

Everything changed on April 6, 1992. I was twelve. That morning I got ready for school and walked into the living room. My parents seemed troubled and sad. When I asked what was the matter, I could barely hear my mother whisper, “Nadja, you’re not going to school today.”

“Is it a holiday?” I asked, excited.

Again she whispered. “Nadja, it’s the farthest thing from a holiday.”

It was the beginning of war and of my second life.

My family spent the day in front of the television, unable to believe what we were seeing — groups of armed men in stocking masks setting up barricades throughout the city, blocking the streets. The next day the thunder of explosions and the whistle of bullets frightened us and our neighbors into the basement. There were more than 270 tenants in our apartment building, and we were all crammed into three small underground rooms.

Day after day we breathed the damp, stale air, watching in terror as the explosions made the ceiling above us shake. We stretched the last of our bread, crackers, jam and water. We became still and listless, like the sandbags stacked against the walls to protect us from shattering glass.

Finally, after weeks in the dark and cold basement, we could no longer deny the truth — war was here to stay.

On May 31, 1992, I opened my notebook and began to write. Instantly this diary became a friend who listened to all that I desperately needed to share. It was my only place of peace amid the chaos.

I am an adult now, living my third life in North America, but my diary is still my most valuable possession. It tells a small part of the story of my city, which struggled to breathe despite the noose of tanks and weapons determined to strangle it.

I often ask myself why I stayed alive when thousands of children were brutally killed. There is no answer. I know that nothing can bring them back, but only forgetting would make them truly dead. They will live in my heart and in the following pages as long as I live and share their stories.