



Not My Turn to Die: Memoirs of a Broken Childhood in Bosnia

Savo Heleta

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In 1992, Savo Heleta was a young Serbian boy enjoying an idyllic, peaceful childhood in Gorazde, a primarily Muslim city in Bosnia. At the age of just thirteen, Savo's life was turned upside down as war broke out. When Bosnian Serbs attacked the city, Savo and his family became objects of suspicion overnight. Through the next two years, they endured treatment that no human being should ever be subjected to. Their lives were threatened, they were shot at, terrorized, put in a detention camp, starved, and eventually stripped of everything they owned. But after two long years, Savo and his family managed to escape. And then the real transformation took place.

From his childhood before the war to his internment and eventual freedom, we follow Savo's emotional journey from a young teenager seeking retribution to a peace-seeking diplomat seeking healing and reconciliation. As the war unfolds, we meet the incredible people who helped shape Savo's life, from his brave younger sister Sanja to Meho, the family friend who would become the family's ultimate betrayer. Through it all, we begin to understand this young man's arduous struggle to forgive the very people he could no longer trust. At once powerful and elegiac, *Not My Turn to Die* offers a unique look at a conflict that continues to fascinate and enlighten us.

Not My Turn to Die: Memoirs of a Broken Childhood in Bosnia Details

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From Reader Review Not My Turn to Die: Memoirs of a Broken Childhood in Bosnia for online ebook

Igor Watanabe says

I read the book in a day as it is in a form of memoir. It does give an interesting, and for Bosnia, a controversial testimony of life as a minority in a city under siege.

Noelle says

Wonderfully written. I found the account to be both objective and heartfelt, a difficult balance to strike. I gave the book to a Bosnian friend of mine who read it along with his mother,(both of them survived the war), and they agreed that the account was very accurate. Savo wrote a narrative that drew me in, while staying true to what actually happened during his experience of the war in the former Yugoslavia. I highly recommend both as a true account for your own historical knowledge as well as an intriguing story of family, friends, heartache and heroism.

Lisa says

I can't begin to imagine. I just can't. I hope I will never have to experience even a little of what is described here, that my children and (one day) grandchildren will never have to. That anybody will.

I know, even writing that, how achingly unrealistic that is. Still.

This is such an important book. We sit here in our warm homes with our televisions and food that we engorge on beyond our capacities and think that what the media tells us is true. We hear that the Red Cross is there, that the UN is there to help, and we donate a few dollars and sit comfortably in the belief that all will be okay, at least they have the food. At least the UN is there. At least someone is there to ensure that the Geneva Conventions is being upheld--that the war is confined only to places unreachable by civilians.

Are there really any rules in war?

His ability to move on and find the degree of peace he was able to is something I'm still working on, and I haven't been tormented personally by anyone. It's amazing.

I hope everyone reads this book or others like it. Reality is awful, but without reality we can never hope to fix what is so very wrong about the world.

Dan says

After the Bosnian War Savo Heleta, a seventeen year old Serbian, found himself with a gun in his hand and the power to take away the life of, Meho, one of his family's tormentors. The man who had attempted to kill

his family four times during the war. Heleta's debut memoir, *Not My Turn To Die Memoirs of a Broken Childhood* in Bosnia documents how political extremists created a climate of fear that destroyed a diverse and harmonious country, and one young man's journey through two years of hell. Prior to the war Savo and his family lived in peace and prominence in their city of Gorazde, but once the war began they lived in constant fear for their lives. The city was surrounded by the Serbian army and former Muslim friends now threatened their lives. From the outside there was constant fear of shells hitting buildings and snipers killing anyone, Muslim or Serbian who moved. Within the city the Heleta's were threatened, beaten, and even forced live in a detention center for Serbians for four months. The Heleta's made it through with the help of Muslim and Serbian friends, strangers, and hope to survive and eventually escape the war torn city.

This suspenseful memoir is what I refer to as a home run story. One that will captivate the reader and give both a historical and very personal context to the brutal Bosnian War. When Savo sees Meho in the United Nation convoy he is faced with the ultimate choice: revenge or redemption.

Ben says

My parents tell me the same thing. "Don't take revenge. Don't stoop to their level." But never in my life has an experience justifiably sparked an all-consuming, searing desire to fiercely and mercilessly avenge myself. Savo Heleta has experienced such horror to warrant that vengeance.

And he chooses his future over violently avenging his past. He listens to his father, the head of a remarkable family, and, by emerging a man of rare quality, proves to his readers that behaving hypocritically, acting monstrously and barbarously as his oppressors acted, would have been far more detrimental to *him* than to his potential victims.

In this war-torn tale of destruction and fear, akin to those of Anne Frank and Elie Wiesel, Heleta tells us of neighbors and friends who morphed into bitter enemies because a political system decided that segregation and ethnic cleansing would enrich their lives. Before the political upheaval, Bosnian citizens of Serbian, Muslim and Croatian descent generally coexisted peacefully and perhaps even blissfully; the envy of America. Perhaps the over-used cliche, "Birds of feather flock together", should be rescinded from public consciousness, because when the cliche was imposed, all hell broke loose. War. Death. Destruction. Horror. Fear.

The truly majestic strength of Savo's book put me to shame. Even in a life relatively painless, I, like so many others, search for something responsible for the evil which blinds me to the good. Heleta's narrative, though horrific and more tense than Hollywood historical fiction dramas, counters savage terror with humanitarian altruism and God's interference. These simple affections and "timely luck" inspire those who suffer to see God while those who have comparatively little reason to complain curse Him for the evils in their lives.

To paraphrase Heleta, the divide between ethnic groups are illusions. There are good, bad and indifferent people. I cherish his perspective and I am inspired by it. Perhaps we can learn a little more about how we treat people from reading this book; the tale of a man whose integrity and character exemplify the best in humanity.

Jenni says

I have to admit I knew very little about the war in Bosnia prior to starting this book. A very poignant account of one man's (who was then a young teenager) perspective of living through the war, surviving and eventually escaping. Well written, touching (at moments I found myself near tears), and at the same time calmly objective. I highly recommend it to anyone interested in learning a bit about what went on in this part of the Europe during the early 90s.

Dionne says

"This meeting, like many meetings afterward, didn't bring us any help. The UN and the International Red Cross were our greatest hopes for survival when we found out they were coming to the city. But our hopes were in vain. They never responded to our pleas for help. Helping ordinary people survive oppression during the war wasn't in their job description." --pgs. 154-155

This was an amazing story of what it was like to live through and survive during the war in Bosnia. I knew very little about the war and found this personal account very gripping. I found it to be a great story of personal triumph and a lesson about the Bosnian war at the same time. I highly recommend it.

Tim says

As the former Yugoslavia broke into a multi-national civil war, it became clear that the Serbs intended to gain control over Bosnia and Herzegovina through a campaign of ethnic cleansing. In *Not My Turn To Die*, Savo Heleta, a thirteen year-old Serb living in Gorazde, recounts his family's experience during the army's siege on that predominately Muslim area.

Even though Heleta's memoir doesn't provide a direct testimony of the ethnic violence raging through other parts of the country, it does provide a unique look at the fallout from the conflict. As non-Serbs found themselves persecuted, the reverse was taking place in Gorazde, as the city turned itself into a xenophobic conclave of Muslim refugees, the ultimate outcome being a mirrored response to the Serbians.

Even though the Serbs of Gorazde weren't the victims of genocide, the similarities are certainly there -- Heleta's family lived in constant fear, were often threatened, were interrogated and beaten, and even spent a short period confined to a building that was nothing short of a makeshift "ghetto." And just as the Holocaust is riddled with small stories of witnesses lending a hand to aid their former Jewish neighbors, this too becomes the recurring theme of *Not My Turn To Die*.

While it would be easy to dismiss Heleta's account as one Serbian's attempt to downplay the violence against non-Serbs, it's far better to take this book as it was intended, as a lesson in the blind brutality of war. In fact, what's most striking about this memoir is its ability to demonstrate that violent events are often viewed through large, global terms, with too little emphasis placed on personal experiences and responsibility. The majority of any given group might take part in a pogrom for instance, but it's the individual who chooses not to follow that produces an extraordinary result.

Sandra D says

Powerful testimony from a young survivor of war. When the Bosnian conflict erupted in 1992, the Heleta family was forced into hiding as minorities in the city of Gorazde. Savo has written an intense and unforgettable chronicle of the unimaginable horrors they endured for the next two years, giving a much-needed human face to the civilian experience of life in a war zone.

Meghan says

"I realized that only brave and strong people can put years of suffering behind them, reconcile with the past, and move on with life. I wanted to be one of them." -p. 225

Savo says

This is my book published by AMACOM, New York, in March 2008

Praise for the book:

"Savo Heleta's account of life in pre-war and war-time Bosnia, and his experiences as a minority Serb in the besieged Muslim enclave of war-time Gorazde is a gripping and compelling story of the nobility of good and the banality of evil. Through the eyes of young Savo we watch the collapse of human moral values under the onslaught of hatred, propaganda, desperation and lies, while also seeing the attempts by some to maintain their humanity in the face of overwhelming odds. It is a fascinating piece of memoir literature from Bosnia that is certain to outrage the reader, while at the same time offering an exciting narrative."

Dr. James Lyon, International Crisis Group

"Savo Heleta's memoir of the war in Bosnia is an eloquent testimony to the human capacity for compassion and forgiveness. Only by hearing the personal stories, like Savo's, from witnesses to the terrible trauma and lasting damage of war, can we imagine how to create a culture of peace. I am grateful to Savo Heleta for erecting a signpost along our path."

Andrew Himes, Voices in Wartime Education Project

More about the book at www.savoheleta.com

Jessica Sonntag says

makes you realize how lucky you have it..

Broc Auringer says

My brother said this book was a must-read, so I am attempting to start this book.

Claire Haeg says

An amazingly calmly written narrative by a Serb survivor of the Bosnian Conflict. Not brilliantly written because it was written in the writer's second language, but very interesting and educational.

Cristina says

Ho letto questo breve libro autobiografico come conseguenza della lettura di *Maschere per un massacro* di Rumiz. Pensavo, giustamente, che la visione "dall'interno" della guerra in Bosnia avrebbe o confutato o confermato le tesi di Rumiz, in particolare che la guerra in Jugoslavia fu più un conflitto "sociale" che etnico (aspetto che fu usato come grimaldello ma che, probabilmente, non fu la causa scatenante di una guerra prevalentemente voluta dall'alto).

Il racconto si svolge in una cittadina a circa 100 km da Sarajevo, Goradz'e, enclave musulmana in terra serba. Savo Heleta è un ragazzino serbo, figlio della buona borghesia della città - quella che non è stata in grado di riconoscere i segni del baratro in cui stava scendendo la Jugoslavia e che pertanto non è stata così furba da scappare in tempo. Nello spazio di pochi mesi passa da una infanzia dorata alla fame e alla disperazione di un assedio durato due anni.

Il racconto è lineare, semplice, privo di sottintesi. Savo è un ragazzo all'epoca dei fatti, e i fatti ci racconta, come li vede e vive lui: tradimento e cattiveria, ma anche inattese bontà, solidarietà e coraggio. Nel racconto - toglietevi dalla testa che sia il vittimistico panegirico del povero bimbo serbo maltrattato dai cattivi musulmani - sono proprio questi ultimi a dimostrare maggiore solidarietà con la famiglia serba. Del resto la breve introduzione descrive una famiglia che vive - senza problemi e tensioni - nello stesso quartiere e nello stesso palazzo con serbi, croati, musulmani e così via, tutti uniti dalla stessa educazione e dallo stesso livello sociale di media borghesia benestante. Quella che alla fine della guerra non esiterà più. La peggiore figura la fanno i politici, i vari apparati militari e di polizia, l'ONU e la Croce rossa, inetti e inefficienti quando non sono persino peggio. Un poco troppo di "zucchero" negli ultimi capitoli rovinano il tono generale di un libro che non è un capolavoro letterario che ma ha un grosso valore di testimonianza.

A fine lettura direi che Rumiz probabilmente ha ragione nella sua lettura del conflitto jugoslavo, anche se a venti anni dal conflitto le sue ipotesi non si sono avvurate, o almeno non del tutto.
