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Where Hope Has Withered -- A special report.; As Lull in the War Ends, Sarajevo Is Shellshocked

By ROGER COHEN

SARAJEVO, Bosnia and Herzegovina, June 24— Always, the stomach contracts. When, through the still air, there comes the flat boom of rending and fracture that is the sound of another shell's impact, indifference can only be feigned. Even the war-hardened of this city feel the familiar knife in the gut.

There are those who attempt a show of bravado. "At least 100 meters away," they say with a dismissive wave of the hand. There are those who rail. "Idiots, fools, savages!" they scream at the encircling hills where the invisible Bosnian Serb gunners lurk.

But nobody in this city escapes a surge of anxiety. The fear has been there since 1992, when the war and the Serbian siege of Sarajevo began.

Yet it is different now. The adrenaline has gone. The belief that international help was at hand, and that such madness could not last, has gone too.

The hope that accompanied a brief lull last year, when streetcars ran and water actually flowed from taps and that deafening sound of destruction did not reverberate in the valley, has also disappeared. All that is left today is a shattered people confronted by the renewed slide of Sarajevo into the abyss.

"We can't even breathe anymore," said Dr. Mihajlo Milasevic, an orthopedic surgeon. "We've been waiting for three years, and now I feel that even my brain is blocked."

He raised his hands to his neck in a gesture of self-strangulation, one that is increasingly common among the 280,000 people living in this European city with a dirt trench around it.

As Western attempts to protect Sarajevo have collapsed this month, and regular shelling has resumed, an overwhelming sense of crisis has taken hold, accentuated by the rising heat of early summer.

In this context, a Bosnian Army offensive supposedly aimed at relieving the town has been welcomed: however desperate, however bloody, however bungled, it is better than dying slowly in confinement.

"To attack is like taking a breath," Dr. Milasevic said. "It is a little air for the rats in this hole."

The doctor is an Orthodox Christian, like the Serbs who lob shells on this city. He comes from Montenegro, the southern part of the truncated Yugoslav federation now dominated by Serbia. But Sarajevo is his adopted city.

He is married to a Catholic. His brother is married to a Muslim. Being from a mixed family, like so many Sarajevans, he feels he has no choice but to remain in the town he loves.

In the end, it is that simple: a man, his family, his town and nowhere to go.

Sarajevo was never Serbian, not even at the height of the medieval empire. There have been Serbs here for centuries, but even the nationalists who took on the Ottoman and then the Austro-Hungarian Empire never dreamed of turning this city at the crossroads of East and West into an ethnically pure Serbian preserve.

But such a Serbian zone covering much of the city is the professed goal of Radovan Karadzic, the Bosnian Serb leader, and his followers in the hills. The license plate on Dr. Karadzic's car now carries the Cyrillic double S: it stands for "Serbian Sarajevo."

Because such ethnically based objectives flout the values on which Western civilization has been built, the people of this city still cannot understand why the Serbs have not been confronted.

"I am in a state of permanent disappointment with the West," said Abdullah Sidran, a distinguished poet. "There is a quality of evil here; that has to be seen. Bosnia is like planet Earth. If Bosnia is senseless, then the planet is senseless too."

This month, as more children's limbs were severed by falling mortars, Sarajevans heard President Clinton try to explain that the Bosnian conflict was 500 years old, if not 1,000 years old. Their cynicism, already almost fathomless, grew deeper still.

Sarajevans heard the argument this way: turn a three-year-old war into a millennial conflict, and inaction becomes the only reasonable course.

"We thought there were rules in the modern world," said Ismet Ceric, the head of the psychology department at Kosevo Hospital. "But as time has passed we have seen that only with a stone in your hand can you defend yourself."

It has been 38 months now, and time passes slowly here. After the shelling there is a silence so deep it amounts to a prolonged hush. Little stirs. People tend the vegetable gardens that are now as ubiquitous as cemeteries.

Some run across areas exposed to sniper fire; others make a point of not changing their pace. If you run, the saying goes, you hit the bullet. If you walk, the bullet hits you.

When the shelling resumes, gravediggers find temporary shelter in the graves they are preparing. The smash of a shell takes the breath away. What follows is exhaustion.

Inside, people burn books to heat stoves to cook the rabbits they have raised in cages in their bedrooms. If there are no books to burn, they try plastic bottles (highly flammable), stockings (surprisingly combustible) or shoes (good, solid value once a fire is going).

Children, forbidden to go outside, bicycle maniacally from one room to another.

There is no future, because no plans can be made. There is no past, because a normal life in the city is now so infinitely distant as to appear unreal. There is only today. There is only, in fact, this moment, because a Sarajevan life may be extinguished at any instant.

"Virtually everybody here now has some form of post-traumatic stress," said Dr. Ceric, who heads the department where Dr. Karadzic used to work in Sarajevo.

"It takes two forms," he said. "The first is anxiety, shortness of breath, a sense of strangulation and, in extreme cases, delusions and paranoia. The second is extreme inertia, flatness and a denial that anything is happening."

Darko Sljivic is calm. He lives in the western suburb of Dobrinja, where Serbian shelling of people lining up for water has killed nine people in the last two weeks.

From his balcony, he can see the front line, about 100 yards away, and beyond that, in Serbian-held territory, his son's former school. Every now and again, the building is sprayed with machine-gun fire.

Before the war he was a bank executive. Now he sips plum brandy, grows vegetables and contemplates the devastation around him.

"We were in Europe," Mr. Sljivic, who is half Serbian and half Croatian, said, "and now we are in the mud. I don't even think about this ending anymore. I'm just happy if my tomatoes grow.

"In fact I don't think at all. If I start to think, I go crazy. My only thoughts are how to bring water, how to get something to eat, when to let the kids out, how to feed my rabbits." **How an Urbane Banker Became a Peasant**

It is raining. Mr. Sljivic, who is 40, says the rain is bad for the potatoes and onions. Then he smiles to himself and mutters that he has become a peasant.

His wife, who is half Serbian and half Jewish, hands him a photo album, but he pushes it away, saying that when he sees photographs of the world outside he feels worse.

This banker-turned-urban-farmer started growing vegetables on a small patch of ground outside his apartment in 1993. The same year, he bought his first rabbit, for \$40. He started breeding them and, at one time, had 30 rabbits. Now he is down to three.

The rabbits live in an abandoned room, too exposed to fire to be habitable, along with some snails that Mr. Sljivic recently collected but has not yet cooked.

"I was worried about killing the first rabbit," he said. "I thought it would upset my daughter. So I took the rabbit to a neighbor to be killed. When we put it on the table, my daughter asked what it was. I said it's the rabbit. She tried it and said, 'I like it better like this than alive.' She was hungry, you see."

Mr. Sljivic laughed to himself. He is a half-Serb fired on by the Serbs who used to be his neighbors and friends, a well-traveled international banker who is now reluctant to go downtown. He says he understands how the world feels. He used to look with disdain at wars in Africa and the Middle East.

Now others look at the Balkans in the same way.

"I don't worry anymore," he said. "If anything, I worry about peace. I don't know if I could still be a bank director. I don't know if I can ever go back to that life." Tired of Answering 'How Does It Feel?'

Sarajevo is now a giant laboratory. Mr. Sljivic, like others, is a specimen. The inhabitants of this town have changed, almost beyond recognition.

They are tired of being exhibits, of being asked how it feels to line up for water, how it feels to lose a limb or a child, how it feels to have no freedom, how it feels to live in the sniper's sights, how it feels to burn clothes to cook macaroni distributed by the United Nations.

They adapt and sip coffee and wait for some unimaginable deliverance.

Havda Sadikovic-Coso has gone into the egg business. She recently acquired 99 chickens, which she keeps in a hut in her small garden. The chickens were brought through the tunnel under the airport that is the city's only tenuous connection with the world outside. They produce about 630 eggs a week, and Mrs. Sadikovic-Coso earns 10 German marks for every 30 eggs.

"Animals have saved me during the war," she said. "It's much easier to deal with them than humans. Before the chickens, I had about 100 rabbits. I never believed I could kill one.

"But then one day I was really hungry. I took a rabbit by the ears and whirled him around, like a ventilator. Then I hit him on the head with a piece of timber. He lost consciousness and I slit his throat. The first time it was not easy, but after that I was fine."

She lit a cigarette. "It's funny," she said. "I can look at 100 rabbits with their throats cut, but one drop of human blood and I start to cry. I have a well here, and when people come to get water, all I can think of is that a shell might land and. . . ." Sobbing drowned her words. 'You Can Never Get Used to This'

When shells do kill, Alija Hodzic deals with the bodies. He has been working as director of the morgue since June 1992. On July 7, 1992, the body of his nephew, Adnan Hodzic, 22, was brought in. Two months later, the body of his 21-year-old niece arrived. And on Oct. 10, 1992, Mr. Hodzic had to identify the body of his 22-year-old son, Ibrahim, killed by a shell in central Sarajevo.

"I can't stand it much longer," Mr. Hodzic said, "but they can't find anyone else to do this job. Every day when I go into the morgue, I look at the spot where my son's body lay. It is terrible."

He opened one of the frayed, olive-colored ledgers where he has entered the names of the thousands of Sarajevans, including his own son, killed since 1992. As he flipped the pages, the body of a woman with half of her head blown off by a shell was wheeled in on a stretcher.

Mr. Hodzic accompanied her into a room where three other bodies lay. Because there has been no electricity in Sarajevo for more than a month, there is no refrigeration and the stench of dead flesh is strong. The other bodies were covered in cloths. Their exposed feet and ankles were turning blue.

"You can never get used to this," Mr. Hodzic said.

Everywhere, now, there is death or madness or exhaustion. This strange experiment, in the midst of Europe, could not possibly continue for so long, and yet it has. Beneath the gaze of a disoriented world whose one achievement -- the curtailment of shelling through a NATO ultimatum last year -- has now evaporated. Battered Museum Offers Remnant of Civilization

Just one haven remains. It is to be found in the overgrown botanical garden of the devastated National Museum. Here roses cascade off battered trellises amid the ancient tombs of Bosnian dukes and kings. There is silence and the scent of conifers.

Enver Imamovic, the director of the museum, sits on a tombstone in the sun writing a history of Bosnia.

It was he who, in June 1992, amid fierce fighting, saved the Sarajevo Haggadah, one of the world's most beautiful illustrated Jewish manuscripts, from a safe in the basement of the museum.

It was an act worthy of this remarkable city: a Muslim saving a Jewish manuscript stored in an old Viennese safe in the basement of a museum built by the Austro-Hungarian Empire and under attack from Serbian nationalists bent on destroying the mingling of cultures and religions that is the hallmark of Sarajevo. An act, that is, of generosity and deep civility.

More than 400 shells have hit the museum, and Mr. Imamovic said he felt like a man watching his child dying. Roman mosaics, prehistoric boats, massive medieval bells lie helter-skelter in the once elegant rooms.

Nobody can be found to tend the botanical garden, and the undergrowth is growing thick. A single tortoise inhabits the garden.

"We used to have four tortoises," Mr. Imamovic said. "But the other three have died during the war. This one is still going, however, and seems quite happy."

As he spoke, the tortoise inched methodically toward an ancient tomb, as if to say, with its ponderous but steady gait, that everything passes in the end.

Photos: Drinking water has been in short supply in Sarajevo, shattered by three years of war. Women collected bowls of rainwater from a street during a downpour last week in the Bosnian capital. (Reuters) (pg. A1); TOP A Sarajevo woman feeding pigeons with bread crumbs (perhaps fattening is a better word) from her damaged window near the city center yesterday. One banker-turned-farmer keeps rabbits in an abandoned room, along with some snails. (Associated Press); LEFT A woman's handbag and glasses -- and splattered blood -- left behind after an artillery attack on a bus. (Christopher Morris/Black Star); ABOVE A woman whose house was rocketed, destroying the top floor, clutches a rosary for protection. (Associated Press); RIGHT Tending a makeshift vegetable garden in the rubble of the city center. Such gardens are everywhere in the city. (Agence France-Presse) (pg. A8) Map of the region surrounding Sarajevo shows the current areas of control. (pg. A8)

