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Chosen to Survive

A Bosnian, cut down by shrapnel, sees his life as a miracle.

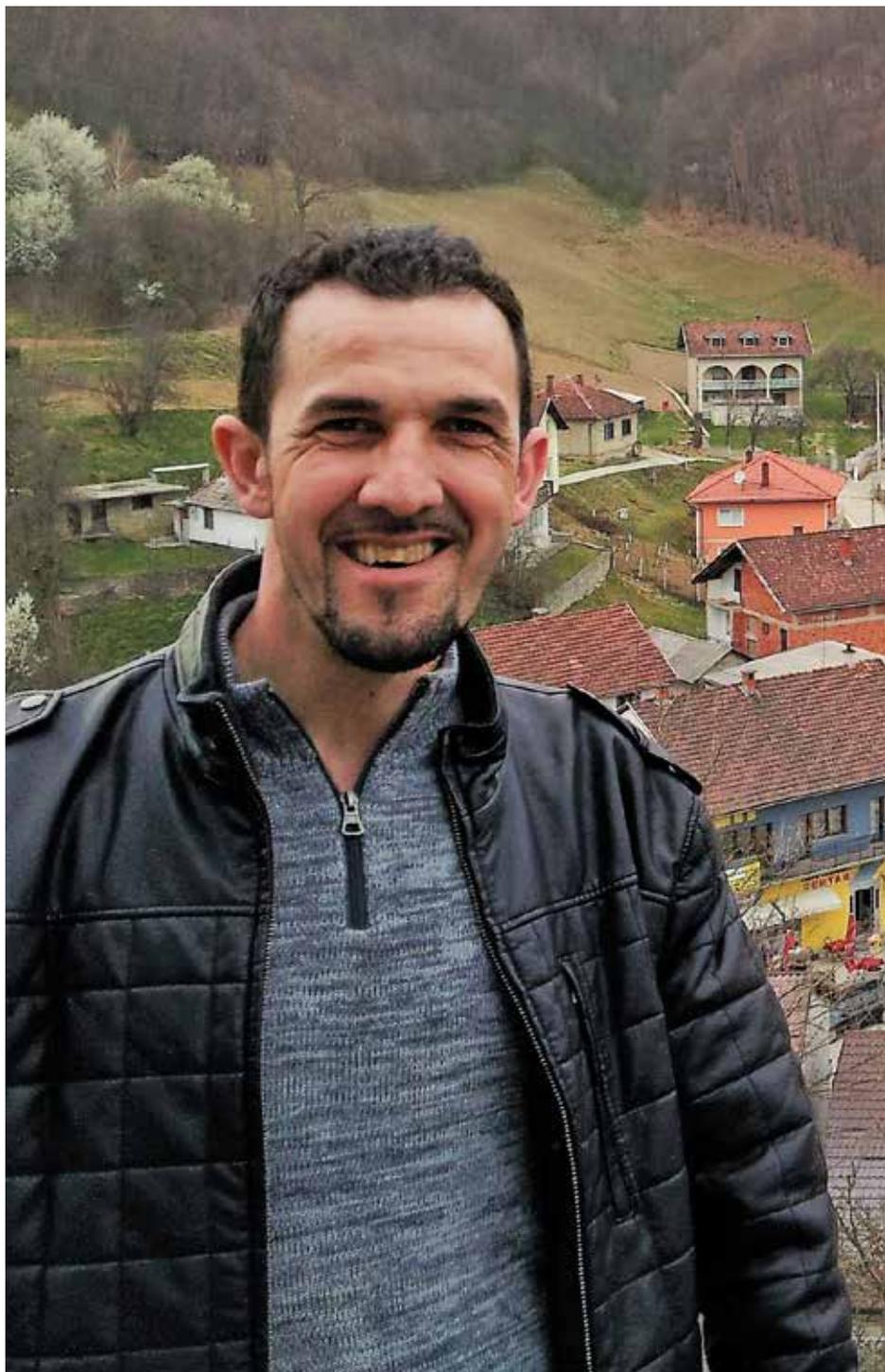
By Refik Sadikovic with Kathleen Rubinow Hodges

Refik Sadikovic, lanky and tall, is a clear head higher than most other people. A refugee from the Bosnian War, he wants Boiseans to know what it was like. Last fall, Refik talked to editor Kathleen Rubinow Hodges at Boise State University, where he teaches and pursues a doctorate in education. A refugee, he explained, is different from an immigrant who searches for jobs and a better life: “Refugees left their country because of war, and fear, and persecution. They are desperate enough to risk their lives, to cross dangerous borders and seas. They just want to have a peaceful life. They don’t have any choice.”

Describe your life in Bosnia before the war began. Where did you grow up?

I was raised on a farm in northwest Bosnia, one of the six constituent republics in former Yugoslavia. We had a family of eleven: four brothers, three sisters, my grandma, my parents, and me. When we weren’t in school, we worked on our farm. We had a lot of land. We planted orchards and made everything organic. I had a nice childhood, going to school, enjoying peace and freedom.

The small town of Vrnograč, where I went to elementary school, is located fourteen kilometers from the municipality of Velika Kladuša, where I rode the bus each day for an hour to attend high school. During the 1970s and 1980s, Velika Kladuša became the corporate headquarters of Agrokomerc, one of the biggest food companies in former Yugoslavia. Agrokomerc made Velika Kladuša one of the most advanced regions in Yugoslavia. The population of Velika Kladuša was around 20,000 people. My town, Vrnograč, consisted of around 5,000 people. In the center of Vrnograč on the hill, there is an old castle built in the 14th century. Around the castle there were houses and a few roads that led to people’s homes where everybody knew each other. We lived a peaceful life until 1991 when the wars in Yugoslavia started. Since Velika Kladuša and Vrnograč are located on the border of Croatia, every day we heard grenades hitting homes located a few miles away in Croatia.



R. SADIKOVIC



Refik Sadikovic with parents, 1978.

Previous page:
Sadikovic returns to Vrnograč, 2013.

And how old were you then?

I was 17 years old, and I was a junior in high school. Students in my school were scared, because we never had experienced something like that before. At that time in the former Yugoslavia, all male citizens were subject to military recruitment, and until you served in the military for a year you couldn't get a passport or leave the country. Because I was 16 years old, I couldn't get a passport. When I turned 18 and finished my high school, I had to join the Bosnian army and fight in the war. My two older brothers, who served in the military earlier, were lucky to leave Bosnia before the war.

The war in Croatia started in 1991. The war in Croatia occurred between Serbs and Croats, because the secessionist Serb Republic of Serbian Krajina was proclaimed in 1991 in Croatia. The war in Bosnia started in April 1992, which was fought between Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats. The Yugoslavian People's Army joined the Serb paramilitary forces in Bosnia and Croatia to fight together with Serbs against the Croats and Bosniaks to create a homogeneous "Great Serbia." Our Bosnian northwest region was completely surrounded by Serbian paramilitary forces in Croatia and Bosnia.

Complicated! You ended up in a refugee camp. How did that happen?

In 1993, I was required to join the Bosnian army, the Fifth Corps. I had just finished my high school in June, and the same month I was required to attend military training in a town about 20 miles away. The training was in a school building, a thousand soldiers, all about 18 years old. After my 30-day training, I was defending the city of Bosanska Krupa from the Serbian forces. I stayed there for two months. Then I went back to fight for my town, and I stayed there fighting the war for maybe a year. In July of 1994, we couldn't defend our town anymore, and we decided to escape into Croatia to save the civilians. About 30,000 to 40,000 refugees went together, leaving everything behind.

We escaped to a town called Turanj in central Croatia. It was a no man's land where the Serbian and Croatian forces



Sadikovic in the Bosnian army, 1994.

were separated by the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR). There were no standing buildings in the town. The abandoned and damaged houses, overgrown bushes, and tall grass were full of land mines. We tried to demine the entrances to the houses for the refugees to find a shelter from the rain and cold. We put our lives in danger to help thousands of women and children find a place to sleep.

On the bridge over the river Korana that separates Turanj from the city of Karlovac, the Croatian military yelled, “No, we won’t let any refugees enter the Croatian controlled territory.” And the horrors of the war were chasing us. I still remember the river Korana with the Croatian tanks blocking the bridge. The bridge was our only way to freedom. I still remember the cruel voice saying, “Nobody can go.” No women, no children, nobody. And all around the river they had military watching. Across the river, people had homes in the city of Karlovac, and if we could have moved there we could have established a livable refugee camp. But we ended up building a camp on the street around the mines. Trying to demine the area, some



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A Croatian tank guards the Bosnian border, 1998.

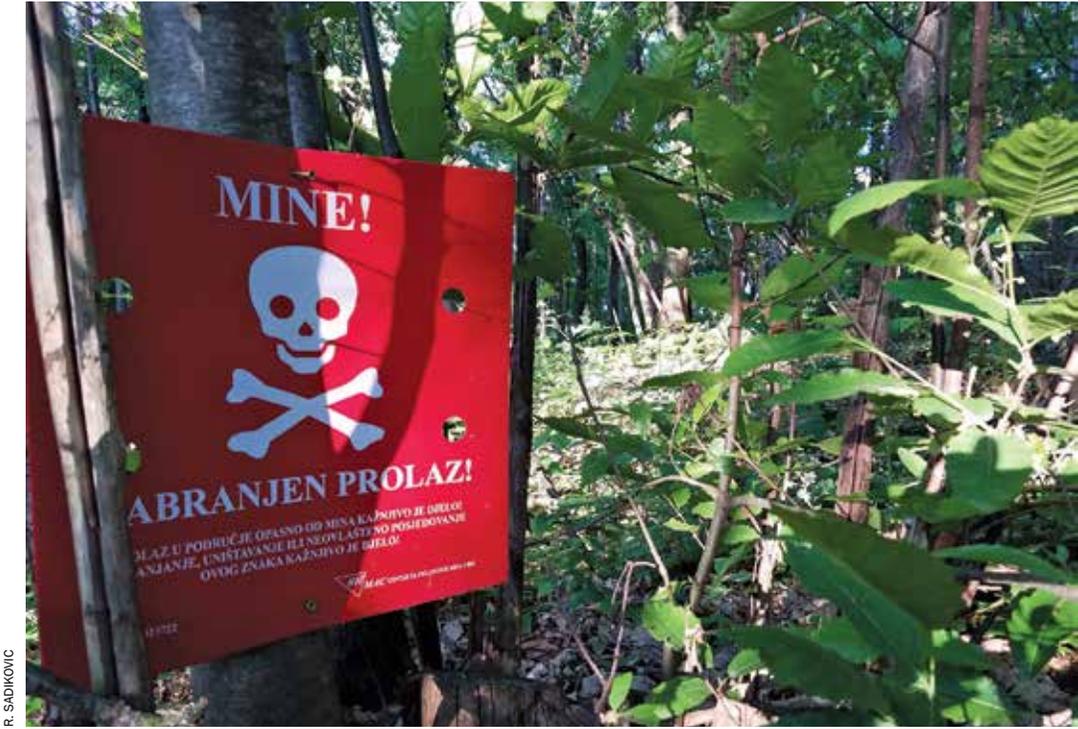


R. SADIKOVIC

Kuplensko refugee camp, Croatia, 1995.

people lost their legs, some people died. We stayed there from July until November of 1994. UNPROFOR brought water and some bread, but that wasn’t nearly enough for so many people to survive.

I was so desperate. One day I said, “Okay, I have to leave the camp,” and I swam across the river during the night. I wasn’t aware that there were tank mines on the other side, laid by the Croatian military. I was shocked when in the middle of the field, I saw anti-tank mines around me. I paused for a minute, thinking about my family and my life in Bosnia. And I



R. SADIKOVIC

Sign warns of land mines near Vrnograč, Bosnia, 2013.

said, “If I go back, so many mines are behind me as well. So, I will not go back. If I die, you know, I will die and that’s it. There is no going back.” After I crossed the field safely, I was happy to be alive. I remember it was late fall, cold and foggy weather. Croatians were fighting in that area earlier, and I saw trenches in the ground from previous fights. I mostly walked during the night through the forests, avoiding occupied areas. On my way to Slovenia, I crossed two more rivers. The second river, Kupa, is on the border between Slovenia and Croatia. After roughly five days of walking I came to Slovenia.

Late at night, I came to my eldest sister’s apartment. I took a shower and I went to bed. About two hours later, I heard a loud banging at the door and men yelling, “Police, open the door!” in Slovenian. The police said to my sister, “He, the refugee, has to go back.” I don’t know how they knew I was there. My frightened sister asked, “Why? I will support him. He did nothing wrong. He just escaped the war.” I told my sister that everything is going to be okay. I will go with them. They took me back to the river where I crossed the border between

Croatia and Slovenia. They told me, “You crossed the border illegally, and we want to know where you crossed the river.” At about 4 a.m., in the middle of the forest, they stopped the car. They said, “We’re going to kill you now, and nobody will ever know that you existed,” placing a gun on my head. I told them, “If you really want to kill me, do it.” Another policeman said, “Okay, let’s first go to see where he crossed the river before we kill him.” The police continued driving. An hour later, I showed them the shallow part of the river where I walked across into Slovenia.

Miraculously they changed their mind, throwing me in front of a judge in his office. After he briefly questioned me, the judge asked me to pay a \$200 fine in Slovenian money or spend 30 days in jail. I told him, “I don’t have any money to pay you, but I have a request to get a year in jail. Because look, if you send me back to the refugee camp, I might die there. If I get prison for a year I might survive.” The judge was livid, and then he ordered the police officers, “Hand him over to the Croatian border patrol!” The truth is, I was happy to go back to camp, because I was afraid they would kill me in Slovenia. At the border the Croatian officers were very nice. They even asked me, “If you want to go back to Slovenia, we will let you go.” I said, “No, I don’t want to go back to Slovenia, because I am afraid for my life. I would rather go back to the camp.”

An hour later, I was back in the camp. Because people were desperate, they decided to start mobilizing to go back and fight for our towns in Bosnia. I was very upset because my dream of being free was destroyed by the Slovenian government: That approach, to return refugees to a place where they faced imminent danger, was against the Geneva Convention. I thought, “Now I will go back and fight for my town, because it’s the only place I have.” Then people in our camp mobilized 3,000 or 4,000 people who were fit for the military, and we went back to Bosnia. The civilians, mostly women, children, and elderly people, stayed in the camp. They came back to Bosnia two months after we were able to liberate our towns. And we stayed there until July of 1995 when we lost the fight and were forced to flee again.



GUBA ZOKY RABKO/WIKIPEDIA

The Kupa River borders Croatia and Slovenia.



HISTORY.COM

Headstones mark the 1991 attack on Bosnia's Srebrenica. More than 7,000 Bosniaks died.

That was when you were wounded?

It was July 10, 1995. I could see my house from the hill where I was wounded. I was talking to my comrade about the life after the war, and then I heard a big blast. I remember I only saw something like a long tunnel and a bright light far away. “Am I dead? That is it, I am dying. But it is too early for me to go.” I started thinking about my family and friends. And my father had died just a few months earlier. I thought, “My father died. Now I am going to die. How is my family going to handle this?” I was thinking about everything my people and I went through. My life during the war was like living on the edge of dying every day because I suffered so much, fighting every day, being cold, wet, and hungry.

After a few minutes, which seemed to me like eternity, I started seeing figures of people around me. “I actually may not be dead!” I thought. “I might die, but for now I am alive.” My comrades were patching my wounds. I had about 15 wounds on my body. I could hear people and I was conscious! My wounds were horrifying, like my shoulder, I could see bones. My hands, arm, chest, mouth were bleeding. My friends had to carry me in a blanket through the forest to an emergency vehicle. And I was thinking I was going to die before I got to the hospital in my town. It took the paramedics half an hour to get me to a hospital.

The hospital had never performed any surgical procedures before the war, because it was only for primary care. The doctor and nurses were moving me from one table to another as they tried to clean and patch my wounds and take X-rays to locate various pieces of shrapnel. As there was no anesthesia, I could feel pain and see the doctor fighting for my life. The doctor was really concerned about the shrapnel in my chest, and he was trying to find it. The look on his face revealed that he could not. I was concerned, but I thought that the shrapnel is in my muscle and it's fine if it stays there. After a two-hour-long procedure, the doctor sent me to a room for critically wounded people. The next morning, the doctor came to see me. When he entered the room, I was sitting. I couldn't use my hands, but I could walk. I was able to go to the restroom by

TURBOSQUID



M-75 Yugoslav hand grenade, 1995



ALLEN R. ANSELL PHOTOGRAPHY

myself, and he said to the nurses, “Now I know he is going to survive, and he can be moved to a recovery room.” I was very happy when I heard that. I thought, “It is not my turn to die. I got another chance.”

The author inspects a fragment of shrapnel that migrated from his chest to his leg over the course of 16 years.

You have a story about the shrapnel.

Since I was wounded, I had shrapnel in my chest. I never knew it was in the artery. I have so much shrapnel still in my body, and they don't bother me. In 2011, I had a CAT scan after a car accident. After the scan, my doctor told me, “Everything is fine, except you have a piece of metal in your upper leg. And that's probably from the war, because you were wounded.” I said, “But I was never wounded in my leg!”

I was somewhat scared. My doctor referred me to a general surgeon. After the surgeon examined me, he said, “Refik, you were never wounded in the leg. Shrapnel can't move through the tissue but through your vein or arteries. I think you were wounded in the chest by the heart, and somehow shrapnel entered your artery and traveled down.” And he said, “I have to refer you to a cardiovascular surgeon.”

The cardiovascular surgeon, Dr. Gilbertson, did an ultrasound. He stated, “The shrapnel is in your artery and blocking the flow of your blood. If you want, you can have the surgery tomorrow morning, at 9 o’clock.” To calm me down, he added, “The shrapnel in the artery, it is something new for me but do not worry.”

After the surgery, the doctor gave me the shrapnel in a vial as a gift. He told me, “That shrapnel stayed there at the same place for 16 years. A miracle stopped the shrapnel there, and then your body created tissue around it so it couldn’t move.” He said, “Your body really protected you, because it surrounded your shrapnel very well with the tissue and expanded the artery to allow the normal blood flow.”



TEDXBOISE

Belma and Refik
Sadikovic, TEDx Boise,
2016.

You told this story as part of a TED talk. Why did you decide to share it?

I had the surgery in 2011, and finally I shared the shrapnel story at a TED talk in April 2016. I never wanted to show that to anybody because it was kind of a piece of me, and I wasn’t ready to share it. I almost felt as if there was still a piece of me in that vial. I didn’t like talking about my experience in the war,

because whenever I wanted to talk about it I started thinking, “Why did it happen to me? How did I survive?” After the surgery, I asked the doctor, “Can you please explain to me how the shrapnel came to my leg?” The doctor said, “I really can’t give you a good explanation. There are only two options. One option, if you were wounded in the artery, you would bleed to death in a matter of minutes. The miracle is that the shrapnel stopped in the artery and didn’t pass through. Or the second option is that you were wounded in the heart but then you would be dead as well. That’s why I can’t explain it to you.”

And since then, I tried not to think about it. But my shrapnel reminded me of the purpose of life. I believe that if you do good things in life, you will be protected. Because during the war I was helping people: I didn’t want to kill anybody, because I felt like if you kill anybody, even if that person is your enemy, it will come back somehow to bite you. Somehow, I was chosen to survive and I am here to share my story. My body was full of shrapnel, 15 wounds, and miraculously I survived.

I always think about that shrapnel, and so many foreign bodies that are inside, and at peace with me. And people ask if I feel anything. No, I don’t! I never felt anything, and even though some of the shrapnel pieces broke my bones, they don’t bother me.

Quite a story! Now, going back to 1995, did it take long to recover from your wounds?

I remember the day I was wounded. By August, our military was losing ground again. I stayed in the hospital for 10 or 11 days. Then for a second time, about 30,000 civilians were forced to flee to Croatia. There was chaos, panic. People were scared, running. There was a big truck standing outside of the hospital to transport wounded people. I got outside and I tried to get into the truck but I couldn’t, because my wounds were still fresh. Somebody helped me to get in the truck. The grenades were falling around us; people were dying. I witnessed horrible scenes. Thousands of refugees were leaving their homes, their town, escaping without anything. The hospital staff loaded the truck with wounded people, and



VENCL

Empty red chairs memorialize the 11,541 victims of the Siege of Sarajevo, Bosnia, 1992-1996.



we escaped the town. Very soon we were in Croatia, feeling safer. So many people now refugees on the road, escaping the war for a second time. I was thinking about life in Bosnia and about the future. I couldn't stop thinking. I said, "This time, it's even worse because I was wounded." This time also, we were stopped 15 miles from the Bosnian border by the Croatian military and their tanks. The Croatian soldiers said again, "Nobody can move."

The houses there were destroyed, because Serbs and Croats had been fighting in that area since 1991. We had no food, no water, no place to sleep. People were hungry; they were sharing their last pieces of bread. Many were dying of wounds, because medical help wasn't available. You have more than 30,000 people; how are you going to feed everybody? And again, it took more than a week for the UN to bring some food and water.

I was looking to find help to treat my wounds. During the middle of August it was very hot, and it looked very likely that my wounds would become infected if I left them untreated. I



RAPHAELLO/WIKIPEDIA

said, “Man, I’m going to die this time.” I saw a UN Red Cross vehicle by the Croatian checkpoint. After I asked for help, they weren’t very friendly. But one of the doctors was really nice. He treated my wounds and gave me some antibiotics. He told me to come again in two days. After a few visits, I was surprised when I saw my deep wounds healing pretty fast. At this camp I stayed with my mother, two brothers, and a sister, as they escaped the war as well. After several days, I started feeling better. Now, again I could shave my face with my hands. I started thinking about leaving the camp again.

Ruins of Bužim Castle,
Bosnia, near the
author’s hometown.

Tell me about your second escape.

Two weeks later, my mother said, “You should go and save your life. What if they force you to go back again and fight? Better go and save your life.” This time, I decided not to stay in Slovenia but to go straight to Austria. I walked again for six days. I had some food with me. I carried some chlorine tablets that I received from the UN personnel at the camp for the disinfection of water. After I crossed into Austria, I purchased a train ticket and I rode the train to Vienna.



Bombed-out Sarajevo,
Bosnia, 1992.

I knew that there was an asylum center in a small town called Traiskirchen. I was told if you reach it, you will be protected from deportation. I was lucky enough to reach that asylum center. At the gate of the asylum, I handed them my ID. It was expired, the picture was damaged, and you could barely see or read anything. I said in the German language, “I am this person. I am a refugee from Bosnia. If you can, please help me.” The people were friendly. In a few minutes, they handed me a temporary ID, and they said, “Refik, you are now protected.” For several days, I couldn’t believe that I was free, again free. I thought I was dreaming. That was one of the very happiest days of my life, but still, I was waking up in the middle of the night thinking I was on the first line of defense and somebody was attacking us.

After a few days, I was resettled to Linz, Austria. Linz was a very nice and welcoming city. I got a place to stay and I received food vouchers for a cafeteria, but we were not allowed to work. Amnesty International helped me file an application for asylum. However, two years later, in 1998, I received a letter that my asylum claim was denied, and I had to leave again.

I left Austria and I went to the American embassy in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, where I filed an application to

be resettled to the United States as a refugee. I explained that I was a soldier in Bosnia, that I was wounded, that I applied for asylum in Austria, and that my application was denied, and I am afraid to go to back to Bosnia. Finally, in December of 1999, I was approved to be resettled in America. I had to go through a cultural orientation class to learn about American life before my flight.

My flight was scheduled for February 26, 2000. I was so happy, finally to be able to leave, and be protected, and get a permanent place to start life. In Austria, I stayed for two years but I wasn't allowed to work. I thought, in America I would finally be able to work! At Zagreb airport, resettlement officials said, "Sign this paper that you are going to repay the airplane ticket, or you can't go." People sometimes think that taxpayers pay everything for refugees, but even an airplane ticket you don't get for free. I had no money or anything, but after resettlement I was \$700 in debt. When I landed in Chicago, I received an I-94 visa. I was free again! Since the age of 16, I was in war and in constant fear. Finally, I was allowed to start a brand-new life.

Why did you come to Boise?

I came to Boise because I had a sister living here who was my sponsor. For five weeks, I attended English classes at a Refugee Center over on Jefferson Street, and then I was offered a job. I was told in order to get federal benefits you have to accept the first job offer. I was eager to learn English, but I had to accept the job, which was with Pavement Specialties of Idaho (PSI). I operated a street sweeper, and I worked about 30 to 40 hours overtime every week for almost three years. Even though I couldn't speak English very well, I was very good at my job. I became a supervisor, because there were many Bosnian refugees hired at that time, because that was kind of a hard job and not many people wanted to do it. Besides working as a street sweeper operator, I was creating work schedules for other sweeper operators' routes. I loved my first job. I was making very good money, because of overtime, which paid time and a half. I could afford things that I never thought I would be able to afford.



USA/Bosnia and Herzegovina flag pin

PROMEX

Later you went to work for Micron. How did that happen?

We were sweeping Micron streets on the weekends. Sometimes I would be over there working all night, and thinking, “I like technology and these are really good jobs. So, I should apply.” In April 2004, I gained enough courage to apply for a job at Micron, and I was hired. But I kept my job at PSI for about two more months to train new people.

My PSI boss, Keith Lewis, was very encouraging. He said, “If you want to stay and need a raise, I will give you a raise. But if you want to leave, I respect that. And if you ever want to come to work for me just let me know, and I will have a job for you.” I’ve met with Keith several times since then, and we are always happy to talk about experiences we had.

At Micron at the beginning, I was an operator making much less than I was making at PSI. But because of my strong technology background on various applications and computer hardware and software skills, I advanced quickly. I sometimes fixed equipment and helped technicians and engineers troubleshoot. My manager and supervisor told me, “We have Boise State University and College of Southern Idaho classes offered at the Micron site. After you start taking the required classes, we will be able to give you a manufacturing technician job.” I took some classes and I was promoted. First, I was a manufacturing technician, and then after I graduated I got an engineering technician job.

But in 2009, microchips started losing value, and Micron laid off workers. The management at Micron offered to relocate me to their Lehi, Utah, Micron plant or the Manassas plant near Washington, D.C. I said, “No, I don’t want to leave Boise. I would like to continue my education.” And they told me, “If you don’t want to go, you will get a severance package, and then you can go to school.” In 2010, I got my degree in criminal justice, and then I got my Bachelor of Applied Science. In 2013, I started my master’s degree in education. I graduated in 2015, and I applied to the doctorate program to pursue my doctorate in education, curriculum and instruction. I am planning to start my dissertation in the summer of 2017.



R. SADIKOVIC

Graduation, Boise State University, 2015.

Tell me more about your decision to go back to school.

I strongly believe that encouragement is very important. When I was at Micron, I was told, “You should start taking classes.” I thought that people were joking with me. “I am not good enough. My English is not very good, and I don’t think I will be able to do that.” They said, “Look, you know how to fix equipment that you never saw in your life. We are sure you will be fine.” I was encouraged to pursue college. Finally, I was able to fulfill my dream to continue my education that was disrupted by the bombs years ago in Bosnia. Many people supported that dream and they believed in me, and I didn’t want to disappoint them.

This is why whenever I talk with refugee students in high schools, I encourage them. I say “Look, I came to America and I didn’t go to an American high school. I was able to finish college and now I’m getting my doctorate. I had to work much harder, because writing was much harder for me than for somebody who attended an American high school.”

The only English I knew was from TV, and from listening to the NPR radio in my truck during my work. As somebody who is from a different country, I felt like if I didn’t know something, people will judge me and laugh at me. If an American doesn’t know how to spell, that’s fine; but if a foreigner doesn’t know how to spell, it’s embarrassing. I felt that I had to prove my worthiness to others. But you should believe in yourself and not give up. Don’t let fear or insecurity or anything or anyone else discourage you. That is my advice.

I wanted to ask some more questions about yourself and other Bosnians here. What surprised you the most when you got to the United States?

In America, many things were similar to my country. For instance, I had a driver’s license before I came here. It was easy for me to get an Idaho driver’s license, because the traffic rules are similar to the traffic rules in Europe. The only thing that was hard for me was the language barrier. At the beginning, I would go to the store to buy something, and I would spend



IDAHO OFFICE FOR REFUGEES

Bosnian dancer, World Refugee Day, Boise.

more time trying to find items because I didn't know how to ask for help. I felt that I was educated and well-rounded, but just because of the one thing, speaking the English language, at times I felt desperate.



EDIN WUJICIN/YOUTUBE.COM

Celebrating Bosnian Heritage Day, Boise, 2015.

Are Bosnians in Boise a community?

The Bosnians are a community here. In Boise, we have about 3,500 to 4,000 people. We have a few Bosnian stores: Bo-Ex on Emerald and Orchard, Europe Delicious on Fairview and Mitchell, and the Sofra Grill on Overland Road in Meridian. We also have singers coming every couple of months, and people gather for those events and dance Bosnian folk dances. We meet at Europe Delicious for coffee, to socialize, and speak Bosnian. Also, we have an annual Bosnian Heritage Day each year in May. The event lasts all day. People celebrate the Bosnian culture with food, music, dance, and sport. The Bosnian community is pretty small; people know each other and stay together. Most Bosnians that came as refugees 17 or 18 years ago own their businesses and their houses. Many of them own construction businesses. If you

want to build your house, you almost can do anything with a Bosnian company, because Bosnians are really well known for very good construction work over there in Europe.

Are there people here from other parts of former Yugoslavia?

Right now, here in Boise, we have Bosnians, and we have Serbians and Croatians. Most Serbians here are of Serbian nationality, but they are from Croatia, because during the Serbian-Croatian war they were expelled from Croatia. In Boise, Bosnians are the biggest group, and we have a smaller Serbian and Croatian community here.

Have you gone back to Bosnia to visit?

Yes, I've visited Bosnia about seven or eight times since I resettled to the U.S. Our family house is empty now. I have four brothers and two sisters over there in Europe, but nobody is in Bosnia. We have some neighbors that take care of the house when we are away. Now it's peaceful there. And I think if the situation was like now, I would have never left in the first place. But people always ask, would you like to go back? When I visit, I always look at my ticket and say, "Oh, in seven or eight days I am going back home," because I have been living in Boise almost 17 years and I feel this is my home now.

Tell me something about the classes you teach.

I am in the Ed.D. program in curriculum and instruction. I teach University Foundation courses and a couple of workshops. One is Refugees, Languages, and Cultures in Idaho; and the other workshop is Bosnians, From Refugee Camps to American Citizenship. In that class, we talk about Bosnian culture, history, and the Bosnian War. I also teach a language course, Bosnian 101.

I started teaching Bosnian 101, because Bosnian youth are losing their language and culture. In 2011, I met a Bosnian girl in one of my classes. Other students told me, "She's Bosnian." I started speaking in Bosnian to her. And she replied, "No, I don't speak Bosnian." She said, "I'm ashamed to speak Bosnian. I do not want my friends to hear me." And then her friends



BHVOLUIM/WIKIPEDIA

Spinach pie zeljanica, a Bosnian favorite.



BAEBAE/WIKIPEDIA

Socializing over Bosnian coffee is an hours-long ritual.



Neighbors United helps refugees resettle in Boise.

asked, “Say something, please, say something in Bosnian.” “No, no, I don’t want to say anything in Bosnian.” It felt really awkward that Bosnians are ashamed to speak their own language. That means they’re ashamed of their parents as well, and their heritage. Because if you’re ashamed to speak Bosnian, that means if anybody sees you with your parents, you will be ashamed because they speak Bosnian, right? So I decided to create a Bosnian language class to encourage Bosnian youth to learn and to preserve their language. I have heard from Bosnian students in Boise saying, “Man, we have a Bosnian class at Boise State! It’s so cool.” One Bosnian, after he took the Bosnian class, said, “Oh, now, after taking this class I want to go and visit Bosnia. It is such a beautiful country.” The Bosnian course had a positive effect on him. Therefore, the Bosnian classes, the workshops, and Bosnian Heritage Day should be used to help young kids get acculturated in both cultures, to make sure that they don’t see their parents, language, or culture as an embarrassment.

Are you also involved in city or university organizations?

Yes, I'm co-founder of two student groups: the Boise State Refugee Alliance and the Bosnian Student Association. I'm also a member of the Boise City Neighbors United steering committee and a member of the Refugee Social Integration staff committee. Also at Boise State, I'm a member of the Cultural and Ethnic Diversity board and a member of the Boise State Community Refugee Collaboration team. We meet every few months, and we talk about refugee issues and resettlement in Boise. All together we can make a difference, and we can help people that are struggling, and dying, and who want to have a good life.

When we help refugees, they benefit our community because they pay taxes, you know: property taxes, state taxes, federal taxes. When I came, after a few weeks, I started working and paying taxes. And I wasn't really against that. Look, I am making enough money; I should be helping other people, because nothing is free. Refugees really help the community because they are willing to work, and usually, refugees are mostly younger, working age.

What do you miss about Bosnia?

I miss friends and family. I miss time, the simplicity of life over there, the ability to slow down. And going out for coffee with friends in Bosnia, which is like having social time that lasts for hours. If you visit a coffee shop in Bosnia, you will see people talking about politics, the government, gossiping, and all that. And also I miss wild nature, like the nature of my village.

When you tell your story to other Idahoans, what do you hope they will learn?

Any refugee, Bosnians or any others, they left their country because of war and because of fear and persecution. And they just want a life without fear, a life without war, where they can be productive and free. Most of them just want to be happy and to have a peaceful life, because they suffered so



BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY

Clubs and an undergraduate minor support refugee studies at Boise State.



Near the author's house where he was wounded in 1995.

much. They did not leave their home country because they just wanted to go on vacation. Think about yourself leaving your place empty-handed and going thousands of miles away. Would you do that if nobody's forcing you? Refugees just want to work and they are ready to start new lives. When I see refugees fleeing now in boats, crossing borders in Bulgaria or Greece, I see myself, because what's happening to them now looks exactly like what happened to me 20 years ago.

I hope that through my story, people will learn more about refugee struggles around the world. Refugees are victims of world instability that wasn't created by the refugees. However, many people still blame refugees for coming to their countries, as if refugees are the cause of everything that is going on in our world. I was desperate to risk my life to get to Austria, and I can tell you that all refugees are desperate enough to cross dangerous borders and seas. Refugees are not different from me - from us. How would you feel if you were forced to flee your country and you had to walk hundreds of miles without anything, only to find that some western countries (like Slovenia in my case) do not want you, and in fact they hate you, they deport you, just because you are a refugee?

Currently, I am Bosnian American. I succeeded in my life, and I am happy. But should I stop caring about other people in the world who are still experiencing things similar to what



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I experienced? I can't! I can't stop caring. I can't let them suffer more, because I am not a person who thinks, "Better to seek happiness in your own life than worry about others born under some unlucky stars." Based on my life and my teaching, I strongly believe we should treat every human being with the dignity and respect that we expect to receive. I have shared my refugee story with students, coworkers, friends, and many good people in our community. Many of them were very supportive toward me and other refugees. Thus I hope that my story will change how people see the refugees that are fleeing to save their lives. With just a little support and resources, refugees grow and give back. It is time we as a nation begin to see refugees not merely as liabilities but as assets. Not as burdens but as becoming. And isn't that what this country is about?

Standing in the spot of the near-fatal shrapnel explosion, 2013.



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