

Survival in Sarajevo - Interviewing a Picture —: A picture is worth a thousand words

“In this European war, Jews were not the victims. In this war Jews, Muslims and Christians joined forces to stand against hate.”

INTRODUCTION:

The Bosnian-Serb siege of Sarajevo, from spring 1993 until winter 1996, was the longest in modern history. With electricity, water and food supplies cut off and only sporadically supplied, with 11,541 citizens shot by snipers or killed by mortars, Sarajevans had to depend on each other.

When governments fail, civil society finds a way. In a faded, turn-of-the-century synagogue, a group of Holocaust survivors and their offspring created La Benevolencija, the Jewish humanitarian aid agency. Who worked there? Jews and Muslims, Serbian Orthodox and Catholic Croats—all those who never believed one ethnic group was superior to another.

After all, Jews had lived alongside *all* their neighbors since they were welcomed in Sarajevo in the 16th century. This is the story of how they paid their neighbors back.

This project, created by Centropa, is based on the book by Edward Serotta, *Survival in Sarajevo: Jews, Bosnia, and the Lessons of the Past*, published in 1994.

Student Assignment:

Look carefully at the pictures, read the captions, reflect about what you see. Choose two of your favorites to explore in depth. First take notes in the table provided, trying to see beyond the surface, “to read between the lines”. Use your notes to do a writing assignment in a format of your choice. You could write a poem, either in the third person, or “in the shoes of” the character in the picture. You could write a diary entry or a letter from the point of view of the character, or you could write a reflection from your own point of view, an opinion piece. Choose your words carefully, engaging your senses and making use of strong verbs. Do your best work.

Alternative Group Assignments:

1 [Sarajevo Exhibit](#) Teams of students can print the photographs from the link and create their own exhibition. They could organize the work thematically and add research details, quotes and comments.

2 [The Story of the Sarajevo Hagaddah](#) – A film that could be shown in conjunction with the Centropa film [Survival in Sarajevo](#).

Some themes to discuss: What qualities do people of courage and integrity demonstrate? What does it mean to be a leader? What does it mean to be a moral and ethical person? How do these films demonstrate the belief that our common humanity overrides ethnic and religious boundaries? Students could create posters, collages or dramas to demonstrate these ideas.



Members of La Bohoreta, the women’s club of La Benevolencija, preparing treats for the children.



Youth Group meeting in Zagreb – Eliezer Papo and Dani Ovadija of Sarajevo. Jewish communities did not offer much in the way of religious services, but they were exceptionally strong in social and cultural programs. This created a strong sense of belonging among those families that wanted to be Jewish.

Life before the Bosnian-Serb siege

“In post-World War II Yugoslavia, the Jewish communities welcomed you if your mother was Jewish, your father was Jewish, or if your grandmother played bridge with someone who was Jewish.”

Recapture the moment	
What is happening in the picture? What do you think was happening just before the picture was taken?	
Notice the physical details in the picture. What do you observe? Be specific.	
What feelings does the picture evoke in you? Mood?	
If you were in the picture, what sounds would you hear near you? What might you hear further away?	
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*All who are hungry, let them enter and eat.
All who are in need, let them come celebrate
Pesach." The Hagadah*

Tzitzko Abinum, the community cook, had three stoves to use – one for electricity (when it was running), one for gas, (when he had a canister) and one for wood. La Benevolencija's soup kitchen fed 400 people daily.

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Donka Nikolic is getting an injection from Miki, the nurse.

"Anyone who visits the sick causes him to live"
Talmud

A medical team visited more than a dozen souls every day. La Benevolencija's walk in clinic served everyone. Three pharmacies gave out more than 500,000 prescriptions free of charge.

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"What does God require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" Micah 6:8

A two way radio station was used to communicate with the outside world.

The Jewish community post office brought 60,000 letters into the city.

Why did people not use the usual means of communication, like phones?

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*I have an aged father and mother who are helpless. I give them food and drink, and wash and dress them daily.”
The Rabbi said: “I will be happy to have you as my neighbor in Paradise!”
Midrash quoted in Sefer HaDorot*

Mrs. Wagman and Dr Wagman burn books to be able to cook.

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Only oxygen is more essential than water in sustaining the life of all living organisms.



The Bosnian Serbs had cut off water to Sarajevo, so city authorities opened a few taps in various parts of the city, where people came to do their wash, and fetch water to bring home to clean with, flush toilets, and cook with.

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While we try to teach our children all about life, our children teach what life is all about.

Volunteers at La Benevolencija took care of the children by providing treats, entertainment and a place to go.

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	<i>This is the fast I have chosen. It is to share your bread with the hungry. Isaiah</i> Djuro, Nada and Boro were part of the food distribution committee.
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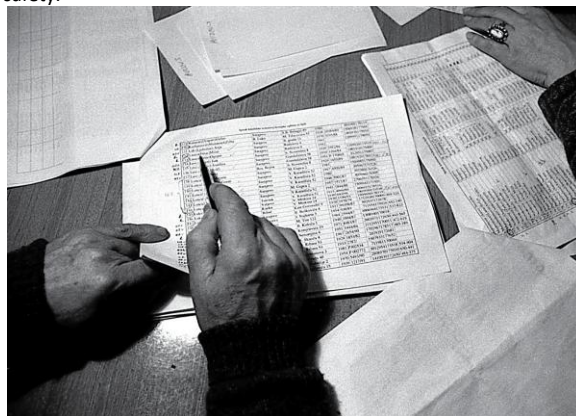
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Rabbi Tarfon used to say: It is not up to you to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it entirely - Mishnah Avot

Jacob Finci and the committee prepare to evacuate Sarajevans to safety.



Between 1992–1995, La Benevolencija organized eleven rescue convoys out of the besieged city. All were underwritten by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee

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"The Jewish people have been in exile for 2,000 years; they have lived in hundreds of countries, spoken hundreds of languages and still they kept their old language, Hebrew. They kept their Aramaic, later their Yiddish; they kept their books; they kept their faith."
Isaac Bashevis Singer.

Not for the first time civilians caught in a war had to leave everything behind.

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Lots of times you can feel as an exile in a country that you were born in.
Azar Nafisi



Preparing to leave a city under siege.
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"You support the falling, heal the sick and free the captives. You keep faith with those who sleep in the dust." From the Amidah

Denis Karalic, a Muslim boy being evacuated to Israel.

What would it take for your parents to send you off into the unknown with strangers? Desperate times sometimes require desperate solutions.

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Miracles sometimes occur, but one has to work terribly hard for them. Chaim Weizmann

Six buses arrived on 4th February 1994 to take 294 Sarajevans to safety. Nine rescue convoys took 790 people to safety.

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"There still existed a just world outside our own, something and someone still pure and whole... for which it was worth surviving" Primo Levi

Muslims and Jews

Zejneba and Mustafa Hardaga, had risked their lives in 1941 and 1942, to shelter Jews. The Hardagas became the first Muslims to be recognised as Righteous Among the Nations. During the siege, an ailing Zejneba and her youngest daughter, Sara, were still living within the shattered remains of Sarajevo in their cellar. Desperately needed medicine was smuggled to Zejneba. Finally, on 5 February 1993, the family made their way out of the besieged city in a refugee convoy headed for the Croatian border. In Israel they were granted Israeli citizenship in the presence of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.



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The heart's intention is the measure of all things. Maimonides, Letter to Hasdai HaLevi, 12th century



Saying goodbye to loved ones is always hard, but much more so in times of uncertainty and war.

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