



**FROM THE ARCHIVES**  
**Autumn 1994**

## **The Libraries of Sarajevo and the Book That Saved Our Lives**

by **Kemal Bakaršić**

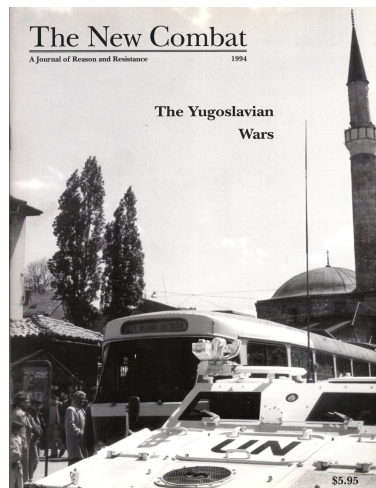
*This report and cri de coeur from besieged Sarajevo first appeared in the Autumn 1994 issue of The New Combat, then flew about the nascent public internet, introducing the author and his books to a wider world.*

Few who met **Kemal Bakaršić** during those years will forget him. He

*articulated, in a charming and often playful English, what the wide world had surmised despite its willful blindness but would rather have ignored — that something precious and rare yet utterly universal was at stake in the Bosnian war.*

*The published piece was a composite of a short essay Kemal wrote for the occasion and extracts from the tape transcript of my first conversation with him in 1993, in his dim, dusty office in the Presidency building in Sarajevo. Every word is his, and he approved the text before it was first published.*

*Besieged Sarajevo was a school of courage, most stirring for its refusal to join the aggressors in the surrounding hills in their hate and their crimes. This courage, demonstrated daily for*



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*more than three years by hundreds of thousands of Sarajlije — Bosnian Muslims, Serbs, Croats, Jews, Albanians and more — demonstrated the reality of what the world struggled so long to ignore. And Kemal in this was a paragon.*

*Kemal Bakaršić died of cancer on June 4, 2006. His beloved wife Marina carries on.*

— William Ney  
October 2006



**I**T IS NOVEMBER 1991 and my wife Marina and I have been watching reports of the brutal destruction of Dubrovnik, on the Croatian shore, by the Yugoslav Peoples Army. We cry. We cry long into the early morning hours. It cannot be true — but it is happening before our eyes. It cannot be that bad. Yet the old town is in flame, the city we both loved so much. We had spent many of our vacations, dozens of weekends, and even a honeymoon, in Dubrovnik.

It is happening on television. Will the pounding aggression ever knock on our door? This night the question seems not a simple one to answer. Holding each other in bed, we finally fall asleep, but only after promising each other no matter what to stay together, and to

protect ourselves, our parents, our friends, our books, our memories and our consciousness of who, as individuals, we are.

April 21, 1992. Afternoon shelling rudely interrupts what had seemed to be a nice spring day in Sarajevo. In the early evening the shelling resumes, and just before curfew (10 p.m.) the aggressors shell and burn down the Museum of the 14th Winter Olympiad.

The Olympics were really something fantastic here. Now, a beautiful old building from the Austrian era and all the documentation of the Sarajevo games have been destroyed.



*The Olympic Museum*

April 22, 1992. Again the daily routine of bombardment all across the city. At about 9:30 p.m., an 82mm mortar shell explodes in our garden, shattering the windows of the living room where we sit. Tiny particles of glass fill the air. We feel a warm blast, and smell the intense smell of explosives and melted glass. Are we still alive? For a moment, which seems to last about an hour, we do not know.

Then yes. We have survived.

The next morning we notice that the blast had knocked a special book off its shelf: the letters of 1926 between Boris Pasternak, Marina Tsvetayeva and Rainer Maria Rilke. It is the first book I ever gave to my own Marina. Picking it up from the floor, we are terrified to find a large piece of shrapnel embedded in the cover. And yet, we are grateful, because a kind of miracle has occurred.

From this morning on, we call this collection of poets' letters *The Book That Saved Our Lives*.



May 17, 1992. The aggressors have deliberately destroyed the Oriental Institute in Sarajevo. The loss cannot be measured or ever repaired. In less than two hours, 5,000 unique manuscripts, Turkish, Persian and Arabic, over a hundred plat books from Ottoman times (books that can no longer show that Slavs professing Islam have lived in Bosnia for many centuries), other records of the Ottoman rule numbering some 200,000 pages, 300 microfilm files of Bosnian writings from other manuscript libraries, the 10,000 volumes of the

Institute's research library, and 300 sets of periodicals ... All lost in flame.

I hate to go on with this, with this bibliometric accounting of the destruction of two years of terrorism in the Sarajevo ghetto. I hate myself, and deeply regret that the figures are not part of a program of recovery. They are, rather, merely history.

On August 27, 1992, in the early morning, the National Library was deliberately attacked and burned. Twenty-five mortar shells struck the building, launched from four positions in the surrounding hills. In support of the attack, forty shells were dropped on adjacent streets, preventing the fire brigade from coming into action. The odd thing about this supplementary attack is that the aggressors had cut off the water to the district before the attack, so there was no need to bomb the fire brigade. But they did it anyway.

The attack lasted less than half an hour. The fire lasted into the next day. The sun was obscured by the smoke of books, and all over the city sheets of burned paper, fragile pages of grey ash, floated down like a dirty black snow. Catching a page you could feel its heat, and for a moment read a fragment of text in a strange kind of black and grey negative, until, as the heat dissipated, the page melted to dust in your hand.

Approximately 1,200,000 book items and 600 sets of periodicals were destroyed. Administrative documents and the card catalog, computer equipment, microfilm and photograph laboratories, the rare book and other special collections, and the university library, which was housed in the same building.

It seems the Nazis burned about twenty million books. But not in one place (rather, in about 45 different places). August 27, 1992 in Sarajevo, then, may have been the biggest book burning in history. In one day, and one night: a million and a quarter books.

So. We have to deal with these criminals. I don't know what the best term is. "Aggressors?" But I think the aim of this kind of aggression, against museums, against libraries, is to erase our remembrance of who we are. Why else would someone want to burn books? Simply to create the situation where the people of a society have no memory of their past.

Can Hölderlin's famous verse lend us any comfort?

Where danger is,  
There salvation also grows

Yes. But only if one can truly believe, as Bulgakov insisted, that “manuscripts do not burn.”



*The National Library*

**BEFORE THIS** “war” I was the chief librarian of the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was founded in 1888 as the Landesmuseum of B-H, as Bosnia came under Austrian rule. We celebrated the centennial of the museum not long ago.

The museum’s library is the oldest scientific library of the western type in Bosnia. As kustos, I cherished and treasured about a quarter of a million books, among them the most famous book of the Sephardic tradition in Bosnia, the Sarajevo Haggada.

The Sarajevo Haggada contains poems, prayers and paintings about Passover and the escape of the Jews from Egypt. It was made between the 12th and 14th centuries, and was brought to Bosnia by the Cohen family in the 16th century, after Isabella expelled the Jews from Spain. It is perhaps the most beautiful and important haggada in existence. Scholars from all the world come to see it. But when people come now, I show them a copy. The original is safe and sound.



*The Sarajevo Haggada*

The aggression here began unexpectedly, and with a cruelty that was unimaginable. When the first Serb barricades went up in March 1992, in the Grbavica district, my colleagues and I realized the museum was in danger. It had been built in 1914 on the edge of town, but today is in the center, and unfortunately sits right on the Grbavica front line.

Not only mortar shells but snipers from the residential towers across the street were a danger, so my colleagues and I were silent shadows as we evacuated the collections. I was absent from home for days at a time over the course of many weeks, and whenever I left the museum I kissed the walls and doors, saying "Please God! Don't let my library get burned! Not yet!" At home with Marina, I would describe for her the books we had rescued, the titles and authors, the design, the front covers, all in great detail, as if making the confession of the last man who would ever see them.

About two kilometers of books were evacuated. We didn't have many boxes. We just carried them. And after several months they

were safe. Then I said, “Okay. If you want to burn it now, just try it. All this is yours. If you want to destroy it, destroy it. You can't hurt me. You can't hurt me anymore. My books are in a safe place.”

They did horrible things to the museum. As a building it is almost totally in ruin. But my colleagues and I managed to preserve all of the exhibits, some of which had been there 105 years. It is something that I am proud of. I am the kustos, the custodian of the library. My job is to keep things the way they are.



**I AM A MUSLIM.** I am an atheist. I am a computer man. I think I am a cosmopolitan kind of guy. Marina's father is a Croat from Sarajevo. Her mother is a Serb from Banja Luka. We celebrate all the religious holidays, Muslim, Catholic and Orthodox. Both my sisters are married to Croats. So we are mixed in every way. And with most people in Sarajevo I think the story is the same.

Of course, we have problems now. Many Serbs have gone. Croats have been active on both sides. But we simply cannot retreat into a Muslim ghetto in Bosnia. It would destroy our tradition, our pattern, our way of life. We are not forced to live together. We really live together.

The Serb nationalists in Pale, the aggressors, say there is no way that Serb and Muslim can live together. It is ridiculous. And it is not true. Or the Croat nationalists say, “We want all of Mostar! Or let's divide it into east and west, we can live side by side.” How can I, with my wife, in one bed? I want to live in something that is dynamic and universal. That is the only intellectual atmosphere I can live in. Our destinies are crossed. We have to treasure the common tradition,



a tradition of mutual understanding. This is the only hope for our future.

We are frustrated. We don't have any food. I am crazy about cigarettes. I am crazy about running hot water, about electricity. But one can get used to all this. The thing that is most important is to communicate with the world, to exchange ideas. The debate, the dialogue. This is the main thing we must secure to have a future. We are suffering from a total communications blockade: telephones, mail, convoys, buses, trains and planes, computers, intellectual conferences, and so on. It is something we must struggle for: a new structure of communicating with the world.

I have no political background, but am working now in the government, until the aggression stops, and then will return to my work as a librarian.

It is part of my job to rebuild the National Library. A while ago we received from UNESCO the first check for reconstruction. \$40,000. It's small, but the process has begun. I have estimated that it will cost about four million dollars. I also have to rebuild my museum. We have to find sponsors who will help us get these things going again.



It is also my job to support the teaching in the university. Fifteen hundred teachers are involved, in 24 faculties. In current conditions, which have lasted two years, it is difficult to organize a decent university. Marina, for example, is a professor of linguistics and Russian literature. Her monthly salary is three kilos of flour (and mine, too).

We have to do something about it. We have many good ideas. But one is most important: to be connected, in many ways, with the world.



**STRANGE THINGS** began to happen during the evacuation of the museum library. Manuscripts not listed in the catalog began to appear among known items. For example: a five-act drama in verse by Moris Hornes, once a curator at the museum and a professor of archaeology at Vienna University. I have also found a three-act play by Svetozar Čorović, a famous poet and novelist from Mostar. Mostar at the beginning of the century had three or four major poets. They published a magazine called *The Sunrise Saga* and were famous in Bosnia- Herzegovina and beyond.

This unknown drama by Svetozar Čorović is called *In the Darkness*. And during night watches in the museum, I typed it into my computer, and tried to discover how this manuscript happened to be in the collection.

Next to Svetozar's play on the shelf were poems by a writer named Avdo Karabegović, the most talented poet we have ever had. He was born in the town of Modriča and died at age 22. I have found the original manuscripts of about seventy poems that have never been published. But here is the interesting story.

It seems that Avdo was very ill in the days of 1901. So Avdo, who is Muslim, sent his manuscripts to Svetozar, who is Serb, and wrote: "My brother Svetozar. I am very ill. Please, here are all my things. Try to publish them." And Svetozar did publish many of them, two years after Avdo died. And now I have prepared a fifth edition of Avdo's writings, with the poems that Svetozar did not include in the first.

That is the answer. If anyone in the United States, or anywhere else in this world, asks about the national differences between Serbs

and Muslims, please tell them this kind of story. We are really mixed in a very special way. Like the books in my library. They have no ethnical background, no cultural background, no racial or geographical backgrounds. They are simply one by one. Alphabetical, perhaps. The only differences are the size, the cover, and the things they say. I think that is the story.

Even here and now miracles can occur. Precious manuscripts have come to light, and the first book I ever gave to the woman I love many years later has saved our lives.

Do Marina and I have any reason to hope that a similar miracle may somehow restore the burned books of Bosnia and Herzegovina? Yes, if it's true that what you love well is your true home, and if sharing and cherishing are the milestones of your journey. We have always believed, with Gaston Bachelard, that up in the sky there must be a Heaven, and that Heaven must be something like a library. Someday again a heavenly rain will fall.



*Marina and Kemal in May 1994, before the  
burnt-out shell of the National Library*



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And for more about the siege as a whole, [see here](#).

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