ADAGIO IN SARAJEVO

Told by Richard Deats

Adapted from "Adagio in Sarajevo" in *Fellowship, the Magazine of the Fellowship of Reconciliation*

What a difference a few years can make. It's hard to believe that not too long ago, the world looked to Sarajevo as a model of religious and ethnic harmony. In 1984, when athletes came to this exquisite city to compete in the Winter Olympic games, people marveled that here Orthodox Serbian and Muslim, Catholic and Jew lived and worked side by side peacefully in a unique atmosphere of tolerance and goodwill. The ancient city of Sarajevo, with over half a million people, was for centuries a cultural haven for Croats, Serbs, and Muslims.

How could it all have changed so quickly? By 1990, Yugoslavia was disintegrating into rival ethnic states, and Sarajevo, the jewel of Bosnia, was surrounded in a siege that was slowly destroying the city. Civil war engulfed the region; its people were subjected to regular shellings and unpredictable sniper fire. Food and supplies were scarce at best.

Waiting hours on the street for a single loaf of bread became a regular routine. One day in May 1992, a long line at a Sarajevo bakery stretched outside and snaked down the block. As the people waited they spoke about the war, about hunger, about their children trapped at home, too afraid to go to school. At four o'clock in the afternoon, their conversations ended abruptly. A shell exploded directly in the middle of the line, killing twenty-two people and wounding more than one

hundred.

The world was shocked, and the grief of the victims' families overwhelming. Still, people needed to eat. So the next day the bakery once again opened its doors. As four o'clock approached, people in line became tense and silent. But instead of another shell, they were surprised to be "hit" by the sounds of music. Vedran Smailovic, the principal cellist of the Sarajevo Opera, arrived at the bakery at exactly four, carrying a chair and his cello. Dressed in a formal black suit and white tie, Smailovic played the majestic yet sorrowful lines of Albinoni's *Adagio,* and the music fed the people's souls. Every day for twenty-two days he came at the same time and played again, one performance for each person killed in the attack. With his music, he honored those who had died there, affirming the indomitable spirit of life even in the midst of death. He also set into motion around the world a series of musical and artistic homages to those victims.

The place of the Breadline Massacre has become a shrine, marked by wreaths, candles, and pieces of paper holding the names of the victims who died there. Not far from where the bread line was hit is a ruined city square, remembered for being a place where a Muslim mosque, a Roman Catholic cathedral, and an Orthodox church once stood. In April 1993, Joan Baez was the first major artist to visit Sarajevo since the siege began. With Smailovic accompanying her on the cello, she sang "Amazing Grace."

How do people respond to unspeakable acts of violence? Monks pray, workers strike, and artists raise awareness by doing what they do best. Half a world away, Seattle sculptor Beliz Brother heard the story of

Vedran Smailovic and created her own memorial to the massacre. On a street corner in Seattle, she built a ten-foot-high stack of bread pans, with twenty-two loaves scattered about. In front of this she placed a cello case, looking eerily like a coffin, and covered it with flour and pieces of mortar. Symbolically, her sculpture depicted "the white-out of ethnic cleansing."

In solidarity with Smailovic, Brother also arranged for Seattle cellists dressed in formal attire to perform the *Adagio* at twenty-two sites around the city. Their only props were baskets of bread and bouquets of flowers. She repeated the gesture for the 1993 inauguration of President Clinton, persuading twenty-two cellists to perform the Albinoni piece at various places around Washington, D.C. The *Adagio* cried out from federal buildings to sites of terrorist acts, from city squares to the White House, and in the midst of the inaugural festivities, the siege of an Olympic city was not forgotten.

In April 1994, cellists gathered at the International Cello Festival in Manchester, England, to hear the renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma perform *The Cellist of Sarajevo,* a piece for unaccompanied cello written by the English composer David Wilde. When he had finished, listeners sat in stunned silence as he walked into the audience and embraced a man with long, wild hair and a huge mustache, who wore a stained and tattered leather motorcycle jacket. The man's face was old beyond his years, creased with pain and suffering. Then the audience recognized Vedran Smailovic—the cellist of Sarajevo himself!

They rose as one, in a wave of emotional release: clapping, weeping, shouting, embracing, and cheering. And in the center of it all stood those

two men, embracing each other, both crying freely: Yo-Yo Ma, the suave, elegant prince of classical music worldwide, flawless in appearance and performance, and Vedran Smailovic, who had just escaped from Sarajevo, disheveled and defiant, who, with his music, had defied death itself, inspiring many to resist despair and celebrate love, life, and that spark of human spirit that can never be put out.

In 1995, to commemorate the thousandth day of the siege of Sarajevo, Smailovic performed at the Statue of Liberty, to remind the world that we should not rest until peace has come again.

To work for a world of peace and understanding, contact **Fellowship of Reconciliation,** at www.forusa.org.