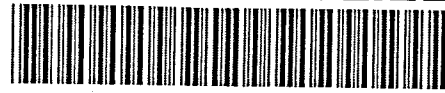


20 Rapid #: -2253913**Ariel****IP: 129.74.72.21**

Status	Rapid Code	Branch Name	Start Date
Pending	AZS	Main Library	1/12/2009 11:38:05 AM

CALL #: TX 341 .G28
LOCATION: AZS :: Main Library :: SCIENCE 2nd FLOOR
 TYPE: Article CC:CCG
 JOURNAL TITLE: Gastronomica
 USER JOURNAL TITLE: Gastronomica
 AZS CATALOG TITLE: Gastronomica : the journal of food and culture.
 ARTICLE TITLE: The Unbearable Lightness of Wartime Cuisine
 ARTICLE AUTHOR: Alma Marin
 VOLUME: 5
 ISSUE: 2
 MONTH: spring
 YEAR: 2005
 PAGES: 26-36
 ISSN: 1529-3262
 OCLC #: 43694059
 CROSS REFERENCE ID: [TN:284155]
 VERIFIED:

BORROWER: IND :: Main Library
PATRON: David Ruccio

PATRON ID: druccio
 PATRON ADDRESS:
 PATRON PHONE:
 PATRON FAX:
 PATRON E-MAIL:
 PATRON DEPT:
 PATRON STATUS:
 PATRON NOTES:



This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)
 System Date/Time: 1/12/2009 12:22:06 PM MST



The Unbearable Lightness of Wartime Cuisine

The world has always been imperfect. I just didn't pay much attention, like so many people who go about their lives ignoring atrocities, war, hunger as if such things happened only in books or films. And even when I found myself in the middle of the chaos of war, for a long time I thought that I would awaken into a beautiful spring morning and realize it was all a bad dream.

In those years, my life spun around one word: survival. That meant coping with existence without water, electricity, and with very little food; queuing in lines for hours under incessant shell and sniper fire to get basic things that are normally taken for granted.

"THE BEST FOOD I'VE EATEN in my life was in Chechenya," said a veteran UN official. "Well, and in Bosnia, of course," he added quickly so as not to offend me. I was hosting a party for a friend's sixtieth birthday in my loft in Sarajevo, Bosnia. It was 1993, the second year of the four-year-long war and siege of the city. The guests were "internationals" (the term we used for foreign aid workers and journalists, war zone veterans) and a few friends who were still around. Most of my friends had left at the beginning of the war. The ones who stayed became my family. The loft where I lived with my (then) husband and two children in the heart of the old town was a meeting place where we shared every morsel of food, where we built a semblance of normal life, interrupted only by regular explosions.

The food the official referred to was delicacies of my war cuisine, a full array of "something-from-nothing" dishes. By then I had mastered the art and craft of this healthy cooking style, and I was more than happy to show it off in

Left: My son with the cat that loved pigeons. The patch on the window covers the hole made by a sniper bullet. This is December 1993—the house is decorated.

COURTESY OF ALMA MARIN

exchange for instant friendship and favors, for cigarettes and chocolate or a piece of fruit. I remember them well—each foreigner and each act of kindness. They helped us survive. But I also remember hunger, despair, and humiliation.

Food and I

My maternal grandparents were religious and very concerned about all living creatures. Consequently, they would never throw food out but would try to feed as many mouths as possible with it. Leftovers were eaten the next day; bones were distributed to neighborhood cats and dogs (yes, there were times when pets just ate leftovers). Extra bread was dried in the oven, packed in big white cloth bags and used for dinner and snacks. My grandmother even went so far as to "save" rotten fruit from the market. Even though they lived comfortably, she would buy basketsful of rotten apples or peaches and spend the evenings salvaging the good parts. The smell of rotten apples catapults me back to my early childhood, when my grandparents would sit in the living room and tell me stories or sing old folk songs while peeling piles of rotten apples. Now I can proudly say that my grandmother was the first person I met who composted, as the rotten parts would be buried in the garden among her geraniums.

If, by any chance, a piece of bread would somehow get moldy, my grandmother would kiss it and wrap it in a newspaper, as if it were a gift for someone, before throwing it into the garbage. "This is God's gift," she would say, "and I have to apologize for throwing it out."

On the other hand, excess is the word I'd use to describe my paternal family's relationship with food. My grandparents were well-to-do and considered that being well fed (and feeding everyone else around them) was the best indicator of wealth. Their cupboards and fridges were filled to the brim with all kinds of foods. I remember huge greasy breakfasts—liver, brain, steaks—early in the morning. Lunch would last for hours, and dinner was planned carefully as soon as the lunch was over. Bosnian cuisine is quite heavy. A meal

consists of several courses, starting with appetizers, followed by soup, an obligatory meat dish with potatoes or rice, salad, and several kinds of dessert. "What would you like to eat?" was the only communication we had in the family, except for gossip and jokes about other people. My grandparents' lives revolved entirely around food.

I acquired my own need for excess in opposite directions—either to starve myself for days to prove how different I was from them or to succumb to the delicacies around me and eat until I couldn't open my mouth, admitting masochistically: *I am one of them, and there is no escaping it.* I can safely say that they never threw food out either—there were never any leftovers, because the ritual of eating would continue until everything had disappeared.

My parents incorporated a bit of both attitudes. As if afraid of hunger, they always piled food in the house. (Or was it simply my father's proof that he was a success?) We had two fridges and two freezers full to the brim, and our garage shelves were lined with jars full of wonderful preserves. As the vegetables and fruits in my childhood were seasonal, with almost nothing available in wintertime, we would carefully prepare for the "dry" period. Jams of all kinds, fruits in heavy syrup, pickled vegetables, tomato sauce, vegetable spreads, and sauerkraut were prepared, labeled, and shelved. My mother is an amazing cook, and we always ate well. She prefers lighter cuisine, so there was no danger that we would all end up getting sick from excessive fat, as most of my father's family members did. The only rule in my family, which I dutifully passed on to my children as one of their heirlooms, was not to leave a single crumb on the plate, because "there were so many hungry children in the world." Later, I learned that my friend's father had a different philosophy: You should always leave a bite on the plate for a hungry child. I stick to the first one, and my children accept it as a house rule. They have never tried to be logical and ask themselves or me, How exactly does the food we eat or leave on the plate get to the hungry children? I guess their acceptance of rules without questioning their logic is what is called tradition.

The Beginning

As the war was getting closer (and I ignored the signs), my parents tried to talk me into leaving, or at least to stocking up on food. I refused both—the first by insisting that there was never going to be a war in my country, let alone my cosmopolitan city, and that if I needed food, I could get it from them, as I had so many times before in the (very different) times of need. Namely, my (then) husband and I had chosen a

bohemian life, which meant that we were quite careless with money and would often turn to our parents for help.

In general, I refused (and still do) to stockpile anything except spices and teas, which are more like souvenirs I bring or ask my friends to bring, from their travels. I insisted that if I ran out of sugar, I'd simply buy some in the supermarket. I was adamant that my children should eat only fresh food, bought daily at the market. Of course, I could always count on getting anything I needed from my parents.

In April 2002 the war did start in my country, and my city was surrounded by enemy soldiers, who had, until recently, been neighbors and acquaintances. The siege lasted almost four years, and the statistics say that over two million shells fell on the city. My parents' food supplies remained in the occupied territory. They had to leave everything they had behind. They left the apartment in a hurry, thinking that they'd be back in a few days, and instead of family photos and valuables they packed two packages of pasta, a liter of cooking oil, and a bunch of carrots, thinking that this would last us those few days they'd be visiting. My parents never went back to their apartment. Even when the siege was lifted and that part of the city was liberated, they couldn't bear to look at the empty walls and rooms. The only thing left in their apartment was the bidet. Their whole life was stolen from them. But that's another story.

My own food supplies consisted of half a chicken, a jar of honey, half a kilo of sugar, a kilo of wheat flour, half a liter of vegetable oil, a liter of olive oil, vinegar, some pasta, and rice, and my collection of spices and teas, which oddly enough steadily grew in the first months of the war as more and more people left the city and brought all their edibles to the ones who were staying. Not having any food in the freezer proved to be a good thing because the electricity was cut off right away. People who were hopeful that it would come back and didn't share their food with the neighbors ended up throwing it out in the end. The stench of rotten meat was in the air for days. I gave the chicken to a cousin who had contracted hepatitis B and needed something other than bread to recover. So, with no supplies and two children to feed, we became miracle workers.

War Diet

In my letters to friends, I joked about how quickly I was getting thin and how the war diet was the first one that worked for me—I had lost twenty pounds in the first few weeks, as had everyone else. The fitness schedule was so strict that it would have been impossible to keep any fat: three to five rounds of water carried in ten-liter canisters (one in each

hand up the stairs (no elevators) every day, running from the snipers at crossroads (at least one person a day wouldn't make it), and walking everywhere (no public transport).

But there was no fat to keep. The food was hard to find. And even when we did find it, we had to share it: children first, then the sick, then the less fortunate. I don't remember ever eating alone during the war.

At the very beginning of the war, finding food was an exciting challenge, since we thought that "the whole thing" would be over soon. This illusion lasted a few months, until the food became more rare, until the shellings became more frequent, and until it became impossible to leave the city. There was no electricity, no water, no phone lines to the outside world.

The humanitarian aid delivered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as often as was possible to get it into the besieged city, consisted mainly of beans, rice, wheat flour, sugar, and oil. Occasionally, we would get something different, like soy flour, powdered milk or eggs (a sulfur yellow powdered egg substitute), feta cheese, canned mackerel or meat, or an American army lunch package. So, our basic diet consisted of bread, beans, pasta, and rice. Everything else that we could on rare occasion add to this was a luxury.

Bread

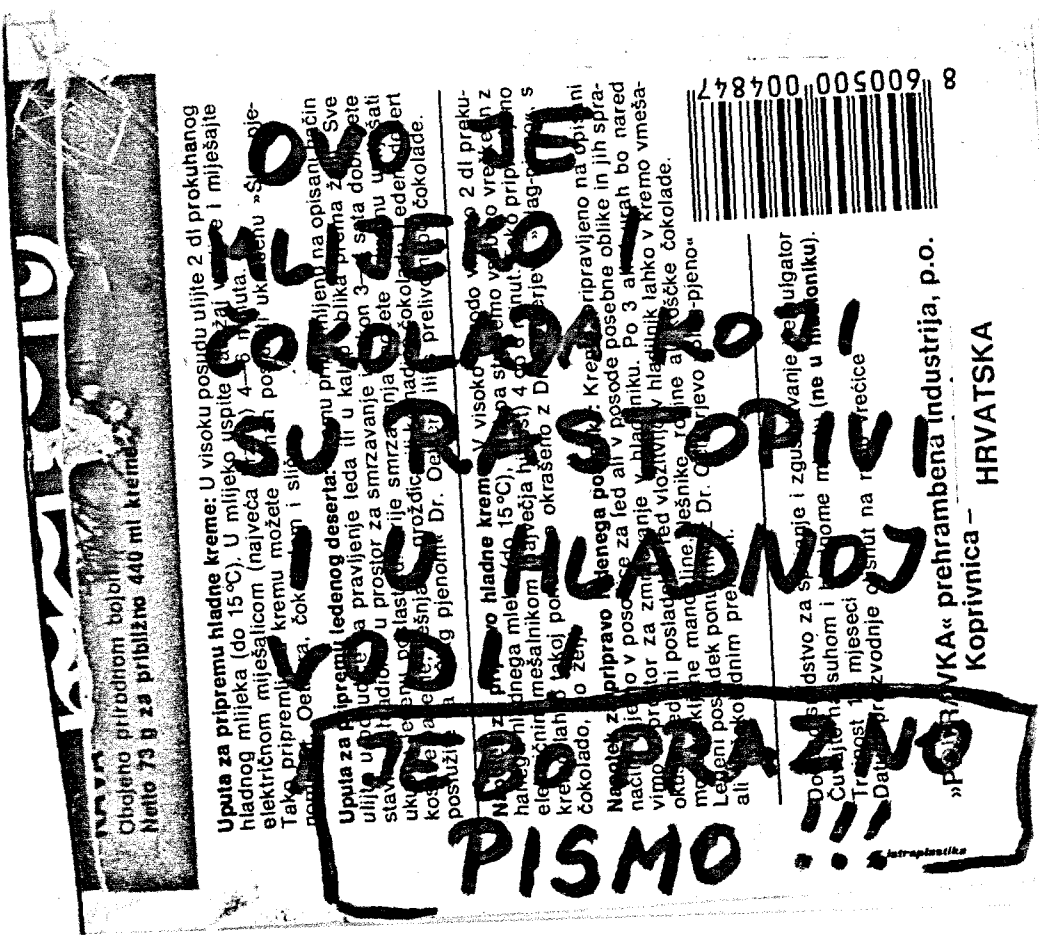
"You bake your own bread?" my Canadian friends ask me. Yes, I still do it sometimes on Sundays. My children love it when they wake up and the whole house smells of freshly baked bread.

There were three things still produced in Sarajevo for most of the war—bread, cigarettes, and beer. Each person was entitled to 250 grams of bread a day. This wasn't enough to keep us going, and there were many days when the city bakery would be closed. So, those of us who were fortunate to have a solid-fuel stove baked bread. When our next-door neighbors left the city, they gave us their stove, which we had shared before. Having a stove in the house was like having gold. But it did require something to burn in it, like coal or firewood, or lacking those, books, tires, or old shoes. It was easier when shared with neighbors. In the first months of the war, until we got our own stove, we used the one set up for the whole building, where all the neighbors would bring their pots and pans and stand around the stove with spoons and ladles, dishcloths and lids in their hands as if in some long-ago time, sticking their noses into each others' pots and gossiping if anything out of the ordinary should show up in somebody's pot.

Wheat flour was a priority on my food list, and I would trade anything for it. I made sure always to have enough flour for a few loaves of bread. Having less made me anxious because it was our essential food; having more was dangerous because of the mice and rats that happily proliferated in the chaos of war. I baked many loaves in those years, very often for other people, and I connect kneading with calm thoughts, friendship, and sharing. In the first months of war, we would go to the basement during the shelling. Later, we learned that death in war had no rules, and we stopped leaving our apartment. The fear was still there, but we would all pretend that it was just an ordinary day and go about our business. I remember a scene (and this surely happened more than once) in which, with a tense expression on my face, my lips pressed tight, my fingers masterfully knead the dough, and beside me my daughter practices the piano (playing etudes), part of her lost in music and the other part fighting fear and listening to the gun on the hill above the city and the whizzing shells. In our invisible shields (bread and music) we were protected from evil, or at least that's what we liked to believe. I decided that I couldn't get killed while making bread for somebody else. We were eating my fear. Developing my own superstitions to be able to cope with the war, which is still beyond my understanding, was a very helpful exercise. I assuaged my fear by cooking, and what more comforting familiar food is there than bread?

There were many people who didn't even have bread—elderly people living on the top floors of high-rises, who depended entirely on the kindness of strangers, or on what they could find in the garbage. One day, I met my mother's friend looking for food. The bakery hadn't been working for days, and she and her husband had nothing to eat. The market was empty. The next day I baked a loaf of bread for her, small and round. No special efforts, no extra fuel: the oven was big enough for more than one bread, and I baked it together with ours. A few days later she brought me a small package. She cried quietly. She is the type of person honest to her bones who is not used to asking for favors, only doing them. She was absolutely lost and helpless in the war. Such people survive only by miracle. I am aware how desperate she must have been when she swallowed her pride and told me, her friend's child, that she was hungry. The package contained a bottle of an expensive perfume: Madame Rochas. Many times I used to spite death with it, putting a drop on my temples before going to fetch water under the rain of shells.

I can say that we shared the daily bread not only with humans but with felines as well. The first cat we had adopted during the war ate only bread and water. It had



Obloženo prirodnom bobicom
Neto 73 g za približno 440 ml kreme

Uputa za pripremu hladne kreme: U visoku posudu ulijte 2 dl prokuhanog hladnog mlijeka (do 15°C). U mlijeko uspite 4-6 ml ulja i miješajte električnom miješalicom (najveća brzina 4-6 min). Tako pripremljenu kremu možete koristiti za razne namjene. Također možete koristiti kremu za razne namjene. Također možete koristiti kremu za razne namjene.

MILJEKO
ČOKOLADA
KREMA
KOPRIVNI
KOPRIVNI
KOPRIVNI

Upućena hladna krema...
Upućena hladna krema...
Upućena hladna krema...



»Pismo« prehrambena industrija, p.o.
Koprivnica – HRVATSKA

PISMO !!!

been somebody's pet, a beautiful gray Siamese, deserted by its owners, like the thousands of cats and dogs that roamed the city and starved, unused to having to provide for themselves. She ran away from us when she realized how much grief she had caused, leaving behind thousands of fleas that found shelter on our bodies and stayed there for months until we managed to get a special powder from abroad. Our second cat ate only mice (there were plenty of those). One evening as we were eating dinner with some friends, he proudly brought us his most recent catch to share. He was very disappointed when we refused to add the mouse to our dinner menu and a few days later walked out of the house for good. The only food that our third cat liked was pigeons. Every day we would just find a few feathers on the floor. Only once did I actually witness the struggle, both the bird and the cat fighting for their lives. The cat won and was happy to offer me some feathers. One day he broke his spine by falling from the roof while chasing a pigeon. He was in such pain that we had to put him to sleep.

Pasta was just a variation of bread, made of flour and water. When cooked, it's gray and sticky. With no cheese on top or sauce, it is completely tasteless. But, like bread, it fills the stomach.

Above: "This is milk and chocolate soluble in cold water. Fuck an empty letter!" When parcels didn't work, friends would sneak something in a letter.

COURTESY OF ALMA MARIN

Beans

We celebrated New Year's Eve 1993 with an all-bean dinner: bean pie, bean salad, bean pâté, and bean cake. Beans were the main part of the humanitarian aid brought to the city by the UNHCR after they took over the airport a few months into the war. There were months when the airport was closed because of fighting, and the food couldn't be delivered. In those months old people starved to death and were buried in wooden boxes, functioning as coffins, in the soccer field substituting as a graveyard. These were not recognizable beans—they were war beans, possibly left over from some other war, just like the cookies from the Vietnam War we once got, white and hard and dated 1969. There was only one kind of bean—small, round white ones, often broken and so old that tiny flies would soon emerge and we would have to face a difficult question: to cook them and eat the flies or to throw them out.

I've read somewhere that beans have such impressive nutritional benefits that you could live on them for six months

and get all the nutrients you need. They are an excellent source of fiber, high in folic acid, a B vitamin, and mostly fat free. But eating them almost daily for three years, cooked in water, only every now and then with an onion or a carrot, or a pinch of paprika or Tabasco, can cause some serious psychological resistance. I remember talking to the beans one day, "You are so gray, and I can't stand you any longer." But I did continue eating them, at least as long as I was living in Sarajevo.

Although we did not get lentils as frequently, the similar taste and color make me shrink, and I cannot bring myself to eat them now. But I will always sing praises to beans, the most versatile of all foods. They kept us alive and healthy.

Rice

One of our daily dishes was a soup consisting most often of rice and a few drops of oil and water, with nettles, when available, or green onion from our roof garden. I had been under the impression that the soup was quite tasty until I read an account by a foreign journalist who wrote about having lunch with us and eating the "tasteless watery soup." I was angry with him for saying something that may have been true but that he had no right to say, let alone write it for the whole world to read. We had to like what we ate. We built a life that seemed normal to us, and some visitors were sensitive enough not to point to the absurd. War is a self-contained universe whose rules cannot be understood by an outsider. And a very important rule was to enjoy every minute of life and every bite of food. And to see color in the grayness surrounding you, including the food. The proximity of death helped us cherish the illusion of normalcy in a completely surreal existence.

Then there was rice cheese, a really terrible substitute for cheese, and rice wine, fermented at home with a little help of (obviously) rice, then some sugar, water, and a drinking straw. For our exhausted bodies and minds, it was strong enough to blur the world around us for a few moments and help us forget how miserable we were. I even tried to make rice brandy once but failed and stuck to the wine.

Nettles

The use of nettles dates from the ancient Egyptians who made oil from it; the Greeks and Romans used it as a vegetable, as mentioned by Hypocrates and the Heretics. Pliny recommended nettles as a tasty and healthy food that protects from all kinds of diseases. Nowadays you can find nettles in the markets of the healthy-lifestyle capitals of the world. It is quite popular at the Granville Island Market in Vancouver.

The fear of death instilled in children the need to listen to everything their parents said. The fairy tales I told my children were about the outside world and life after the war. I also told them stories about food, how privileged they were to eat nettles, how nettle soup was a delicacy that had been served in the European courts before fancy balls. "There would be a whisper in the room, and not because the emperor was arriving, no, my darlings, but because the servants were bringing in the nettle soup. The nettle-pickers would go early in the morning into the fields, without gloves, and pick the pale green leaves, their fingers red, their palms stinging. But no pain could prevent those brave souls from bringing this unique food to the royal chefs, who would then pull out their secret recipes and cook the famous nettle soup. Yes, my lucky darlings, think of other poor children in the world who have never had the opportunity to eat this dish of the emperors. Yes, other children have chocolate and hamburgers and hot dogs. But have you ever heard a story about an emperor who ate hamburgers? Or a princess who ate hot dogs? No, the princess would eat the nettle soup and it would give her strength to dance all night. Now eat your soup today and Mummy will cook you some beans tomorrow. And what a story I have for you about their magical powers!" And they believed me and never complained.

Chocolate and Sweets

All the wish lists my children made during the war consisted only of food items, mainly sweets. My son wrote to the tooth fairy, "Please bring me a can of Coke, a few candies, a small chocolate, and an apple." Children swarmed around UNPROFOR troop carriers and trucks or ran after them, pointing at their mouths and shouting, "Hungry, hungry." The soldiers tossed them little packages of sweets. I wanted to protect my children from humiliation and strictly forbade them to do that. But survival instinct (and peer pressure) prevailed in this case. So my five-year-old son continued to run after soldiers until one day he was almost run down by the carrier. When the neighbors brought him home, he was frightened to death. He stopped running after foreigners, but he invented other ways of getting what he wanted. He became a businessman. His most precious possessions were glossy magazines (waiting to become fuel). He clipped pictures of models and cars and sold them to teenagers or exchanged them for chewing gum or sweets.

One day my son came home from school and said, "I want to be a Muslim." I was surprised by his declaration. My children were brought up as atheists, and religion was not a topic of conversation. None of our friends were religious, and we

didn't really feel that we belonged to any nationality. Perhaps it was a result of our communist upbringing, or our cosmopolitanism. But the war imposed divisions. Again, not among our friends, but among neighbors and people on the streets. And, as always in difficult times, people turned to religion for comfort. Missionaries used the opportunity to attract more people into the folds of their respective religions. Sarajevo, which during the war lost about half of its citizens (from six hundred thousand it was reduced to less than three hundred thousand), swarmed with various religious groups posing as NGOs, who offered food in exchange for a commitment.

So it was quite easy to find out where my son's religious drive originated. A humanitarian aid organization from Saudi Arabia came to his school and made lists of Muslim children. They were getting packages with dried fruits and notebooks and colored pencils. It turned out that my son was the only one who didn't declare himself a Muslim, and he was the only one who didn't get a package. I was tempted to tell him to be whatever he wanted, but I was also trying to raise the children as human beings who wouldn't exchange their own beliefs for a package of dried fruits. That was hard, because very often I myself had similar dilemmas and thought I would sell my soul to the devil for food. Luckily, I didn't have to, but the very fact that I did think about it makes me believe that there could have been circumstances when I would have done it.

Catholic priests were knocking on people's doors and making lists of Catholics. In exchange for having your house blessed, you would get on the list of your local church and receive food packages. The Jewish community was also active, and people were digging out the death certificates of their ancestors to prove that they had Jewish blood. The Orthodox Church consisted of one old priest who managed to gather quite a big flock, attracted by prospects of food. My son had befriended a young man who was a Seventh Day Adventist, and he would get toys and sometimes chocolate from him. It is unbelievable how many missionaries risk their lives to spread their faith, choosing the most dangerous parts of the world where people are most vulnerable and inclined to embrace religion, sometimes for comfort and sometimes just for food—another kind of comfort.

Both my (then) husband and I belonged to the weirdest sect of all—the sect of artists and intellectuals. We also had our missionaries, some well intended, without whom we wouldn't have survived, like Susan Sontag, who collected money for artists among her friends and organizations like PEN and Human Rights Watch and risked her life many times to bring that money into the city. Some came to use our stories to advance their careers. They usually didn't do any favors.

We gave many interviews and sometimes got food in return. The stingiest were the big American networks. Unless we asked, they wouldn't even bring a chocolate for the children. When a very famous TV personality came to our loft to interview us, he was preceded by a crew of ten people who rearranged our furniture and lit hundreds of candles (what a waste that was, apart from the fact that it wasn't authentic—we could use one candle for a few days). They brought bags of chips, sweets and fruit, wine and juices. My children's eyes were wide open in shock. I was so happy with the prospect of sharing all that with my friends who were there. But by the time the interview ended several hours later, the crew had eaten and drunk all of it. My kids each got a peach.

I didn't really care about giving interviews. At first, I thought it would be good for the country; I thought that if people in the outside world saw how "normal" we were, they would lobby their governments to help us. After the disappointing false signs that we would be saved, I didn't believe that my words had any impact on anyone. They were probably edited anyway, in whatever fashion suited the network. So, after many interviews that were all the same—the same superficial questions and false compassion—I started doing them only in exchange for food. I would ask ahead of time, "Okay, but what's in it for us?" and negotiate a food package in exchange for an interview.

A Fair Exchange

As I was sitting on a beautiful sandy beach, playing with waves in a summer resort in the south of Italy where I spent a year as a refugee after leaving Bosnia, I noticed beside me a small plastic bag. A familiar brown thick plastic bag with the contents listed on one side in black letters. It was the American army lunch package, the same one we used to get occasionally in humanitarian aid during the war. The same one we could buy on the black market for DM 15 (ten dollars) each. It was odd that I of all people should come across this bag when it arrived at the Italian shore of the Adriatic Sea, having come all the way from the Mediterranean where American ships were stationed.

I tried to recall the contents. There were five or six different types. But there, on the beach in Italy, I could remember only the tiny bottle of Tabasco sauce, its drop or two the most precious supplement to our bean dish or rice soup, the only color added to the same food we ate almost every day. How did it get there? To tease my memories, to tell me that I couldn't run away.

American lunch packages consisted (are they still the same?) of one or two brown packages with an "entrée" and

smaller plastic bags with coffee, sugar, salt, toilet paper, matches, and dessert—usually a small chocolate bar. These delicacies would cause our hearts to beat faster. The contents were listed on one side in black letters. The entrée would be divisible into as many portions as we needed. A meal that fed one American soldier could feed a whole family and their friends. Four meatballs could easily become eight or sixteen pieces of meat. A small chocolate bar would be shared among children.

Markets are among my favorite places—the buzz, the colors, the smells. In wartime a market is as drab as its surroundings. In Sarajevo it was also a favorite shelling target. I went almost daily to look for food, for something green and fresh. That particular day I had a few worthless coupons in my pocket. They were printed by the government instead of money, and salaries were paid in coupons. You could buy your monthly bread supply with them, or a few packs of cigarettes, or sometimes a thing or two at the market. I managed to buy some nettles, happy that I had found them so late in the day, noon already, and that the vendors agreed to take my coupons. I walked home slowly. Since losing all of that weight and having to do hard menial jobs every day, I was quite exhausted. We hadn't seen fruit or vegetables or juice in almost a year. We were among the lucky ones because we had enough to eat. But it was always the same, and I had to force myself to eat. I sometimes added something green, a few dandelion leaves, vine leaves (which we also smoked when we couldn't find cigarettes), or nettles, and invented different shapes to make the food appealing for the children. Did they just pretend to be fooled by my castles, trains, and boats made of rice or flour and salt and water and some grass or herbs?

Walking home from the market with a few green leaves in a plastic bag, I imagined bringing home a bag full of apples and oranges and cheese; I imagined the faces of my children opening the bag. "Would you like to give blood for the wounded?" a man in a white coat woke me from my daydreaming that day. Of course not, I wanted to say. Ashamed to say no and yet selfishly thinking of my exhausted body, I just stopped and stared at him, speechless. What if I faint? What will happen to my children if I end up in a hospital? What if the needles aren't sterilized? Does this blood really go to the wounded? How much blood will they take?

Squeezing the white plastic bag with nettles I silently communicated my questions to this man in the white coat. If I faint, somebody might take my bag. This is war. He noticed my hesitation and added: "You'll get the American lunch package and a juice." But I have two children, I thought. As if reading my mind, he casually added: "Actually, I can give

you two juices." That was enough to persuade me. I was easily bribed, with food especially, in those days. I entered the former toy shop turned clinic where I used to buy birthday presents for my children and for my friends' children: colorful wooden blocks with which they built castles, trains, boats. There was a hospital bed, and beside it a metal stand with the infusion bag and a table with a rack of test tubes on it, some empty, some filled with blood. I lay down and rolled up my sleeve. He smiled. I closed my eyes and imagined the faces of my children when they opened the bag and saw those two small juices. I imagined them unwrapping the tiny straws and sucking the juice slowly, rolling each swallow in their mouths, gargling with the sweet liquid, trying to keep it as long as possible so that the taste would stay until the next juice, slurping it at the end, then opening the tops of the boxes carefully, at the edges, to stick in their tongues and lick the last drops. "Would you like some?" they would offer as they always did, and I would say, "No, thank you, this is yours," as I always did. "It's done," said the man in the white coat, and he handed me the package and two juices. I stuck them under the nettles. I wanted to see my children's surprised faces. For almost two weeks my hand was blue and it hurt. But it was worth those meatballs we had with rice that day. And the small chocolate and peanut bar that was in the package. And the tiny bottle of Tabasco sauce. It took me a long time to realize that the event was not a mere exchange of blood for food but that it was supposed to result in saving someone's life.

French army food packages were different, much smaller than the American ones. It was difficult to make a lunch for four or more people out of one, but the dishes were much tastier. Luckily, we did not get them in humanitarian aid, but they turned up on the black market. Somebody brought us one, and I remember only that everything was tiny. They looked like airplane meals with more wrapping than food, and they contained white tablets for heating the prepared dish. Since the instructions were in French, which they couldn't understand, some people thought that these tablets were vitamins and swallowed them. There was a warning printed in our daily paper: "Citizens of Sarajevo are kindly asked not to eat the tablets from French food packages. They are merely to be used as a food-heating device. Consuming them can harm your health."

A Parisian Affair

Our next-door neighbors were among the few lucky ones who immediately got jobs as fixers for foreign journalists. We had met them only when they moved into the

loft beside ours a few months after the war had started. Our former neighbors had left with thousands of others as soon as the war started. The brother-and-sister team employed by CNN regularly threw parties to which very few locals were invited. There was no curfew for foreigners or for those who worked for them. Everybody else had to be home by nine o'clock.

We lucked out one night around Christmas in the second year of the war and found ourselves among the privileged. On the menu that night was a turkey flown in directly from a famous restaurant in Paris. The children were asleep. We left the door open in case they woke up, or screamed in their sleep. They often did. I brought my nettle pie, always exotic enough to bring accolades.

The first thing I noticed was fruit, some that I hadn't seen in two years. And, quite naturally, I started following it with my eyes as it disappeared into people's mouths, thinking of my children asleep in the next-door apartment, angered that they wouldn't get any. My husband was drinking whiskey, and he took a soda from the table. I did not say anything, certain that there was a silent agreement between us that whatever we were offered except liquor we would put in our pockets and keep for the children. It was the nastiest look I had ever given him when I realized he had opened the can.

Apart from our hosts, we were the only "locals" at the party. Despite a few drinks, my food antennae were on the alert: Will there be anything left? A Spanish journalist noticed I wasn't eating anything. She took a banana and offered it to me. I said: "No, thank you. I have children. And they love bananas." She seemed to understand what I meant by my odd answer; she collected the rest of the bananas from the tables and gave them to me. "Take these to your children."

Ashamed and happy, I hurried to take the bananas home with the excuse of checking on the children. I did the same with my share of turkey. When it was time to go home, I could not help noticing that there was still some turkey left. What will they do with it? To be certain it would not end up in the garbage, or rather, to be certain it would end up in my friends' stomachs. I offered to clean up the apartment. The hostess accepted because she had to work early the next day. Playing the part of a good neighbor gave me a good excuse, and the next day I scraped bones from dirty plates until there was not a single shred of meat left. My heart was beating as if I were stealing something, happy that no one saw me. I managed to fill a plate with meat. I invited all my friends the next day and shared the turkey from Paris, bananas, and humiliation with them.

Monde bizarre

The loft I lived in with my family had become a drop-in place. Old friends, new friends, foreign journalists, UN officials, diplomats came by. The door was always open throughout the whole war, and we were never alone. I think that in some odd way I felt that we were safe as long as there were people who cared around. They would bring food, cigarettes, liquor, presents for the kids, and I would feed them my war specialties or freshly baked bread. Or caviar. A friend from New York came to visit one morning and brought a British journalist along. I offered them breakfast. "I don't want to eat your children's food," she said. "But they don't like caviar." I opened the fridge, which was empty, having been disconnected more than a year before because there was no electricity. And there it was, on the shelf, an open jar of caviar. When Marc, a French soldier, had brought the jar to the party the previous night, neither of us could believe it. A kilo of caviar! My friends, at least those who liked caviar, and I had eaten some, but it was impossible to eat the whole kilo. It was cold enough in the house to keep it for a day or two. I brought out the freshly baked bread and spread a thick layer of caviar on slices. My friend said, laughing, "I haven't had caviar in a long time."

Fruits and Vegetables

As we grew accustomed (?!) to living under siege, we became more and more inventive. We created balcony and roof vegetable gardens. Plots in city parks were used to bury the dead and to grow vegetables. Seeds don't take up too much space and can be sent in a letter. What a joy it was to receive a rustling letter; it meant that it contained seeds. I managed to grow onions and parsley. Carrots never grew big enough to be taken seriously. But anything green and fresh was a little miracle. A friend of mine grew cherry tomatoes, the sweetest I've ever tasted.

In the first year of the war, you could find nettles, vine leaves, and dandelions at the market. Locally grown fruits—plums, apples, and cherries—were too expensive. We didn't have any money in the first year (my resistance to stockpiling applied to money as well). So the only way I could get something at the market was by exchanging the canned food that we would get with humanitarian aid. Bargaining with black marketeers had never been my forte, but you can do anything when you have two hungry children at home.

Much later, we started getting money from friends abroad, from PEN and similar human rights organizations. Our currency was the German mark, and prices were



astronomical. There was a period when sugar was DM 100 (sixty-seven dollars), a liter of oil DM 120 (eighty dollars); a piece of fruit or vegetables smuggled into the city, or an egg, went for DM 15 (ten dollars). The black market was flourishing. There were times, later in the war, when the tunnel out of the besieged city was built and black marketeers traded even with the enemies, when you could find anything on the market. There were people who could afford it. During one of those periods, for the first time in two years, I saw an eggplant on sale for DM 30 (twenty dollars). Eggplant is one of my favorite vegetables. I started crying, partly because it was beautiful, partly because I couldn't have it.

The first fruit my children had were cherries. A soldier who used to be a waiter brought bags full of cherries from an orchard on the front line. He went door to door giving cherries to children. They had had a few apples in the fall and two oranges, distributed once with humanitarian aid to the elderly and to children. Then, after a while, they got bananas. And then in the late summer of the second year of the war, a friend showed up at the door with a huge watermelon. An American journalist was going to enemy territory to do an interview, and she asked him to bring it for my kids. We had a camera and snapped their faces at the moment when we brought the watermelon. It is hard to describe the joy one feels when seeing food.

Above: My children and their friend seeing a watermelon for the first time in two years. The fridge in the background was covered with pictures of food from magazines, since it was empty.

COURTESY OF ALMA MARIN

My children's nightstands were full of peels and pits—mementos of fruits they had eaten—and candy wrappers.

Parcels

The city was under siege, but trucks with parcels were regularly (once every few months) allowed to cross enemy lines. The most successful in this venture were the Seventh Day Adventists and the Jewish community. Somehow, both armies allowed them to go back and forth. When word got out that a convoy had arrived, thousands of hopefuls would gather to look for their name on the lists taped on a downtown bulletin board. We were often among the lucky ones whose friends did everything to send parcels whenever possible. Often I would discover that even people we hardly knew felt the need to help, like my colleagues from the British Council, where I had started working just before the war.

Seeing your name on the list was just a first step. Then you had to choose a relatively calm day, which was always

unpredictable, to walk for an hour to the warehouse, usually followed by sniper fire. Then you had to wait in line for hours to get the parcel, and lines of all sorts were a shelling target. Then you had to walk back with the parcel for another hour or carry it home using one of the improvised carts made of prams or roller blades or anything that had wheels. But it all paid off the moment you got home, with your family and friends waiting. Opening a parcel was utter bliss. Our friends became experts in sending exactly what we needed, and sometimes even what we didn't, like brandy sneaked in a dishwashing detergent bottle. Once we got a whole wheel of cheese. But since it was wrapped in a plastic bag and the parcel had traveled three months, it was rancid and stank terribly. But we ate every bite, including the outer layer.

A friend of mine who was living in Germany as a refugee had been into macrobiotic food, so her parcels were the best because they contained nuts and seeds, soybeans, and all the healthy supplements for our monotonous diet. But she did send us sausages once, and we had a real German feast. The parcel that moved me the most was from a family in France. We got it through another friend whom they had asked to find a family in Sarajevo to whom they could write.

The parcel came for Christmas. It was full of beautifully wrapped chocolates and candies, coffee, and cookies and had a big Christmas card and a letter with a picture of the family. It felt just as if we were receiving a Christmas present from close friends.

Epilogue

The world is still imperfect, wars are still raging, and children are dying of hunger all over the world. Only now I pay attention, and with this experience that I never really asked for, I know what they are going through. I live in Canada now, and I haven't started stockpiling yet. There are grocery stores at every corner, and we can afford lots of fresh fruits and vegetables. My children now make different wish lists. But, if by any chance we have some leftover bread that goes bad, I still follow the same ritual that I inherited from my grandmother, replacing the newspaper with a sandwich bag. Well, and I also kiss the bread only in my mind. ☺