

# THE ENEMY IN THE HILLS

GRADUATE STUDENT WORKS TO MAKE SENSE OF WAR EXPERIENCE

**AZRA HROMADZIC, C'01, G'03, divides her life into three parts: before the war, during the war and after the war. Parts one and two mostly took place in the city of Bihac, one of the “safe havens” established by the United Nations when Yugoslavia disintegrated into a battleground that added the term “ethnic cleansing” to our lexicon.**

Because of the Bosnian War, people think of her country as “gray and destroyed,” she says, but “the river that goes through my hometown is very, very blue in my memories, and the trees and mountains are green.” Mostly, she remembers feeling “totally safe,” playing into the night on the streets and coming home from the discotheque in the early morning darkness. Even when Serb forces attacked Sarajevo in 1992 and began their march toward Bihac, townspeople refused to believe that bad things could happen to them. Hromadzic was 16.

The first artillery shell exploded in the middle of the night. “I jumped up, put on my favorite 501 Levi’s jeans and was ready to leave.” By that time, there was nowhere to go. The Serb army had filled the green hills surrounding the city with guns. “That first shell was followed by thousands and thousands more, and my town was under siege for three-and-a-half years.”

Serb gunners would target the schools at the start of class, Hromadzic recalls. She fought back by reading in the dim light of a foul-smelling lamp made from a shoe-string wick stuck into a bowl of fat. A first date with a new boyfriend ended with both of them wet and muddy from diving to the pavement when a shell blew apart a nearby district. Neighbors cooked together on wood stoves and gathered around a little TV powered by a truck battery to watch CNN or BBC reports on the war. “People were constantly commenting on how politics was different from everyday life,” she says. Refugees who had fled to Bihac told stories of murder, torture and rape. “There was a lot of sadness and anger at how slowly the world was reacting — at how they didn’t see that this was genocide.”

Her brother, who went to the front lines with a weapon in one hand and a philosophy book in the other, was

severely injured by a grenade. Most of the fragments tore into his legs, and he couldn’t walk. Not long after, the siege lifted, and the family took him to a hospital in Zagreb.

“What I needed,” she says, “was to make sense of the 17 pieces of shrapnel in my brother’s body, of my lost friends and of thousands of destroyed homes and mosques.” The understanding she sought would have to cross “a gap” between her experience of the war and scholarly writings about it. Hromadzic received a full scholarship to Penn and studied anthropology, the academic discipline that she believes can get at the lived experience that political analysis and TV news cannot.

She has studied Bosnian War rape extensively, collecting stories from refugees that came to her town and other survivor testimony, and putting them at the heart of her analysis, which will be published in a forthcoming anthology. She is currently back in Bosnia-Herzegovina conducting ethnographic research for a Ph.D. dissertation that continues this emphasis on individual experience. The Dayton Peace Agreement, which brought peace to her country, created a unified state that is ethnically partitioned. The scars are too fresh for full reconciliation, she says. Through interviews and observation, Hromadzic is exploring what it means for young people to “live Dayton,” the tension between unification and segregation, in their everyday lives.

Last July, she and her brother climbed one of the highest peaks in the former Yugoslavia to celebrate the healing of his leg wounds. “It was the 10th anniversary of his survival,” she explains, “and he could walk, really, without fear.” ■

—PETER NICHOLS

“WHAT I NEEDED WAS TO MAKE SENSE OF THE 17 PIECES OF SHRAPNEL IN MY BROTHER’S BODY, OF MY LOST FRIENDS AND OF THOUSANDS OF DESTROYED HOMES AND MOSQUES.”