A Shot in Sarajevo

In one year in former Yugoslavia, 28 journalists have been killed—more than during the whole period of American involvement in Vietnam. A French journalist, Jean Hatzfeld, and I almost became numbers 29 and 30.

Jean—who works for the French Left-leaning daily Liberation—was driving as we sped down the road to Sarajevo airport. Two cracks rang out, followed by the sound of splintering metal. A third shot hit me in my left side, but the impact was so slight that I thought it was a mere flesh wound, and was distracted by the sight of Jean's right leg exploding under the impact of the first two bullets. Up to 15 more rounds hit the car as I tried to steer us towards the cover of some garages on the left, over which I thought the shots had come.

With shots still ringing out, I flung open my door and ran around to Jean, lifting him out of the car and into the ditch that ran parallel to the road. Deep red blood was everywhere. "Save my leg please," he pleaded. "I want to play football again."

There was much confusion, but eventually a stretcher was found and Jean was carried off to an ambulance. My wounds were dressed by soldiers of the Bosnian Territorial Defence; I suspect it was they who accidentally shot us, taking us for Serb Chetniks, who frequently use that road, masquerading as journalists.

I arrived at the Kosevo hospital in Sarajevo in a private car about 20 minutes after we had been shot, to find Jean had only just arrived. Ambulances are prime targets for Chetnik snipers, so they are few on the ground and their journeys are hazardous and slow. After a two-hour operation on Jean's leg, I was told that it had been completely shattered and there was a chance he would lose it below the knee. Still under the misapprehension that I had escaped virtually unscathed, I returned to my hotel. In fact, I had a bullet lodged in my pelvis and, after an agonising and sleepless night, made worse by the constant shelling around my hotel, I was rushed into hospital the next morning.

I remained in hospital for four days, during which time I was unable to sleep because of the pain, although the medical staff worked wonders with what equipment they had. The nurses and doctors are on 24-hour shifts in groups of eight for each department. During the two months of the war the traumatology department alone has seen 3,500 patients. More than 100 were admitted in less than an hour on 21 June, when a shell landed on a bank in the main street in Sarajevo, killing 20 pensioners who were queueing up for their pensions, and wounding many others. Professor Vranich, the head of traumatology, says 90% of the casualties have been civilians caught in the indiscriminate shelling and sniper fire from the Serbs. Even at the hospital, they are not safe. The staff there have no shortage of horror stories—the surgeon shot by a sniper while performing an operation; the old man admitted with his lower arm shot off who, 12 hours later, had the rest of it shot off by another sniper as he lay in his hospital bed.

In the bed next to me was another old man, aged 74, who had been one of 2,000 civilians imprisoned in Kovla, a former open prison for traffic and other minor offenders, near Sarajevo airport. He had been tortured until every bone in his fragile body was broken. He was finally released in an exchange of prisoners. The Serbs never release Bosnian fighters, he said, only women, children and the elderly, in exchange for their own fighters.

Four days before I was shot, a Spanish journalist and I had been driven into Dobrinja under heavy sniper fire. When we arrived in Dobrinja, we were shown the tiny 'hospital' consisting of 20 or 30 sleeping bags in two basement cellars, run by one doctor, Dr Smojek. By chance, he had been staying in the district with his two children after escaping the Serb destruction of his hometown of Vitegrad, where his wife was still trapped. He had been working round the clock and hadn't seen his children for 20 days, nor had any news of his wife for a month. A local pharmacy in Dobrinja had been the sole source of all the medical provisions for this hospital for two months.

A Serb, Bosko Reljic, who had left part of Serbian-controlled Dobrinja with his Muslim wife and daughter, told me: "The Chetniks came to our block and asked if we had any Muslims. The second day they returned and searched and looted every suspected Muslim apartment. The final straw came on the third day when an old Muslim man's daughter was taken at gunpoint and the old man was told to bring a handful of gold jewellery to the Chetniks the next day or his daughter would die. Everyone in the block rallied round..."
and enough gold was collected to save the girl."

Sarajevo's spirit of integration—Muslims, Serbs and Croats have lived harmoniously as neighbours for years, and intermarriage is commonplace—has galled the Serbian Chetnik fighters, and partly explains their relentless pounding of the city. This often extends to Sarajevo Serbs, too. I even met one Serbian woman whose husband had left to join the Chetniks to head their communications network at the beginning of the war. She had heard nothing of him since, despite making an impassioned plea on TV. Instead, her broadcast resulted in shelling being directed by Chetnik forces at her apartment block.

While I was in Dobrinja, the Chetniks captured part of the district and began 'cleaning' it of Muslims. In one incident, this meant cutting the throats of most of the men in front of their wives and children, and then leading the women, and the small number of surviving men, to a bridge that had been mined. There they were made to collect the dead Chetniks around it, before being told that they were free to run across the ruined bridge—and its mines—to freedom.

After I left Dobrinja, I spoke to a young Muslim man (D) and his Croat wife (J) who had undergone this barbaric treatment. They did not want their identities revealed for fear of reprisals. D told me: "There were 40 of us in our group. As soon as we started running, they began to shoot at us with machine guns. I saw a pregnant woman with a child fall in front of me—I don't know what happened to the child. We all ran into a ditch but they shouted at us to get out or they would hand grenade us. So we came out and they began shooting us again. So we dived into the opposite ditch and began crawling the 450 metres to the other end."

"We crawled over the rottning corpses of three Chetniks," J continued, "and after about two hours we reached the other end of the ditch, but we still didn't know where we were. They had said the TV cameras would be waiting for us, but there was no sign of them." D picked up the story. "After three hours crouching in terror, one woman, whose husband had been murdered in front of her, finally crawled out and ran towards some buildings. The Chetniks shot at her, but missed and one by one we all followed her to safety. Out of 40 who started, only 26 of us made it." There are stories in Dobrinja of Chetniks being found with documents on them saying they are a superior race descended from the inhabitants of the lost continent of Atlantis, which will soon rise to the surface and join with the Serbs in battle. Apocryphal or not, the stories fit easily with the behaviour of the besiegers of Dobrinja.

I was trapped in Dobrinja for a further two days because of the ferocity of the shelling. The previous day, a journalist from Associated Press had gone out in a convoy and his driver had been hit in the leg, while the two ambulances in front had been shot to pieces, killing four medics and two patients.

So, finally, we were forced to escape under cover of darkness. There were about 50 of us, some carrying 50kg packs and bazookas. At precisely 11.10 pm we left the shopping arcade which was being used as a bunker and silently crept into the deserted streets, towards the periphery of Dobrinja.

We had gone about 400 metres when a Chetnik machine gun, positioned on the hill above the road we had to cross to get into the hills, opened up with a terrifying burst that was returned by some Bosnian snipers. Tracer bullets flashed everywhere and a couple of green flares went up illuminating the ghostly scene. The hills that ring Sarajevo amplified the sounds of shelling and gunfire, while the echoes made it impossible to tell where the gunfire was coming from, or who was shooting at whom.

After a consultation, the Bosnian forces returned to the bunker. We would wait for an hour for the Chetniks to get thoroughly drunk, as is their wont, they said. At midnight, we crossed the road three streets further down. It seemed they were right about the Chetniks: we crossed into the hills without a single shot being fired. I didn't know then that, having escaped Dobrinja, I would be cut down by a bullet on the road to the airport.

It has been remarked that it took just one bullet, the one that killed Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914, to start the first world war, but it has taken a million bullets before the EC or UN will even consider military intervention in this one. Is it simply because there's no oil in former Yugoslavia?

KEVIN WEAVER writes for New Statesman and Society, where a longer version of this piece was originally published.