



# Letter From Sarajevo

Neither guns nor ethnic cleansing . . . An eyewitness report on Adventists running Sarajevo's postal service.

by Tihomir Kukulja

"It is a moving experience to see an elderly woman overcome by tears when she receives the first letter since the start of the war from a daughter or son, and hear her cries of thanks," says Veselinka Baban, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) post office supervisor in Sarajevo; "Wherever we go, we meet with respect and gratitude."

A senior religious official in Sarajevo is more direct in his praise. "Adventists have captured the hearts of those people," he says.

Pastor Radomir Nikolic, ADRA director in Sarajevo and president of the Adventist Church in Bosnia and Herzegovina, explains, "Sarajevians appreciate Adventists because of their strict fairness, honesty, and practical display of love toward everyone in the city, regardless of religion or nationality."

Since last March the Croatian and Serbian humanitarian transports of ADRA, two branches of ADRA International working in the area, have become Sarajevo's principal postal service. Adventists have delivered more than 60,000 aid parcels and as many letters to the 300,000 people fighting for survival in the besieged city.

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The 30 Adventists who have chosen to remain in Sarajevo and operate the one effective postal service have been part of the same tragedy faced by all who remain in the dying city. Some of these Adventists have been wounded, their homes destroyed or damaged. "Like others, every day we look death in the face," says Pastor Nikolic. "I was only a few meters from the place where a mortar hit, killing seven people. The dead and wounded were everywhere. A woman that was walking only a step in front of me was killed instantly. I received only a minor injury. I can only conclude that the Lord saved my life."

Under the circumstances, the Adventist postal service delivers such essentials as food. The heavy artillery positioned in the hills around the city constantly threatens the supply lines that bring necessities to the city.

But food is not the only thing that Sarajevians hunger for, and here, too, Adventists meet an urgent need. Nikolic says, "Sarajevians do not live on the food parcels alone. They hunger spiritually, too. They need a sense of God's providence in a hostile environment where life means little. We have had to introduce two church services every Sabbath, since the church hall is too small to accommodate the 300-plus people who often attend the services."

After a brief lapse while the church balcony and the roofs of attached buildings were restored following devastating explosions from mortar rounds,

church services have been held regularly since June of 1992. Mira Nikolic, another active ADRA worker and wife of the church pastor, says, "We were on our knees, praying, in the basement of the church when the building was hit. This was the worst night I have experienced in my life. Throughout the night explosions shook the city. It was a horrifying experience, but it never shook us in our decision to carry on with regular church services."

Evidently it hasn't discouraged many others, either. When the author visited in March and April of 1993, the church was packed each Sabbath and Sunday, and often filled an hour before services began, with Moslems, Serbs, and Croats quietly waiting together.

A regular worshiper in the Sarajevo Adventist church explains: "I come to the Adventist church because in it God fills me with peace." Another regular visitor adds, "I believe that Jesus Christ,

whom I have come to know better here, has helped me to face the deadly realities of life in this city in a rational manner. I don't know how on earth I would have survived this ordeal otherwise."

In addition to distributing mail and providing a place for Sarajevians to worship, Adventists have found another way to minister. Every Thursday, Adventists broadcast a 15-minute program entitled "Voice of Hope," which is produced by members of the ADRA team in Sarajevo. Although Adventists are not the only religious group with regular air time on Bosnian state radio—Moslems, Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Jews also broadcast religious programs—Radmilo Zurovac, the non-Adventist chief producer of the "Open Programme" in which "Voice of Hope" airs says that he is "pleased with the enthusiasm and professionalism of the Adventist youth who produce a program that is not only interesting to the Adventist audience, but to listeners at large."

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## Sarajevo's SDA Postal Service— "Nobody's and Everybody's"

by James Rupert

Washington Post Foreign Service

All day long, the besieged people of Sarajevo troop into a dank warehouse basement beside the rusting rail yard, looking for a sign that they have not been forgotten.

For more than 300,000 people trapped by artillery and sniper fire in this narrow strip of the city held by the Muslim-led Bosnian government, isolation is nearly complete. There is no regular telephone line to the outside, no road, no escape.

But in the musty former wholesale market down by the tracks, a once obscure religious minority here—Sarajevo's tiny Seventh-day Adventist community—keeps alive one of the last means of contact with the outside. The city's 35-member Adventist church, working with the Washington-based Adventist Development and Relief Agency, maintains a mail and parcel service that has delivered up to

300 tons of packages and 30,000 letters to Sarajevo in one month.

As 14 months of war has sundered Bosnians into groups full of fear and hate, the Adventists are laboring to build bridges not only across battle lines but also across communal and personal divides among the warring Serbs, Croats and Muslims.

At the half-ruined warehouse, Sarajevans crowd around posted lists of parcel recipients, hoping their individual isolation has been broken by a letter or food package from a loved one.

Last fall, the Adventist churches and the Adventist relief agency offices in Zagreb and Belgrade—the capitals of neighboring Croatia and Serbia—began sending parcels of canned or dried food to Sarajevo, mostly from refugees from the Bosnian capital trying to help the family and friends they left behind.

"Over the winter, the convoys got bigger. . . . We imported 16 big

trucks, and we started the postal service," said Milan Suslic, an Adventist pastor and director of its relief office in Belgrade. As the Adventist relief operation grew, it recruited hundreds of Serb, Croat and Muslim volunteers in Zagreb, Belgrade and Sarajevo.

The nationalistic violence of the Bosnian war has made Slavic Muslims, Roman Catholic Croats and Eastern Orthodox Serbs feel more acutely their religious identities and historical rivalries. But this is a war into which the Balkans' religious minorities—Seventh-day Adventists, Jews, Baptists, Pentecostals and others—do not fit. The Adventists have worked hard to turn their minority status into an asset.

"As Seventh-day Adventists . . . we are not part of any nationality or on any side in the war," Suslic said. The conflicting sides "know us to be non-political people. We belong to the region, but not to the conflict."

Suslic said the Adventist relief agency tries to keep the confidence of the warring factions by constantly reminding them that it is helping people of all groups in Sarajevo. "We are nobody's and everybody's," he said.