

COMMUNITY STORY - LORA

Connecting
Community for



Lora was born in Sarajevo (the Capital) of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1984. This beautiful city held the Winter Olympics that year. Sarajevo was at that time quite a cultural hub, with a mix of religions, including Muslim, Catholic, Orthodox. Lora's first few years growing up were very peaceful and happy. With her Mum, Dad and little brother, 7 years younger, she grew up in a predominantly Muslim household however Lora was raised to explore her own choice and was always encouraged to engage and befriend into other cultures and religions. Until Lora was 7 years old life was unfolding peacefully till the war and siege of Sarajevo began in 1992.

Remembering Lora was only 7 years old she didn't initially know what was happening, there was a lot of chaos on the streets, breaking into shops, a feeling of despair and lack of control over what was happening. She recalls all the shops around them were being broken into. They managed to stay in their house for a while until one day they were held by gunpoint by the Serbian army and told to get out of the house. They weren't allowed to take anything from their home and with guns pointed

at them they took off with other lucky refugees to Alipasno Polje to her mum's parents, Lora's grandparents. 'Lucky' as they did not get shot.

Lora remembers that Sarajevo, which is surrounded by hills, was eventually surrounded by the Serbian army and they were stuck there. The first Bosnian Army recruits Lora says, were "our fathers, uncles and brothers" who maybe had never held a gun before let alone shoot one. Before the war Lora's Father was an electrician who suddenly became a soldier. Lora says he was very conflicted and tormented over the years by what he had to do.

There exists a very complicated history in this part of the world, Lora at 7 years old didn't fully understand it! Her friends died around her and she couldn't understand why! Whole families died because they were the wrong religion. There were snipers who were indiscriminate, grenades flying constantly. Sometimes sirens warned them of air raids, other times there was no warning. Trying to go to places was like an obstacle course with your life but they needed



food, water, and sometimes school was on. Lora recalls that lining up for water people would get gunned down and they would have to move the wounded aside. It was common place to step over dead bodies. However, she remembers people still had a sense of pride and determination and would get dressed up to go get water and other essentials.

Lora's mum was determined to keep Lora busy. Lora joined a choir, learned the guitar, and it gave her something to focus on during the war. Lora is also a talented writer and during this time wrote poetry. Eventually, she caught the eye of a famous poet, Velimir Milosevic, who supported her. A book of poetry by Lora was put together with music from her music teacher, Slavko Olujic and included were pictures from choir members and friends. This book was published during war time even though there was a lack of access to paper and safety was so often compromised. It even led to a public event to publicise the book and created several headlines. Lora recalls travelling



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was good at Maths for example would teach the subject and so forth. Even Music and Art found a way to exist underground.

An armistice was declared Nov 1995 Lora was 12yrs old, but war didn't just suddenly stop there was still ongoing shootings, still "aftershocks". Lora's mum, Dada, wanted to get her children out of Sarajevo and to a better life. They managed to get on the last buses out to Croatia. However, her Father was not permitted to go with them. He was still in the Bosnian army and would have been considered a traitor if he left, and it was punishable, often by death. Lora's mum sold everything (she had a little shop in Sarajevo).

They said goodbye to everyone. Including her grandparents. Not all of the journey was legal. They were put on a bus from Sarajevo to Croatia. They got on a boat from Croatia and were taken to Italy where 2 men (they didn't know) met them and took them through the borders with no passports all the way through some of the cities of Europe heading to Berlin, Germany.

In Berlin the family was able to stay for a while with the Auntie until the German government found out they were there and they were told they had to go back to Sarajevo because the Armistice had been signed. While they waited for this to be organised

the family were thrown into a refugee camp. There were a lot of refugees in this camp from Russia, and all parts of ex-Yugoslavia. In the refugee camp Lora remembers it consisted of lots of tiny houses fenced off, with a big black fence around them separating them from the nice neighbourhoods.

There were nice memories there, lots of other kids to play with, and a little playground where she spent much time. They had a room to a family but shared the kitchen/bathrooms/toilets. In the meantime, Lora's Father had found his own way out to the Auntie (his sister) and found them in Germany. Needless to say it was very unpleasant what he had to go through to get out.

Lora's parents got work and she was accepted into school but Germany wanted to send them back. For them there was no future still in Sarajevo, no economy, people/friend's lost, and a lot of re-building needed across Sarajevo. A lot of the places they used to hide in were turned into drug dens. A lot of hopelessness.

About this time Lora's parents contacted the International Organisation for Migration. They agreed to help Lora's family as Lora was seen as a 'valuable person' – She had written a book of poetry in Sarajevo and they wanted to help the family with their journey to a better life.

with a convoy of two French United Nations tanks to get to the event and being accompanied by several United Nations soldiers on the day.

While staying with her Grandparents in the apartment building blocks, Lora recalls that when there were bombings people would seek refuge underground in what were really just storage rooms. There was the constant fear from snipers and shrapnel from the grenades. People who couldn't make it in time to escape from top floors of their building would jump to their death getting away. She was often seeing this as a young child.

People often lived down in the storage rooms underground for months at a time with candles lighting the way. Power was cut off often, and when people from a particular building were underground, a type of community support could be found in the shelter. This happened all across Alipasno polje and all across Sarajevo. When the kids in one building or area bombed couldn't get to school an adult who



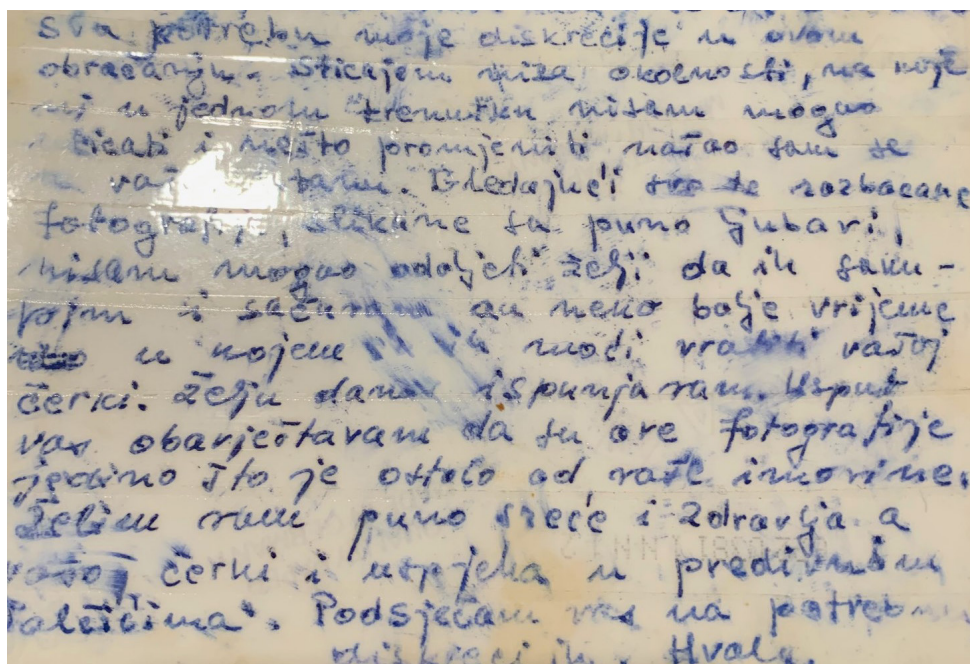
They wanted Lora to continue to write. They offered to take her to Australia or America. The family chose Australia.

Life here in Australia was very hard at the beginning. Lora's parents did cleaning and delivery jobs to get by. Her Mum was a seamstress so got some good work eventually. Lora had a lot of pressure to do well but she was still a teenager and needed to cut loose a little, finally.

She was a good student but started to skip school in the last year of high-school - during this time Lora watched her parents' relationship unravel and brutal physical domestic violence took a hold of the household. It got so bad that Lora's mum tried many times to get away, eventually separating from Lora's father. By that time Lora had grown up and was working away.

When you meet Lora one thing you will always notice about her is her positivity. No matter what has happened to her she always recognises the good things that have come along her way.

When they left their home in Sarajevo they weren't able to take anything with them. The Serbian soldiers destroyed their house, but one particular soldier saw the family photos scattered around and decided to rescue them. Years later when Lora sang at the well known choir Palcici and was featured on the television across ex-Yugoslavia, a package arrived at the local television station addressed to Lora and her family. Inside were all of their family photos and a note from the Serbian soldier who had saved them. He followed Lora as she published her poetry and became known in Sarajevo. This was pretty incredible and there were a lot of tears and emotion about this simple kindness and thoughtfulness from the soldier, who was meant to represent the enemy. Lora believes in the kindness of all people.



Lora's dad could never address the trauma he had experienced and he committed suicide ten years ago. It was an extra heartache to Lora and her family. It took several years to accept and Lora is still on a healing journey.

Today, Lora is a mum to two gorgeous girls with her partner who is Aboriginal and both Lora and her partner are very dedicated to equality and supporting their families.

Several years ago Lora wanted to get involved again with Community work, after spending some time north in WA, settling finally back in Fremantle, in Yangebup; she approached the Yangebup Family Centre and commenced some volunteer work as a mum also attending the centre with her two young kids. She was soon after offered the first ever role of Community Development Officer at the Centre.

Having a partner who is Aboriginal and becoming part of his family has helped her to look at where the gaps are, she is passionate and loves to teach others how to feel comfortable and embrace Aboriginal culture. Lora has started up Kaya Time which

is an Aboriginal playgroup and she is immensely proud of the fantastic mums that she has met through the group. Lora became involved with Connecting Community for Kids and is always looking to contribute to community projects.

Lora is trying to utilise her experiences and background as well as incorporate her partner's culture into her everyday life. She is constantly in touch with her Mother in Law and is interested in learning more from her. She hasn't been back to Sarajevo since she travelled back as a young adult but would one day like to visit with her children and visit her grandparents' final resting place.

Lora is a big believer in uniting people and hopes to continue doing so for many years.

