

ABOUT SAVO HELETA

SAVO HELETA, age 28, is currently pursuing his Master's Degree in conflict transformation and management at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. He wants to contribute to preventing the kind of ethnic hatred and destruction he lived through. In 1992, when the fighting in the Bosnian war finally hit Goražde, a small, diverse city with a long, proud history of economic security and cultural harmony, Savo's family—Serbs, with an Eastern Orthodox religious tradition—became objects of suspicion to their Muslim neighbors. Along with his parents, grandparents, younger sister, and many other innocent people, he spent two years living with the terror of snipers and missiles, relentless hunger, and being reviled and degraded by former friends. On April 21, 1994, Savo and his family escaped from Goražde, swimming for nearly an hour in the dark of night in the icy river Drina, to freedom.

Settling in Visegrad, Bosnia, Savo completed high school and remained a prisoner to memories of fear, starvation, and humiliation. He thought revenge was the answer. After a close encounter with a man who had tried to kill his family, Savo realized that taking this man's life would turn him in to a monster. The incidence marked the start of his new life. While searching for job leads in a country with nearly 50 percent unemployment, Savo was drawn to the peacemaking and community-building initiatives of local youth organizations. Soon, he found himself attending conferences and talking with young Muslims and Croats, as well as Serbs. One day, a friend faxed him an application for a program in America, called PeaceTrails. To his amazement, Savo was one of 36 young Bosnians selected from over 400 candidates.

With PeaceTrails, Savo traveled to Washington, D.C., throughout Minnesota, and parts of Canada. He not only learned about community development, budget proposals, and leadership, but also applied his skills to projects back in Bosnia. After a year as a participant in the program, Savo was offered a job. In 2002, his second year of work was rewarded with a trip to Hawaii and California. While in San Francisco, he met with Daniel Whalen, a supporter of PeaceTrails and president of The Whalen Family Foundation. The meeting culminated with the promise of a four-year scholarship to the college of his choice, after completing an intense summer course in speaking, reading, and writing English. In 2006, Savo graduated from Saint John's University in Minnesota, with a double major in history and business management.

"I realized that only brave and strong people can put behind years of suffering, reconcile with the past, and move on with life. I wanted to be one of them," Savo declares. Since letting go of his need for revenge, Savo Heleta has found common bonds with people from all over the world—India, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Ireland, Trinidad, Spain, and, of course, America. He credits his new friends with opening his mind to different perspectives, helping him grow, and persuading him to write about his wartime experience. The result is his first book, **NOT MY TURN TO DIE: Memoirs of a Broken Childhood in Bosnia** (AMACOM; March 20, 2008).

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