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## **Not My Turn to Die**

*Memoirs of a Broken Childhood in Bosnia*

“We are all Yugoslavians.” That’s what **Savo Heleta** was told growing up in a predominantly Muslim city in Bosnia. Situated in a scenic river valley, his hometown, Goražde, was small, inviting, peaceful, and safe. As children, Savo and his younger sister, Sanja, played outside in a spacious yard they shared with all the children who lived in twin apartment buildings. Like his parents, Slavko and Gordana, Savo counted Muslims among his close friends. Besides, the Heletas, Serbs, were Eastern Orthodox Christians by tradition rather than in practice. Savo’s carefree boyhood ended on May 4, 1992, at age 13, when, in the aftermath of the breakup of Yugoslavia, the ethnic fighting raging all over Bosnia finally reached Goražde. Savo’s parents refused to believe that politics could drive neighbors and friends to hate and kill one another. “We’d never made enemies,” Heleta reflects. “We didn’t expect anyone to harm us, so we decided to stay in our home.”

In **NOT MY TURN TO DIE: Memoirs of a Broken Childhood in Bosnia** (AMACOM; March 20, 2008; \$22.00 Hardcover), Savo Heleta relives his two-year nightmare of living with terror, starvation, and humiliation. He also describes his life-saving transformation from an angry young man desperately seeking revenge to a dedicated activist for reconciliation. Told in vivid, intimate, unflinching detail, Savo’s story is a testament to the human will to survive and to the healing power of forgiveness.

“As Serbs in a Muslim-controlled city under siege, we’d had reason to fear for our lives, both because of the relentless Serbian attacks on the city and because of our ethnic differences from the people in charge,” Heleta explains. “The Muslim majority saw us as the enemy within their city walls, not victims of the same guns that were killing their families.”

A gripping chronicle of an innocent teenager’s wartime experience, **NOT MY TURN TO DIE** is filled with terrible acts of brutality and cruelty, searing accounts of suffering and degradation, and uplifting moments of courage and compassion. Chapters recount:

- *The first wave of killings in Goražde.* The Heletas are spared with a warning about a planned ransacking of their home. Soon after, thugs take Savo’s father, a local journalist, and Savo’s mother, an office worker for a large state-owned company, in for questioning on suspicion of spying. During his interrogation, Slavko learns of a plan to capture all the Serbian civilians in the area and use them as human shields against the Serbian forces.
- *The tension of living in hiding.* Secretly fleeing to the apartment of Slavko’s best friend, Nedim, a Muslim, the Heletas hole up in a tiny, dark bedroom, without seeing sunlight or breathing fresh air, for 22 days. Savo and his family have to stay, still and quiet, even when bombs assault the building and blow neighbors apart.
- *The horror of being arrested and locked up.* A week after the Heletas sneak out of their hideaway, police arrest the entire family, plus Savo’s grandparents, and throw them in a detention center, crammed with Serbian men, women, and children. For four months,

Savo and his loved ones endure horrific conditions, with no food or water provided. Fear of being killed by passing missiles is as constant as the danger of dying from starvation.

- *The humiliation of homecoming.* Abruptly released from detention, the Heletas return home. Daily life pushes the limits of their physical and psychological endurance. Forced to dig ditches and sweep city streets, while passersby laugh, Slavko can barely feed his children. The company where Gordana worked for 15 years refuses to re-hire her. Often, the family's sole meal is stinging nettle and dandelion stew.
- *The daring escape to freedom.* When the United Nations and International Red Cross at last arrive, Savo's parents beg for help in leaving the city. An American with the UN promises to send a list of names, including the Heletas, to a haven for refugees across the border. Propelled by the threat of being burned to death by Meho, a man who had been a family friend before the war, Savo and his family escape Goražde in the dark of night, swimming for nearly an hour in the icy river Drina.
- **NOT MY TURN TO DIE** culminates with Savo Heleta's hard-fought emotional journey after the war. At age 17, after settling down in a new city, graduating from high school, and struggling to move forward with his life, Savo comes face to face with Meho. With a gun in his hand, Savo considers killing the man who terrorized his family. Instead, he thinks of what his family has already sacrificed, and what would be taken from them if he acted on his thirst for revenge. His choice to forgive and heal marks the beginning of his true freedom.

Putting a human face on a complex ethnic conflict, **NOT MY TURN TO DIE** is a profoundly affecting and, ultimately, hopeful account of war and its aftermath.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Savo Heleta** worked for the PeaceTrails Youth Leadership Program, training groups of young people from Bosnia to become leaders in their communities. He has traveled to the United States, Canada, and Spain to conduct workshops in communication, leadership development, and strategic planning. Savo graduated from St. John's University in Minnesota, with a double major in history and business management. He is currently studying conflict transformation and management at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. For more information, visit [www.savoheleta.com](http://www.savoheleta.com).

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