

THE TUNNEL OF SALVATION, radio play

I don't know what I'm going to tell you. I just know that I've been wanting to do this for years.

But I never have. I've been taught that a story must have a beginning and an end.

But I don't know when it all started. And I don't know when it ended.

All I'm certain of is that I wanted none of what started in my town that spring.

And that I didn't want to lose what I had gained – how ironic! – because of it and right in the midst of it.

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I'd never been on a plane. I'd never been to an airport either.

And now, I'm about to crawl to the other side of the runway with you, a five-year-old.

The cymbals join the violins. I can feel them in my throat.

The muffled sounds of strings and wires, the creaking of the barbed wire being forced with pliers, not the violin strings, catapults me back to reality.

I put my finger to my mouth. "We have to be quiet. Let's go.

Pianissimo, my dearest."

We're back at the wire. I know you're hungry and scared.

But you're doing as we've said, you're quiet. I kiss your cold cheeks, plucking up the courage to try again. This time we'll be more careful.

The whizz of bullets above our heads weaves a random shiny, thick web.

The biggest noise is the rustling of your jacket, which I got you from Caritas after four hours of standing there.

Your breathing tells me that you're tired. Tomorrow is your birthday.

Where on Earth am I taking you to?

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Anyone who had to cross the runway at least once must have thought about a tunnel. It was logical to think about going underground. I have run over the runway, and believe me, I don't know how many times I thought how good it would be to have a tunnel.

The Bosnian army, which was being formed at the time, organised everything. My first meeting with the people who came to ask us for our house and land was in the spring of 1993. I met Nedžad Branković, who later became the chief designer of the Sarajevo tunnel, and Bakir Izetbegović, Alija Izetbegović's son. My father and I met with them in our garden. I think Bakir told my father that they needed our house and land. He didn't say: "We need it for the tunnel," since they wanted to keep it secret. But my father and I knew what it was about, so my father told them: "Everything we have is yours. Do what you want." That's how it started. After about a month, a month and a half, I can't remember exactly, they started tunnelling on this side. At that time, they were already digging from the Dobrinja side. They organised everything there, and then they must have realised that the construction was not going fast enough, and they decided to tunnel from this side as well. So they dug the tunnel from both sides and on 30 July they joined. We built it in four months, which is incredible. Today we could not have dug an 800-metre tunnel in four months, even if we hired professional miners and paid them two or three thousand euros; they could not have done it in four months. Not by hand. Never.

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"I'd like to go to the city."

I'm getting quite big. Autumn is coming and the rain. Then I won't be able to go.

“I’d like to take some food to my parents if you could get me some kind of pass.”

“What do you mean, ‘I’d like to go to the city?’ Will you jump over the airport runway with such a belly?”

“I’d take the tunnel.”

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I went into the tunnel several times when it was being dug. Just out of curiosity, to see what they were doing. I’d been in a tunnel before, about 200, 300 metres, and came out. But the first time I went through it was in 1993, about two, three months after it had been dug. I asked the army for permission to visit my mother and brother and take something to them. It was at night. There were always five hundred, a thousand people waiting around the tunnel, waiting to be let in. Groups of people went into the tunnel, forming a single file. Today, 800 metres doesn’t seem like much, you can cross it in five minutes. But 800 metres of tunnel seemed like 8 kilometres. The first time I walked through ... You should know that I probably went through it more often than anyone else during the war. I didn’t count, but I must have gone through more than five hundred times. But the first time I did it, I thought I’d never get out.

It seemed so terribly long that I could see no end to the journey. I was carrying a backpack that weighed 20 or 30 kilos. It was tough, water, mud, people, everyone sweating ... You were wet from the sweat, and down below, you were wet from the water. The tunnel was not hermetically sealed and insulated; it was permeable. Groundwater was constantly seeping in. All the time, you could hear the pumps draining out the water to keep the tunnel from flooding. And the sound of the people you were walking with. Unless you were alone, then you heard the sound of the trolley that you were pushing along the rails. That metal trolley on the metal rails made such a racket that you couldn’t hear anything else. We always brought an empty one from the other side to load. I’d push the trolley in front of me, it made it easier if you leant on it. The noise was so incredibly loud, you couldn’t hear anything else. But you did walk faster because your stride was one and a half metres instead of 70 centimetres. Leaning on the trolley, you couldn’t hit your head because you were bent over. You heard: “Ta-dam, ta-dam, ta-dam ...” The trolley made the same sound as

the trains in the films. Tracks and crossings ... “Ta-dam, ta-dam, ta-dam ...” It was always noisy and crowded, never quiet. But sometimes, when you sat down to rest and there was nobody in the tunnel, you could hear the water trickling. Slowly dripping and dropping.

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“There’s a rumour that a mole is making a molehill.”

My dear father ... He managed to send us a letter through a soldier.

Wanting to check the news to see if a tunnel really had been dug under the airport runway and fearing that the letter might fall into the wrong hands, he resorted to the famous quote from the TV series I loved so much, “Salaš u malom ritu, A farm in Mali Rit”. My mother, who was running from one Sarajevo wartime classroom to another on a daily basis, added a recipe for some kind of powdered milk spread into the envelope.

The tunnel had been dug, but no civilians were using it yet. There was fighting at Bjelašnica, and soldiers from the city were trooping to this side.

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I volunteered because they needed people. Many got sick because it was difficult to dig the tunnel. You were cold and wet every day, it rained a lot, people were getting ill ... So the authorities were looking for volunteers.

I signed up at the end of April. I had crossed the airport runway many times, so I knew how important it was to dig that tunnel. It meant avoiding bullets and getting to the other side safely.

I dug from the Dobrinja side. There were 65 soldiers digging in groups of 15, 16 people in four shifts, every day. But then a Serbian who was working with us escaped and revealed the place where we were digging and discharging the material. So in May, they started shelling us with grenades. Every night we were shelled two or three times: at nine in the evening, at one in the morning and at four or five in the morning. Unloading the soil was the most dangerous, so we

agreed that every night two different people would unload the soil. That way, we all had an equal chance of dying.

When we got to the small airstrip, the water came rushing in. We had a lot of problems with the water because we had no pumps to drain it out. It took about three, four days until they got a pump. The Sarajevo fire brigade gave us a sludge pump, so we managed to expel the water and then kept on digging.

At 20.50 we broke through. The other side only dug a hole about a metre wide. Our side would have had to dig on another metre, metre and a half. But when this hole was dug and both ends of the tunnel were joined, everyone flocked to Butmir to celebrate, to eat and drink. When we came to our shift at ten o'clock, we followed suit. There was plenty of "rakija" spirit and a bite to eat ... We sat and drank until eleven o'clock, and then the order came to properly finish the tunnel and unite the two sides. The army had to pass through because Igman had fallen.

Me and Piva, the guy who worked with me, were in the lead, and it was us who eventually joined both sides of the tunnel. That lasted until one, half past two in the morning, and then we put up the frame and made a proper entrance. We finished everything and at two o'clock Solaković's army went through the tunnel. Then we were ordered to deliver MTM's (material and technical means), weapons and ammunition to Žuč because there was heavy fighting going on there. We delivered anti-aircraft machine guns, machine guns and other weapons. After we had done that, the army – I don't know whose – went through the tunnel again, and then we were ordered to deliver the MTM's for the Dobrinja brigade.

Listen to this, I'll tell you what happened next, you'll cry with laughter.

We transported everything, weapons, ammunition, food ... Halfway through the tunnel, we had already laid the tracks for the wagons. From the Butmir side, they brought the stuff, the MTM's and everything else, to the halfway point of the tunnel. We loaded it all on the wagons and wanted to leave. In the meantime, someone came and brought some "oil". Five, six cans of oil. After we had loaded everything, someone got the idea to open a can. There was cognac in it, my friend! How we grabbed that five-litre can that went from mouth to mouth! But then we had to deliver the stuff. We drove the wagons slowly and boozed at the same time. There was singing in the middle of the tunnel, I tell you. We were happy and the song was bouncing from the walls. Before we

came out of the tunnel, we had drunk those five litres of cognac. Oh, what fun! Oil cans, sure. "Oil"? It was cognac, my friend!

We weren't interested in the other cans after we had found that five litres. We drank the can, dumped it, brought the rest of the stuff over there, and everyone was happy. We sang in the tunnel, some song echoed in the passageway.

I don't remember which one, but it was a song.

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If it hadn't been for the tunnel ... we wouldn't be here anymore. The tunnel was the umbilical cord, the connection to the world. Everything came through it. People, medicine, weapons, petrol, electricity, animals. Even politicians.

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"You want to cross the airstrip with such a belly?"

"No, I'd take the tunnel."

"But you can't," he says. "The tunnel is for the army, the wounded ... It's not meant for you to go see your parents in Sarajevo. No. There are no exceptions."

But I insisted for a few days, as women often do, in our own manner ...

"You have to get me a pass."

"I'd have to go to headquarters for it."

I said to him, "Right, go and get the pass. Tell them: 'My Indira is pregnant. She has to go to Sarajevo for some urgent check-ups.' Think of something."

I don't know how he did it, but he got me the pass. He accompanied me to the tunnel. Nobody could believe that a pregnant woman would go through the tunnel alone. But I was not afraid at all. Had I been scared, I would have said:

"OK, Mum, Dad ..." They didn't know I was coming. I couldn't reach them. Had I

been scared, I wouldn't have gone. I left my five-year-old child in Hrasnica. I was not afraid of anything, but my husband was worried, endlessly worried.

A soldier there said to me, "Where on earth are you going, woman?" I told him that I needed to see a doctor because I was about to give birth.

I saw there were planks over the floor, it was very muddy. My husband said to the soldier, 'I have to go back and be on constant stand-by because of what I mentioned earlier. Could you please escort her into the tunnel? At least a bit of the way?' And the boy said, "Maybe 15, 20 metres, and then I have to go back, too. I have to be here."

I strode into the tunnel with my husband shouting behind me, "Mind your head!" I had a rucksack on my back.

I was so happy.

I can't describe this happiness. The boy walked for some time in front of me and then said: "I have to go back. I don't know how long it will take you."

I was all alone. I think I was ... Well, I'll say more, but I think I was one of the first ten civilians to cross the tunnel.

Early August 1993. At that moment I was the only civilian and the only living being in the tunnel. After that, I crossed it at least twenty, twenty-five times. Later there was always someone in the tunnel: the army, people, cattle or wounded people on trolleys. But the first time I was all alone. I met no one and no one followed me.

Completely alone. Completely happy. Because I was going to see my parents.

I perceived myself as a grown-up, but I was still a 30-year-old child.

And I was scared that I'd meet a rat or a big mouse. Like that was the worst thing that could happen to me. Believe me, the mud was up to my belly. And the water. Lots of water dripping from the ceiling. The ventilation and drainage systems hadn't been built yet as the tunnel had just opened. At times, I thought that lighting was non-existent. You were in the dark most of the time. But at least you were sure that there were no grenades, no snipers. There were no bad guys and murderers. I was safe there. My only job was to walk straight. Nothing bad could happen. That was my thinking at the time.

I just didn't want to bump into a mouse. And a couple of times I was scared I would run out of air since pregnant women breathe faster. But there was some air streaming from somewhere.

I mentioned the squelching of boots in the mud. I had some boots – I don't even know where I got them from, because I could not carry any footwear across the airport runway – and they were already full of mud. And the water dripping, then running down me.

The beating of my child's heart ... Or maybe it was mine.

You know, pregnant women like to put their hands on their bellies. Women like to do that. I felt as if I could feel his or her (I didn't know the sex at the time) heart under my hand. And then the boot. And again the water, the heart and the boot that I was pulling out of the water. These three sounds, one after another. One up above, the other – the heartbeat – which came from here, and the sound of the boot that I was pulling out of the mud.

I think it took me about an hour.

When I came out on the Dobrinja side, our men on duty there beheld a wet, probably dishevelled, muddy pregnant woman. Civilians were not yet using the tunnel. They were speechless at the sight of me. Like the soldier on the Hrasnica side, they asked me: "Where on earth did you come from, woman?" And I repeated my story.

Then I went to my father's brother, changed my clothes, happy to see the relatives. I used that bottle of petrol for someone to give me a lift. It was too far to walk and I was very tired.

My parents were even cross with me for leaving my other child behind. Such folly ... but that's me.

I spent one night there, but coming back from Dobrinja, I had the misfortune of finding the same group of soldiers on duty. I think it was their shift again after 24 hours. One of them asked me: "Weren't you in labour?" I replied: "They said it wasn't time yet."

Three months later it was the right time. On 10 December 1993, I gave birth to my son and became a mother for the second time.

Yes, he saved me.

When your baby coos, when it smiles ... it's louder than any grenades. You no longer have ears for them.

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It's hard.

Don't hold it against me for leaving out some details.

Sometimes it's better to gloss over something than to relive it.

This letter is for you, whom I love. For the two of you who gave me life.

Before I broke away from the family tree, the moment I entered the tunnel.

Hundreds of people are standing at the entrance to the tunnel. Waiting to get to the other side. People who want to start again. And people who want to fight for what was taken from us. I belong to neither.

I am leaving.

But I know I will return.

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I was lucky that I had never been in the tunnel before. In fact, I had only been through it once before, when I left Sarajevo. I was lucky if we can talk about luck here, that my parting from my parents was so emotional that I was completely frozen. Walking through the tunnel, through the water, is the only thing I remember. The water was cold, but I didn't care. My body was there, marching through the tunnel, but my head and my heart were not. They were elsewhere. I was still with my parents. Their image remained frozen in my mind. In my memory, it's as if we were editing a film and we said let's film a scene in a tunnel and someone walking through it, and then we'll insert a frozen image of their parents. I was somehow edited in halfway through. And I'm glad it was like that, otherwise I don't know how I would have reacted. I'm not claustrophobic, but believe me, if it hadn't been for the emotional impact of saying goodbye to my parents, I would have probably become claustrophobic in an instant. That

water, that stench ... The water must have been filthy. Thousands of people went through the tunnel. I even remember banging my head on the ceiling a few times. Everyone did. I remember bloody bandages that must have fallen to the ground when someone was being carried. It was horrible, really. But I can say that now. Just horrid.

It was only about ten years ago, twenty years after I went through the tunnel, that I started thinking about it. And I guess that goes for a lot of people who survived the war. Maybe it's only now, in the last three or four years, that I can say I've dealt with some major traumas, but not all of them, and that gives me strength. But it was a very sensitive issue for many years. Whenever someone mentioned the tunnel, I would ask them if they wanted more coffee.

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Of course, Ismir. When you run away quickly, you leave the past behind.

If the memories are painful, I don't want to know anything. I can bear forgetting better than torment and pain.

I don't believe it happened. But I'm tormented by dreams. These inevitable dreams. A sadness that corrodes, that tears the heart apart. When memories are painful, it's sometimes better not to know. Better to forget than to feel the pain.

Now I know it's all over. The sadness comes calling. All these stories start to unfold ... The sadness that corrodes and tears the heart apart.

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When the tunnel under the airport opened, we were one of the few who didn't leave and flee the city. Instead, we returned to Sarajevo, to my father.

And I remember – this is one of the first memories in my life – that I was waiting to see my father. I didn't remember him because I hadn't seen him for two years. I don't remember the actual moment when I saw him. I only remember that it was not him who was waiting for us in front of the tunnel, but

someone else, showing us the way. And at the time I thought it was him. My first memories of him are from the apartment, where I was able to see him in a more relaxed atmosphere, as relaxed as it could be at that time.

That was in 1994. Actually, I'm not sure, maybe it was the end of 1993. In any case, it was about two years after the war started. That was when the tunnel was built.

I only remember parts of our journey through the tunnel and our arrival in Sarajevo. These are my first memories. I remember them so well spatially that I can describe the arrangement of things around me, the colours, materials and atmosphere.

But my memory is fragmented. I remember part of the way through the tunnel because of something that happened. I don't remember the actual entrance or exit of the tunnel. There were wooden planks on the floor of the tunnel, but because it was flooded or because the groundwater had seeped in, the floor was uneven and not suitable for small children to walk on. I remember that my foot got caught between two planks and I couldn't get it out. My mother panicked because the people behind us started to get edgy and a general sense of unease filled the air. Of course, everyone wanted to get out as quickly as possible, on the other side. I remember it was very stressful for me because I tried to pull my leg out, but it was stuck. I couldn't move when all these strangers were expecting me to. In the end, we left my shoe – or trainers, I don't remember exactly – wedged between the two planks and went on. I remember that feeling of cold and damp, and I still feel uncomfortable about it, as I suspect many others do. But for me, it's directly linked to that event in the tunnel, when my shoe got stuck ...

I can't say that I remember the exact sound that I would use to describe it or compare it to. Although I know that it must have been quite loud, a cluster of different voices and sounds mixed together, there was silence in my head. Because I was panicking what now. We had travelled a long way. My mother was hoping we would finally get out of the tunnel and end it all. I realised it was a very long way from Zadar to Sarajevo, that this was the last part of the journey and that we were almost there.

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November.

Hunger wreaked havoc through Sarajevo.

The approaching winter pushed streams of starving mothers and children through the tunnel, on their way to long-forgotten relatives in Europe or wherever. To the unknown. Wherever, as far away as possible.

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The tunnel was small. It smelled of earth. The smell struck me more than any sound. The dampness, the earth, the wetness, the humidity, you could definitely smell it. Maybe it was raining when I went through the tunnel, hence more water, I don't know ... And the walking, the steps – almost uniform, but not quite, of course. Some people take smaller steps, others bigger. I remember very well that I was wearing my Converse – a knock-off, of course, they weren't genuine – but they were white. I was wearing those. In the middle of the tunnel, we suddenly stopped. First somebody in front of me stopped because they didn't know what was happening. Then someone else shouted to move aside. The tunnel was a bit wider there, not much, but enough for us all to step aside. Why? A military team was carrying the wounded. They wanted to get through as fast as possible because they didn't know how many of us there were. They rushed past us to take them to Sarajevo as fast as possible. This is one of my memories. The light was dim, they bypassed us quickly, as in a flash, you could only see the bodies of the soldiers going past, really very quickly. It was a small group; they were carried past us on stretchers and then we continued on our way. That was a kind of break in our tunnel crossing. There was a pause, more silence, until they passed, and then we went on.

Coming out of the tunnel, we stepped into a trench. It must have been raining because there was an incredible amount of mud. As I walked through it, I thought to myself: "Why am I wearing these shoes? They'll get dirty ..." Things like that ... We came out of the tunnel at about half past two. And there was that guy again, the one I walked with. They put me in a military van that took a small group of soldiers over Igman to Zenica. I was also bound for Zenica, everything was organised. But now, looking back, after so many years, I wonder how come I didn't ask the guy who carried my bag what his name was.

All the sounds from the tunnel somehow ... I wouldn't say that they echoed but you felt like you were in an empty space, when in fact it was full, and the sound was absorbed. It was absorbed into our cloth, our fabrics, our garments, into the wooden construction of the tunnel. The sound of footsteps was somehow muffled by the people in the tunnel. Perhaps the echo would have been louder if only one person had walked through it. I remember the silence, nobody was crying, nobody was having a claustrophobic attack or anything like that. Everyone was quiet and hoped that they would make it through to the other side. But you couldn't tell where the safe place was. We knew they were shelling the entrance and the exit of the tunnel. So you were as safe as you could be in the tunnel ... Until you came out ... And then what? That happened, too. People stepping out of the tunnel, a grenade falling, and that was it.

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Your army mate pushed you in a squeaky trolley through the tunnel. I walked behind you, holding the hand of our elder son and carrying our younger son. He was very amused by water dripping on his head from the damp earth. After about forty minutes, we were blinded by the light at the exit of the tunnel, where a vehicle was waiting to take us to the hospital. You'll make it. You have to make it. I'll make sure of it ...

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A grenade came, the first one from this side. It fell in front of me ... And hit me in the arm and leg. That's when something happened to me. I had a feeling ... Nothing hurt, but at the same time, I had the feeling that I was going somewhere. Whoever approached me was beautiful, beautiful, beautiful.

At that moment, the improvised aerial bombs they were launching started to fall. When a bomb like that fell, the whole mountain shook.

Somehow they managed to get me out. The people who got me out carried me to the surgery section. There I was received by a surgeon who unbandaged my

wounds. I thought I was going to be left without a leg because from what I could see, it looked very bad. But he said my leg was fine.

He put on some kind of makeshift ... He immobilised my leg. He examined my arm and said: "The arm looks bad. If they operate anywhere else than in the Sarajevo orthopaedics, they will cut it off." He wrote something on a piece of paper. It said: "Dr Jarlagić". With this slip of paper, he sent me over Igman, through Hrasnica, through the tunnel ... They had to take me through the tunnel to Dobrinja Hospital. And so it was.

I was wounded at about half past five in the evening and taken to the first doctor at about eleven, twelve. So they carried me for about four, five hours to the first paramedics. Then they put me in a van and took me to the military hospital on Igman, where I was given an IV, nothing else. I was with it all the time and I held on to that piece of paper for dear life. Then they took me back to Hrasnica, put me on a drip again and took me to the tunnel. There, they put me in a makeshift wheelchair. It's in the museum here.

A little man took me through the tunnel. When you're on this trolley and you look up, you have the feeling that the metal shafts are about 20-30 centimetres above your nose. You constantly feel like you're going to hit your head or something. At one point, I really did get stuck on something with a piece of wire they used to immobilise my arm. It got stuck and it hurt a lot.

That ride through the tunnel ... It just seemed to go on and on. I'd been through the tunnel before and sometimes the water was up to my knees, dripping on me. When you walked alone it was quite different. Everything seemed much quicker, even though it should have been faster with the trolley. But you had this feeling, the sound ... The sound in the tunnel, like a tram going. And the clanging of the iron wagon against the iron rails, that's what stuck with me.

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Nearly two million tunnel crossings have been recorded. As for the amount of food, ammunition and other things, I don't think the statistics matter. What is important is that the tunnel served its purpose and that it saved and defended Sarajevo.

I think the tunnel carries the message of life and the hope it gave. For me, that's the most emotional part of its existence.

Yes, many things happened, including the massacre at the entrance to the tunnel. Many bad things happened. But I think we should focus on beautiful things in life, even at such difficult moments.

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Ismir, you have to get over the war, but you can't do it in Holland. To be happy, you have to go back, Ismir. You have to return to Sarajevo. The city is healing its war wounds, and you can move on with it, too.