DEAR UNKNOWN FRIEND,

Dear unknown friend,

Children’s Letters from Sarajevo

Selected letters from the Pen Pals for Peace Program

Open Society Fund

Dear unknown friend is a non-profit publishing venture aimed at raising public awareness about the war and ongoing conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the other republics of former Yugoslavia. Copies of this book will be distributed to schools and libraries as an educational resource and historical document.

The Pen Pals for Peace Program, which organizes correspondence between children in Sarajevo and children in the United States, is a project of the Soros Foundations’ Open Society Fund in New York and Open Society Fund of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Soros Foundations promote the creation of open societies, primarily in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, through support for education, independent media, human rights, arts and culture, and the transition to market economies.

Dragi nepoznati prijatelju,
Pisma djece iz Sarajeva

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is a collection of drawings and letters written by children living in Sarajevo during the siege of that city when its residents were under constant bombardment and sniper fire. Writing to pen pals in America, the children tell extraordinary stories about their experiences of the war amidst the ordinary preoccupations of childhood. This book is a testament to the courage of the children and their ability to cope with fear and suffering without losing their dreams of the future. Their own words, so evocative of childhood even when describing the horrors of war, are a sign of hope that the spirit of these children will survive and triumph.

Cover letter: Sejla Bajramovic

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Dear unknown friend,

Children’s Letters from Sarajevo
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Aldin Šetkić, 7
Dear unknown friend,

Children’s Letters from Sarajevo

Aldin Šetkić, 7
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Introduction
In May of 1993, when we received Soros’s urgent request for children’s letters, we were deeply involved in establishing the Soros Foundations’ Health Education Project in Central and Eastern Europe. Working with local schools in Harrisburg, which responded favorably to the idea, we were able to gather and deliver to Soros approximately 600 letters within the space of a week. George Soros did not get into Sarajevo that time, but the letters did. Despite the danger and difficulty of travel in the war zone, friends, associates, and representatives of the Soros Foundations successfully transported the letters into Sarajevo.

We did not anticipate the overwhelming reception these first letters would receive. By late August, some 400 children’s letters had made their way from the war-torn homes and basement schoolrooms of Sarajevo to our doorstep. Only a few were written in direct response to specific letters from American schoolchildren in May. Most letters were addressed “To my unknown American friend” or, more simply, “Dear unknown friend.” We distributed the letters to many of the schools that had participated earlier, with the understanding that they would write back. And thus began the formal Pen Pals for Peace Program. On September 27, 1993, approximately 1,000 “Dear friend in Bosnia and Herzegovina” letters were carried into Sarajevo. To date, more than 3,000 children in Sarajevo and the United States have participated in the program.

We also did not anticipate the impact these letters would have on our own lives. We studied the drawings and reread the letters again and again, drawn to them each time we passed the desk where they waited to be distributed. The letters demanded to be read. They need to be read. The words, so innocent yet powerful, immediately evoke the feelings of this war: horror, frustration, helplessness, and fear. At the same time we can still find among the words surprising evocations of love, humor, and hope. They are the words of children who have grown up quickly and understand the real value of childhood. Most of all, these letters are a powerful testimony to the resiliency of children. They show how the spirit copes and survives, jumping from the horrors of war into a place of peace and happiness within the space of a sentence. A heart-breaking description of a bombed-out home turns into a wish list for MTV, ice cream, and even “the normal school life,” with an outraged declaration in the margin: “I hate rice and beans!”

Some of the letters selected for this book were written in English by the children. Others were written in the native language and translated. We photographed the letters, drawings, and envelopes to share with you the actual look and feel and sound of these personal documents from the war. Read the letters in the original or the translation. Listen to these children. Feel their sense of urgency. And, through their words, may the children who have needlessly suffered and died be remembered not only in our thoughts but in our actions.

Susan Shapiro and Lisa Pilsitz
Coordinators, Pen Pals for Peace
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania
May 1994
Children imitate what grown-ups do. That is how children become grown-ups. What is more significant, they become the same as grown-ups. That is where the misery lies since most grown-ups represent a bad model, and children have no choice.

Some children imitate grown-ups by playing the game of war—even in war time. It is a frightening and appalling fact, pregnant with meanings we can never fully translate. While these children play their game of war with wooden guns, tangible death enters their world from a tangible war, a war made by grown-ups, a war in which children are victims. They do not understand the war, but they learn to imitate it.

When a child is born, it is neither a Serb nor a Croat nor a Muslim, it is not British or Russian or French, neither Christian nor Jew, neither Hindu nor Buddhist. It is yet to become any of these. Its universal human identity has yet to be hidden beneath the acquired identities of ethnicity, religion, and national politics. These acquired identities represent merely one of myriad possible ways of bringing reason into one’s life and the surrounding world.

When we manage to look through the veil of all those symbols, we always find only this and always this—a child starring at the glory and the horror of the world.

All grown-ups were children once, even the worst of criminals. It is no big thing to grow up. It is much bigger, once that happens, to find the child in ourselves again. When a grown-up truly recollects his childhood and asks himself who he was then and who he is now, he is well on the way to salvation as a human being. We believe that reading the letters collected in this book can be the starting point for this journey.

Program Officers
Pen Pals for Peace
Open Society Fund for Bosnia and Herzegovina
Sarajevo
May 1994
Daily we hear stories and see pictures of wars waged in distant places: so many dead, so many injured, so much suffering. We have become accustomed to scenes of violence on the nightly news and often watch tragedy unfold with detachment, as if viewing a movie. But when we received these letters from the children of Sarajevo, it was impossible not to be touched by their personal stories of fear and suffering, their desperate cries for peace, the bewildered child’s question, why?

The letters were written by children in the besieged city of Sarajevo to their peers in the United States as part of the Pen Pals for Peace Program. George Soros conceived the idea for the program in May of 1993 when, in making plans for going to Sarajevo, he wanted to bring the children of that city letters from kids in America. He believed that such a correspondence would be a simple, effective way of breaking the isolation in which Sarajevo’s children lived. He was right. In its own way, this small program of pen pals has had as profound an impact on life in Sarajevo as many of the Soros Foundations’ more ambitious programs of assistance.

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Program Officers
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Open Society Fund for Bosnia and Herzegovina
Sarajevo
May 1994
Abida Borovina, 13

“I like to read comics and novels. I like to play basketball and watch television. Did you hear about my country? It’s war in Sarajevo now. There are a lot of blood on street. Life is dangerous and difficult. Many young people lost the legs and arms.”
Abida Borovina, 13
“I like to read comics and novels. I like to play basketball and watch television. Did you hear about my country? It’s war in Sarajevo now. There are a lot of blood on street. Life is dangerous and difficult. Many young people lost the legs and arms.”
Dejan Davidović, 14

Dear friend,

My name is Dejan Davidović. I am 14 years old. I live in Belgrade, in the north of Serbia. I go to a school in Belgrade. Recently, my family and I have moved to a new place. I am not used to it yet.

In my country, there is no peace. We have many wars. I hope I'll see you one day, your friend,

Azra Kaldžo, 11

We want peace.
Dejan Davidović, 14

Dear friend,

My name is Dejan Davidović. I am 15 years old. It is exciting to find a friend who speaks English. I am from Serbia. I want to write to you and tell you about my life and my interests. I enjoy playing soccer and reading books. I also like to travel and see new places. I hope to hear from you soon.

Azra Kaldžo, 11

We want peace.
Elma and Nerma Klico, 13
Elma and Nerma Klico, 13
Dario Stanković, 10

“Dear unknown friends, This letter write for you boy ten years old. When I think about war in my country, it still seems to me that I am dreaming. All my life has changed. There is nothing like before. The worst is I can’t go out to play, drive bike, and walk. I don’t go to the shopping to buy bread and milk. You can’t understand that because in your country is peace. There is not peace day in my town. Killing and death is ours every day. Window from my dining room is my window on world. Every morning I look through it to see is something change. But unfortunately everything is same. I see people run street, they hiding theirselves, now they carrying water and trees. Maybe you couldn’t believe but I see bombs fly by one hill to another. It’s so hard because I think that bombs fly on innocent children. Some days I’m so unhappy because of war. Then I am crying. I want to go to Croatia to see my grandmum, but I can’t. Sarajevo is closed town. Convoys don’t go. I must wait peace. Maybe it will come once.”
Dario Stanković, 10
“Dear unknown friends, This letter write for you boy ten years old. When I think about war in my country, it still seems to me that I am dreaming. All my life has changed. There is nothing like before. The worst is I can’t go out to play, drive bike, and walk. I don’t go to the shopping to buy bread and milk. You can’t understand that because in your country is peace. There is not peace day in my town. Killing and death is ours every day. Window from my dining room is my window on world. Every morning I look through it to see is something change. But unfortunately everything is same. I see people run street, they hiding theirselves, now they carrying water and trees. Maybe you couldn’t believe but I see bombs fly by one hill to another. It’s so hard because I think that bombs fly on innocent children. Some days I’m so unhappy because of war. Then I am crying. I want to go to Croatia to see my grandmum, but I can’t. Sarajevo is closed town. Convoys don’t go. I must wait peace. Maybe it will come once.”
Dear Stranger,

I am writing this letter from Sarajevo. It's a very sad time for us here. We have been in a conflict for a long time now. The city is empty and many buildings are destroyed. I wish we could live in peace.

Peace to you and your family.

With love,
Alma Skopljak, 14
Alma Skopljak, 14
Sanja Buhić, 10
“I had the birthday. It wasn’t cakes and sweets. It was only the rice pudding on water without sugar.”

Nikica Milićević, 13
“Sarajevo was beautiful town, but now is destruction. I live in center of town and my house is destruction too. I like films, music, painting and I very like reading books. I like animals and I have six bird, one turtle and one grown-up chicken which is name Koka. Koka sometimes give us eggs and I like her very much.”
Sanja Buhić, 10
“I had the birthday. It wasn’t cakes and sweets. It was only the rice pudding on water without sugar.”

Nikica Miličević, 13
“Sarajevo was beautiful town, but now is destruction. I live in center of town and my house is destruction too. I like films, music, painting and I very like reading books. I like animals and I have six bird, one turtle and one grown-up chicken which is name Koka. Koka sometimes give us eggs and I like her very much.”
Dear Mr. President,

I am very happy because I have a chance to write to you. My name is Anisa Sokolovic, I am 15 years old. I am from Bosnia and Herzegovina. As you know, it is war in my country. It is a very terrible situation for every family in this country. Our parents and also our friends are endangered. Sarajevo was a very nice town because the war and bombing, young people too. My neighbors, friends, and I would love to talk to you and to know what you think about this war. I want you to know that we are not happy that you are fighting. We want you to understand that we are not asking for your money, we are asking you to help us because we are dying. We want your help, we want peace. We don't want to die. Please give us peace.

Sincerely,
Anisa Sokolovic
15 years old
Anisa Sokolović, 15
Edina Karadžić, 14

“Children of Sarajevo can’t go outside, because they are afraid. Each and every day we are listening to music of shooting. We are just like you. We like sweets, chocolate and ice creams, but now we don’t have it.”
Edina Karadžić, 14

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Elma Softić, 9
“I want to go on a picnic, but I must go in cellar.”

Adis Kečo, 8
Elma Softić, 9
“I want to go on a picnic, but I must go in cellar.”

Adis Kečo, 8
Edita Gakić, 12

“I like music, specially Guns ‘n’ Roses, Skid Row, Bon Jovi, Prince, Nirvana, Ramones, and many others. Now I can not listen music (haven’t current) but we are playing music, we have guitars and every evening in the shelter we are singing, sing about peace. One beautiful day everything will only be bad sleep and bad remembers. I hope and I fight for love. Bad men hate us and kill us, destroy our home and our life, for what?

I am only 12 years old and I don’t want to die!”
Edita Gakić, 12

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I am only 12 years old and I don’t want to die!”
Worst things are happening, which you couldn’t imagine, there in the paradise you don’t know how difficult is to listen children who cry while watching severing parts of their body.”

There is a lot of bombing in Sarajevo. We are spending our days in our cellars. Last year I was courageous in the moment and went out, in my courtyard. My parents thought that was the safe place. The bomb fell down right on that place. I was wounded. I stayed in the hospital for 45 days. Now, I feel better, but from that day until now I stay at home.”
Aida Puzić, 15
“Worst things are happening, which you couldn’t imagine, there in the paradise you don’t know how difficult is to listen children who cry while watching severing parts of their body.”

Vedrana Lukačević, 13
“There is a lot of bombing in Sarajevo. We are spending our days in our cellars. Last year I was courageous in the moment and went out, in my courtyard. My parents thought that was the safe place. The bomb fell down right on that place. I was wounded. I stayed in the hospital for 45 days. Now, I feel better, but from that day until now I stay at home.”
Aida Duraković, 10
Damir Suljagić, 12

“Now we don’t have tennis and football playgrounds because they are turned into cemetery.”
“Now we don’t have tennis and football playgrounds because they are turned into cemetary.”

Damir Suljagić, 12
Dženana Ortaš, 15
“...The bombs are falling all over. Sarajevo is a very pretty city but now it is much burning and broken. Every day it is terrible and really hard, and every day everything is difficult. There is a really hell. In a few days I’ll finish the eighth class. I haven’t my father. He was a soldier and he is killed by the bombs. He was fighting for the freedom and liberty of our country.”

Suada Rašidagić, 10
“My daddy was wounded by a sniper. The doctors couldn’t save his life.”
Dženanana Ortas, 15
“The bombs are falling all over. Sarajevo is a very pretty city but now it is much burning and broken. Every day it is terrible and really hard, and every day everything is difficult. There is a really hell. In a few days I’ll finish the eighth class. I haven’t my father. He was a soldier and he is killed by the bombs. He was fighting for the freedom and liberty of our country.”

Suada Rašidagić, 10
“My daddy was wounded by a sniper. The doctors couldn’t save his life.”
Vedad Špuren, 12
Vedad Špuren, 12
Melika Arnautović, 13

“I am often very sad and I would like to leave off this war area. I would like to run off from all that is happening here. Many children of my ages are killed or they are now invalids. Nobody can help them ever. I have been living in the besieged town for more than 14 months. I am refugee in my native town. As there is no electricity, we have to have wood to prepare some food, but unfortunately there is no wood. We are expecting the coming winter with a great fear deep in our hearts. We are, also, completely uncertain what will happen with all of us.”
Melika Arnautović, 13
“I am often very sad and I would like to leave off this war area. I would like to run off from all that is happening here. Many children of my ages are killed or they are now invalids. Nobody can help them ever. I have been living in the besieged town for more than 14 months. I am refugee in my native town. As there is no electricity, we have to have wood to prepare some food, but unfortunately there is no wood. We are expecting the coming winter with a great fear deep in our hearts. We are, also, completely uncertain what will happen with all of us.”
Vladimir Rajić, 9

“I think only about shooting and dreams about peace.”
Vladimir Rajić, 9
“...I think only about shooting and dreams about peace.”
Anja Krumić

“My soul is full of pain, and I must to open it. My father and brother are in the army now, my mother works every day, and now, I just have this paper and you, to write you about good and bad things…. In this destroyed, blockaded city, people go to job, children go to war school, and that is only chance to meet friends and have a good time. Sometimes, if it is a quiet day, we go out to breathe fresh air. Sometimes we even laugh.”

Sanja Jovanović, 15

“I want so much to meet a new friend.”
Anja Krunic
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Sanja Jovanovic, 15
“I want so much to meet a new friend.”
Cherished memories from Amila and Jasna Strik

Amila Strik, 12

Your love was like a warm embrace, always ready to comfort me in times of need. I miss the days when we would sit under the cherry tree and share our secrets. Your laughter was the sweetest melody that filled our home with joy. I wish we could relive those days together.

Jasna Strik, 9

My dear friend Amila, I am sending you this letter to share some wonderful memories from our childhood. Remember the day we built a fort in the backyard using old blankets and cardboard boxes? We spent hours there, pretending to be knights and princesses. I hope those happy moments bring a smile to your face.

Amila, let's make a plan to meet soon. I have a special surprise for you. I can't wait to share it with you. Until then, take care of yourself and remember always to be kind.

Best wishes,

Your friend,

Jasna
Nerma Osmanagić, 13

“I want peace. I want the shells do not fall on my city. I want that the peoples not perish on the street. I want a lot of things that now haven’t. I want to play again.”
Nerma Osmanagić, 13
“I want peace. I want the shells do not fall on my city. I want that the peoples not perish on the street. I want a lot of things that now haven’t. I want to play again.”
"My town is in the center of the most terrible war in the world. You live in peace. Lucky you! One day I shall live in peace again."

Dario Kavčić, 8
“My town is in the center of the most terrible war in the world. You live in peace. Lucky you! One day I shall live in peace again.”

Dario Kavčić, 8
Nadja Kazić, 11

Emily Piltsitz, 11
Dear [Name],

I am writing to you because I want to share my thoughts and feelings with you. I hope that you will be able to understand me.

I have been thinking about the world and all the people in it. I want to make the world a better place for everyone. I believe that if we all work together, we can achieve this goal.

I want to do something to help. I think that the most important thing we can do is to show kindness and compassion to each other. We should try to understand each other and respect our differences.

I believe that we can make a difference. Even small actions can have a big impact. I will try to be kind to everyone I meet and to make a positive difference in every situation.

I hope that you will also be able to do something to help. Together, we can make the world a better place.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]
Alma Jahić, 8

“To a girl who knows nothing about war...This evil around us will disappear some day and we shall again go to excursions and seaside. We just have to be patient. On a nice sunny day the life in our town will come back to normal. All children will then come out in the streets to greet the peace and will help grown-ups to restore our town. When you hear on your TV that peace has come back here, please write me a letter and let me know when you can come and visit me to see how nice is my Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

Ena Omeragić, 9
Alma Jahić, 8

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Ena Omeragić, 9
Anesa Bičakčić, 13
“I can’t write you anymore, because I don’t have a light.”
Anesa Bičakčić, 13
“I can’t write you anymore, because I don’t have a light.”

Names

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Acknowledgements

We wish to thank all the schoolchildren and teachers in Sarajevo and the United States who participated in the Pen Pals for Peace Program and all the people who carried letters to and from Sarajevo.

The letters and drawings in this book are reprinted with the permission of the Pen Pals for Peace Program. Individual permission was requested from the families of the children whose letters were selected, but because of the circumstances of the war contact was not possible in all instances.

For more information about the Pen Pals program, contact: Pen Pals for Peace Program, Open Society Fund, 388 Seventh Avenue, New York, New York 10106.

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Set in Bodoni
Printed on Finch Opaque Bright White
Dear  [name],

I hope this finds you well.

I'm sending you this letter as a reminder that I love you. You are always on my mind, and I miss you.

Please write back to me soon.

With all my love,
[Your name]
Introduction
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The Soros Foundations promote the creation of open societies, primarily in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, through support for education, independent media, human rights, arts and culture, and the transition to market economies.

Selected letters from the Pen Pals for Peace Program

Dragi nepoznati prijatelju,  
Pisma djece iz Sarajeva  
Children’s Letters from Sarajevo

Dear unknown friend is a collection of drawings and letters written by children living in Sarajevo during the siege of that city when its residents were under a constant bombardment and sniper fire. Writing to pen pals in America, the children tell extraordinary stories about their experiences of the war amidst the ordinary preoccupations of childhood. This book is a testament to the courage of the children and their ability to cope with fear and suffering without losing their dreams of the future. Their own words, so evocative of childhood even when describing the horrors of war, are a sign of hope that the spirit of these children will survive and triumph.

Cover letters: Sejla Bajramovic

Copies of this book will be distributed to schools and libraries as an educational resource and historical document.