

# Dear unknown friend,

## Children's Letters from Sarajevo

Selected letters from the Pen Pals for Peace Program

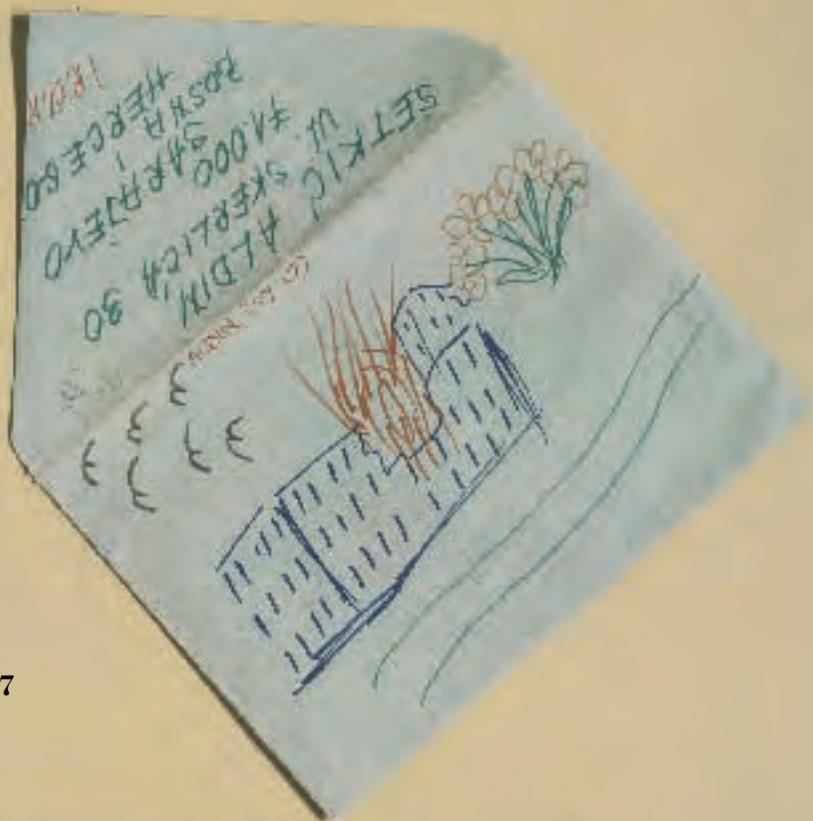
*Dear unknown friend* is a collection of drawings and letters written by children living in Sarajevo during the siege of that city when its residents were under constant bombardment and sniper fire. Writing to pen pals in America, the children tell extraordinary stories about their experiences of the 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: Šejla Bajramović

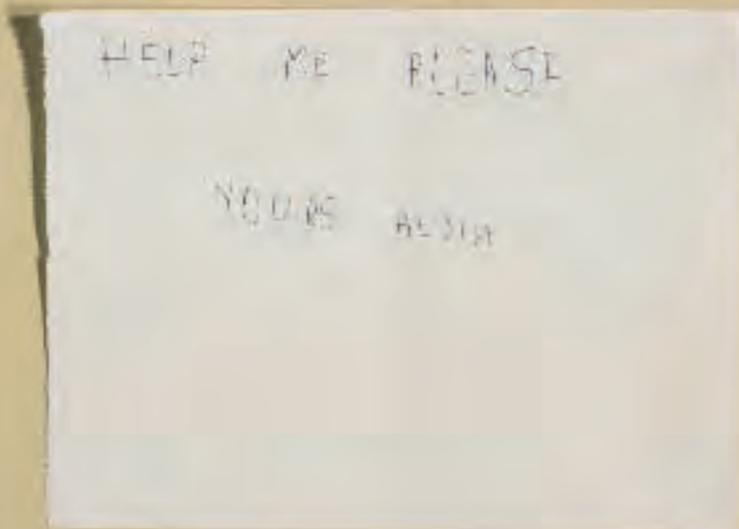




**Dear unknown friend,**  
**Children's Letters from Sarajevo**



Aldin Šetkić, 7



**Dear unknown friend,**  
**Children's Letters from Sarajevo**

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First Edition

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# **Introduction**

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 staring 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.

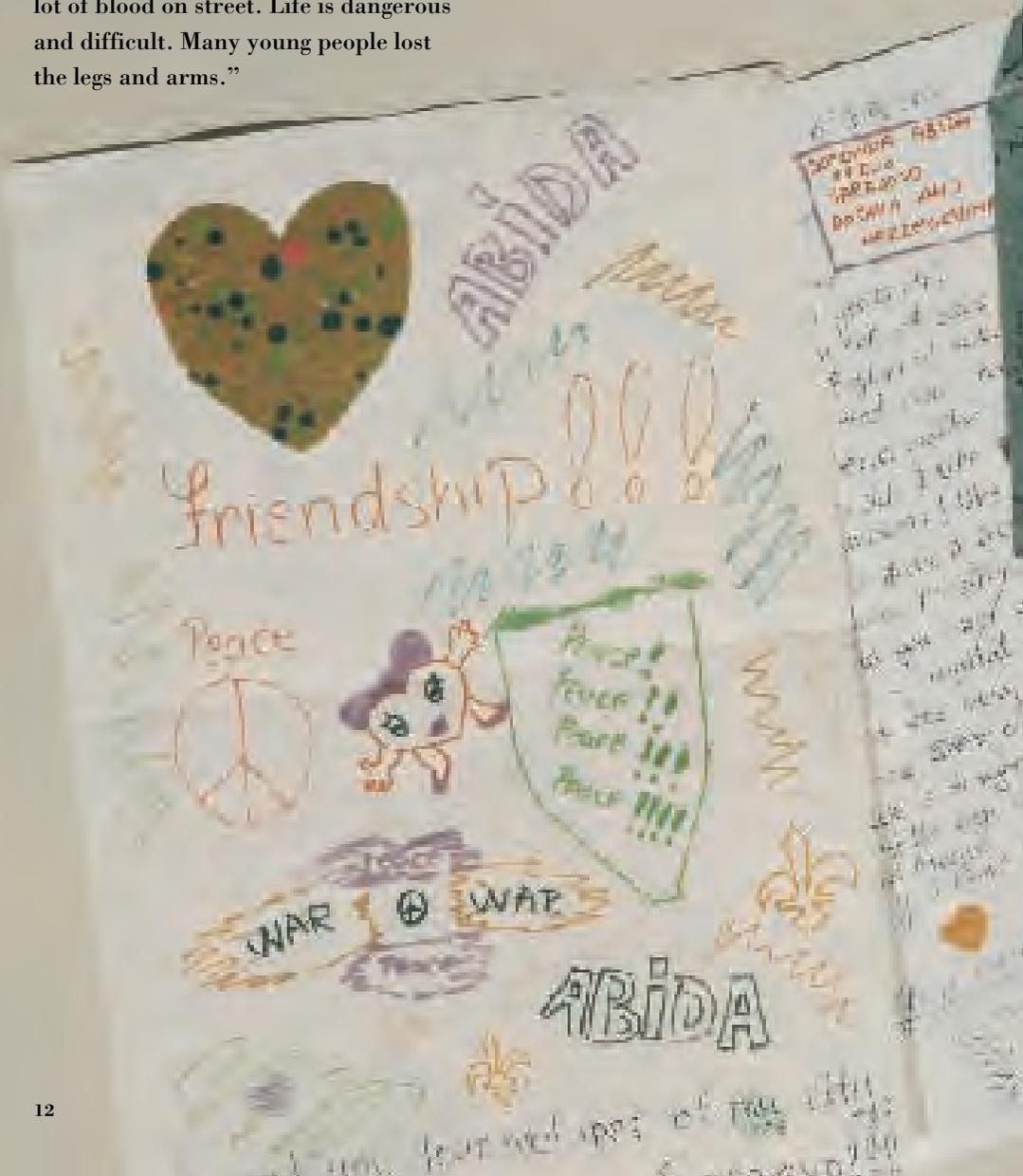
In May of 1993, when we received Soros's urgent request for children's letters, we were deeply involved in establishing the Soros Foundations' Health Education Project in Central and Eastern Europe. Working with local schools in Harrisburg, which responded favorably to the idea, we were able to gather 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

## **Letters**

**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.”









**Azra Kaldžo, 11**



Elma and Nerma Klico, 13



Handwritten text on a separate piece of paper, partially visible on the right edge of the page. The text is mostly illegible due to blurring and being cut off.



# AMERICAN



ADNAN OMEROVIC  
10



BENNY AND CHERY



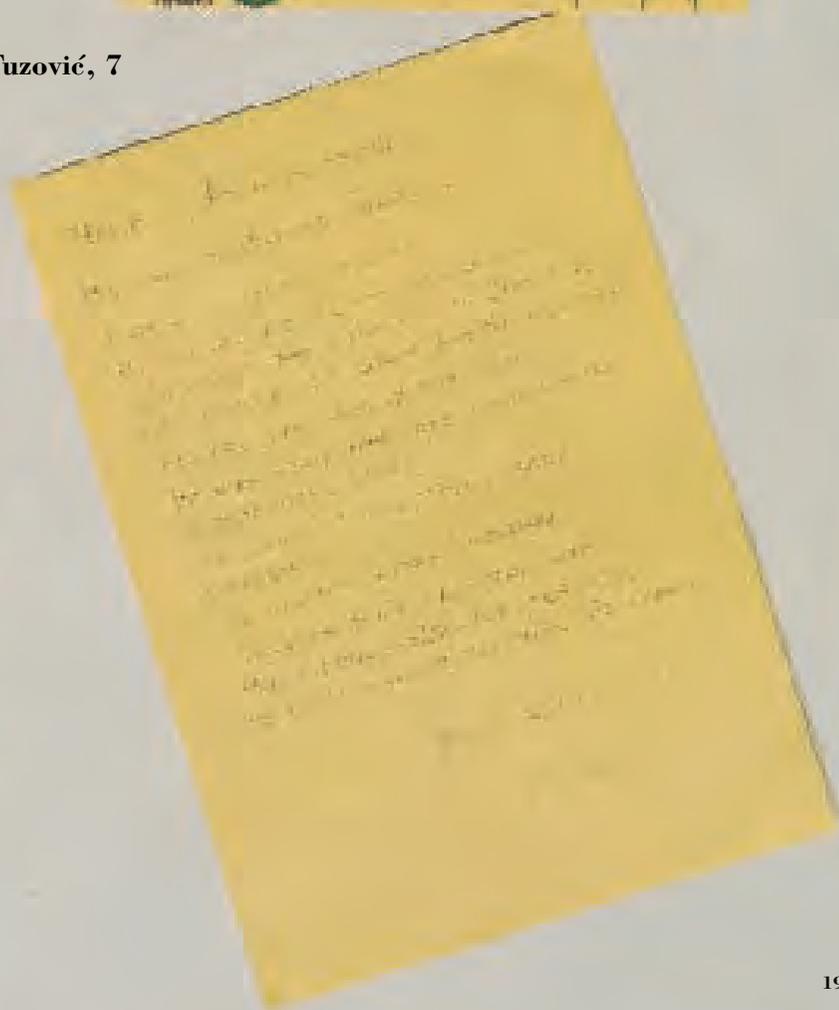
B

H

Adnan Omerović, 10



Mirela Tuzović, 7



**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 themselves, 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.”





# WELCOME TO SARAJEVO

10.1.1992

Dear General Pinochet,

I am writing this letter to you  
to say how much I am pleased to hear  
that you are coming to Sarajevo  
and how much I hope that you will  
enjoy your stay in the city.  
I am sure that you will find  
the people of Sarajevo very  
friendly and that you will  
have a very good time.  
I am sure that you will  
enjoy your stay in the city.  
I am sure that you will  
have a very good time.  
I am sure that you will  
enjoy your stay in the city.  
I am sure that you will  
have a very good time.

With love and  
affection to all

your good friend  
Enrica



FOR  
PEACE

Please

Alma Skopljak, 14

Bosnia - Herzegovina



Sarajevo

Peace in Bosnia  
Sarajevo

WORLD

of love:

Love is the best  
thing in the world  
and it's free  
Music

LOVE



LOVE

PEACE



with computers

LOVE



of love



LOVE FOR

you  
don't  
forget

LOVE

PEACE



Faded handwritten text in a foreign language, possibly Cyrillic, covering the top left portion of the page. The text is mostly illegible due to fading and the presence of tape.



Faded handwritten text in a foreign language, possibly Cyrillic, covering the bottom right portion of the page. The text is mostly illegible due to fading.

**Sanja Buhic, 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.”



2004/05

WELL, MY ORIGINAL NAME  
 IS VERY RARE BECAUSE I HAVE  
 A CHANCE TO HAVE TO GO MY  
 NAME IN SOME DOCUMENTS IN  
 A GILL AND I'M IN STAFF  
 OLD. FOR 20 DAYS I'VE BEEN  
 THE SPANISH SCHOOL AND I'M  
 WORKING HARD. I LIVE IN SARAJEVO  
 WHICH IS THE CAPITAL OF YUGOSLAVIA  
 REPUBLIC BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA.  
 AS YOU KNOW IT IS WAR IN  
 MY COUNTRY. IT IS A VERY TERRIBLE  
 SITUATION FOR EVERYBODY IN  
 THIS COUNTRY. MY BEAUTIFUL COUNTRYSIDE  
 WAS A VERY BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY  
 BEFORE THE WAR AND TOWN OF  
 YOUNG PEOPLE AND MANY  
 TOURISTS CAME HERE TO  
 SEE IT. NOWHERE'S  
 NOTHING, NOTHING AND  
 OTHER SIDE OF THE WAR.  
 LAST YEAR IS THE WORST

WELL, IN MY TOWN AND THE  
 REASON. MY FATHER IS IN THE  
 ARMY AND HE'S VERY AFRAID TO  
 GO TO WORK. I DON'T SEE  
 HIM FOR 20 DAYS. THAT'S  
 TERRIBLE. I'M VERY UNHAPPY.  
 WE DON'T HAVE ANY ELECTRICITY  
 AND WATER AND GAS. I DON'T  
 KNOW WHAT MEANS LISTENING TO SOME  
 MUSIC AND LISTENING TO SOME  
 GOOD FRIENDS. I AM A GIRL  
 YOU KNOW. I DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH  
 YOU ARE HAPPY. ARE YOU  
 GIVE ME PLEASE. I WANT YOU  
 UNHAPPY TO ME AND I KNOW  
 YOU'RE HAPPY AND MY FATHER  
 THE POLICE, ARMY, SOLDIERS  
 ARE KILLING YOUNG PEOPLE,  
 CHILDREN, WOMEN, THOSE  
 FLORIDA DON'T HAVE  
 HEART. THEY ARE LIKE  
 WILD ANIMALS.

THIS IS A LINE FOR  
 TRANSLATING  
 IN ENGLISH  
 I DON'T KNOW  
 I WANT TO  
 WRITE ABOUT THE  
 WAR IN BOSNIA  
 AND HERZEGOVINA



PLEASE WRITE ME AT ONCE  
I'M ON  
MILITARY SERVICE  
PLEASE

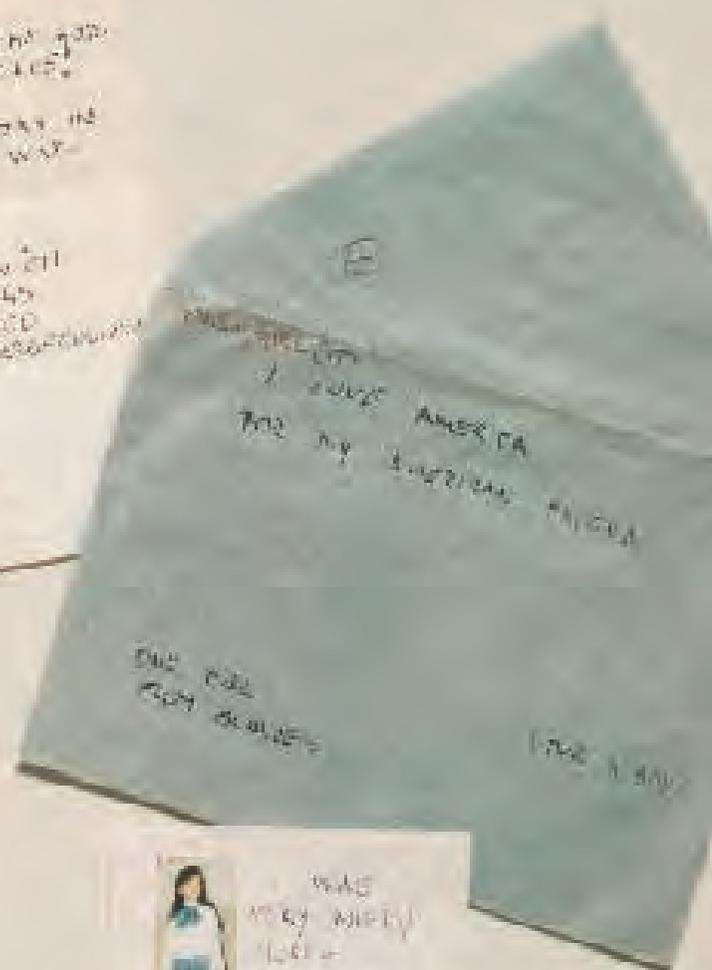
IF THE NAME OF THE  
GUY IS  
TOMMY

PLEASE WRITE TO THE  
ADDRESS BELOW

NY ADDRESS IS:

1000 AVENUE  
NEW YORK NY 10018  
PHONE 212 45  
STONY BROOK  
LONG BEACH

PLEASE WRITE  
TO THE  
ADDRESS



PLEASE  
WRITE  
TO  
THE  
ADDRESS  
BELOW  
IF  
YOU  
KNOW  
THE  
NAME  
OF  
THE  
GUY  
PLEASE  
WRITE  
TO  
THE  
ADDRESS  
BELOW



**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.”

Dear ...

For ...  
I ...  
I ...  
I ...  
I ...



For ...  
I ...  
I ...

Peace



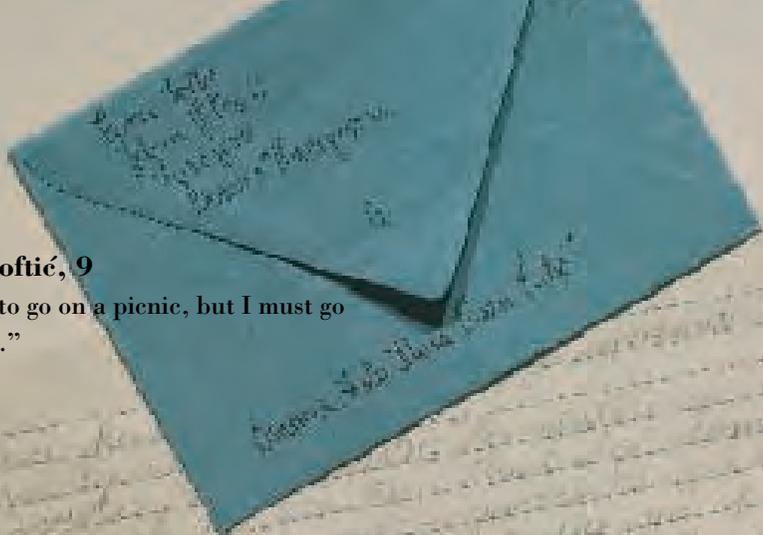
We are ...

Peace and ...  
I ...  
I ...



**Elma Softić, 9**

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



Kato...  
 ...  
 ...  
 ...  
 ...  
 ...



Adis Kečo, 8

GAMBAR, 14 July 50

TO MY UNKNOWN FRIEND!

HI, I AM A GIRL FROM MY SURNAME IS GARDI. I DON'T  
KNOW YOU, BUT I WANT TO WRITE YOU ABOUT MY TOOLS  
AND SOMETHING ABOUT ME. I AM INTERESTED AND I WANT  
TO KNOW HOW YOU ARE. I AM INTERESTED IN YOUR  
LIFE AND I WANT TO KNOW HOW YOU ARE. I AM INTERESTED  
IN YOUR LIFE AND I WANT TO KNOW HOW YOU ARE. I AM  
INTERESTED IN YOUR LIFE AND I WANT TO KNOW HOW YOU  
ARE. I AM INTERESTED IN YOUR LIFE AND I WANT TO  
KNOW HOW YOU ARE. I AM INTERESTED IN YOUR LIFE  
AND I WANT TO KNOW HOW YOU ARE. I AM INTERESTED  
IN YOUR LIFE AND I WANT TO KNOW HOW YOU ARE.

I HAVE MANY FRIENDS IN MY  
CITY: ANSOLA, ERWAN, AND  
ROBERT, ANEKA AND  
TOGETHER, WE ARE  
VERY HAPPY AND  
I LIKE MUSIC.  
NOW, PLEASE  
ADERS NOW  
BUT, WE ARE  
EVERY EVENING  
SING ABOUT

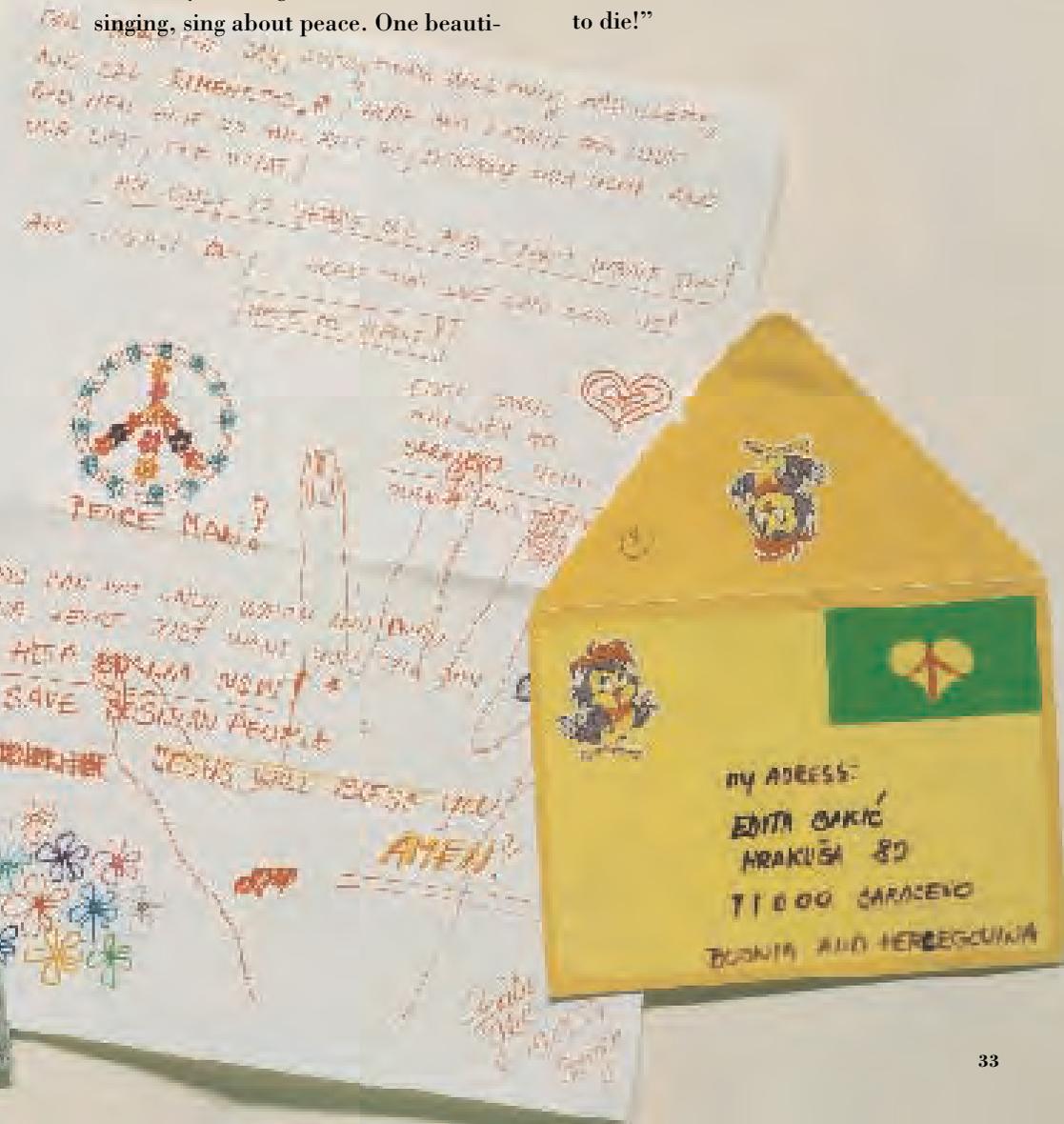


**Edita Gakić, 12**

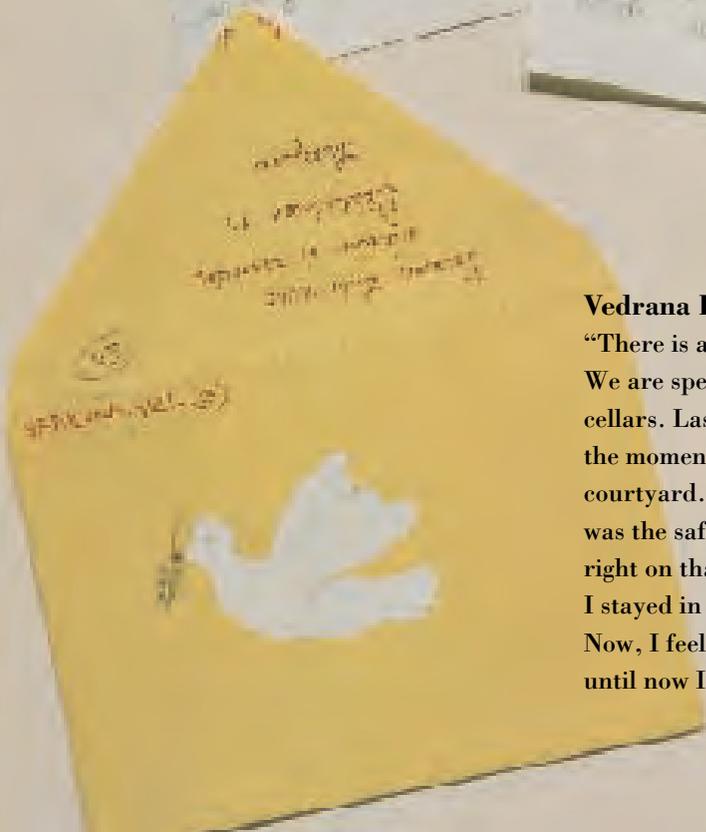
“I like music, specially Guns ‘n’ Roses, Skid Row, Bon Jovi, Prince, Nirvana, Ramones, and many others. Now I can not listen music (haven’t current) but we are playing music, we have guitars and every evening in the shelter we are singing, sing about peace. One beauti-

ful 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!”



*[Faded handwritten text on a piece of paper, likely a letter or document.]*



**Vedrana Lukačević, 13**

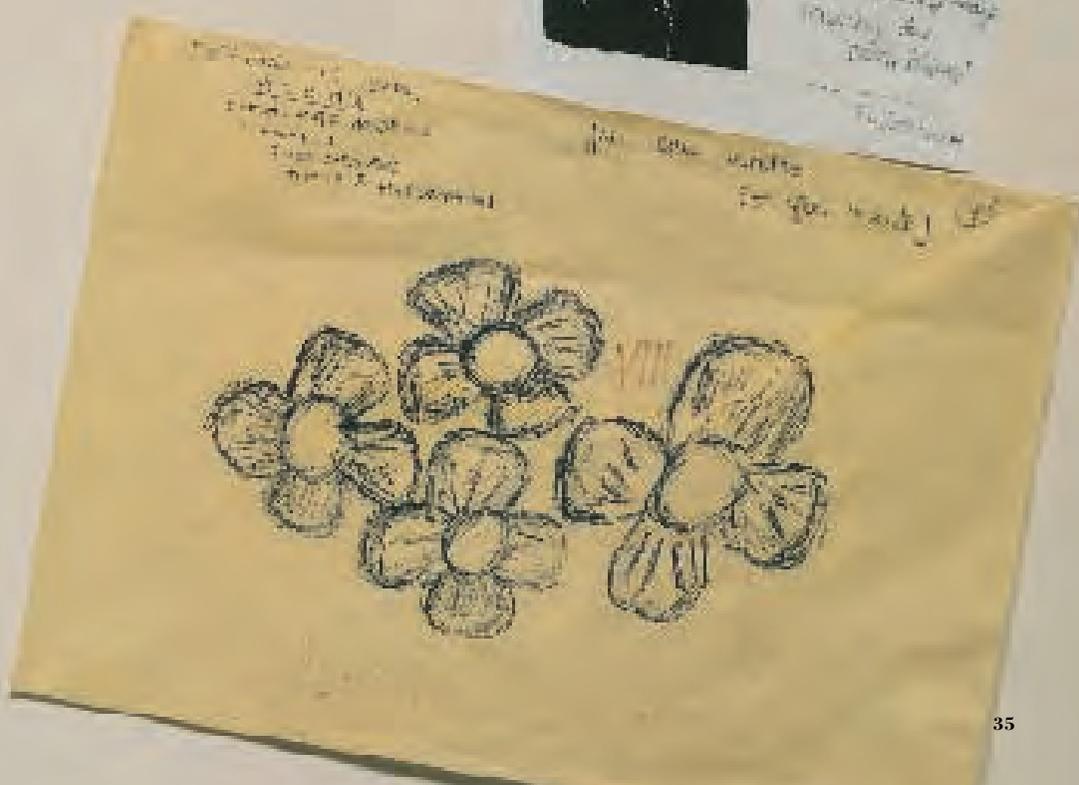
“There is a lot of bombing in Sarajevo. We are spending our days in our cellars. Last year I was courageous in the moment and went out, in my courtyard. My parents thought that was the safe place. The bomb fell down right on that place. I was wounded. I stayed in the hospital for 45 days. Now, I feel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

**Aida Puzić, 15**

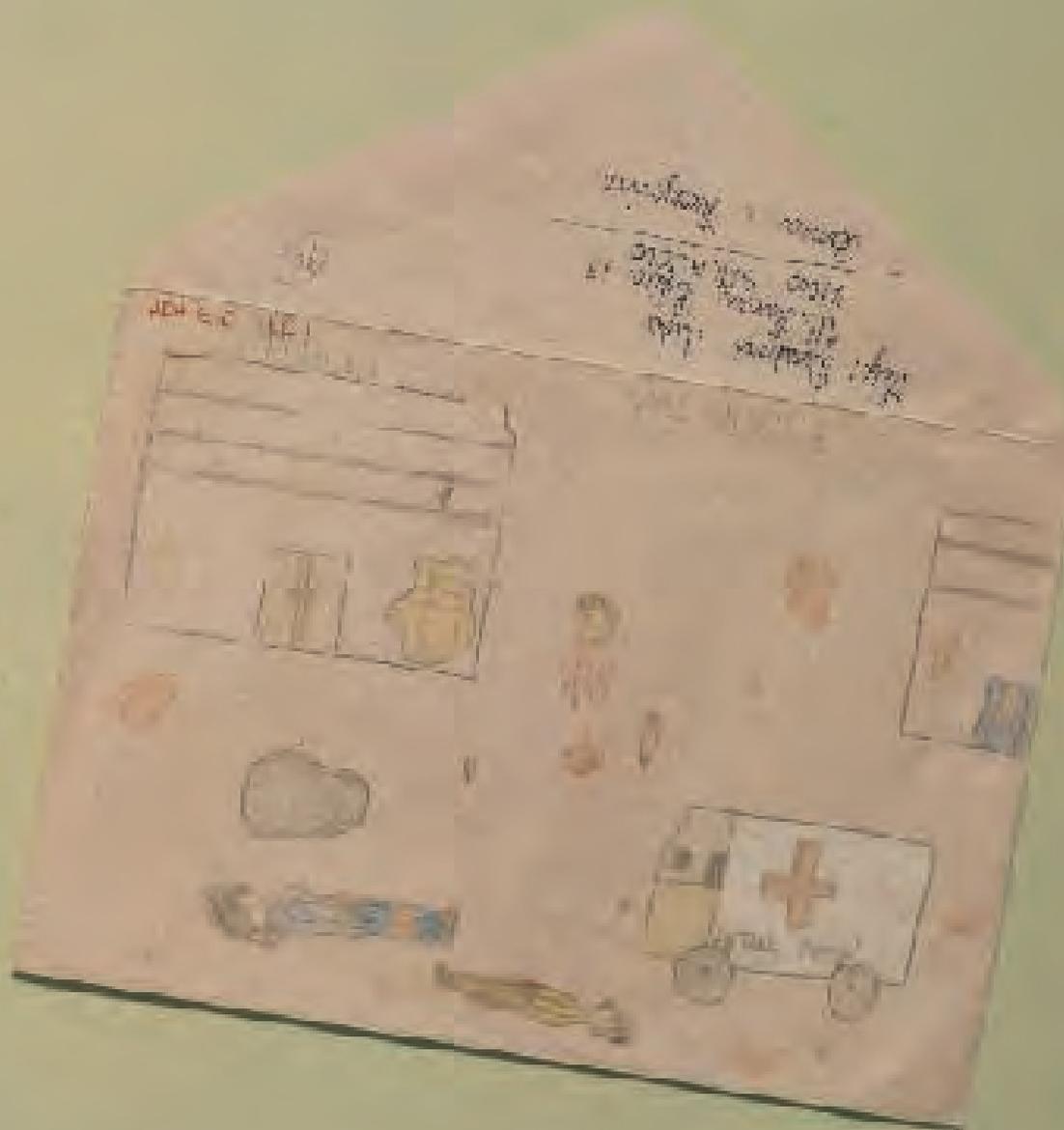
“Worst things are happening, which you couldn’t imagine, there in the paradise you don’t know how difficult is to listen children who cry while watching severing parts of their body.”



*[Faint, illegible handwritten text in a non-Latin script, possibly Cyrillic, covering the top right portion of the page.]*

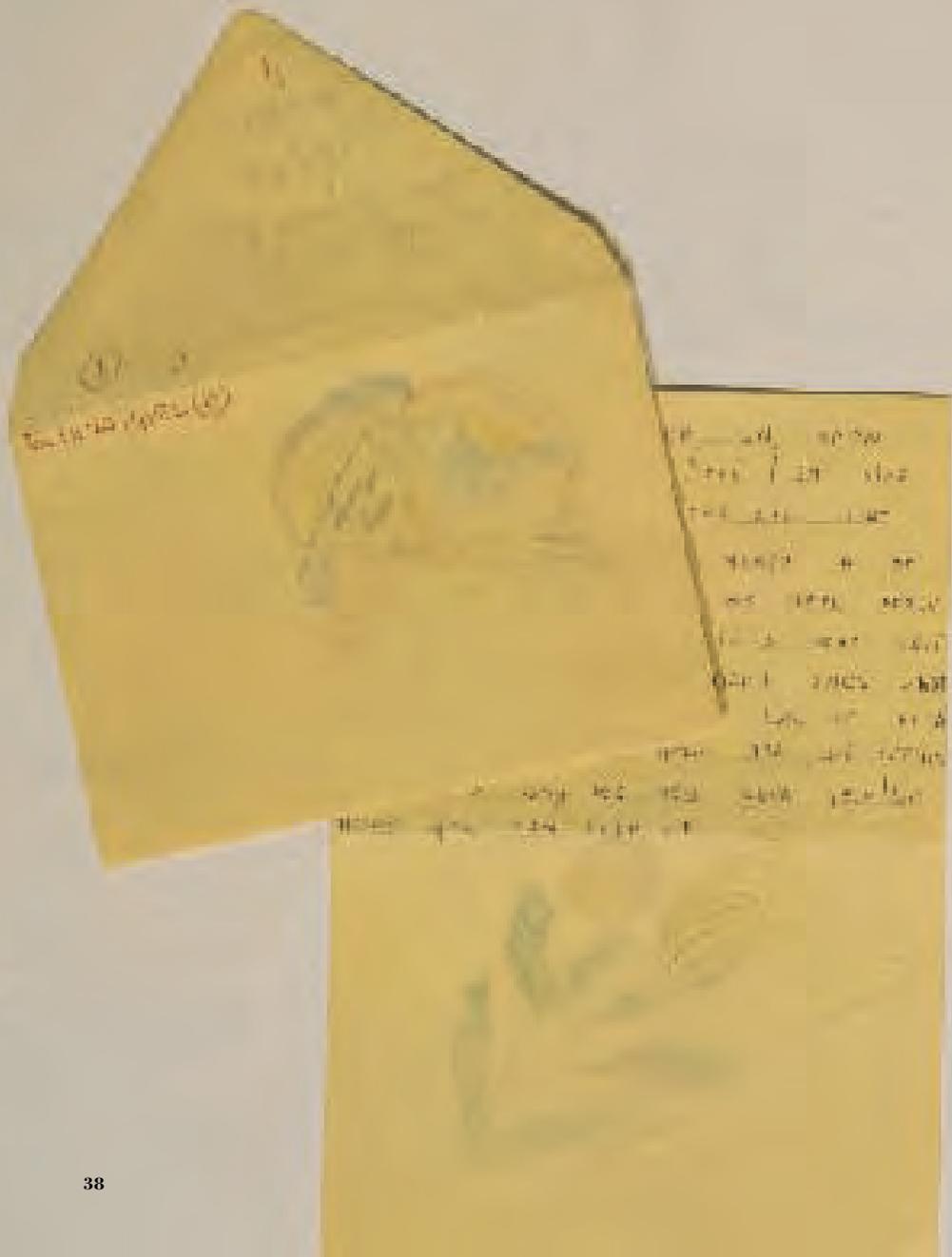






Handwritten notes in the top right corner of the sketch, including the word 'AMBULANCE' and other illegible scribbles.

Handwritten text in the top left corner of the sketch, possibly 'AMBULANCE' or similar.





**Damir Suljagić, 12**

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

**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.”







well casual



WAKE  
... ..  
... ..



well casual



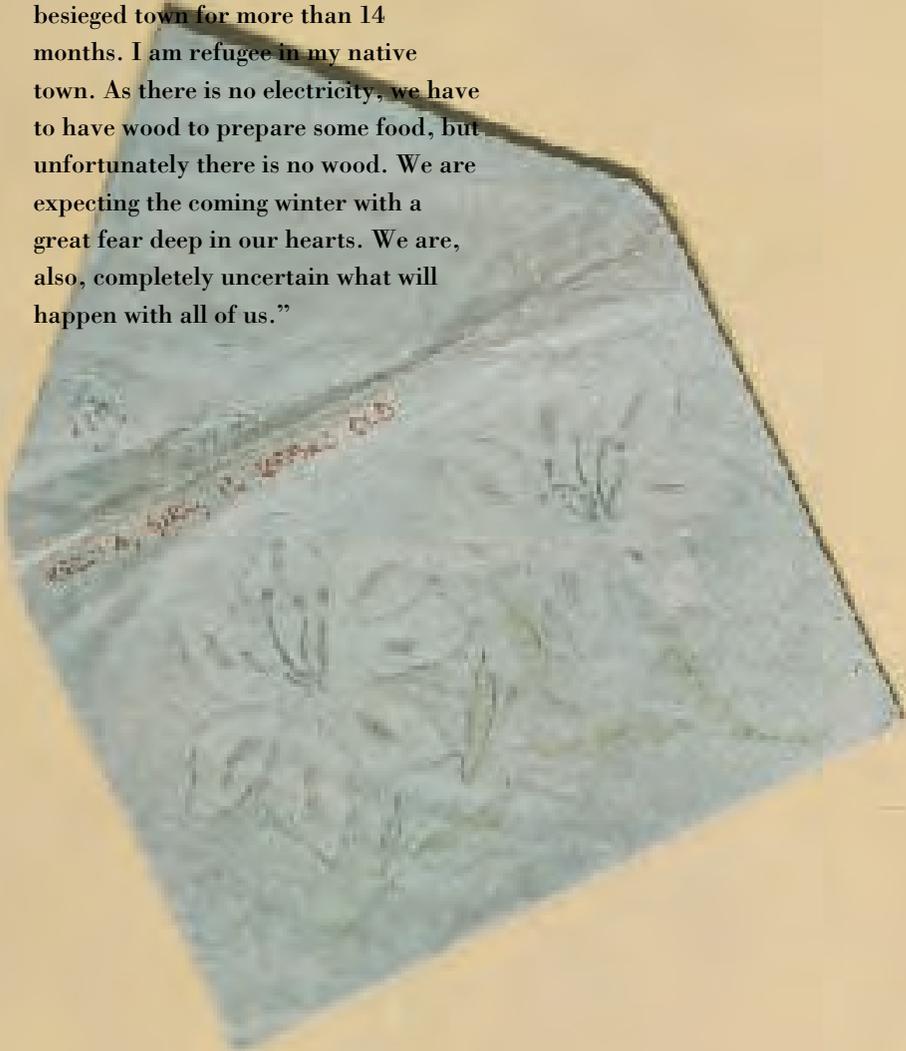
well casual

well casual



**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.”



My dear father,

I'm still here, but I'm very  
tired, I'm kind of like you.

We did not sleep, we were so  
tired we could not sleep. I  
was out of the house, I was  
out of the house, I was out of  
the house. I was out of the  
house, I was out of the house.  
I was out of the house, I was  
out of the house. I was out of  
the house, I was out of the  
house.

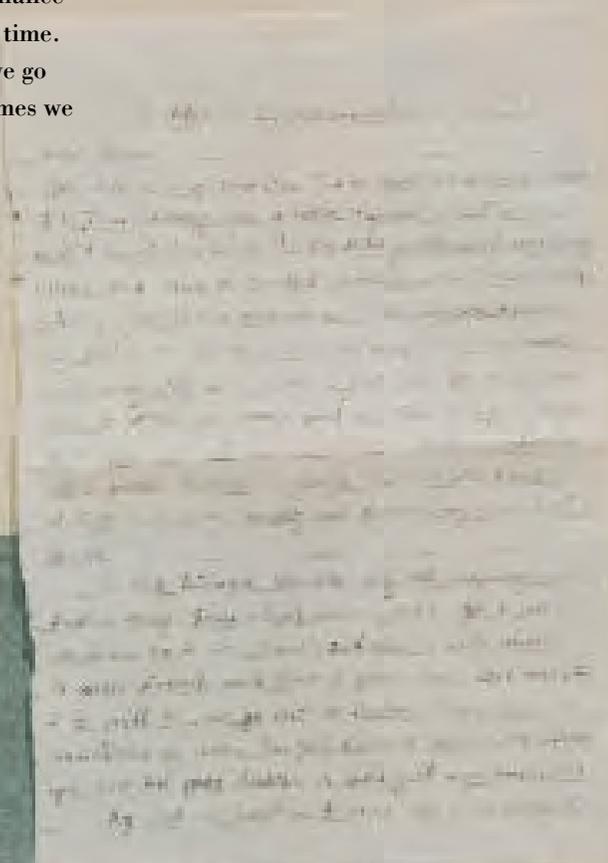
Love  
Dad



My dear father,  
I'm still here, but I'm very  
tired, I'm kind of like you.  
We did not sleep, we were so  
tired we could not sleep. I  
was out of the house, I was  
out of the house, I was out of  
the house. I was out of the  
house, I was out of the house.  
I was out of the house, I was  
out of the house. I was out of  
the house, I was out of the  
house.

**Anja Krunic**

“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.”



The image shows a handwritten letter on lined paper, which is partially covered by a green envelope. The handwriting is in a cursive script, likely from a non-English speaking country. The letter is written on a piece of paper with horizontal lines. The envelope is a dark green color and is positioned in the lower-left corner of the frame, with its flap pointing towards the top-left. The background is a plain, light-colored surface.

Handwritten text at the top of the page, including a date and possibly a name.

First paragraph of handwritten text, starting with "I want to meet a new friend..."

Second paragraph of handwritten text.

Third paragraph of handwritten text.

Fourth paragraph of handwritten text.

Fifth paragraph of handwritten text.

Sixth paragraph of handwritten text.

Handwritten text at the bottom left of the page.



**Sanja Jovanović, 15**  
"I want so much to meet a new friend."

I have decided to make  
 a book for my mother and  
 father. I will write in it  
 all the things that I love  
 about them. I will also  
 write about the things that  
 we have done together.  
 I will also write about  
 the things that I have  
 learned from them.



I will also write about  
 the things that I have  
 learned from them. I will  
 also write about the things  
 that we have done together.  
 I will also write about  
 the things that I love  
 about them.

I will also write about  
 the things that I have  
 learned from them. I will  
 also write about the things  
 that we have done together.  
 I will also write about  
 the things that I love  
 about them.

My mother is  
 my favorite  
 person in the world.  
 She is the best  
 person I know.



Jasna Strik, 9



DEAR MAMA AND DADA

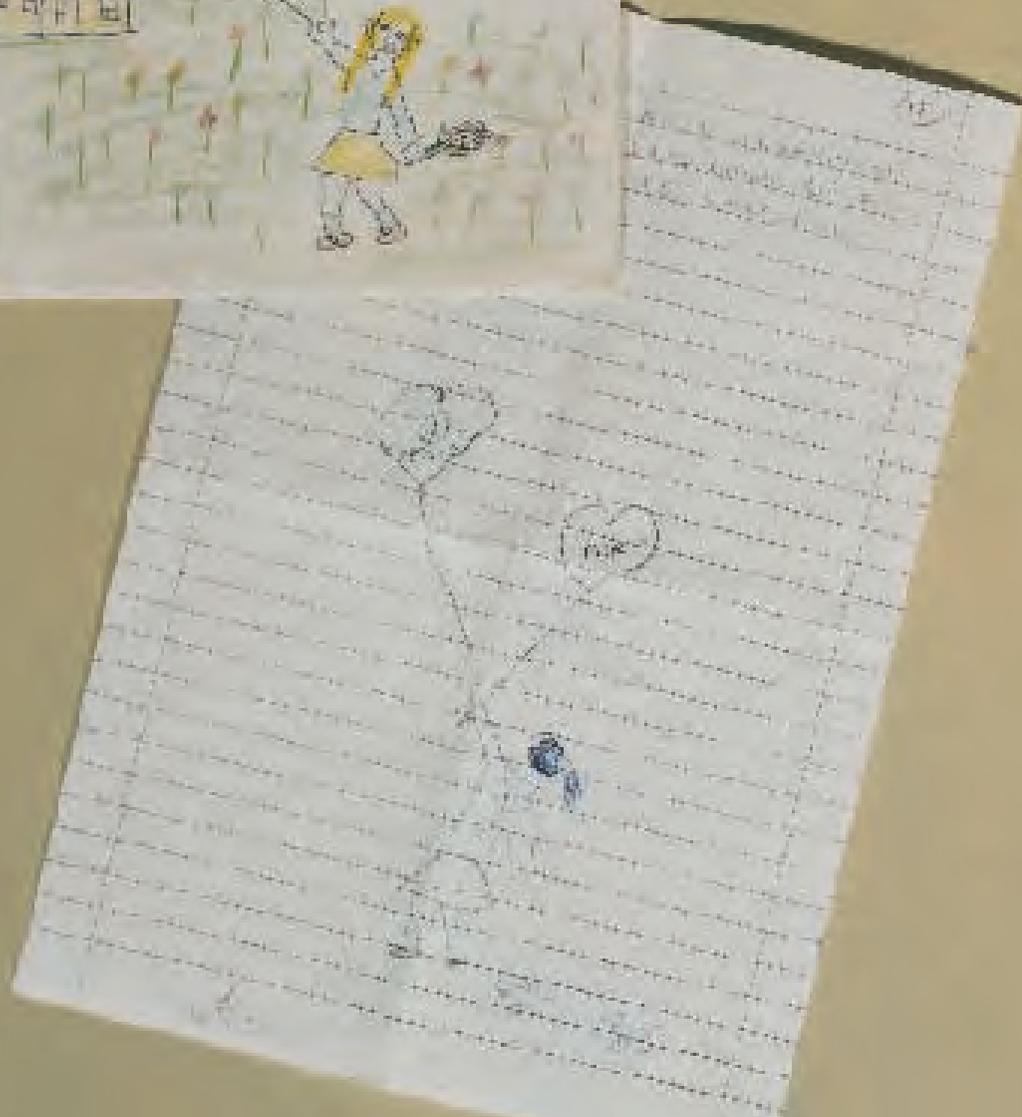
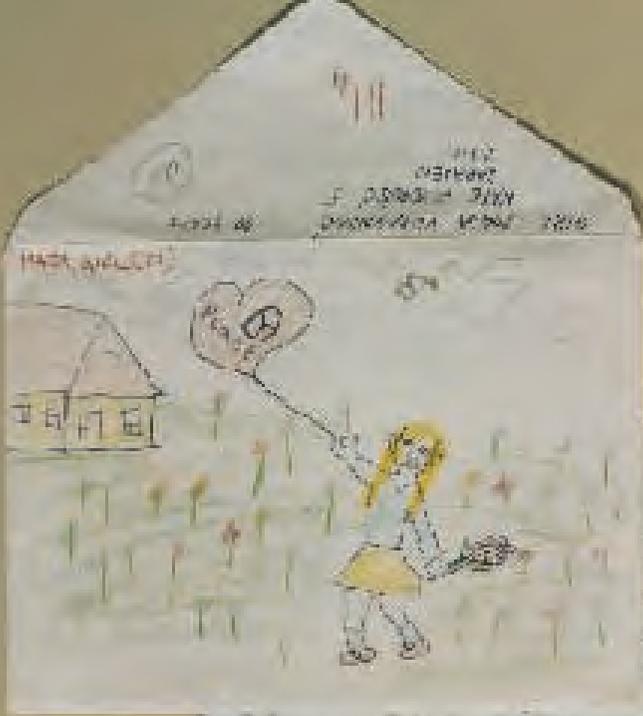
MY NAME IS JASNA STRIK. I AM A GIRL 9 YEARS  
 OLD. I LIVE IN A VILLAGE IN THE MOUNTAINS.  
 MY VILLAGE IS VERY BEAUTIFUL AND I LOVE  
 IT. I HAVE MANY FRIENDS AND I AM HAPPY.  
 I AM GOING TO SCHOOL AND I LIKE IT.  
 I AM WRITING TO YOU TO LET YOU KNOW  
 HOW I AM. I AM HAPPY AND I LOVE YOU.  
 I AM GOING TO VISIT YOU SOON.  
 I AM WRITING TO YOU TO LET YOU KNOW  
 HOW I AM. I AM HAPPY AND I LOVE YOU.  
 I AM GOING TO VISIT YOU SOON.  
 I AM WRITING TO YOU TO LET YOU KNOW  
 HOW I AM. I AM HAPPY AND I LOVE YOU.  
 I AM GOING TO VISIT YOU SOON.

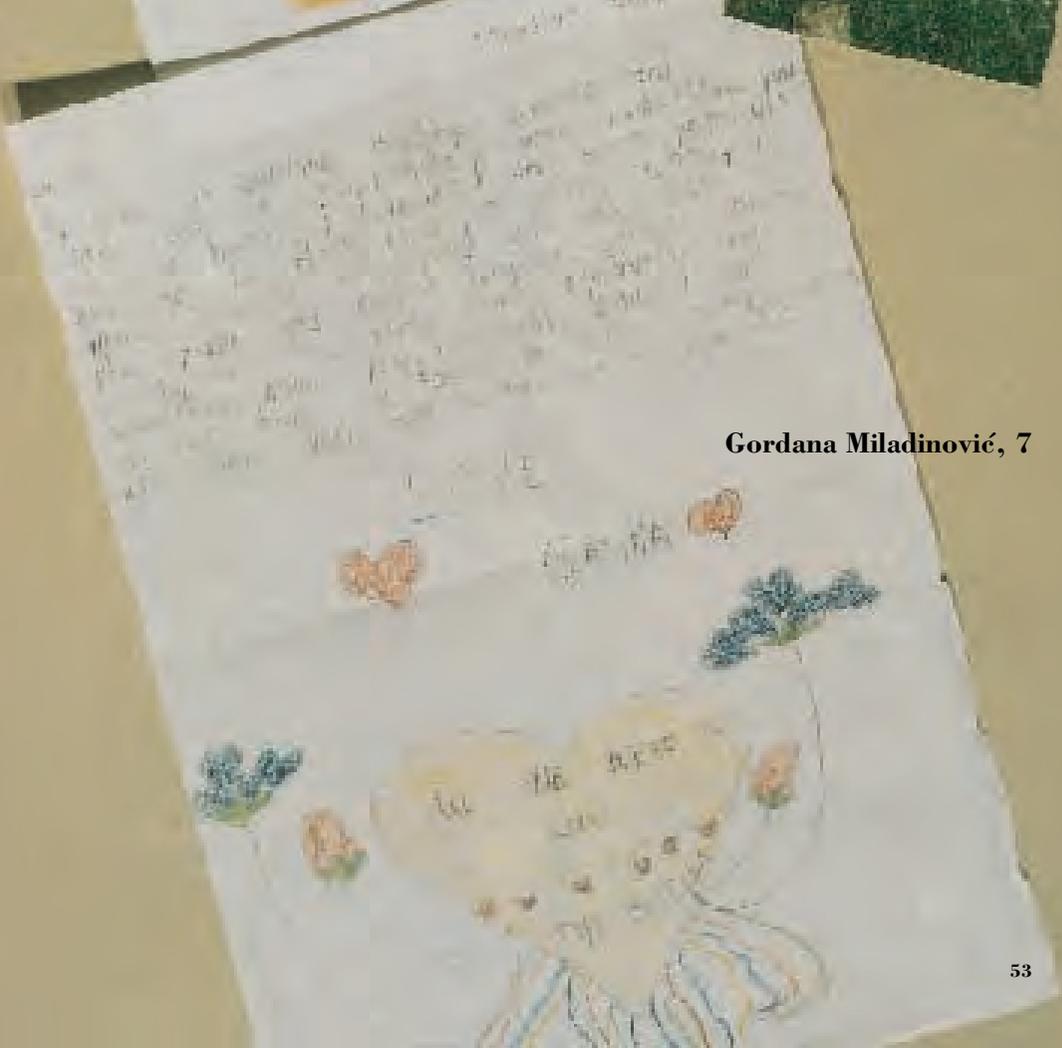


YOUR  
JASNA

FRANCO

My Address is  
 Jasna Strik  
 123456789  
 123456789  
 123456789





**Gordana Miladinović, 7**







For someone you  
may want to see I will  
you all I go to the world  
day of our lives stay with  
the in danger they have in  
the rest of the world  
and in the world you live  
and living you live



**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.”



Dear [Name],  
 I received your letter of the 10th and was  
 glad to hear from you. I am well and  
 hope these few lines will find you the same.  
 I am not sure how to write to you just now  
 but I will try to say a few words.

I am glad to hear that you are  
 well and happy. I hope you will  
 continue to be so. I am not sure  
 how to write to you just now but  
 I will try to say a few words.

I am glad to hear that you are  
 well and happy. I hope you will  
 continue to be so. I am not sure  
 how to write to you just now but  
 I will try to say a few words.

I am glad to hear that you are  
 well and happy. I hope you will  
 continue to be so. I am not sure  
 how to write to you just now but  
 I will try to say a few words.

10/10/10



Dear [Name],  
 I received your letter of the 10th and was  
 glad to hear from you. I am well and  
 hope these few lines will find you the same.  
 I am not sure how to write to you just now  
 but I will try to say a few words.





**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.”

*[Faded handwritten text, likely a letter or drawing related to the theme.]*

*[Faded handwritten text, likely a letter or drawing related to the theme.]*

*[Faded handwritten text, likely a letter or drawing related to the theme.]*

**Ena Omeragić, 9**





## Names

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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, 888 Seventh Avenue, New York, New York 10106.

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Don't write to me







*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.

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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.

# Dragi nepoznati prijatelju, Pisma djece iz Sarajeva

Selected letters from the Pen Pals for Peace Program