

THE STORIES: MARIJANA



First name: **MARIJANA**

Last name: **ČEŠNOVAR**

Age: **63**

Country of origin: **BOSNIA**

Living in **Slovenia** since: **1992**

SHORT SUMMARY

Marijana Češnovar's husband died in 1990 and in 1992 Sarajevo and Bosnia got involved in the Bosnian war. Marijana spent some fifty more days in Sarajevo. This was an appalling experience. Next, she left with her son and arrived in Slovenia. Though she holds a university degree in economics and her grandmother lived in Slovenia where the family owns a bed-and-sitter, though she spoke some Slovene when she arrived, she did not feel accepted for a very long time. Slovenian people are sensitive as concerns the accent of those whose mother language is Serbo-Croatians and speaking Slovene has always been a challenge for Marijana. Having enrolled at Slovenian Third Age University, she finally feels accepted and integrated. In later life, what counts is the ability to be yourself and to nurture relationships. You can get integrated through studying and admiring beauty together with the natives.

“WHO YOU ARE, NOT WHAT YOU ARE, IS IMPORTANT”

CONFLICT

The war in Sarajevo started on the 6th April, 1992. This was unbelievable. The one month and a half she spent in Sarajevo at war before she left has been the most horrifying and uncertain time in her life. Her husband had died in November 1990 due to a massive heart attack, her ex-company's building was one of the first buildings to be destroyed during the war, so she found herself alone, jobless and a single mother of a 7-year old boy.

ESCAPE

“A friend of mine directed me to the organisation »Children's Embassy«. I did not hesitate and my decision to leave was firm. I was lucky to have my grandmother living in Slovenia in a bed sitter of which we, as a family, were owners.

I travelled with my son by bus together with many other women of all ages and their new born children.

There was a lot of crying and screaming of women who did not know if their family members were alive, wounded or dead. There was also shooting and we were very scared. Two days later taking hidden roads through Bosnian hills we reached Split and continued our way to Rijeka and from there on to Ljubljana.

In those days I still firmly believed the war in Sarajevo would not last and we could go back shortly. I was so naïve!”

She could lean on people close to her, some professionals and institutions.

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BELONGING

“The first months brought us certainty that the war back in Bosnia was getting worse, that going back would not be possible. In those days we also found out who our real friends were and which family ties were valuable. Some friends and relatives did not even call on me, being afraid that I would need their help. In August 1992, I decided my son should go to a Slovenian primary school. Our refugee status did not make the decision any easier. We had to knock on many office and school doors. I even went to the Ministry of Education. Finally my son got enrolled into the elementary school Tone Tomšič. The headmaster, a wonderfully nice man- helped me. But, nevertheless, my son’s experience there was somehow mixed. Some experience were desolating like when he was asked to write about France Prešern the Slovenian iconic poet and his text was scored best in his class, but my son was not allowed to read it to the others because this »was would not be appropriate for a refugee«. Such stories made me sad and I could not explain the reason why to my little boy.

Another experience. My son proudly took his Ljubljana born grand mother, who had just arrived from Sarajevo to school as to show everybody how good her Slovene was. It is not hard to imagine why he did it; to demonstrate that we were Slovene as well and to oppose his school mates’ ill mannered and hurting remarks. Children will be cruel.

Back in Sarajevo, I had some Slovenian business partners, but due to the war, changes and privatisation processes many contacts and ties disappeared. This was difficult for me when I started searching for a job. A neighbour of mine directed me to the Centre of social work - I will never forget how kind the social worker there was.

She finally feels integrated since she has enrolled at Slovenian Third Age University.

He did everything, all he could, to help me.

In September 1992 I started cleaning apartments of three Slovenian families of intellectuals. Personally, I graduated from university and I hold a university degree of economics. But they considered me mostly as a cleaning lady not as a person with diverse competencies. I noticed that the most important was how I spoke Slovene, my accent. I do not know why, but speaking foreign languages has always been a problem for me. Many people criticized me. How come that your mother didn't teach you Slovene? I was frequently asked. But she did teach me enough to communicate with Slovenian people during my annual holidays when I regularly came to Slovenia. And later, speaking Slovenian language helped me working with our Slovenian business partners.

Two years later I found a job in a charcuterie store. Language, language again! Slovenian society is closed and does not open up easily towards refugees from former Yugoslavia.

I also met my future husband in those days. He is Slovene but has never had any prejudices concerning my origin and me being a refugee.

Later, a colleague suggested I should enrol at Slovenian Third Age University where I started studying art history. It structures my life, and it has opened up my life to the outside world.

Going back to Sarajevo? No, I would not go back to Sarajevo because it has changed and has become a town for tourists, no more. The longer you live there, the less you like it. My son has grown up in Slovenia, has finished his schooling here, got a job, got integrated, totally. I am happily married and despite numerous challenges I have had to cope with, I think I was immensely lucky. This might sound cruel, coming from a refugee like myself, but in my opinion not all refugees should be allowed to cross the border and settle in a country, unless they are ready to make an effort to integrate in the host society.”