Longest siege in modern warfare leads to lifelong lessons

“My new normal was knowing which streets were safe to walk on, where I needed to run, and where I needed to crawl. I knew which sounds were dangerous. And I knew when silence was bad.” That was Nadja Telalagic’s world for 1,425 days. She was a teenager living in Sarajevo, capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina, when her Olympic city turned into a city under siege. From April 5, 1992, to February 29, 1996, residents were assaulted by artillery, tanks, and small arms. Cut off from the rest of the world, they lived without water, electricity, and heat—and with hardly any food. For nearly four years, Nadja’s family, friends, and neighbors endured what was to become the longest siege of a capital city in the history of modern warfare. She says they were the worst days of their lives. And yet, in a strange way, they were the best days, too.

Learning while under siege

Survival meant solidarity and coming together to help each other. “I can’t tell you how many people I would see on a daily basis helping with small things like carrying water,” says Nadja. “My teacher who lived next door even helped me learn English, which I couldn’t speak at the time. Solidarity is what kept us alive and hopeful.” Nadja, who works for Microsoft in Dubai, says there were numerous times when her life was in danger, “but even with such life-threatening events, you remain hopeful. That’s the most important thing.” During those four terrifying years, Nadja fought to maintain a sense of normalcy by not only learning English, but also learning how to play the piano and dance. “I even had a group of friends who had a rock band, so we created a huge concert in Sarajevo called Rock Under Siege.”
Comforting words

“But the siege was tough. We suffered the loss of loved ones and people around us. But we never gave up on life. Our view was all of this will be yesterday one day.” That “yesterday” finally arrived for Nadja, along with lessons she’ll never forget. “Those 1,425 days taught me that it takes very little to be happy, so I consider myself a very happy and a very positive person. You need to look at the small things in your life that bring you joy.”

Navigating through the war also taught Nadja to trust her intuition and learn how to listen to it. “People are just too busy to listen to themselves or they think what they sense isn’t reliable,” Nadja says. “I learned not only how to listen to my intuition, but how to validate it. It’s difficult to explain, but it gives me a lot of confidence.”

Today, whenever Nadja faces a daunting challenge like moving to Dubai from the country she loved, that confidence is bolstered by four words she will forever take comfort in—*I survived the war*. To hear more of Nadja’s story, check out the *Powered by the People* podcast. And for an additional look at the surprising music scene in Sarajevo during the siege, see the extended trailer for Iron Maiden’s *Scream For Me Sarajevo*. 