



# CIVIL COURAGE PRIZE

## Acceptance Speech

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### *Written Acceptance*

#### Courage & Fear

News of being named the first laureate ever of the Civil Courage Prize reached me when Serbia was overwhelmed with fear that Milosevic, then president of Yugoslavia, might use police and military force to keep in power.

The critical day was 5 October 2000. Hundreds of thousands of people went out to the streets determined to stay there until Slobodan Milosevic admitted electoral defeat and relinquished power. It was clear that police and the military would not dare to intervene against such a huge crowd. Sunset marked the beginning of a mass celebration, demonstrators relaxed, and we all sensed the change. We knew that nothing would be the same again. I was very calm, and I felt an urge to describe to others that moment of birth of something different. Life seemed almost normal, almost banal.

It was in these circumstances that I decided to take the journey to London, and to use the opportunity created by the ceremony of receiving the Prize to tell about the different atmosphere that had developed in Serbia — about relaxation, safety and hope.

Instead, on that occasion, I spoke mostly of fear. My words dovetailed into images that were still running through my mind: images of people looking down and staring in front of themselves, people aimlessly walking around with plastic bags, people sitting in the dark listening to the sound of steps... On that occasion in London many participants approached me and complimented my courage. I felt strange and uneasy wondering about the sort of courage they might be referring to.

What is courage? Who are the brave persons? Is a decision to act courageously ever made before deed? I started considering all that after I was handed my award. I asked myself whether I am really a brave person, and my spontaneous answer was negative. I have been feeling fear for years. I used to take fear for granted. I never came to terms with it. However, I was always sure that fear would not make me keep my mouth shut, change, or twist my attitude, conceal or fail to make relevant facts public.

I remember developments in March, 1993 when I was overwhelmed by fear. These were times of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Before the war, a number of Muslims lived and worked in Serbia while their families continued to live in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Telephone lines were cut off, and they had no news of their loved ones. They suffered horrendously not knowing what was happening to their children.

I suggested to three of them that they join me in an attempt to cross the border controlled by Bosnian Serbs. They were frightened, but the fact that a Serb woman, myself, decided to travel with them provided some hope of success. A nasty development occurred at the border when the guards realized that the three of them were Muslims and I, a Serb.

The guards insulted my companions, calling them "Bahlyas" (derogatory name for Bosnian Muslims), Turks, fiends of Serbs, while they labeled me a traitor to the Serbian people. They took us inside their building. They took me into a room, while the three Muslims were left in the corridor. Several policemen entered, one of whom was their commander. They were yelling and cursed me heavily. I was afraid that they might take the three Muslims away.

So I started yelling myself. The commander pulled out his gun and started brandishing it in my direction while heaping the dirtiest insults on me. I remember that I was repeating to myself: "You may well fire your gun but you are not going to prevent me from telling you what kind of a creature you are". I started walking towards him while still yelling ... I saw him walking towards me with his gun pointed at me.

In the next moment, I saw a young policeman open the door, running towards me. He grabbed me, lifted me up using just one arm and took me out to the corridor. He was trembling in fear. He put me down and said: "He would have killed you". The three Muslims were panicking and they begged me to go back, all of us.

We were all trembling in fear. I asked the young policeman to help me phone the police supervisor in Bijeljina, the town which was the target of our visit. He took us to a house from which I called a state security supervisor. I told him of developments and asked to visit with him, to be allowed to cross the border with the three Muslims, to visit their families and to be granted safe return to Serbia. I had publicly mentioned this state security supervisor to the media in reference to the expulsion of Muslims from Bijeljina. That probably made him wish to present himself in a favorable light.

He sent a policeman to escort us to him. Then we went to visit the families of the three Muslims, and returned to Serbia, encountering no problems, while passing by the same police who had previously treated us like cattle for slaughter. On the way back, we did not discuss the experiences of the day. We traveled quietly and considered the events of the past day. When we reached Belgrade, one of them sighed and said: "Take care Madam, you are going to get yourself killed."

I used to get terribly frightened when I traveled to Kosovo in the time of the NATO bombing campaign. NATO planes had targeted bridges. I used to pass the destroyed ones en route to crossing ones not yet destroyed. I would say to myself: "They are not going to shoot a civilian car. Once, when I exited one of the few tunnels in Kosovo and drove for a couple of miles, I heard a strong explosion. I learned later that two foreign journalists lost their lives then, on 23 May 1999, at the exit of that tunnel. On my way back I saw the spot where the car had been hit. I felt no fear, just indifference.

While visiting homes of my Albanian friends, I experienced quite a different kind of fear. As we sat conversing in the dark, I did not even notice that my fear of NATO planes and explosions had vanished, yielding to a panic related to something everybody around was frightened of: a knock at the door, a visit by armed police or soldiers, then shooting, and orders to younger men to follow them out.

Once more than 50 young men were taken away from a neighboring house, and we did not even see how it happened. It was afternoon; my friends and I sat behind the closed blinds while young men were

taken out of their apartments. The feeling that something horrible was happening next door while neighbors are unaware of it, or unable to do anything about it drove me mad.

I discussed this with friends, and I now understand that the fear of a persecuted person is quite different from mine. Such a person cannot help out another persecuted person. My situation was different: I was part of the same ethnic community as the persecutors themselves. I was wondering if that realization might be of some help in time of danger, to help me try to intimidate Serbian police or the military bent on entering some Albanian flat. I was aware that I could not help much, but I have the impression that the persecuted feel less deserted if I stay with them.

In Kosovo I learned that fear is a rather natural feeling, and that it is not an obstacle to bold action, self-assuredness and free expression. One day in May, when the Hague Tribunal promulgated and published its indictment against Slobodan Milosevic, Serbian police pulled me over during one of my Kosovo journeys. I believe they stopped me because my car had Belgrade plates, which made them curious to learn why I was not afraid to travel during NATO bombing campaigns. My story that I was on my way to visit some relatives was obviously not very convincing.

They decided to search my car. They found some reports on violations of human rights, which indicated to them that I was not just an ordinary traveler. They took me to the police station where I spent eight hours with state security agents who happened to know my name very well. They threaten to charge me with spying, accused me of supporting "Albanian terrorists" and of "betraying" Serbia. It was clear to me that they could have done to me whatever they wished. I felt no fear. I was calm and determined to tell them my views on what was going on in Kosovo, on the crimes committed there, and to ask them if they heard of the indictment against Slobodan Milosevic which had been just published. Indeed, that was my conversation with them, and I was very focused, not giving a thought to what might happen to me next. I was astonished by their lack of attempt to refute my statements. They were just yelling and repeating that they are not going to leave Kosovo, and that they would defend it by all means available. Eight hours later a policeman came in and yelled that I was free to go and that my case would be decided at a higher level, in Belgrade.

I did not feel victorious. I was aware that my destiny was in the hands of somebody else, and those persons seem to have understood that in the very moment that the indictment against Slobodan Milosevic was published, that information in the media that Serbian police had arrested the only human rights activist in Kosovo might not be exactly beneficial to them.

There has been no single occasion when I had a feeling that I had done something brave, and that I deserve to be awarded a prize for courage. Whatever I did was quite ordinary, simple and natural. I have met people whom I still admire for their humanistic attitude towards persecuted persons. The policeman who rescued me in front of the pointed gun of his superior was surely brave. Victims supply me with most of the stories about courageous people. I still remember every word pronounced by people who managed to survive because of help or assistance from some friend from the "hostile community". To these people I owe my trust in human beings and my award for courage.

I am telling you something rather obvious and very simple, but have decided to stick with my genuine feelings, attitudes, and experience. You were so kind to give it attention and time. Thank you very much for that.