ays a game of chess with daughter Kristina, 15, in their Richardson apartment as daughter Marina, 19, watches.
Rade Milovanovic plays a game of chess with daughter Kristina, 15, in their Richardson apartment as daughter Marina, 19, watches.

MAKING HIS MOVE

Chess master Rade Milovanovic needed a good strategy to get his family out of war-torn Yugoslavia

By David Tarrant
Staff Writer of The Dallas Morning News

They met at the Tuzla Hotel. They slipped out of their homes and apartments, hurrying along the deserted streets of a city battered by mortar and artillery shelling, listening for the whistle of a stray bullet from an unseen sniper.

They gathered inside the old banquet room to feast on chess. These men, of different ethnic backgrounds and faiths, did what chess players everywhere do: They played tournaments. Instead of money, the prizes were a chicken, a sack of potatoes or, rarest of all, a bottle of cooking oil — one of the scarcest and most expensive items during the war in Bosnia.

When power went out, which was often, they played in candlelight and wore overcoats to ward off the cold. But they were able to leave behind, if only for a few hours, the madness outside.

“People played chess to forget. They played chess because it felt like normal times,” says Rade Milovanovic.

Before the war, Rade was poised to become a grandmaster, the highest ranking in chess. From his home in Bosnia, which was part of the Yugoslav federation, he played in tournaments all over Europe against the greatest players in the world.

Then, in the early 1990s, war tore Yugoslavia apart. Ethnic hatred shredded Bosnia’s intricate quilt of Serb, Croat and Muslim cultures. Families like his own were left to try to gather up the loose ends.

For Rade (pronounced Rah-day), now 45, chess served as his lifeline during the war. It kept him in touch with other chess players of all nationalities who gave one another emotional support. Playing and studying chess kept him sane and focused as the fighting approached his city, as work stopped, as the bombing started.

And when he found himself suddenly separated from his children and facing the darkest moment of his life, he turned to chess. The way a flower turns to the sun.

Chess had always taught Rade to think in a logical way, always with the big picture in mind. It taught him how to weigh each option when faced with a complex and difficult situation.

But in the fog of war, choices were rarely clear-cut. In the spring of 1992, Rade’s two daughters were staying with their

ON THE WEB
For a Q&A with Rade Milovanovic, visit dallasnews.com. Also, for those interested in visiting Rade’s chess Web site, go to texaschess.org and click on “Chess links.”

Chess provided precious support during the war in Bosnia.

Photography by Cheryl Diaz Meyer
The Dallas Morning News
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grandparents in Serbia when the militarized border between Bosnia and Serbia was sealed. The children were trapped.

Few options seemed open to Rade and his wife, Snjezana (pronounced Snay-jahnnah). One involved sneaking across a border, risking death or capture. The other was a strategy that Rade was still working out in his head.

Naturally, it involved chess.

"I have nothing to do with politics. I came here [Yugoslavia] to play chess and nothing else." — Bobby Fischer, Belgrade, 1992.

Rade paid little attention to the war clouds gathering over his country in the early 1990s. A lawyer, husband and father, he spent what little free time he had playing and studying chess.

He took up the game when he was 15, a relatively late start by chess standards. He grew up playing soccer. But one day in 1969, his younger brother brought home a book about chess. Rade borrowed it and was hooked.

"For me it was some kind of great discovery," he says. "I saw the game was over 1,400 years old. I liked all the combinations and possibilities. For two months, I played only chess in school."

For years, Yugoslavia was considered the second-most powerful country in chess — next to Russia, Rade says. Every city boasted a network of competitive chess clubs. Rade thrived in this system. In high school, he won his city's championship and placed second in the junior Yugoslavian championship. While attending the University of Belgrade, he became a member of the Partizan chess club, the best team in Yugoslavia.

He returned to Tuzla to practice law. For generations, the mining town in north central Bosnia had attracted workers from all over Eastern Europe, and its

daughter."

When the first of Yugoslavia's republics, Slovenia, declared its independence in 1991 and skirmished with federal troops, Rade gave it little thought.

"I am thinking, 'OK, it cannot be that bad. It's Europe. We are in a new millennium almost. The politicians will find some solutions.'"

A few months later, war broke out in Croatia. "Still we're thinking, 'It won't be in Bosnia.'"

Then in April 1992, war came to Bosnia. "But we are still thinking, 'Not here in Tuzla!'"

In May 1992, Tuzla was in a vulnerable position, surrounded on all sides by warring Serbs, Croats and Muslims. In chess terms, Tuzla was "in check."

The city was flooded with refugees. They brought horrifying stories of murder, torture and rape by gangs of paramilitary soldiers. Rade's neighbors dug bomb shelters and stored food in basements.

Every summer, Rade's parents took the children from Tuzla to their cottage in Banja Koviljska, a small spa town in Serbia about 30 miles away. They decided the children should go there immediately.

They left on May 10, 1992. The road between Serbia and Bosnia was still open. Rade drove his parents and his daughters in his Russian-made sedan loaded with toys and returned the same day.

Rade's wife planned to join them in a few weeks. But five days later, the war came to Tuzla. Inside their apartment, Rade and his wife could hear machine-gun fire and mortar shells pounding the deserted streets.

Serbia closed its border to Bosnia, cutting off the children. At first, Rade and Snjezana were hopeful that the border would reopen quickly. But days stretched into weeks and months. "I never thought it would be two years before I see my daughters," she says.

Work stopped. They huddled in their apartment. Like everyone during the war, they endured shortages. Water was available only a few hours a day, if that. There was no electricity. Meals were eaten cold.

"It was like prison," Rade says.

Occasionally, Rade and Snjezana could get news about their children from Snjezana's sister in Switzerland, who would still get a phone call through to

As Mr. Milovanovic placed the fork on his plate, he said, "In the beginning, I lived in a good

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Yugoslav championship. While attending the University of Belgrade, he became a member of the Belgrade chess club and competed in several tournaments.

Rade, on the other hand, lived in Tuzla, a city in Bosnia and Herzegovina. His family had a strong connection with the region, as his parents were from the area. Rade's interest in chess began at a young age, inspired by his father's passion for the game.

Both Sharla and Rade had a deep love for the game, and they often played together. Their passion for chess was not just a pastime but a source of comfort during the difficult times they faced.

Sharla, a dedicated chess player, knew how to handle the pressure of competitive play. She was known for her strategic mind and her ability to analyze complex positions on the board. Sharla's competitive spirit was evident in her approach to every game, and she always gave her best effort.

Rade, on the other hand, was more reserved and thoughtful. He took his time to consider his moves and was known for his precise and calculated style of play. Despite his relative inexperience compared to Sharla, Rade displayed a keen understanding of the game and a strong determination to improve.

Theirs was a partnership that was built on mutual respect and a shared passion for chess. Together, they faced the challenges of the war and the uncertainties of the future. Despite the adversity, Sharla and Rade remained steadfast in their love for the game, and their dedication to improving their skills.

In the midst of the war, they found solace in the world of chess, where the rules were clear and the rewards came through intellectual victories. Their journey as chess players was not just about winning games, but about finding a sense of normalcy and a way to cope with the challenges of war.

Sharla and Rade's story is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit, and their love for chess is a reflection of their unwavering commitment to their craft.
playing chess, a player suggested they would be safer in another room. Another bomb went off and the same player dived under a table. "Are we safer here?" the player asked. Rade and the others laughed.

At a 1993 tournament, Rade took first prize and won some potatoes and a chicken. A Muslim player took second and won a chicken. Rade invited the player back to his apartment. "We prepared a very rich dinner to celebrate with him, and he stayed overnight."

During the war, chess players lent each other money. "But the best help was emotional support," Rade says. "My friends saw that we were suffering without our kids and they would come by and visit and give us support."

Snjezan spent most of her days looking through family photo albums. "I was thinking how it was before and how it is in this situation now. I just spend all my time thinking about my kids."

She would gaze out her apartment window at the Majaevica mountains shrouded in a blue haze along the eastern border. Just beyond those mountains were her children.

"Chess teaches you to think independently ... to know what's important and to analyze each situation for the best move." — Rade Milovanovic

Smugglers could take you over those mountains for a price. After two years of waiting and nearly going out of her mind with worry, Snjezan was ready to pay.

"There was no other way. We didn't know when the war would stop," she says.

Snjezan and Rade sold all their furniture to help cover up the $800 demanded by the smuggler.

"This was the last of the money we had," Rade says. "We had beautiful Italian furniture. We sold it very cheap. People sold everything in these times."

Rade stayed behind. They could not afford to pay the smuggler for two people. Also, there was more risk involved for a man. If he were captured, he could be forced into military service — or killed outright depending on the whim of the soldiers.

"The idea," says Snjezan, "was for Rade to travel and find work."

"I'm finally here," he said to his wife after a phone call after he landed. "I will see you in two hours."

Over the next year, they decided to apply for residency in the United States as United Nations refugees. Going back to Bosnia as a mixed-marriage couple could cause problems. The United States also offered better medical care for Marina.

In the summer of 1998, the family left for Dallas — a place they knew only from the Kennedy assassination.

In just five years, their whole world had changed. Before the war, Snjezan says, "We think we will stay all our lives in Tuzla. All our friends and our family are there. We are all living only a mile from each other."

Rade remembers when he was just 8, going on a walk with his father, who had mapped out his whole life for him. "Remember my father saying, 'You will go to this primary school, then to this secondary school. You will go to Belgrade and study law.' He even told me in what building I would live in Belgrade. It was 20 years of my life, and my father supported me all the way."

His father died of heart disease at the age of 62 in 1994, a refugee in Serbia. He had been a civil engineer in Tuzla and nearly all of the buildings he had helped design had been damaged. "He loved Tuzla very much. That war destroyed him," Rade says.

Chess had taught Rade to think several moves ahead. But war had its own painful lesson: "You can't control what happens around you," he says.

Mr. Milovanovic, a lawyer in Bosnia who teaches chess now, ponders a move at the tournament.

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— Rade's wife, Snjezan

both adults and children as young as 7.

He and his family live in a simple two-bedroom apartment in Richardson. In one corner of the living room, there is the first trophy that Rade won in the United States: a first place in a Houston "Brainstorm" tournament. Earlier this year, he tied for first place at the National Open in Las Vegas.

On the walls of their apartment, there are no photographs from their old life. They are happy to be here and have applied for permanent residency in the United States.

Kristina, 15, is a sophomore at J.J. Pearce High School and is already very Americanized. "I hardly recognize her," Snjezan says. Marina, 19, is getting physical rehabilitation through Parkland Hospital to help strengthen her muscles.

"When you come here, you need a long period to adjust. It's a different kind of life," says Snjezan, 45, who worked for a year at a La Madeleine restaurant. "But I see that each day is better and better. And I see that the kids are satisfied."

Still, memories linger.

"Sometimes I miss my family," Snjezan says. "I know Rade misses his mother."

His mother..."
Before the war, "we" would stay all our lives in Tutia. All our friends and family were there. We were all living in the same place. But after the war, we had to leave everything behind.

Rade's wife, Suzana, says, "I don't know what happened next. We just left everything behind and started anew."
Mr. Milovanovic says goodbye to Marina, whose neurological disorder and need for medical care helped prompt the family to seek haven in America.

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— Rade's wife, Snejzana