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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

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."

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.

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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

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Chess provided precious support during the war in Bosnia.

Photography by Cheryl Diaz Meyer
The Dallas Morning News

MAKING

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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-zahna). 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.

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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

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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

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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!' "

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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 Koviljaca, 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.

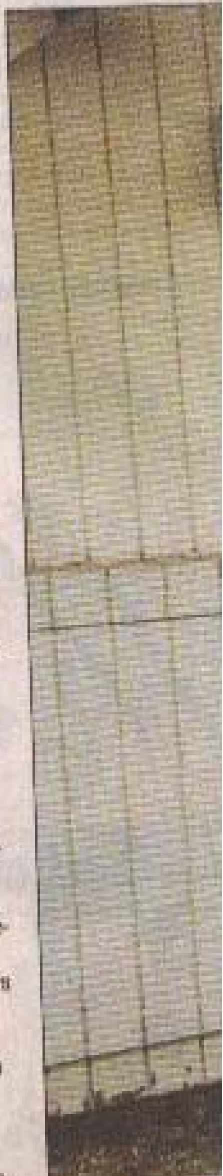
Rade's wife planned to join them in a few weeks. But five days later, the war came to Tuzla. Inside their apartment, Rade and his wife could hear machine-gun fire and mortar shells pounding the deserted streets.

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 could still get a phone call through to



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Snjezana, whom Rade had known from high school, was a Croatian Catholic whose family had lived in Tuzla for generations. Rade, whose mother was from Serbia, was an Orthodox Christian whose father's side had long lived in Bosnia. Their marriage in 1979 was nothing out of the ordinary in Bosnia, where one out of every three marriages was mixed.

They had a spacious three-bedroom apartment and both worked as business lawyers. Snjezana has gauzy memories of those idyllic days, traveling with Rade to matches in resort towns on the Adriatic Sea, shopping with her mother while he played chess.

From 1977 to 1990, he played all over Europe and steadily grew in stature, earning his International Master title in 1988. At that time, his company decided to support his quest to go to the next level — a grandmaster, which required an enormous commitment.

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In the gloom of their apartment in Tuzla, Rade and Snjezana hashed over ways of reuniting with their children, who were now in a refugee camp. Going across Bosnia into Croatia was out of the question. It meant passing through territory contested by Bosnian Serb and Croat troops. With her Croatian first name and Serbian last name, "I could not make this trip," she says flatly.

For Rade, traveling anywhere brought the risk of getting picked up for military service — by any one of several armies. The Bosnians had tried to force him into a military uniform. But he had managed to convince them, with help from a Croatian chess friend, that he was already in the Croatian Army — an ally of the Bosnians.

He spent his days studying chess. He had a library of chess books lining one wall. Sometimes his chess friends would visit for a game or they would gather at the nearby Tuzla Hotel.

"A lot of people [were] playing chess at this time because it was not possible to go outdoors," Rade says.

Most of his chess friends were Muslim, men who had known him since his days as a junior champion. They didn't object to his Serb nationality despite the civil war.

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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."

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

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

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"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, Snjezana was ready to pay.

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

Snjezana and Rade sold all their furniture to help come up with 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.

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for the Olympiad. The Bosnian team took second place behind Russia. Afterward, instead of returning to Bosnia, he flew directly to Belgrade, the capital of Serbia.

"I'm finally here," he said to his wife during 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, Snjezana 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. "I remember my father saying, 'You will go to this primary school, to this secondary school. You will go to Belgrade and study law.' He even told me in what building I would live in Tuzla. 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

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

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

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," Snjezana 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 Snjezana, 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."

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She left on their 15th wedding anniversary on April 14, 1994, with a group of eight others. They traveled single-file, walking in one another's footsteps. Mines were everywhere, and the narrow trail snaked through a dense forest. The 25-mile journey took all night and part of the next morning.

"I think it's only possible to do something like that one time in your life," Snjezana says. "I was so tired. But it didn't matter. I was happy we are together."

Rade, meanwhile, was working on his own plan of escape.

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"We are all one people." — Motto of FIDE, the international chess federation

One recent morning, Rade leaves his apartment in Richardson after his traditional pre-tournament cup of thick Bosnian coffee. Dressed in a blue Hawaiian print shirt, khaki pants and sandals, he kisses his two daughters and wife goodbye.

As he steps out the door, his wife spills a cup of water on the ground behind his feet. It is a Bosnian good-luck gesture, usually reserved for students before exams. Sometimes preparation and strategy aren't enough. The hope is that they will find their path just as water always finds its own way.

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

His mother lives now in Serbia. Her parents still live in Tuzla. During a visit earlier this year to Dallas, Snjezana's mother told her she supported the family's move. She also told her that Tuzla had become just a place for old people.

"In the end I think we are really lucky. No one lost their life, and we are together as a family," Snjezana says.

Rade also came away from his war experience with a greater appreciation for his "chess family."

The extreme nationalism and ethnic hatred that incited the civil war in Yugoslavia was fueled by propaganda and self-serving politicians, he says. "Suddenly it's very important

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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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