

Courage

John & Fiona Earle.

Imagine a shell coming in with a whistle from an innocent blue sky. Difficult. A very brief whistle, mind you. Certainly not long enough to warn a queue of people to scatter or, at least, lie flat. They were desperately hoping to buy some flour from one of the few bakeries in town that had some to sell. By the time you reach the full stop at the end of this sentence twenty-two people will die as the shell explodes.

We are all octopuses in a way aren't we? – we have a tentacle in many households: husband or wife; boy- or girl-friend, fiancé(e). Gone. Memories remain with those who are left and maybe something more – a photograph, together with a deep feeling of loss.

This happened. It happened in Sarajevo in Bosnia (about 120 miles north of Dubrovnik) on 22nd May 1992 at 4.00 p.m. A 35-year old cellist, Vedran Smailovic, who had performed with the Sarajevo opera, felt profound anguish when he saw the wreckage of people and houses as he looked out of his window.

What could he do? In a way, this was Macbeth's problem. Should he *'take arms against the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'*? Smailovic took his 'cello. He didn't go out in his everyday clothes but in full concert dress. He decided that he would make music in public, on a battlefield.

He walked out of his apartment with a plastic chair that he placed next to the crater that the shell had made. He played to the abandoned streets, the shattered buildings and the frightened people in the cellars. Meanwhile bullets flew.

He made a stand in the way he knew, for human dignity, for those lost in war. Like the Dalai Lama, he stood for peace.

He played *Albinoni's* Adagio in G minor. He did this not once but at 4.00 pm for 22

days. The shelling went on but he was never struck.

The story reached the newspapers and Smailovic became known as "The Cellist of Sarajevo". David Wylde, an English composer, was so moved by the story that he was inspired to write a piece for unaccompanied cello called *"The Cellist of Sarajevo"*.

Every two years, a group of about 600 people connected with cello music meet in Manchester. There will be players, bow and instrument makers, those interested in the history of cello music. They meet for a week of recitals, master classes, workshops and, of course, parties.

There is a tradition at the Royal Northern College of Music that there are works for unaccompanied cello on the opening night. So, on the stage, there was a solitary chair. No music stand and no pianist to accompany. Yo-yo Ma, the world famous cellist was to play *"The Cellist of Sarajevo"*.

So, he played and the music created an ominous haunting, shadowy message. Then it became agonised and screaming, then a hollow death rattle. Then silence.

There was no applause. Applause will die away while silence speaks louder. Ma remained bent over his cello, then straightened up and beckoned to someone in the audience. A man, dressed in tatty oil-stained motor-cycling leathers stood up. He had a huge moustache and long, wild hair. Ma and the man embraced, hugged and cried as if they were alone. It was Smailovic. Then the audience screamed and shouted, clapped and stamped. They were seeing a man who had shaken his cello in the face of the enemy. Someone who knew that music can soothe and inspire and unite us. Smailovic provided music when it was most needed and least expected, on the field of battle.