

April 2018

## Displaced by War, Driven to Learn

A Long Road for Five Bosnian Women Leads to America, USF and a New WLP Scholarship to Help Refugees on a Similar Journey and Quest for Education

By Dave Scheiber / USF Foundation



**Now and then:** At left – Ivana Djokovic Wendling, Maja Lacevic, Nevena Pehar Sanja Djokovic, Mirna Pehar. Top– Mirna and Nevena's immigration paperwork to enter the United States. Middle – Maja's refugee ID. Right – Sanja at 1 ½ and Ivana at 5, just as war broke out in Sarajevo.

Even when their world took the harshest of turns, and the varied paths they traveled veered into uncertainty and fear, five girls uprooted by a conflict beyond their childhood comprehension were always guided by the same compass.

It pointed them – regardless of the challenges they and their families faced as refugees of the brutal Bosnian War – in the direction of hope and higher education.

Little by little, the jagged courses they followed led to new lives as American citizens, and ultimately to the University of South Florida with a shared story of perseverance, resilience and giving back. Four are USF alumnae – twin sisters Nevena and Mirna Pehar, Ivana Djokovic Wendling and Maja Lacevic – the fifth, Ivana's younger sister Sanja Djokovic, is a graduate of Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago. And all are bonded

in a friendship, purpose and passion that bridges any of the differences that once divided their homeland.

“I remember my mother telling me back then that the one thing nobody can take away from you is your education – your knowledge,” Ivana says. “That always stayed with us.”

The sentiment could have applied to any of the girls as they and their families were displaced by a devastating war that began in 1992 and lasted until 1995, all growing out of a political crisis that swept through Yugoslavia in the 1980s, following the death of the country's longtime leader Marshal Tito. In the end, the fighting led to the tragic siege and constant shelling of Sarajevo, more than 100,000 casualties, unspeakable acts of genocide, and nearly 350,000 civilians fleeing their home to seek safe haven in Germany alone.



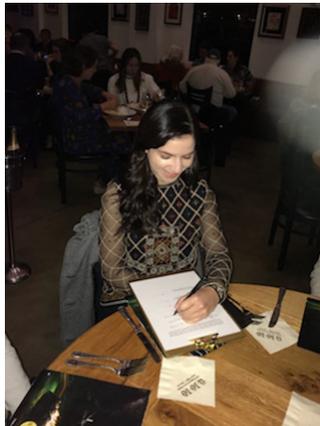
Sarajevo was devastated by constant shelling during the Bosnian War.

Wherever they went in search of a new start – whether to Germany, Russia or eventually the United States – the parents in the Pehar, Djokovic and Lacevic families made sure their children applied themselves in school. And, in turn, the girls thrived on mastering new languages, adapting to the nuances of different cultures and pushing themselves to succeed in whatever pursuits they undertook. War may have forced them from their homes, but could never drive out their love of learning.

That mindset sustained them through the seismic disruption of their young lives. And today, their commitment to education connects the five as driven, accomplished women who have done something truly meaningful. They have combined to create the New American Scholarship for Women of Excellence through USF's Women in Leadership and Philanthropy.

The scholarship will provide a financial helping hand to a standout recipient from a refugee or immigrant background – mirroring the merit-based achievements of the five women, who excelled in class and extra-curricular activities and showed strong collegiate promise. But there is a larger purpose as well.

“A big part of the reason we are starting this scholarship, more than the financial assistance, is to give an exceptional young woman the opportunity for mentorship and to be a part of the WLP experience and share in the WLP network,” explains Maja. “We selected WLP as the site for the scholarship because we wanted a female student, who shares our passion for education. We were also



Sanja Djokovic signs the paperwork to make her contribution to the scholarship official (left), while WLP Executive Director India Witte adds her name to Nevena Pehar's agreement several months ago.

drawn to the opportunities that WLP gives their scholars through training and career development.”

Adds Ivana: “This is a merit scholarship meant to support a young adult through a transition that is financially taxing on any young adult planning their college tuition, and is made especially difficult if they were displaced at some point in their lifetime.”

Each woman contributed \$1,000 to establish the scholarship and an official signing celebration was held several months ago, and their next goal is to raise the funds to permanently endow the scholarship at \$25,000. “They wanted to create a positive example of the benefits of education and living the American Dream,” says WLP Executive Director India Witte, “but also with the statement of ‘I am a refugee.’ It’s a very important message.”

Indeed, that message is undeniable.

“In this political climate, the refugee story is a very relevant one to tell,” says Maja, recently honored with a 2018 USF Outstanding Young Alumnus Award. “So often refugees are talked about as a ‘drain on the economy.’ We disagree. None of us are drains on the economy. We are successful in our careers. And we all feel that giving back is so important, because we were helped by so many along our journeys.”

How they got to the United States – parting with all of their worldly possessions and embarking on a road of anxiety and hardship – is a tale in itself. But even then, no one could have imagined that they would one day be pulled into each other’s midst, with USF at the center of it all.

## *Ivana and Sanja*

Like so many children displaced by the war – and certainly each of these five – the Djokovic sisters learned to adjust at a young age.

“1992, I was 5 and my sister, Sanja, was 15 months,” recalls Ivana (pronounced E-va-nuh). “And when the war started, it seemed like it came out of nowhere. Even though I was young, I knew that most of us weren’t expecting it – people said, ‘No way can this happen in Europe. It will stop.’ Lucky for us, our parents decided to go right away. We just packed up and left.”

In fact, her father, Miodrag, and mother, Azra, believed the conflict would only be temporary, so they left most of their belongings at home and drove to a family home in the country to join the girls’ paternal grandparents. Their maternal grandparents, meanwhile, chose to stay in their home, and wound up spending the duration of the war in Sarajevo.

“The whole city was under siege,” Ivana recalls. “We were only in it one night when there was shelling. I remember waking up in the basement and my dad was holding me. I remember the loud explosions and the fear everyone felt. As a young child, you saw fear all around you and it was very scary.”

The Djokovics soon made their way to relative safety in the capital city of Belgrade, and Ivana’s father, a mechanical engineer, continued to work from there for the international business side of his company. When an opportunity arose to establish a permanent office for the company in Moscow, Miodrag went on his own to start work and find a family home to rent – and then moved his wife and daughters there.

The girls, encouraged by their mother’s belief about the value of education, loved to learn and were still attending Russian elementary school when the war ended. But the idea of returning home to an unknown future wasn’t appealing. Instead, they followed the lead of an aunt, who had signed up for an immigration program during the war and moved to the U.S., settling in Tampa. Ivana and Sanja (pronounced Sanya) had learned English in Russian grade school, and made the transition to life in the U.S. with relative ease.

Their parents, meanwhile, faced the challenge of starting over yet again in a new country, this time on a new continent, and developing careers in their professional fields. Miodrag spoke only Serbian and Russian at the time the family arrived in the States, but was eventually able to apply his past engineering experience to restaurant planning; Azra, who had a law degree from Sarajevo University, went to work as a paralegal for the Attorney General’s office. They became U.S. citizens five years later, with Ivana and Sanja gaining citizenship through them.

At Freedom High School, both established themselves as outstanding students, and that led one day to Ivana being selected by her social sciences teacher to attend the Anne Frank Humanitarian Award ceremony. The event was held at the Florida Holocaust Museum in St. Petersburg, where award-winners from area public high schools arrived to be honored.

By chance, one of them was another girl from Bosnia – Maja Lacevic.

Ivana and Maja met, and happily discovered they actually lived just down the same street in Sarajevo from one another. A close friendship was about to be take root, in time entwining USF and the start of a special scholarship.



Ivana playing in Sarajevo just before the war. "Essentially, when we left Sarajevo it was very unexpected and, thinking we would be back once everything died down, we packed a few necessities and headed for our family's vacation home. It soon became clear we weren't coming back. We were getting some photos done for personal documents and our mom, knowing that we may never recover all of the family photos we had left behind, had us pose (above right) for this picture. It was the first photo of my sister and I and it eventually made it to our grandparents which meant a lot to them during the separation. I'm 5 and Sanja is about a year and a half there."

## Maja

Maja's parents, like the Djokovics and so many other adults, doubted war would come to Bosnia. Her mother was a physician; her father, a director in what had been one of Yugoslavia's largest electrical companies. Both thought the rising tensions would blow over.

"It's not that they were in denial, but they wanted to believe the best," Maja says. "But obviously, the worst happened. And the soundtrack of our lives became explosions going off like fireworks – day after day."

They lived near what had been the 1984 Olympic Village in Sarajevo when the phone rang with urgent word to leave their house and evacuate the area immediately. Maja's parents took the girls and departed to her paternal grandparents' home in the center of the city. Her maternal grandparents, who were with the family at that moment, remained behind to tidy up their house – and wound up being trapped for three months until Maja's mother managed to send a special police unit to get them out safely.



Maja (bottom), her sister Nina (middle) and their mother Mira with food packages they were sending from Germany to family members back home amid the war. The "Paketiza Sarejvo" sign she is holding means "Packages for Sarajevo."

Maja has a distinct recollection of what their parents took after placing her and Nina in the car: "They grabbed their diplomas," she recalls. "Each step of the way, education was so important." The Lacevics remained in Bosnia for the first year of fighting as conditions deteriorated.

Then the situation grew dire. Her father, Jasmin, had gone to distribute pay to his employees when a bomb targeted the large gathering of civilians. He spent several weeks in a hospital, and Maja feared her dad had died. But when he finally returned home, the decision was made to get out of Sarajevo as soon as possible.

What followed could have been a scene from a movie but it was all too real.

Maja remembers that her mother, Mira, had given her a sedative to keep her calm and from blurting out anything that might draw attention from armed soldiers manning one checkpoint after the next. She sat on the lap of her father, Jasmin, who was still recovering from wounds inflicted by a bomb blast. Her sister, Nina, squeezed into the back seat beside a woman holding a baby. And slowly, the car made its way through the once-serene streets of Sarajevo – a city that had glowed on the world stage less than a decade earlier as host of the 1984 Winter Olympics, but now ravaged by a brutal war.

The sedative had no effect on the normally talkative 5-year-old, but she instinctively knew to stay quiet as her mother inched toward the line of demarcation, intended to prevent citizens from exiting the city.

They had tried to make it out of Sarajevo twice before, only to be turned back by soldiers guarding the borders. But this time, they blended in with one of the last Red Cross convoys scheduled to leave the city. And a ride that normally would have taken 15 minutes stretched more than 20 hours as countless civilians desperate to leave were being searched, questioned and turned away, amid constant shelling and sniper fire from the nearby mountains. Finally, they arrived at a heavily guarded checkpoint and Maja vividly recalls what happened next.

“We were about to be turned away, but my mother said, ‘I’m just going to gun it,’ and she did, with all of us in that packed car,” Maja (pronounced Maya) says. “We heard them yelling, ‘Stop that car!’ Shoot them!’ But this young armed soldier yelled back, ‘No, no, I checked them already. They’re fine.’ To this day, I don’t know why he did that. Maybe he saw the little baby. I have no idea. He was a complete stranger, but the kindness from people you didn’t know during those horrible times is what kept you whole.”



Following their daring dash out of the city, the family made its way to Croatia to the south. After several months, Maja and Nina remained with an aunt while the parents went to find work in Germany, where the Iron Curtain had fallen only several years before. In time, the young girls were put on a bus to join their mom and dad. Maja and Nina soon attended an international school in Germany, where they met students from all over the world and many different backgrounds – reinforcing the love of learning their parents had instilled in them.

When the war finally ended, the family could have returned to Sarajevo. “But there would have been nothing but uncertainty to go home to – it was destroyed,” Maja says. Instead, prior to the conclusion of the war, Maja’s parents applied for a refugee placement program that might easily have sent them to Australia or South Africa, but instead allowed them to be sponsored by a U.S. church in Harrodsburg, Ky.

By now, the girls spoke German but no English, yet quickly learned the language with the help of a tutor. “It was a lovely town with lovely people but the first time I’d seen a cow,” Maja recalls.

After several years in Kentucky, her mother applied for a research position at the Moffitt Cancer Center in Tampa and, thanks to her background as a physician, was hired. The entire family followed her there and started over again. The sisters attended Gaither High School, and when Nina enrolled at USF, Maja knew that was the place for her as well.

“I wanted to be close to my parents, so USF was the only place I applied,” she says.

She majored in English and international studies. And as a bonus, Maja soon re-connected with the high school girl she’d met at the Anne Frank ceremony two years earlier, Ivana, who had also enrolled at USF in the international studies program.

They took classes together and became inseparable, each graduating in 2009. The stage was now set for a growing circle of friends linked by a common past – and shared goal for the future.

Young Maja (top left) with more food to send from Germany to family still in Sarajevo. With older sister Nina attending school in Germany (right) and with her family after leaving Sarajevo.

## Nevena and Mirna

Nevena and Mirna followed a similar path to America and ultimately USF. But it still took a twist of fate – and a John Mayer concert at Amalie Arena this past August – to bring everyone together.

The twins were only 3 when the war started and their older brother, Mirko, a promising junior tennis player, was 12. The Pehar family lived some 40 miles outside of Sarajevo in Zenica, and with the outbreak of hostilities, the siblings' father, Vlado, a corporate lawyer, enrolled his son at a tennis academy in Germany.

Months later, the sisters and their mother, Dubravka, who was a technical interpreter for the Metallurgical Institute in Zenica, made their way to Croatia until they could gain refugee status to enter Germany as well. After long, anxious bus rides with her twin toddlers – stopped several times to be told she had the wrong papers– she and her children made it to Germany, where the family stayed for seven years.

Her parents were forced to apply for work visas constantly to patch together an income and extend their refugee status. But the stress and uncertainty led them to pursue resettlement. They signed up for a program and were informed, much to their delight, they would likely be moving to America.

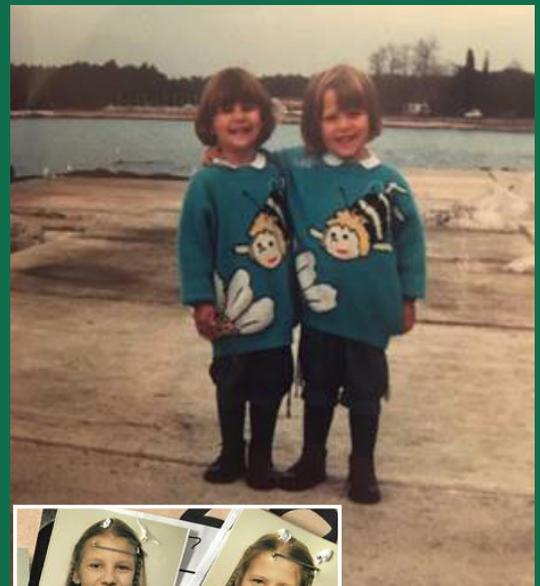
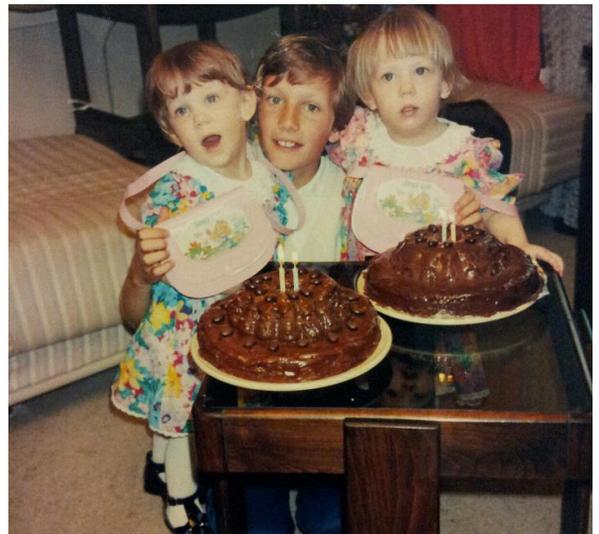
“It happened so fast, and I was thinking, if it's Florida, we can go to the beach and to Disney World,” recounts Nevena. In German elementary school, the sisters had started learning English in the fifth grade, but it was proper British-style pronunciation. That concerned Nevena, who worried that she and Mirna would stand out for not sounding truly American. “I thought, ‘We're not going to be cool. We'll speak English weird,’” she says.

They couldn't have been more excited to move to Florida at age 11, but Nevena reminded her sister about using the proper dialect. “British people say, ‘I don't know,’ so we have to say, ‘I dunno,’ and instead of answering, ‘Yes,’ we should say, ‘Yeah,’” she advised.

“Nevena was more worried about it than I was,” interjects Mirna with a smile. “I just remember our classmates referred to us as ‘The German Twins.’ And it wasn't easy explaining what country you were really from and what happened to that country.”

The girls adjusted quickly, however, and became top-notch students and musicians at Robinson High. They entered USF and became naturalized American citizens after their first year in school, where Nevena earned *three* bachelor's degrees in 2012 (music, psychology, and international studies), while Mirna graduated in '12 as a double-major in music and engineering and completed her master's in civil engineering in 2013.

As fate would have it, Nevena often heard her honors thesis professor talk about a particularly impressive incoming student: Maja Lacevic: “He kept saying how brilliant and amazing she was, and I was like, ‘Who is this girl?’ I'd never heard of her in



Twins Mirna and Nevena celebrating their second birthday with brother Mirko – unknowingly the last one they would mark before war began to brew. At 3, posing in Croatia in 1992 as refugees. At 11, they had their immigration papers and were heading for the U.S.

the immigrant community.”

Then, after graduating, Nevena returned to USF, where she works today in the Annual Giving Office as assistant director of development, in charge of engaging young alumni. Why not, she thought, reach out to the student her professor had raved about?



Ivana and Maja at the fateful John Mayer show in August.

“We met and talked, and I invited her to attend a John Mayer concert at a USF event at Amalie Arena,” Nevena explains.

Maja was thrilled, and decided to bring along one of her good friends, Ivana. Mirna was also in attendance and the four women clicked, comparing refugee experiences, and forming an instant bond.

As they talked that evening, Mirna, Nevena and Ivana suddenly realized that they had met years before when they first arrived in the U.S., thanks to a special shared connection – another Bosnian family named the Novakovics, also refugees. Amazingly, the Novakovics had been able to come to Tampa due to their relationship with Ivana and Sanja’s family and – in turn – sponsored Nevena and Mirna’s family to come to America.

The realization further cemented the women’s friendship. But the best was yet to come.

### *The WLP New American Scholarship for Women of Excellence*

A week or so after the concert, Maja called Nevena with an idea.

It was inspired by a Muma College of Business scholarship started by WLP member and USF business graduate Fadwa Hilili with fellow alumnae from the Muma College of Business. That \$5,000 gift was established to help women in the Lynn Pippenger School of Accountancy, funded by personal donations from Hilili and her friends.

“ I think it would be a great idea if we did something similar – we all go in on a scholarship for new American refugees, the immigrants coming to the country,” Nevena recalls Maja saying.

Nevena and Mirna both loved the idea. And when Ivana mentioned it to Sanja, who earned her architecture degree in 2015 from Illinois Tech – she embraced it right away. “I wanted to be part of it even if I didn’t go to USF,” she says.

“Nevena and I had always talked about giving back to the university, but then I’d think, ‘I don’t know if this is something I can do now,’ ” Mirna added. “But once Maja brought it up, it seemed totally plausible.”

As graduating high school students, Maja and Nevena were honored as Young Women of Promise by the Athena Society, an organization of Tampa professionals dedicated to leadership and creating opportunities for women, of which WLP Executive Director India Witte and many other WLP members are a part. All five young women have shown promise, indeed.



Nevena Pehar and Maja Lacevic – both WLP members – catch up at a recent WLP Faculty Research Awards dinner at the Gibbons Alumni Center.

In addition to Nevena's Annual Giving position at USF, her sister Mirna is a structural engineer for Baker Barrios Architects. Ivana is an instructional designer for Franklin Templeton Investments and is pursuing her master's in Instructional Technology at USF. Her sister Sanja is a designer, pursuing architectural licensure at Design Styles Architecture. Maja works as a business transaction attorney at Trenam Law. And now they can assist others with the kind of philanthropy that helped each of them along the way.

All also emphasize the help they received from their parents. "We're just so lucky our parents made this choice," Nevena says. "No matter how difficult we may have had it, they had it so much harder. We're just so grateful to be here, and so grateful for the opportunity they gave us to live this life."

"Even during the war, when it was hard to find basic amenities, I never felt that I was missing anything," adds Maja. "I never felt unhappy. My parents did such a good job of making the abnormal seem normal. We owe so much to them for making us who we are – instilling in us the importance of education and the desire to work hard. They are the ones who helped us learn to be resilient in life."

Little wonder that the differences that divided their country in the war have no place in their lives. "We don't talk about the differences," Maja says. "To us, we are all the same."

And they have shared the same path – from five girls forced to embark on a refugee's journey, to five women paving the way for others to learn and achieve in a new land of hope and dreams.



Photo above and on page one courtesy of Koryo Photography

On a path to help other refugees: Mirna Pehar, Maja Lacevic, Ivana Djokovic Wendling, Nevena Pehar and Sanja Djokovic.

For more information about WLP's New American Scholarship for Women in Excellence and how to support it, please contact Nevena Pehar, '12, at (813) 974-4125. For more information about USF's Women in Leadership & Philanthropy, visit us online at <http://giving.usf.edu/get-involved/wlp>