

[00:00:00] **Stephen:** This is Road to Resilience, a podcast about facing adversity. I'm Stephen Calabria. Today on the show we have acclaimed author and filmmaker Zlata Filipovic. Zlata was born and partially raised in Sarajevo, Bosnia, which at the time was part of the larger country of Yugoslavia. When war broke out and came to Sarajevo in 1992, Zlata was just 11 years old, and over the next several years she would witness and endure innumerable horrors. Zlata recounted her what she saw in her journal. When that journal was published in 1992, under the title Zlata's Diary, it received worldwide recognition and would provide Zlata and her family the opportunity to escape. We're honored to have Zlata on the show.

[00:00:47] Zlata Filipovich, welcome to the show.

[00:00:50] **Zlata:** Thank you for having me.

[00:00:52] **Stephen:** Could you describe what the lead up to the war was like and how things suddenly changed in your community in Sarajevo?

[00:01:00] **Zlata:** It was sort of like the change when it happened, I think when it was happening, was imperceptible and slowly encroaching. But now when I look back on it, I would say that there was a one day where my life was kind of cut into two halves -- the time before the war, and then the time once the war started.

[00:01:21] And in a way, everything kind of harks back to that moment of the slicing of life into two halves. So even though it's now, you know, 30 years later you still think, that was a, it's 30 years since my life completely changes. My life was sliced into the time before the war and since the war.

[00:01:42] And that kind of almost seems to suggest that you're still living through a war because it hasn't stopped. You haven't had the second slice where you're gonna move away from it. but actually thinking of kind of, the details of when it was happening. I think there's a sort of a level of rejection when something big is coming and changing your life, that you're kind of pushing it aside and you're not accepting it and you're not believing it.

[00:02:07] So therefore, the changes are actually happening in the moment more gradually than with a bit of perspective of time. You say, oh, that was the moment when it all changed, but there was a series of moments where you didn't believe things were changing. But they were.

[00:02:23] **Stephen:** And so what was that?

[00:02:25] **Zlata:** So, I mean, there was kind of, you know, the, the, the war was starting to happen.

[00:02:29] You know, obviously Bosnia was part of a bigger country called Yugoslavia, and there were these, You know, there, there, there was conflicts and shooting and various things happening in other parts of Yugoslavia prior to it coming to Bosnia and then prior to it coming to Sarajevo, which is where I was. So we were seeing all this stuff on the news happening in, in like countries next door.

[00:02:51] But still going, oh, that's terrible, but, but you know, that can happen over there, but it's not gonna happen here. And I think that's generally how we tend to think of all the bad things that happen to people, whether it's divorces or cancers or wars or whatever. They kind of happened to other people until they happen to us.

[00:03:10] So even as the war was slowly encroaching from all these other countries around Bosnia, and even when it started happening in other parts of Bosnia, we're kind of going, oh, it's okay, maybe there, but not here. And you're sort of rejecting the idea that it could happen to you. you know, we felt that we had this slightly more kind of special status that, you know, Sarajevo was this very multicultural city, multiethnic city, and that that was a way of pres-- that was going, that was something that was going to preserve us from succumbing to what was happening in other parts.

[00:03:41] But you know, so there's a sort of, so that's why you don't believe it. So you keep when and things are happening. You, you, you still don't think it's happening. But now kind of looking back there is that day, which is the 5th of April, 1992, when the first gunshots were fired, when the first, you know, victim fell and it started seeming real.

[00:04:02] And it was, you know, this is happening now to us. This is no longer happening to other people. This is ours now. But even then thinking, okay, well, okay, it's been happening, but it's not gonna last a very long time. You know, you again, you keep rejecting it. It's, you know, it's gonna be finished really soon.

[00:04:17] And, you know, some people left at the start of the war going, well, we're just gonna go and visit a family and, you know, we'll be back in a couple of weeks. We're only taking, you know, 10 pairs of underpants, you know, and that's what we're, you know, no one really believed that it would end up being what it was, which was three and a half years.

[00:04:32] And some of those people never saw each other again. And some people lived the reality of being away. Some people lived the reality of staying under the siege of Sarajevo, which went for nearly three and a half years. And we lived for a good chunk of that.

[00:04:45] **Stephen:** Your parents seemed to have served as role models for you for positivity and perseverance. Your mother in particular, after your father injured himself, took on the burden of transporting the family's water, often having to run across the bridge to town because a sniper would pick people off. To what extent would you say that your parents and other family members served as role models for you in terms of how to handle the conflict?

[00:05:15] **Zlata:** That, yeah, that's absolutely true. So my, my dad ended up developing hernia quite early on in the war and therefore he wasn't allowed to pick up anything heavy cuz obviously you're not gonna go to the hospital for hernia at the time when people are, you know, losing their limbs and, and lives.

[00:05:30] So, it was a non-essential surgery. So mom just said, okay, I'm going to do this. I'm gonna go to these points in the city where you could get water, because the running water was cut and electricity and gas and everything was cut. So she took that on, I think as a, just sort of, but this is what you do. I can do this.

[00:05:47] You can't do this. So I'm doing that. That kind of level of practicality. I think now I see that, you know, they held, they, they had to also protect me as much as I could. But they were also very powerful in -- powerless in my, in how much they could protect me. You know, there was, you know, only years and years later did I find out that there was a moment when I asked my mom for a slice of bread or something to eat cuz I was hungry and she was sort of like, no problem.

[00:06:15] And then went over and saw that there was only this one piece of bread that was very moldy and she scraped off the mold and gave it to me, not telling me, obviously, what it was. But that moment of protecting me, not telling me, holding that, yeah, I mean it was. You know, very hard. But I think we were extremely lucky cuz we became part of this kind of community of the neighbors who were people that we would've crossed paths with before the war in a briefly kind of on the stairway or across the street and just kind of wave and nod.

[00:06:48] But we all became extremely important to each other and I think we gave each other so much strength. I kind of remained the only child. The others kind of their children had left at the start of the war, in that thinking they'll be

back in two weeks. But, you know, three and a half years later, four years later, they saw each other.

[00:07:05] So I was one of the kind of few kids stayed. There was one little girl who was much smaller than me, but I kind of became everybody's kid a little bit as well, and we, I think there was so much of trying to preserve as much normality as possible. Things like remembering each other's birthdays, marking birthdays, you know, exchanging recipes for these new ways of cooking now with whatever we were getting from humanitarian aid.

[00:07:31] Humor. Dark humor. You know, there was, there were radio shows which were kind of whenever we could maybe get some electricity or we would connect the battery from our car to our radio so that we could listen to the news. But also sometimes listen to these kind of comedy shows, like things that are, you know, songs that were written, music that was played, the idea of maintaining some sort of level of culture.

[00:07:53] For me, reading books, all these types of things, **we were kind of supporting ourselves and each other, knowing that at any moment, very fully aware that at any moment a bomb could come through the window, a sniper bullet could come through the window. It did. It just didn't hurt us. Those bombs did come then we have to run to the shelter, that there was no food, medication, electricity, water, all of these things.**

[00:08:17] **But somewhere in there, living whilst surviving, living and taking control as much as possible of a level of maintaining humanity.**

[00:08:27] **Stephen:** Why didn't they get you out? Was it a money problem? What,

[00:08:31] **Zlata:** No, at the start of the war, we, we, there were a lot of attempts where I was thinking maybe I'll go on my own with some family friends who were leaving and then it was like, God, I'm 11 and you know, I'm an only child.

[00:08:41] I'm very close to my parents and you know, and this is only gonna be for two weeks, so stay back. And I was crying. I mean, there were times when we were crossing the bridge outside of my house, me with the suitcase about to go board the bus to get out of the city and then like halfway across the bridge, crying, coming home, saying, No, and let's stay together.

[00:09:00] And you know, then thinking, should mom and I leave? But then dad stays. And whilst we were making all these decisions, there was this month of this kind of still flexibility where you could potentially leave or not. And then the 2nd of May happened, which is when the city really felt completely locked and then you couldn't leave.

[00:09:16] So, no buses or, planes or trains were leaving anymore. The city was fully under siege. The city was fully locked, and at that point you couldn't leave. And we couldn't leave. And until the moment, which was had to do with the diary being published, is how we left, which is kind of insane because there would've been others who have been much more worthy of being taken out in terms of being sick and wounded.

[00:09:41] But we got out because I was scribbling something, so I was scribbling something when I was 10 before any of this was even a remotest possibility.

[00:09:49] **Stephen:** Right. And so the conflict basically began in April. May 2nd, 1992. Seems like it was an important day in the trajectory of your story. Could you talk a little bit about that day and what that cellar in particular came to represent for you?

[00:10:08] **Zlata:** So, the cellar there was the apartment where we were living was a part of sort of a house, and downstairs were some offices. Upstairs was our apartment and there was a cellar and really, I mean, I never used to go there. I thought there was like where witches and bats and, you know, trolls or whatever lived in.

[00:10:23] So, I kind of didn't really like, it was very humid, dark, nothing space that I would usually sort of hang back on top of the stairs if dad had to go and get something from there. But then I don't even know how we found out that when the bombing starts, really where you should go is go underground.

[00:10:37] So, the cellar suddenly was that ,it was a place of shelter. So, the 2nd of May was a, there was that 5th of April when the first bullets were fired and it felt like something was really changing. But the 2nd of May probably felt like really the day when it had changed, the city was locked.

[00:10:55] The post office across the road from us was burned. It was the main city post office. The phone lines were cut. You know, we could smell the burning, the, you know, the, the smoke and you know, of this huge, beautiful

post office where my parents met for the first time. You know, this was sort of a significant place in our kind of family history and mythology.

[00:11:15] And it, that was burned. That's meant no longer having kind of connections with people anymore. But we, you know, that was the day when we kind of ran into the cellar and stay there for hours and hours and hours. You know, there were tanks in front of the house. There was serious bombing happening and that's when it felt like, okay, this really is the war.

[00:11:32] And it really was after that, that we couldn't leave anymore. It's after that, that the water cuts and the electricity cuts and everything started happening. We ran downstairs, we had this sort of bag, and obviously I've seen so much of this now in Ukraine, when people have that bag next to the door mm-hmm.

[00:11:47] That you run to the, the cellar with. So I think we had kind of slightly prepared that bag and we, for the first time, utilized that bag, brought the bag downstairs with some snacks and things. We forgot to bring the bird, our canary, stayed up because in that sort of moment of rushing and then thinking, how is he, and just thinking, okay, when it stops, Do we go up now?

[00:12:08] Oh no, it started again. So when does this stop, you know, when do you even know when this stops, when this bombing has done its thing for today or for this stretch of time. So it was a, it was a, it was a day when it all became very real with the smell of burning, with a tank in front of the house, with spending hours and hours in this place, which now was a safe, had to be a safe, warm place.

[00:12:32] A sanctuary from what was above where it had been the opposite prior to that.

[00:12:36] **Stephen:** Right. You had something of a tight-knit community of people living close to each other. You referred to yourselves as the neighborhood. If you would, talk about those relationships and what it was that bound you together and how you all helped to pull each other through each day.

[00:12:55] **Zlata:** So the neighbors, there was a, a connecting kind of courtyard between our back of our house and another house. And there was a wall in that courtyard. So we found out that the cellar that the other house had was nicer than ours, smelled less bad, and was a bit more kind of functional. So they said, well, you know, why don't you come in into our cellar?

[00:13:15] So from from there on, what began was, whenever the bombing would happen, if we had time, we would run down into the courtyard, then try and hop over this wall. We had a ladder kind of on it. There's a photograph of us all hanging by the ladder. We'd kind of go over the ladder, over the wall and into their cellar and then spend the time with them.

[00:13:35] But so those were the moments when we were kind of hiding from the shelling together. The courtyard had a cherry tree. We picked the cherries when we didn't have water in the courtyard, which felt just a bit more protected cuz it wasn't exposed to the street. We would collect rainwater by like piercing hole through the drains to kind of get, collect rainwater so we could bring that in to use it for flushing it cuz, we didn't have any of that.

[00:13:59] The neighbors, there was a sort of a diversity of people. You know, there was a couple who were same age as my parents whose daughters had left at the start of the war, so they were obviously really missing their daughters. They had their, you know, the guy's mom was there, so there was granny there.

[00:14:13] There was the three of us, the apartment next door to us, suddenly these kind of refugees from a different part of town came in. They had a little girl and a little boy. Another guy was also left, his family in a part of the city that was occupied and he came in and he brought the cat, and then the cat was kind of everybody's cat as well.

[00:14:31] So, we suddenly kind of found ourselves supporting each other mentally through friendship, through laughter, through remembering these birthdays, through cooking together, through sharing. If, say, somebody would get something from the outside, maybe a parcel of something, you go, okay, what have we got here?

[00:14:48] Okay, so there's some medication here, so we'll give that to the granny. There's a chocolate. Okay, we'll share that between the three apartments that have the kids, you know, there's, you know, so we would kind of really share support, in practical terms, but also in keeping each other afloat terms. The neighbors would come over to our house every, every night at nine o'clock where we would connect the radio and listen to the news to see what the French radio was talking about us.

[00:15:16] they had the program in our own language. So we would listen, what's the outside world saying? What's gonna happen? You know, when they would get a do letter from their daughters abroad, you know, we'd read it together and. You know, we, we shared everything and we kind of opened

ourselves away from our kind of units of apartments and really extended ourselves to each other. And I think that really helped all of us.

[00:15:38] **Stephen:** You had each other's back, there were other people there for you. Yeah. That you weren't completely alone.

[00:15:43] **Zlata:** Yeah. Who were not, wouldn't have been on our radar before, except as just sort of familiar flat spaces across the road. We've really, and you know, now they are the closest, some of the closest people we have because of what we've gone through together.

[00:15:57] **Stephen:** Two of your family members during that whole experience were your bird, the canary, and your cat. They seemed to provide an outsized sense of meaning and purpose for you during the worst days. Could you tell us about them and what it was about them that you think made them so important to you and your family?

[00:16:18] **Zlata:** So the bird I got from my, I think ninth birthday, so it was before the war, I was 11 when the war started. And he was sort of chirping around a yellow canary. The kind of like, some of the things, you know, even, even sort of a symbolism of not having stuff, no longer having food, was when we kind of realized that we were running out of the bird food that you usually go to the shop but don't buy or sell bird foods during the war.

[00:16:42] So we were kind of going, what are we gonna do with him? What's he going to, What's he going to eat? Now that there's no bird food, will he have the little bit of crumbs of bread that we may have got? Or, you know, what do we feed him?

[00:16:53] And then these sort of channels opening up across the city where even though we didn't have phones, and this is before mobile phones, a channel would come through, that there's like, there's a bird in this street that's running out of food and somehow a little bag of food from somewhere someone would go, this friend of mine that I was just, cause I was visiting my mother, and their neighbors, they had a little bit of extra food, so they put it in a bag and they gave it to me. So I brought it to you for your bird. Like, it, it even kind of became that symbolism of sharing that the birds were sharing bird food or the owners were sharing bird food.

[00:17:26] And then this young man, you know, he was in his kind of like mid-twenties, who was a sort of a refugee in his own city. He left his parents in a



part of city that was occupied, but he crossed into the part where we were all living, to stay in his daughter's apartment, and he's in that building next to ours.

[00:17:41] We shared the courtyard, we shared the wall, we shared the cellar. He was walking down the road one day and running, you know, because of snipers and everything, and this little white kitten was following him and he was like, will you just leave me alone? And the kitten kept following, following and he remembered that somebody told me if a cat follows you, take it.

[00:17:59] So I dunno where he heard that. So he just suddenly turned up with this tiny little fluffy yellow ginger ball, that was extremely cute and sweet and innocent and vulnerable. And he officially kind of took it for himself and that building, but she also learned very easily to cross the, the ladder and the wall and everything.

[00:18:20] So she would, the, the cat would kind of literally hear me when I would wake up and I opened the window. She, you could hear, she would just go like, mm, in the other house and then go ding, down the staircase, hop onto the table, hop onto the wall, down the ladder into our thing, and then come in and stay in bed with me.

[00:18:38] So she became all of ours and, oh my God. I mean, I, I just loved her so much. I absolutely was crazy about her. I think she has made me a cat person and, I hadn't had one before and she was, you know, everything. She was another glue of this neighborhood. She was super sweet. I'd never met a, a cat as sweet as her.

[00:18:58] I have forever since, you know, searched for a cat that would be as fluffy and as sweet as her, as she wasn't. Like, I loved her so much. It literally was like kissing her and like hugging her, you know, it was, she was so, so, so important to me.

[00:19:11] She was really tiny. She had kittens, but because she hadn't really grown because it was also, what do we feed her? Like we have her now, we barely have stuff to eat. What do we give to the cat now as well and the bird? So she was really tiny. She never really grew, so she was kind of kitten-esque, but she still developed and she was meant to have kittens.

[00:19:29] And it was just one morning when I did this kind of open the window in the bathroom that she would know was a sign that I'm awake and would do this journey to me. That didn't happen. And nothing was happening.

And then I went over and, and they told me that she died trying to kind of give birth to these kittens.

[00:19:42] So it was a real like, well, she would've been the right size if it wasn't for the stupid war. She would've had those kittens and we would've all had kittens. You know, she would've never been in our life probably if there wasn't a war. So you're kind of always trying to untangle these, like, what would've been, what could have been, what should have been, what was, you know, meant to be or not.

[00:19:59] So when she died, that was very, very hard for me, you know, cuz it was a lot of, obviously a lot of death and a lot of loss happening all the time anyway, but that was I think it, it had a really strong, it culminated a lot in her dying.

[00:20:14] **Stephen:** You witnessed both firsthand and secondhand, an immeasurable level of suffering and death. Death of family, death of friends, death of the city itself. Over time, it seemed you began to lose some hope, but you never became mean or embittered, or at least it didn't come through in the writing. Could you talk a little bit about maintaining a sense of right and wrong amid the chaos and still not giving in to cynicism and overwhelming negativity.

[00:20:50] **Zlata:** I think I'm kind of probably naturally a hopeful person. So there were the times when were the hardest is when I thought this may never end or, or I don't know how this will end if, when this will end.

[00:21:07] And that was hard. It's almost like living the day to day of it obviously was extremely hard, but you get used to it. And that is the absolute insanity of us as humans, that how adaptable and how quickly, and, you know, we've all gone recently through COVID on a global level and how our lives have changed and how we adapted.

[00:21:26] And when COVID started happening, that all that brought a lot of stuff for me in a way in which I hadn't really, I don't live with all the feelings of my experience of the war on a day-to-day basis, but certainly that idea of something's about to start, it's horrible. We don't know how long it's gonna last.

[00:21:43] We don't know who it's gonna hurt that we love, that was all of that kind of came back with COVID, but at the same time, we've all just gone through something that, where we've kind of adapted. So you adapt. The, the hard thing is, When does this end and losing hope or knowing, the knowledge

that there is an end, whatever that end is, however good or bad that end is that not knowing when it ends.

[00:22:10] And that's maybe the moments where I found the hardest. Otherwise, the most of the time I just thought, well, it'll end and at some point it will end. And I hoped for that, and I yearned for that. And I yearned for seeing my friends and being a kid again and going to school again, and in the meantime, trying to keep myself as untouched by the ugliness of all this, even though the destruction and the ugliness of it all was everywhere in every, every atom of my life, but trying to keep something steady in it and hope, and I guess that's maybe what gave the strength through that time. And I think, writing the neighbors, the support network, the cat, the bird, you know, books.

[00:22:56] **Stephen:** I also imagine that it was, I don't wanna say easier, but just a different experience because you were a child versus being an adult, where you didn't know what was causing this. You didn't know what was happening. You didn't know what would ultimately end it. But it's a lot easier sometimes as a kid to wake up to a fresh new day and everything's happy and joyful, and you're starting with a complete blank slate as opposed to waking up as an adult, the kids as you called them. And, uh, you have a lifetime of negative experiences and cynicism that you draw upon as many adults draw upon. And so I imagine that that was perhaps what made it easier for your experience as opposed to having been an adult and gone through it.

[00:23:41] **Zlata:** Yeah, absolutely, but then even, even among the adults, I've seen some that fared better than others, you know? So I, you know, some people found it all really, really very hard. And then some, which is maybe what happened to our little neighborhood, which is what the strength of sharing those moments together and maintaining each other and supporting each other, that's where maybe all of our strength lies. So yes, absolutely.

[00:24:08] As a kid you are more adaptable to everything. It's sad, then, as a kid, very quickly you're like, learn to differentiate between it's this gun that's shooting at the moment and that gun and of going, you know this awful thing suddenly becoming normalized to you like that from the outside is, you know, heartbreaking and didn't happen only to me.

[00:24:31] It didn't happen to only us in Sarajevo and it's not even, you know, it's happening today still to so many. But I think even as an adult there is the kind of variety of how you go through it. And I think for my parents it helped that we all had each other with those neighbors.

[00:24:48] **Stephen:** You had to face fear every single day. Even stepping outside became so risky that you actually gave a nickname to your neighborhood sniper. In terms of having to face that fear constantly, was it something you became less afraid of over time or did every new tragedy bring it back in waves? And was there a strategy you employed for yourself to get through it?

[00:25:13] **Zlata:** So a lot of the time my parents didn't let me go out. You know, you kind of look at what's essential and what's not essential. So what was essential is somebody needed to go get water. Somebody needed to go pick up the food from the kind of humanitarian aid pickup point, it's not essential to go to the park.

[00:25:28] It's not essential to go for a walk. And there was that moment when there was a park next to my house at the very start of the war where it was a beautiful, sunny sort of spring day and it had been very quiet. There hadn't been any shooting for a while and everybody went out, and the kids were like, Zlata, you know, cuz you could see it from my window, come on, Zlata, come in. We were all in the park.

[00:25:48] I'm downstairs and my mom was leaving and she told my Dad, don't let her go out. And she was really like, Do not let her go out cuz she knew that even if she says it, I could maybe swindle my dad a bit more easily than her. And luckily he didn't because the bomb did fall into that park and a lot of those kids were wounded.

[00:26:04] And one of them was killed who was exactly the same age as me. So, you know, you kind of, that sort of idea of maybe sometimes, you know, you don't hear shooting for a while, so you kind of think, oh, maybe it's okay. It's okay. And then it happens again. And the fear is back in you and then it releases, you know, in the same way with COVID, it was like, oh, we're fine.

[00:26:23] We're fine. Oh my God, another lockdown. We're, no, we're actually okay. We seem to be, yeah, yeah, yeah. And then again, so that kind of always reinforces that for you when, when it, when a big kind of, like that with the park would happen. But yeah, you do adapt and that is the mad sort of crazy thing about it, is that you adapt.

[00:26:40] So, you know, I remember very well going over to see my friend, which was not essential. But it's also essential to spend a bit of time with your friend for your own kind of mental well-being and for being a kid and you

know, so I would go over to her house occasionally or she'd come to mine. This was very rare and very, very special.

[00:26:57] And I went over there with my dad, and my dad was, as we were coming back and we were walking around the kind of the banks of the river, which has a sort of a wall, the sniper started shooting and my dad and I were just like walking and then like, oh, he started shooting, and then duck underneath the wall.

[00:27:13] Continuing our conversation. Still like talking about what happened and then like, I think he stopped and get up. Oh no, he's still there. And it was it, it was normal that this was happening. So I think there's always this kind of like, you're stretched between kind of like, you know, you let yourself go a little bit.

[00:27:29] You get yourself go a little bit, and then something happens and then like snaps you back into the kind of, the core, the house, the safety, the seller, what's essential, what's non-essential. So, you're kind of always testing it because you want it to stop.

[00:27:42] You want it to be normal, you want it, but it wasn't until three and a half years later when one of the agreements that was signed was actually respected and became the one, even those peace agreements, you know, they'd get signed. You go, okay, they've signed it, so it's all cool. It's finished now, isn't it? And then it would start again. And maybe sometimes those kind of, those moments when you think something's improved and then it's hits you back down again are actually worse than constantly feeling like this is my reality.

[00:28:09] So a kind of a raised hope and then dashed hope is actually more painful than forever living in a state of vigilance and slight hopelessness.

[00:28:20] **Stephen:** And I imagine that once it actually did happen, it was almost impossible to believe it for a while.

[00:28:27] **Zlata:** Yes, and that's what took a long, you know, when, when the agreement was signed. We know that the date and peace agreement, which is ultimately what ended the conflict in a, in a written form. When that happened, it was like, okay, is this the one, hang on, wait. See, because we, we had moved at that point to Ireland and we were wondering, when can we go back and, you know, visit my, my grandmother, my grandfather had passed away, and all the other family members had stayed behind.

[00:28:50] So yeah, you kind of, you lose a sense of believing in something really genuinely being positive because the hope had been dashed so many times. So, yeah, it was definitely a period of disbelief, and then maybe like six months later it was like, okay, well maybe this is the one that will last.

[00:29:05] **Stephen:** Maybe we can finally exhale.

[00:29:07] **Zlata:** Yeah.

[00:29:07] **Stephen:** Right. You seemed at the time to possess an almost otherworldly optimism, but at the same time seemingly rooted in the present and in reality, like rejoicing at small day-to-day victories and hoping for a better future. How did you maintain that kind of perspective, and to what extent would you say it's still something you practice?

[00:29:32] **Zlata:** It's that kind of sense of hope. It's strange that I would use a phrase of hers, because I ended up being often compared to her, Anne Frank, because, you know, I'd read her diary just before the war started, so war was not ever something that was happening to me when I read her diary, you know, and she has that sort of line, you know, despite everything I, I still believe that people are, you know, in the goodness of people.

[00:29:55] And I think I still did and do, and I guess I was always looking for that and always trying to find that even when the circumstances above you are proving you wrong, there's still those sparks and glimpses of goodness, which was, in our case, the neighborhood, the cat, et cetera. The sharing, the bird food being transported from one bird to the next. I think in those sort of extreme situations, you see the worst of the humanity and the best of the humanity.

[00:30:28] So, that sort of level of pressure accentuates both and if you're so predisposed as maybe genetically, mentally, being raised wise, I was, to continue to believe in it. I did. And, I don't know, maybe blindly or maybe for, purely for my self-preservation, I just hoped that it would end that, that it had to end like anything.

[00:30:50] I mean, there is, somebody later on gave me this, it was a poem, I think it was like fifth century BC. This needs to be like fact-checked, by a Chinese poet, but it was sort of, it's called All Things Pass. And you know, and it kind of goes along the lines of neither the same, the rain or the sunshine.

[00:31:07] So when you're having a fabulous day, don't believe it, it's gonna end. And when you're having the worst day, believe it, it will end. So, this

ability to just stay in that moment knowing that that moment will pass. Whether it's a good one or a bad one. Obviously, you don't wanna think about it too much when it's a good moment, but it helps to think about it when it's a bad moment.

[00:31:26] And that poem, even though I didn't know it at the time, it sort of encapsulates, I guess, how I found hope and optimism and looked for it and saw it in in people around me.

[00:31:38] **Stephen:** How did it ultimately end?

[00:31:41] **Zlata:** It ended with, as every conflict does, you know, people sitting around a table signing a piece of paper.

[00:31:46] **Stephen:** Well, for you, I mean.

[00:31:47] **Zlata:** Oh, how did the war end for me? I mean, in, in certain ways, you know, I can still go. I wouldn't be sitting here in Dublin talking to you if it wasn't for that, you know, I wouldn't be with my partner who's Irish, I wouldn't, et cetera. If it wasn't for that, I wouldn't maybe be doing the work that I do.

[00:32:04] You know, you would've never met me cuz I would've never written the diary and you wouldn't have known about me or whatever. So I can forever go back to the kind of, when, when does this all begin? And you know, how it, the war changed everything and put everything on different kind of tracks and trajectories.

[00:32:21] For me, it ended by, in a kind of very concrete way when my parents and I had the chance to leave because my diary was published, and the publishers of the diary were going to do the impossible, which is get somebody out from the siege of Sarajevo. And that's when we left.

[00:32:37] It was 23rd of December, uh, 1993, and we left everybody behind. We arrived in Paris at Christmas, lights everywhere. We left everyone in the darkness in the cold, second winter of the war coming in. You know, now truly nothing to heat yourself with, you know, no more supplies of any sort. Going into the abundance of Christmas and Paris and lights and

[00:33:01] **Stephen:** The City of Lights.

[00:33:02] **Zlata:** Exactly. The city of lights after we left the city of darkness. And, the kind of craziness of how close that was, you know, you take two hourlong flights and you're from one in the other.

[00:33:13] **Stephen:** Was that a culture shock moment for you?

[00:33:16] **Zlata:** Again, I think, you know, for me it was easier cuz it was, I was younger. I, I think about the culture shock that it was for my parents. I was, you know, it was so sad to say goodbye to everyone, and knowing that some of those people we didn't see again. We knew what we were leaving them in. You know, those people who left at the start of the war didn't know what was to ensue.

[00:33:34] We really knew, we knew the day-to-day reality of living this and we were leaving them all in. And it was only because I was scribbling in a colorful notebook from the age of 10. Not because others, as I say, were more, more worthy of being evacuated, to be treated, to be hospitalized, et cetera.

[00:33:55] So it was, it was very strange, you know, it was very hard for my parents. It was hard for me too. And then kind of going, so what now, you know? Okay. So you know, the thing that you wanted to end ended in some way for you. It did not end for others. It did not for anyone that you love who stayed behind, but it sort of allegedly ended for you. So where to now?

[00:34:17] **Stephen:** It all ended. You've left it all behind materially. Yeah. Physically, you're no longer in that environment. You are no longer living under those hardships. You're sitting now with a glass of tea next to you, on one side with a keyboard on the other, outside of your house in Dublin. Do you ever have these moments where you almost pinch yourself, like, am I really here? Is this really what my life is having come from essentially having nothing. Is it sometimes difficult to believe? Is it sometimes feeling, kind of like you said at the beginning, that that isn't even really over? Is it something that's still difficult for you to become accustomed to?

[00:35:03] **Zlata:** You know, it's like those, like, you know those comic books as a kid where you were like, if you want Mickey Mouse to walk through the door on the left, turn to page 32 if you want him to walk to the door on the right, you know,

[00:35:15] **Stephen:** choose your own adventure,



[00:35:15] **Zlata:** Choose next page kind of thing. And I kind of, everything, this tea, this keyboard, this house, you know, the people inside that house, this city, everything, is because that happened. So, and I'm very conscious of that. I'm very aware of that. Doesn't mean that I don't fully live it and, and I'm in it, but if I think about it, it's like, isn't that crazy?

[00:35:37] Especially with kind of the anniversary say, coming up now, there's always the kind of anniversary of April when you're kind of going, God, isn't it? It was in 1992 that, that those first shots were fired. You know, it's the anniversary of the 2nd of May. It's the anniversary of this person passing. It's the, you know, being killed.

[00:35:56] It's the anniversary of leaving. You know, and, and how did I, how crazy. You know, who would've thought that, you know, in 1991, September, 1991, as I started, say, that new notebook with the new school year of my diary going, I'm so happy to be going back to see all my friends and, you know, my new notebook and my new pencil case and everything that person, that life ended up here and that would've never happened for that.

[00:36:24] What I thought my life would've been was Sarajevo for the rest of my life. I would maybe have visited Dublin in a kind of, let's go to the Guinness Storehouse kind of way and lovely music. But that this is my reality is all because of that and these kind of random circumstances and roads that opened up that got me here.

[00:36:48] **Stephen:** You've since moved here to Ireland, where you're now both a documentary filmmaker and a parent to a little girl of your own. Has the idea of parenthood changed the way you view your experience?

[00:37:02] **Zlata:** I think the fact that I'm a parent now has maybe changed my perspective of my own parents, which is that kind of idea of wanting to do the best and the fact that in their circumstances and not their own and so many parents around the world though at that time then still today, that idea that my mom had to scrape that piece of bread and pretend that there wasn't mold on it so she could give me something because I was hungry and, and how that made her feel, which she also didn't share with me, didn't reveal to me until years and years and years later.

[00:37:36] I think it's given me a new perspective on my parents, for sure. And the absolute tiny bit of time in life that we get as kids, that kind of carefree, beautiful time that I'm sort of seeing in this kind of crazy three and a half year old and how quickly that goes and how unfair it is for that to be interrupted by

something as horrific as war and the tragedies that are happening around the world.

[00:38:05] So, yeah, it's so short. We're so grown-up an adult for such a long time of our life. We're so not a child for a very long time. And the, the kind of the protection of that and as a parent, trying to see if you can do some of that even against all odds.

[00:38:22] **Stephen:** That's it for my questions. Was there anything else you wanted to say?

[00:38:25] **Zlata:** No, thank you.

[00:38:26] **Stephen:** Zlata Filipovic. Thank you so much for your time.

[00:38:29] **Zlata:** Good pronunciation.

[00:38:31] **Stephen:** Zlata Filipovic is a documentary filmmaker and the author of Zlata's Diary. That's all for this episode of Road to Resilience. If you enjoyed it, please rate, review, and subscribe to our podcast on your favorite podcast platform. This podcast is a production of the Mount Sinai Health System. It's produced by me, Stephen Calabria, and our Executive Producer, Lucia Lee. From all of us here at Mount Sinai, thanks for listening and we'll catch you next time.