

Review by Evan Williams, in *The Australian*

WWithout knowing a word of it, you can hear something beautiful in the Serbo-Croat language. There is a fine Slavic — almost a Celtic — lilt to the vowels, a richness and intricacy in the way consonants fit together. Like French, it sounds especially lovely on the lips of children; and after seeing **Exile in Sarajevo** I am sure it is the wrong language for recounting terrible crimes.

Exile in Sarajevo is a documentary by two Bosnian-Australians, Tahir Cambis and Alma Sahbaz, about the Serbian siege of Sarajevo. I have only the vaguest knowledge of the politics of the Balkans war and won't pretend to make judgments about it. Cambis — for the film is really his and reflects his experiences as a young, wounded refugee from the fighting — approaches his subject with a deep commitment to his people and Sarajevo, which he loves for the richness of its culture. But the suffering he describes transcends all partisan feeling; his film would be no less affecting if the atrocities had been committed by the other side (as sadly, we know, many were).

Listening to eight-year-old Amira describing the mass murder and rape of her friends and family, one is glad, in a way, that she is speaking in a foreign language — foreign, that is, to me. The subtitles convey her meaning, but little of what must have been the horrific nuances of her narrative, though we are aware of silences, the occasional breaking of the voice, the gathering of breath, the groping for particular words. Amira had to be coaxed to speak and she does so bravely. When she describes how a schoolteacher, a Serb, took a class of children into the street, produced a knife and went about stabbing and cutting throats while a child cried, "Please don't hurt us, teacher!", you wonder whether any language would have been adequate before she died.

Nirvana was a 13-year-old killed by a Serbian shell burst. The only time we see her — caught by someone's video the day she is dancing in a red dress at a party, twirling wildly among friends and partners and, amid all the horror of this city, briefly and ecstatically happy. We observe the grief of her mother (now living in Missouri), the bedroom with its posters, the funeral. Like most children, Nirvana was buried in darkness; snipers liked funerals in Sarajevo and even at night, even at the funeral of a child, it was inadvisable to smoke, or to drive in the country, or stand near a balcony or an open window. Many of the children who died in the siege were taken by snipers, who were paid, according to one witness (and for some reason in German currency),

200 deutschmarks per victim. Cambis returns repeatedly to the image of Nirvana's pirouetting body, her face alive with confidence and joy. This, he insists, was the attitude of the city's inhabitants, despite their suffering.

Exile in Sarajevo is rich in imagery as well. Like Anne Prank, Amira kept a diary — a big well-thumbed book — full of her drawings and writings and pasted scraps. The camera roams over the words, written in her bold but still immature hand, and the little pictures done in coloured pencils or crayons. One shows a woman's severed finger still bearing a ring. The stick children with mutilated throats and limbs lying in scribbled red puddles are infinitely more wounding than the real footage of atrocities. And of that there is plenty, too: flowing gutters after the market square massacre in August 1995, the Drina — a river not unlike the Yarra in size and appearance — a virtual torrent of death.

His film is an unforgettable hymn to the courage of a people and a city. Its style is alternately jagged and lyrical; there is an excellent mix of music. Horror, anger and indignation are here, but nothing I could detect of hatred or bitterness. Remembering Amira, remembering Nirvana, remembering Cambis himself and his harsh experiences, the message is one of hope. If it were not, **Exile in Sarajevo** would be pretty well unendurable.

Exile in Sarajevo (M)

Sydney and Perth; Adelaide and Melbourne next week

Paris, Texas(M)

Sydney and Melbourne

Evan Williams _____

