

AFTERWORD by Ervin Rustemagić

About Joe, me, my family and this book

My friendship with Joe Kubert and his family lasts longer than 40 years. I don't remember now the exact year when we first met, but it was in the early 70's, at a comics festival in Europe, probably at Lucca or Angoulême. Then we met again in San Diego, in 1977, when the Comic-Con (organized by Shel Dorf), was still a very small event and held in a hotel lobby.

Ever since then we were in constant contact and seeing each other occasionally. But it was not until Joe and his wife Muriel visited my family and me in our home city of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the summer of 1990, that Joe and I started talking about working together. Only then did we agree that Joe will produce a new three-volume graphic novel series "Abraham Stone" for my company Strip Art Features (SAF). And in the following days, when I took Joe and Muriel to visit the ancient city of Mostar in Herzegovina, and then Dubrovnik – the jewel of the Croatian Adriatic coast – we discussed this project in detail. All the time while we were talking about it, Joe was making sketches, thus the series and the main character were already taking shape. So, this is how "Abraham Stone" was born. The series was published just everywhere and we achieved quite a big success with it.

But, while Joe was still working on the third volume of "Abe Stone," the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina began and my family and I were trapped there, while



A photo taken in our new house's garden in Celje, Slovenia, in early spring 1994. Maja was 11 years old and Edvin was 6.

our home and my office in Sarajevo were all destroyed by shells in the first few months of the war. More than 14,000 pieces of original art – including some of Joe's work – were destroyed in a fire in SAF's offices.

After spending 18 months in all that hell, which should rather be called 'slaughter of civilians' than a 'war,' my family and I got out from Sarajevo and, in September 1993, we settled in the newly-formed country of Slovenia – also a former Yugoslav republic – which is bordering with Italy, Austria, Hungary and Croatia. And, already in May 1994, Joe and Muriel visited us at our new home in Slovenia. It was only then that Joe told me about his plan to make a graphic novel based on the faxes which I was sending him from the war. He already had a title for it: "Fax from Sarajevo." I was very much against that idea because – being fresh out of the war – I wanted to concentrate on the future of my family and my work, and not to go back through all that war saga again.

But Joe was very firm and decisive, insisting he was going to do that book with or without my help. So, we had a friendly argument about it at my home, where he and Muriel stayed for a few days, and that argument was interrupted by my daughter Maja, who was only 12 at that time. Maja told me: "Why do you argue with Joe, Dad? It is going to be *his* book and not yours." Joe laughed at it, kissed Maja, and the first thing he did when he got back to New Jersey was



Whenever they find the time the Rustemagics go to their Sarajevo home, which they built again. This photo was taken in Sarajevo on July 20, 2007, for Maja's birthday.



Maja is now a doctor of medicine, a pediatrician. She works in a local hospital In Celje, where she takes care of pre-school children.

starting work on "Fax from Sarajevo." And I couldn't oppose any longer his great wish to tell the world this story. Being one of the greatest artists in the profession, Joe was also a great man, very concerned about suffering of people – from Holocaust to Bosnia.

After Dark Horse published the first edition of "Fax from Sarajevo" in the United States, in October 1996, this book was translated in many languages and published in France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Denmark, Finland, Czech Republic, Brazil, etc. In most recent years we're getting many publishers' requests for reprints of this book.

Unfortunately, my friend Joe cannot see and enjoy all these beautiful reprints of this book, because he passed away five years ago.

Sunday, August 12, 2012, was the last day of a comic convention in Rosario, Argentina. Late in the afternoon, I was giving a lecture to the Argentinean comic writers, artists and publishers. Most of the questions they – and the journalists who were present – asked were about my relationship with Joe Kubert and about "Fax from Sarajevo." Later in the evening I went to a restaurant for dinner, which had been organized for all the invited guests of the convention. The dinner was rather quiet, very unusual for Argentina, and I noticed some people looking at me with certain sorrow in their

eyes, but I thought I was just imagining their sad gaze.

The dinner ended after midnight and, when I got back to my hotel, I switched on my laptop to check e-mails before going to sleep. There was a message from my friend Mike Richardson, the president of Dark Horse Comics: "Dear Ervin, As I'm sure you've heard, Joe passed away today. I'm really saddened by this. Best, Mike." This came to me as if a tumultuous storm suddenly consumed a perfectly clear sky. The rest of the night, I was sleepless, thinking about so many great moments I have spent with Joe, and simply not believing that I was never going to see him again. In the morning, I realized that the pillow was wet with my tears. I couldn't eat the breakfast. I just had a coffee in the bar with some friends, and it was only then that the American artist Dave Johnson, who was also present at the last night's dinner, confessed to me that everyone in the restaurant last night knew that Joe died, because someone got the news, but they all were hiding it from me because they didn't want to make me upset during that meal.

When I returned home I called Joe's son Andy, who told me all about what Joe was going through in his last days. I said to him that I was amazed by the number of condolences I was receiving every day from all over the world, as if I was a member of the family. "You are a member of our family, Ervin," Andy said. "You are!"

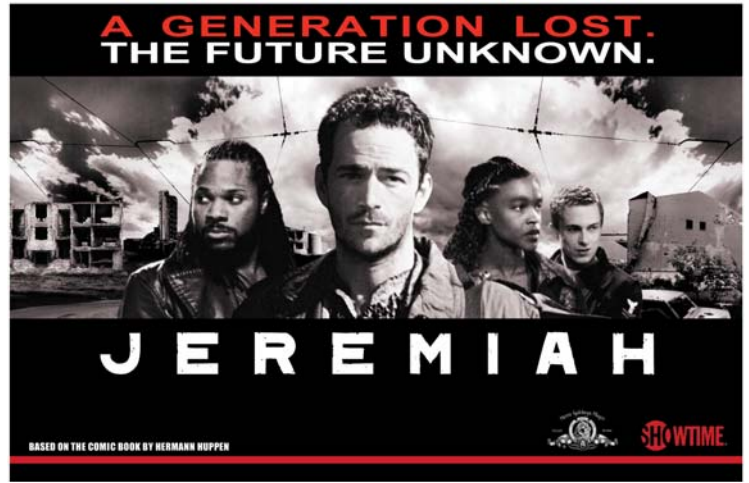
I had tears in my eyes again.



Edvin has earned his Master's degree in Information Security at the London University, and now works in that field. In his spare time he is composing pop and R&B music for American artists.



After the war, Ervin took a number of friends to Sarajevo, and they all wanted to see what was left of the SAF offices.



The ruins were used as the background of the official poster for a TV series, based on SAF's comic series "Jeremiah". Ervin was an executive producer of the 2002-04 MGM/Showtime production.



Muriel and Joe Kubert with Ervin (in the middle) during the couples' visit to the Rustemagics in Slovenia in spring 1994.



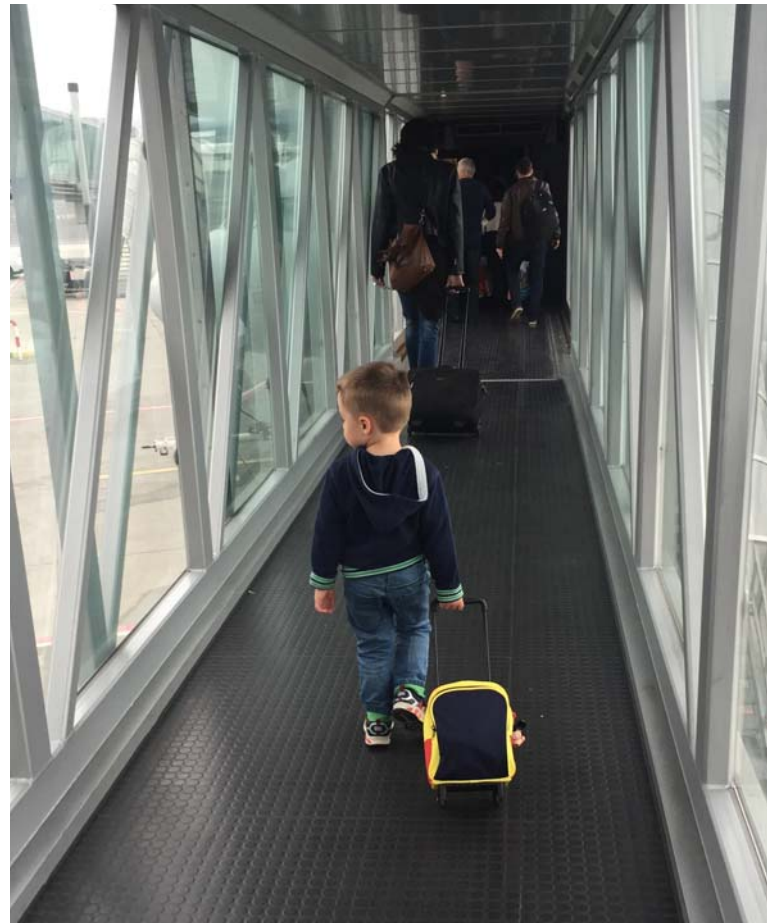
Muriel and Joe loved Edina's Bosnian way of cooking, and Edina always enjoyed hosting them at her home in Sarajevo before the war and, later on, here in Slovenia.



Muriel and Joe in front of the SAF office building in Celje in the summer of 2001.



On June 17, 2011, Maja married her boyfriend Alem Toskić, a professional handball player.



On March 27, 2012, their son Benjamin was born. Benjamin, who shares his birthday with his uncle Edvin, loves flying on aircrafts.



Edvin has made many friends while studying at the London University. Here he is (on the right) with Joaquín from Spain (on the left) and Platon from Greece, December 18, 2014.



Edina and Ervin in Provence, France, in June 2015.