

## **Sarajevans Mourn Lost Legacy of 1984 Olympics**

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Multimillion dollar investment in winter sports was wrecked in the war that followed.

As the world's eyes turn towards the Winter Olympics in Sochi, residents of Sarajevo have bittersweet memories of their own moment of glory 30 years ago.

Little now remains of the extensive developments put in place for the Sarajevo Winter Olympics. Most of the purpose-built hotels and sports facilities were destroyed during the 44-month siege that ravaged the city and left nearly 12,000 people dead.

Mt Trebevic, used for a number of Olympic events, became an artillery strongpoint. The two hills used for ski-jumping saw heavy combat and the Zetra ice rink was burnt to the ground.

Those who were there still remember the excitement and sense of optimism that came after Sarajevo beat its nearest rival, the Japanese city of Sapporo, to win the 1984 games by just three votes.

Edin Ramovic was 19 at the time and recalls the era fondly.

"As early as 1982, I started collecting souvenirs related to the Winter Olympics," said Ramovic, now a sales executive at a Sarajevo bank. "In summer of 1983, I went to the Croatian riviera and started selling these souvenirs to foreign tourists. I was selling them so fast that I had to return to Sarajevo several times to get more stuff. That was my first job, and the best I ever had."

Sarajevo's successful bid was a first – before Yugoslavia, no communist state had hosted a Winter Olympics. New sports facilities, transport systems and accommodation had to be put in place, at a cost of around 150 million US dollars.

Geography was very much in Sarajevo's favour. With Mt. Igman, Mt. Bjelasnica, Mt. Jahorina and Mt. Trebevic all around, competitions could be confined to an easy 30-kilometre radius.

While the plan was to put Sarajevo on the world tourist map as a new winter destination, there was a last-minute wobble as it looked like there would not be enough snow.

The night before the opening ceremony, however, a blizzard fixed that problem.

So much snow fell that hundreds of volunteers, high-school pupils, and Yugoslav army soldiers had to spend the night clearing the Kosevo stadium where the games were due to open. At a spectacular ceremony held on February 7, the Olympic flame was lit.

Sarajevans felt a glow of pride when visitors and foreign dignitaries said these were the best-organised Olympics ever.

Eight years later, the Bosnian war broke out. It was to last from 1992 to 1995. Sarajevo was subjected to the longest siege since the Second World War. For three-and-a-half years, its residents were exposed to shelling and sniper fire from Bosnian Serb positions ranged around the city. Thousands were killed.

Since the war ended, there have been no serious attempts to restore facilities built for the 1984 games, and Sarajevo never became the major winter sports centre that people once dreamed it would.

The two costliest items – the bobsleigh track on Mt. Trebevic and ski ramps on Mt. Igman – still lie in ruins.

A few ski clubs operate on Mt. Bjelasnica and Jahorina, but the resorts are used for recreation only, not serious sporting events.

Even when it comes to less expensive winter sports like speed and figure skating, enthusiasts can only get on the ice for two to three months each year, not nearly enough for anyone hoping to compete seriously.

"The Olympic spirit is gone, mainly for want of money," local artist Nebojsa Seric Shoba said. "If we could start with ski-jumping again, or reconstruct the bobsleigh, we could put Sarajevo on the world map again. But that's unlikely to happen."

Even a museum built to commemorate the 1984 Olympics, located in a beautiful old villa in the city centre, was burnt to the ground after coming under heavy shelling in April 1992.

Thanks to its director at the time, Edin Numankadic, most of the exhibits were saved.

“Shortly before the museum was shelled and burned down, I had a feeling that something bad was going to happen, so I moved all the exhibits into the basement,” he recalled.

As flames engulfed the building, and artillery shells kept landing, Numankadic and other museum staff, helped by local people, spent three days rescuing the items from the basement and took them for storage at the Olympic ice rink.

“It’s ironic that the Zetra rink itself was shelled and burnt down later on,” he said. “But most of the exhibits from the Olympic museum miraculously survived.”

The exhibition went on display again when Jacques Rogge, head of the International Olympic Committee, officially reopened it at its designated home, the rebuilt Zetra stadium in 2004.

The old museum building is still under reconstruction.

Artist Damir Niksic, best known for his satirical take on Bosnian life, says that Sarajevo’s lack of an Olympic legacy cannot be blamed on the war alone. Local people, too, must take some responsibility.

“In all these years since the Olympics, we haven’t managed to host any relevant competition, cup or championship in any winter sport on any of the Olympic mountains around Sarajevo,” he said. “That shows we’re incapable of setting ourselves long-term goals and working diligently to achieve them. The 1984 Winter Olympics were very successful only because they were short-term.”

Sarajevo put in a largely symbolic bid to host the 2010 Winter Olympics, mostly in the hope of reviving some of the sense of optimism and unity of 1984. The bid was rejected on the grounds that the city now lacked the capacity, infrastructure, and political and economic stability needed to make it eligible.

Sarajevo has not given up. In January, it hosted two international ice hockey matches, which attracted a record audience of over 14,000 people.

In 2017, Sarajevo will host the European Youth Olympic Winter Festival (EYOWF), in which 1,500 young athletes will compete across 16 disciplines on the Mt. Igman, Mt. Jahorina and Mt. Bjelasnica.

“We have to take a step-by-step approach, and not give up easily,” said Pavle Krstic, a university lecturer who sits on Bosnia’s national commission for ice skating. “Soon we’ll host EYOWF, and maybe one day we will be able to host another Winter Olympic Games in Sarajevo. But that cannot happen overnight. We have to build strong foundations for winter sports again, and the rest will come over time.”

### **Dražen Huterer is an IWPR-trained reporter in Sarajevo.**

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