



LIFESTYLE
Sarajevo, Bosnia

History in the Making



Sheltering some of the world's most valuable manuscripts, a treasured Sarajevo library has just been given a welcome update





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Sarajevo's old town, Bašaršija, glows along the Miljacka River valley, surrounded by low mountains. The Gazi Husrev-Beg Mosque, built during the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century, forms the heart of this old town. Sarajlije, as locals of all faiths call themselves, as well as international travellers, stroll down the pedestrian lane, Sarači Street, which leads right down the middle of the mosque complex, shopping for clothes, jewellery, artisan metalwork, pastries or just enjoying the views.

While faithful Muslims arrive at the Gazi Husrev-Beg Mosque for prayer, visitors cross through the complex beneath its four heavy oak trees. With a 24.4 metre high dome, minaret, clock tower, fountain, tombs, madrasa, bazaar and a public Islamic library, the mosque is not only a place of worship, but a point of arrival to the city, a meeting point for old friends and an artefact of nostalgia for anyone who ever loved or lost someone in Sarajevo.

The Gazi Husrev-Beg Library, built in 1537 and holding an extensive collection of Arabic, Turkish, Persian and Bosnian handwritten manuscripts dating back to as early as 1111, has survived numerous wars and is seen as a symbol of Sarajevo's resilience and continues to serve as the city's cultural crossroad.

The library has long been the virtual home of Dr Mustafa Jahić, who has served as its director since 1983 and seen the collection through war and recovery. Many see his team of archivists as protectors of a crucial part of the Bosniak, or Bosnian Muslim, cultural heritage as represented in the archive, which was nearly destroyed in the siege. How does a guardian of heritage begin his day?

'I come for tea in the office,' he says, 'and try to be here to have close contact with library users. We want to stay close to our community. We have plenty of visitors every day and we're proud of that.' His priority with the library has not only been to protect and restore the archives, but also to ensure that they are accessible to researchers globally.

'The library's best known for Arabic handwritten manuscripts and for having the most bound scripts of this kind,' he explains. 'In the time of the war, we started putting everything on microfilm to protect it, so we were able to quickly digitalise everything – historical documents, Arabic world, Islamic sciences and cultural heritage of Bosnia-Herzegovina. We created an eighteen volume catalogue where people can find what they're looking for on the Internet. If people can't find it, then they can email, so they don't always have to come in person.'



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DR MUSTAFA JAHIĆ



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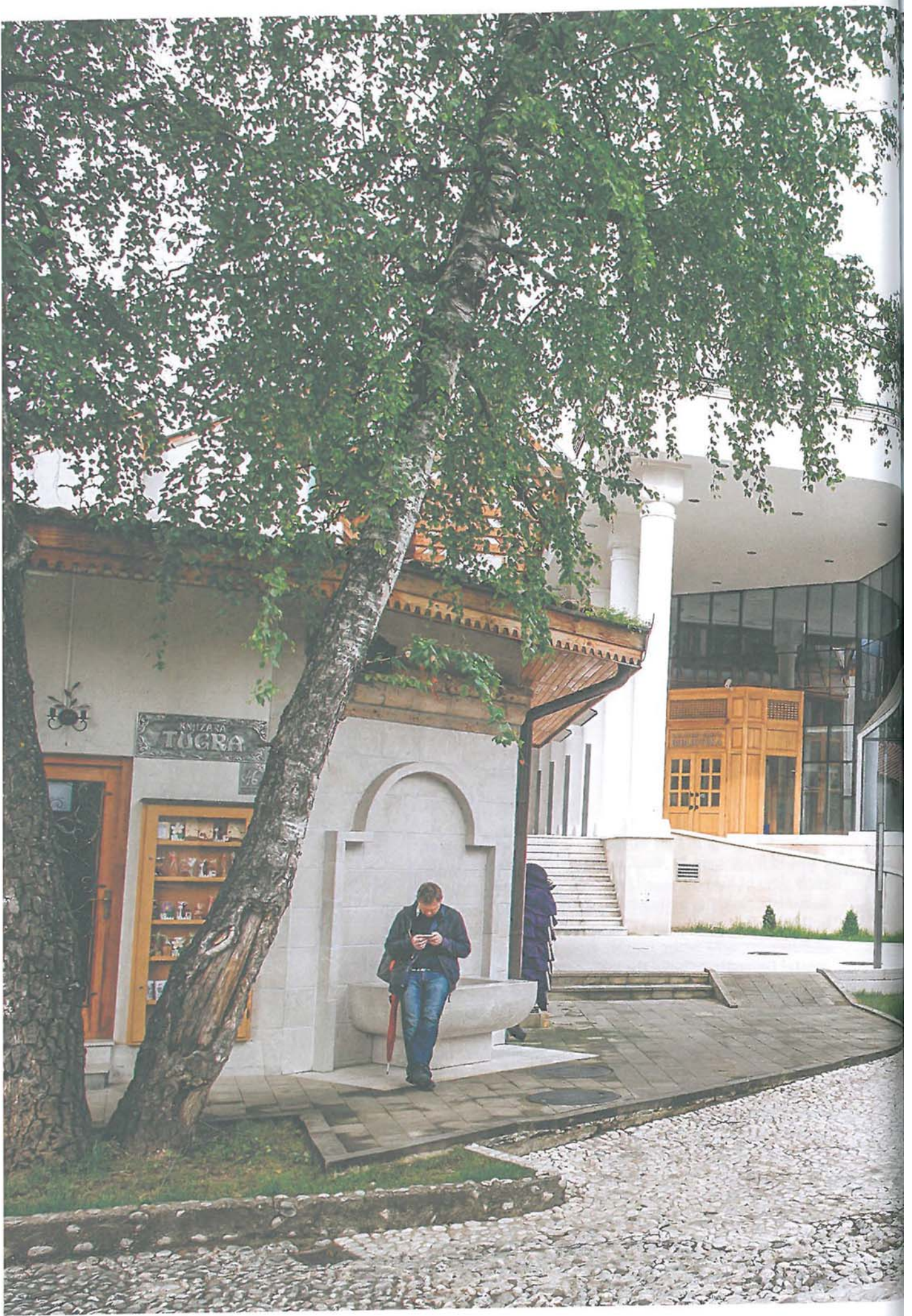
Gazi Husrev-Beg, the half Bosniak, half Turkish leader, founded his namesake waqf, or Islamic foundation, in the early days of his rule over the Ottoman Empire's regional administration. Beginning in 1529 AD, his administration built the waqf rectory and clock tower. Then, by 1531, his builders brought white marble from the island of Brač, coastal Dalmatia, to build the high dome mosque, fountain and courtyard. By 1537, Husrev-Beg added the bazaar, madrasa, his own tomb and a tomb for the waqf founding manager Murat-Beg Tardić. Critically, Husrev-Beg wrote special orders to ensure that a library be included not only to hold texts, but to train experts to copy manuscripts.

Over the next centuries, the library would acquire 100,000 volumes of handwritten manuscripts, as well as Islamic science charts, globes, artisan metal work, and more. The oldest manuscript brought into the collection is the 'Thya'ulum al-din', copied from the handwritten Arabic of Abu Hamid Muhammed al-Gazali in 1105 AD. Another source of pride is Nur al-Din 'Abd al-Rahman Jami's illustrated 'Tuhfat al-ahrar', a didactic poem in Persian, copied from the 15th century original in Mecca in 1575.

As told in the documentary, 'The Love of Books: A Sarajevo Story', during the Bosnian war Dr. Jahić, his



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Now a major tourist attraction, the neighbourhood of Baščaršija, in which the library is located, was scheduled for demolition in the 1940s

team, and other volunteers, some of them having to travel on foot through sniper fire from their homes to the library, rushed to save the Vijećnica collection from fire and shelling, as well as the Gazi Husrev-Beg archives, which were also at serious risk. Archivists also scrambled to protect the Jewish Haggadah text now held in the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Since then, the Gazi Huzrev-Beg waqf has received support, 'unconditional support,' Dr. Jahić makes clear, from Qatar, Turkey the US and other donors to repair the mosque and then to construct an entirely new building for the library. The new extension not only serves as a centre for archival restoration and viewing, but also as a community centre and auditorium.

Just this past year, the library has hosted events as diverse as the annual Muslim Jewish Conference and a musical performance of traditional Bosnian 'sevdalinka' music by singer Amira Medunjanin.

Today, with so many Sarajlije and travellers enjoying the country's most famous cafés, Slatko čose, Demirović pastry shop and Ramis on Sarači Street beside the mosque and library, the library itself has become the city's crossroad.

'For me this space is an open meeting point of people with all sorts of backgrounds,' says Fanny Hagmeier,



The National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina also houses a library of its own, counting the Haggadah among the 250,000 publications in its catalogue



The efforts of the library's staff to preserve its collection was the subject of its own film, 'The Love of Books: A Sarajevo Story', directed by Sam Hobkinson

a filmmaker who subscribes to the library to be able to plan and research for projects profiling Bosnian culture. 'Unlike European libraries, which are usually divided by interest, faculty and ultimately cliques, here everybody is welcome.'

Zora Lavo, a Czech archive researcher, stumbled upon the collections only to discover exactly what she had been hoping for. 'I have been working on al-Ghazali, a medieval Islamic luminary, for years,' Lavo explains. 'I knew that Sarajevo scholars had translated his Summa Magna of forty volumes two times in the past ten years! There is no complete translation into other Western languages, only Urdu and maybe Turkish.'

'Last April,' Zora continues, 'I went to Gazi Husrev-Beg, which had an exhibit of a dozen old manuscripts. What did I find? The oldest existing, and surviving, manuscript they had was one of the books I work on from al-Ghazali's 'Thya'ulum al-din'. It's written in beautiful script during the lifetime of its author in 1106, which must be quite a unique thing, most existing manuscripts being posthumous copies. I'm sure the more I dig, the more discoveries await me here.'

What's next for Dr Jahić, as director of the library? 'In September, there's going to be a conference on manuscripts in conflict at Cambridge University,' he says. With a glowing, proud look in his eyes, he's excited to reach out to new audiences to share how his team protected their five hundred year old collection, only to keep it as a symbol of their culture and their city's resilience.