

## THE ISLAMIC CULTURAL CENTER (ICC) WOMEN'S GROUP

And

### BOSNIAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION

For years and since 1969, I used to go to the Bosnian mosque on Halsted Street in Chicago. Then I joined its offspring, the Islamic Cultural Center of Northbrook (ICC) since August 20, 1973. At that time, the only ladies whom I have known to work actively in the Bosnian mosque were Olga Avdich, Latifa Spahic, Zerina Zvizdich, Nefa Torlo, Esrefa and Razija Kljako, Zehra Bambur, Zejna Zec, Tea Zulfic and Mersa Lejlic. However, the Bosnians did not have formal women's organization. They worked informally, mainly cooking Bosnian dishes for BACA events such as burek, other pitas, sarma, baklava, halvah, etc.

After the first phase of the ICC building in Northbrook was completed in March 1976, the non-Bosnian women have first formed an ICC Auxiliary committee, which did not last very long. Subsequently, with the help of Imam Mustafa Ceric, they formed an ICC Women's Club with intermarriage families. I have continued to cook occasionally with the Bosnian ladies.

In October 1988, the ICC Board of Directors asked me to organize a Muslim Women's Antique Fashion Show at the Hayatt Regency Hotel in Chicago to mark the celebration of the completion of the second phase of the ICC building. I prepared the Show and we had exhibited some truly very beautiful and very old antique outfits, including an over 100 years old Bosnian outfit, called "Anteriya", which belonged to Zerina Zvizdich and was modeled by Azra Bojic. Zerina's sister, Dr. Safiya Sarich, was our MC for that Show. Azra Ceric and I have modeled over 100 years old Turkish gold embroidered velvet dress "Bindali", with shalvars, yelek, and blouses, which I had borrowed from the Turkish Consulate General. We had another famous Bosnian antique outfit, silk embroidered with gold threads, which belonged to Fadil Merhem, that was worn by his grandmother at the State function in Sarajevo during the visit of Prince Ferdinand of Austria and was modeled by Minka Rustempasic. Also, we had a very nice Egyptian antique wedding dress modeled by Dr. Souheir El-Masry. Mrs. Inga Sarich modeled a long beige evening dress. Other models with very nice outfits were Nefa Torlo, Razija Kljako, Suada Kljako, Nasiha Bambur, Mukerem and Handan Senalan, Azra Bojic, Selma Dedici, Dina Hasan Dabah, Sue Othman Amer, Fadila Zec and Nora Dajani.

Mrs. Sandy Qureshi and Barbara Khan who were members of the ICC Women's Club asked me to join their Club. After they had explained to me that their main goal was to raise enough money to educate an American-born Muslim in Islamic studies to serve as our Imam at the ICC, I decided to join their Club. At that time, the president of this Club was Mrs. Darlene Arslan and the Club had only 10-12 members. I became a member in 1989 and in 1990 they elected me as their president, with Nefa Torlo as VP, Zerina Zvizdich as the Secretary and Dr. Hoda Aboleneen Khalil, very dedicated member and the best ticket seller, as the Treasurer. Soon, thereafter, because there were some objections to the name "Club", we decided to change our name to the ICC Women's Group. Subsequently, we have added other objectives and goals for our group, expanding our activities to include raising funds for needy people, helping Sunday school children, organizing lectures and inviting well known Islamic or other scholars as the guest speakers to our community. Since then, we have been achieving our goals by organizing lectures and preparing dinners, lunches, parties that attract members of our community as well as non-Muslim guests.

Every year, in the spring, we elect new officers for the new school year, which starts in September. Except for 1992, when Zehra Sheriff became president for one year, I was reelected every year as the president through 2005/2006 school year. I am tired of this job and the responsibilities, but I do not have a heart to reject the trust and confidence of my friends as the group may just break up. The past Vice presidents were: Nefa Torlo, Zerina Zvizdich, Hidajeta El Shishakli, Johana Arif, Hoda Aboleneen Khalil, Latifa Spahic, Najwa Dajani, Lubna Makki and Dina Rashid. Dr. Effat Moussa, renown professor of statistics and mathematics at De Paul University, has been serving our group with great distinction and dedication as its Treasurer/ Secretary since joining the group in the early 1990's. Our officers for 2005/2006 school year are: Nedime Tanovic, president; Latifa Spahic, vice-president; Zerina Zvizdich, vice-president; Najwa Dajani, secretary; and Dr. Effat Moussa, treasurer. Our membership dues are only \$25 per year and our regular meetings are held on the first Sunday every month from 11:00am until 1:00 pm in the conference room of the ICC. Our membership rolls were different at different times, going up or down. Our most recent membership list is as follows: 1. Nedime Tanovic, 2. Dr. Hoda Aboleneen Khalil, 3. Husnia Idrizovic, 4. Zerina Zvizdich, 5. Hidajeta El Shishakli, 6. Dr. Effat Moussa, 7. Najwa Dajani, 8. Alma Ovcina, 9. Latifa Spahic, 10. Azra Rokolj, 11. Selma Kulenovic, 12. Esrefa Kljako, 13. Razija Kljako, 14. Nefa Torlo, 15. Dina Rashid, 16. Nuha Dabus a, 17. Jene Koushanpour, 18. Barbara Khan, 19. Alma Arslan.

At the beginning of every school year we prepare and submit to the ICC Board and Imam a calendar of our planned activities for the next school year to prevent any conflicts or problems in the scheduling of other planned events by the general board. We work closely with Imam and the ICC Board to help in preparing for religious holidays, parties or other events. In addition, every year we had organized at least one summer picnic, usually at the Lake Forest Beach. Gradually we have increased membership of ICC Women's Group to 30-35 members.

In our files we have many original awards, certificates, pictures, or other documents, such as: several certificates of appreciation from Illinois Governors to Nedime Tanovic or Bosnian American Women's Association or Islamic Cultural Center Women Group, Award of Excellence from Cook County Treasurer, Zahvalnica (Thank you note) from Behram-Begova Medresa in Tuzla, Articles of Incorporation of Bosnian American Women's Association from Illinois Secretary of State, Annual Reports since 1997, Governors Invitations, letters and awards, letter of appreciation signed by Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Letters to or from various lecture speakers, professors or other dignitaries or officials, including Jim Edgar, George Ryan, Ambassadors, General Consuls, City mayors or managers, or presidents of other organizations. Some of our documents or pictures we have given to the BACA and ICC Museum in Northbrook.

Subsequently, Serbian aggression and war against Bosnian Muslims started in Bosnia and everyone wanted to help the Bosnians. We started organizing dinner/lectures fund-raising events. Every weekend, we baked pita for sale to help the Bosnian cause. We would make a schedule for pita, baking and selling every weekend with our members Latifa Spahic, Nefa Torlo, Zehra Bambur, Zejna Zec, Hajrija Zec, Ismeta Puskar, Rabija Pasanbeg, Alma Ovcina, Esrefa Kljako, Hidajeta El-Shishakli, Nadira Agic and Johana Arif. We sold pita for \$5 a piece and made about \$ 350-450 a week. Bosnians, Arabs and other Americans were sympathizing with the Bosnian situation and would contribute and help.

We should mention here some of our more important activities and fund raising efforts by the ICC Women's Group:

1. In 1991, we contributed \$5,000 to the Rijaset of Bosnia to forward our donation to the needy people of Kosovo, who were terrorized by the Yugoslav and Serbo-communist regime.
2. In 1992, we contributed \$14,000 for the Bosnian humanitarian causes because Bosnia was attacked by the Serbian military forces and JNA.
3. The first big dinner that we had organized was to invite the Bosnian Ambassador to the UN, the Honorable Muhamed Sacirbey and the proceeds of \$5,000 were contributed for humanitarian causes.
4. Later we invited Mr. Husein Zivalj, Bosnian Ambassador to Austria, and we had purchased about \$5,000 in bonds, for humanitarian causes. Also, we invited others, including Mr. Sven Alkalay, Ambassador of B&H in Washington, D.C., to help Bosnians suffering terrible genocide and aggression from the Serbs.
5. In 1993, we contributed to the Islamic school \$4,300, and \$3,500 for Bosnian victims of the war rape and genocide. This lasted almost 4 years (1992-1995).
6. We collected clothes, which were shipped to the refugees, during the entire war in B&H.
7. Further, we continued to help Bosnian refugees, especially mothers with sick or wounded children, who were evacuated here. As an example, we have organized a dinner/ lecture for the benefits of a Bosnian young refugee Belma Islamovic, who has lost both arms from Croatia shelling in Mostar and we collected and donated \$26,400 to purchase prosthesis for her arms.
8. Also, we contributed \$13,000 for remodeling of the ICC kitchen cabinets.
9. We raised \$4,500 for installing a stair-lift chair for Bosnian invalids and other handicapped persons at the ICC to be able to come to the Social or Lecture Hall.
10. At that time we contributed another \$10,000 to the Bosnian invalids, children and other Bosnian humanitarian causes.
11. In 1996/97, we donated to Iraqi children over \$10,000 and \$1,500 to a women's social work organization "Sanad" in the south side of Chicago.
12. In 1998/99 alone, we donated \$2,000 to the ICC library for the books, to the Albanian mosque \$20,000 for Kosovo women's relief, \$3,000 for an Egyptian sick orphan, and \$12,000 to the Turkish relief fund for the earthquake victims.
13. In 2000, we donated \$7,000 to the Averroes school, and \$4,000 to the new Al-Azhar Foundation Mosque of Barrington.
14. In 2001, we donated \$10,000 to the Palestinian children and \$4,500 to the Committee on Jerusalem.
15. In 2002, we donated to the Community of Bosnia for students \$6,800, and for the Palestinian children relief \$8,000.
16. In 2003, we contributed \$1,000 for the new Bosnian Islamic Center in Chicago, \$1,000 for the scholarship of two Bosnian children, \$1,000 for the Al-Azhar Foundation Mosque, and \$3,000 for the Iranian earthquake relief.
17. Every year, we deposited \$1000 in the Student Imam Fund from the general account.
18. Since 2002, we have been sponsoring two students, who lost their fathers during Bosnian war, in Tuzla madrasa, by providing scholarship of \$1,000 per year, for their Islamic studies.
19. Our latest project was to hold a dinner/ lecture on October 1, 2005, with proceeds going for the victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.
20. In addition, during the Ramadan, we collect and distribute gifts for the needy children in the south side of Chicago.
21. We provide Bayram gift packages for children at the celebrations of Aids (Bayram).

To sum things up, we should note that in 1992, our General Account had \$1, 827.64 and the Student Imam Fund Account had \$1,993.94. With the above listed donations [totaling \$188,500], and as of September 2005, our General Account has \$6,936.04 and our Student Imam Account has \$9,326.90. If we have listed all other contributions in smaller amounts for many other causes, our total collected and distributed contributions since 1991 would be well over \$200,000.

At our events, some of our lecturers and speakers and their topics were:

1. H.E. Muhamed Sacirbey, Bosnian Ambassador at the UN, topic: "Aggression on B&H"
2. Rev. Jack Cory, Pastor, United Methodist Church, Jesus in Islam, Christianity and Judaism"
3. Dr. Vincent Cornell, professor, Duke Univ., "Growth of Islam in the US"
4. Dr. Hassan Hathout, Dir. L.A. Isl. Center, "Reflections on Islam Today"
5. H.E. Sven Alkalay, Ambassador of B&H in Washington, D.C., "Bosnia Today & Tomorrow"
6. Prof. Francis A. Boyle, U of I, "The International Objection to Prevent Genocide Against Bosnian People"
7. Ms. Barbara Jean Cizzek, Exec. Dir., Chgo Metrop. Assn. for Ed. Of Young Children, "Importance of Education in Early Years"
8. Ms. Kathy Kelly, Dir. Voice in the Wilderness, "Economic Sanctions Against Iraq"
9. Prof. Muhammad Eisa, NW University, "Aamina Bint Wahb: the Mother of Arabian Motherhood"
10. Kareem Irfan, Attorney, "Community Involvement, an Essencial Aspect of Islam"
11. Prof. M. Hakan Yavuz, U of Utah, "Zones of Islam: Turkey and Bosnia - Regional and Ethnic Influences"
12. Azam Nizamuddin, Principal, "Renaissance of Islamic Education"
13. Dr. Alma Dzubur Kulenovic, "Bosnian Women and the War" and Dr. Ferzana Hamid, Director "Hamdard Center Services"
14. Dr. Sadulla Khan, Dir. Isl. Cent. Of Southern California, "The Muslim Individual and the Global Islamic Community"
15. H.E. Yavuz Aktas, Consul General, "Earthquake Disaster in Turkey"
16. Prof. Rashid Khalidi, "Centrality of Jerusalem to Just Resolution of the Arab-Israeli Conflict"
17. Prof. Michael Sells, Comp. Relig., Haverford College, "September 11 and Genocide in Bosnia"
18. Dr. Hassan Hathout, Direc. L.A. Isl. Center, "The Prophet Along My Life"
19. Prof. John Esposito, "Islam - the Fastest growing Religion"
20. Prof. Francis A. Boyle, U of I, "Palestine, Palestinians and International Law"
21. Dr. Ronald Miller, Chair of Relig. Studies Dept., "Perspectives on Islam"
22. Esq. Junaid Afeef, J.D., Pres. Elect Chgo Musl. Bar Assn., "Safeguarding our Civil Liberties and Civil Rights: Strategies in Post 9-11 America"
23. Esq. Edward W. Miller, New York Trial Lawyer, "An Orthodox Jew Gives Thanks to Islam"
24. Dr. Shafiq Daulet, "The Kazan-Tatar Peaceful Struggle Against Centuries of Russian Ethnic Cleansing and Domination"
25. Prof. Ahmad Sadri, Chairman Soc. Dept., Lake Forest College, "Impact of the Recent Election in Iran"

Also we should note that in March 1996, Governor Jim Edgar had organized one day in Illinois to honor Ethnic Women organizations of Illinois in the Thompson Center in Chicago. Because no Bosnian Women organization was registered, we decided to register with the Secretary of State our "Bosnian American Women's Association", whose purpose was to promote Bosnian culture, and we reserved two booths for our exhibits. First members and officials of this organization were: Nedime Tanovic, President, Azra Rokolj, Secretary, Esrefa Kljako, Treasurer, and other members were Zerina Zvizdich, Latifa Spahic, Alma Ovcina, Hidajeta El-Shishakli, and Johana Arif. Subsequently, we considered our two organizations, the ICC Women's Group and Bosnian American Women's Association as one group and we would participate every year in March exhibiting our artifacts and craft displays, Bosnian and American flags, Bosnian and Islamic crafts, books and pictures at the Thompson Center in Chicago with two adjoining booths. On the invitations of the Illinois Governors, we have been exhibiting every year since 1996, promoting Bosnian and Islamic culture. Also, for two years, we had participated in the invitations of Maria Pappas, Cook County Treasurer. We participate in the inter-religious dialogues between Muslims, Christians and Jews since 1996.

In summary, our group has done tremendous humanitarian work for our community and for various causes in the USA, Palestine, Bosnia, Iran, Iraq, Kosovo, and Turkey. Our group consists of many nationalities including Bosnians, Palestinians, Egyptians, Turks and Americans. Our current project is to prepare, collect and publish a Muslim-American Cook Book with the most favored ethnic Muslim dishes. We shall continue, inshallah, with our humanitarian work as long as we have energy and support of the members of our community.