

On the Record: Refugee Returns to Srebrenica

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*The author of this report, Peter Lippman, was born in Seattle, Washington (USA) and is a long-time human rights activist. He holds a degree in international studies and is fluent in Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian. Peter's dispatches from Bosnia were first published in AP's online newsletter *On The Record*. The photo shows Zulfo Salihović, who led the "march of death" out of Srebrenica in the final days of the 1995 siege and returned after the war to head an interethnic organization. Contact Peter at pl52ip@hotmail.com.*

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Zulfo: Promoting Return

I went to Srebrenica with Marta one last time in June before leaving the country. We caught a ride with Zulfo, coordinator of Drina, an excellent organization based in Tuzla that helps with return and reconstruction in Srebrenica.

I met Zulfo a few years ago, when return to Srebrenica was just beginning. I was visiting the village of Sućeska, the first village that people were returning to outside of Srebrenica town. Zulfo grew up in a small settlement that is part of the Sućeska complex of villages. He was one of the people who walked out of Srebrenica through the woods when the town fell in 1995.

Zulfo and his organization were very active in promoting return to Sućeska. Now Sućeska is one of the most advanced locations of return in the municipality, with a rebuilt school and clinic, electrical and water services, and a couple dozen kids in the school.

We attended a meeting and checked in one last time with several friends and colleagues. I had hoped that we could visit Sućeska, so that I could see its progress from a tent encampment to its present state. And I wanted Marta to see the beautiful countryside around Srebrenica. As it turned out, Zulfo did not have time to visit Sućeska, but offered to take us over the hill route out of Srebrenica. This route goes above Sućeska, bypassing Bratunac, and winds up in Milići municipality on the other side of the hills.

We climbed up the dirt and gravel, and sometimes mud, road out of Srebrenica. Around a half hour out, we stopped at a viewpoint from where you could see just about to Srebrenica to the south, and almost to Sućeska to the west. We were in the mountains, above everything, with a view of many shades of green. The place was called Vijogor.

As we stood there taking in the view Zulfo said, "From here we watched the line defending Srebrenica break on the 11th of July." Through most of the war, Zulfo was in the army trying to protect Srebrenica from being taken over by Serbs, and on the day of the town's fall, he was with a detachment in these hills where he had grown up. He recounted further, "We watched two bombings from NATO planes, and we expected there to be a massive bombardment. But then nothing happened, and the Serbs moved on into Srebrenica."

Near the viewpoint, we passed a tall cherry tree growing in the woods. We stopped and picked a few cherries and then Zulfo, who is at least 6 feet tall, jumped up into the tree and started picking sprigs of branches with handfuls of cherries on them, and throwing them down to us. We filled two plastic bags that way.

The road to the Sućeska area is as bad as it was when I first went there a few years ago. I was told then that it was an old Austro-Hungarian road, one of the few in the municipality that had not been repaired during the Tito era. Further up the road we came to a summit where there was one damaged house and one fixed one, in which Zulfo's uncle, also named Zulfo, lives with his wife Sejda. We stopped to visit them.

Uncle Zulfo and Sejda told me that they returned to Srebrenica a little more than a year ago, on

April 7, 2002 (I'm always struck by the way people here remember the exact date of all their fateful moves). They live there on the top of the world, in a place called "Spasin Do," all alone without even a hint of a neighbor. Uncle Zulfo said, "There are no trucks or airplanes coming by here." They have running water, but no electricity. They showed me the electrical poles that are supposed to carry in a new power line soon.

It has been a struggle to survive. During the winter, the snow comes up to one's chest. Uncle Zulfo and Sejda were snowed in for 10 days last winter. A mobile phone is their only connection with the outside world.

On the Mountainside, Remnants of the War

All the houses and barns around here were destroyed during the war. Uncle Zulfo is hoping to get a donation from a relief organization to rebuild his barn. He said, "It is a shame for a farmer to be without a cow, but you need a barn first." He asked me to find him a donation.

Zulfo explained that the United States dropped relief packages in these hills during the siege of Srebrenica. They were dropped at night, so that Serb forces could not see. People would come out with flashlights and find these one-ton packages, open them up, and take their contents home. Sometimes they would fight over the goods. At times a package would land on someone.

As we left Spasin Do, Zulfo mentioned that his uncle had been the commander of a brigade in these hills during the war. When he returned, some local Serbs threatened him, accusing him of having committed war crimes. But then nothing happened.

We passed Zulfo's home village of Brakovci, across the valley. Zulfo pointed up a ravine and said, "I spent much of my youth in these woods." I said, "Then you're not a city kid like me." He answered, "And I'm not ashamed of it." He proceeded to talk about his childhood. The village school only went through fourth grade, and then Zulfo had to walk down the hill to Derventa -- eight kilometers each way -- to get to school. This lasted through sixth grade, before they built a bigger school in Brakovci.

Zulfo went to high school in Bratunac. He told me that he rented an apartment there and lived on his own throughout that time. I asked him why he didn't go to school in Srebrenica, and he said that he wanted to go to technical school, because he liked it more than the school in Srebrenica. He went to Serbia each summer to do odd jobs so that he could continue to study in Bratunac. He picked corn and cut hay, whatever he had to do.

We took photographs for Drina's bulletin, to show progress, or the need for more work: electrical poles, road-building machines, Uncle Zulfo's barn foundations, holes in the road: "another job for the UNDP."

We stopped for water at a fountain in the woods. An inscription on the fountain read, "Good works are the measure of a good person."

There was a hefty slug climbing on the fountain. After we drank, Zulfo looked at it and said, "I

had to eat a lot of those during the hike through the woods. At first, I couldn't eat them, but after a few days, I learned to." Zulfo's walk, with other men from the army, lasted 32 days. They were stuck on one mountain for 18 days, waiting for a signal to go through to safe territory.

Along the way through the mountains, we stopped occasionally as Zulfo met someone fixing a house or doing an errand. Zulfo would stop and say, "Hello friend, how's your father?" These were Serbs from the area, people he worked with and was friends with before the war. Of one person, Zulfo said, "He was in the Serb army. But now the war is over, and people have to accept that."

North of Konjević Polje Zulfo pointed out the mountain, Udrč, where he and his fellow refugees were stuck for 18 days. "We ate snails, leaves, and mushrooms, and waited," he said. "After a while there was nothing more to eat. Then we came down to these villages at night, and stole a cow. We cooked in the mountains, in the dark. The Serbs hunted us, fired bombs at us. Some people tried to escape from here into Serbia, but most of them were captured."

Zulfo escaped, survived, and became the effective leader of a non-governmental organization. Now he goes through the woods and greets his former enemies. He also finds it within himself to climb a cherry tree and enjoy life.