

On the Record: Refugee Returns to Srebrenica

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The Challenge of Recovery

I arrived in Bosnia from Kosovo in November and started on a project on Srebrenica for the Advocacy Project, continuing work I had initiated last April (2002). This ongoing project builds communications capacity for the Forum of Srebrenica NGOs, a network of non-governmental organizations involved in refugee return and reconstruction of the Srebrenica municipality.

While I was in Sarajevo, I got news that the Dutch foundation *Stifting Vluchteling* had agreed to fund part of the project, so my visit became a busy but productive 7-week stay.

While there I shuttled between Sarajevo, Tuzla, and Srebrenica, meeting regularly with members of the Forum, helping them establish a task force to set up a web site, planning content and outline for the site, hiring an IT company in Tuzla to construct it, and drawing up contracts to formalize the work. Much of this is new work for me, though not so different from the volunteer organizing I'm used to doing.

The project is ongoing at this point, with me spending my days at the desk, at the computer, on the phone, coordinating, and editing text for the site. Another part of the project is the development of markets for the kilims (flat weave rugs) produced by Bosfam, an affiliate of the Forum. Among other things, Bosfam is a women's crafts cooperative. Most of Bosfam's members are widows from Srebrenica. I have known them for some years, and am happy to be trying to do something concrete for them at this time.

I spent a lot of time with Bosfam this fall, interviewing members in preparation for profiles and promotional material. The women of Bosfam are intense people, survivors. They are always ready to say what is on their mind. They talk about what they have lost and what they need. When they talk to you their eyes burn you. You don't look away though, if you have any respect. It hurts, but you can learn from this encounter.

Now I have been trying to learn how to promote kilims, how to find someone to sell them, how to import, get fair trade approval, set up a credit card handling system on a web site. The Advocacy Project will finance the reconstruction of Bosfam's web site, currently not very useable. All these things are complicated and Bosfam, with its impoverished members and their beautiful products, is operating at a financial deficit. It will be difficult to get a market for their carpets, as there's much competition from cheaper, and maybe finer, goods made by Afghan refugees and other people further to the east.

The atmosphere is quite different in Srebrenica these days compared to those first few years after the war. Then, even U.N. soldiers felt uncomfortable around the place, never staying too long on their patrols there. Srebrenica was locked up by Serb nationalists, some of them probably small-time war criminals in their own right, and perhaps even they were not so happy to be there. After all, Srebrenica was nowhere -- a dead-end town in the hills with two back streets and no main street, pock-marked by shrapnel, and full of displaced Serbs from Sarajevo and other happier places.

In 1999 I interviewed the deputy-mayor of the town, Dragan Jevtić, who was from Sarajevo

himself. He told me he was happy there, and didn't want to go back home. He had a political position and owned a pizzeria on the side.

However, in the next couple of years the international community exerted a lot of pressure on the politicians running Srebrenica to shape up and follow the rules. One of the rules was majority rule, and Muslims had been winning a majority in the municipal elections since the end of the war -- the only Muslim victory in the whole Serb entity -- but they had never been allowed to take office. Finally the international officials removed some of the Serb politicians, banned some others, and just pressured others to leave the place.

One of those was Jevtić, who was exposed for corruption. Among other things, he was running a contracting company (rebuilding houses his friends in government had burned down), and he was doing a terribly bad job of it. Now Jevtić is a resident of Serbia, and for the last couple of years Srebrenica's top four political positions have been shared by two Serbs and two Muslims. They cooperate rather well, and returning Muslims and activists speak quite well of the two Serb politicians.

But there are other huge problems. Srebrenica municipality doesn't have much money, so the local authorities can't do much with their good will. The buildings are rotting and their roofs leak. There has been talk but no action for years about the bad water system being fixed. The health care infrastructure is also in serious decline, as are the roads.

People return and they don't have jobs. So those who do return are either retirees with a pension to live on, or else villagers who hope to make a living from the land. It's a rough and discouraging life. In the winter it's especially harsh -- if there's half a meter of snow in Tuzla or Sarajevo, there's a meter of snow in Srebrenica, the power goes out too often, and the water shuts off. People return and see these things, give it a try, and some of them leave again.

Still, Srebrenica is certainly more livable than it was before. The town may be at a turning point. Muslim returnees go about their business without worrying about security. Activists -- Muslims and Serbs together -- meet, draft proposals, and cook up plans for renovations, small businesses, tool donations, seminars, and a web site. It's not idyllic. Like all places of hardship, there are those who use their creativity to make things better, and others who creatively (but destructively) complain, spread rumors, criticize. We hope the former will prevail.

One activist, a returnee in a mixed marriage, tells me, "Srebrenica is not just something I do. Srebrenica is my obsession."

New volunteer organizations with more ideas than resources sprout up all the time. There is certainly no shortage of good ideas -- a crafts cooperative, a women's produce market, a computer lab, a mini-bus line to the newly resettled villages, a health screening program, and many more. Ideas that need money.

Right now the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) is the main donor and coordinator of other donors for that part of Bosnia. They held a donor conference last spring in New York, and they have raised several million dollars. The UNDP has its finger in everything,

from reconstruction to small business support. But in a town of rubble and despair, recovery is very slow. Slow enough to discourage some people.

I should mention that the international organizations, to their credit, are trying to fix Srebrenica. They are fixing roads, buildings, and eventually, the water supply. During the winter they installed a system of street lamps, giving the night-time streets a much more civilized atmosphere. Hundreds of houses and apartments have already been made inhabitable. But the people need jobs.

Omer Spahić started an asćinica (short-order café) in the middle of town a couple years ago. A little joint with white-tile walls, it has the atmosphere of a laundromat. But it's a central place and Muslims and Serbs alike hang out there casually, eating burek or ćorba, smoking, drinking coffee, and catching up. Now there's a new place up the hill, a real restaurant with space for dozens, a fine menu, and a very friendly proprietor named Abdulah. If a few of the shops can be fixed up, so that people don't have to travel 10 kilometers to Bratunac to buy a needle, perhaps a real town atmosphere will arise again in Srebrenica.

A Dutch volunteer organization, the Werkgroep Nederlands-Srebrenica, is doing valiant work to help things revive. There are a couple of long-term coordinators staying in the town, and they station volunteers there for two months at a time, regardless of season. The volunteers come and do whatever they can. Most of them are qualified to teach something -- photography, computers, English -- so they work with the various local organizations and teach the kids these things. They also fixed up the park in the middle of town, restoring the wooden benches that had been used for firewood during the war, and painting some bright murals based on local kids' designs. They organized a circus with Serb and Muslim kids' participation, and they channel donated resources, especially tools, to help reconstruction in the villages.

There are around 1,000 Muslim returnees to Srebrenica municipality today. A few hundred in the town, the rest in the villages. Life is hard for them all, but these are people who are drawn back to their ancestral home. I have heard from people who vow they'll never return, but just as many who long to go back to the place they consider the most beautiful in the world. It is beautiful, in fact. The town is in a pleasant mountain valley, and as soon as you drive up into the hills, you reach villages that are on top of ridges, with views of other green ridges and villages in the distance.

Srebrenica could be a nice place, as it used to be. It had a good economy, plenty of jobs, and a variety of industries, even though it was geographically a bit remote. Now the local activists are struggling to make things livable again. One NGO, SARA, runs art and music classes for kids, and shows videos some nights, because the movie theater hasn't worked since the war. Another NGO, Amica, provides counseling for women. Drina coordinates reconstruction and helps returnees visit their villages.

There's much more work underway, or being cooked up. These activists are an inspiration. One such inspiration is Bosfam's sweater program. With donations, the organization buys wool and gives it to displaced and returned women, both Muslim and Serb, to knit sweaters. Then they pay the women a little for the sweaters, and donate them to schoolchildren. They pay no attention to

whether the children are Serb or Muslim. All of the programs of these organizations are open to both ethnicities.

There are a couple of new landmarks since I was in Srebrenica last spring. The White Mosque has been rebuilt. It's a little mosque right above the center of town, across from the Domavia Hotel, overlooking the whole town. This was finished in July, in time for the 7th anniversary commemoration of the massacre. Now you can hear the muezzin again in Srebrenica -- a rare thing anywhere in the Serb entity.

I heard the call of the muezzin at 12:00 noon. Right after the muezzin's call started, so did the church bells from a little ways down the valley.

A vast field is being prepared for the cemetery and memorial center in Potočari, a few kilometers down the road from Srebrenica. Potočari is where Muslims fled to when Srebrenica fell, seeking the protection of the Dutch troops stationed there. That's where the massacres started, and people have been agitating for years for the cemetery to be built there. After much resistance from some local Serb officials, it was finally pushed through. Now bulldozers are clearing the ground, and a concrete wall is being placed around the entire perimeter.

DNA testing has started to identify more and more remains of people found in mass graves. There are several hundred (out of over 4,000 remains) identified and ready to be buried. But more money is needed to complete the project. As of the beginning of this year around half of the approximately \$5 million needed had been collected.

(The Bosnians have become experts at DNA identification, and they volunteered to help identify victims in New York after the 9-11 attacks.)

Many people have focused on getting the cemetery built, but not everyone is pleased about it. One friend of mine said, "The people must be buried, but this is overdone. It doesn't help us at all. They should use some of those funds for a factory, and put us to work. What do we get out of this? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. The dead don't eat bread. But we do, by God. Put me to work so I can feed my family."

I visited two friends "Mirha" and "Sejdo," Muslim returnees to Srebrenica. Sejdo is from an old Srebrenica family, once rich landowners in the town. The couple stayed in Srebrenica with their two children throughout the war, and barely survived. Sejdo and the two children were all wounded at different times. When Srebrenica fell, Sejdo walked with other men through the woods, arriving in safe territory 15 days later. He made a face with hollow cheeks to show me how he arrived starving in Tuzla. Sejdo was very lucky to survive, as hundreds of men were shot by Serb forces during that trek.

The couple returned to Srebrenica from Sarajevo last year. Their two children are still studying there, but plan to come home. Mirha and Sejdo are happy and proud to be back in Srebrenica. Sejdo says, "When I came back here to Srebrenica, some Serbs asked me how much I would sell my house for. The most they could pay would be somewhere around 30,000 KM (about \$15,000), which in Sarajevo would only be enough for a garage. I wouldn't sell my house in

Srebrenica, no way. So I told them, yes, I'll sell you my house, for two million KM. They asked, are you crazy?"

"Now, I wouldn't give up my place in Srebrenica for anything. Because this is really my home. My grandfather was one of the richest people in the municipality. The land where the Dom Kulture (Cultural Center) stands used to be ours; it was taken from us about 50 years ago during Tito's time. They didn't pay us anything; we should be getting some restitution for that, but that will be a long time coming. Anyway, I can't leave here. This is my place. If I were to leave, I would have to dig up the graves of all my ancestors and take them away, too."

Speaking of Srebrenica, Sejdo said, "When London had a population of 6,000, Srebrenica's was 14,000." I don't know what time period he was referring to, but Srebrenica was already an important mining center during Roman times. Sejdo also told me that Srebrenica was the location of the first Franciscan monastery in Bosnia, in the 13th century.

On one visit, I rode to Srebrenica with two SFOR (U.N. Stabilization Force) soldiers: a Dutch man and a French man. They were a friendly and helpful pair, on their way to a meeting. The French soldier had been in Sarajevo during the war. As we were leaving town, we passed the Bosnian parliament building, still a wreck. He said, "I saw that when it was burning." The Dutch soldier said, "Why didn't you put it out?"

Then they started talking about Bosnians. The Dutch soldier said, "There are no good guys here." The French soldier started explaining how the Muslims must have bombed the Markale -- the infamous marketplace massacre that happened in 1993, when dozens of people were killed by a falling bomb. The French soldier insisted that there was no way a bomb launched by the Serbs could have reached that location.

I was so astonished by the rehearsal of this hoax that my mouth refused to move. The French soldier went on to say, "You know, they are not the same as us. They don't place the same value on life."

The Dutch soldier told me that Ratko Mladic, the wartime Serb general who was responsible for the massacre at Srebrenica, had been arrested in Serbia a couple of weeks before. But then someone kidnapped the family of a high police officer, and promised to kill them if Mladic were not released. So the police released him.

It is widely asserted in Bosnia that the fall of Srebrenica was something that was allowed by Muslim politicians, who counted on such an event to precipitate the Western intervention that then happened. (Of course, they had no way of foreseeing that it would result in such a horrible massacre.) The two soldiers that I was traveling with agreed with this. They were also prepared to admit that the Dayton arrangement of post-war Bosnia reinforces nationalism, but they said that it's too late for the international community to do anything about it.

This is the typical "realist" attitude of most international officials in Bosnia. People as high in authority as General Jacques Paul Klein, head of the now-departed U.N. Mission to Bosnia, have admitted it to me personally. They always wrap up the subject by saying, "It's not in my mandate

to do anything about it.”

A result of this careless attitude is the current re-escalation of ethnic tensions in many parts of the country. Just as I was arriving in Bosnia in November, a soccer match was held in Banja Luka, capital of the Serb entity, between a Sarajevo (mostly Muslim) team and the local Serb team. The football players just wanted to play, and most of the fans just wanted to watch. But someone brought a banner that said, “Nož, Žica, Srebrenica.” This translates as “Knife, Wire, Srebrenica.”

This chilling slogan stood throughout the match, and Serb fans sang songs about Radovan Karadžić, and displayed his portrait. Afterwards, some Serbs threw stones and flares at the buses departing back to Sarajevo. They fought with police, who prevented them from further attacking the opposing team’s fans.

Afterwards, no one was prepared to take responsibility for this incident. The local police arrested some of the hooligans, but none of the Serb political parties were prepared to take a position on the incident. The Serb team was suspended for a few games. There were Serb fans who didn’t like the offensive banner, but when interviewed they said they were afraid to do anything about it.

Later the slogan showed up again, painted as graffiti in big letters on the front of a Muslim returnee’s house in Konjević Polje, about an hour from Srebrenica. This incident took place when a couple of busloads of Serbs were returning from a sports match. They exited their buses at the intersection by the house, and hung around and painted slogans on it for an hour. Local police and members of the IPTF (U.N. police advisory task force) were present, but didn’t do anything. Someone also painted “Sarajevo Markale” on the house, and “This is Serbia.”