



## **On The Record: Returning Refugees to Bosnia**

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### **Some Local Serb Views on the Conference**

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#### **From the AP Editorial Desk**

#### **From Teresa's diary - "They have been robbed of their memories"**

Wednesday, May 26. We made a trip today to Hambarine, a village above Prijedor. As we went higher into the hills above the city, it seemed less like a suburb and more as I had imagined the Republika Srpska (RS) to be before I came. I had imagined something like a science fiction novel about parallel worlds: the RS and the Federation, one full of darkness and the other of light. Kozarac contradicted that, since it was so full of life. But up in the deserted hills, my expectations seemed to be confirmed. We were surrounded by the empty shells of houses silhouetted against the sky. We were the only life.

We stopped at a cemetery near a destroyed mosque -- one more on the list of destroyed mosques in the RS. It is hard for me to believe there are no mosques at all remaining in the RS.

The sight of this cemetery struck me hard. The people buried here had died before the war. Even that did not save them. Many of the gravestones had been destroyed. It was as if the war had claimed two sets of victims: those killed in the war and those whose memories were later desecrated. One would think that in a land that has seen so much death, cemeteries would be sacred to all.

In fact, the cemetery survived the war. But a month ago someone came at night and destroyed many of the gravestones. The Muslims visiting the cemetery with us were angry, but it was a controlled anger. Their fears and convictions had been reinforced by this act of desecration.

I remembered visiting a cemetery a few years ago to bury my grandmother. She had been a Marine, and was buried in a veterans' cemetery in California. There was a flag flying and a

monument with a soldier's helmet on it. The grass was well tended, and there were pinwheels on some of the graves.

Since the death of my grandmother, I have taken comfort in knowing that someone has been taking care of her grave. I can picture the cemetery in my mind, and I am confident that it still looks the way it did the day we buried her. I can remember a time before her death when we drove past the cemetery, through the Valley of the Bears, on our way to the house my parents built when I was little. That memory sustains me when my life is uncertain and moving at a quick pace.

The people of Hambarine no longer have that kind of certainty. For them the memories have been replaced by a hard new reality. They have been robbed of their memories -- of their past -- as well as their homes.

We packed into the cars again, drove on, and pulled up to a destroyed house. One of the conference participants -- a Muslim woman who was always making sure I had enough food on my plate -- was the first out of the car. She stood in front of the house and her shoulders began to shake. This was her home. She could not take comfort from seeing her house rebuilt, like the women from Kozarac. Several Muslim and British women put their arms around her. Others, like myself, felt uncomfortable and stood on the road, arms crossed, looking at her in her yard.

I explained the graffiti on the walls to two of our British friends. It was the kokarda, a Serbian nationalist symbol. I had been told that the same symbol was at times carved into the skin of prisoners in the nearby concentration camps. Graffiti is a statement of ownership. It is a way to say: "These houses belong to us. Even your body isn't your own. You're no longer a person."

Across the road, a smaller track led between several houses. Manisha asked about landmines. A man appeared leading a horse-drawn carriage, as if in defiance of the very thought. Earlier, as we explored Kozarac, Laura had asked the same question. She recalled from her work in Cambodia videos that explained how to look out for landmines. Landmines claim victims even after the end of the war. But here, mines were put in the houses and then detonated. The danger is in the ruins, as well as on the roads. That's hardly reassuring.

### **Profile: "The women stop caring about their appearance"**

*Laura McGrew meets Čima Softić, Trauma Counselor:*

Čima Softić introduced herself at the Srcem do Mira (Through Hearts to Peace) conference with these inspirational words: "I have been living in Kozarac for 6 months and I feel born again. I have lost six kilograms because I am enjoying life so much. I hope you feel at home in my, and now your, Kozarac."

Čima Softić is a vibrant woman of 67, whose house was rebuilt by the Norwegian Refugee Council four months ago. She opened it to The Advocacy Project for the duration of the conference, in spite of the fact that her husband has just returned from the hospital. Manisha, Teresa and I are staying downstairs in one room. Peter is upstairs with the chickens.

Čima makes coffee for us -- very important in Bosnian hospitality -- and is willing to prepare food at all hours. Her story demonstrates great personal courage in the face of adversity. Čima and her family were living peacefully in Kozarac until May 24, 1992, when they were expelled by the Serbs. They took everything from the house, and then destroyed it. She spoke with us on the seventh anniversary of her expulsion.

Čima lived in Kozarac for 51 years. When the war broke out, she spent 10 days in the concentration camp, Trnopolje. After being released, she first went to Prijedor, then Travnik, and finally to then Zagreb (Croatia) where she joined an association of Bosnian women that was helping old people.

"All the families had suffered during the war, and were traumatized," Čima told me. "Being a very communicative person, I tried to help just by talking. I also went to seminars on psychological counseling.

"When I first visited one family, the husband was sitting in one room, the wife in the other. They weren't speaking to each other. I told them that they had to speak together. I told them some nice stories about things that had happened between myself and my husband. And then I said 'I am not your guest; you are my guests. and I will make you coffee.' I made them coffee in their own house.

"I stayed for two hours, by which time the man and woman were in one room together. Two days later, he came with a nice present for me. He gave me a kiss and told me that he had been amazed and fascinated with my 'guest gesture' and I was the only person who could think like that. They are still living together in a small place near Sanski Most. They never argued again after my intervention. They told me that I had brought a miracle into their home."

Čima described the problems that face traumatized women. "They feel very burdened and disinterested in life. They are not functioning normally, they can't deal with their families, and they have no interest in sex. There are problems between husbands and wives, among both older and younger couples. The women stop caring about their appearance. After we have discussions with them, they come back to their old selves. First, the woman becomes interested again in her personal hygiene. Then, she becomes involved with her family again.

"There is no difference in the kind of trauma suffered by all the women: Serb, Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim), or Croat. They are displaced, they are mourning, and they are without material resources. All of them have these three problems in common.

"It is true that many Bosniak women were raped. Women are very reluctant to talk about it. Many of the women in Omarska were raped and they are sick now -- not one of them who survived has had a child since then. They had a horrible time, and it is really hard to work with them. You have to bring out that whole story, and it's very difficult. I worked with the older people who were traumatized. Everyone told me I had a lot of success and I feel very satisfied."

After her return to Bosnia, Čima continued working with traumatized women and older people.

She moved to Lušci Palanka, which had been a Serbian village before the war but is now occupied by displaced Muslims. She started an organization called "People in Trouble," which is partnered with another organization, "Megaherz." Megaherz is registered both in the Republika Srpska and the Federation and has 360 participants, all of them older than 60. These include displaced persons living in Lušci Palanka, as well as Serb families who are returning there.

Čima is seeking 8,000 Deutschmarks for a project that would work in both entities to help traumatized women. This project is to include a psychiatrist, an assistant, one professor, and one doctor. "I have a picture in my mind of a lot of women sitting together around a table, in small workshops where they can do something with their hands like sewing. We have many capable women who could do this work. We would have a workshop and we could do some handicrafts. It would mean a lot to these women and would help integrate them back into society."

Megaherz has a computer, a photocopy machine and a fax/telephone machine, but no e-mail. Asked about her familiarity with e-mail, Čima said, "Yes, I learned about e-mail in ten different seminars! I know what it is; even though these seminars were about trauma they taught us about e-mail."

"I would not have come back here if I hadn't made peace with myself and with the Serbs. If you force yourself to come back when you are not ready, all you find is trauma and pain. I asked myself in my soul whether I could communicate with all people. Anyone can come here to my house and have coffee. However, I don't allow certain things to be talked about in front of me. That's the past."

Although Čima is very pleased to be home, her life is far from easy, and far from the standard in which she lived before the war: "We live on my husband's pension of 120 marks per month which we receive from the Federation. However, 70 marks of it now goes to pay for my husband's medicine every month. There is no state health assistance at all for us. We also receive help from our children. If we were to register for our pension in the Republika Srpska, it would only be around 50 marks."

Čima feels that the Serb refugees in Kozarac who are not from the town are very traumatized. "I have made an effort to tell them they are welcome to visit me anytime. One family comes to visit us often. When they first came and I invited them in, they were surprised and reserved. They have lost their identities.

"They don't know what's going to become of them, how they are going to eat -- they get food from the Red Cross. We give them a few things, whatever we can. When you see a really old person who is not at all guilty, your soul hurts because, for instance, they have no coffee. It is only human to help them. We are also not guilty -- I was thrown out of here out of the blue, and I understand and empathize with them."

After hearing this, I find myself hoping that Bosnia is full of people like Čima so that a truly peaceful multi-ethnic society can be rebuilt.

Čima Softić can be contacted through her partner organization "Megaherz": Pecani H-2-48,

Prijedor, Bosnia Herzegovina, Tel/Fax: 387-(0)79-224-870. Her proposal for the project to help traumatized women is available through The Advocacy Project.

**Profile: "There is still a gulf between the two communities"**

Peter meets Željko Marić and Murisa Stanković of "DON" (Democracy, Organization, and Progress), Prijedor; and Branka Kolar, president of the Prijedor regional forum of NGOs.

The absence of Serb NGOs from the conference seems like a great step backwards from the previous conference, where displaced Serbs and Muslims sat in the same room, many for the first time. It makes the oft-repeated declarations of "building bridges of peace and trust" seem rather empty. I visited two Prijedor NGOs run by local Serbs to hear their views, and learn why they did not attend.

Željko Marić and Murisa Stanković work with "DON" (Democracy, Organization, and Progress), Prijedor. DON is a member of the Forum of NGOs, an NGO coordinating body for the Prijedor region. There are four such umbrella organizations in the Republika Srpska and they coordinate NGO activities throughout the entity. They are currently working together to formulate a unified law on NGOs.

DON organized local citizens to observe last September's general elections. The organization also holds educational seminars on such topics as resettlement of displaced persons. Željko recalls that Annex 7 of the Dayton agreement also allowed for displaced persons to remain where they are, and trade or sell their old property. But, he said, "the international community is concentrating on return and ignoring these other options."

Murisa listed some obstacles to return, including educational curriculum. "There are, for all practical purposes, three entities, not two. There are three separate curricula, with three different language programs. "Serbian," "Bosnian," and "Croatian" are one language, but the politicians are trying to divide us with language.

"Then there is the problem of religion. Now there are no mosques in the Republika Srpska. Also, say a young displaced Serb returns to the Federation, if he fought against the Muslims during the war, how is he going to serve in the Federation army? And the hardest thing is getting work. It's not enough to have your house repaired, and then come home and sit between four walls. That's why mostly older people, who have pensions, are returning."

I asked for an assessment of the sentiment in the Republika Srpska regarding reunification of Bosnia. Murisa told me, "We need time. People of different ethnicities need to associate with each other in order to build trust. This depends on us, not on the governments. In Yugoslavia, it didn't matter what ethnicity a person was, and there were no borders. But today, the situation is what it is. Time will tell whether we can make it better.

"In the United States you have a nation, without worrying about all the ethnicities. What binds Americans together? Business. No one is concerned about your ethnicity. Your economy holds the state together. Here, if there is no economy, it is the downfall of the state. When the NATO

intervention started in Yugoslavia, the Republika Srpska border with Serbia was closed, and our economy started to fall apart. If the international community is interested in peace, it will invest in our economy."

Branka Kolar, president of the Prijedor regional Forum of NGOs, spoke to me about herself and the work of her NGO, which is called "Pro et Contra." "I am a native of Prijedor; my great-grandfather was born here. By profession I am a lawyer. I was a magistrate for ten years. I had very bad experiences in the war. I don't like to talk about that, but use my experience now to work for improvement."

"I was in Spain on vacation when the war broke out. I was unable to return to Bosnia, so I lived in Croatia for a time. Then my husband, who was a Bosnian Croat, left me because I am a Serb. Things became very difficult for me in Croatia, so I went to Germany and lived in Nuremberg for four years. After I returned home to Prijedor, my mother died at age 75. Now I have my father and my son, who is my life's motivation. Fortunately, God has helped me preserve my sanity.

"I only think of people in two categories: good and bad. I wish to defend human rights and work for the development of civil society in the Republika Srpska. As a lawyer I can help with my knowledge and represent returning displaced persons in court. I collaborate with a Muslim lawyer in Sanski Most to help displaced persons make their way through the return process. As long as displaced persons do not return, there's no use talking about civil society.

"My organization had funding until the beginning of this March. Between last October and March we helped 550 people file property return claims. Since that time 300 more people have filed claims, and I have been working for free. People have no money. I could make a living as a paid lawyer. But Prijedor has 16 lawyers. What would be the use of a 17th one?"

I asked Kolar to assess the present atmosphere for return in the Republika Srpska. She said, "If we leave aside the problems related to Brčko and the NATO intervention, there's still the problem of return. If people find a secure living situation somewhere else, they will not come home. If I had gotten a good job in Germany, I would have stayed there. That's why mainly older people are returning."

### **From Peter's diary -- "I need to be honest, this year's conference was a big farce"**

Wednesday, May 26. When I asked why DON did not attend the Kozarac conference, Željko told me, "That was the position of the (NGO) Forum." But it was obvious that he did not wish to explain this in detail.

Branka Kolar was open about the Forum's decision not to attend. She referred to an incident at the end of the conference last year, when there was a children's talent show presented by a youth group from Sanski Most. Inexplicably, the children started singing a song about the "Serbs coming to slaughter us."

This incident was not forgotten by the Serbs, who believed it was an intentional provocation. To

them, it seemed hard to believe that someone could have accidentally included the song, but it is difficult to pinpoint the responsibility. In any case, it was an indication that there is still a gulf between the two communities.

In addition, Kolar gave me an explanation of further difficulties between Prijedor Serb NGOs and Srcem do Mira. According to her, last year Srcem do Mira invited the Prijedor organizations to participate in the fifth annual conference only after the agenda for the conference had been formulated. The Serb organizations regarded this as an affront and, with the involvement of international organizations such as the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), succeeded in gaining input into the program.

Kolar told me, "To make a conference and invite us is not acceptable without our involvement in the creation of the program. Imagine that we Serb NGOs called for a multi-ethnic conference for return to Bihać, from where many Serbs were displaced, and simply presented it in a finished form to the Muslim NGOs of Bihać. This situation is comparable to that."

This year, Srcem do Mira Director Emsuda Mujagić received a letter from Branka Kolar as director of the Prijedor regional Forum of NGOs, announcing that the Serb NGOs had decided not to attend the sixth annual conference. Kolar gave me several reasons for this. "First of all, Kozarac as a venue is not acceptable, because there are three displaced persons' centers there. The town still lacks the facilities to have a civilized event."

"I am sorry about what happened with this year's conference, but I need to be honest; it was a big farce. Once again, we were excluded from involvement in the formation of the program. We received an invitation to the conference too late to do anything about this problem. Also, the date chosen for the event is a provocation. On that date, the war started. There were casualties. And that was the date that the Muslims wanted to take over the government in Prijedor."

This characterization of Muslim intentions to take control of the Prijedor government flies in the face of all evidence, and compromises Kolar's credibility. However, part of her complaint is supported by a local representative of the OSCE, who told me, "Emsuda is a leader and I admire her. But I believe that she manipulated this event purposely to exclude the Serbs. She wants the recognition for herself."

This assessment was further supported by a Muslim woman who has returned to Kozarac, and who has been active with Srcem do Mira. She said, "I didn't want to attend the conference. The leaders now do not understand that participation must be from both entities. The rhetoric of Srcem do Mira is excellent, but the work to accomplish the goals of reconciliation is deficient. Branka Kolar is a good, sincere woman. I know her from before the war. We should have worked through the OSCE as we did last year, to do this together."

I returned to Kozarac from these interviews discouraged about the possibilities of reconciliation between Serbs and the returning Muslims. It is clear that the war has clouded people's judgment. Considering the extent of the violence and upheaval that everyone has experienced, any other outcome would be practically a miracle. The polarization in Bosnia is still profound, giving reality to the expression, "One person's sanity is another's oppression."

As I walked back into Kozarac, however, a positive thought came to me. In spite of the problems, return to Kozarac is underway and Srcem do Mira is partially responsible for that. With luck, leaders will appear on both sides whose strong point is truly reconciliation.