



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

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### **Contents**

- **Introduction**
- **Emsuda's escape**
- **"Before the War, There Was No Prejudice"**
- **"Those Who Were Not Holding Their Heads Down Had Their Throats Cut"**
- **Escape from Trnopolje**
- **Escape to Croatia**

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

#### **Introduction**

In this issue, Peter visits northwest Bosnia with Emsuda Mujagić, a refugee leader who is trying to return to her home in the town of Kozarac.

The northwest is steeped in the grim history of the Bosnian war. Nationalist Serbs intended this to be the heart of their independent "Serb Republic," and unknown to their neighbors they started making preparations in 1991 -- months before Bosnia declared independence from Yugoslavia. In May of 1992, the Serbs attacked across a broad front, catching the Muslims, Croats and other minorities in this region totally by surprise. By the time the front-line had stabilized in the west, the Bosnian Serbs had seized a large chunk of territory, including such towns as Sanski Most, Prijedor, and Kozarac.

These first months of aggression by the Bosnian Serbs defined the war that was to follow. They were marked by acts of great cruelty and murder, as well as the "ethnic cleansing" of entire civilian populations. Thousands of Muslims were detained and tortured in concentration camps near Prijedor, the most ferocious being at an old iron-ore mine named Omarska. The Muslim population was expelled from Banja Luka (the second largest town in Bosnia) and nearly a score of Muslim mosques destroyed.

The region is also associated with the perpetrators of these war crimes. The first war criminal to be prosecuted and jailed by the Hague tribunal -- Dušan Tadić -- owned a restaurant in the town of Kozarac, before he served as a guard and interrogator at Omarska. In 1997, the police chief of Prijedor, Simo Drljača, was shot and killed by NATO troops as he resisted arrest. Drljača had been vice minister of the Interior of the Serb Republic and one of the architects of ethnic

cleansing in the northwest.

But the northwest is a region of hope, as well as of horrible memories. Against the odds, refugees are starting to return. They are inspired by individuals like Emsuda Mujagić and her organization Srcem do Mira, a Bosnian nongovernmental organization (NGO) based in Sanski Most. They are also helped by the election of a less stridently nationalist Serb government in Banja Luka. Progress towards repatriation has been halting and slow. The nightmares are vivid, and the obstacles are real -- but something good has been happening in this corner of Bosnia.

Peter will tell this story in the words of refugees like Emsuda. He recalls how the ethnic cleansing began and what it meant to live under occupation. He hears how Srcem do Mira was set up in exile, and how early efforts to return home were thwarted. He goes back with Emsuda to visit her devastated home in Kozarac as the thaw begins, and looks at her efforts to rebuild with assistance from international aid -- and local Serbs. Finally, he attends last year's international conference of Srcem do Mira, and watches efforts at building reconciliation between former enemies.

### **Emsuda's Escape**

#### ***From the diaries:***

*Before the war started, the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) held exercises around the outskirts of Kozarac and Prijedor. As with other places around Bosnia, these were secretly in preparation for attacks on cities. Then the attacks on the cities of eastern Bosnia began in April of 1992. Kozarac was a 95% Muslim town of about 27,000, before the war. Starting on May 24th it was bombarded for 40 hours. Emsuda told me that at 2:00 a.m. on May 25th, the Serbian members of the Kozarac police force disarmed their Muslim colleagues. She described how there were two policemen working the night shift at the station, playing a game of chess. When the clock struck two, one of them, a Serb, pulled out his gun and disarmed his partner.*

#### **"Before the War, There Was No Prejudice"**

On the morning of May 26, 1992, the prominent Muslim politicians, doctors, and intellectuals in Kozarac were arrested. There was a loudspeaker announcement that "all who were against war" should meet at the edge of town. People came out to see what was happening, and were told to leave the town. They headed towards Prijedor, and were met by Serb police.

The police spoke the ekavian dialect spoken in Serbia, but they had information about people from Kozarac, apparently given to them by the Serb residents of the town. Many were arrested by the Serbs, including most of the men and some women too. Some who were not arrested went to Prijedor and Banja Luka. Most of the men who were arrested were sent to Omarska, the most notorious Serb concentration camp. Many of them did not survive.

Some women, children, and a few men were sent to another camp, Trnopolje, where the mistreatment was not as harsh. Emsuda and her family were sent there, and released after a month. They stayed in Prijedor for a while, under Serb rule, until it became unbearable; then they went to live as refugees in Zagreb.

This is the story, in her own words, of Emsuda's escape:

"Before the war, people in this area behaved the same as in the most civilized places in Europe. There was no prejudice. We didn't even know who was of what ethnicity. My daughter Alisa does not have a Muslim name; we took that name from a song we liked.

"But beginning in 1990 the nationalist parties were forming, and you could notice polarization among the people. It was not too visible, but there was something in the air. You knew something might happen, you just didn't know what. Then, in 1991, the wars in Slovenia and Croatia started, and there was preparation for war here. We didn't know it at the time, but looking back on it, the picture comes together.

"Muslim parents were getting their sons out of the Yugoslav army. Most of the Serb parents were on the side of the government. There were demonstrations both against and in favor of the army's role in Croatia.

"With four friends I organized a rally to prevent our sons from going to Croatia to fight. But the government changed the bus lines so that we couldn't go from Kozarac to Prijedor to demonstrate. We organized van trips to carry people there, and held these demonstrations every Saturday. We would march to the municipality building. The authorities filmed all that and recorded the identities of the organizers. Of the five of us, only three are still alive.

"Serb women were organizing rallies on Sundays to support the war, with people bussed in from Drvar, Banja Luka, and other places. The mothers were saying things like, "I have two sons. One died in the war. When the other one dies, then I'll go to war." Parents were compelling their sons to put on uniforms. One young man didn't want to go, and killed himself instead. The Bosnian government emptied the state pension funds, the health care fund, and the budgets of the state-owned companies in order to support the war.

"In late April of 1992, Muslims were being prevented from traveling to other parts of the area of northern Bosnia. This was after the war had already started in the eastern part of the country, but we didn't know the scope of it, and didn't believe that it would last that long or reach to our part of the country.

"In May, the Yugoslav National Army made a circle around Kozarac. They called it a "military exercise." They had rocket launchers and cannons in place in the hills above Kozarac, as well as on top of the highest buildings in Prijedor. They were preparing a siege, as was done in Sarajevo. There were very many soldiers, and we did not know what to do.

"The war started in Kozarac with two days of bombing from all sides. At that time I was at my parents' house on the outskirts of town. I was staying with my brother, who had had a heart attack and had just returned from the hospital. My son Adis was with me, and Osman and our daughter Alisa were at the home in the center of Kozarac. We had felt that something bad was going to happen, and decided to split up to increase the possibility of at least one of us surviving.

"After 48 hours of bombing, the army stopped to announce over a PA system that everyone should come out of their houses, that no one would touch them, and that we must leave and go to Prijedor. They said they would check everyone for weapons, and whoever did not have a weapon would have no problem. When people heard this announcement, they were less afraid, and then a river of people came out of their houses.

### **"Those Who Were Not Holding Their Heads Down Had Their Throats Cut"**

"Then there was bombing again, and many people were killed. They separated the men from the women, and there were younger men who were not holding their heads down -- these people had their throats cut or they were taken into houses and killed. This happened to four people I knew; two were cousins of mine, with two of their friends.

"The Serbs had lists of people to kill: respected people and businessmen, owners of private companies, restaurants, and top sports figures. The Hodža (Muslim religious leader) was killed in his home.

"Everyone was driven towards Prijedor. There was a column of people all the way to the nearby village of Kozaruša, and they put people in buses and took them away. They called out people's names from the list, and naturally people didn't know what the list was about, so when they heard their names, they responded. They stole from people, tortured some of them, and then loaded them onto trucks to various prison camps: Omarska, Keraterm, Trnopolje, and Gumara (a tire factory), also a juice factory. They split up families, sending a father to Omarska and a son to Trnopolje. There was a general panic, and in two days, Kozarac was empty.

"The night of the attack I was in Kozaruša. Tanks passed through, and the army killed people and burned all the houses on the way. The day before, we had made a shelter in the woods, by digging a big hole, covering it with logs, and throwing branches over the logs. It was near a brook. That night we had nearly 50 people hiding in the shelter. This was about a half-kilometer from the village.

"All of the shelters that had been created earlier were bombed, but they did not know about our position. Osman and Alisa thought we had been killed, because all the houses in the village were burned. We watched the column of tanks pass my uncle's house, then the house of my brother. This happened on the night of the 24th of May, 1992. Around 2:00 a.m. we left the shelter, and we found the Trnopolje camp by chance.

### **Escape from Trnopolje**

"I was in the Trnopolje camp for one month. There was not enough space, so they were taking some of the prisoners and getting rid of them. Some people they took and were using as live shields in battles around Doboj, Gradačac, and Gračanica to the east; others, they took to the IEBL (inter-entity borderline), raped the women, and then forced them to walk through mine fields to get to Muslim-controlled territory.

"Trnopolje was an elementary school, but the whole village around it was also part of the camp.

Sometimes people were allowed to go to a house to wash. There was a Serb social worker who wanted to help me get out of the camp. She gave me a piece of paper saying that I could leave the area, that I was not dangerous. I was able to arrange for my mother, daughter, and sister to get out. I tried to get out with my son, but they wouldn't let us go, because he was 12 years old, and they considered him old enough to carry a gun.

"At one point I pretended to go to a house and wash. A guard said that it was all right if I returned in one half-hour. I returned, so that he would trust me. The next day I went to the house with my son and my other sister, promising again to return in a half-hour. But we stayed in that house with some friends.

"Those of us who were staying in the house agreed to go to a village called Suhi Brod. We did not know that everyone in that village had been driven out or killed. On our way there, two soldiers stopped us and asked for our documents. We showed them our passes.

"One of the soldiers had a heavy village accent. He was from near Omarska, and I knew some of his family. I asked about his cousin, a woman I had helped by selling clothing that she had made. This soldier decided to help me after going to his village and asking his cousin about me. He brought us food for several days, to the house in Suhi Brod where we were hiding. This was even though he had a list with my name on it, where I was listed as an "Ustasha" (Croat fascist), I was on this list because I had organized the demonstrations against the war.

"When I was hiding in Suhi Brod, a strange thing happened to me. I went to an empty house to look for some food, and there I met an old man who had always been around Kozarac. People thought he was crazy, but my father had told me to listen to what he said.

"We conversed for a long time, and he explained to me that I had a responsibility to work to stop the war. He told me, "You have a big job to do, my child. You must call the women of the world, and get them to help you stop the war. This is the only way." I asked him how, when even a fly can't escape from this place, and anyway, I don't know any foreign language." The man said, "Don't worry, you will find people who will want to help. You will always find a way to overcome obstacles."

"I persuaded the soldier to take me back to my house so that I could get some clothes. When we went there, I saw many corpses along the way. I took some clothes, a towel, and a handbag. The soldier prevented people from completely plundering my house. Then he took me back to the house where we were hiding, in Suhi Brod.

## **Escape to Croatia**

"When we were going back to Suhi Brod, we passed the intersection leading to Trnopolje. Near there was the factory where I used to work. I saw some of the people who had been directors and managers of that factory. They were taking machines from the factory and packing them to take away.

"One of these former colleagues saw me. Later he talked to the soldier who had been driving me

and told him, "You are helping the biggest Ustasha in the municipality. She led demonstrations and tried to prevent us from forming our state." The soldier came to me and told me that they were looking for me, and that the only way for me to escape was to go to Omarska and to pretend to register there. At this point Suhi Brod was full of soldiers, and we left only a few minutes before they came to the house where we had been hiding.

"I went to Omarska, where a camp guard recognized me, and asked me if I knew a certain woman who had worked at my factory. I did, and I told him, "She was always speaking well of you." The guard said, "That woman is now my wife. Don't worry, we'll get you out of here, but the only way is for you to go back to Trnopolje camp." It was the safest thing to do, because the soldiers would not look for me there. It was risky, but I decided to do it.

"I went back to the camp, and saw Osman and my whole family. A couple of hours later the soldier came for me and we left with my children and sister. This was on July 1st. We went to Prijedor, where I stayed for 20 days with my nephew, who later disappeared.

"While I was in Prijedor someone saw me and told the authorities. They went to Trnopolje and started asking all the women where I was. Out of 2,000 women, none of them would even admit to knowing me. Then one told them to ask my sisters, who said I had been taken to Omarska.

"When I heard a couple of days later that they were looking for me, I got rid of my identification. I found some other ID and managed to get out, first to Travnik, then to Split in Croatia, and finally to Zagreb.

"Osman was able to get out of the camp on the 19th of August. He had to sign a form saying that he was giving everything he owned to the Republika Srpska (RS). He was supposed to go on a bus with prisoners to be taken to the IEBL and released. He succeeded in getting out of the camp and getting to Prijedor, where he tried to telephone the Serb who was organizing that trip, who was apparently doing him a favor.

"Osman reached the man's wife instead. He wanted to tell the man that he was in Prijedor, so as not to miss the bus trip. The woman told him that if he could leave the same day, and not wait until the bus trip, it would be better. He managed to get a ride out of town. As it happened, the people who were on the bus the next day were all taken to the mountains and killed."

***From the diaries:***

*Some people who were stuck in Prijedor and Banja Luka had to bribe their way out, and sign a statement that they relinquished their possessions. Emsuda said that many people died during the bombing of the Kozarac and when they were leaving. She said that the fear was the worst feeling -- not having any control over what to do. She said that one of her colleagues, a Serb woman from work, was spreading rumors about her during this time, in order to get revenge on her for having seniority.*

[At the 1998 conference] we were shown a book of those missing from the Kozarac area. There are 3,000 people listed in it. And there are many who were not listed, because whole families were killed and there was no one to notify that they were missing. In some cases whole villages

were wiped out, so no one was left to testify or return. If there were no relatives left to inherit property, it went to the RS government.

Meanwhile the houses in the town of Kozarac were looted by troops from Serbia, and then they were systematically destroyed. Emsuda made it clear to me that these were not paramilitary raiders, but trained soldiers.

Emsuda told us the story of a Serb woman who was left behind in Kozarac, let's call her Anka. She had married a Croat, and they had a son. They spoke against the separatist policies at the beginning of the war, and the father and son were taken to Omarska and never heard from again. The son had been living in Croatia, and had returned just before the start of the war.

Anka had information about who killed her husband and son, and where they were buried. She also knew who organized the killing. Later, Anka was arrested, beaten, handcuffed by the authorities, and taken to an insane asylum. She was held there for three days, until some friends helped her get out.

Anka told about several mass graves on Mt. Kozara, where 700 to 1,000 people are buried. One of them is now covered by a military post, while construction of a youth center is planned at one of the other locations. Another is used as a garbage dump. Emsuda said that the international community is avoiding opening up mass graves, and so the RS authorities are reading this apparent indifference as a sort of approval of their policies. Anka is a thorn in their side; her information comes from people who buried the dead at the camps.

We were told that the people who buried large numbers of dead were also usually killed, but that one of them had told someone who later was released from the camp, who then told Anka. It also happened sometimes, as in Srebrenica, that mass graves were later dug up and moved.