



On The Record: Returning Refugees to Bosnia

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From AP Editorial Desk

'To Us Kozarac Is Beautiful, Even if it is Ruined'

Peter first visited Kozarac in May 1998 with the refugees of Srcem do Mira, at the time of their annual conference. He found it grim and foreboding and he wasn't surprised when Emsuda Mujagić told him of the first time she had returned home to visit her old house. A local Serb remarked, "Go ahead and fix things, so we'll have something to destroy again."

Peter returned recently for a visit with Emsuda and found that the mood had changed dramatically. Displaced people from Kozarac, like Emsuda and her husband Osman, have started to return on weekends for "actions," which means cleaning up the town and houses preparatory to rebuilding. Kozarac itself is bustling with activity. In this issue, Peter contrasts his impressions of two visits.

From the diaries:

May 1998. "Some of us walked up the stairs into Emsuda's house. Pots were in the yard, tiles were falling off the bathroom wall. Weeds were growing through the concrete slab in the basement, which was exposed to the sunlight. The railing was off the steps. But Emsuda was happy. She said, 'My son was born today, twenty years and about five minutes ago.'"

"To Us Kozarac is Beautiful, Even if it is Ruined"

From the diaries:

Approaching Kozarac, we saw dozens of wrecked houses and a mosque with its minaret lying down beside it. Here and there was an overgrown Muslim graveyard, or a planted garden.

Kozarac had been 95% Muslim before the war. Everyone was driven out; the houses were plundered, and then destroyed. Emsuda told me she later happened to find her dining-room table and chairs in a house in Sanski Most. They must have been taken there from Kozarac while the Serbs still held Sanski Most.

On the outskirts of Kozarac there were bigger groups of destroyed houses, without roofs, windows, or doors -- just concrete, brick, and cinderblock frames. Emsuda showed me one group of houses where her father and brother lived, and where she was when the war broke out. There were woods behind the house, where she and the others had dug a shelter and hid. Further along, there was an intersection leading to Trnopolje, the camp where she and her family had been kept captive. "This is where a man was going to shoot me," she said. "That was on my birthday."

Kozarac used to be a small town of 10,000, with another 17,000 in outlying villages. Now there are a few hundred Serb refugees there, who live in a collective shelter converted from a high school. These people were mostly displaced from central Bosnia and from Croatia.

The streets were full of houses with walls, but no doors or windows. It was drizzling. We stood in the yard between the wrecked high school and a Muslim graveyard -- about 40 women and a few men in a circle. Several folks had shovels and we planted a "tree of peace." Afterwards the people in the circle chanted, "Peace. Tolerance. Return." Someone impromptu asked for a moment of ecumenical prayer, "in whatever way is your custom," for those who could never return. This was a very strong moment. Afterwards everyone sang part of the song, "Bosno Moja," My Bosnia.

I spoke with a couple of Serb refugees who were standing near the SFOR (the NATO Stabilization Force) truck, watching. They live in a refugee center in the old elementary school. One man with deep lines in his face, from a village near Sanski Most, asked me, "Will everyone come back to their home?" I said, "That's what they want to do."

He replied that this was a good idea, but that it would take a new government that was strong enough to make it happen. It wasn't clear to me whether he was referring to the government of either of the entities or of Bosnia itself. We talked a while about where he was from, etc. Some other Serbs were listening. Someone said, "Will there be return?" Another man, walking away, said, "I think not."

Emsuda's house is only half there, minus a roof and a couple of walls. In the driveway was what remained of her car. It was red, rusty, upside down, missing the doors and wheels. Some of us walked up the stairs into the house. Pots were in the yard; tiles were falling off the bathroom wall. Weeds were growing through the concrete slab in the basement, which was exposed to the sunlight. The railing was off the steps. But Emsuda was happy. She said, "My son was born today, twenty years and about five minutes ago."

I walked down the street with Rozalija to her house. There was rubble in the front yard. Dishes on the floor. Rozalija said they were not her dishes. Someone had chipped out the mortar from the front wall to remove some electrical wire. We stood on the back balcony, looking out at the back yard. It was the first time Rozalija had been home in six years. The back yard was lush,

overgrown with untended flower bushes. Nearby someone had cultivated a vegetable garden. Rozalija pointed out where the shade arbor had been, and where they used to grill food, and hoped to one day again.

Some of us got sidetracked on the way out of town and were invited into Anka's house, the Serb woman who had lost her husband and son. About eight of us crowded into her little sitting room and she served each of us a warm drink. She got out her documents and showed us her son's boxing award from Zagreb, first place junior. Anka told us she used to celebrate everyone's holidays. She would put on *dimija* (women's "harem pants") and go to the mosque. Her mother was Muslim.

She said, "No one can keep me from being friends with all ethnicities." Speaking of her experience in the asylum, she said, "They tried to make me crazy." Anka knew where her husband and son were buried, because when Emsuda was in Trnopolje camp, the man who buried them told her, and she told Anka.

One Year Later -- April 1999

We drove across the IEBL (inter-entity borderline) towards Prijedor. There is only a little yellow metal tab on a post, not even a sign, marking the IEBL-- But I did not feel the same when we passed that post. Emsuda told us that 16 Muslim villages had been destroyed in this area.

We passed a narrow bridge where people had been killed and thrown into the water. We saw a church on a hill on the left, built before the war. Emsuda said this area had been populated by Muslims. She said people didn't understand why the Serbs wanted to build a church right there, but they gave them land and helped anyway. Emsuda now interprets the building in that location as part of a plan to prove later that it was Serb land.

We passed a village. Emsuda told us that all the men from that village were taken to Omarska and thrown on a fire. She said 400 men were killed that way. That there were 80 ways "the chetniks" (her term) had used to torture people. There are houses that came out of the war not too badly damaged, but are now being stripped by local people for the building materials. Emsuda's house and others had had the mortar chipped away so that electrical wire could be removed.

We stopped in Prijedor and walked around a bit. It could be a pleasant town, but knowing what happened there makes me nervous to be there. Osman and Emsuda have apparently become used to going there, and they assert their right to go anywhere they want.

The town was 48% Muslim before the war. We saw where the old part of town used to be. All but one of the old Bosnian-style houses had been razed, and an outdoor market put up in their place. Emsuda pointed out the house of the policeman that had tried to kill her. She told me that the man who had saved her was a Serb soldier who took her and hid her in Kozarac, and then in Prijedor.

We passed Prijedor and headed towards Kozarac. The notorious concentration camp Keraterm, previously a ceramics factory, was on our left. The even more notorious camp, Omarska, was off

the road, but not far away. We passed a Roma (gypsy) town. Half of its inhabitants had been killed. Emsuda pointed out two houses on the main road. She said, "They killed people in that house." Further on was the intersection leading to Trnopolje. Emsuda said, "A policeman was going to shoot me here, but another Serb soldier who knew me saved me."

It is a pleasant territory of gently rolling hills with farms on one side of the road and the river on the other. Here and there is a demolished house, sometimes several in clumps. But there are many new or repaired houses also.

We passed through the village of Ališići. Along this road there have been some reconstruction projects, not only by Serbs who have taken over Muslims' houses, but also by Muslims preparing to return home. Emsuda recounted how, on a recent night, a drunken Serb came to the home of a returned Muslim, and started threatening him. The Muslim defended himself with a shovel. The Serb went to the police and so did the Muslim. The police, apparently very cooperative, put the Serb in jail.

This was a man who had already been in jail recently, and was suspected of attacking another nearby house. We passed that house, which another displaced Muslim had been repairing. Now, there was a burned-out trailer, and new front doors on the house had just been destroyed. Several fruit trees in a row, just about to blossom, had been chopped in two at about chest height. Emsuda said that the owner of this house was a persistent man, and not about to be deterred from returning home.

Emsuda pointed to another house, saying, "This was the house of my colleague from the paper factory." "Who lives there now?" I asked. "A Serb family."

She went on to tell me of an exhumation currently underway of a nearby mass grave. The body of the director of her company was identified, and there was a large funeral in Sanski Most. The director had been a very popular man, and even some Serbs came from Prijedor to attend. But it is very hard to identify people with poor technology and scant records. Of 140 corpses from that grave, only 27 were identified.

Kozarac Revival

Things have changed considerably in Kozarac in one year's time. Srcem do Mira has managed to persuade several international relief organizations to finance the reconstruction of some houses. Individuals and families started coming back to clear the rubble away from their homes, so that contractors could begin reconstruction. And now some 50-odd Muslims have returned to their homes.

Five thousand houses were destroyed in Kozarac. Each one looks pretty much like the others, in varying stages of wreckage. Some only lack a roof, others lack parts of walls and look like they would be so much the harder to fix. There are piles of rubble next to many houses, here and there a stripped, rusty car. Weeds grow where flower and vegetable gardens used to be cultivated. Fruit trees stand unpruned.

But obvious progress has been made since I was first in Kozarac a year ago. Then, all was wreckage, and the Serb refugees walked sullenly, and the visitors timidly. Now, there is much reconstruction activity, and the Muslims who have returned to their town stroll the main street as if wreckage were the most normal thing in the world.

Most remarkable, the Serbs are now engaged in the rebuilding. Over 100 houses have been repaired, and another 100 are currently being rebuilt.

This does not mean everything is going smoothly. To date, mostly older people are returning to Kozarac. Unemployment, lack of a multi-ethnic police force and municipal administration, and lack of a school are all serious obstacles. There have also been occasional incidents of violence against returnees. However, SFOR has increased its patrol of the town, and Srcem do Mira has increased its resolve. Return continues.

Now, the town is bustling with rebuilding activity. A German reconstruction organization has hired local Serb contractors and laborers to fix 100 houses. It is ironic that some of the same people, literally, that destroyed the houses are now rebuilding them so that their old owners can return.

Overseeing the Repair of Emsuda's House

We walked up to Emsuda and Osman's old house. I asked if I could take a picture. Osman said, "Of course, it's my house, after all."

Osman's car, which last year had lain upside-down in the driveway, stripped and rusted, was gone. The rubble from his destroyed house has been cleared away. We walked into the house, where a half dozen Serb workmen are finishing the brickwork on the top floor. They greeted us cordially. I have the impression that no one who gets to know Emsuda can remain hostile.

Emsuda told us that she came there practically every day to check up on the progress of reconstruction, including that on her and Osman's own house. Today she met one of the contractors and looked at the plans for their house. She and Osman were upset because the contractor was not following the original agreement on how to fix the house.

Emsuda explained that a lot of contractors were rebuilding the houses smaller than they had been. She said that they would finish a house, and say "We fixed another house," but it would be "half a house -- a chicken coop."

She and Osman had taken three years to build the house. They loved it the way it used to be, and wanted it to be done right. They went to the office of the Germans who were coordinating the rebuilding project. The manager was speaking in English to an interpreter who interpreted for Emsuda and Osman.

He was saying, "If everyone came in here like you and complained...I can't change everyone's project...I'm a nice guy, so I'll explain this again...You have to talk to the contractor." He wasn't listening. I was so disgusted that I had to leave the room.

Emsuda and Osman found out that the German organization had not given the contractor enough materials. I translated what the manager said to Emsuda afterwards. The interpreter had not done a complete job. Emsuda encouraged me to go back and talk to the manager, and I did. Politely I explained to him that it wasn't nice for people to be told they are one of "everybody," when they feel like they are individuals.

Emsuda told me that if the house doesn't get fixed the way they want it, they will withdraw from the program and have it fixed some other way.

Emsuda and Osman checked the workmanship, as they do regularly. Osman asked for one wall to be adjusted, and Emsuda asked where a door is going to be placed. From the open top floor we saw flowering lilac bushes, and the surrounding Kozara hills.

There is good reason for Emsuda and Osman to observe the repair process closely. The reconstruction is being funded by a German relief organization that hires local (Serb) contractors, mostly from Prijedor. They in turn hire unemployed Serbs who live in Prijedor and Kozarac. The friendly crew working on this house are mostly displaced persons from Bugojno.

Many returning Muslims have been dissatisfied with the results of the rebuilding. Apparently the relief organizations take the lowest-bidding contractors, and the contractors in turn take every measure to save on construction and materials costs. I toured some of the neighboring houses. There were thrown-together staircases made of leftover lumber in the living rooms, which I would be embarrassed to have in my basement. Doors do not fit, and whole floors are without heating.

Emsuda told me that the Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) organization hired a contractor from Omarska, whose brother was on the list of indicted war criminals. This man built bedrooms on the noisiest side of the house, bathrooms away from the main plumbing, and omitted vent chimneys. Fortunately Emsuda's vigilance has prevented such bad work. But others were less lucky. The NPA financed the repair of around 50 houses, then got so many complaints that it left town.

Emsuda's next-door neighbor, Almira, was visiting her house. There was insufficient headroom to go up the stairs to the second floor. Those stairs need to be replaced, but she has no money to take care of that. She told me that she lost her husband and son during the war, that she does not know where they are. Her pension is 100 DM a month, and when she moves back to Kozarac, the Republika Srpska pension will be even less. She has not accepted the key to the house at this point, because of the poor repair work.

Emsuda pointed out the clinic that was being repaired. I asked her if there would be work for people in Kozarac after they return. She said, "Of course. We will make the work. We did that before, too. We didn't wait for the government to build our roads and our water supply system. We are training people now in various jobs, and will continue that when we return."

Visit to Anka

We visited Anka, the Serb woman who had lived in the town before the war, and still lives there. Her house had also been somewhat damaged, but was fixed up. Her family had not agreed with the Serb policies, and her husband and son had been taken away and killed.

As we walked up to the house Anka ran out. She said hello to Emsuda and hugged Vivien. She didn't know Vivien, but Vivien was a blonde foreigner and a friend of Emsuda's, so that was good enough.

We sat and had coffee. Anka brought out some slivovitz for me and Vivien. It was too strong for Viv and she was surprised when I swallowed it down. It was a surreal feeling for me, sitting in a ghost town drinking slivovitz, with SFOR trucks driving by. Emsuda said to me, "We made this town together -- not only the houses, but the roads, the drainage, the water supply. The government didn't help us with this."

Osman said, "To us Kozarac is beautiful, even if it is ruined."

We stopped and visited two houses owned by Emsuda's sisters, next door to each other. They are being fixed. In back of them lives an elderly couple of Serb refugees from Knin. They were turning plums into a distilled drink, with a large rented still.

There was a boiler full of plums cooking away. A copper tube came out of the boiler and spiraled into a barrel of cooling water, where the vapors condensed. There was a slow steady drip of slivovitz. I held my finger under it and tasted it, and it was strong. I asked the old man if he was going to stay in that house.

He said, "No, the owners are coming back." The woman turned to me and asked, "What are we going to be able to do?" as if I, a random foreigner, represented the United Nations. The couple allowed that everyone should be able to go back home, that no one except the politicians wanted this war in the first place.

Emsuda showed us the untended garden in front of one of her sisters' house. She said there were 85 kinds of roses there. Next door some workmen were putting a new roof on her other sister's house. They were cutting 6" x 6" rafter beams expertly with a chain saw.

It felt strange to me to be in a ghost town with so much activity -- a town that had been dead the last time I was there. Emsuda knows everyone and everything, but says nothing negative. She smiles, and people trust her. I am convinced that the work going on here is happening because of her.

Reviving the Ghosts -- and Dealing with War Crimes

As we were walking down the street, a Serb worker came by and said to Emsuda, "Gde si, bre." (How are you/what's up?)

The man was a refugee from Knin, who had become friendly with Emsuda. The odd thing was

that he had spoken to her in a dialect that was from Serbia, never spoken around the Krajina. He had picked up the politically correct dialect. Emsuda told us that this man had told her where there was a mass grave, under a pile of building supplies. There were 96 corpses there. I asked her how he knew. She said he had been in the army.

I said, "So he was a 'chetnik?'" She said, "Yes, but not a real chetnik." He wanted to make up for what he had done and help Emsuda to let The Hague know about the graves. She said the local authorities knew that he knew about them, but not that she knew about them.

We passed the house on the main street that had been a kafana (coffee house). A small inscription on the front said, "Owner, Tadić." This was the house of one of the first war criminals captured and prosecuted by the war-crimes tribunal. Duško Tadić was one of the guards at Omarska.

In the evening, Emsuda showed Vivien and me a film made by two women from Prijedor, a Croat and a Muslim. They were both lawyers. They were taken to Omarska during the war, and were required to serve food to the inmates. They suffered all kinds of mistreatment from the guards and the commander, Meakić. The women, Nusreta and Jadranka, were in the camp a few months. Eventually they were released and escaped to Zagreb. During the war they decided to make a film about their experience rather than suppressing it. The film is titled "Calling the Ghosts."

The women said, "At first all I wanted to do was get revenge. I decided that the best way to get revenge was to collect information and provide it to The Hague. Later the hatred subsided, and I felt myself to be in the role of a confessor. Maybe what I went through was punishment for not being concerned about the mistreatment of women at other times and places around the world, of women in other wars... People are only interested in war as a movie they watch while eating popcorn. The war was boring because it was someone else's...."

Meakić, the commander of Omarska, was indicted for war crimes. In the film, Nusreta and Jadranka traveled to The Hague to provide evidence. From there, they mailed Meakić a postcard that said, simply: "Wish you were here."

I asked Emsuda whether Meakić was ever caught. She said no, but that she had seen him two-and-a-half weeks earlier, herself. She had gone in a car with a friend, the Serb who saved her life, to Omarska to look for evidence of mass graves. When they arrived, they saw Meakić standing there with some other people. They drove around once. When they returned, he was gone.

Emsuda told me that before the war everyone in Kozarac and Prijedor, both Serb and Muslim, had worn the same kind of clothes. No one could know who was what, but invading Serb troops from other places must have been told by locals who was Muslim. Emsuda was wondering how the old neighbors could be trusted again. Emsuda is aware of the evil that happened. She has no illusions, but is willing to do what is necessary to get back home.

I talked to her until late into the night. I wondered how the people who had done such crimes could sleep. She said the small fry have a conscience, and they can't sleep. Some of them are

trying to make up for what happened. It's the big criminals who have no conscience, but they stay up late thinking about what else they can do to consolidate their crimes. It would be better if they would sleep more, Emsuda said.

Emsuda wants to build a "house of peace" in Kozarac when people return. She is interested in the tower. Alternatively, she may be able to get the old high school, more than 100 years old. It is presently a shell, standing without a roof or windows.

The "house of peace" would be a place where women would be able to congregate, study, and work. Vivien said she hoped that some men would be able to come too. Emsuda said that men wouldn't be excluded, but that most of them are dead; 3,000 people were killed at Omarska.