



On the Record: Returning Refugees to Bosnia

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From the AP Editorial Desk

Largely as a result of what happened in northwest Bosnia in early 1992, the label of cruelty has now stuck to Bosnian Serbs. To some extent this was inevitable and also deserved -- large numbers of ordinary Bosnian Serbs were co-opted into the murder of their former Muslim neighbors. But the Serbs, too, have been victims of the war, and expelled in large numbers. Furthermore, there are many decent, committed Serbs working for reconciliation.

This is examined in this issue of Peter Lippman's dispatches. The first item, taken from the newspaper *Oslobodjenje*, shows that Serb refugees face most of the same obstacles, and hatred, as do Emsuda and other Muslim refugees trying to return home.

In the second piece, Peter profiles Željko Marić, a policeman from Prijedor, who married a Muslim refugee during the war and now participates actively in the Democratic Organization for Progress -- a group that campaigns for the return of refugees to their home. Finally Peter talks to the Banja Luka branch of the Coalition for Return.

The Serbs of Northwest Bosnia: "The War Was War, Now Let's Get on with Life"

From the diaries:

February 23, 1998. We walked forever and climbed up a high hill or small mountain through the snow to a large concrete monument, visible from much of Banja Luka, in honor of the fallen heroes of the anti-fascist war, WWII. There is a beautiful view from the top of this hill of all Banja Luka, the river winding through it. This monument used to be called "Shehidluci," a Muslim word for martyrs. The name has been changed.

The monument was covered with bas-reliefs of the people's struggle against the Nazis. Scenes of people being hung. Refugees. Men and women holding guns. Nazis hurting people. A victorious

Partisan with his foot on the neck of a Nazi. Nothing new. Lots of graffiti, kids trying out their Cyrillic.

I read the paper. Glas Srpske (Serb Voice), formerly Glas, founded by the Partisans, now in Cyrillic. Articles with headlines about "Shiptar Terror." Shiptar, an insulting word for Albanians. Such professionalism.

In the evening I spoke with Damir, the night watchman at the Dia youth center. He is desperate, was asking me how he could leave the country. A lot of young folks are leaving. He is a Serb from Zagreb, and had to leave Croatia during the war there in 1991. He told me that he moved to Banja Luka, and had to move seven times since then. He has four kids, including infant twins. The people here don't accept him, because of his Croatian accent. He says he doesn't fit in. Zagreb is a city, Banja Luka a town. Damir would like to go to Australia. He also told me he thinks that NATO should bomb Serbia.

I talked to the taxi driver. I asked him whether he felt that Bosnia was a country, or two separate entities. He said, "Two entities, 100% separate. And let it stay that way. If it doesn't, I'm leaving the country. I have had problems, my father and grandfather had problems, and I don't want my children to have problems. One of our humorists said, 'I don't want Sarajevo. Let them keep it. We keep leaving there and coming back. The problem is not with Sarajevo, it's with us.'"

"Nikola, Thank God You Died before the War"

A group of 95 Serbs, who currently live in the Republika Srpska (RS), recently visited their houses and cemeteries in the villages of Pritok and Bijelo Brdo near Bihać (in the Federation). This is their second visit to those villages this month.

Although they had security accompaniment from the IPTF (International Police Task Force) and SFOR (the NATO Stabilization Force), and the presence of representatives of several international organizations, the Serbs were not allowed to exit from their buses at the planned location, a gas station in Ripac. This was explained as being due to fear of the current residents of Ripac. These people, however, did not display particular interest in the visitors.

Savka Grbić entered into the courtyard of a house in Bijelo Brdo belonging to her sister. Now the Cirić family is lodged there, and Savka meets a young man at the door.

"Hello son, you know me."

"I do," answers the young man.

"Then why don't you shake my hand?"

"I won't shake your hand."

"Really, son, I did not expect that of you. You used to come over to my house as if you were my own child. Where is your father?"

"He died."

"And where is your mother?"

"She went into town, but it's better that she is not here."

"You know, son, we want to come back here and live together again."

"However God wills it, that's how it will be," finishes Izet Cirić, explaining to us why he did not shake hands with Savka. "They killed my brother. They burned down my house, and I found the door and some other things in Savka's house. When the war started, over there somewhere around Bijeljina, Savka didn't even want to drink coffee with my mother, and she talked about "what Alija (Izetbegovic, president of Bosnia) and the balijas (an insulting term for Muslims) were doing to them. She was cursing Alija and the balijas."

On the way to the cemetery with a bouquet of flowers in her hand, Savka speaks to her dead husband, "Nikola, thank God you died before the war."

It is difficult to get to the cemetery, because of the grass and weeds. "Here, we can go this way, but can one of you go first? Maybe it's mined," says one woman to the police and journalists.

They clean the graves, pulling out weeds and lighting candles. No one wants to talk with a journalist, only Ratko Durbajić, the leader of this group, and president of the municipal committee of the Socialist Party of the Republika Srpska. He praises the government of Bihać and the members of the police force for their professional behavior on both visits.

"I have been working with the government of Bihać for a long time on return of Serbs to their houses. I think that these visits show that there is a growing conviction among people for the need to return. Our slogan is Sarajevo to Sarajevans, Prijedor to Prijedorans, Doboj to Doboians, and Bihać to Bihaćans." (Oslobodjenje, May 18, 1998 -- Translated by Peter Lippman)

Profile: Željko Marić, Democratic Organization for Progress, Prijedor

Prijedor is a Serb-controlled town of 95,000, which once held a population of almost 50,000 Muslims. Nearly all of these people have been expelled. The municipality of Prijedor was the location of atrocities during the war. Many Muslims were killed in the nearby concentration camps of Omarska and Keraterm. Omarska, a former mining complex, was the most notorious camp in all of Bosnia: over 3,000 people died there.

When Croats and Muslims retook Sanski Most in late 1995, thousands of Serbs left for Prijedor. There are thousands more Serb refugees there who were displaced at the same time from Croatia. As a result the present population of Prijedor is now almost half refugees. Meanwhile, Croats and Muslims displaced from Prijedor are now living in many parts of Bosnia and throughout the world, but especially in nearby Sanski Most, across the inter-entity borderline (IEBL).

The Prijedor non-governmental organization (NGO) Democratic Organization for Progress (DON), headed by Murisa and Željko Marić, is an NGO that works for reconciliation and for the return of displaced persons to Prijedor. Mr. and Mrs. Marić are close colleagues of Emsuda Mujagić and the Sanski Most return organization Srcem do Mira. DON collaborates with this organization in preparation for their annual conference.

During a recent visit with Emsuda Mujagić, I arranged for her to take me to Prijedor to meet with Željko Marić. Before leaving from Sanski Most, I asked Emsuda if we could call him to confirm the meeting. She said, "It's better if we don't use the telephone for this, because you never know who is listening. We'll find them."

Mr. Marić was not at home; we found him in a barn near his house on the outskirts of Prijedor, tending to several hundred week-old chicks. He took time off from his work to speak with me:

"I have two jobs, so I don't get much rest," Marić told me. "I work at the firm all evening, then get up early and tend to the chickens." "The firm?" I asked. "The police department. I'm a policeman; that's what I call the department. But I earn more from the chickens."

I would not necessarily have predicted that a Serb policeman in Prijedor would be an activist for the return of Muslims to his town. But there is more to his story. Murisa, his wife, is a Muslim. They married during the war. Murisa, a native of Prijedor, was stuck in the town and unable to escape. She took refuge with a Serb family who happened to be related to Željko. As Željko recounts it, he came around to visit and help regularly. One thing led to another, and now they are married. They both have children from prior marriages.

"I'm the only policeman volunteering in a non-governmental organization," said Mr. Marić. This is the third year of DON's existence. We are working for democratization of this entity, as well as for non-violent conflict resolution, independent unions, social welfare, and return of displaced persons. We provide legal assistance to the many people wandering around trying to figure out what they need to do to return home. We have around 50 members in Prijedor.

"Last year the Srcem do Mira conference was held partly in Prijedor, which was a first. We asked people in the Prijedor Forum of NGOs to participate. Some of them said, "What's in it for us?" But then they started to come around. We are supporting this effort because we want to promote reconciliation, to overcome the present situation.

"We are ordinary folks. We can't decide big things. We didn't sign Dayton. What we need here is to have a peaceful atmosphere, without fighting and disruption. Progress towards reconciliation is going very slowly now -- the overall political situation is not stable enough. We don't need much here to improve conditions; people are returning home. We just need a guarantee of peace. That is the best catalyst to change.

"It was much better before the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia. Now that has set off a current of anger and uncertainty among the people here.

"The Brčko decision was also not a good one. What is a "district?" It is nothing. It is as if Brčko

is a toy in the hands of the international community. Brčko should have been given to one entity or the other. There's too much uncertainty -- who will it belong to tomorrow?

"We are participating in the conference with Srcem do Mira because this kind of activity needs people from both entities involved. That will help to prevent hostile incidents. The people who are coming to attend the conference need to get to know those of us who live in the Republika Srpska, as we are. We are not savages.

"Because of the present situation, some of the other people in the NGO Forum are opposed to participating again. I think most will come but now, with the new situation, we haven't met. So I really don't know. In my opinion, we need to show that even under these conditions people from both sides can work together.

"Other NGO activists in Prijedor selected Murisa to be their spokesperson at last year's conference, and she's a Muslim. That's a sign of respect," exclaimed Željko. "In these NGOs people don't look at who is what ethnicity. We are ordinary people, not politicians. And look, there's my father talking to Osman, a Muslim. My father lost a son, my brother, during the war. So what should we do? Should we hate? The war was war, now let's get on with life.

"I'm a natural optimist. I always hope for a brighter future. I think the world will create a stable peace in the Balkans. That would lead to an improvement in relations among the ethnicities. In the pre-war Yugoslavia, what you did was relevant, not who you were. That is normal, and all rational people think that way.

"But now division is everywhere. Some people say that ethnic division is good. Maybe it is good, I don't know. But it has to be under the condition that people can work. The economy is more important than ethnicity. However, no one can prevent return. Return of refugees is important because there's no happiness in being in someone else's house. If I'm using someone else's house, I'll be aware of that the rest of my life. There's nothing worse than that.

"There is an old curse among our people, 'May he have everything, and then lose it.' Now there are many who have experienced that."

Profile: The Coalition for Return, Banja Luka

The capital of the Republika Srpska was moved from Pale to Banja Luka in early 1998, when Milorad Dodik became prime minister of the Serb entity. Banja Luka is the second largest city in Bosnia, and far larger than any other town in the RS. It is the industrial and agricultural center of the Bosnian Krajina, and traditionally has cultural and commercial ties with Zagreb, the capital of Croatia.

There was no fighting within the municipality of Banja Luka during the war, but there was serious harassment and discrimination. Most of the non-Serb population was driven out. At the same time, displaced Serbs poured into Banja Luka. They came not only from the rest of Bosnia, but also from the Croatian Krajina and other parts of Croatia.

The population of the city thus shrank by almost one half, but then ended up larger by 10,000 or 20,000. These figures include around 60,000 Serb refugees from Croatia. Most of those from Bosnia have come from the now Federation-controlled parts of the northwest: Sanski Most, Drvar, Glamoć, Bosansko Grahovo, Bihać, and other municipalities.

By the end of the war there were fewer than 2,000 Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) left in the city. Bosniaks and Croats were signing over the deeds to their homes during the war to be able to get passage to refuge. Approximately two thousand of each ethnicity have returned. Also during the war, all 17 of the mosques, and most of the Catholic churches, were destroyed. The most notorious case was the Ferhadija mosque, considered one of the most beautiful in the country.

Before the war the Banja Luka area had well-developed industries for wood products, electronic machines, tools, tobacco preparation, and military hardware. Presently the economy is operating at around 10% to 15% capacity. Much of the industrial plant is outdated and needs renewal.

Here, Peter profiles the Coalition for Return, an organization that works for the return of Serb refugees to their former homes.

The main branch of the Coalition for Return in Republika Srpska is in Banja Luka, the capital of the RS. This organization works with local associations, especially in the western half of the RS, of displaced Serbs who wish to return to their pre-war homes in the Federation. It also cooperates with Federation-based associations of people displaced from the RS.

Activists on behalf of refugee return in the Republika Srpska have special problems because the dominant tendency in the government, while not always openly expressed as such, is opposition to return in either direction. For this reason, members of the Banja Luka Coalition asked me to use only their first names.

Nebojša, director of the Banja Luka Coalition for Return, explained:

"Our organization works with a number of associations of displaced people from various localities in the Federation: Glamoć, Drvar, Bosansko Grahovo, Bosanski Petrovac, Sanski Most, Ključ, and Bosanska Krupa. All of these places are in the Federation-controlled part of northwest Bosnia. These displaced people (DP) associations have a council containing three members from each municipality. There are less well-organized associations for return to Jajce and Bugojno.

"With the passage in December 1998 of a new property law in the RS, return from the Federation to Banja Luka is increasing. As a result of this, Serb return to the Federation is also increasing.

"The Banja Luka Coalition for Return is involved in house reconstruction projects to assist displaced persons who are living in Banja Luka to return to their homes in the Federation. We participate in the "Roofs" program coordinated by the Coalition for Return's main branch in Sarajevo, using donations from the organizations Cap Anamur and KAS (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung). This program arranges the repair of roofs of destroyed houses.

"In the past couple of months over 600 Serbs have returned to Bosansko Grahovo (in Croatia).

This morning, over 40 more people from Grahovo came into the office to fill out request forms for house repair assistance. Another 80 people from Glamoč came in yesterday. If you had asked me two months ago, I would not have said that return would be taking place now in such numbers.

"There is less of a problem in Grahovo than anywhere else. Croats and returned Serbs are singing in the kafanas (coffee houses) there together. But Mile Marčeta cannot go to Drvar. The HDZ (Croat nationalist party) is very strong there. Marčeta is the leader of a strong organization of DPs returning to Drvar, but there was a double murder and riot there last April.

"There is also huge obstruction to return of Serbs to Knin and the rest of the Croatian Krajina. The international community needs to put more pressure on the Croatian government. This situation can't stay this way. To date, there has been less than one per cent return to that area.

"Most of these efforts are initiated by the associations of displaced persons. They are working well, and the tempo has increased. But the bulk of return at this point is to villages. This is because the people own their own land in the villages. The Croat authorities are making it hard. For instance, a displaced person must go in person to deliver the applications for resolution of his or her property status.

"There are also associations here in Banja Luka that call for the DPs to stay here. They spread disinformation in the media, on television. They receive money from the SDS (Serb Democratic Party -- the Serb extreme nationalist party formerly led by Radovan Karadžić). They claim they took a poll that showed that 99% of Serbs do not want to go home. This is a lie. Actually, the truth is the reverse. Those opposing return are usually living in other people's houses. But private property is untouchable. They will have to give it back.

"We work together with organizations in the Federation for return of their members to Banja Luka, more now than before. We especially work with the Zenica Coalition for Return, and DP associations that are affiliated with them.

"We help them submit their requests here on this side for property settlements. The official maximum time period for resolution of a property request is one month. There is a deadline of April 4 for people returning to the Federation to file their property requests. Here in the Republika Srpska, it is June 19, six months from the passage of the property law. That should be extended.

"Return will not make things like they were before the war. If there is 50% return, that will be good. Evictions will take place here, but they are very slow, as in the Federation. It is faster with houses, but more difficult for a returnee to recover an apartment, which was socially owned.

"There can be no significant return as long as the nationalist parties are in power; they all oppose return of their own people to where they came from. It would be best to remove those who were involved in prosecuting the war; things would be 100% better.

"This is true on all three sides. The nationalists have to be cleared out, including the SDS, HDZ,

and the SDA (Party of Democratic Action). There are moderate politicians here. I support Dodik and Radišić. They are reasonable people. The social democrats are good also. Dodik can accomplish more than the others, but there is obstruction from the other parties.

"There will be 50% more return this year than last year. It will be better, in both entities."

To contact the Coalition for Return, phone: 387 (0)78 218 302

From the diaries:

February 23, 1998. Andrea and I took a marathon walk to an old monument to the Partisans, high on a hill outside Banja Luka. Our first stop was the vacant lot where the Ferhadija mosque used to be. This is one of the most famous of the 1300 mosques wrecked during the war, because it was said to be the most beautiful in all Bosnia. It was bombed in the middle of the night in early 1993. Andrea told me that every stone was taken away and indeed, it looked like nothing had ever been there. We stood there dumbly. Andrea took pictures until someone in a nearby trailer banged on the window, then came out and said, "No pictures!" We left.

Last July the Mufti of Banja Luka, who had stayed there throughout the war, died unexpectedly. They tried to bury him in the former mosque yard. A mob gathered and prevented the burial, and he had to be taken to Sarajevo.

There is urging from the international community to rebuild the mosque. The Banja Luka mayor says "no, it can be done on the outskirts of town somewhere; it is a reminder of the darkest days of Serbian history, when the Turks raped our daughters," etc.

We crossed and walked along the river Vrbas, a wide and beautiful blue-green river flowing all along the town. Further along there was another mosque-yard, with a gate and some tombs still standing. We photographed some chickens pecking in the yard. A couple of young guys across the street at a kafana watched us but did nothing. I wondered how they feel. They must know that people will always be curious about this destruction.

Right down the street from there we found yet another mosque yard, this time with part of the mosque, the domed roof, still lying there under the snow. All seventeen mosques were destroyed in Banja Luka.

Across the street was a very large Muslim cemetery, a kilometer long. There were gravestones there dated from during the war and more recent ones. Some Muslims, around 1,500 of the 30,000 that had lived there, managed to stay throughout the war, and a couple of thousand have come back.

On a building in the cemetery there was a sign -- "Behavior during funerals: No smoking, no drinking, women must dress decently, no loud talking, no attending funerals while drunk." We looked over the fence and saw a man in a black beret, therefore Muslim, building a snowman next to a grave. I talked to him, asked him what he was doing. He told me that he was building it in honor of Smail. He was kind of spooked, maybe permanently so, and the conversation did not go much further.