

On the Record: Refugee Returns to Srebrenica

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Srebrenica: Struggling Toward "Normalcy"

Srebrenica is known to the world as a place of crime. The phrase most often associated with the place is "the worst atrocity since World War II" This is true, if you are referring only to Europe.

Up until 2000, Srebrenica was a place where Muslims feared to return. It was only through the bravery of some activists and returnees, combined with pressure from the international community, that things changed. Today over 1,300 Muslims have returned to the town and the surrounding villages, and every week a few more families come back. In the last couple of years people have told me repeatedly that they feel safe here, that there are no "incidents," or almost none. I have seen the change in the atmosphere myself, a great contrast with the immediate post-war period, when even SFOR soldiers did not feel comfortable here at night.

I recalled in a recent journal how in late 1999 I interviewed Dragan Jevtić, the deputy mayor of Srebrenica. He was a displaced Serb from Sarajevo and a member of the most hardline nationalist party, the Serb Radical Party. This party was later banned from Bosnian politics. Jevtić was cordial enough, expressing sympathy for the displaced Muslims, saying, "I can understand why they wouldn't want to return. He even referred to the massacre, calling it a "tragedy."

I wrote at the time about how he said it may be too early for the Muslims to return. I had the feeling that this was more of a warning than a regret. Jevtić told me that he was "happy" in Srebrenica, that he owned a pizza parlor, and that he did not plan to return to Sarajevo. Later I found out that he also was a business partner in a construction company that was rebuilding houses that had been destroyed by Serb forces during the war. Last year when I started working with the Forum of Srebrenica NGOs, I learned that Jevtić had left Srebrenica and is now living in Belgrade.

This May, when Momir Nikolić pleaded guilty to war crimes associated with the massacre, he wrote a very detailed statement about his involvement, including a description, with names of those present, of meetings that took place after the crime. At these meetings the subject of covering up the traces of the crime was discussed. Nikolić named Jevtić as one of those present at the meetings. My blood chilled when I read this.

Last year I met with a group of widows from Srebrenica residing in Sarajevo. When I told them that my organization was planning projects to help the recovery of Srebrenica, one of them told me, "Don't help Srebrenica; it only helps the Chetniks," referring to the extreme nationalist Serbs.

I prefer to think that helping Srebrenica helps the unlucky people who live there, whether they are Serbs or Muslims. Srebrenica is an unhappy place, and it needs a lot of help. It doesn't seem right just to let it die.

The orientation of the groups I work with, most of them multi-ethnic organizations working for return and reconstruction, is to try to make things better in the hope that Srebrenica can one day be a healthy and happy place again, as it was before the war. I wonder if this is possible.

Auschwitz is not only the location of a WWII concentration camp, but a town where Poles live today. It is not a particularly happy place.

What is the balance of evil that lives here, and how does it weigh against the good, and the possibility for recovery? To a large extent the answer rests in the faith of the good people who work against logic, who work against the past, to make Srebrenica a normal place again. There are a good number of these people working in and for Srebrenica, as is the case throughout Bosnia. They are a small minority but, to paraphrase Margaret Mead, they are the ones that make a difference.

I have had the impression that the war criminals like Jevtić who controlled Srebrenica until a few years ago are all gone, fled to deeper holes in Serb-controlled Bosnia, or beyond. What I have seen and felt in Srebrenica reinforced this. If they are still in Srebrenica, they don't have the upper hand as they once did.

But recently a friend wrote that "friends of Ratko Mladić still reside in Srebrenica." I wondered what he knew about this. Maybe he was speaking metaphorically? In my opinion, the root of the problem is in Banja Luka -- where the friends of Karadžić still rule the Serb entity -- and in Sarajevo, where international officials continue to tolerate and even collaborate with these extremists.

Unpleasant incidents -- not even violent ones -- have only occurred in Srebrenica rarely in the past few years. They could be ascribed as much to drunkenness and petty thievery as to ethnic hostility. For the most part, people mind their own business. There is not the level of friendliness between Serbs and Muslims that there was before the war, but neither is there any fighting. At worst, those few who are employed (mostly with the local government or international agencies) go directly home after work, and the streets are empty. This itself is a great contrast to the liveliness and friendliness of pre-war Srebrenica. The town has not started to live again; barely a heartbeat registers.

I just heard that Momčilo Cvijetinović is still operating in Srebrenica, and I was shocked to hear his name. He was an old confederate of Jevtić, and certainly a "friend of Ratko Mladić," and he is still here. He had been a local leader of SDS, the Serb extreme nationalist party, Karadžić's party, in the worst days after the war. Now he is managing a semi-privatized textile company. So he is in control of a part of the wealth created by and stolen from the people that lived here before the war.

This is a graphic illustration of the way in which the people who led the war, on all three sides, won it. More examples of the way the warlords enriched themselves are in the daily newspapers every day of the week, but the "ethnic privatization" is not being rolled back or even discouraged. It continues apace.

The extremists have -- for now -- lost the political battle in Srebrenica municipality, but they still have behind-the-scenes economic influence.

So activists and ordinary people of both ethnicities are struggling to recover Srebrenica, but at

least one of Mladić's friends is still here, controlling a company -- one of many that sit idle, not employing anyone, while the ordinary people of Srebrenica are struggling to make ends meet. Unemployment and a dead economy are the final phases of obstruction to return.

A Party in Srebrenica

Meanwhile the new mayor of Srebrenica Abdurahman Malkić, a Muslim and a popular man, had the idea of organizing "Srebrenica Days," a cultural festival taking place in the second week of June. With the support of the municipal government, all the local NGOs got involved. They organized a rock concert, a foot race and other sports competitions, a graffiti party, a theater performance, and many more events. It promised to be the first pleasant public happening to take place in this town in 12 years.

When news got out that a rock concert was to be held in the high school in Srebrenica, people in other places criticized the plan. The Tuzla Student Union made a public call for a boycott of the event, saying it was "too soon after the tragedy" for such a concert to be held. Fadila Memišević of the Sarajevo chapter of the Society for Endangered Peoples called the concert idea "worse than scandalous." One of the criticisms was that the concert was to be held near the spot where many young people were killed in 1993, struck by a bomb that landed while they were playing soccer outside.

Mayor Malkić responded by saying, "Many people died by the school, but tell me where people did not die. Among my circle of friends and relatives 113 people were killed, including my father, and I was wounded twice. Gentlemen, life goes on. We can't forget the past, but we have to look to the future." He continued ironically, "For sports, cultural, economic, and all other events people should go elsewhere because, they say, it's not yet time. Let us know when it is time, because we don't know, and without you, we can't know."

Another pointed comment came from Sakib Smailović, reporter for the Sarajevo daily *Oslobodjenje*, who wrote, "Those who are concerned about Srebrenica from a distance must know that the exhumations, identifications, and reburials will not be finished even in twenty years, and many victims, sadly, will never even be discovered... But the students of Tuzla should know that people have returned to Srebrenica, and they are struggling so that their children can have a decent future... Even if they wanted to, the returnees couldn't forget the evil that was done to them. That's why those "concerned from a distance" should not try to give them lessons, and not try to kill what slight heartbeat still lives in this town... The Tuzla Student Union takes care of Srebrenica students by giving them stipends to study in Tuzla, and those students thank them wholeheartedly...from abroad!"

The festival went ahead. I didn't make it to the concert, but I heard that it was well-attended and very enjoyable. Rock bands and DJs came from Serbia, Croatia, and both entities of Bosnia, and people stayed until after 3:00 a.m. "Električni Orgazam" came from Banja Luka. The rap group "Crnci" (Blacks) came from Bugojno. A local friend told me there were no "incidents" -- not even the kind of fights that happen all over the West at such events.

I arrived in Srebrenica halfway into the festival, in time for the children's costume competition,

held at the city park in the sweltering heat. Dozens of kids pranced around dressed as Charlie Chaplin, many “gypsies,” a Tin Man, clowns, witches, princesses, and pirates, just like costume parties anywhere else. And, rather to my distaste (it *really* is too early for this), there were a couple of kids whose parents had dressed them up as soldiers with big weapons -- just like at costume parties anywhere else.

In the evening there was a theater performance called "Government Thief" -- basically a redundancy in this country. A theater group came from Tuzla and performed this ribald piece, universally appropriate in Bosnia, to a very appreciative crowd of all ages, numbering at least 500. It was clear that the young people of Srebrenica are starving for entertainment.

This festival is to become an annual event. Its message is that people in the region care about Srebrenica, and that Srebrenicans appreciate receiving something in addition to reconstructed roads and houses.

Srebrenica is not only a place where a great crime happened. It is also a beautiful place, where as many as 2,000 tourists a day used to come during the summer. I don't expect that the international community will bother to clean out the friends of Mladić. But I'd like to think that with enough care from the outside world, combined with the efforts and faith of the local activists, Srebrenica can again become a happy place.

Surviving and Celebrating

With two friends, "Hessie" and Marta, I went to visit my friends Mirha and Sejdo on their land, north of Srebrenica almost all the way to Potočari. They have a rather large spread there, filling up a significant part of the valley. They have a couple of plastic greenhouses and many fields of potatoes, tomatoes, onions, and corn. We sat and ate pita, and I picked cherries from a nearby tree. Later Sejdo lit a fire, Mirha roasted some chicken, and we ate more.

The moon, just shy of being full, came up over the hills to the east of the valley. Marta, Hessie, and I talked about traumatization. Marta is an intern working at Bosfam, and Hessie was born in Germany just a few years before World War II. She told me that her father never returned after the war, and she never found out what happened to him. She said that after the war, people never took the time to deal with what had happened to them psychologically. Now, she said, after the war in Bosnia many Germans came to help, as a way psychologically to work through their own war-time experiences.

Hessie described how, in the mid-1990s, she heard a noise in her house and ran out into the street, not even knowing what she was doing. This happened three times in a row before Hessie realized that a malfunction in the heating system was creating a noise just like the sound of the air-raid siren she had heard 50 years before.

Mirha and Sejdo stayed in Srebrenica throughout the war. Mirha and their two children were all wounded. At the fall of Srebrenica, Sejdo walked through the woods to escape with thousands of other men, many of whom were captured and killed by the Serb forces. Sejdo walked for 14 days, and on the 15th he arrived in free territory, near Tuzla. He said that the only time he had

something to eat was when he found a cherry tree with overripe cherries. He climbed up in the tree and ate the cherries -- pits, worms, and everything. He said that his stomach even digested the pits.

Sejdo showed us the scars that remain on his feet from walking through the woods. When he arrived in Tuzla he weighed 40 kilos. He told us how someone threw some bread in a creek, and it got dirty. He ate it, mud and all. Mirha said that after he arrived he behaved oddly for a while at meals, the way he looked at the bread.

Sejdo looked at the moon coming up. He said, "When we were going through the woods, we had the good luck to have full moon to light our way. I like the full moon, but now when I see it, sometimes it reminds me of that horrible experience. At times I still wake up dreaming of that long walk through the woods. This is what I have to live with.

Mirha and Sejdo told us that after they came home to Srebrenica two years ago, they were nervous for the first five or six months. There were "incidents," people throwing bottles or rocks at their house. "You slept with one eye open," Sejdo said. But now these things are not happening.

Sejdo and Mirha are relatively comfortable in Srebrenica. They have each other, and they work hard on their land. Right now their hands are torn up with blisters, but they will earn money and things will be easier. Sejdo said, "After what we lived through, we can live through this. People are made of steel." HESSIE nodded, and said, "I know."

Sitting around the fire, Sejdo told us that he liked to have us as guests. But he is the only surviving male of his family. His brother and all his cousins were killed. He wished that there were twenty or thirty other people at the picnic grounds to welcome us, as there would have been in the old days.

Marta and I attended the closing event of the Srebrenica festivities. A couple hundred people were there, both Serbs and Muslims, activists from the NGOs, and members of the local government. Awards were distributed for achievement in school and for participation in the festival. There was food and there was drink. One highlight of the night was the fashion show staged by Bosfam. Wearing snazzy knitted dresses created by displaced Srebrenica widows, twenty-odd young Serb and Muslim women (some of them still displaced and living in Tuzla Canton) pranced up an improvised catwalk, stepping onto a stage covered with hand-woven kilims, fully capturing the attention of all the diners.

A cultural association from Tuzla performed some traditional Muslim and Serb folk dances. Afterwards, the event evolved into a dance with live music provided by a duo from Tuzla. There was fun to be had. Folks of all ages stood up and danced all kinds of dances, improvising, swinging, boogying, laughing. At one point the duo performed a traditional kolo, and that got the whole room on its feet, including me. The mayor was out there dancing the kolo. A mayor who dances the kolo can't be all bad.

I looked at the room, a bit overwhelmed. Was it possible for people to be celebrating in

Srebrenica, celebrating being alive? Was it proper? Was it anybody else's business? I wondered what I would do if I had walked through the woods and eaten whatever I had to in order to stay alive, and then come back to a town full of ghosts? Would I do it, or would I spin the globe and try and flee to the furthest place from here? I admire those who have not left.

The party dwindled, but later I heard that it went on until almost sunrise. As I was leaving, a friend who works for the municipal government came up to me and said, "Do you see? Srebrenica is not just a dying town. It is a place for living."