

On the Record: Refugee Returns to Srebrenica

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From the AP Editorial Desk:

In the aftermath of the Srebrenica massacre, thousands of survivors were settled in collective centers and abandoned homes in the Federation, mostly in Tuzla and Sarajevo Cantons. They were still there when the Dayton Agreement was signed five months later, putting an end to the war. They remain there to this day, five years on.

For most of these internal exiles, it is a precarious existence. They are second-class citizens in their own country -- unemployed, scorned by the city dwellers, threatened with eviction by returning Serbs, and pitied from afar by the whole world.

Yet they have not been passive. Throughout the last five years, their representatives have kept up a drumbeat of protest, drawing attention to those still missing and insisting that the exiles be allowed to return home.

The Tuzla-based Women of Srebrenica (Žene Srebrenice) and the Sarajevo organization Mothers of Srebrenica have been particularly vocal. They have led demonstrations and helped to organize the fifth anniversary convoy to Srebrenica, which Peter Lippman accompanied on July 11, 2000. Another association of displaced persons, called Srebrenica 99, organized the first group return to a village near Srebrenica inside the Serb entity.

In September 1997, the exiles were able to express their frustration through the ballot, when municipal elections were held throughout Bosnia. Voting by absentee ballot, displaced Srebrenicans won 24 out of 45 seats on Srebrenica's municipal council. That gave the exiles a majority on the council. Now they had to return physically.

The chances of this happening seemed to improve when a new government took power in the Republika Srpska under the relatively moderate Milorad Dodik, who pledged to work with the international community. Shortly afterwards, in early 1998, the Sarajevo Declaration promised that 20,000 'minority' returns would take place to Sarajevo during the year. This would open up places for displaced Serbs who had moved to Srebrenica.

All of these measures promised to accelerate the return of refugees. Indeed, freedom of movement began to pick up throughout the Serb entity -- but not in Srebrenica. The scene of the 1995 massacre remained frozen by the past and firmly under the control of Serb nationalists.

In this issue of his series on Srebrenica, Peter Lippman looks at some of the obstacles that are preventing the survivors from returning to Srebrenica. They range from the hostility of local Serb politicians to economic underdevelopment. The refugees even face opposition from Muslim politicians. And then there is the international community. In spite of their failure to protect Srebrenica during the war, Western governments have shown little interest in rebuilding it during peacetime.

This issue is written from the perspective of the Muslims who fled Srebrenica. The next issue will look at the Serbs living in the town.

From the diaries:

Elissa and I drove up the tight valley, practically a ravine, to Srebrenica. It was our first time there, and we were nervous. We couldn't help it, passing through Potočari, knowing what had taken place there. The flat part of the valley is little more than two blocks wide, and at the end of town it quickly rises into the mountains toward Serbia. A dense fog increased our sense of foreboding. We could hardly see two blocks in the distance.

The town is poor, but the physical setting itself is magnificent. People from Srebrenica always tell me that to them it is beautiful and that they would never like to live anywhere else. I can see why, with the clean mountain air, the paths into the woods, and the mineral springs nearby.

But today, Srebrenica is nothing but a shabby place with mortar-pocked buildings whose facades are falling off, full of displaced Serbs who hang their laundry on their balconies, and who have no work. Graffiti for the extreme Serb nationalist political parties is scrawled on the walls of crumbling stores.

Half the buildings in the center are damaged; the huge Robna Kuća (department store) on the square stands empty, covered with campaign posters for Šešelj and Poplašen (two extremist Serb politicians). Strangely, the two main streets in the town both seem to be back streets. And a couple of modest building projects sit half-finished, empty concrete shells filling up with garbage. They have probably been sitting that way for eight years. (December 15, 1999)

'They dream of going home'

Would anyone really want to return to Srebrenica -- scene of Europe's worst war crime in the last 50 years? Over 7,000 Srebrenicans have given their answer by submitting a request to reclaim their property.

They need to know the fate of their loved ones. For several years after the massacres, there were rumors that men were being held in secret jails, or as slave laborers in mines in Serbia. Widows simply refused to believe that their husbands were dead.

Emina Džananović last saw her husband and son at Potočari in July 1995. She now makes a bare living cleaning offices in Tuzla. When asked if she would return to Srebrenica, she told me, 'Why wouldn't I return? I'm not interested in my house. I'm just interested in knowing what happened to my family.' Emina said she had heard from a witness that her son was captured on the July 20, nine days after the fall of Srebrenica. She has no further news of her family. She said, 'We hope, but there is no hope.'

Exiles like Emina dream of going home. They yearn for the beauty of the hillside country of Podrinje in eastern Bosnia.

The Serb deputy mayor of Srebrenica, Dragan Jevtić, argues that few Muslims want to come back to Srebrenica. He says, 'I can completely understand the Srebrenicans in Sarajevo who do

not want to return, because the conditions do not exist here for return. If I were a Bosniak in Sarajevo, I would not return.'

Vesna Mustafić is a member of the return organization Srebrenica 99, and a displaced Srebrenican of Serb ethnicity married to a Muslim. She counters, 'My house was destroyed in 1992, and that is when I came here to Tuzla. I will fix my house and return there. I love Srebrenica very much and will do all I can to return. All of my memories are there. It was a very beautiful town. Now it is sad and ugly, but we will fix it. The desire to return exists. Whoever says it does not is wrong.'

Reconstructing their farms would also give them a chance to escape the squalor of life in exile. Mrs. Zehra Ferhatbegović of the Tuzla-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) Bosfam, herself displaced from a town near Srebrenica, expressed the plight of the displaced this way:

'The people of Tuzla have gotten tired of us. We are second-class citizens here. Our last name is 'refugee.' Our displaced people are in collective centers or houses, a few in apartments. Some of them pay rent. Many are in houses that Serbs left empty at the beginning of the war. Only a very small percentage of all these people can make their way under these circumstances, with employment so scarce. Therefore, most would like to return home. As for myself, every morning when I wake up, I ask myself, 'What am I doing here?' If there is no return for another year or two, people will start to go crazy. Patience runs out.'

Unfriendly Reception

Many obstacles must be overcome before the exiles can return. First and foremost, would they be welcome?

The mood in Srebrenica for the first few years after the war was so unfriendly that only the boldest dared to come back and visit their homes. In 1998, a helicopter carrying international officials to Srebrenica crashed near the town (without fatalities), and Serb bystanders applauded.

As with most localities in Bosnia, the atmosphere in Srebrenica is strongly influenced by the actions of the local government. Despite the results of the 1997 election, the town continued to be administered by hard-line Serb nationalists. Formation of the multi-ethnic municipal council took almost two years, and the Serb members of the council have developed an entire repertoire of ways to slow down its workings.

At a session of the Srebrenica municipal council in early 1998, Serb members opened the meeting by singing the nationalist hymn of the Republika Srpska, and the Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) councilmen, interpreting this as a provocation, walked out of the meeting in protest. They were not to return for over a year.

In the summer of 1999, it appeared that a turnaround was about to take place. Under pressure from the international community, and desperate from the effects of their isolation, Srebrenica's local Serb officials agreed with elected Muslim representatives that the municipal council would finally be inaugurated. The council started functioning. During the summer, visits of displaced

Muslims to Srebrenica and its surrounding villages increased, and the tension subsided noticeably.

But the tentative rapprochement experienced a serious setback in the fall of 1999, when there was a vicious assassination attempt upon Munib Hasanović, Muslim secretary of the municipal council. This took place in a restroom right in the municipal building, where Hasanović was beaten, strangled, stabbed, and left for dead. Fortunately he survived, but his attackers were never arrested. Muslim councilmen boycotted sessions again for several months, calling for increased security measures.

It is apparent that the ongoing violence and disruption of the municipal council are orchestrated by people whose positions of power would be threatened by a change in the ethnic makeup of Srebrenica. Vesna Mustafić explained, "This place is frequented by people who would be in big trouble when the displaced persons returned. People are still being persuaded and bribed to give up on return." ('Povratak,' August-September 1999)

Braćo Šurlan is a Serb lawyer from Srebrenica who supports Muslim return. Temporarily living across the border in Serbia, he said, 'Reconciliation with Bosniaks (Muslims) and return is not possible as long as municipal council and party positions are held by those who still think that they are in the trenches with guns in their hands. They are not thinking about their people's future.' ('Oslobodjenje,' July 8, 2000)

Milisav Gavrić, until recently Srebrenica's police chief, illustrates Šurlan's point. On the fall of Srebrenica, Gavrić appeared on Serbian television, reporting to General Ratko Mladic that Srebrenica was 'finally liberated.' Last fall Republika Srpska Prime Minister Milorad Dodik requested Gavrić's dismissal. This measure was in response to statements from the international community that Srebrenica would not receive assistance under present conditions of obstruction. But Gavrić's removal turned out to be cosmetic. According to Muslim municipal council representatives, Gavrić remained the force behind the scenes: 'Gavrić has more influence than the current chief. We have received documents in which the local policemen were getting orders from Gavrić after working hours.' ('Vecernje Novine,' October 26, 1999)

In January 2000, the International Police Task Force (IPTF, the U.N. police) stationed a complement of more than 15 international police observers in Srebrenica, and the Muslim representatives resumed their participation in the municipal council. The U.N. High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) organized regular bus visits from Tuzla and Sarajevo. Both Serb and international officials asserted that the security situation was calm. Deputy Mayor Dragan Jevtić told me in December, 'There are no incidents. The stabbing in the municipal building was an isolated incident. Every other day there is a bus full of people visiting from the Federation, and they have no problem. Some people have cleaned their houses in the villages, for example in Sućeska. No one prevented them from doing so.'

But some would-be returnees are not so convinced. Ibrahim Hodžić lives in Tuzla and works for the Srebrenica administration, in the public court. Mr. Hodžić says, 'We go to Srebrenica, park our car, go into the hotel to meet, and then we leave. We are the government, but it is as if we are in a jail. We met with the OHR [Office of the High Representative], the OSCE [Organization for

Security and Cooperation in Europe], SFOR [U.N. Stabilization Force], and with representatives from the RS [Republika Srpska] in Tuzla. We are asking for an increased security presence, and for a telephone in each office.'

'Serb friends of mine in Srebrenica tell me to be careful, and they know. It is known that there is danger, and SFOR knows this too. Until they make arrests, there will be no change. The problem with war criminals is a basic one, because no one has answered for the war crimes yet. So many people were killed, and the criminals are walking free. There is a better atmosphere in Bratunac than in Srebrenica. There are unburied skeletons in the woods around Srebrenica, and the people there know this.'

Hakija Meholjić, director of Srebrenica 99, advocates the formation of a multi-ethnic police and court system as a way of re-creating trust. 'The police must have Mujo and Djuro out there together,' he told me, using typical Muslim and Serb names. 'The people are not worried about food or work, but security -- that's number one.'

The First Returns

As we have shown in previous issues of this series, refugees have been returning to many parts of the Republika Srpska in increasing numbers this year. There has also been progress around Srebrenica as well. The first Muslim couple, the elderly Šaćir and Mevlida Halilović, reclaimed their house in Srebrenica last March. Since then two other families have moved back to town.

More substantially, Srebrenica 99 has established several tent encampments in nearby villages, where returnees have been rebuilding their demolished homes.

A dozen houses and twice as many apartments in Srebrenica have been repaired and handed over to their pre-war owners, who have yet to move in. Two houses were reconstructed for the use of the Muslim members of the municipal council, who live in them during the week and then spend the weekends with their families in the Federation. Muslim representatives estimate that over 600 families are ready to return to Srebrenica immediately, as soon as security conditions permit.

To ease concern about security, SFOR established a new SFOR base near Srebrenica and in April stationed a mobile unit there. And the first Muslim police officer was finally assigned to Srebrenica's police force early in August 2000. But the possibility of attacks continues to frighten would-be returnees. In May one of the houses used by Muslim council-members was robbed. In early June three Muslim-owned houses were torched. Later in the month Munib Hasanović's house was torched.

In mid-June SFOR announced that their troops were patrolling the Drina area and that they believed it to be safe. During a visit to Srebrenica early in July, I asked an international official (who asked not to be identified) what the acts of arson said about security. He told me that one house had been hit by lightning, and that a pattern of arson could not be established by the other three.

However, since that time the arsons have continued -- one house in Srebrenica was torched on

the eve of the fifth anniversary commemoration of the massacres. This was the fifteenth arson attack in and around Srebrenica.

Thus in the summer of 2000, attacks against returnees picked up rather than subsided. Srebrenica 99 released a statement accusing hard-line Serb politicians of fomenting the violence: 'We have information that the local SDS [Serb Democratic Party] leader, Momčilo Cvijetinović, and the Srebrenica municipal council deputy chairman, Dragan Jevtić, are behind the latest incidents in Srebrenica. It is interesting that after the fires, the reconstruction of the demolished houses is being performed by Cvijetinović's and Jevtić's companies.' ('Oslobodjenje,' July 24, 2000)

While the rash of arson attacks went on, obstruction at the political level also continued. Throughout the spring and summer, Serb members of the municipal council boycotted or walked out of sessions, with different excuses at different times. The council did not function for most of April and May. When it did function, the Serb members would walk out in order to avoid discussing the establishment of a Muslim cemetery and memorial center in Potočari.

On some occasions the Serb representatives insisted that problems of water supply were more urgent and had to be discussed first. A June 30th session was boycotted on the technicality that only the Muslim mayor, and not the Serb deputy mayor, had signed the invitation to the session. In any event, preventing the municipal council from functioning is one way to prevent Srebrenica from returning to normal.

Resistance from the Muslim Politicians

Obstruction from hard-line Serbs is only one of the problems confronting would-be returnees to Srebrenica. Some of them bitterly criticize their own governing party, the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), for working against return.

The substance of this accusation is that the SDA plays on the fears of displaced people, encouraging their perception of themselves as permanent victims, fearful of persecution. The assumption is that they will respond to favors from the SDA (such as permission to stay in Serb-owned houses in Sarajevo) by keeping the SDA in office.

'The SDA has influenced villagers against return,' said Vesna Mustafić. 'The displaced people are keeping the SDA in power.'

Some displaced Srebrenicans want to return home, but some do not -- they have established comfortable lives in the suburbs of Sarajevo. Some are clearly manipulated by leaders who claim to speak for them.

SDA officials are further accused of being 'permanently ready for a demonstrative withdrawal and boycott,' from the Srebrenica municipal council. Their main strategy is to disrupt political functioning in a way that makes the Serbs look guilty. Inasmuch as this is true, it adds up to tacit collaboration with the Serb regime to keep Srebrenica ethnically cleansed.

At first glance these criticisms seem far-fetched, since members of the SDA party, notably

Munib Hasanović, have taken great personal risks to establish a presence in Srebrenica. But Senija Purković, a displaced person from Srebrenica and member of Srebrenica 99, explained how her government really approached return:

'When I went to Srebrenica for the first time after the war, in spring of 1997 with the accompaniment of SFOR, the minister for refugees in the Tuzla canton government, Adib Đozić, called me. He is from Srebrenica. First he told me that I don't need anything in Srebrenica, that there is nothing for me there. Đozić told me, 'You had a nice big house, that's all fine, but the best thing would be to trade Srebrenica for Vogošća or, say, for Ilijaš; that would be the best, and Ilijaš is the most similar to Srebrenica...' and how that's already been arranged. And we expect them to support return, but that's a sheer illusion.' ('Povratak,' August-September 1999)

Hakija Meholjić had particularly harsh words for the SDA. He told me, 'The international community gives a large part of its assistance directly to the government, and too much of this money ends up in the pockets of influential politicians. Some of these are people who did not even own a bicycle before the war, and now they are driving Mercedes, live in fancy villas, and own companies that are worth 10 million Deutschmarks. This includes some Srebrenicans who have bought houses in Sarajevo and Tuzla, and so now they are not interested in promoting return.'

Ilijaš Begić is a member of a prominent Muslim family from Srebrenica. He criticizes the former intelligentsia of Srebrenica for not working toward return: 'All those people are occupying apartments that are not theirs, working in other people's work places, and they are the key to return. They are the first who left Srebrenica, and they should return first. The Muslim intellectuals of Srebrenica can be the key. They will contribute much to softening the attitudes on political security and other questions. Their return would not only crack open the door to Srebrenica, but it would throw it wide open.' ('Oslobodjenje,' December 13, 1999)

International officials are also very critical of the SDA. One official that I spoke with in July said, 'The SDA has exaggerated security concerns to discourage return. However, they are now changing their strategy, because ordinary displaced people are clamoring to go home.'

The OHR special envoy to Srebrenica, Charlie Powell, recently blasted the SDA, calling them 'a party that opposes a safe return of refugees to this town.' The SDA responded with outrage, calling this statement 'total nonsense' and 'material for Ripley's Believe It or Not.'

The International Community: Unkept Promises

Many return advocates are convinced that Srebrenica is low on the list of priorities for international officials. When the OHR decided in December to postpone new municipal elections in Srebrenica, members of the Social Democratic Party (SDP, Bosnia's leading non-nationalist political party) called this 'unfair punishment' and described international officials who had worked in Srebrenica as 'third rate.'

On the other side, an international official concerned with Srebrenica, working in Sarajevo, told me, 'No one wants to touch Srebrenica, because everyone who has tried has gotten burned.'

I asked Ms. Mustafić for her opinion on this comment. She said, 'That is because they went through the wrong people. There are many organizations. We formed Srebrenica 99 with a clear goal -- to help return happen. Sometimes we are angry because of the lack of assistance. The international community needs to take stronger measures, because there is not time.'

The international community has been criticized for its 'superficial' implementation of the election results and for the establishment of a multi-ethnic police force. This criticism is understandable given that the police force has barely changed at all and that the municipal council was not inaugurated for two full years after its election.

But the most common criticism concerns the way the international community spends its money. Hakija Meholjić accused donors of favoring the nationalist parties: 'The leading nationalist parties have installed their own customs officers, military officers, and police. The government is based on criminality; it is equivalent to a Mafia. The international community is mistaken in giving so much money to the nationalist-controlled regimes; I oppose that, because it strengthens their parties. They take this money and spend it just before elections, and that way they manage to buy votes.'

The international community is also faulted for failing to support reconstruction. In villages around Srebrenica, there are currently over 250 damaged houses that have been cleared of rubble and are ready for rebuilding. Meanwhile, their owners sleep nearby in tents and wait for assistance. The International Crisis Group recently reported that 'available donor aid may be sufficient to support reconstruction in only 10 percent of the spontaneous returns.' (Institute for War and Peace Reporting: Balkan Crisis Report #146, June 12, 2000)

It is difficult at times to distinguish between activists' heightened rhetoric for public consumption, and realistic assessments of the state of return. But there is growing intensity to the criticism. At times, the international community and the nationalist parties are lumped together and seen as a common adversary.

Vesna Mustafić told me last December, 'We maintain that we will return. We can do it in any case, but it would be better with the help of the international community. We are beginning to doubt them, though. We are not afraid, because right is on our side. If we go back, then there will be a change of government in Srebrenica. Serbs are changing, and so are Bosniaks. We are trying to change things in a legal way, but if that doesn't work, we will go into the streets.'

They are already in the streets. Demonstrations were held in Tuzla in July of this year, after the commemoration of the massacres took place in Potočari. Fadil Banjanović, the popular director of the Department for Return in the cantonal government of Tuzla, warned: 'These days, whenever we ask for help, those who should take action concerning the returns are either on vacation, or they have more important things to do. We will come to Sarajevo, but not to block this city. We are going to block them, the people who ride in expensive jeeps, who attend donors' conferences, and get paid because they say that they implement Annex 7.' ('Dnevni Avaz' July 19, 2000)

In another initiative, citizens in several cities of Bosnia have been signing a petition calling for

the creation of a 'special status' for Srebrenica similar to that of Brčko, which would increase international powers in the municipality. This measure would speed up the establishment of multi-ethnic police and permanent station of SFOR troops in Srebrenica.

The Economy

Regardless of the intentions of the politicians and international officials, a further obstacle stands in the way of reestablishing normal life in Srebrenica: the near-total absence of an economy. In response to the lack of cooperation from the Srebrenica administration, the international community has turned its back financially on the municipality.

In its report on Srebrenica at the beginning of 1999, the Return Information Center declared that there is no agricultural production in the municipality, that all industries are working at 5 percent of their capacity, that there are no income-generation projects, no microcredit providers, no specialized schools, no hospital, and only one clinic. One reason is that Srebrenica today suffers from the economic sanctions that applied to the entire Republika Srpska until Dodik came into office.

Dragan Jevtić told me, 'If we could get the economy going, things would be a lot easier. But if people return here without work, what will they live on? So we need investment, but no one wants to invest here.'

Ibrahim Hodžić described Srebrenica's economic problems: 'I was an engineer in the mines. That mine has not worked since 1992. It was the biggest lead and zinc mine in Bosnia. There was still some silver. The mine had modern equipment. Nothing has been maintained since then; now it's probably no good and will need replacing. The mines employed around 1,300 workers. It was the municipality's biggest source of work.

'Srebrenica is one of the least-developed municipalities in Bosnia, in all senses: physically, economically, and politically. Most of the companies are not working. It will take a lot of money to fix this. Ninety percent of the people who live in Srebrenica now need welfare.

'For us to be able to return to Srebrenica, first the economy must be activated. There is nothing now to live on. If we just return and add to that 90 percent figure of welfare cases, social problems there will increase.'

Underscoring the financial crisis in the local Srebrenica government, workers in municipal agencies called a one-hour strike on August 18 because they had not received wages for four months. It is possible that half of these workers will be laid off after the fall elections.

Fadil told me: 'I went to visit my house in Potočari. The Serb who is living there now wouldn't let me in. He said, 'This is mine now; I fought for it.' I said to him, 'No, you didn't fight for this house; you fought for something else, for someone's ideology. But this is my house. My grandfather and great-grandfather were here, so it can't be yours. And the Serb house where I am staying in Tuzla can never be mine.'" (July 11, 2000)

Glossary / Who's Who

BOSFAM: Refugee advocacy organization based in Tuzla.

BOSNIAK: Bosnian Muslim.

CHARLIE POWELL: OHR special representative to Srebrenica.

DRAGAN JEVTIĆ: Displaced Serb from Sarajevo, now deputy mayor of Srebrenica.

FADIL BANJANOVIĆ: Prominent and charismatic Tuzla-based advocate for refugee return, himself displaced from eastern Bosnia.

HAKIJA MEHOLJIĆ: War-time police chief of Srebrenica; leader of Srebrenica 99.

MILOSAV GAVRIĆ: Until recently, Srebrenica's police chief; dismissed over controversy, but purported to still be influential in police affairs in Srebrenica.

IBRAHIM HODŽIĆ: Displaced Srebrenican currently living in Tuzla, employee of Srebrenica government.

ILIJAS BEGIĆ: Member of prominent Srebrenican family now displaced to Sarajevo.

IPTF: International Police Task Force; U.N. police observation and advisory body.

MILORAD DODIK: Prime Minister of Republika Srpska.

MUNIB HASANOVIĆ: Muslim Secretary of Srebrenica Municipal Council, stabbed by unknown attacker in fall of 1999.

OHR: Office of the High Representative; Dayton-created institution representing the international community in Bosnia.

OSCE: Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe; intergovernmental body tasked with democratization and human rights monitoring in areas of crisis. **SDA:** Party of Democratic Action; Muslim nationalist party headed by Alija Izetbegovic.

SDP: Social Democratic Party; Bosnia's leading non-nationalist political party, with members from all three ethnicities.

SDS: Serb Democratic Party; Serb nationalist party that was the political leadership during the war, still entrenched in many parts of Republika Srpska.

SFOR: U.N. Stabilization Force; military body tasked with enforcing military aspect of Dayton agreement in Bosnia, keeping peace.

SREBRENICA 99: Tuzla-based multi-ethnic organization advocating return to Srebrenica and reconciliation.

UNHCR: U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees; agency responsible for taking care of refugees. **VESNA MUSTAFIĆ:** Displaced Srebrenican, Serb married to a Muslim, now Tuzla-based return activist, member of Srebrenica 99.

WOMEN OF SREBRENICA (Žene Srebrenice) and MOTHERS OF SREBRENICA: Srebrenica survivor advocacy organizations based in Tuzla and Sarajevo, respectively.

ZEHRA FERHATBEGOVIĆ: Displaced person from Bratunac and employee of Tuzla-based refugee advocacy organization Bosfam.