

On the Record: Refugee Returns to Srebrenica

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From the editorial Desk: Srebrenica town in 2002

July 11, 2002 marked the seventh anniversary of the murder of over 7,000 Muslim men and boys in and around the Bosnian town of Srebrenica. The massacre was the worst atrocity in Europe since World War II. Its repercussions continue to impede the return of refugees to the Bosnian Serb Republic and the reconstruction of eastern Bosnia.

After seven years, the deadlock may finally be breaking. Refugees are starting to return and aid is starting to flow to the region. Srebrenica is no longer the bastion of extreme Serb nationalism that it once was.

These encouraging developments are largely due to the persistence of refugee advocates, who suffered terribly during the war but have never given up their dream of returning home. In 2001, eight leading advocacy groups formed a new network, the Forum of Srebrenica NGOs, in an effort to make their voices heard and to create a unified lobby for Srebrenica's reconstruction. They are clear that reconstruction will be seriously hampered until those responsible for the crimes of 1995 have been brought to account. The process must also respect the rights of Serbs currently living in Srebrenica.

The Forum has asked The Advocacy Project to support their work, and as a first step we present this illustrated profile of their efforts. The material was collected in the spring of 2002 by AP Associate Peter Lippman. Two years ago, Lippman visited the Srebrenica region and met with the first group to return to the village of Sućeska. ([Read his reports](#)). Lippman also wrote a diary of his recent visit to the region, extracts of which are reprinted on some of the following pages.

In the fall of 2002, The Advocacy Project initiated a new phase in support of the NGOs of Srebrenica. It is presently assisting the Forum in developing a website for the local network of NGOs. This website, due to open in the spring of 2003, will serve as a lobbying tool for the Forum, helping Srebrenica's activists to promote their projects, advocate for their constituencies, and inform donors and policy makers about unfolding conditions in the municipality.

At the same time, The Advocacy Project is working with [BOSFAM](#), a Tuzla- and Srebrenica-based women's support organization, to improve the promotion and sale of goods made by their handicrafts cooperative. As part of this work, The Advocacy Project is helping BOSFAM renovate its website. We are also preparing to promote kilims (flat-weave rugs) made by BOSFAM's weavers -- most of whom are widows from Srebrenica -- in the United States.

The Advocacy Project hopes to publish regular reports on the reconstruction of Srebrenica, as seen from the perspective of civil society, in the months ahead. If you would like to receive these reports and join an informal network of friends of Srebrenica, please contact us at info@advocacynet.org. The Advocacy Project would also welcome suggestions from anyone interested in helping the Forum to promote its message, in the region itself or abroad.

When people hear the word Srebrenica, they think of the massacre. But few know that for its pre-war residents, Srebrenica was a tranquil place, almost idyllic. Although it was an out-of-the-way municipality, Srebrenica was exposed to a rich culture that attracted visitors from the rest of Yugoslavia and beyond.

“My soul hurts when we talk about how Srebrenica was before the war,” says Svetlana Buca Jukić, a staff member with the NGO Drina. “Then, it was a city of flowers. In the Cultural Center, there were performances each evening from all over Bosnia. The department store was so well-stocked that people even came from Belgrade to buy food and clothing there. Every day the streets were cleaned. Each window, every balcony, was full of flowers.”



Deceptively peaceful: sunset on the hills around Srebrenica

According to Munira Beba Hadžić, director of the NGO Bosfam, competitions were held to decide who had the nicest balconies. Srebrenica boasted an amateur cultural association, an amateur theater, and sports -- soccer and basketball teams. There was a library and a movie theater.

“Srebrenica” means “place of silver” in the Bosnian language. Exploitation of the rich silver, lead, and zinc mines dates back to Roman times. The Romans called the place “Argentario.” In modern times, these mines helped make the Srebrenica region one of the richest in Bosnia.



Svetlana Jukić from Drina: “My Soul Hurts”

From the mining, forestry, and agriculture, factories grew up after World War II that supplied all of Yugoslavia and parts of Europe with lumber, paper, and furniture, minerals, and industrial products. About a dozen factories in two industrial zones provided secure employment for townspeople and the inhabitants of surrounding villages alike. As a result, the villages around Srebrenica were anything but primitive. They boasted large houses and well-equipped schools and clinics of their own.

One of the finest assets of Srebrenica was the “Guber spa,” the complex of mineral springs that ran through the hills above the town. These springs, known from ancient times, were developed by the Austro-Hungarian occupiers in the late 19th century and attracted tourists from all over Yugoslavia until the outbreak of war. Ibrahim Hadžija Hadžić, a staff employee of the Srebrenica municipal government, said that Guber was so popular that one

had to have “connections” to reserve a room at one of the two hotels that housed visitors to the spa.

In spite of the bitter tragedies they have experienced, those who were displaced from Srebrenica recall the region as the "most beautiful place on earth." The memories motivate their determination to return home.

They would be shocked by what they see. Mortar shells have left their trace on virtually every building. Those that were not damaged by guns have suffered from neglect. Roads and factories have not been maintained since the beginning of the war.



The former EnergoInvest building in Srebrenica

Off the center square stands the “Robna Kuća” (department store) and nearby, the municipal building and the EnergoInvest office building. The Austro-Hungarian-style municipal building has been repaired and repainted, but the other two buildings are empty hulks. The Robna Kuća, a modern building with a red brick façade, is plastered with old campaign posters for various Serb

nationalists. The EnergoInvest building, where the administration for the defunct local mining industry used to be, has no intact windows. The little city park in the square lies neglected and littered, and across the square is a several-story building that once housed the movie theater. It too stands empty, disintegrating.

One mosque has been rebuilt. There were many mosques in Srebrenica; all were destroyed. This one stands on a hillock right above the center of town, in direct view of the hotel Domavia. The Malaysian Embassy, responsible for much reconstruction around Srebrenica, is financing the work. In order to rebuild the mosque, they had to tear it down completely, as it was quite wrecked. Workmen started on the foundation in the spring of 2002, and its official opening took place in September. It has a commanding view of the center of town.



Srebrenica is a long and narrow town in a mountain valley. It has one long thoroughfare that splits into two main streets in the town's center. But both of these two main streets, with their few depressing shops, have the atmosphere of back streets.

The Robna Kuća (department store) in downtown Srebrenica

The two main streets reunite two blocks away, at the other end of Srebrenica's center. The Cultural Center (*Dom Kulture*), a new

building in the time of the Sarajevo Olympics, is located there. Today it houses the offices of a few NGOs, but they are sorry places. Each little office is heated by a small electric space heater. In the rest of the building, tiles are crumbling, glass is broken, railings are missing, and the lights are dim. The roof, like those of a number of other multi-story buildings nearby, leaks and needs to be repaired.

Compounding the disintegration and neglect is the fact that factories were pillaged after the war. The authorities controlling Srebrenica at the time enriched themselves by selling off plant equipment from the factories and mines. Some of it ended up in Serbia. What was not taken away has rusted, and will probably need to be replaced if the factories are to start working again. But some of these factories are obsolete, or their markets have found other suppliers. Not all of them will be able to be revived.

From [Peter's Diary](#)

We drove up to Guber, the old mineral springs above Srebrenica. This was a major tourist attraction for all Bosnia, and many people used to come here from Serbia and other parts of Yugoslavia as well. Besides Hotel Domavia in town, there were two other hotels along the road. They were full of visitors all year. Hadžija told me that you used to have to have connections in order to get a room. Now one is still in use, and the other, the Argentarium, is a collective center for displaced Serbs who have been evicted from Muslim-owned houses in Srebrenica.

The way up to the springs is a pleasant cobblestone road built by the Austrians in the 19th century. It winds through the woods, passing springs on the downhill side. People used to walk the several kilometers to the top. Spring is just beginning here, with fruit trees flowering just like in Seattle. One hillside is covered with purple wildflowers.

There are benches to rest on every so often -- only now the wood has been removed from most of them, to be used for firewood. As we wound up into the hills, we passed a couple of people coming down with a wheelbarrow overloaded with wood.

Izet pointed out to me the different springs, and what their medicinal properties are. He said that no fish can live in them, because of the minerals. One spring is good for rashes and other skin problems. One is good for eye problems. Another, for heart disease, another, for “feminine complaints.”

Other than the two hotels close to town, all the recreational buildings were destroyed during the war. At the top we found the ruins of the restaurant. It was in a beautiful setting between two springs. Izet pointed out to me the plaza where people used to sit and listen to live music while they ate. He said that they used to roast five or six sheep there every day. I can imagine that once upon a time it was an exquisitely pleasant place to rest after walking up through the forest