

On the Record: Refugee Returns to Srebrenica

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Remembering Naser Oric

When I returned to Bosnia in early April I went straight to Tuzla for some meetings with the Forum of Srebrenica NGOs and with Beba Hadžić, director of the women's support organization Bosfam. I talked with Beba about the project to market handicrafts made by these women, and then sat a while and drank coffee with them. Most of them are displaced from Srebrenica.

Hajrija is very disappointed. Besides having lost part of her family in the massacre, now she waits for someone to volunteer to help her repair her war-destroyed house so that she can return. She says, "People come, take photos, and go, and then...nothing."

Tifa tells me she has a sister in Florida, and a cousin "somewhere else in America" -- she can't remember the name of the place. Sadeta says she has lots of relatives in America, but they don't get in touch; "It's as if they didn't exist."

Hajrija complains about donors. "Tito and Clinton," she says, "were the only ones who ever gave us anything, there's not a third person. Now this Bush, he's making a war like the one we lived through, and going around threatening people."

Mejra is reading people's coffee cups. She looks at mine and says, "Someone is missing you." She says, "There's much movement in your life, but you are with people, you're not alone. Many meetings. There were some problems, you overcame them. Someone didn't wish you well, but that's over now." On the whole, my prognosis is good. Mejra reads Hajrija's cup and says, "There will be two separate trips, and your roof will be fixed. It will be good." Hajrija says, "Mejra always gets it right." Mejra says, "Peter's cup is the best."

After a couple of days I caught a ride to Srebrenica with Beba and her sister Djefa.

Displaced people have been returning to Srebrenica for three years, but it is one of the most difficult returns in Bosnia. It doesn't help that there's a disproportionate number of older, single women -- there are an estimated 6,500 widows from Srebrenica. The once-thriving economy is at rock-bottom in this municipality, so that other than a few jobs with the local government and international agencies, the only other way to live is by raising food in the villages.

Consequently, most of the returnees are farmers, or elderly people who are trying to live off their pensions. Though there are many international organizations working on reconstruction in Srebrenica, fixing houses doesn't make the economy go. Investment is starting very slowly. There are still more Srebrenicans in the United States than in their pre-war homes. Beba says that one of the psychological obstructions to return is that people are afraid of going back home and then being forgotten, left in their semi-repaired homes without work -- and often without water, electricity, or telephone service.

We crossed the inter-entity borderline after Kalesija, and were in the Republika Srpska. By the road there was a row of greenhouses. Beba told me that this area, along the former front line, had recently been de-mined.

We passed through Zvornik and then Konjević Polje, where anti-Muslim hate graffiti still covers the front of a prominently-placed house belonging to a Muslim returnee. More Muslims have returned to this stretch of road between Konjević Polje and Bratunac than to Srebrenica itself. We passed a mosque under reconstruction. Beba told me that Serbs in this area had built a church in the private yard of a displaced Muslim, who now wants to return. She is trying to get the church torn down. Building churches in areas that before the war were predominantly Muslim is a common practice in many parts of the Serb-controlled entity. Nor is this rare in Croat-controlled territory.

Beba told me that a Serb in Bratunac had said to her, "When SFOR (U.N. troops) goes there will be another war, because we don't want your kind around here. Anywhere within 15 miles of the Drina, there can only be Serbs."

Nearer Bratunac there is an SFOR base at Glogova, staffed by U.S. troops. It was only after this base was constructed that Muslims started returning. Now the road between Konjević Polje and Bratunac is lined with rebuilt Muslim-owned houses.

The U.S. was winding up its invasion of Iraq. USAID made an announcement that it expected to wind up reconstruction efforts in that country within a year or two. Beba shook her head at this news.

Beba had heard on the radio the previous night that there's talk again about U.S. troops leaving Bosnia. The U.S. government is threatening to remove the troops, essential not only to Bosnian security but also to the process of military reform, if the Bosnian government does not sign an agreement not to cooperate with the International Criminal Court (ICC) where U.S. soldiers are concerned.

The ICC is the first permanent international court set up to try cases of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The U.S. doesn't want anything to do with it, and is pressuring Bosnia to sign an agreement with the U.S. that it will never file a complaint against the U.S. in the court.

Since mid-2002, when the ICC came into being, the United States has signed bilateral immunity agreements with around 30 countries. If Bosnia signs on, it will be in the company of Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, the Dominican Republic, Israel, the Marshall Islands, Mauritania, Micronesia, Nauru, and Tonga, among others. Amnesty International issued a statement recommending against signing, and called for the Bosnian Parliament to reject the agreement if the government does sign.

Potočari

We arrived at Potočari, the outskirts of Srebrenica where the massacre began in 1995, and where construction of a vast cemetery for the victims began last fall. The concrete and iron fence has been completed. I saw where the 600 victims -- 599 men and one woman -- were buried, at the north end of the field. At the head and foot of each gravesite stood a temporary, green wooden marker. They have also started constructing an open-air mosque at the other end of the field, about a kilometer away. Another group of victims will be buried on July 11th, the eighth

anniversary of the massacre.

These are remains of people who have been exhumed from mass graves throughout the area between Srebrenica and Zvornik, and identified through advanced DNA testing. The most sophisticated use of DNA identification in the world is practiced in Bosnia. The advent of this technique radically sped up the identification process. For years, as the count of exhumed remains mounted to the thousands (at least 5,000 to date), only a couple dozen victims had been identified. By 2001 there were still only 73 identified remains from Srebrenica. Then in the last couple of years, around 1,000 have been identified. But there are several thousand sets of remains waiting to be tested, and the majority of them are incomplete or mixed. There could be parts of one person in more than one body bag.

Meanwhile, the exhumations go on. The remains of over 40 more victims were exhumed 10 kilometers north of Srebrenica during the first week of this month. One employee of the International Commission for Missing Persons said, "I don't really know if there will ever come a time when finding bodies will stop."

Investigators are still taking blood samples from relatives as far away as St. Louis. But DNA identification is an expensive process, running to \$100,000 a month. The continuing decline in international assistance to Bosnia leaves in question how this work will be completed.

The reburial was a momentous event for the survivors. On one hand, it was a step towards closure for a small number of the thousands of the survivors who have been waiting for years in agony for news of their loved ones. On the other hand, the event re-opened old wounds, and brought the tragedy back to the surface in the hearts of everyone involved. One survivor, learning about the identification of her husband's remains, said, "It was as if he had just died at that moment."

My friend Vesna Mustafić, a displaced person from Srebrenica and one of the stalwart NGO activists from that town, went to the funeral. She told me that it was at that moment that she realized just how traumatized all the survivors are. She recounted that one mother just stood at the funeral, continually calling out her son's name.

The funeral is closure for some people, but it also, according to Vesna, represents the end of the faint hope that their loved ones may have somehow survived. She noted her horror at the realization that the 600 burials are only a tenth, or even less, of those that need to take place. She asked, "How long will this last?"

Djefa's son disappeared at the time of the massacre, and she has no word of him, eight years later. She was very quiet as we drove through Potočari. I noticed her pulling a handkerchief out of her pocketbook after we passed the cemetery.

I went to stay with my friends Izet and Zekira, who in 2000 were the second pair of Muslims to return to Srebrenica. Izet informed me that there have been a good number of returns since I was last here a few months ago. He said, "I have had no problem here. No one threw a stone, not even into my garden. But if other people don't want to return, that's their choice."

Izet attended the March 31 reburial at Potočari. Izet told me, with only slight exaggeration, that no Serbs had attended the funeral. The international community's High Representative to Bosnia and the U.S. Ambassador were there. In fact, the Republika Srpska foreign minister came -- the first entity-level Serb politician to attend an event like this. He said he was coming as an individual, not as a representative of the government. But he made a reasonable statement about the atrocity.

Izet said of the Serbs, "Theirs is a very hard-line nationalism. I have gone to the funerals of a couple of Serb friends. But they don't reciprocate."

I spent some time with some of the local NGO activists. The hardships go on. For three days prior to my arrival there was no telephone service. Water and electricity service are still intermittent, and the area had just struggled through a hard winter with lots of snow. People in the offices try to stay warm with space heaters or wood stoves. It's a difficult place to live, and it shows on people's faces.

Momir Nikolić

In the first week of May Momir Nikolić admitted participation in the Srebrenica massacre. He was to go on trial with three other relatively high-level commanders from Bratunac and Zvornik who are accused of involvement, but he gave a statement detailing his role. He admitted that he had participated in the killing of over 7,000 people because they were Muslims. In return for his confession, Nikolić was promised a sentence of 15 to 20 years in jail, after he testifies against the other three. His lawyers will press for a ten-year sentence.

Nikolić admitted that he had participated in a "systematic, multi-sided attack against the civilians of Srebrenica," resulting in the murder of more than 7,000 people. He had arranged places for the victims to be detained, killed, and buried. Later, in September and October 1995, he organized the removal and reburial of corpses in secondary graves around Srebrenica municipality and beyond. He admitted that he was "aware of the broad context in which these events were playing out." (Between 1992 and 1995, 618 concentration camps were created in Bosnia, and 40,000 people were killed in them or went missing.) Nikolić also submitted a detailed statement describing his role in the genocide, and naming other key figures. He said that his orders were to expel the women and children, and to kill the men.

These admissions of Nikolić and his eventual testimony constitute a breakthrough of sorts. Because of this, it is hard to imagine how it will be possible any longer for the political leaders of the Serb entity -- predominantly members of Radovan Karadzic's party and thus his political inheritors -- to blatantly deny or distort the record of what happened in Srebrenica. This should open the door to more efficient prosecution of war criminals, and hopefully, lighten the trauma that still weighs heavily on the hearts of the survivors. Theoretically, by personalizing the responsibility for the atrocity, it should also bring closer the day when the mass of Serbs do not take every accusation of war crimes as a collective attack on their entire people.

However, the various organizations of Srebrenica survivors, located in Tuzla and Sarajevo, were

outraged by the deal that The Hague made with Nikolić. Munira Subašić, head of the organization "Movement of Mothers of Srebrenica and Žepa Enclaves," protested that "the Hague Tribunal is not a market where you can bargain about such things as genocide." The mothers were scandalized that Nikolić could thus get off with a relatively light sentence.

Before the war, Nikolić had been a teacher of military defense at the high schools in Bratunac and Srebrenica. Then he participated in the murder of some of his own students, including the 18-year-old son of Munira Subašić. Her husband was also killed. The mothers objected to the Hague Tribunal's arrangement to strike the accusation of genocide from Nikolić's record, leaving him with a charge of "crimes against humanity," which carries a sentence twenty years lighter than that of genocide.

Now Ms. Subašić's organization has announced that it will file a lawsuit against the government of the Republika Srpska, because its bureau for relations with The Hague had issued a report last year asserting that only 2,000 Muslims were killed, and most of those in battle. Some others had died of exhaustion, or killed themselves, according to this report.

If I ever had the chance to meet Nikolić face-to-face, I would like to ask him what kind of world he thought he would be living in after participating in genocide. Did he think he would have a great future, riches, glory? Did he think he and his cronies could get away with this crime forever, and that the mass graves would never be uncovered? Or did he just think the hell of war would last forever?

A couple of weeks after Nikolić's guilty plea another suspect in the same case, Dragan Obrenović, also admitted his guilt. He was chief of staff of the Zvornik Brigade. He received the same promise for a lighter sentence, as did Nikolić. This left two other former officers with very little in the way of a case to defend themselves.

Orić

In Tuzla, just a few days before I arrived there, Naser Orić was arrested. Orić was the commander of the forces that defended the Srebrenica enclave during the war. He was a young man at that time, a native of Srebrenica, and formerly one of Milošević's bodyguards. During the war, he led his soldiers out into the surrounding villages to expand Muslim-controlled territory, and at one point early in 1993 almost succeeded in connecting with Muslim-controlled Tuzla. But that failed, and for the rest of the war, the resistance in Srebrenica was limited to holding off the Serb siege and occasional attacks on nearby villages.

In the spring of 1995 Orić was removed from Srebrenica by his commanders in Sarajevo under "mysterious circumstances," a couple of months before the massacre. This has fueled ongoing rumors that "Srebrenica was traded for Vogošća" (a neighborhood of Sarajevo controlled by the Serbs during the war). At least in some sense this is true, in that Vogošća and other Serb-controlled parts of Sarajevo were much more important to the army than was Srebrenica, and therefore Muslim forces fought harder to regain them. But that does not mean that any Muslim officials had an idea of what was in store for the residents of Srebrenica.

Orić was indicted by The Hague for his part in brutal attacks on Serb civilians in the villages around Srebrenica. During the forays into these villages, starving civilians followed Orić's troops to Serb villages to get food, and on some occasions mistreated the Serb villagers that they encountered. But Srebrenicans regard Orić as having been the only force that kept them from slaughter as long as he did.

All this makes Orić a very interesting, tragic figure, a young man in a position of responsibility that he tried to fulfill, but for which he had no ethical preparation. Certainly, much more mature leaders on all sides of the conflict committed crimes far worse than those for which Orić is accused.

Emir Suljagić was a teenager in Srebrenica during the siege, and grew up to be a journalist, now stationed at The Hague. He is therefore an articulate first-hand witness to what happened in Srebrenica. On Orić's arrest, he wrote that he had not known much about what Orić was doing during the war, but that to Srebrenicans at that time, Orić represented the difference between life and death. Here's more:

"Every time (that troops under Orić's command would go out to fight the Serbs), crowds of civilians would follow them, carefully listening and asking where the truckloads of soldiers were going. With bags, backpacks, and an occasional truck or tractor. As they came nearer to the front, the distance between soldiers and civilians disappeared -- I know, I was there -- and the mixed group would attack a village. Hours later, after the columns of smoke were rising high, they would return, both soldiers and civilians.

"Podravanje, Fakovići, Bjelovac, and Kravice, all burned. In that smoke, and ashes of houses, we left everything that we had brought there: our upbringing, our education, our belief that we are better.

"...Then it was winter. We were still desperate, huddling in cold rooms with plastic sheeting for windows, where wood was piled high to prevent shrapnel from coming through; we woke up starving and lice-infested, without the desire, or more often the strength, to move. Without our families, alone and abandoned, humiliated, our past raped and our future butchered, our present defeated.

"Probably to that point we still thought that this would somehow be over soon. Only one man gave us hope. He, one man, at that time performed the impossible: yes, Serb villages were torched, but on the way Serb forces were brought to their knees. Those who killed my friend ... while he was waiting in the water line and, I hope, those who pulled the cord and fired the howitzer grenade whose shrapnel struck the useless but thick book I was holding in my hands at the time. And no, I'm not trying to defend anyone, but I am alive today thanks to the fact that someone had enough courage to hunt and kill a drunken murderer, before he pulled the cord again."

After the war, Orić was an oft-seen figure around Tuzla, reputed to have become a leading local gangster. By the time of his arrest he was the owner of several apartments, houses, villas, and businesses.

Once I saw Orić at the car wash next to the house where I was living in 1998, tall, muscular, crew cut, with his Cadillac bearing Arizona license plates. I wondered what humanitarian organization donated that.

Orić's self-enrichment and shady activities were tolerated by the Muslim nationalist party that dominates Muslim politics in Bosnia, in return for his silence on the Bosnian army's policies towards Srebrenica during the war. The tip of this iceberg is the completely reliable report that during a 1993 meeting of Muslim leaders, President Alija Izetbegović asked the delegation from Srebrenica what they thought of trading the enclave for Vogošća.

This is not a rumor. And it's reasonably demonstrable that towards the end of the war, the Muslim leaders in Sarajevo were tired of Srebrenica, at a loss to solve the problem of its defense. When they pulled Orić out, they decapitated the enclave's military command. Presumably these leaders, many of them still in power, do not want Orić talking about these decisions.

Orić was never in hiding, even though he knew The Hague was interested in him. He had appeared voluntarily for questioning and stated publicly that he would turn himself in to The Hague whenever called. But the authorities chose to apprehend him in a commando-style raid on his apartment, right down the street from where I stay when I'm in Tuzla. My landlady told me that four or five helicopters hovered above the street as he was pinned down on the sidewalk by a dozen masked soldiers. Newspapers reported that "there was no resistance to the arrest."

After Orić was taken away to The Hague, a friend of his from Srebrenica reported that someone had attempted to assassinate Orić around 10 days earlier. This friend's assumption was that someone in the Bosnian government did not want Orić to end up in court.

There was a cry of outrage by Srebrenicans and residents of Tuzla in response to the arrest. "Dani," an independent weekly magazine, posted a cover that wrote, "And Radovan? And Ratko?" referring to the big fish that remain free.

One commentator accused the war tribunal of "compounding the crime" and "murdering Srebrenica again" by arresting Orić before the big war criminals. Srebrenicans expressed that they felt terrorized by the arrest, and male survivors said that they feared arrest for having survived. The Muslim mayor of Srebrenica said, "If it's a crime to defend oneself and other people against an aggressor, then Orić is a criminal." On the wall of a Tuzla apartment building a graffiti reads, "Remember, Naser is a hero!" Now the government of the Federation of Bosnia is trying to get Orić out on bail.

News, May 16th: The minister of justice for Bosnia and Herzegovina and U.S. Ambassador Clifford Bond signed an agreement that Bosnia will not hand any American citizen over to the International Criminal Court without American consent. Assistant Secretary for Defense Paul Wolfowitz was in Sarajevo on a visit. He said that "the U.S. is not seeking immunity for its citizens inasmuch as they commit a war crime." A commentator for the Sarajevo daily *Oslobodjenje* wrote that in this case Bosnia had no choice but to "bow and sign," and that anyone who objects on moral grounds should realize that such principles are long since dead in politics.