



On the Record: Returning Refugees to Bosnia

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From the AP Editorial Desk

A Unique Account of a Difficult Journey Home

Kosovo reminds us that the madness of war can take hold quickly in the Balkans. Bosnia is an equally sobering reminder of how long it takes to build peace.

Three-and-a-half years have now passed since the Dayton Agreement put an end to the war in Bosnia. That agreement was based on the assumption that Bosnia would revert to its former status as a multi-ethnic society, but for this to happen, refugees have to return to their former homes. This is not happening. Over a million Bosnians have returned to the country, but only a fraction of have gone back to live in their former homes, where they now constitute part of an ethnic minority. Bosnia remains as it was when the fighting ended: ethnically-polarized instead of ethnically-mixed.

Why is this? Why does it matter? How do Bosnians feel? Is the international community doing enough? Over the next six weeks, the Advocacy Project will try to answer these questions through the dispatches of one of our members, PETER LIPPMAN, who has been visiting communities throughout the country.

Peter knows the Balkans well. He speaks the language, and has been traveling in the region for years. He served as an OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) supervisor in elections in Bosnia. Last year, together with six other Americans, he visited Kosovo to work with students and other civil society groups that were struggling to keep Albanian culture alive without resorting to violence. Peter and his colleagues were arrested by Serbian police, thrown into jail, and subjected to a mock trial before being expelled. He has been watching events in Kosovo from Bosnia with alarm and consternation.

Peter suggested this writing assignment to The Advocacy Project. During more than a year-and-a-half in Bosnia, he has compiled a diary, extracts of which are used in this series. His work in Bosnia and Kosovo has convinced him of the importance of grassroots pressure and community organizations in rebuilding war-torn societies. He believes completely in the power of people to effect change. He also believes that a multi-ethnic Bosnia remains feasible -- and that refugees can return to minority areas. But he is also realistic: he knows that the obstacles to return -- political and economic -- are formidable.

What you can expect in the weeks ahead: Peter's reports from Bosnia represent a new approach for the Advocacy Project, although it fits with our goal of helping community activists exploit and use the new information technology. We are also more than willing to offer specialists like Peter the chance to exercise their writing skills, when this helps our aims.

Over the next six weeks, you -- our readers -- will receive dispatches from Peter at a rate of two or three a week. Each will look at a region or a community, and combine profiles with background information.

The series will take a break at the end of May, when our group plans to publish an issue of *On the Record* from northwest Bosnia in the week of May 24-29. The occasion will be the sixth annual meeting of the Bosnian women's initiative known as *Srcem Do Mira* (Through Heart to Peace), which is due to take place in Kozarac. This will be a major event, taking place in a town of symbolic significance. The northwest Bosnian town of Kozarac was an early target in the war. The town lies near the former detention camp of Omarska, when Muslims were tortured, starved and killed. The first war criminal to be sentenced by the Hague Tribunal came from Kozarac.

Yet, in spite of this ominous background, Kozarac has become a symbol of hope. There has been more movement in northwest Bosnia than almost anywhere else in Bosnia. Several of Peter's early dispatches feature this region. Issue eight will also report on the results of last year's conference.

Peter's dispatches will be highlighted in a special section of The Advocacy Project's website: www.advocacynet.org. Visitors will find a map of Bosnia and photos.

From the diaries:

Sarajevo, Friday, Oct 9, 1998. In the morning we met Andrea and her friend Corinne. We met at Skenderija and decided to walk up to the Jewish cemetery. This place was on the front line during the war, and the Serbs held it. They mined it so that no one could cross it. The Norwegians de-mined it, and last month there was an official ceremony when they turned it over to the Jewish community.

The graveyard is truly a pretty place on the hill overlooking Sarajevo. There is a fine iron gate with a Star of David built into it. From it you can see the garish yellow Holiday Inn, the two towers nearby that have been stripped by bombs, and the old Republican Parliament that was also ruined. Beyond the city are the northern hills of Sarajevo -- Žuč, Hum, and Bjelave. Near the entrance there is a nice old synagogue, a small one, that has been damaged by bombs. The

whole cemetery has been damaged. It has been de-mined, but not restored.

We walked up into the cemetery, on a steep hill that must be several acres. Towards the lower part are newer graves, and above are the older ones. There are prominent monuments to Jews who fought in WWII, Jews who were killed at Jasenovac (the concentration camp in Croatia), and Jews who were killed at Auschwitz and other places. One monument had a quote from Njegoš: "Die valiantly, when die you must."

The further parts of the cemetery had stones that seemed more ancient. They were made from granite, and seemed to me like loaves of bread coming out of the ground. They were curved in the back, with the front end squared off. Sometimes you could detect an inscription, entirely in Hebrew. On the left, most of the graves were of Ashkenazim. On the right were the Sephardim. Names like Montiljo, Kabiljo, Finci. Djego, Blanka, Grasja. Santo Papo lived from 1859 to 1960. Most of the stones were chipped by shrapnel. The array of names was remarkable: Hebrew, Spanish, Bosnian, Yiddish. German-, Turkish-, and Arabic-influenced, all together.

Tension is building in the Serb areas of Bosnia, because of the threat of NATO bombing Serbia. All the RS [Republika Srpska] politicians (including Dodik) support Milošević's policies. Andrea said that members of foreign organizations are taking the identifying stickers off their cars.

Drawn to the Balkans

The author of this series of *On the Record*, PETER LIPPMAN, was born in Seattle, Washington (USA). He has been active in human rights struggles throughout his adult life, and holds a degree in International Studies, with concentrations in Middle East and Balkan studies. In the following introduction to this series, Peter recalls how he became interested in the Balkans and how he graduated from visiting the region, to helping Bosnian refugees, and, finally, involvement in peace-building in Bosnia and Kosovo.

The First Visit

As a child, I was always curious about languages and geography. My family was involved with folklore activities and I was drawn into this. The Balkans have held a special interest for me ever since. The rich cultural kaleidoscope of Yugoslavia was an intriguing puzzle, and the door to broader studies. In 1981-1982 I went to live and study in Novi Sad, Vojvodina, then an autonomous province in the north of Serbia.

I made headway in the language, and visited much of the country. I was amazed by the density of the culture. It may have been a small pond, but it was deep. Every locality, every neighborhood, had its own traditions. Each village had its own embroidery, its own songs, and its own legends. Yugoslavia was also a magnificently beautiful country, with the tight hills and pointed haystacks of Bosnia, the jewel of Dubrovnik on the Mediterranean, and the town of Ohrid on the lake by the same name.

I loved the sociable, unhurried way of spending the day -- the idea that "coffee is not coffee unless you are sharing it with a neighbor," the fact that people knew their neighbors and cared

about them. Families and communities lived and breathed together in a healthy way that has been missing from American culture for a long time.

I returned to Yugoslavia periodically throughout the 1980s, and witnessed the country's disintegration with sadness. On a visit to Serbia in 1989, I noticed that Tito's pictures had disappeared and were replaced by those of the new president, Slobodan Milošević. As I prepared to leave in the spring of 1990 my friends told me, "this is the last time you will visit Yugoslavia." Indeed, as I was passing through Croatia a year later, the scenes of combat on the television were real, not replays of old Partisan movies.

The First Refugees

As the war spread to Bosnia, I consulted with friends in Seattle who had similar interests and decided to form a sponsorship group to help a family of Bosnian refugees. Soon they began to arrive, and we took in a family from Gacko, in eastern Herzegovina. These were people who had been in concentration camps and lived through atrocities unimaginable in our comfortable lives. We couldn't stop the war, but we could help a little.

More refugees from all over Bosnia gradually arrived in Seattle over the next few years. I spent more and more time with them, and simultaneously studied their history. These were people who had had a good life in Yugoslavia and then lost everything, and were required to start anew without any preparation. It was a sad and difficult adjustment, especially while the war was still going on. People wondered whether their relatives were still alive.

These people did not sleep very well, and at times neither did I. But they were honest and hard workers, and over the next few years they made good headway in resettlement. And they had by no means lost their customary way of closeness to friends and relatives.

I had a new family. I never particularly felt that I could heal their wounds, but I had a sense that I was doing something important -- one of the few important things I have ever done -- in simply listening to their stories. But however much I may have helped, I always felt that I was the one who was becoming enriched.

The downfall of Yugoslavia burned in me; it was a personal wound. I felt drawn again to the country in a different way. I wanted to return as a witness, even during the war. This was hard to explain to friends in Bosnia, who have never had the leisure or discretionary money to take a long trip. I arrived back in Sarajevo and started to work.

For a time I translated for the Sarajevo press agency Onasa, and spent much of 1998 in Tuzla working for a small refugee relief organization. I found time to participate as a supervisor in three OSCE-organized elections. I could see that Bosnia was still a place of density. Each locality has its own story again -- more often than not it is the story of an atrocity, a wound. But the spirit that attracted me in the first place is still here. People are trying to dig out of the ruins. They are at times dazed at what has happened to them, and daunted by the enormous task of rebuilding, and unsure whether there can ever in fact be a Bosnia again. But they retain a warmth and humor that is hard to find in America. I hope the world can hold onto the goal of helping

them rebuild.

With more luck than planning, I have gained a background and a feeling for the state of Bosnia. This has led, in turn, to a sense of why the refugees must return. While attending the fifth annual "Srcem do Mira" conference on refugee return in Sanski Most last May, I realized that refugee return is the central issue of rebuilding Bosnia. For this to ever be a country again, as opposed to a facade, people will have to return to their homes. There will be no democracy or true stability in this region for generations if that return does not take place. As important, hundreds of thousands of people will be condemned to be strangers in their own country and throughout the world.

Kosovo -- Past and Present

I first visited Kosovo in July 1981, when Albanians started to riot in Prishtina, the capital. It was a coincidence. I was passing through the city on a bus during my first trip to Yugoslavia. We passengers were warned not to point cameras out the window. I didn't really understand the situation, but I soon got an earful when I settled in Vojvodina, one of Serbia's two autonomous provinces along with Kosovo, during the following year. I saw graffiti on the walls reading, "Each Serb should kill one Albanian," but the word used for "Albanian" was less than polite. Regarding Kosovo and Albanians, the predominant attitude among citizens of Vojvodina was ignorance and mild prejudice.

In response, I sought to educate myself. When I finally visited Kosovo and spent some time traveling from one market town to the next, I found two things: the people were friendly and courteous, and the atmosphere was the least "Yugoslav" of anywhere I had been in the country. Partly this was because of the region's economy which had been left behind the rest of Yugoslavia, and partly it was because here was a more traditional, more Muslim, agrarian society, whose language was not a Slavic one.

I also learned that in spite of the autonomy that the province was then enjoying, there were still many reasons for Albanians to be dissatisfied. There was a great sense of alienation from the dominant Slavic culture, and resentment of the authoritarian brand of socialism as practiced by the post-Tito regime. I also heard of the vicious repression Albanians had experienced in an earlier decade, during the Ranković era. These bitter memories lingered.

Still, contrary to widespread stories passed around in other parts of Yugoslavia, no one I met seriously supported the idea of secession or unification with Albania. After all, that country was still under the notorious rule of Enver Hoxha. Kosovar Albanians of the 1980s wanted to live in a better Yugoslavia. But ignorance and prejudice against Albanians was common all around the country. When Slobodan Milošević became president of Serbia and tensions rose in Kosovo during the late 1980s, several slanders were spread: "They're raping Serb women," "They're desecrating our cemeteries," and "They're attacking Serbs and driving them out of the province."

In 1989 my friend Sali, from the Kosovo town of Peć, was staying with me for a time in the United States. We listened to the radio as Serbian President Milošević removed Kosovo's autonomy status from the constitution, and Serbian forces brutally suppressed the resulting

protest demonstrations. From that moment to the present it has been a downhill slide along a path of increasingly brutal repression, encompassing economic suppression, detention without charges, disappearances, torture, and assassinations.

After 1989, to be an Albanian in the cities of Kosovo was to be insecure. The provincial Albanian government and police forces were disbanded, and most Albanian government workers lost their jobs. Directors of companies were fired, professors locked out of their schools, and doctors and medical staff removed. The social infrastructure came under Serb control, constituting a new apartheid. Serbs were forbidden to sell property to Albanians. In this period, thousands of Albanians left to avoid being drafted and sent to fight in Croatia and Bosnia. Others simply left to find work and support their families.

I strengthened my bonds with Kosovo by taking in a young student for two years. Nina, Sali's niece, finished high school in my house and practiced being an American teenager. She polished her English quickly, hung out with Bosnian refugee teenagers, and worried about her family back home. Her father was educated in economics and philosophy, spoke three languages, and had been a bank director, but was now unemployed.

Kosovo was coming to resemble occupied Palestine, and the Kosovar Albanians reacted to the repression. They elected a parallel government led by President Ibrahim Rugova. They created an underground school system and an alternative health care system. Rugova enjoyed great popularity among his people, leading them with a pacifist, non-violent approach to resistance.

In recent years, two groups emerged to disagree with Rugova. The Independent Student Union resented Rugova's passive approach and called for a more active form of non-violent resistance. And there were stirrings, only rumors at first, of a violent resistance (always termed "shadowy") in the countryside.

The students began to organize public demonstrations of protest in late 1997. At first these were termed "non-political," with the single demand of returning public school buildings to the Albanian students. However, the demonstrations were joined by masses of citizens, and spread around the country.

Some colleagues of mine were invited to come to Kosovo to observe these demonstrations in March of 1998. Before we could arrive, massacres perpetrated by the Serbian government took place in the central Kosovo region of Drenica. Eighty people, villagers of all ages and both sexes, were killed. The Serbian government had decided to attempt to wipe out all resistance. But the protests continued in the cities, their focus broadening to include solidarity with Drenica. My colleagues and I went to Prishtina.

What we observed in Prishtina was a valiant attempt to change events with mass non-violent demonstrations in the street. I had not seen such broad participation, hope, and enthusiasm since the Palestinian Intifada eight years before. Tens of thousands of people were in the streets day after day, calling for withdrawal of Serbian "special forces" from Kosovo, for the return of their schools, for aid to Drenica, and, yes, help from NATO. At that time, there was almost no mention of the UCK, the Kosovo Liberation Army. People were still chanting Rugova's name.

The scenes we saw in the streets of Prishtina were compelling. The heavily-armed police seemed powerless in the face of such non-violence. But although they were powerless to react at the time, they had other plans and tactics. During our detention at the Prishtina police station later, we had the opportunity to witness some of their sadism. It is a tragedy that the people of Kosovo did not turn to active non-violent protest several years earlier.

My friends and I quickly met all kinds of people. We held meetings with medical workers, human rights activists, students and professors, and spoke with ordinary people that we met on the street. We had a chance to talk with a few Serbs who expressed the hope that this would not become an ethnic war, as in Bosnia. We saw that Albanians had had friendships with Serbs, but this was all in danger now. Most of all, we felt the solidarity of the Albanians in their new-found power to practice active non-violent resistance.

We were also touched by the warmth and hospitality of our hosts: our translators, who patiently explained their lives and hopes to us. There was the neighbor, Tony, a 14-year-old who played Beethoven's Moonlight sonata on the piano for me without reading notes. When I asked him how long he had been working on it, he told me, "Since New Year's, but I haven't had much time."

After we left Kosovo, the massacres continued. The violence rose, and the world knows about the ensuing negotiations at Rambouillet. Meanwhile, villages were burned, hundreds of thousands of people displaced, and refugees started showing up in Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia, and beyond. Old men with white caps now sit on the sidewalks of Sarajevo, and sympathetic Bosnians, who unlike many others know what these people have lived through, give them a little change.

The present catastrophe eclipses the atrocities of last year. I wonder where my friends are. Prishtina is empty. Are they alive? Peć is empty. Where are Nina's relatives?

And once again, there are new refugees. The 20,000 or so Albanian refugees that have arrived in Bosnia are a new wound on a great scar -- the 800,000-plus displaced Bosnians whose fate has yet to be resolved.

From the diaries:

Wednesday, March 24, 1999. The NATO bombing of Yugoslavia started a few hours ago. A lot of people here did not believe that it was finally going to take place, but it did. I was more or less inclined to say it was going to happen.

I went out for a walk around 9:30 in the evening, and decided to stop by Onasa press agency, where I used to work. That's where I found out the news, and read all the Reuters posts as they were coming in. Several sites, all the way from Montenegro through Kosovo, Belgrade, and on up into Vojvodina, were hit.

I hope they only destroy military targets, although I know that won't happen. The Serbian news already report deaths of women and children. I know that if that weren't true, they'd make it up,

so there's no way to know the truth from official Serbian sources. They also said they shot down a plane, which NATO denied.

I know this is going to be bad. The Serbians aren't going to just roll over. I can't see how this will work out for the inhabitants of Kosovo (the Serbs too), without an occupying, peacekeeping force on the ground. And I doubt NATO really has a plan for that.

I have looked at some of what the pacifists in the U.S. are writing. They are saying, "Wait, don't bomb, there are alternatives." I like that, but don't see the alternatives. They are calling for negotiations. That was tried. As one of my professors told me in a course on the Mid-east conflict, when I proposed UN troops in Israel, "This is Alice in Wonderland stuff."

I'm convinced that Milošević aims to wipe out or expel as many Albanians as he can. That will happen if he is allowed to do it.

From a news article -- (In Kosovo.) This evening Serbian military-police have set fire to the city of Podujevo. The left side of the city is in flames. Every house and club is in flames, now. The state of the civilian population, according to the latest information, is very dramatic. The population is surrounded from both sides; on the one side, by Serbian military-police forces, and on the other side from the armed Serbian civil people, coming from Serbia. It is also said that all telephonic lines are cut off, communication is completely interrupted. -- End of news article. This happened before NATO's attack, and has been happening for a year. Did the anti-interventionists know where Kosovo was, during that time?