



On the Record: Returning Refugees to Bosnia

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From The AP Editorial Desk

Sarajevo 1999

SARAJEVO: TRAUMA AND RECOVERY

Memories of the Siege

Sarajevo's Neighborhood War

The last eight issues of this series have followed the story of Muslims in northwest Bosnia and their long struggle to return home. In the next three issues, Peter visits the refugees of Sarajevo.

By the time that Emsuda Mugajić was expelled from her home in Kozarac, in late May of 1992, Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia, was in flames. The siege of Sarajevo was to last longer than any other in modern history -- longer even than Stalingrad. What brought about such a cataclysmic event?

In late 1991, Bosnia was beginning to reflect the larger tensions that were already tearing Yugoslavia apart. On October 15, 1991, Bosnia's fragile multiethnic government collapsed. Bosnian Serb deputies walked out of the parliament under their leader, Radovan Karadžić. The Croats and Muslims who remained agreed that Bosnia should follow Croatia's example and separate from Yugoslavia.

Bosnia's Serbs had warned that they would not accept minority status in an independent Bosnia, and on January 9, 1992 they attempted to forestall independence by creating a "Bosnian Serb republic" within the Yugoslav federation.

A referendum on Bosnian independence was held on February 28 and March 1, 1992. It produced an overwhelming vote for independence, but was boycotted by most of the Bosnian Serbs.

The Serbs then stepped up their pressure on the Muslims and Croats in the east and northwest. In the beginning of April 1992, the ethnic cleansing of Muslims from northeast Bosnia began. Bosnian Serb militia linked up with Serbian troops from the Yugoslav Army (JNA) and attacked several major towns in the northeast -- Brčko, Zvornik, and Bijeljina.

On April 4, as reports of the atrocities began to reach Sarajevo, Izetbegović ordered the mobilization of the Bosnian territorial defense, throwing down the gauntlet to JNA forces stationed in Bosnia. Two days later, on April 6, Bosnia was recognized as an independent state by the European Community. The United States followed two days later. Karadžić immediately proclaimed the independence of the Bosnian Serb republic from the new state. Bosnia was independent -- but also at war.

The world had heard of Sarajevo long before the war in Bosnia. It was famous as the site of the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand that precipitated World War I, and as the location of the 1984 Winter Olympics.

Bosnia's capital was a city of sophistication and cultural ferment. "Sarajlije" (citizens of Sarajevo) were proud of their city's leading place in Yugoslav theater, popular music, film, art, and literature.

It was also uniquely multiethnic. It was home to a rich blend of Muslims, Jews, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Albanians, Roma (Gypsies), and others, who all contributed to making the city an unusually sophisticated place. A significant number of these people called themselves "Yugoslavs," either out of political conviction or because they were the product of a mixed marriage. Sarajevo was a centuries-old model of ethnic and religious tolerance.

The first deaths in Sarajevo occurred on April 6 when a large march for peace was shot at as it crossed the Vrbanja bridge in the heart of Sarajevo. On that day, Serb gunmen also opened fire from the Holiday Inn at crowds that were demonstrating outside the parliament, killing six people. The same day, Serb tanks and artillery seized the Sarajevo airport. From that point on, the city was to all intents and purposes cut off.

Over the next three weeks, Sarajevo's multiethnic character began to dissolve. The heart of the city remained intact, and many Croats and Serbs remained. But areas on the fringe of the city exchanged populations as minorities tried to escape from neighborhoods that had suddenly turned hostile. Muslims hurriedly moved out of largely Serb areas like Grbavica, and Serbs began to move out of predominantly Muslim areas like the old town. Sarajevo was experiencing ethnic cleansing at the community level.

The Bosnian Serbs were able to draw on the limitless supplies of the Serb-controlled JNA. On May 2, they made a military move to separate the modern western half of the city from the more densely populated old quarter by sending tanks up from the south through the suburb of Grbavica. The attack was halted with the Serbs in control of Grbavica. At this point, the front line solidified. It was to remain this way for over three more years of war.

It was a strange front line: it wound in and out of communities like the "green line" in Beirut or Mogadishu, creating artificial ethnic pockets.

The entire city was ringed by Serb forces, which established commanding positions along the mountain ridge. Outside, to the west, the Serbs held Mojmiilo, which was the source of the city's water. This allowed them to turn the taps off during 1993 and 1994, and forced the Sarajevans to draw water from the river and the city brewery. Under the eyes of snipers, collecting water became a laborious and dangerous ordeal.

During the siege, the one opening in this outer ring of Serb firepower occurred at the airport, which was under UN control and supposed to be neutral. The Serbs handed the airport over to the United Nations in early June of 1992 on the understanding that it was only to be used for humanitarian flights. Much to the anger of the besieged Sarajevans, the UN enforced this agreement aggressively. Many brave Sarajevans were picked out by UN spotlights and killed by Serb snipers as they tried to bring supplies in and out of the city.

But the Sarajevans responded by building a tunnel under the airport. Apart from UN humanitarian flights, the tunnel was Sarajevo's link to the outside world -- 760 meters long and 1.6 meters high, it became a symbol of the city's determination to resist and of its wry humor. As people left the city and emerged from the end of the tunnel, they were met by a sign that read: "Paris 3,765 km."

Entering the city through the tunnel, one would arrive in the suburb of Dobrinja, which had been built to house athletes during the 1984 winter Olympics. Dobrinja was almost overrun in the early days. It was virtually cut off from the rest of the city by the fighting, and was to remain this way for three years -- under siege within the Sarajevo siege. Those wishing to enter and leave Dobrinja had to run the gauntlet of sniper fire, ducking behind a long row of wrecked cars which formed a sort of protective wall.

The main road ran into the city from the airport in the west, past the wrecked building of Oslobodjenje, the multiethnic newspaper that continued to publish in the rubble, and the old Post Office which was turned into the UN headquarters. This stretch of open road became known as Sniper's Alley. Entering the city center, the former barracks of the JNA and the Holiday Inn (which kept functioning through the war) lay on the left; on the right were the buildings of the Parliament and the Presidency. Then the road entered the dense, crowded old Turkish quarter. It was cut off by the Serbs on the other side of a long tunnel, which housed an emergency water purifier during the war.

From this east-west road, another spur of the besieged Sarajevo ran north. Up here, on higher ground, lay the old cemetery, the stadium, and Sarajevo's famed Koševo hospital. The hospital was dangerously close to the Serb lines, and it was a favorite target. During the war, surgeons struggled heroically to operate under candlelight as the shells tore into the walls: hundreds of patients, including newborn children, were killed.

There has never been a siege in history like Sarajevo's. Inside the Serb ring of artillery and snipers, people cowered from their former neighbors, took up positions in bombed out buildings,

and ducked to avoid the shells that landed on the paved roads and showered splinters in deadly arcs. (These left marks that became known as "flowers." Many have been lovingly filled in with red clay as a reminder). The Muslims of Butmir and Dobrinja, two communities near the airport, were particularly vulnerable and isolated -- but under pressure, they became extraordinarily resilient.

Outside of the surrounded part of the city, the Serbs of Grbavica found themselves on the right side of the siege but the wrong side of the city's topography. Grbavica lies in the Sarajevo valley, and is linked to the same electricity and water grids. As such, its inhabitants were subject to some of the same restrictions on food and water that hurt the city.

The siege of Sarajevo lasted for three years and three months. There were countless atrocities -- attacks on bread lines, markets, schools, and hospitals. There were also lulls in the shelling, as in the spring of 1994. But it was not until August 1995 that the Serbs withdrew under NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) bombing, and agreed to talk peace.

The courage of Sarajevans cannot disguise the fact that Sarajevo today is a pale shadow of its pre-war glory. In 1991, the city's population was 501,000. Of these, 252,000 were Muslim, 139,000 were Serb, and 35,000 were Croat.

By 1998, the population had dropped to 360,935: 310,000 were Muslim, 16,000 Serb, and 18,000 Croat. According to one estimate, 45% of the pre-war population of the Sarajevo Canton left the Canton either during or soon after the war, and the city that had once been 50% Muslim became almost 90% Muslim. Many of these people were displaced from the newly-created Republika Srpska (RS).

If Sarajevo is to stand any chance of reverting to its multiethnic state, refugees must return home. The following three issues of *On the Record* illustrate some of the obstacles, and profile some of the people who are trying to remove them. (Iain Guest, Peter Lippman)

Three or Four Cats Didn't Cover his Aunt

From Peter's diary:

Wednesday, Oct 7, 1998. In the morning we watched a film made in Sarajevo during the war, a half-hour documentary called *Ecce Homo*. It's a very sad movie. Kids play in wrecked streetcars and walk through graveyards. People carry water and run from snipers. People go out for water all dressed up. A bomb falls in the river near where people are washing, and they run for the shore. Not all survive.

Afterwards Damir apologized and told us some anecdotes to cheer us up. He said that during the war it was so cold at his aunt's house, they put the cats on his aunt to warm her up. Three or four cats didn't cover her, so they put some rabbits on her, up to her neck. Live rabbits. Then they would spread the blanket over the whole assemblage, and his aunt would go to sleep. The next morning when they took up the blanket, the cats and rabbits would go springing out in every direction.

Damir said that if you had to transport a body to the cemetery, you had to go beg a UN officer to sell you some gas, 4 or 5 liters. A liter would cost 40 DM (\$25). Then you'd take the gas to a driver, and he'd tell you, "that's half water!" So in that way a lot of people ended up getting buried in people's yards. I asked Damir if any were buried in his yard. He said they were, but they got moved after the war.

"The sniper had been a medical student. He would snipe and study medicine at the same time."

From Peter's diary:

Marina took us to see her old apartment, over in Grbavica. She had a flat on the ninth floor of a building that is now totally stripped -- no doors, windows, or anything else but the concrete shell. Rubble around the outside, some pots, cushions -- just garbage. We walked around the neighborhood. Some of the buildings had been fixed.

Marina pointed out the apartment of an archaeologist across the street. This was in a similar building that had been ruined. Several apartments had windows, though. People have taken over some of these empty flats and moved in, even though there's no electricity or water. Marina said that on the ground outside these flats after the war there were big piles of ruined books, which the people who moved in threw out the window because they didn't care.

At one point after the war Marina went to one of these apartments to retrieve some fossils the archaeologist had collected: fossils and relics from the Roman times from Herzegovina, and other valuable things. She got the man to promise that she could take them. When she came back in a week, he had used the stones to make an outhouse. He said to her, "If anyone who does not have my name comes around here, I've got an axe to take care of them."

We went into Marina's building. The place had been looted. Any doors or furniture that was not destroyed by the bombing had been taken away. Even the pipes were ripped out of the walls. The building is going to be restored, though. We saw a metal gate that had recently been put on one doorway. Marina explained that someone had already claimed the apartment. She said, "Maybe they've claimed mine, too."

On another floor I found an old notebook, from 1949. At the beginning there was a quote from Tito: "Brotherhood and unity in the society is indistinguishable from brotherhood and unity in the Party."

We got up to Marina's apartment. She had two really nice views -- one looking to the east to Trebević, and the other to the north, across the river into town. This building was on the front line and it was taken over early in the war by the Serbs, who used Marina's apartment to snipe from. She later found a lot of cartridges on the floor. She also found the notes of a sniper who was a medical student. He would snipe and study medicine at the same time.

On Saturday night Marina took me to her mother's house, on their ancestral land. It's a five-

minute walk from a streetcar stop on the main street of Sarajevo, but when you get there, it's like a farm. There's an acre or two of land with a fruit orchard and three small houses. Marina has a large garden plot already dug up for planting.

We went into the house. It's a two-story house with foot-thick walls, probably made of stone and mortared over. It's not in great repair, especially with the paint peeling or just worn off after 50 years.

Marina said that during the war, after her mother died, people came in and stole all the furniture, only leaving one cabinet. Now it is furnished again with donated furniture from friends. Marina's own apartment, in Grbavica, may be restored some day, but for now the old house has to be her home.

We took a walk up towards one of the nearby hills. It is half covered by houses and half by fields. She explained to me that those hills had been covered by woods before the war, but the trees were cut down for firewood. On the way back to Marina's house, she showed me where a huge crater from an anti-aircraft bomb of some sort had been filled in. This was in the middle of her yard.

International investigators came to see the hole, and filmed it. Marina said they were going to use the footage in The Hague as evidence of bombing civilians. She told me that when the bomb fell, it threw a huge tree in the air. She pointed to a 5-story apartment building about a half-kilometer away, and said that the tree was thrown over that building. The crater left by the bomb was deeper than the height of a man, and it took many truckloads of dirt to fill in. Marina's cousins want to sell this land to the "war profiteers," she says. Maybe she will be able to keep a small part of it for a garden.

Mirjana and her parents are Serbs who stayed in Sarajevo throughout the war. The father was a professor. Mirjana worked as a translator, as she still does, for an international agency. Some Serbs moved out of the apartment building during the war, and refugees from Foča and other places moved in.

Mirjana's family was harassed. People would knock on their door and yell, "You should be killed!" Mirjana's father would say, "I'm not one of them; if I wanted to bomb Sarajevo I would be up in the hills." They had a hard time, no work and no food. Mirjana would go over to Marina's house and get apples off her trees.

All these people look normal now, but they have been through hell. Marina said, "These people had nothing. Do you know what means nothing?" I had to admit I didn't.

She said, "During the war they sold their piano. It was a beautiful antique, handmade piano. They got half a meter of wood for it. That means, about as much wood as they would have gotten out of the piano.

Alma said, "When I was little I didn't know what this was all about. I knew some people went to churches and some to mosques, but I didn't know what they did there. Then an old woman who

was our neighbor died, and we went to her funeral service in a church. There were all these statues of saints, Saint Mary, Saint Francis, and so on. To me they were dolls, but to them they were saints. I said to my mother, 'Buy me one of those dolls.' She said, 'Shushhh.'

Alma told me that before the war started, a few Serbs moved out of her apartment building and left town.

Then she saw some of her neighbors in the same building breaking into those Serbs' apartments and stealing furniture. She said she couldn't understand how they could do this. She said, "I couldn't find a place in my brain where I could think of such a thing." Many of these people had been neighbors for ten years or more.

During the war Alma sold a VCR that cost 1,000 DM for 100 DM. Then she bought five kilos of flour with that money, to feed her kid.

Marina told me about a writer, Karim Zaimović. He was a brilliant young man who was killed towards the end of the war -- August 13, 1995. He had a circle of friends who had developed a very wise young literary culture around them.

Marina is taking excerpts from Karim's selected writings, and has also interviewed some of his friends, asking for samples that would recapture the wit and the feeling of those days. I have translated some of those samples into English for her.

One of Karim's stories was about a scene in a kafana (coffeehouse) in Sarajevo, an outdoor kafana. There were two peacocks wandering among the tables, and one of them came up to a cafe door that had mirrors on it. He saw his reflection in the mirror, and pounced on it. He wouldn't stop attacking it, and was getting bloody, when the waiter pulled him away from the mirror. Karim said that for him this was a metaphor for war.

Marina told me about some things that happened in Sarajevo during the war. She said that she knew someone who put a cast on her leg, and an upper body cast on her husband, and they paid \$20,000 to get out of the city. Marina herself was going to a convoy to get her mother out, and when she saw the crowd of pathetic people waiting for transportation, she said, "Let's go home and die like humans."

She later asked the friend who had paid to get out, how she could do that. The friend said, "How could you stay? And how about the people who accepted \$20,000 to get me out, knowing that I didn't need to go?"

My friend Strik showed us his orchards and we picked some apricots from a big old tree. He also has apples, pears, plums, blackberries, and raspberries.

We looked at Strik's shop. From there he showed us the view, and explained to us how close the Serbs had been when Sarajevo was surrounded. 1.5 kilometers to the east, and 3 kilometers to the north. I said, "It must have been dangerous."

He said, "Yes, but you got used to it." Strik recently visited some friends of his in Lukavica, not far from Sarajevo in the RS. But he still maintains, as he told me last fall, that the Serbs would attack Sarajevo again in five years. That's just how they are, he says. Though they won't attack as long as NATO is here.

We talked a little about Kosovo. Strik, always given to making quotable and extreme statements, said that the Albanians had already been defeated. He said, "And we would have lost too, if it weren't for the US and the Europeans, and their airdrops."

Ahmo is married to a Serb woman. When the war started Ahmo volunteered to work as a paramedic on the front line. His commander was something of a criminal. This was not unusual at the beginning of the war, to have a commander from the ranks of gangs. There were some quite notorious criminals who ran the defense for a while.

One day this commander said to Ahmo, "You're not going to work as a doctor anymore. Take this gun. You're going to kill Serbs. When you've killed ten Serbs, then we'll forgive you for marrying a Serb."

So Ahmo said, "OK, but give me some time to get ready. I've never even held a gun before." He went home and got his wife and daughter, and they went to Germany for the next four years.

Alma was telling me about how it felt to be divided up into ethnicities when the war was starting. She said her son, then 18, came to her and said, "Mama, what are we, are we Muslims, or are we Bosnians?" Alma said, "We are sheep." (August 12, 1998)