



On the Record: Returning Refugees to Bosnia

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The Serbs of Sarajevo: 'Stepchildren Of Dayton'

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From the AP Editorial Desk

In the last two issues of his dispatches from Bosnia, Peter visited with Muslims from Sarajevo. He heard their stories of heroism and hardship during the siege, and their struggle to return home to their destroyed and abandoned homes.

In this, the final issue on Sarajevo, Peter hears the other side of the story from Sarajevo's minorities -- the Croats and Serbs who are trying to return home to the Bosnian capital.

This is one of the great disappointments of the Dayton process. During the war, Serbs controlled parts of six Sarajevo municipalities: Ilidža, Ilijaš, Vogošća, Hadžići, Novo Sarajevo, and Novi Grad. As part of the Dayton agreement, it was decided that these neighborhoods would be incorporated into the Canton of Sarajevo, under the (Muslim-Croat) Federation.

This decision provoked one of the most controversial episodes of the post-war period. In the spring of 1996, tens of thousands of Serbs from Sarajevo left for the Republika Srpska (RS). It was a heart-rending sight: old people and young children struggled through the snow, while NATO troops and the first contingent of international police looked on. Some blamed the Muslims for pushing them out; most blamed the Serbs for refusing to allow them to stay, and everyone blamed the international community for allowing it to happen. But the tragic upshot was a new and massive exodus of refugees. This was hardly the intention of the peace agreement.

It is widely agreed that Sarajevo holds one of the keys to the return of refugees in Bosnia, and that the return of the city's Serbs and Croats holds the key to Sarajevo itself. In early 1998, an international conference was held in Sarajevo entitled "Sarajevo Returns." At that time, the

Sarajevo Declaration was drawn up calling for the return of 20,000 minority citizens to Sarajevo in 1998 -- fewer than 2,000 actually returned that year.

Why? In this issue, Peter attempts to answer the question by talking to three prominent Serb activists for return, and a Croat whom we will call "Lara." All four show that while many want to go home, they face daunting obstacles on both side of the "inter-entity borderline" (IEBL). The obstacles include out-and-out violence, byzantine property laws, and bureaucracy so malevolent that it leads some to talk of "ethnic cleansing by red tape."

People rarely have the stamina, the funds, or the legal resources to force their way back to a home where it is so clear that they are unwelcome. As a result, thousands of people every year are giving up and moving abroad. Slowly but surely, Sarajevo is losing its status as one of Europe's most multiethnic capitals. The tragedy is that this is happening during "peace."

From Peter's Diaries: A Visit to the Serb Side of Sarajevo

I went back to "Srpsko Sarajevo" today and met up with Slavo, an interpreter from last November's elections whom I had liked and wanted to keep in touch with. While waiting for him at the top of the hill (Vraca) I stood by three women who had come up from the Serb side to sell cigarettes. A carton of Marlboros was 15 DM, 10 to 15 DM cheaper than on the Federation side. The women would sit and wait until someone would come along to buy, and then they would all jump up and hustle.

A truck with "Herceg-Bosna" license plates from Livno came up from the Federation side and they all crowded around the window. I watched one woman desperately trying to rip a carton of cigarettes open so that she could show the buyer that they weren't counterfeit. All this for a few marks' profit.

Slavo is a displaced person from Sarajevo. He translates for the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) at times, which is how I met him. He told me that he stayed in Sarajevo for the first year of the war, but then left because it was too dangerous for Serbs (I think it was dangerous for everyone, but the Serbs had somewhere to go.).

He and his brother and father now live in Sokolac, an hour east of Pale, and he describes the people there as "villagers, crude and selfish people." His father is sick, has to go to Belgrade for a leg operation because of thrombosis (blood clots). He needs 700 or 800 marks, and the only assistance he can get, as a refugee, is a free bus ticket from the Red Cross. He was asking me for help finding a job.

We sat at a kafana (coffeehouse) and I showed Slavo photos from the elections. I showed him one of Ranko, the polling committee chairman, who had said to me, "For us, Radovan (Karadzic) is a saint." I told this to Slavo, and he told me, "I used to think that too, but he ruined my life. He and Alija (Izetbegovic) and Tudjman."

I asked him if anyone had returned to Sarajevo to live or if he thought anyone would, with the new return plan. He shook his head and said, "No. That's just ridiculous. That's for the public

consumption of the world, not for us."

He goes into town sometimes, however, because of work with the OSCE, and is able to spend time with old friends. He says he has been accosted a couple of times by people who recognized him -- old neighbors. But when that happened he was with friends and they calmed things down. He says, "It's one thing to be able to go back and live in your old apartment. But what about when you want to go out? And what about a job?" (March 1, 1998)

The "Stepchildren of Dayton" - Focus on the Serbs of Sarajevo

The Democratic Initiative of Sarajevo (DISS)

The Democratic Initiative of Sarajevo Serbs (DISS) was formed soon after the signing of the Dayton Agreement to help those Serbs who stayed in Sarajevo and those who wanted to return.

DISS has over 2,000 members and advocates for the implementation of Dayton. It is non-governmental, non-party, and non-profit. It receives assistance from the international community, has collaborated with the Coalition for Return (a Sarajevo-based NGO) and many other organizations, and also participates in the Open City program. It has links with relief organizations including Intersos, HELP, and Catholic Relief Services (CRS).

When people return, DISS provides them with information on where to go, what documents to get, and how to appeal decisions, whether that is with the international community or in court. DISS provides free access to a lawyer to returnees and also runs programs in human rights, documenting human rights violations against Serbs of in Federation Sarajevo. The international community uses DISS's information, especially regarding human rights, which is viewed as reliable and authentic.

DISS also carries out humanitarian activities and runs a radio station, Radio DISS, which is the only Serb-operated radio in the Federation. A DISS outpatient clinic has functioned continuously, including during the war.

DISS prides itself on being multi-ethnic. It particularly caters to people of mixed marriages who stayed in Sarajevo. For instance, the wife of Božidar Stanojević, the head of the DISS human rights program, is a Muslim. The organization works with an Orthodox Church charity (Srpski Dobrotvor) to distribute canned food and hygiene packages to 120 recipients. The Samaritans donated 480 New Year packages through DISS for children of different ethnicities.

DISS has also worked with the Coalition for Return's "Krovovi" (Roofs) program, and assists with roof repair. Around 70 people have applied to DISS for help for mini-farms, woodwork shops, and similar ventures. CRS has helped with micro-credit, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has given furnishings to returnees. Around 250 people have applied for house repairs: approximately 200 of these houses have been fixed to date.

Over 900 families have registered via DISS for return. Of these families, 85 have received a decision on their cases, and only 46 have moved into their homes -- a 5% result, which is very

low. It is not surprising, however, as I discovered during a long conversation with Jovo Janjić, president of DISS, and Božidar Stanojević, head of DISS Human Rights Program. They explain it this way:

"We are the step-children of both entities. No one loves us. The leaders of RS call us 'traitors,' 'weak Serbs,' or 'Alija's Serbs.' This is a problem between us and the Serb politicians, not the Serb people. Then people in the Federation call us 'Chetniks,' 'aggressors,' and other ugly things. Neither side is correct. We are ordinary people who want to stay in our own city. We have been here for centuries, and so have a right to be here.

"There is much resistance to people coming back, and people who do come back sometimes leave again. It is not enough just to return. People need work, schools, cultural organizations, and other social institutions." Božidar Stanojević says, "There are problems not only for Serbs, but also for people in mixed marriages. My wife is a Muslim. She got a job a year after the end of the war, in the place where she had worked before. People there called her a 'Chetnik' and said, 'Why don't you go back to Karadžić?' Then her job was changed, and her pay reduced. Our daughter cannot even get work."

Jovo Janjić agrees: "Before the war, there was much intermarriage. It was a normal thing in the cities. It was only a matter of chance that I married a Serb woman. The idea of ethnic separatism was a tragic stupidity. We have maintained good relations with our own people here, in the RS, and Yugoslavia, and have some contacts with Serb organizations abroad. Our main goal is to facilitate return. We tell people, 'If we are here, then it is possible for you to come home.' "

Obstacles to Return in the RS

"Serbs from Sarajevo now live in the Trebinje area, Foča, Višegrad, Bratunac, Srebrenica, Zvornik, Višegrad, Bijeljina, Brčko, and Banja Luka. In other words all over the RS, especially down the eastern side. We work with groups of people in these places. But however much these people desire to return, there is equally as much obstruction on the part of the RS government.

"The Republika Srpska government considers it a defeat for them whenever a Serb leaves the RS to go home to the Federation. It does not wish there to be a reunified Bosnia. It works at the expense of the ordinary Serb citizens, against return. There is an often-quoted poll of Serbs in the RS, which supposedly showed that 97% of them had no desire for return. Under present conditions, polls are no way to determine the real wishes of the people. People will say one thing in public, because they are afraid of consequences. But in private half of them will ask for advice about how to return.

"Some laws which would facilitate return to the Republika Srpska are not in place. These need to be enacted. But we fear that the new ones will only be on paper."

"Ethnic Cleansing by Red Tape" in Sarajevo

I asked for further details on the obstruction that Serbs experience on their return to Sarajevo. Jovo Janjić listed several factors:

- Information:

"There is a lack of information, and there is misinformation. For instance, in the RS, there was no printed copy of the Dayton Agreement until a year ago. The only good information comes either from us or from the international community."

- Fear:

"In the RS there is pressure, trickery, and unfavorable speech against people who want to return, so that people lose their desire to return. Or else they conceal their true wishes and plans. If we were in the RS right now, we would not be talking openly like this."

"There is also fear on the part of people who have returned. Right after the war, there were threats by Alija (Izetbegović). There is also a fear of secret arrest lists held by the Federation government. And there is fear of the actions of local citizens, especially in the case of the return of small groups of people. Some of the Muslims have organized harassment, even physical attacks."

- Abandoned Property:

"There is no organized method of dealing with abandoned property. If someone's property has been declared abandoned, then it is under the jurisdiction of the government agencies. If it has not been declared abandoned, then it is illegally inhabited, in which case it is a matter for the courts. In any event, people are waiting for two, three years for their cases to be settled."

- Proof of Ownership:

"On return, the government requires from the returnee proof of ownership, which is expensive and takes months to establish. Some people never transferred ownership from their father or grandfather who died, so they have to do that. And there were many unlicensed buildings, which therefore do not exist legally."

- Delays:

"The legally prescribed time period for a decision to be made is never respected. Say a decision is supposed to be made in 30, 60, or 90 days. In no case is the decision ever made within that time period."

- Appeals:

"Suppose someone receives a finding on their case. Even if it is positive, there may not be any eviction because the illegal occupant refuses to leave or the government will give him extra time to find a new place. That requires a whole appeals process, which takes a lot of time -- because the law also says that an illegal occupant must have a new home. In other words, a positive decision can be as bad as a negative one! If there is a negative decision, then there is also a very

slow appeals process. Finally, a case may go to the international human rights ombudsman, and they have their own slow processes."

- Resistance:

"When an eviction takes place, the local inhabitants usually organize and resist it. The government will not help. The police attend the evictions, but they have not used compulsion to evict, except in rare instances when they are making a political point. This is an extremely rare occurrence."

- Police:

"The police force is called "multi-ethnic," but is hardly so. It is mostly Muslim. We need Serb police, but that is not enough. We also need Serb government officials at all levels, to participate in making the decisions and seeing that they get enforced.

"There is pressure from the international community to form a more multi-ethnic police force. The IPTF (International Police Task Force -- a UN unarmed police observer force) attends evictions, but they only observe. An international police force should be created that would efficiently implement evictions, here and in the RS. When people who are trying to return go through all this, only the most persistent get anywhere. You can imagine how many give up. We try to encourage people -- they have to keep going, to bear it until the end."

- Selling of Property:

"Now, there is massive selling of property. Serbs are cooperating with Muslims who act as brokers to help them sell their property to a third party, usually from another country, since people here don't have any money. Many of these buyers are Muslims from the Sandžak (a region of Yugoslavia), and lately people arriving from Kosovo. These people have no papers legitimizing their presence in Bosnia, yet they are allowed to freely purchase or build property here.

"The Federation government faults Serbs for selling off their property here, but then it lets foreigners buy it without restrictions. There are fewer native Sarajevans here now than anything else. First, there was a wave of displaced persons (DPs) right after the war. Then there were the people from the Sandžak and Kosovo, and then there were many Muslim refugees coming back from abroad. But they are not going home; they end up in Sarajevo.

"There are many wheeler-dealers here, people illegally buying and selling homes. They are thieves, DPs who had one home in a village. Now everyone in their family came here and each took a Serb house for himself. And they keep their house in the village. A man will leave his wife in the village, or in Olovo, or Kladanj (towns in the Federation), and occupy a house here. The government should register people by their place of residence."

Obstruction from Displaced Muslims

"Displaced Muslims who live in Sarajevo work against the implementation of the Sarajevo Declaration. Their goal is to prevent the return of Serbs. They prevent evictions of illegal occupants of houses. When there is an eviction, a hundred or so women will go out and block it.

"Some of the DPs voted in the municipalities where they came from, and say that they want to return there. But many of them don't want to, because the quality of life is much better for them here, richer, more comfortable. They lived in villages, in old houses, sometimes without running water. Here, they live in houses that belonged to Serbs, and they have water, gas, electricity, buses, and schools. Many people are now living in someone else's home. Also, there is much destruction of houses, preventing direct return, which is the easiest kind.

"We have the least problem with Muslims who are from here. Among us, it's almost as if there was no war. Mostly we avoid talking about it. The biggest problem is with the DPs who are not from here. Such people, who are often from ethnically homogenous communities, are the most hard-line. People from Sarajevo voted more for moderate parties (the Reform party, and now for the Social Democrats) than for the nationalists. I never would have fought a war with someone I grew up with, went to school with, you know, chased girls with..."

[Peter adds: I note that displaced people tend to be selective about the evictions they support. Generally they are in favor of the eviction of someone occupying their homes, but understandably they are opposed to their own untimely evictions. They criticize the displaced population as being the hardest to get along with, but when referring to themselves say that "DPs are always second-class citizens." Displaced people that I have interviewed rarely make the connection between their own suffering as DPs and that of the DPs who are in their houses.]

The International Community Must "Put More Trust in NGOs"

Jovo Janjić of DISS argues that the international community should give more to NGOs and less to government, but do this with great care:

"The international community should put fewer resources into the government. We see that they are obstructionists, but then we reward them for their obstructionism. As for us NGOs, we are getting less assistance than before. If DISS were forced to shut down, it would be catastrophic for our people. The international community needs to be more careful in how it supports NGOs that are working on return and reconstruction. It should have more trust in proven NGOs, which have shown themselves to be effective organizations. Many NGOs are small, have no influence, and only exist for the benefit of the organizers -- to get donations from the international community.

"We want the international community to persist, to put pressure for return to take place in both entities. We need their help, but return must be planned -- city by city, town by town. Return should happen in larger groups. Small returns are not popular. There is less danger, and less pressure, for larger groups. We really need the active participation of the international community."

Prospects for the Future

Božidar Stanojević explained: "Before the war, people lived solidly here. Sarajevo was the capital and the richest part of Bosnia. There was industry here, good schools, and cultural centers. It was an Olympic city. This year will be a turning point for return -- it must be the year of return. If the things that were promised last year do not happen in 1999, then there will be no return. People will go to New Zealand, South Africa, Canada. It is a sad thing to have to leave. It's logical when younger people go, but what about older people? If I go to the United States, what am I going to do there? How much longer would I live?"

"My brother stayed in Ilidža after the war, and then went to Michigan a year ago, where he has established himself better in a year than he would have been able to here in 20 years. Perhaps Serbs who stayed in Sarajevo will leave this year if the international community does not help, and increase pressure for return. It is a bad situation; there is very little assistance or moral support. It's difficult for people who return. They lack social assistance. People can't get a pension here. Why not? No one says why."

As I left, Stanojević walked me to the door. He told me a little more about his brother in Grand Rapids. "If things don't get much better here this year, I am going to consider going to the US. I know they have a priority immigration program for people in mixed marriages."

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Dr. Milorad Muratović, Association of Assistance for Refugees and Displaced Persons in Yugoslavia

Professor Milorad Muratović is president of the Association of Assistance for Refugees and Displaced Persons in Yugoslavia. He was born in Mostar, and lived in Sarajevo for 30 years. He taught sociology at the university, and then retired. When the war started, he stayed in Sarajevo for a year, and then departed for Belgrade, Serbia -- leaving behind 20,000 books in his Sarajevo apartment. He does not know what happened to them. He is now trying to return to Sarajevo.

The Association was founded in June 1993 by 14 self-organized return organizations from different parts of Yugoslavia. Dr. Muratović was elected president. The organization represents Serb and other refugees, from Croatia as well as Bosnia.

Dr. Muratović told me that the basic program of the Association is to promote return of refugees -- not only return, but also repatriation. As he put it, this means resettlement with sustainable conditions for life at home. Like DISS, the Association provides information to refugees about the return process, legal advice, and assistance in filling out forms. It also lobbies: the Association has submitted 10,000 signatures to the Bosnian Federation government calling for the abolition of discriminatory laws. It has also called for the extension of the deadline for filing property claims, and this was done. Other programs include English courses.

I met Dr. Muratović at a conference in Goražde, and arranged to speak with him during his subsequent visit to Sarajevo. He told me of the plight of displaced living in Serbia and about the problems that Serbs have in returning home to.

In Serbia and Montenegro

"There are some 646,000 refugees in Serbia and Montenegro. About half are from Croatia and half (around 325,000) from Bosnia -- of those, some 15,000 are non-Serbs. (Note: This interview was conducted before the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia. During the intervention, the figure decreased by up to 50,000 as some Bosnian Serbs sought refuge in the Republika Srpska.) There are Muslim refugees from Sarajevo in Belgrade.

Approximately one third of these displaced people are in Belgrade. The rest are in various cities around Yugoslavia: Novi Sad, Subotica, Niš, Kragujevac, and parts of Montenegro. Very few are in Kosovo, according to Dr. Muratović, "because of the unstable situation there."

Q. How does the Yugoslav government treat refugees?

Dr. Muratović: Very badly, but not in public. I have been accused of being a foreign agent. I don't dare criticize the government. We call on it to have transparency in its distribution of food and other humanitarian assistance, that is, how much is being given out monthly, and so on.

There is a lot of "humanitarian profiteering" going on. In Yugoslavia the refugees are a source of enrichment for politicians and businessmen. No one has consented to a public discussion of our problems. They don't help us.

Q. How are displaced people faring in Yugoslavia?

Dr. Muratović: Very poorly. Here in Sarajevo, I have seen that a family of displaced persons in Bosnia receives 15 kilos of flour a month, and 1 1/2 liters of oil; In Yugoslavia, you don't get humanitarian aid. When it used to be distributed, you would get enough in one month to live three days. Belgrade, with a population of 2.5 million, has a situation of unregulated black market activity. People manage. After all, Serbia is a food producer. Some people work for below-minimum wages. Others leave the country. There are few families that don't have a member abroad. I have a sister in the United States, and a brother in Holland. They send money and clothes. Other people practice small-time black-market activity.

Q. Such as selling cigarettes on the street?

Dr. Muratović: I did that myself for ten days. I could earn 150 dinars a day (at that time around \$15), and in ten days, earn enough to live, after a fashion, for a month. Around 7 or 8% of the refugees live in collective centers. This is a poor existence, but it is also difficult even living with relatives. The refugees are like tourists, in that they have to pay top price for rent. An apartment costs 200 to 500 DM per month. I pay 300 DM, and that's only because the landlord is letting me stay there below the market price.

The displaced people living in Yugoslavia are people who left because for them war was not a way to solve problems. I stayed in Sarajevo one-and-a-half years during the war. When I left, I weighed 67 kilos. I should weigh 95.

In Sarajevo

"Sarajevo looks worse than when I was here last, in June 1998. The social situation here is poor. Prices are higher, and pensions are arriving later and later [November pensions were received in March]. The question of displaced persons is taking a very long time to be resolved. I am not as optimistic I was. Many of the Serbs who stayed in Sarajevo have lost their jobs. There is obstruction to implementation of the Sarajevo Declaration. On March 5, the international community removed Poplašen from his position as president of the RS, because of his lack of cooperation. They need to do something like that here, also.

"We have the message that we cannot live here in Sarajevo. The Federation government has canceled our pensions, for instance. We will go wherever we can go. But over 70% of the refugees in Serbia want to go home. There was a survey in the Republika Srpska saying that 97% of Serb DPs there want to stay. How can that be? I am a sociologist, and I know how they word those questions to get the answers they want. After the Sarajevo Declaration in early 1998, there were more than 26,000 requests filed for return. That's over 7,900 families. I myself first visited Sarajevo in March of 1996, soon after the signing of Dayton.

"The problem is that other families are occupying our apartments. If the property problems are not solved, that will lead to new conflicts. Most of the refugees from Bosnia come from cities. They had tenancy rights. People won't be able to return without resolving tenancy problems.

"We have encountered horrible obstruction to return here in Sarajevo. I have presented my claim nine times, and I will never give up. I was told that my case had to be deliberated by a Cantonal commission for housing questions, but then the commission was not formed. There was a deadline of April 4th for submitting claims, and in March this commission was still not formed. This is a kind of obstruction. Also, I am able to come here; I have a place to stay. But many people can't come here to file their claims, so it's very difficult.

"Better return has been able to take place in some other parts of Bosnia: In the beginning, to east (Muslim-controlled) Mostar, but now, also to the villages around west Mostar. Oručević (Muslim deputy mayor of Mostar) asked us in the beginning, "What do you propose?" It was a good start. And Selim Bešliagić, mayor of Tuzla, went to Belgrade and Novi Sad, and met with refugees, and made a public call for people to return."

Lara's Lament - Focus on the Croats of Sarajevo

"Lara" is a native of Sarajevo, a Croat who left the city during the war, and has been struggling to return to her apartment ever since. Nothing can describe her situation better than her own words. In the following interview, she talks of the confusion of laws regarding tenancy rights, abandoned apartments, and property claims. The names and some details of this interview have been changed to protect Lara's security.

"When the war started in April 1992, I was living in my apartment and working. That lasted two months, until June. In spite of the war, I went to work. At that time I worked in a large state-owned company, as a clerk. My apartment was a little one with one bedroom, a few kilometers

from the center of town. I had moved into it in 1988. My daughter Danica went to elementary school in the neighborhood. I had tenancy rights to my apartment. That meant that I could do with my apartment whatever I wanted, like everyone else. I had those rights as long as I paid my bills. My rent was very low, because it was a small apartment.

"I worked at the company until June 1st. Then all of us who had young children received notice that we were temporarily laid off, until the end of the war. However, the war wasn't ending. We expected military intervention, but that didn't happen either.

"And my daughter Danica was sick; she had asthma. She was around ten-years-old. One day we were coming up from a bomb shelter, and she started to suffocate. At a certain point she passed out from terror. I called a doctor, who told me to get Danica out of Sarajevo however I could, on account of her mental health, until this was over.

"Danica was in fifth grade. She was interested in everything. She read a lot, and was just that kind of kid who was interested in the world, in life -- very curious. She was very intelligent and was like a little encyclopedia. At the end of July I thought, "Let's get out of Sarajevo for two or three days." I found a young friend to take care of our apartment. This was someone who had been displaced from Grbavica (neighborhood of Sarajevo taken over by the Serbs), and they destroyed his house. I asked him to stay in my apartment until I returned.

"However, when I left, I wasn't able to come back to Sarajevo so soon. There was no military intervention, and the war kept on. Someone kicked the young man out of my apartment, and various people started using it. I know of two or three families who came and went. They took all my belongings.

"When I left Sarajevo, I went to Zagreb, Croatia. There were very many refugees there, both Croatians and Bosnians. Since there were so many, I didn't really have a place to stay. I registered at the social welfare office, but there were just so many people that, in spite of their good intentions, the workers there did not succeed in helping me. I was only in Zagreb a few days. With the little money I had left, I went to Munich, where a cousin of mine lived.

"In Munich I started to work a little. I worked cleaning houses there for a very short time, but then I became very sick, and was immobilized for six months. I was there until January 1996. Then a friend from Sarajevo told me that the Dayton agreement had been signed, and peace had started in Bosnia, so that we could go home.

"When I returned, I went to my apartment, and my neighbors told me that it was locked, and that a crazy person had just moved in. He had supposedly been in a mental asylum before the war. He has a house in another neighborhood. He sent me a message through my neighbors that he would kill me if I tried to get my apartment back. I don't know if he is really crazy or just pretending.

"I went to the police and told them about how this person who had taken over my apartment. They said, 'What should we do, throw him out?' I said, 'My daughter and I are homeless.' They said, 'We can't help you.' Then I went to the municipality offices, and to the ministries -- I knocked on every door, everywhere. To the Ministry for Refugees and Displaced Persons, then

the Cantonal Ministry for Housing, and nothing happened. Everyone filled out forms and wrote letters, but nothing happened. They just lied to me.

"I saw that it wasn't so simple as I had imagined, that I could not just go to my apartment and get resettled. There was a very ugly atmosphere in Sarajevo; wherever I went to some office, they greeted me with some kind of greeting that I didn't understand, that I had never heard before. People all but said, 'Oh, you left, why didn't you defend Sarajevo?' and so on.

"My answer to that is that I was not one of the militant people here such as those who, when the bombs were falling, were putting on makeup, and going out in the streets as if everything were normal. It was incredible to me. From the first day when the war started, I felt horrible -- it was sad, it was senseless. You couldn't tell where it would lead.

"It's beyond my comprehension to kill because one is of another faith, or ethnicity, or skin color. I can't understand that. None of us deserved this, because we're not guilty for the way we were born. This all struck me so horribly -- I cried so much and was so unhappy. Others put on makeup and said, 'So what? I'm going to do it out of spite.' I have no spite in me. I don't know whom I would try to spite. I just wanted to live in peace; I didn't ask for anything else. And that's why I left.

"I saw that my return was not working out smoothly, so I sent my daughter away again, to Croatia to go to school. I couldn't take her with me and keep going around with my bag in hand, from home to home, looking for a place to stay, asking for someone to take me in. I moved from house to house all the way up until 1997, until November.

"The Cantonal Ministry for Housing decided to get rid of me, since I had been bothering them for months. So they sent me to the municipality office, saying, 'Go see if they'll give you a written statement that they will return your apartment to you.' The municipality told me that the apartment had been declared permanently abandoned. And I had been going around for almost a year trying to get my apartment back. How can they declare it abandoned, when I'm here, alive and well?

"People were then saying that they'll return apartments to us if the displaced persons staying in them return where they came from. So then I realized exactly what was happening here -- that they are kicking me around like a ball.

"In 1997 the man in my apartment sent me a message, saying that he had received permanent tenancy rights to my apartment. I went to check this out, and they wouldn't tell me if it was true. I saw that there was nothing I could do about it: if he got permanent tenancy rights, then I can't get it back. What can I do now?

"I went to the OHR (Office of the High Representative) office and asked what I could do; I was almost on the street. They sent me to the UNHCR, and the UNHCR sent me to an outer neighborhood of Sarajevo, to stay in a displaced persons' shelter there, in one room. Up until then I was going from one friend's apartment to another. If I had known that I was going to live like that for so long, I would have gone crazy. But the days go by, and you think you're doing

something, something smart. You don't know how much time is going by.

"Finally they gave me that room, but it was so damp. The room was so damp that you couldn't close the windows. I forced myself to take that room, but I was all alone. Maybe it would have been better to be a refugee somewhere than to get sick here. My daughter stayed in Croatia, and she comes to visit me on vacations. I have been there over a year now, although they said I could only stay there six months.

"Nothing has happened to this point with my apartment, but something is happening in the DP shelter. Now the Ministry for Refugees and Displaced Persons has decided that because I am alone, they have to put someone else in there with me that I don't know, between those four walls, those sixteen square meters, of which one corner is set aside for a bathroom.

"I told them, 'I'm not alone, my daughter comes to stay with me on vacations.' 'No,' they said, 'She's not with you all the time, so that doesn't make any difference.' And I said, 'How is someone I don't know going to come live there right beside me?' They say, 'What's it to us? You can kill each other, if you want.' They're putting people into our rooms to get rid of us. As if we wanted to be there in the first place!

At the ministry they said, 'You've been in the shelter too long. We can't kick you out, but we can make you want to leave.' I asked, 'How can you do that?' They said, "We can do it." I asked, "Where am I supposed to go, onto the street?" They said 'On the street. What's it to us? Go wherever you want.'

"We are all rebelling. Let them find another solution. They are saying that it's for 'rationalization of the living space.' That's okay, I agree with rationalization of the living space. So let me live in my apartment, after these three and a half years, and let this gentleman who has taken over my apartment either go back to his house, or else let him come to the collective center-why is he better than me? Let's trade for a little while! Let him see how it is.

"They took everything away from us; I don't have the right to social assistance, no kind of compensation, I have no right to my apartment, my belongings -- I really have nothing. The people at the ministry told me, 'We can't do anything more for you. We've done everything we can do.' I said, 'Why don't you return us to our apartments?' They said, "You'll never ever get your apartments back."

"I heard that almost all the people employed at the ministry are living in other people's apartments. Why aren't they in their own apartments? And of course, then I'm somehow guilty; why am I and my daughter guilty? Is it because we left? That means we should have stayed here and died. Why?

"I went to the UNHCR and asked, 'Can you send me to some other country? So many people have left, so help me to leave, too. You can see that they're not returning my apartment to me.'

"They said, 'Don't pay attention to what they say, you'll get your apartment back.' But they won't return our apartments. Do you know why? Because exactly the people who are passing those

laws are people who are in others' apartments. That is the biggest problem. They are speaking in public about how they are in favor of refugee return -- that's the most dishonest, most hypocritical thing I can think of. I would be ashamed to work that way. And they don't want to leave those apartments that aren't theirs. Probably because those apartments are better than the ones they used to have. Bigger, or better furnished.

"The refugees who have come back to Sarajevo, those who were driven out, have not gotten back permanent rights to their apartments. But Sarajevans who stayed here were going around just moving into others' apartments in order to increase their space. Not just during the war, but also in 1996. That happened to me; that man moved into my apartment just before I came back to Sarajevo! And I'm not allowed the right to my apartment -- they've taken that away. Now I see in the newspaper, "No one will be put onto the streets." But we are on the streets, and the people who took our apartments receive permanent tenancy rights.

"The international community has just overturned the laws about permanent resolution of tenancy rights. That means that the man in my apartment no longer has permanent tenancy rights, so he should be leaving. Then I read in the newspaper that no one is to be put out onto the street. But wait -- he wasn't on the street in 1992, he didn't fall into my apartment from a branch on a tree. Where did he come from? Let it be known, where were people located in 1992? Why don't we take a look at that?

"I don't know if things would be different if I were a Muslim, because in fact I don't want to think about that. I'll repeat that what I am is not something I chose. I'm not ashamed of what I am. I just don't want to think about things in that way, because I never did, and no politics will succeed in making me think that way. Everyone says that this is all happening to me because of my ethnicity. I don't know. I just want to distinguish people by whether they are good or bad, that's all. I never asked a friend what religion she was. That's not important.

"Now people are saying that around 90% of the population is Muslim. I don't know. I'm just looking at what's happening to me personally. No one is telling me officially that this is happening to me personally because I'm a Croat, a Serb, or whatever. But if it's mostly a Muslim city now, and Croats and Serbs can't return, then something's happening. Then I can only think that people are right.

"Those people who are lying to us need to be removed from office, first of all. Let's see where they were in 1992, and let them return to those addresses. Why are Sarajevans, not just displaced persons, in other people's apartments? When people leave, starting with all these people in power, only then will I start hoping that something will happen, that I'll be able to return to my apartment."

From Peter's Diary: A Visit to Muslims in Ilidža

I took the streetcar out to the suburbs, to Ilidža, to visit Haris and his wife, daughter, and mother. During the war this family, displaced from Herzegovina, came through the now-famous tunnel under the airport on the outskirts of Sarajevo and entered the city at a time when most people would have liked to leave. They told me that they were among the first people to use the tunnel.

They lived through the rest of the war in a basement in Koševo neighborhood, near where the hospital is. They told me how they spent hours going to find water. Sugar cost 60 DM a kilo, meat more than that. There was a wood stove for heating and cooking that had to serve 75 people. They went to sleep hungry many nights.

Haris joined the Bosnian army and fought in various places. He was not demobilized until August 1996, almost a year after the peace. I asked him if he was afraid, and he said no, that he got used to it. People expected that one half of the fighters would die. I said that I was afraid of the traffic around Sarajevo, never mind fighting with guns.

The family lives in a house in Ilidža with three other displaced families. They have a kitchen and three other rooms. Most of Ilidža is like a village -- houses with fields in between, where people now grow vegetables in order to survive. After the Serbs left in early 1996, many Muslim refugees were then moved from camps and wrecked buildings in Sarajevo into houses in Ilidža, recently inhabited by Serbs. Haris's family has been there a year.

Haris is a dark-haired and thin version of his brother Enis, who is my friend in the United States. Like Enis, he is quiet, serious, and smart. Haris told me a number of things that rather shocked me. He said he was waiting for NATO to leave, so that the Bosnians could take back the rest of Bosnia, "to the Drina (the eastern border with Serbia), or all the way to Belgrade." He said they were waiting to see the backs of the Americans. If all the conditions of the Dayton accord were not fulfilled (particularly a complete return of refugees to their homes), there would have to be more war. Haris said he was not afraid of this, now that they have weapons. He said that 90% of the people who fought felt this way.

Haris also said that people who left the country should have stayed to defend Bosnia. If all had left, there wouldn't be any Bosnia, and the Bosnians would end up like Palestinians -- pushed to Austria, then Iraq, then America... I asked him why he supposed some people stayed and some left. He said it was a matter of cowardice. I asked him if there were Croats and Serbs among the people who defended Bosnia, and he said yes, there were many such people who considered a multi-cultural Bosnia their homeland.

No one in the family works now. They have small pensions -- Bahrija, Haris's mother, gets 12 DM a month. There is not much help for veterans. The Croats in Ilidža get help from the church. Haris says that the people who have nice cars in Sarajevo are people who went away and earned some money. He obviously resents the people who left, and this slants his view. There is a lot of privilege in Sarajevo. Anyone who can get a job with a foreign agency does well, but Haris focuses on those who left. Haris says there is no opportunity, no future for the refugees and veterans. There is a future for the children, he says. "If they take back the rest of Bosnia, that future will come earlier."

Bahrija must be 70-years-old. She is alert and lively, wears dimija (harem pants) and a scarf. She gets up at 6:00 every morning and makes bread. She takes her worry beads and goes to pray before dinner. When the topic of conversation turns sad, she says, "Poor people, poor people. All broken up, all spread out everywhere."

Other times she says, "Well, we're alive, that's what's important."