



On the Record: Returning Refugees to Bosnia

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From the AP Editorial Desk

Introduction

Emsuda Mujagić is the leader of a nongovernmental organization (NGO), Srcem do Mira (Through Heart to Peace), which is based in Sanski Most. This organization works for reconciliation among the Serbs, Croats, and Muslims of northwestern Bosnia. It also runs programs to support Muslims in the Sanski Most area who have been displaced from nearby Prijedor and Kozarac.

One of its most important goals is the return of displaced persons to Kozarac, Emsuda's home town. About 5,000 houses were destroyed in Kozarac, and Srcem do Mira has been pressing to return since the end of the war. In 1996 a convoy of members returned to Kozarac for an assessment visit, but they were met by a hostile crowd of people who threw stones. In 1997 they returned with SFOR (the NATO Stabilization Force) accompaniment.

The security problem is heightened by the fact that nearby Prijedor has been a notorious center of obstruction. It was the location of some of the worst concentration camps in the Republika Srpska (RS). The first war crimes suspects were arrested there in 1997; however, after the split in the SDS (Serb Democratic Party -- hard-line Serb nationalist party) in 1997, and the subsequent election of Milorad Dodik as RS prime minister, inter-entity travel became significantly easier in this northern half of the RS.

In this issue, Emsuda tells Peter how she managed as a refugee in Croatia with her husband and two children, Adis and Alisa; how she formed Srcem do Mira; how she went back to Bosnia to live in the town of Sanski Most -- nearer home in Kozarac, but still on the other side of Bosnia's ethnic divide.

Exile in Croatia, Return to Bosnia

From the diaries:

To say that Emsuda has a deep-seated optimism would be an understatement. She seems to recognize no obstacles in achieving her goals. The freedom of movement proclaimed by the Dayton agreement is often only an illusion, as people who try to exercise that right are met by violence. But Emsuda brushes off any suggestion of resistance, calling upon her right to live in her own home as paramount. In addition, she works tirelessly for reconciliation between ethnicities. Today, there is more reconstruction activity in Kozarac than in any other part of Bosnia. I am convinced that this is due in large part to the vision and energy of Emsuda Mujagić.

Emsuda Mujagić was a busy person before the war. She worked in a paper-producing company, raised a family, and designed and sold clothing on the side. In addition to this, she found time to organize in her community against increasing militarism.

Her energy and organizing skills have served her and her people well both during and after the war. After living in Croatia, she moved to the town of Sanski Most in northwest Bosnia.

In 1995 Sanski Most was retaken by the Bosnian government army, and today it has a population of about 75,000, including around 50,000 displaced persons. Two thirds of the town are displaced! Most of the Serbs left, but some stayed. Emsuda said that some were then killed by returning Muslims, but that others stayed and more are returning now. There is one Serb on the Sanski Most city council.

There is terrible pressure for housing. By the end of the war, 45% of the city's housing had been wrecked. Much of that has now been repaired. Emsuda and Osman have had to move once, and it looks like they'll have to move a second time because the owner of the house they're in, who lives in the U.S., wants to sell it. (May 1998)

In her own words Emsuda describes life in exile:

"When I arrived in Zagreb I went to the displaced persons shelter and found that there were very many traumatized women there. These were people who had lost their husbands and sons. Some of them had been highly accomplished citizens in Kozarac and other parts of Bosnia, but they were now in a horrible psychological state. When I saw this, it was clear to me what my job was. I needed to work to teach children to help their elders and to help women.

"People from the Croatian organization "Bedem Ljubavi" suggested that I form an organization of Bosnian women. I called Šerifa (pronounced "Sherifa") Halilović, a refugee woman from Sarajevo, and we went to the refugee shelter to find educated women to participate. The association of displaced citizens of Kozarac had an office, and they offered us use of their space.

"We formed the organization Women of Bosnia. Our social programs included: counseling for traumatized or raped women, people who had lost part of their family, and sick people; assistance for old people; and occupational therapy. We began to be known because of these programs, because they earned money for people that they could use for school tuition for their

children or for medicines. We began to offer training in needlework and hairdressing. We had three shelters for refugee women. There were women who had been sleeping in parks. After we opened the shelters, 75 women lived in them.

"We started doing relief work in Zagreb with 50 refugee women who had been professionals in Bosnia. After a few months we organized a meeting to plan for a conference, and invited some women from England to come meet with us. Our first meeting was in Samobor, Croatia, in September of 1993. Some of these women then traveled to different parts of the world to spread the message of our organization and to invite others to our first conference.

"The first Srcem do Mira conference was held on January 15, 1994. There were more than 400 women, from 24 countries. I proposed holding a conference in Sarajevo on May 23-27 1994, still during the war. We tried to get assistance from various governments and the U.N. to get to Sarajevo, which was all but impossible at the time.

"We found buses. There were 150 women from 15 countries, who wanted to go with us from Zagreb to Sarajevo. Three buses went from Zagreb to the border with Bosnia. The HVO (Bosnian Croat militia) soldiers at the border made great difficulties for us to go into Bosnia, but we persisted.

"There was one old woman in the group. She was sick, and wanted to see her three sons in Sarajevo one last time. She had been snuck onto the bus without my knowledge. She couldn't walk, and we were going to have to walk over Igman, the only free passage to Sarajevo. So we ended up carrying her the whole way.

"Then the drivers of the buses then said they were afraid to go to Sarajevo. So I called a journalist in Zagreb and asked her to help. She announced on an open radio program that we had buses, but needed drivers. Several volunteer drivers called up. Then the bus company took away our buses when we got to west Mostar.

"A friend of ours in Sarajevo persuaded a Sarajevo bus company to send us buses. We headed on. People were still trying to deter us from going, but we went because we knew that we couldn't let the first obstacle stop us. We arrived at Mt. Igman, the only way into Sarajevo, and came down the mountain in the dark, with no lights. In this way we succeeded in holding our first conference in Bosnia. We planted a peace tree at a nursery school -- this was a tree we had brought from Croatia. And the old woman we carried in got to see her sons, who were overjoyed. It was a very touching thing. She died 18 days later.

The First Returns Are Met with Stones

"We continued our work, with meetings in Germany, France, Italy, and England. We spread information about our project and understanding about making peace. There were two more conferences, in May of 1995 and 1996. In 1995 we took buses to Sarajevo again. Someone shot at our bus on that trip. The bullet hit a branch first and glass was shattered, but no one was hurt. They were bombing Sarajevo at that time. We went through the tunnel into the city, in five separate groups.

"Meanwhile, I was living in Zagreb with Osman and my son. I was working as the main coordinator of Women of Bosnia and our new organization, Srcem do Mira. My daughter left to go to school in America. I didn't see her for three years. In 1994 Adis went to America also, to go to high school.

"In 1996, after the war ended, we planned to go to Sarajevo via Banja Luka and Kozarac for another conference. We entered into the Republika Srpska with a bus and two vans; however, we were not able to get to Kozarac. In Prijedor the Serbian government organized a group of people to throw stones at us. Women and children were throwing stones. So instead we drove on through Mrkonjić Grad, also in the RS, and down to Sarajevo.

"I moved to Sanski Most in 1996 because the largest number of people from Prijedor and Kozarac were here, and these were people who had experienced some of the greatest evil during the war. I also wanted to be closer to our goal, of returning to Kozarac. Now I am satisfied that I was not wrong. By persisting, we have made a big contribution to freedom of movement in this area.

"When we came to Sanski Most there were no office spaces available, we had no phone, fax, or car. Nor was there electricity or water much of the time. The bus to Sarajevo only ran twice a week. There weren't enough teachers, so Osman got a job teaching in the elementary school. At first, all we had was one foam mat, one pillow, and one blanket.

"I thought of going to Zagreb, Sarajevo, or Bihać, but I decided to stay. I wanted to overcome problems. The director of Osman's school gave us his office and a phone. He said, "I know that your presence will help this city." We were in his office from January to May of 1997, when we took over a larger room there. We received some equipment, financed by a donation from Hillary Clinton. From the same donation we were able to finance a program for traumatized women.

"Srcem do Mira started various programs, including workshops in non-violent conflict resolution, and community democratization. We received assistance from USAID and Caritas, which still helps us now, for the seventh year in a row. In 1997 the Norwegian People's Aid helped us start a sewing cooperative, as well as hairdressing classes. We will continue these programs when we move back to Kozarac.

The International Community's Reservations

"In 1997 we prepared for a conference in Sanski Most, and planned to make a peace pilgrimage to Prijedor, Kozarac, Banja Luka, Mrkonjić Grad, Ključ, Jajce, ending up in Sanski Most. We succeeded -- there were 50 foreigners, from around 10 countries. When we went to Kozarac, the SFOR found out about our plans and followed us.

"I must say that in 1997 we had great resistance from SFOR, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the International Police Task Force (IPTF). They wanted to prevent our trip to Kozarac, because they thought the time was not ripe. They were angry that we were so persistent.

"Last year (1998) they also had many reservations. They were not happy about what we were doing, but they were not as opposed as before. We told the Prijedor municipal government that we were going to hold our conference in Kozarac. We wanted to hold it in Prijedor, but we knew they would resist that. So we told them Kozarac, and they negotiated with us. We were allowed to hold part of the conference in Prijedor, as we had wanted.

"Last year's conference was important because we had Serbs, Croats, and Muslims all together in the same hall, both in Prijedor and in Sanski Most -- in both entities. I think that this year's conference will be even more significant. It will be a step towards more continuous work. This year it is truly time to meet in Kozarac, to come to the source of the idea of Srcem do Mira.

"Now, we are working to prepare people psychologically for return. We hold trauma counseling sessions, and conflict resolution seminars twice monthly for 50 or so women. The purpose of these sessions is to confront reality. When people return home, there are hard questions. How will I live? I think this will be the hardest confrontation with reality. The truth is very difficult.

"There is still a large element of this experience that does not feel real. People in a sense think they are still dreaming, but then when they finally return to Kozarac, they will really understand what happened to them, that their sons and husbands are not alive, that they will not reappear.

"We are preparing for economic projects to facilitate our return to Kozarac. We hope to continue in Kozarac what we have done here. One program we are preparing is a mobile kitchen to help people eat in Kozarac. There are workmen who are restoring damaged homes, and they will buy food from us. Some of our people will be able to earn some money this way.

"Also, the kitchens will help the women who are working all day cleaning rubble from their houses; maybe they don't even have a kitchen. These are women who still live in Sanski Most or Lušci Palanka, and they come back to Kozarac by day to clean their homes and prepare their gardens.

"In Lušci Palanka, a small town near Sanski Most where many displaced persons live, we are supporting a program to produce milk and meat. There are ten war-disabled, displaced persons working on the project, and there will be more in the summer. There are also work projects to help this reconstruction. Last year there were 27 students who came from the U.S. to work; this year there will be more.

"We have many friends who sincerely want to help. There are many different ways. No one has the right to say that you can't work for peace and reconciliation in a certain way. If someone calls on the power of prayer, let them do so. For others, the way is by writing, or film, or influencing politicians; let them do it all."

From the diaries:

May 1998. With my friend Vivien I visited the office of Srcem do Mira, in the elementary school where Osman is a teacher. The group had a classroom and a small storage room/office next door. However, they have had to evacuate the classroom because the town's population of

schoolchildren has expanded dramatically, and they need the space.

Outside the school we saw a cornfield and a couple of cows. Emsuda pointed out to us a small storage room near the classroom. She said that the concentration camp she and her family were in, Trnopolje, was a school built on the same design as this one. For a time Emsuda and 17 of her family members were crammed into one room like the storage room, about 8' x 20'. So being at this school has some bad associations for her.

We looked at literature and pictures in the office. Vivien gave Emsuda a donation she had collected from friends in Seattle. Emsuda explained to us that the organization works with some 250 displaced women who have been through all kinds of the worst traumas of war. There are 15 volunteers. They provide counseling, and have organized workshops where women can create clothes that are then sold.

The organization has donated a mini-van and free lunches to the school. The van is used in a program to pick up disabled students. We went to look at a house that the organization is going to move into. The house is a wreck. It is right across the street from the new mosque. It was damaged when the old mosque was demolished by the Serbs in 1992, soon after they occupied the town. It will be fixed up and then loaned to Srcem do Mira for three years.