



On the Record: Returning Refugees to Bosnia

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From the AP Editorial Desk

On May 24 last year, Peter attended the annual meeting of Srcem Do Mira, held to promote contact and reconciliation between displaced Bosnians on both sides of the Inter-Entity Boundary Line (IEBL). There were two sessions, one in Sanski Most, the other in Kozarac. It was Srcem Do Mira's fifth annual meeting, and also one of the least troubled. But even this session showed that a wide gulf still separates these former neighbors. Both sides have suffered terribly and both want to return. But both are also trapped by their memories of five terrible years, as this issue shows only too well.

Tiptoeing to Reconciliation

In the Hotel conference room in Sanski Most there was a sign on the wall carrying a picture of Alija Izetbegovic, the Bosnian president. A quote read, "I would call the light darkness, if it weren't for you, Alija."

In 1996, after the end of the war, Srcem do Mira tried to organize a visit to Kozarac. They drove in a caravan towards the town, but the caravan was stoned on the way, and had to turn back. In 1997, a similar group was accompanied by a large SFOR (the NATO Stabilization Force) contingent. When they got to Kozarac, they were met by a crowd of hostile people, so they had to leave again.

Šerifa, from Srcem do Mira, explained that the Republika Srpska (RS) authorities had a new approach this year (1998) along the lines of the Dodik policies. Their approach was to appear cooperative in order to receive money from the international community. This was why they were allowing the conference to take place in Prijedor. Šerifa advised us to try to share a feeling of love and not anger with the people that we would meet there.

Emsuda's idea for the future, after return took place, was to have a multi-ethnic "house of peace" in Kozarac. Rozalija, who was expelled from Kozarac, but whose family survived, and who now

lives in Sarajevo, said, "there are possibilities to love and to hate. We are looking for people to expand the possibility of love."

We were told that the conference the next day was to be entitled, "Building Peace and Return." Emsuda told us that the refugees in the RS were kept in ignorance so that the Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) could continue to be blamed for their problems. But she has found that they are normal people, and that they also want to return to their homes.

There have been previous meetings between the women of the two refugee communities. The refugees of the RS are on an unequal footing, because they are actively discouraged from promoting return by the RS authorities. They are rarely able to speak publicly about their wish to return, and are subject to harassment when they do.

However, there has been an increased SFOR presence in some places since last winter, making it easier for refugees to visit their homes without getting shot. And part of the solution is to establish a multi-ethnic police force, as has been done in Brčko. Then returnees can feel safer.

The first session of the conference was to take place in Prijedor. Before leaving, Emsuda and I talked a little. Emsuda told us that she was not happy about the criminals being in charge in the RS, but that she couldn't change that.

"We should try to bring love and understanding, and change things in a different way. We should approach the problem as women. We should establish relationships with some rational people on the other side, until they can look at the situation with a different understanding, because we cannot only change things from this side."

Many "NGOs" in the RS are controlled by the government, which wants to control the topics discussed at the conference. We were not to talk about the causes of the war, but about "building peace and return." They also didn't want us to spend too much time with the refugees.

We drove through the Krajina countryside in a van and a couple of cars to Prijedor. Along the way, someone pointed out the spot where they had been stoned previously. This time there was no incident. We arrived at the Hotel Prijedor, a tall tower, probably the fanciest hotel in town. Like every other fancy hotel I have seen in ex-Yugoslavia, it was nicely designed and poorly built, with water stains here and there, and little things falling apart.

Bringing down Bosnia's Borders

The meeting began with a welcoming speech by the mayor of Prijedor in his green suit and matching tie. He is a member of the SDS (Serb Democratic Party -- Karadžić's former party). He told us that he hoped the Federation and the RS could contribute to the implementation of the Dayton agreement, especially to Article 7, referring to refugee return.

He couldn't have said a more appropriate thing. The director of the Forum of Prijedor NGOs told us that their organization is composed of 20 groups, including Merhamet, which is a Muslim organization like the Red Cross. The various organizations organize educational courses on

health and human rights issues, teen centers, and women's centers. There are 110,000 people in the Prijedor municipality, about one third of those being refugees. Fewer than 3% of women are currently employed.

A doctor from Banja Luka who is now living as a displaced person in Sanski Most praised people for meeting together like this in such a dignified way. She said that although everyone doesn't feel good, she was proud of them for trying to act naturally. She said that the same health problems existed among women in the Federation as in the RS, with a high level of stress probably leading to an increase in incidence of cancer. Her conclusion was that people should help each other and show friendship.

Šerifa spoke. She told about being stuck in Zagreb during the war, and starting to work there with other women refugees. She said that it was the hardest period of her life, but in a way, the best. People of different ethnicities were working together on things they had in common. She was sad that we were making borders in Bosnia while Europe was getting rid of them, but that we had to make a something good from a bad thing.

She also said that we shouldn't forget the past; not for purposes of revenge, but to learn. She quoted a woman who had been raped, who said, "They took everything from me, but I didn't give them anything."

Another woman from Kozarac spoke. She said, "Exactly six years ago we were expelled. That is my town, where I grew up. This conference is a step towards return. I feel like a stranger here in Prijedor" (at this point people clapped).

"So I want to fight for the basic right to live on our own land. I hope this will help. The NGOs on either side should know more about each other. Also, there will be no peace in our hearts as long as one displaced person who wants to return is not allowed to go home. And we must know where the bones of our beloved are so that we can rebury them."

We had dinner in a big hall. I was sitting with some Serbs who live and work in Prijedor. The conversation was friendly. A pair of young men were playing a guitar and synthesizer and singing pop and folk tunes. Lynda noted that they started out with "Yesterday," by the Beatles. A comment book went around. One Serb man had written in it, "We need not only a return, but a return to normal."

Since I was not sitting with any Muslims I didn't realize this until later, but we had been served both chicken and pork -- and Muslims do not eat pork. After dinner, people got up and danced to the live music. A lot of "kolos" (line dances). Many Serbs were dancing, and some Muslims. Emsuda danced all evening. There was the joy of dancing, but it was mixed with a determination to dance with the Serbs and to live, for an evening, like it was before the war. There were many who could not do it, but it was a step. Emsuda led the way.

"Shoot Me, My Father Is a Serb!"

We returned to Sanski Most to continue the conference program, with some of the Serbs. An

evening of kids' performances had been prepared. There was a folkdance in Muslim costume, a teen fashion show, and some poetry.

Emsuda then stopped the presentations because one or two of the kids were reading poetry that could be offensive to the Serbs. There was reference to "chetniks" and to the mistreatment of Muslim refugees. Some people got angry but Šerifa got up and apologized, and she and Emsuda talked to some of the Serbs for a long time after that.

What this all showed me is that there is good will to cooperate but there will be mistakes. It's not that the kids didn't speak the truth, but that whoever arranged the show was not thinking diplomatically.

With that incident, and the pork the night before, I could see that there will be two steps forward and sometimes one step back. The participants have probably seen symbols on both sides that have developed during separation.

On the Serb side there was the RS flag in Prijedor, the Chetnik cross, the letters "S D S" (Karadzic's party) spray-painted on house walls in Kozarac. On the other side, in the Federation, we saw the green flag in Sanski Most, the sign about Alija, and a book at the reception desk by the regional Bosniak commander.

None of these things could have been welcome to the respective sides. But I think -- and hope -- that for the most part they were willing to overlook them.

We met at the hotel in Sanski Most in the afternoon for the final session of the conference, and drew up a concluding statement, including the following suggestions and comments, which I noted down:

Implement Annex 7 of the Dayton agreement. Hold more, similar conferences. Make it possible for everyone to go home. It is hardest to be a displaced person in one's own home. Promote more help from the intergovernmental organizations, but sincere help. Promote more personal contact between different refugee communities. Hold the next conference in Kozarac (Last year they didn't think they'd be able to hold it in Prijedor.) Put pressure on the Croatian government to allow return of Serbs to Krajina. (The Croatians are trying to make it impossible for Serbs to return, even by buying the Serbs' houses.)

Raza, a Muslim refugee, spoke. She told about one survey that was taken in Prijedor among refugees, 93% of whom stated that they didn't want to return. She said this was because they were "rural, illiterate, don't think with their own minds, just think about eating and smoking, are satisfied with hating, and have become used to not working."

While there is probably some truth to all this, such a broad stereotypical description also shows the huge cultural gap between the city and country here. City people very much look down on the peasants.

Raza spoke about what had happened the previous night, when some of the Serbs were angry

about the children's poems. She spoke with one of the men and described what it was like in Sarajevo during the siege.

Raza's husband was a Serb. She and her daughter were walking near the crowded Markale market early in 1994 when a bomb fell there, killing about 45 people and wounding a lot more. She wanted to help them, but her daughter was in shock. She was running down the street in plain view of the snipers. She opened up her jacket and yelled, "Shoot me! Shoot me here! My father is a Serb!!" When Raza told the Serb this story, he started crying.