



On the Record: Returning Refugees to Bosnia

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Conference in Kozarac: a Landmark in the Return Process

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From the AP Editorial Desk

Last week a team from The Advocacy Project visited the town of Kozarac in the Bosnian Serb Republic. Their purpose was to work with Peter Lippman during the conference of Srcem do Mira, the women's initiative for refugee return.

This was the sixth annual meeting of Srcem do Mira, and Peter's pre-conference dispatches had led us to expect that it would be a singular event. Last year, Muslims, Croats and Serbs met on both sides of the inter-entity boundary line (IEBL) that divides Bosnia. It was a brave first step. There was every hope that this year's meeting would produce some measurable progress.

It was not to be. First and most serious, none of this year's participants were from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the Serb Republic. In part, this reflected Serb anger at NATO's (North Atlantic Treaty Organization's) bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). But the Serbs also felt they had been excluded from preparations for the meeting. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was reluctant to provide the key assistance that it had given last year, after having had to repair what it saw as damage from the 1998 conference. UNHCR (the UN refugee agency) did not even put in an appearance.

It was left to Srcem do Mira's core members, a few visiting activists from around the Federation, and faithful foreign friends, to get as much as they could out of the experience. All in all, this was not what people had expected.

What is the significance of this for the broad theme addressed in Peter's dispatches, namely refugee returns in Bosnia? It shows, only too clearly, that repatriation is two steps forward and one step back -- and sometimes even the reverse. It is a process of frustration as well as achievement.

But repatriation is much larger than organizations like Srcem do Mira. Indeed, in several other respects there is important progress to report in the last year. There are more houses under reconstruction in Kozarac. More refugees have returned. There is a greater sense of security.

But not, perhaps, of reconciliation. As the following four issues make clear, returning Muslims are a mistrusted minority in their former homes and face hostility from some of the Serbs. But their Serb neighbors, too, are feeling beleaguered and adrift. The meeting in Kozarac took place near a collective center for Serb refugees, who fled from Croatia and parts of Bosnia. They face numerous obstacles to return. They are suffering for the arrogance and cruelty of their own leaders. But that does not make their plight as people any less distressing.

It is important to bear this larger context in mind when working with inspiring individuals like Emsuda Mujagić and her organization Srcem do Mira. It may also be time to ask whether Srcem do Mira's model of interethnic cooperation has served its purpose.

In 1997 and 1998 its gatherings helped to breach the ethnic divide in northwest Bosnia, and drive a wedge into Serb resistance. It helped to force open repatriation. But the challenge of peace building in Bosnia today is subtler. It is both getting Emsuda's house repaired -- and providing Emsuda and her Serb neighbors with some peace of mind after all that they have endured. High profile inter-ethnic meetings, with ethnic nametags, may not be the only answer. In some ways, they may even reinforce the ethnic divide.

Our project also learned some important lessons last week. Wherever possible, we work directly with campaigners and advocates. Two of our members -- Teresa Crawford and Laura McGrew -- went to Cambodia earlier this year to report on violence against women in Southeast Asia. But this was the first time we have gone to the heart of a campaign in this way. It is much more difficult that we imagined.

Our team had hoped to issue daily dispatches on their meeting. It proved impossible to contact Kozarac by phone, let alone email. This, of course, is a measure of the isolation of the Serb Republic -- even in the relatively progressive northwest. It also reflected the unstructured nature of the meeting. Whatever else it was, it was clearly not a "news event."

As a result, our coverage is not as we intended. Instead of covering an event, our team found itself to be part of a process -- and, of course, of its people. These next four issues of On the Record concentrate on individual stories, in keeping with the tenor of Peter's dispatches. As part of this, you, our readers, will also read what it was like for Laura, Manisha Thomas and Teresa to arrive in a place that their friend and colleague had portrayed so vividly. (Iain Guest)

From Peter's diary -- "Permission is refused"

Sanski Most, Saturday, May 22. The conference begins on Sunday. Emsuda is getting ready with an orientation for the foreigners, Monday for everyone else. Teresa and Manisha will come down from Geneva, and Laura from Washington D.C., to work with me on reporting the event. It should be an interesting collaboration.

Things are falling apart before they start, which is probably appropriate. Emsuda went to Kozarac today and was told that we cannot use an office building there which has a conference hall. The building is being repaired from war damage and the NGO responsible for construction told Emsuda that it will only be ready on the last day of the conference. So she is scrambling to get some tents set up. We will do that tomorrow.

Meanwhile, I translated Emsuda's opening speech for her. It is completely positive -- and therefore contains no history. It calls for people to "use the warmth in their hearts to build bridges of peace and trust."

Unfortunately it looks like there will be almost no Serbs because of the reaction to the NATO intervention. The NGOs in the Republika Srpska (RS) notified Emsuda that they were not going to participate because they had not been given enough notice, even though they were told about it a month ago. Emsuda noted that they were able to make demonstrations against the NATO bombing on a half-day's notice.

Kozarac is in the Prijedor municipality. Emsuda has received written permission from the municipality police force to hold the conference. She presented this to me as a guarantee of security, but I wouldn't necessarily interpret it that way.

Today she received a fax from the municipal government in Cyrillic. On top, it carried a "kokarda" -- a Serbian nationalist symbol that to the Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) represents genocide. The letter said that they had considered "with much respect" Emsuda's request to hold the conference in Kozarac, but that it was "too ambitious," because there is "not enough meeting space in Kozarac." This is true, but interestingly, this fax and the information from the NGO handling the reconstruction of the meeting space came within an hour of each other.

The letter went on to say that there were insufficient "economic and political conditions to support the program in Kozarac," and that the "possible negative effects from the present NATO aggression on Yugoslavia" should also not be ignored. Therefore, "in the interest of respecting one of the basic tenets of Dayton," it proposed to hold the conference at the hotel in Prijedor. This would cost a lot more money than Srcem do Mira has. Emsuda decided to ignore the letter.

More on letterheads: the Srcem do Mira letterhead shows an outline of the map of Bosnia that only shows the outer borders but does not show the internal boundary between the two Bosnian entities. This apparently bothered the Prijedor municipal government, because the last sentence of the letter read: "Noting that in the map which forms the logo of your organization, the Dayton-guaranteed entity borders were erased, we hope that was a mistake. Sincerely yours,"

From Peter's diary -- "You are a strange woman"

Kozarac, Saturday, May 22. I went out to Kozarac with Emsuda today. The women are cleaning the area where a tent will be set up for us to hold the conference.

For the first time I saw what is, or used to be, lovely about Kozarac, between all the wrecked

houses and buildings. The long main street is still tree-lined. In all the destruction, they did not bother to cut down the trees. And the place where the tent is supposed to be set up is a pleasant little stepped plaza between a former library and a former "kafana" (coffee house/bar).

We walked by the former elementary school where Osman (Emsuda's husband) used to teach. Now it is a collective center, housing several dozen displaced Serbs from Croatia and central Bosnia.

There was garbage on the sidewalks, as in other parts of the little town. Emsuda said, "We were going to clean up this part too, but we decided not to because they would just throw out more garbage to provoke us."

I asked who "they" were. She replied Mladen Tadić, whose brother Dušan was the first war criminal to have been convicted at The Hague.

Emsuda told me that there are a few hundred Serbs in the town, and maybe 2,000 in the entire area, including all the surrounding villages. All but a few hundred are displaced persons. But not all are hard-line like Tadić. One displaced Serb woman was helping the Muslim women clean up yesterday in preparation for the conference. She lives in the collective center. She told Emsuda that while she was working, a car carrying some of her Serb friends pulled up and asked what she was doing, and said, "You'll have trouble for doing this." The Serb woman went to the police.

We looked at some of the homes that will accommodate the 100-odd people attending the conference. Most of those who have returned to the town are older people whose houses have been partially rebuilt. It's strange to walk into a house with only two furnished rooms, while the rest may not even have floors or windows. I wonder when these retirees who are getting 100 or so Deutschmarks a month will have the means to fix the rest of their houses.

We visited Sadija, Emsuda's elder sister, who has already returned to Kozarac. Her restored brick house is not mortared on the outside, and looks like it will stay that way. The kitchen is a brand new room with windows, but most of the rest of the house has not been repaired. Some of the adjoining rooms do not even have floors. Sadija returned last December.

We stood in the doorway and Sadija showed me the marks of dampness on the walls. The house was wired but the electricity is not hooked up. Sadija runs a cable to her kitchen from somewhere outside. Inside the kitchen there is simple furniture, a couple of cheap wooden beds made from kits -- the kind of furniture that should be replaced as soon as possible, but that could be forever. These people are living like pioneers in their ancestral homes.

Sadija is alone. She lost both her husband and son during the war, and doesn't know where they ended up. Just a few days ago another mass grave was exhumed nearby, a deep pit containing the remains of 140 bodies. Only 30 of them were identified. Emsuda told me that when they threw the bodies into this pit, they would also throw in hand grenades to make them harder to identify. Sadija suspects that her son was thrown into this pit, because there were camp survivors who knew that he was taken away at the same time as some of those identified from this grave.

Sadija sat on a stool in her kitchen and peeled onions as she told me her problems. She owns the house in front of hers as well as the house behind. Her son used to live in the front house, and her brother-in-law in the back one. Both are missing. Now, some displaced Serbs from Bosanska Krupa live in the back house. Emsuda says they are reasonable people, but Sadija told those people they have to leave by July. They asked her where they are supposed to go. She said, "How should I know? No one told me where to go when I was taken away from here."

In the front house there is a kafana that was built and run by Sadija's son. Now it is occupied and run by a Serb who has a house in Banja Luka. The Prijedor municipal government gave him the right to run this club for five years.

One day this man came to Sadija's door asking her to sign an agreement that would legitimize this arrangement. Sadija refused. She said to him, "You were in the army. How do I know you didn't kill my son? And now you expect to take his property? This is mine. Is this yours? Put yourself in my shoes."

The Serb said, "You are a strange woman."

Sadija replied, "I would be strange if I were to agree to let you take my property like that."

He said, "Anyway it's mine for the next five years."

Sadija said, "You can dream about it."

The Serb answered, "If I have to leave, this place could be blown up." Sadija said, "Go ahead, they left me with a pile of rubble anyway. I came back here with no possessions to my name."

From Laura's diary -- "We were a bit nervous"

Kozarac, Sunday, May 23. As two Americans and one Canadian, we were a bit nervous to come to the Republika Srpska at a time when there was increasing talk of ground troops going into Kosovo.

We knew that there has been anti-NATO, and especially anti-American, sentiment among Bosnian Serbs because of the bombing in Yugoslavia. Before we left our hotel in Croatia, Manisha was advised to take the Canadian flag off her backpack. But we crossed the border without incident, and didn't notice any overt hostility. Our bus dropped us off at the road leading to Kozarac about 20 kilometers before Prijedor, where Peter greeted us.

The countryside was beautiful, with green rolling hills and red-tiled roofs scattered in clumps, and many cultivated fields. About 10 kilometers before Kozarac, however, the landscape changed -- suddenly, the houses turned to rubble. They looked like so many sad mouths with missing teeth.

After the Serb army evacuated the Bosniaks from their houses in 1992, the houses were

systematically looted. Nothing was left -- as the Bosniaks say, "nema ništa!" -- and special teams even tore out the pipes and electrical wiring from the walls. Then the houses were set on fire and blown up, so that no one could live in them.

One woman at the opening of the conference made a particularly telling observation: "I could not believe that so much has been destroyed here in Kozarac. Whoever did this was not only not thinking of others, but they were also not thinking of themselves. Now no one has a place to stay."

Today, however, Kozarac is changing, as rebuilding takes place. The German company THW (Technisches Hilfswerk) has a large compound in the town, full of trucks and building materials. Our open-air conference allows us to hear the pounding of hammers in the background and to see the huge THW trucks rumbling by full of sand or bricks. Emsuda remarked "It is lucky that we are outside for this conference, or we wouldn't see all the re-building and new life."

As Peter has noted in his diary, Emsuda was not able to get the conference hall. Instead, the conference is being held outdoors. Orange plastic chairs are lined up in rows on the crumbling and uneven concrete. Coffee and juice were served out of a shell of a building, converted into a kitchen. The chairs were moved around during the conference because the blazing hot sun moved in and out behind the trees.

Different people had different impressions of the town. To some, the glass is half empty, and to others, it is half full. Magdalena, who used to live in Kozarac, only sees the destruction and the hard work it would take to rebuild her house, and she remembered her friends who are no longer alive. She stares off into space at times. At other times she keeps her head lowered, as during the opening night of the conference.

Even if one only looks at the positive, the destruction is shocking. Walking from our house to the conference, we passed one destroyed house after another. A minaret was lying on the ground at an angle, and the mosque next to it was reduced to a pile of bricks.

One participant said: "I heard about Kozarac from Magdalena and nothing surprised me. But I have found something beautiful also: a white rose, just like the bush in front of my grandfather's house. When I saw the rose, I felt like I was back in that house." Others have no trouble seeing beauty, even among the ruins: "I feel like this is a homecoming. I don't care if the meeting is held in a tent. I have been living here for six months, and I feel as if I'm born again."

Returning to one's home has meaning that many of us mobile North Americans cannot understand. As in many other cultures, Bosnians have extremely strong ties to the earth, and to the houses and graves of their ancestors.

Dara, a Kozarac Serb who lives in the village of Lušci Palanka near Sanski Most, is waiting for her home to be put on repair list. She identifies with her Bosniak neighbors: "My home was taken from me too, and we have to struggle to get our homes back. My grandfather is buried there, only 100 meters away from my house. I must go back."

There are three kafanas in Kozarac, all run by Serbs. One of them is run by the brother of the convicted war criminal, Dušan Tadić. I asked a woman who has not yet been able to return to her home near Kozarac if she would ever go to that cafe. Her answer was unequivocal: "No, no way, not a chance!" shaking her head vigorously.

Another woman who has returned to Kozarac said she is at peace with herself and has decided she can communicate with her neighbors no matter what happened -- otherwise she would not have returned. This shows me that there are many different stages of reconciliation and many different approaches.

At certain times and places, there was a chill in the air as we walked through the streets of Kozarac. Perhaps it is only because we knew the kafanas are Serb-owned, and we were apprehensive due to the events in Kosovo. The few shops in Kozarac are also owned by Serbs. As a result, some of the Bosniaks there travel to Sanski Most, in the Federation, to do their shopping. Others are more ready to live side by side with the Serbs, and do their shopping in town. In the long run, the people of Kozarac will have to find a way to co-exist and to buy goods and services from each other.

The 30-foot-high wall at the back of the square where the conference is being held dates from the 14th century. A huge white flag hung on this ancient wall, with the symbol of Srcem do Mira painted on it in rainbow colors. Peter brought us to the square yesterday, as it is one of the most historic parts of Kozarac. If you pass through an opening in this wall, and up a flight of stone stairs, you can then see the remains of a building and tower that date from pre-Ottoman times.

Emsuda asked the authorities that this building and tower be designated as a "community peace center" where women could gather. But they rejected this request, saying that it is a historic monument. Emsuda, along with the support of the women of Srcem do Mira, will find another solution to this problem. Judging by their success so far, we can be confident that there will be a House of Peace in Kozarac in the near future.

From Teresa's diaries -- "I'm trying to imagine how it feels to be back"

Kozarac, Monday, May 24. This is my first time in Bosnia. I have always thought of the Serb Republic as dark and dreary, and the people as depressed. Peter's dispatches made Kozarac seem like a ghost town.

But when we arrived today, Kozarac was sunny and green. People thronged the streets. With three hundred refugees now returned and a hundred houses under construction, it does not seem empty.

After a long day of travel we gathered around a long table at the house owned by Anka, who is half Serb, half Croat. Not that her ethnicity matters. One could call her the unofficial mayor of Kozarac. SFOR (the NATO Stabilization Force) troops from the Czech Republic come to her house and drink coffee.

Most of those present were Muslim women. We introduced ourselves around the table. The

women's stories were remarkably similar. Anka's son and husband were killed and she knows where they are buried. Another woman lost her only son. A woman from Gornji Vakuf lost her husband. Rada from Sarajevo was in a refugee camp in Italy until her son found her and took her to the Czech Republic.

Rada was the only Serb in the group. She was born in Kozarac, and left in 1963 for Sarajevo. She married there and only returned to Kozarac during the war, after living in a refugee camp for several years. Rada considers herself a naturalized Sarajevan. She says she wants to return to "my Sarajevo" but she is afraid that the city will not be the same since many of the "real Sarajevans" are gone.

I could tell from Rada's lime-green pants and metallic lipstick that she is a city woman now, and does not fit in the village. Or perhaps she is trying to be a city woman, and is worried that the village will rub off on her.

Magdalena told the opposite story. She is from Kozarac, but now lives in Sarajevo and wants to return home. Her house is still being repaired. She apologized for the way the town -- her town -- looks: "In Kozarac when they destroyed the town they did not hurt only Muslims, because they destroyed everything, including most of the Serb-owned houses."

Ten or so women from Gornji Vakuf introduced themselves. They are members of "Fatma," an NGO that assists the children of fallen Muslim soldiers. One woman said that she never even heard of Kozarac before it was mentioned on television during the trial of Dušan Tadić in The Hague.

She is a teacher. Her students have asked her about Kozarac and what happened in the nearby prison camps. We passed one of them (Keraterm) today. We are all struck by the fact that part of the Tadić family still lives in Kozarac.

Many of those who introduced themselves shared inspirational thoughts about love, reconciliation and peace. Russell from London described what he was seeing here in Kozarac: "What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the butterfly calls the beginning."

If this sounds vague, there was nothing remotely vague about his commitment to Srcem do Mira. The organization's foreign friends have been involved since the beginning and shared its most dangerous moments. They met Emsuda when she was in exile in Zagreb. In 1994, they had to pass through the front lines to attend the meeting in Sarajevo.

As the introductions came to a close, someone asked why we were not singing. This was all the prompting needed for the group to break into song. Because most of the Bosnian women gathered here were older, I wondered if these songs would be passed on to the younger generation.

Many traditional songs were sung tonight. Several women cried quietly, some while they sang. One song had been written by a woman of Kozarac while she was in exile: "From the window of

my room, I see the light of my Kozarac, surrounded by mountains and green fields." I try to imagine how she feels to be back.