



On the Record: Returning Refugees to Bosnia

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Taking Back Kozarac

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From the AP Editorial Desk

From Peter's diary -- "The people of Kozarac take back their town"

Monday, May 24. Approximately 100 Bosnians, Croatians, Europeans, and North Americans sat in a sun-blasted courtyard in the middle of the ruins of Kozarac today as Emsuda Mujagić, director of Srcem do Mira, convened the conference under the title "Building Bridges of Peace and Trust in Civil Society."

In the year that has passed since the fifth annual Srcem do Mira conference, much progress has taken place. But the good will between Serb and Muslim activists that pervaded the atmosphere of last year's conference is absent today, because the members of Serb nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the municipality have chosen not to attend this conference.

This is partially a reflection of the present political atmosphere in the Republika Srpska (RS), resulting from the international community's recent award of Brčko to both entities and its removal of RS President Nikola Poplašen, as well as the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) intervention in neighboring Yugoslavia.

For these and other reasons, relations between Serb and Muslim NGOs in this part of Bosnia are at a low point. And a bridge cannot be built from one side only. For the time being, with few exceptions, the Serb inhabitants of the town keep to themselves, while the Muslim returnees to Kozarac socialize with each other and draw comfort and inspiration from the women attending from Bugojno, Gornji Vakuf, Sarajevo, Srebrenik, and other towns around Bosnia. Those who have returned speak of "being reborn." Mirsada, an activist from Gornji Vakuf, has lived in exile

in Travnik, Mostar, Zagreb, and Germany. She now works on behalf of orphaned children of fallen soldiers. She exhorted the children of Kozarac, "Your fathers may be gone. But you still have Kozarac. Go home; your fathers have paid the price of that home with their blood." Mirsada also said, "When I saw the new roof on Emsuda's home, it made me hope that I also will be able to go home one day."

After a day of motivational speeches, the conference attendants put loud music on the loudspeaker and danced to the sounds of Willie Lobo, the Gypsy Kings, and local ethno-pop. The music reverberated down the street, as polite but reserved Serb policemen stood by. The people of Kozarac are taking back their town. I wonder if they're familiar with the feminist slogan -- "Take back the night."

Later, some of the older women gather in Anka's home to sing their favorite old folk songs. One torch song about a woman who left goes, "Return to me my pictures, my memories, and my letters. Return to me my life." The song could just as well be about these people.

Emsuda Mujagić opens the meeting - "Step by step, bit by bit..."

(From Emsuda's opening speech)

"May this prayer be directed to all people for a better and happier future: that those who have returned to their homes may live in happiness and security, and that those who have not yet returned may do so soon, and for those who will never return, because they were the victims of this unhappy war, may their souls rest in peace. May life and peace return to the living, and to the dead, eternal serenity...."

"Dear friends, today we are observing the sixth anniversary of the Initiative, "Srcem do Mira" (From Heart to Peace). It could be said with assurance that this is a day of friendship and reconciliation among people. This is regardless of their ethnicity or religious affiliation, regardless of geographical separation or the language they speak. This is a day when we can all together with complete equality speak of that which is shared among us, and of our mutual work for a better future.

"At the very beginning of this Initiative it was difficult to establish contacts with many people, as well as to understand the language of "Srcem do Mira," because at that time many hearts were trembling from lack of peace. However, step by step, bit by bit, we have succeeded to carry on the work of this Initiative, and achieve visible results of the work. The very location of this conference is confirmation of this, which at the beginning of the work of the initiative would not have been possible to believe.

"Our intention at this conference is to discuss the proposed topics, which can help us to exchange our thoughts and experiences, so that we may use them for more effective work in the realization of peace in every heart and in every place.

"We are pleased by your attendance at this sixth annual international conference of 'Srcem do Mira,' under the title, 'Building Bridges of Peace and Trust in Civil Society.'"

"You are our dear friends, good people who came here regardless of distance and of the place where this conference is being held. Your daily obligations did not distract you from the good intentions that you carry within you, to endeavor to make your contribution to building those bridges of peace and trust.

"Besides our warm hearts and the sincere joy that we feel because of your presence here today, we offer you our modest homes so that together we can share our joy of return to our homes. We ask you not to mind too much the obvious deficiencies, and we truly offer you our sincere and warm hearts, which can also warm you.

"I am certain that you have sufficient warmth and love in your hearts that can, with our common strength, convert even the hardest rock into fine, fertile soil from which will grow the fruits of life and fragrant plants of healing. Their fragrance will awake people from the deepest sleep and urge them to cultivate the fruits of life, to care for and preserve those healing plants.

"Dear friends, I would like the thoughts written on our signs here to be an encouragement for our work, in order that our conclusions from this conference may be more clear and acceptable to all people who sincerely wish for 'building bridges of peace and trust in civil society.' Therefore I propose that we hold to a program that can bring us to the discovery of the best solutions for the realization of peace and a good life together." (Kozarac, Monday, May 24)

Profile: Manisha Thomas meets the first Muslim to return to Prijedor, and finds that even in the face of adversity, families of mixed ethnicity can hold together

"She would wake in the mornings to find that people had thrown garbage on her porch and spat outside her door."

There is a sadness in the eyes of many of the women attending this meeting. Most have not yet been able to return to their homes. Salma is one of the lucky ones. She was able to return to her apartment in Prijedor after spending more than three and a half years in exile. As far as she knows, she is the only Muslim to return to Prijedor after the war.

Salma told her story proudly. For 30 years she worked in the "Kras" baked goods factory in Prijedor. One of her two daughters, Eldina, was married to a Serb policeman, and he was helpful to his Muslim in-laws. His protection was not enough, however, and on April 22, 1992, as the war was starting, Salma was forced to stop working. Her daughter and son-in-law moved into the apartment to help. Adding to the pressure, her husband died in November that year of natural causes.

Out of a Muslim population of almost 50,000 in the city, only about 120 managed to remain throughout the war. Salma was not one of them. Without work, she had no income. She was denied access to her money in the bank. She did not know what had happened to her daughter, Vahida. At one point she was told that Vahida had been killed. In September of 1993, Salma decided to leave Prijedor in order to find out the truth.

Salma paid a local Serb 400 DM (\$250) for a forged identification card with a Serbian name on it so that she could safely travel to Belgrade. From there she went to Germany, where she spent the next three-and-a-half years, living in a refugee center with an Albanian women and two Turkish women in the same room. Salma received some social assistance, but also had to work illegally in order to survive.

Determined to find her daughter, Salma placed an advertisement in a Zagreb newspaper. It turned out that Vahida was alive and well, living in a village near Maglaj, central Bosnia. Almost a year after Salma first placed her advertisement, a Bosnian Croat neighbor showed Vahida the advertisement. Vahida then telephoned her mother, who fainted when she realized who was calling. Vahida's family was safe, but her husband had lost two brothers. She did not know her father had died.

After Salma left Prijedor, her other daughter Eldina remained in her apartment in Prijedor with her husband. They divorced in 1994. She then joined Salma in Germany with her two sons, and she remains there today. While she wishes to stay in Germany, there is increasing pressure on her and her family to return to Bosnia.

The moment Salma decided to return home came in 1997, when the chief of police in Prijedor, Simo Drljača, was killed by British NATO troops while resisting arrest. Drljača had a fearsome reputation and had been one of the commanders of a concentration camp. He was indicted by the Hague tribunal.

Upon hearing of Drljača's death, Salma immediately returned to her apartment in Prijedor, where Eldina's ex-husband was still living. He welcomed Salma back, and continues to live with her. Salma explains that he hopes eventually to contact his sons in Germany.

Living with her ex-son-in-law makes it safer for Salma in a town that is still not welcoming to Muslims. When she first returned to Prijedor, she would wake in the mornings to find that people had thrown garbage on her porch and spat outside her door. Yet none of that frightened her away, and she is as determined as ever to remain in her home.

Salma mentioned that the Muslim cemetery in Prijedor is the object of repeated desecration. She recently repaired her mother's gravestone for the 3rd time since her death in 1984. When she went to the police to complain, the officer told her, "Go to Alija (Alija Izetbegovic, Muslim member of the Bosnian presidency) and complain to him."

"If I were a man," Salma said, "I would have hit him. Since there is no force of law, it is useless to complain."

The company where Salma used to be employed controls the tenancy rights to her apartment, and it is trying to evict her on the pretext that she abandoned her apartment. Under the pre-war system, a law on socially-owned property declared that a tenant could lose those rights if he or she were away from the apartment for more than six months. This law was overturned last December, making the company's stance illegal. Salma is to appear in court this week for the sixth time.

"They can't do anything to me, because I'm a fighter," Salma said. "In my opinion, it is my flat. I think I will succeed."

Salma is not allowed to return to work in the factory, and she says that life in Prijedor is not friendly. Her old Serb friends barely acknowledge her presence. Her Muslim friends have not yet returned to Prijedor. "I drink my coffee alone," she told me -- a very uncharacteristic habit in Bosnian culture. "That does not bother me. If I want company, I'll go to Sanski Most, or go visit my daughter in Maglaj."

Salma's daughter Vahida would like to return to Prijedor from Maglaj, but Eldina's son would have difficulties going to school in the Republika Srpska.

"At the beginning of the war they were separating the Serb children from those of mixed marriages. So how can he go back there? It would be taken as a provocation."

"I think the attitudes and the hatred will change. This was starting to happen before the NATO intervention. People were starting to say, 'I didn't do anything,' or that 'My son did not kill anyone.' In other words, at least they were aware that crimes had been committed." But, she says, with the NATO bombing, Serbs in Prijedor are angry and they say that their "motherland" is the victim of an aggression. As a result, any progress that was made is being set back to some degree.

Many Muslims want to return to Prijedor, but their homes are occupied by Serbs. Laws against such occupation are not being enforced in the Republika Srpska. Unless there is teamwork and the creation of multi-ethnic organizations for return, the displaced people of Bosnia will not be able to return to their homes. Salma told me, "The Serb NGOs in Prijedor are not approachable. These organizations should include Muslims in their work."

Despite the atmosphere of distrust, Salma is still filled with hope. I asked her if she thought she would always have to drink her coffee alone in Prijedor. She replied with a smile, "God willing, one day I will have company." (Monday, May 24)

From Teresa's diary -- "A statement of their right to be present"

Tuesday, May 25. The conference opened yesterday in the central square, across the street from the unfinished conference building. With the sun beating down on the square, people were moving to the fringes to find shade.

There was talk about the goals of the conference and what should come out of it. Some of the talk was concrete, some nebulous. How much should the international visitors participate? To whom should the conclusions be directed? That is concrete enough. But there was much also talk of "peaceful visions" and "bridges of trust."

There are also questions about process. Do we break into groups or do we talk all together? It was compounded by problems with translation.

The discussion was freewheeling. It ranged from the political participation of women, to the history of refugees in the Balkans (going back to WWI), to innovative economic experiments in underdeveloped regions, to possible meetings on return in other parts of the country. This was interspersed with personal refugee and return stories. Peter gave a talk about his own research.

After lunch it was back to process. Should we break up into smaller discussion groups? It was decided that the work would all be done in one group, after several British women said they did not want to miss anything that might happen in another group. But it was also becoming clear that some individuals were going to dominate the discussion, out of the 40 or so participants. It was hardly participatory!

Day two of the meeting, today, got off to a late start. There was more talk about process. Many of the same people who spoke yesterday, spoke again: about the participation of women in politics, the lack of media coverage of the conference, networking amongst return groups, the presentation of a coordinated voice to the international community, the kind of problems that face a woman when she returns, property rights; the German government's return policy and the problems it is causing. They also discussed how to get more coverage for a recent report on violations of women's rights.

During the morning break, Branko Popović from the International Catholic Migration Commission told Emsuda that this organization would be opening an office in Kozarac. Popović requested local input and advice.

We are two days into the conference and it is clear that for the participants, the act of meeting is just as important as any conclusion. In many ways it is a statement of their right to be present in the RS, and in Kozarac. No working groups have been set up.

Every night is taken up with dancing and singing. At lunch people spread out and talk amongst themselves. Although they mostly stay around the small area near Anka's house and the square, several of the international participants have visited the Serb collective center and the kafana (coffee house) down the street.

Some of the women returnees have invited participants back to their homes for tea and cookies. This involves walking through the center of town past curious stares, a clipped "dobar dan" (hello) from Serb inhabitants, and greetings from SFOR (NATO Stabilization Force) soldiers.

From Peter's diary -- "What happens to a body...?"

Tuesday, May 25. "What happens to a body after it is thrown into the river?" A friend asked me this question last summer as we sat by the Vistula in the middle of Warsaw. Her grandparents had died at Auschwitz. I remembered the question as members of the Srcem do Mira conference walked along the Sana River during a visit today to Prijedor, near Kozarac. Both rivers, like many others in both Poland and Bosnia, have been used to dispose of members of an unwanted ethnic group.

Very few of the 50,000 Muslim citizens of Prijedor remained in the city after the war, and only a handful have returned. "Hasnija," an activist in Srcem do Mira, comes from Prijedor. Today she lives in Sanski Most. Hasnija is a handsome gray-haired woman, cheerful considering what she has lived through. She took us through the neighborhood where she had spent most of her life.

Hasnija grew up in "Stari Grad" (Old Town), a pleasant neighborhood that was almost entirely Muslim-populated. One of the oldest neighborhoods in Prijedor, it ran along the Sana and included an island created by a tributary to the wide river. However, Stari Grad now looks like a nature preserve or a neglected urban green strip, as every house in the area has been destroyed. Unlike in Kozarac, the rubble was removed and hardly a trace remains.

A couple dozen foreign visitors and Bosnians crossed a rickety footbridge approaching Stari Grad. A block ahead of us was a large vacant lot with a flea market and to our left was a forest of six-year-old trees. Both areas had been cleared of houses. We took a path through the woods. This path had once been a two-lane road through a residential district. On the side of the path, where a house had been leveled to the ground, one could barely make out the outline of a foundation concealed by nettles and thistles.

We were told that the houses in this neighborhood had been large and comfortable, and that many of them had belonged to the most prestigious members of Prijedor society: intellectuals, politicians, and company managers.

These people were the first targets of the campaign to "ethnically cleanse" Prijedor. By chance we ran into Muhamed Muselović, the city's deputy mayor. He was walking along the path with some friends. Muselović was elected by the absentee vote of Muslims expelled from Prijedor. He lives in Sanski Most.

I walked with Hasnija as we neared the wide river. A pleasant footpath followed along the now-overgrown banks, passing park benches here and there. Hasnija told me, "This is the warmest river in Europe. We used to go swimming here when we were young; we didn't need the sea. This was an area for young people. We would come here with our sweethearts. The first kiss always happened here."

I said, "That is something that can never be forgotten." Hasnija replied, "And it can never be repeated."

Further on, Hasnija ran into an old friend, a colleague with whom she worked before the war. They greeted briefly and passed on. Later, Hasnija told me that she had not seen this woman in seven years.

After our walk, we stopped at an outdoor restaurant near the river and relaxed. Twenty Muslims and foreigners could not have done this two years ago in Prijedor. But in spite of the progress, the multi-ethnic Prijedor of past days is gone, and may never be reclaimed.

I visited another river in Poland, the San -- almost the same name as that of the river that runs through Sanski Most and Prijedor. My host in Poland told me that "San" is an ancient Indo-

European word for "flowing waters." Perhaps it is the same word as Sana, and for that matter, Seine. I hope that these flowing waters will only be the site of young romance and recreation from now on.