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Challenges

MIRHUNISA: *There's such a concentration of evil, and not a lot of good. Women do a noble job just existing in this dirt. Coming out of it clean is very difficult.*

MAJA: *Democracy is coming in, as we say, through very narrow doors.*

DANICA: *We've got a long, long road ahead of us.*

Danica's metaphor struck me as particularly apt. That long road stretches into uncharted territory for Bosnians, into a democratic political system and free market economy propelled by advancing information technology—all three new phenomena. The travelers are already traumatized as they begin the journey to a place unfamiliar and which they can't see. In many cases, they're on foot as others speed by. Some—the most attractive—may be able to hitch a ride. Others may simply drop by the side of the road. With the opening of the new democracies, the first out of the cage were the predators.¹ The journey, then, is even more dangerous for those not prepared to defend themselves along the way.

History can be transformative, but only when its wounds are dressed by healers unwilling simply to move on to the next crisis. Learning from the past for the sake of the future is an organic process, often birthing new concepts and institutions. The Great War spawned Woodrow Wilson's attempt at a League of Nations. The failed League was revived in the United Nations, when the War to End All Wars was followed by World War II. The atrocities of that war birthed the Anti-Defamation League, which applied its fight against anti-Semitism to dangerous stereotyping far beyond explicitly Jewish concerns. Highly respected humanitarian groups such as the International Organization for Migration and International Rescue Committee had a similar origin. The Marshall Plan grew out of the assessment of a U.S. general-turned-secretary of state that a new foundation for the European economy had to be built from the ashes of war. And

members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization responded to their disastrous experience with the Soviets following World War II by not only creating a defense structure, but also making unlikely allies of France and Germany, and eventually Turkey and Greece.

The same principle—looking to the past while building the future—applies at an individual level. What is foul must be uncovered, acknowledged, and examined so that new life can grow and replace the decay. Postwar Bosnia faces a long list of immense challenges as it emerges from not only the war but also decades of communism. Its controlled economy resulted in a lack of entrepreneurial experience and no intrinsic incentive for testing new ventures. A political power structure that quashed opposition produced a passive electorate. A network of state-run social programs bred psychological dependence. Fear of an extensive secret police force discouraged citizen-led initiatives. A tradition of political favors created a society in which marketeering and corruption are rife. Add to these challenges half the population displaced; 60 percent of the housing stock destroyed; utilities, factories, and transportation systems heavily damaged; and the tremendous toll of war trauma. It's remarkable that Bosnians are moving forward as well as they are.

Open Wounds

EMSUDA: A wife or child wants something, and the husband can't get it, so he becomes violent. The wife covers it up. Then the sons become aggressive toward girls and other boys in the classroom, as they've seen their father. It's a chain reaction.

TANJA: After any war there's violence in the family, because people are psychologically wounded. Even we who could be called "normal" have been traumatized by the war; there isn't a single family in Bosnia that wasn't touched.

ANA: Let me tell you, our war was bad for those who didn't lose a family member: mother, father, brother, sister. . . . But those who lost someone in the family will remember this war forever. Forever.

VALENTINA: When we came back home, we were still afraid, but at least the

shooting was over. You don't know who to be afraid of in wartime. Sometimes I'm still afraid.

MEDIHA: *Why did we need to suffer so much? Did that satisfy someone? Did it help us progress?*

The challenges of postconflict Bosnia are at the same time public and private, a complex blend of loss and love that the women must accept and integrate, more than overcome, as they create a new future. Families are subject to enormous strain in postconflict situations, and the communities that would otherwise support them are often dispersed. Women are dealing with rape, dislocation, an eroded ability to trust, and a longing for loved ones. Many men are psychologically and physically injured from battlefield experiences, often leaving the care for other family members to the women. In addition, difficult transitions occur when women become heads of households while their men are away, then again when the men return home, usually unemployed or underemployed.²

VESNA'S story is not uncommon. When the war started, she was in her late thirties, a life stage that should represent consolidation and stability. Instead, her mixed marriage—she's ethnic Croat, he's ethnic Serb—went through trial by fire. *In our town, at the beginning of the war, the worst thing was to be a Serb, so my husband and father-in-law had to go to Belgrade.* Such a self-imposed exile was not uncommon. Serbia's population swelled with Bosnian and Croatian Serbs who felt unsafe in Bosnia and Croatia, as those newly independent states tried to withstand attacks by the forces under Milosevic's direct and indirect control. When Vesna's husband returned, he wanted to protect and provide for his family and to make up for time missed because of the war. That created new tensions at home. *My husband is a sports journalist. He still hasn't found work. My father-in-law lives with us, and the two of them are trying to give our daughter gifts to make up for those years in Belgrade. They spoil her. Love can't be bought. Those years can't be made up.*

Vesna moves back and forth between frustration and appreciation. *I wouldn't want my worst enemy to go through what we've endured. My husband is a great man. When he catches a fly, he lets it go. In this war he was deemed guilty not because of anything he did—just because he was Serb.* But regardless of his innocence, the damage has been done. *He told me that when he was in Belgrade, he saw how Serbs in so-called pure marriages, Serb-to-Serb, had a lot of divorces. Mixed marriages like ours had even more. When he came back, he asked me to decide whether to stay in our marriage or to divorce, and he would accept it because he'd been away throughout the war. It wasn't*

easy to start over. We were two strangers starting over at living together, and with a child. But my daughter adores her father, so I'd sell my soul to the devil before I'd get divorced.

Like Vesna's family, Bosnian society has been torn apart. It will never be as it was; too much is lost. Psychological shock is the least visible result of war, yet it's felt at every level of the society. UNICEF and other humanitarian agencies report long-lasting war effects on Bosnian children. Psychiatric care for Sarajevans in the first postwar years was virtually nonexistent; and broken marriages, suicides, extreme emotionality, paranoia, flashbacks, and sleeplessness were reported across the former Yugoslavia. The irony, of course, is that several of the war planners were psychiatric practitioners. Perhaps their background gave them particular insights into tactics that were, literally, maddening for the victims.³

The world is a violent place for women, whether in war or peacetime.⁴ But a war context allows for violent behavior that is otherwise tempered by civility. The violence is more a symptom of the war environment, rather than just bad behavior on the part of soldiers. For example, women and girls have been brought into Bosnia as sex slaves, and many of their clients are members of the international community. Trafficking is a booming business for organized crime rings. That social blight carries over to the way Bosnian women are treated at home.

Many activists point to a connection between domestic violence and war. The Belgrade war protesters called Women in Black insist that "when violence against women ceases, war will cease."⁵ Not only are societies with high domestic violence a breeding ground for warfare, home violence also generally climbs as soldiers return, shaped by experiences at the front lines. Sex roles become accentuated, as men become warriors. Although quieter than the clamor of battle, a surge of domestic violence has been reported as soldiers returned home to a shattered economy and relationships under high stress. Alcohol aggravates the problem.⁶

None of the women I interviewed described herself as a victim of home violence (although I didn't ask directly, which was my oversight). But several had comments on the subject in the context of the lack of counselling services just when they're needed most, and the emergency hotlines now appearing. SABIHHA gave me an example: *One night last week I couldn't sleep as I listened to a man beating his wife. She's a wonderful woman, taking care of the house and family. He's always drunk, and when he wants to go to bed with her she refuses, and then [Sabiha makes the sound of a neck being broken]. I beg her repeatedly: "I can help you. I'll call the police. I'll arrange things for you." And she says, "Please don't, because this place belongs to him. I've never worked. Where would I go if he decides I'm against him?" I say, "This*

flat is government-issued, given to him because he has family. It doesn't belong to just him." But she says, "No, no, no, I'll keep quiet." The story is not anomalous. Many, many women are not only beaten up; men rape them or call them horrible names. Communication between men and women has become ugly. It's worse now because of the war trauma and the horrible economy.

Violence permeating Bosnian society is not only physical. Those who had to flee the war endure a constant emotional battering, as everyday tasks require titanic effort without support systems that have long since imploded. As courageous as they usually are, several of the women confessed to me moments of severe depression. DANICA describes her life as a refugee, longing for her home and stripped of her professional identity. Though able to organize and comfort others, she seems beaten down by years of frustration and discouragement. Her depression is almost palpable as she looks back on the tolerance—celebration, really—of different cultures coexisting in Bosnia during the past fifty years and compares it to the current situation. *Now everybody's blaming someone else for something. What is this evil that happened among Serbs, Croats, and Muslims? No answer follows, so she tries to imagine the future. After so much wickedness, after so much dying, after so much killing, if someone were to say, "We're going to recreate Yugoslavia just as it was, where we were happy and worked hard, where our children grew up . . ." Danica has no end to her sentence. She begins to cry. She tries again to reconcile the irreconcilable. Was our life together fake? Self-deception? I don't think people could have been so free and happy, so equal, if it were all a lie. But look: atrocities . . . so many dead people . . . even children . . . so much suffering. Now something has changed inside us.*

I know it's not "politically correct," but I'd be happy if miraculously there were three separate regions. A united Bosnia, but within it three areas—Serb, Muslim, and Croat—each with its own customs, habits, culture, religion, but everybody respecting everybody else. I know it's impossible. Everybody fights against ethnic separation. But if we could divide Bosnia into little squares and just put all Croats here, and all Serbs here, and all Muslims there. It would almost be a good idea. Everyone would know, "We live here. You live there. Let's not touch each other." A remarkable statement from a woman who, for years, has been focused on returning home, since her pipe-dream solution would require much of the population to move from their homes. Danica knows her idea doesn't make sense. She's just speaking as a woman who has for the moment despaired of alternatives. As we are, I can't see the way out. It will take a very, very long time to feel as we did before. I wonder if I'll live to see that day.

As if in a direct conversation with Danica, KRISTINA picks up her words. All

people really wanted was enough money to live—you know, to get up in the morning and go to work, take their family to the coast in the summer. They could have had that, but they were told they couldn't. Do you understand? This schoolteacher, surrounded by the paranoid propaganda spewing from Belgrade across Bosnia, can look back now and say: *It was a big lie.* Lies can take on a life of their own, and Kristina surveys the ruin caused by a powerful idea like Greater Serbia. She describes how, immediately after the war, she brought humanitarian aid to her devastated hometown. She was grateful that her volunteer work gave her an excuse to return. *But to be honest, we didn't feel like moving back to Sipovo. It hurt too much, and there was nothing to go back to. Suddenly it was like a foreign place. Everywhere we looked, there was a reason to cry. Our flat was burned, and everything in it. I thought, if we're going to start over, we should go to a place not burdened with so many memories. But my husband was stubborn. Nobody was going to kick him out of anywhere.* [She laughs.]

For hundreds of thousands like Kristina, even after the war, simply making it through the day has meant a struggle to rebuild a life out of memories. *We came back, because he wanted it so much. But we had absolutely nothing. Nothing to sit on. Nothing to sleep on. I don't know if you can understand. We didn't have a spoon—nothing but our pride. Little by little, with help from friends and through perseverance, thank God we're making it now. Even in the thick of all the problems, we were always a happy family in a sense, because we had each other. But I hope we don't have to be tested like that again.*

Kristina and her husband returned to their home, two competent adults rebuilding their lives. But as teachers, they know the fragility of young psyches. Many Bosnian children went to sleep for years listening to bomb blasts after spending a day in a cellar where war was the constant topic of the adult conversation. But the damage began even before the war officially started. IRMA's father remembers how fifteen days before the shooting began, they saw their best friends, Bosnian Serbs, not allowing their young daughter to play with the granddaughter of Izetbegovic, the Muslim political leader. He and his wife were appalled, but looking back, he realizes how the seeds of distrust were spreading.

Irma herself, with a teenager's honesty, reflects on the lasting effects in her internal world, where trust and distrust vie for space. Despite thick resentments that must have developed during six months in a crowded basement, she puts aside the negatives as she compares the intensity of wartime with the pale mundanity of postwar life. *During the war, there was more love, because we were forced to be together and be friends. When you have so much time, you get to know a person—to like him, or fall in love with him. But now people are going their own way, thinking just*

about themselves. There's lots of pressure, and everybody's changed. Take my neighbors. I know them like I know my own face. But now, after all those days and nights together, it's just "Hello" when we pass in the corridor. During the war, we used to sit around, playing the guitar. Now I don't even see those people. They're all here, but it's like they've just disappeared.

Irma has a difficult time talking about her friends. She starts and stops repeatedly, trying to find the right words. That difficulty seems related to the inconsistency she's experienced in her relationships. *As I'm getting older, it's becoming very hard for me to find friends that I . . . You know, when I was little, I could be friends with anybody. Now it's a little different, because I can be . . . I can know a lot of people, but friendship has a different meaning for me. I appreciate a friend more, because during the war I lost a lot of them. Now—and this may be left from the war—I often think something bad is going to happen to one of my best friends. Lots of my friends died. I was sorry they died, but you forget. And now, when I remember, I think of them. That's what hurts me, how people just disappear, just . . . It's so unfair.*

A psychologist wouldn't be surprised by what follows: *I don't trust too much any more. Before the war, some of my closest friends just left and didn't say a word to me. Why? One phone call wouldn't have been so much trouble.* Then she tucks in a statement about ethnic identity, a cue for me to the fact that her friends' leaving was more than betrayal or abandonment. It was Irma's first experience as the victim of a political act. *I didn't even know what "Serb," or "Muslim," or "Croat" meant before the war. I couldn't believe they just left without saying a word to me. I mean, they didn't say anything. Now I don't go around trusting just anyone.*

Irma goes on to a brief reflection on one of the deepest scars in postconflict Bosnian society: the split between those who stayed and those who left before or during the war. *Anyone can be my friend, no matter if that person was here during the war or not. But there's a difference. You know, sometimes when we sit and talk about the war, I get the feeling that my friend who's come back feels bad. She's uncomfortable. I'm not judging her. Maybe if I'd had the possibility to leave Sarajevo, I would have gone too.* It is an unusual statement. After all, Irma did leave, escaping through the tunnel under the airport during the latter stages of the war. However, she draws a distinction not only in terms of how long a person endured the siege but also between those who fled for safety reasons and those who left for political reasons, having been tipped off that the siege was about to begin. *Those friends who left before the war and didn't tell me anything . . . if I saw them on the street in Sarajevo, I wouldn't say "Hello." I wouldn't say anything. I'd just go right by. It's not hate. I just don't want to have anything to do with them.*

Beyond shooting, hunger, or refugees, war is about memories melted in the heat of firebombs, hopes crushed beneath the weight of tanks, and plans ground into dust by combat boots. The loss may be material or intensely personal. Sometimes it helps to sit with an interviewer and sift through a past now in ruins. I felt a sense of the sacred in my hours with KADA, who vacillates between grief and numbness in the aftermath of the loss of her brother-in-law, two brothers, husband, and son. *A person can't live with these feelings . . . but we have to.* Her words struck me as both contradictory and complete. Indeed, all the women I interviewed described thoughts and feelings that crisscrossed the lines of logic. An outsider like me could only absorb their lessons intuitively, not account for them linearly.

Given the barbarity she experienced, Kada's words seemed markedly tame. *Looking back, I'm disappointed with people and with our leaders. Before the war, I thought government officials never made mistakes . . . never told lies. But now I know they lie. I don't respect them any more.* Beyond her disenchantment and distrust of the political system, Kada has serious worries about everyday life, including concerns about her daughter and son-in-law, both unemployed in the postwar society. But at another level, she wears the wounds of war. *We had a good life—calm and peaceful. I used to be young in spirit. But what I've gone through has shaped me. I'm not that happy woman I used to be. I'm old. If it hadn't been for the war, I wouldn't be old now. Sometimes I wish I were standing in the shade of a man. It's the traditional way for a Bosnian woman. Sometimes I wish I had someone to protect me, at least for a minute.*

Kada wonders at the damage done to the society at large, then returns to her own experience. *Before, Serbia existed on myths. They applauded and supported "Slobo." And they believed Russia would help them—as it did actually, sending weapons and in lots of other ways. Now the country isn't rich any longer, and the Serbs are furious. They don't like Milosevic, because they're poor. And for me? Life isn't the same. The men that were killed—they were destroyed quickly. We women . . . we were also destroyed, but left to die slowly. Life without joy isn't life.* In fact, Kada spends her time mostly with other women who are mourning dead or missing men and boys. Sometimes, she confesses, she finds their company boring. On a recent excursion, she shared a room with two other women who kept telling her their stories. She left and joined the men in the restaurant, to play cards.

Kada may tire of hearing others' tales, but she's ready to talk to me about her husband and son, as a way of holding on to rich relationships now reduced to memories. *My husband and I knew everything about each other. We had no secrets—*

at work, or at home. We got to where we liked almost exactly the same things. Srebrenica has woods all around. I love nature—gathering mushrooms. He took to going out and picking mushrooms with me. I loved swimming in a small brook near there. He used to hold my dress while I was in the water. He'd spend the whole day with me out in the woods. [She pulls out of her purse a picture, sent her by her husband's cousin, of a dashing young man.] I grieve more for my pictures than for my flat. Every detail is precious. He was medium tall, not fat, with Asian features, more like an Arab—dark skin with a lovely moustache and beautiful teeth . . . deep black eyes, wavy hair that eventually turned gray. He wrote beautiful poetry. I loved reading his poems. I tried to make him have them published somewhere, but he was writing only for his soul. Sometimes he taught sociology. He was a leader, always head or director or some important position. Whenever he wanted to change his job, he'd ask if I thought it was good for him, or if he could do it. I always said he'd do it better than anyone else, and it was always true. So we had a lot in common. Thirty years. We spent all our free time together. At parties, we'd sing then laugh and break our glasses. We both loved music. We loved dancing and playing. I loved romantic French songs . . . traditional folk tunes . . . Serbian, Croat, and Bosnian singers of the '60s . . . Greek . . . oriental music. Now I seldom listen to music. I just don't want to do those things. Sometimes I try to hum a song, but the beauty's gone. Then I start crying.

In addition to the murder of her husband, Kada grieves for her son. He was born in 1966. He grew tall. His hair was thin, like mine, but he had a beautifully shaped head, with full lips, a long face, and a thin nose like an eagle. Kada sounds like mothers across the Western world. I asked my son why he was listening to foreign music, because he didn't understand the words. He said he loved the rhythm. He'd put speakers in every corner and turn the volume way up. We weren't like a mother and son. We were friends, pals. He used to confide in me, telling me a girl had left him, and he was hurt. Once he was just sitting there, and I asked, "What's the matter, son?" "She got married," he said. I told him, "It will pass. I've been through the same thing. When you're young and in love, there are ups and downs. That's just life." He didn't get married, just because of that girl. And then came the war, and he said, "It'd be stupid to get married during the war," which was true.

I wake up in the night and remember everything. I think of my son and don't get back to sleep for hours. When sleep finally closes my eyes, it's only for a short time. In the morning, I sit in my small room. I have my coffee and drink it alone. I have a cigarette. Then I remember how my son made smoke rings. I cry. And I wipe my tears in my loneliness.

Divisions, Devastation, and Donors

GRETA: *Someone recently offered to take me into Serb territory, to Banja Luka. I instantly felt a knot in my stomach—a vague, undefined threat—and I said, “No, thank you.” That feeling is new, and I don’t like it. Who is the enemy? It is our own citizens.*

SABIHA: *The only good thing about Dayton is that it stopped the war and accepted Bosnia as a sovereign state. But Dayton needs to grow with the times.*

TANJA: *I was against the division agreed on at Dayton. I told Mr. Clinton in person that we have many cultures, traditions, ethnic groups. Any division would be artificial.*

SUZANA: *Dayton was a success because it stopped the war . . . and a failure because it divided our country.*

MEDIHA: *We hoped the international community would somehow come in and make everything right. However, as you can see, after years a civil structure has still not been created.*

Concessions to the war makers in the Dayton Agreement, signed in Paris in December 1995, have compounded the emotional trauma of the war. On the one hand, the peace agreement was a success. As ALMA says: *With the cease-fire and Dayton, thank God, the guns stopped talking and the people started talking.*⁷ But the peace treaty’s constructive ideas were only partially enforced, thus deepening the divisions desired by the nationalists who led the war.⁸

The agreement was the result of a quick-moving series of events: The July massacre at Srebrenica had gruesomely highlighted the consequences of inaction by the international community. At roughly this time, President Clinton instructed his advisors to solve the Bosnian problem, and the United States, led by Richard Holbrooke, began diplomatic negotiations. The Europeans and Americans were finally acting in unison: NATO was spring-loaded for action. Tudjman launched a blitzkrieg on August 4, with arms he’d been collecting in defiance of the UN embargo. The Bosnian army joined the push. After a mortar shell exploded in the Sarajevo downtown market on August 28, 1995, killing thirty-seven

people, NATO bombing commenced. The two-week bombing campaign struck Bosnian Serb army targets around Sarajevo, crippling their communications system. The fortunes of war had turned, and the Serb army — at last facing meaningful opposition — was on the run.

Some 150,000 lives had been lost, in part due to American foot-dragging out of fear of another Vietnam. This time, President Clinton declared, the United States would keep bombing until the Serbs lifted the siege of the capital and agreed to a cease-fire and negotiations to end the war. In the last three days of the bombing campaign, U.S. Ambassador Menzies in Sarajevo sent numerous telegrams to the secretary of state, urging him not to stop before the Serbs had retreated far enough so that Bosnia would not be divided.⁹ Instead, the United States stepped in to save Milosevic and to keep the Serbs from being driven out of Bosnia. Under intense American pressure, the Bosnian/Croat army stopped their successful counteroffensive short of Banja Luka, allowing the Serbs to keep much of their conquest as “Republika Srpska.” That controversial decision likely kept hundreds of thousands of Serbs from being routed from their homes or simply fleeing in fear; but it also protected and rewarded the original aggressors. Now rebel nationalist Croats wondered why they shouldn’t have a separate chunk they could call “Herzeg Bosna.”¹⁰

The U.S. diplomatic effort was a lifeline for Milosevic, who was facing a political disaster at home. Serbia, its economy already in ruins, was now burdened with Bosnian refugees who were both miserable and not welcome. In November, representatives from all sides met in Dayton, Ohio, to negotiate a new political system for the beleaguered land. Bosnian Serb President Karadzic had been indicted (although not apprehended) as a war criminal by the UN tribunal at The Hague. Milosevic took charge of the negotiations for the Serbs, pushing aside the Bosnian Serb delegation. He was a fitting substitute, since he had masterminded the start of the war from Belgrade.¹¹ The political world focused on the drama of a contest between the forceful and cunning Holbrooke, and the mendacious and wily Milosevic. No one was invited to formally or informally represent the women of Bosnia, who had been pushing for peace throughout the conflict. The goal was to get a deal as quickly as possible, to end the killing and stop the political hemorrhaging.

The Dayton Agreement, which established a governance structure for the postconflict period, required all sides to turn in those indicted for war crimes. That portion of the agreement failed for two reasons: It didn’t provide an enforcement mechanism for recalcitrant local authorities who ignored or protected

the alleged criminals, and under U.S. leadership the international military force made a conscious decision during the first years of its presence not to go after war criminals and turn them in to the international tribunal at The Hague. With many of those responsible for the depravity of the war left in place—some even as police chiefs and mayors—most refugees could not safely return to their communities. Thus the imbalance caused by ethnic cleansing in large part continued, and the large ethnic majorities strengthened the hands of nationalists. At the end of the day, despite whatever was written on paper about a unified country, Bosnia was divided between two “political entities”: Republika Srpska (controlled by Bosnian Serbs) and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (controlled by Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats). The economy was in shambles. The population was grieving. Electricity was sporadic. Had Dayton been implemented, Bosnia would have been limping, but on the road to recovery. Instead, the military elements (separating of forces and turning in heavy weapons) were quickly enforced, while the civilian efforts were stymied.

In the spring of 1996, there was a general shuffle of populations in response to the maps drawn at Dayton. In some cases the shifts were voluntary; more often, they were sparked by death threats and other forms of harassment—by enemies, or extremist bullies within the person’s own ethnic group. The most notable example is the exodus I witnessed of 100,000 Serbs from Sarajevo suburbs, after the neighborhood was defined as part of the Federation. They were both fearful of living under Bosniak rule and hounded by hysterical warnings of their own leaders that they would not be safe if they stayed. Thus DANICA, longing to go home, watched with enormous anticipation. But her hopes were dashed, as she was left to reconstruct life within lines on maps drawn by political leaders intent on keeping control of the territorial spoils of war. *In a way, a miracle happened at Dayton. But the Serbs didn’t resist leaving towns given to the Federation. They had burnt everything they could, and no house was inhabitable. Refugees who had fled came over the weekends (if they were nearby) or once a month (if they were in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, or Croatia). Without water and electricity, they rebuilt their own homes. I know one town. I’ve no idea how they’ve managed. Some humanitarian aid, there are chicken farms . . . but people had to build a bakery and a post office. They’re living an almost normal life—it’s unbelievable—with the little money they earned in Germany or Austria. People came back despite everything, because it’s still their home—and they had no other place to go.*

As Danica talked on about towns in her home region, I got the sense of a process that was almost capricious. *According to Dayton, one of the towns in my can-*

ton was returned to the Federation. Out of eight, just one. As if it were accidental. One morning, they said, "Odzak is back." None of us could believe it. I talked to a general from that area. "Have you heard?" he said. "Odzak has been returned to us by Dayton!" And I said, "My God, that's amazing! People will go back to my husband's village!" He told me, "My wife and my children called and said, 'Guess what! We're free! We can go back home!' Nobody can believe it!" Then he added, "But what good is it if we all return? What are we going to do with Odzak without other towns around it?" You see, those places are connected by the river. [She has been drawing a detailed map.] The entire populace used to work in a neighboring town. They need to go there — otherwise there's no industry. Dayton was signed, and that's that. This place is yours, but you can't do anything with it.

Danica wraps up, reflecting on the decade: *During the war, every negotiation gave us hope. Even though little has been implemented, every person knows when the peace was signed. The greatest joy is, of course, that the war stopped. But if Dayton had been carried out, I'd be home. Instead, look at me. I'm here, just like the day it was signed, thinking the same things, wishing the same things. All these years since Dayton, so many people are waiting. I'll tell you what the agreement means: a little bit of luck, and a lot of sadness.*

That failure resounds despite the international community's attempt to implement the agreement by setting up an office with a whopping seven hundred employees, larger and more expensive than the entire Bosnian government. Multiple nations lent personnel to the office, which meant short tenures (sometimes only a few months), constant turnover, and uneven talent. That inefficient force had an extremely difficult task, since the agreement provided for the country to be divided politically into two parts, essentially to satisfy the Serb aggressors. Assertions that refugees had the right to return with complete "freedom of movement" were undercut when half the country was allowed to be called "Republika Srpska" ("The Serb Republic"). The Serbs' unwritten expectation was clear: nationalist politicians would drag their feet on allowing non-Serb refugees to return until the international peacekeeping forces were pulled out. Then the Republika Srpska could secede from Bosnia and become part of Milosevic's "Greater Serbia." Croat nationalists would follow suit.

Squabbles inside the United States and with our partners undercut the goals of Dayton. The United States whittled down the mandate of the high commissioner, who, it was agreed, would be a European. But the American-led military refused to enforce critical civilian provisions of the agreement. These machinations have huge impact on the women determined to rebuild their country. *Dayton*

condoned everything that happened in this war by recognizing *Republika Srpska*, says EMSUDA. On top of that outrage, she reels off other challenges, such as destroyed property, no jobs, and inept international aid organizations that run roughshod over cultural sensitivities and waste money, often doing harm while trying to do good. Despite her impressive organizational skills and fundraising know-how, she's frustrated with the parade of would-be helpers who move regularly from one world crisis to the next. *I can't stay in contact with the donors, because they keep changing.*

SABIHA chimes in. *In the past year, I've managed to get four women's projects financed by different international organizations. I was able to work without pay in the process, because of money I earned abroad, or I couldn't have helped them get started.¹² Most of the time, the donors give money to the organizations, but don't teach women how to use it. Or they give machines and money for production, but they don't help find a market.*

Many of the women—such as AMNA, in central Bosnia—point to the relationship between aid, economic hardship, and the inability of refugees to return. *The international community gives money to an international organization, and that international organization gives money to another international organization, then the other gives money to the local NGOs, then the NGOs give money to the construction companies, and the construction companies build houses. Every level takes a percentage. So if you have one million at the beginning, it could be half a million by the time it gets to the beneficiaries.*

Heavy middle-management cost is not the only problem with the delivery of aid. There's a gap between the plans of providers and the actual needs of the recipients trying to eke out an existence. *Returnees were promised their houses would be reconstructed. Not completely—just two rooms with electricity and water. They would've been completely happy with even that. But the international community gave them just the houses. And a house without electricity isn't useful during winter. And if you have a house but no employment, what can you do? You'll have nothing to eat. The houses were reconstructed by the end of the year. The next year they'll get electricity. The year after that we'll get to employment. It's too much to ask. Ultimately, the return of displaced people depends on the economy. But whenever we raise that, decision makers say something like: "Yes, but in central Bosnia there are thousands and thousands of returnees, and we have to feed them." Amna distills her frustration into a policy formulation: *If you want aid to be sustainable, you can't dole it out in small pieces. If you're going to give help, then give help.**

Amna conjectures that even with a functioning economy, only half the dis-

placed people will return to their homes from abroad. They've become relatively comfortable. They have new jobs, new neighbors, and the basics of a stable life. There's also a more pernicious reason people are still displaced: fear. After all, hostile acts—death threats, grenades tossed into houses in the middle of the night, intimidation by masked men—drove them from their homes. No one is guaranteeing them protection if they come back. *They know they'll be a minority when they return. And because of that they'll have problems with electricity, with telephone connections, with whatever. They'll have problems in a shop, when they want to buy something. Storekeepers will say, "There's nothing for you here."* That's all assuming they would have money with which to shop. As Amna explains: *Our economy is in deep trouble. Even many who weren't displaced are unemployed; and those with jobs, whether private or public sector, can't pay their electricity bills. They're not sure if next month they'll have the same income, or lower, or any at all.*

No situation represents a greater challenge than the restoration of the remnant of the community of Srebrenica, in eastern Bosnia. As a step toward eventual return, the international community has organized "confidence-building" visits, small steps toward normalization, such as an excursion so that expelled citizens can look at their former homes from a bus window. Widows from Srebrenica, including KADA, went back for an extremely emotional and politically charged visit to their hometown, now inhabited by Serbs who came from other areas, such as Sarajevo. The result of that population switch is a nonsensical mismatch of urban dwellers in a small town, and rural refugees living in the capital: *I don't know anyone who has an answer to our problem. The way things are now isn't good for Serbs or for us. I was in Srebrenica a while back for lunch with the Serb women who live there now. The spirit was tolerable. We were trying to understand each other. We didn't insult each other, but each of us talked about the hardships from her own point of view. Everybody blames somebody else. Nobody thinks she's guilty herself.*

The organizers were happy to keep this occasion as low-key as possible, but Kada isn't sympathetic with that careful approach. *Those of us who were kicked out of Srebrenica met the Serbs at the hotel. There was not a single journalist, no TV. I asked, "Are you hiding this meeting from your townspeople?" But I saw how in Srebrenica life is awful. It's a dying town. The streets have become narrower. Nobody cuts the weeds. All the mosques are destroyed. There was one called "the white mosque," with a graveyard around it. There were pigs running around—a desecration! When we lived there, not even chickens were allowed there, and the grass was always trimmed. We took a short walk, two or three of us. I asked the women living there: "Don't you believe in God? These are graves! Animals never walked around this place. Aren't you afraid of God's curse?"*

One of them said, "Hmph" and made a sign with her hands, like she was helpless. I don't know why they're not doing anything in Srebrenica.

Kada is appalled by the overgrown hedges, roses and grapevines running wild. There are places you still can't walk, because they haven't been cleaned up. In such a short time it looks so awful. Just a few more cobwebs, and it would be a perfect setting for horror films. One street with the old, traditional houses that had craft shops was completely destroyed. They haven't cleared up the very center of the town. I cried when I was taking that walk. And when I looked at the building where my flat was, I wished I could go up there. Then I promised myself, "I'm coming back to live in Srebrenica."

As homes have been reconstructed, they've been burned down again by Serb extremists. Mob violence, bomb attacks, beatings, and murder have increased as sporadic returns of refugees have occurred. Returnees have spent months in tents, waiting for construction materials from aid organizations.¹³ In spite of the obstacles, Kada sees some movement. I think they're now working toward return. The Serbs aren't using ethnic slurs anymore, but it seems to me it's because of money more than anything else. As it is now, in Srebrenica there's no life. It's impossible to live there until industry is restarted. They haven't even reconstructed the water supply or electricity. What was destroyed during the siege looks even worse now. They live in terrible misery. In contrast, many of the homes deserted by the Serbs who fled the capital after Dayton now are inhabited by refugees from Srebrenica. The result has an ironic twist. Even as refugees, we live much better than these Serbs who took over our town. We're living on their land here, near Sarajevo. We till that land. We work it. We trim the hedges, cut the grass, grow flowers. If they come back to their property, they'll find everything in order.

It's difficult to figure out a good entry point to address such a convoluted situation. Donors who set up employment programs often taught women skills like knitting and sewing that would not enable them to be competitive in the modern labor market. In some cases, women with prior professional careers were offered courses that represented "de-skilling."¹⁴ I was a member of an NGO. At the beginning, it was like psychotherapy. Later we had some support from women from the States and from Canada that we were paired with. My "sister" in Canada sent me a bit of money—about \$20 a month. Half went to the organization because they were supposedly training me. The idea was to train women in some skill so they could support themselves. But these were rough skills, like upholstering. A woman isn't fit for doing that. She could do it, but to be trained, she should have an upholstering workshop. Instead, they put up some old sewing machines, and they had an old retired man with trembling hands to teach us to thread that old machine. One day they brought a curtain

to be made. That old man was teaching me, but I told him that I could do it myself. I made the curtain. They spread it out and took a picture of it—as advertising for the project, even though I already knew how to sew before. I left. It was useless. A lot of projects are complete failures. It's a misuse and an abuse. Four or five well-educated people running a program, earning big salaries. They aren't teaching anybody anything new. It's just a way for the humanitarian aid professionals to justify their salaries. And then comes the obvious conclusion, an understated warning to would-be helpers. The donors should be careful.

The flaws of the aid delivery system pale next to the flagrant postwar corruption and abuse of power of Bosnians themselves, with estimates of up to a billion aid dollars having been stolen by government officials from all three ethnic groups. Millions were unaccounted for by Izetbegovic's party officials. Croat extremists siphoned funds to create parallel political structures in their proposed territory. And indicted Serb leader Radovan Karadzic purportedly has special police on his payroll.¹⁵ Meanwhile, KRISTINA describes how she's trying to survive on a small stipend that doesn't cover her bills. She adds ruefully: *People who before had nothing are suddenly rich, while my family, who was stable, is barely surviving.* Despite these challenges, Kristina is optimistic about the difference she can make in the rebuilding of her hometown. A Bosnian Serb herself, she describes how a Muslim schoolteacher—her former colleague—came back to Sipovo for a meeting, after having fled to Sarajevo as a refugee during the ethnic cleansing of the war. *When the rest of us saw her come in, we all hugged her and cried. I think that says it all. Men would never have done that.*



Olympic Village on the outskirts of Sarajevo. December 1995.