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Women Transforming

ALMA: *A Muslim woman — by religious rules — should be only a homemaker. But Bosnian women work. It's not like Algeria or some other place where they're fighting for basic rights. We should help the women of Kabul. Bosniak women are an inspiration for women all over the world.*

AMNA: *When I went into technical engineering, I was told, "That's for men, not women." They said I'd never finish, but I did — and graduate school too. Still, women hold themselves back — women themselves! We've got to be tough! [She pounds the table, smiling.] We girls have to be ten times better than boys to be recognized as equal. Fortunately, that's possible.*

MIRHUNISA: *Balkan men say my work is men's work. Well, if it's men's work, what does that make me? And how do I know how to do the job?*

EMSUDA: *At some point women just have to take over situations and make decisions. We've got to take responsibility.*

BILJANA: *Every woman will tell you: If women were ruling the country, there would never be a war.*

When over five hundred women gathered in June 1996 in the capital of Bosnia, they called their conference "Women Transforming Themselves and Society." At the request of Nurdzihana and other planners, I helped secure funding and key-noted the conference. This was the first such attempt at bringing citizens together across ethnic lines since the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in Paris six months earlier. I didn't tell the planners I found the name of the conference over-reaching.

I was wrong. At a conceptual level, the women were correct in asserting how critical they were to the postwar transformation that lay ahead. Their importance was at least threefold: They held key jobs as professionals and academics, exerted great influence on their families at home, and one in five actually headed a household.

But the women were right in another sense as well. The grand optimism of their conference title was matched by their determination to turn rhetoric into reality.¹ They were successful in spreading the word of the gathering, even though telephone (and fax) service was unreliable for technical reasons and blocked for political reasons. Many delegates made their way across illegal military checkpoints from Republika Srpska, risking retribution against themselves and their already traumatized families. Clearly these were women with a mission, embracing the huge problems staring them in the face. In doing so, they were transforming themselves—from victims, into healers.

For all the frustration that comes along with mending of a war-wrecked society, in my dealings with hundreds of Bosnians I saw how those who felt themselves engaged and acting with purpose had the greatest opportunity for joy, however minute or grand.² In that sense, Bosnian women leaders were typical of hundreds of women across the new democracies of Eastern Europe who came together for another conference I organized in Vienna in July 1997, called “Vital Voices: Women in Democracy.” Women across the region have coalesced in new alliances, leading the large majority of NGOs that have emerged as the building blocks of postcommunist civil society. This development makes sense to ALENKA, who comments, *Women have smaller, but more concrete agendas: everyday life, homes, children.* But she goes further to apply the principle to stabilizing a fragile post-conflict situation. *We have common ground with women across any divide. We don't fight in the army or think hierarchically, and we reconcile easily. We're not afraid to go to the other side. Maybe that's because everyone knows we weren't carrying guns; we weren't in the death squads.*

JELKA chimes in. *Women bring a positive, hopeful perspective into the family. That's important since now, after the war, there's still a fear among young people—especially boys. Long after the shooting stopped, my younger son still couldn't cross the bridge to the western part of Mostar. Young men were being murdered, because they had been soldiers. It took a long time before he dared cross, even to visit his grandparents. Since men were in the military, it's not easy for them to recreate relationships with their former enemies. That's why women are the solution!*

Jelka is suddenly energized by the thought of women moving into leadership.

I can't stand seeing only men in the parliament, deciding on maternity leave and how much freedom they want to give women. I'm not too old to start changing things. During the war, I frequently went to donate blood. Men fainted, and women propped them up.

It's not only a fascinating question but also an important one, whether women are better suited to deal with the delicate and dangerous situations of war. MAJA, a physician and administrator maneuvering life in the middle of the fighting in Mostar, believes so. *I knew how to handle the paramilitaries who got out of control. I'd have them sit down, offer them something to drink, and tell them everything was OK. Finally I'd see them off, and we'd all take a deep breath. It was a different way of resolving conflict. Men are more aggressive, but women are more courageous.*

Jelka's and Maja's strong views about women's abilities are widely held. Of the twenty-six women I interviewed, all but one insisted that Bosnian women were committed to values antithetical to the war, and that now that the war is over, they are a force for the restoration of their country. In the United States, religious institutions have been a primary training ground for women whose lay service has been a stepping stone to political and civic leadership. In contrast, Croatian women in Zagreb expressed to me their unease that Tudjman's nationalism had given the Roman Catholic Church greater influence in Croatian society, with a concomitant theme of bringing women back to the hearth. I heard the same concern addressed in Belgrade with reference to the Orthodox faith, which was being nourished by Milosevic's nationalism. In Bosnia, intelligence reports described Islamic extremists requiring that women receiving aid cover their heads, a step toward keeping them "in their place." Thus the circle was complete. War fueled the influence of traditional religions that demanded the withdrawal of women from decision-making positions where they might be a moderating influence on the war.

Pulling against those pressures, the women I met with are leading essential community-based initiatives—running for office, helping the traumatized, repairing houses, producing a radio program, directing a summer camp—despite daunting challenges. VESNA sounds at first like any energized activist. *Whatever I've been through, there are others who've endured much, much more. They somehow manage to keep on. So how can I think of giving up? I'd lose a lot—not society, but me.* But when she talks matter-of-factly about starting an NGO, she does so as a woman traumatized by being on the run for years: reunited with her husband, who was severely beaten, then in exile; caring for a father-in-law who lost part of his leg to a land mine; working in a society without a tradition of charitable organizations; dealing with a scandalously inflammatory press; depending on un-

reliable outside donors; and enduring discrimination in a culture where women are trivialized. In short, organizers like Vesna are overcoming obstacles that I, as an onlooker, could never fully appreciate.

Joining the Political Battle

NURDZIHANA: "Can't." Politicians always "can't" do something. The truth is, this current situation suits many politicians. They have more wealth and power than ever, and they want to preserve that status.

KAROLINA: Women stop conflicts by negotiating. They negotiate with their husbands all the time. When a man wants war, his wife doesn't; so she'll try to stop him. Pity we don't have more women in politics. Problem is, men don't trust women. They think they're the stronger sex; but — except physically — we women are stronger in everything.

JELKA: In Mostar, any good effort can be destroyed in an instant by politics. But through organizations like mine — and the work of women — we can pressure our politicians from the grassroots. A politician can never identify himself as the leader of the whole population. There's an alternative to whatever he does — people like me, who don't agree with him.

MEDIHA: There's plenty women can do in politics, here and everywhere else. No country is so richly endowed that it needs only half its brainpower. But we need to fight not to be left out of the game. Imagine a country doubling its brains, by including women.

After the war, Bosnian women choosing a political route to help stabilize their country were swimming against the strong current that swept away the strong gender representation prevalent in most socialist countries. Women were not integral to the inner sanctum of policymaking before the transition from communism to democracy. But as a new chapter of freedom was being written, ironically, Eastern European women found themselves even more poorly represented. Although communist parliaments were little more than rubber stamp bodies, women were at least visible, their presence ensured by state-imposed

quotas. To some extent, that ruse was pernicious, since communist leaders could crow over gender parity when the reality was quite different. But women's stature decreased significantly as the pretense of political representation was replaced by a transparent reality of nonrepresentation after the fall of communism.³

In Tito's Yugoslavia, women tended to be well represented at the lower levels, such as urban councils, but their numbers decreased as the government body became more politically important. With the demise of Tito, the number of women in upper-level government across Yugoslavia plummeted.⁴ But women continued to organize, for example, protesting the wars in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo. In May 1999, women in southern Serbia took to the streets to demand that their sons and husbands not be sent back into Kosovo, sparking widespread mutinies that helped undermine Milosevic domestically.⁵

To further strengthen the voice of women in Bosnian politics, in 1998 I invited Nada and five other women to help organize a conference of women across Bosnia's political parties. The five women, representing the three largest nationalist groups, a women's party, and two multiethnic coalitions, came to Washington for a series of meetings at venues such as the State Department and the U.S. Institute of Peace. Their parties' leaders had caused incalculable dislocation, loss, and pain to the Bosnian people. Still, over the course of a several-day collaboration, the five put aside their reasons to hate and managed to find common ground. Returning to Bosnia, our organizing group invited every political party (dozens had sprung up) to send representatives to a conference I chaired in Sarajevo, titled "Women: A New Political Future." Two hundred women came from over two dozen political parties—a remarkable 40 percent from Republika Srpska, many visiting the capital for the first time since the beginning of the war six years earlier. This conference, cosponsored by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and my private foundation, helped create a momentum. One result was a rule requiring that women be one in three candidates distributed evenly throughout all party lists.

Similarly, in December 2000 I chaired a meeting in Belgrade to reunite more than ninety women from across the former Yugoslavia who had organized democratic election campaigns to oust the nationalists who'd brought ruin to their country. In all these gatherings, the women were filled with energy and ideas of what they could do to promote women's role in politics. Frankly speaking, engaging in electoral politics meant joining bad company. For example, after being a local leader in the prewar Communist Party, MAJA left the political scene when it turned nationalistic in the early 1990s. That decision led to the loss of her hospital management position. *When the rigid parties were formed, I dropped any political*

affiliation and put my white physician's coat back on. As a human being, I found it too constraining to belong to a party just out of nationalist sentiment. I completed my term of office, handed over my things to the HDZ, and went back to my professional work, which I'd never stopped anyway.

Now Maja is free to say: *I want to speak frankly, with no political agenda—although all life is politics, and you can't avoid it completely.* Even more interesting is her commentary on the relationship between gender and politics. *When I was appointed to political office, I knew it wouldn't last forever, so leaving wasn't that difficult. It's easier for women to give up official positions without psychological complications. Maybe that's because I always believed I was first a mother, then everything else. That's basic to my framework somehow. Men are motivated more by careers, and belonging to a party is a precondition to advancing those careers. Women are probably less ambitious in that way. Their views are more refined.* Maja seems ambivalent about leaving politics, in part because she wants to stand up for women. *In Bosnia and Herzegovina it's always been hard for women. When I chaired meetings where I was one of just a couple of women, I'd say to my male colleagues, "I envy you. You don't have to be smart and elegant, and you can vent all you want." I could never behave like that. Still, today I'm the only woman doctor working with eight men.*

One of the scars of the war is the great increase in ethnic-based divisions. Damage in Bosnia extended beyond the official war years. During the conflict and immediately afterward, I frequently met Bosniak leaders of government and business who took pride in pointing out to me their closest colleagues who were Bosnian Croat, Bosnian Serb, or from a mixed marriage. But in the years following the Dayton Agreement, which reserved political positions for people who identified themselves by ethnicity, nationalists controlled the agenda and ethnic identity became much, much more important. The powerful SDA political party, for example, devolved into a group of Bosniaks led almost exclusively by men, many of whom were widely suspected of corruption and who demonstrated very little of the vision required to restore the multicultural society that existed before the war. Sitting next to me at the one-year memorial service in Tuzla for those massacred at Srebrenica, an SDA leader dismissed the extraordinary role of TANJA, who was calling the world's attention to the plight of the 30,000 Bosniak survivors. "But she's a Serb," he muttered, with disdain.

Tanja was a member of the seven-person Bosnian presidency, but after the war she rejected the nationalist Serb line and insisted on an independent affiliation. That decision cost her a public role in the postwar government, since the new regime was essentially the spoils of the nationalists on different sides. Tempted to abandon politics altogether, she observes: *If everybody who wants a better life*

did that, we'd get nowhere. She remembers the war years. I was the only woman in the highest rank of politics, although we have a lot of educated, multilingual women who could have filled those jobs. Women are much more flexible, and they bring charm into negotiations. They constantly think of life rooted in their concern for their families. But at high-level meetings, I don't see a single woman except Madeleine Albright. It's a disaster, a parade of one man after another after another.

Given her stint in politics, Tanja has done considerable reflecting on the gender aspects of her experience. *Men can't stand having accomplished women around; but women, too, are reluctant. Many are oriented toward their husbands, and they don't easily accept a role outside. The problem doesn't stem from school. We have a lot of educated women. But in our tradition, a woman's place is at home. This view of women permeates society. Seldom can you find women executives, although before the war there were women managers of companies—more than now.* Tanja's words reminded me of a visit I made to the city bread factory a week after the war ended, at the suggestion of President Alija Izetbegovic. After a fascinating hour with the five managers, during which they pointed out to me their ethnic diversity, I pointed out, in turn, that they were all men. They seemed surprised that gender was raised as an issue, then gave me examples of women in positions of leadership before the war. The men, however, didn't see anything strange about a workplace with 70 percent of the general employees women, and all six of the highest decision makers men. Hence the importance of Tanja's final thought: *Unless it's legally mandated, men will never let them have their rights. Women need to speak out more.*

That same spirit of obligation is shared by МЕДИНА, who represented a liberal multiethnic party as the only woman in the National Parliament immediately after the war ended. *We women are a force no one can stop, but we have to fight for our place, even in our own parties. We can't just wait around to be invited.* Meanwhile, NADA, representing Biljana Plavsic's party, was one of two women out of eighty-three members in the Republika Srpska parliament.⁶ She's much less intentional than Mediha, describing herself as swept into public office just by not refusing to be on the party list. But she adds: *We women were merely decoration. During the war, all that mattered was that a politician was a nationalist. I thought I could change that, but I couldn't.* Nada didn't fight to maintain her place on the party list, and for the next election she was dropped down to number thirteen. Her party won twelve seats.

Nada's discouragement about whether women can make a difference is not uncommon. There's a camouflage effect as women who rise within male-constructed and dominated systems often assume characteristics of the men they depend on for success. In addition, the prevailing role expectations (based on

male performance in those roles) demand compromises in content and style. Afraid they'll not be taken seriously if they "act like women," many try to blend in with the men around them. Their reluctance to express countervailing perspectives diminishes the mix of ideas brought to the table. The larger the number of women, the less they need to act like men. To build the numbers, VESNA, with Nurdzihana, helped organize a League of Women Voters of Bosnia and Herzegovina, to encourage women to run for office and to vote. The organization formed a partnership with the American mother organization, which conducted training sessions for Bosnian women.⁷ The Bosnian League has taken on issues of particular concern to women, such as maternity leave, asking women in parliament to band together across party lines. Can such an unusual initiative succeed in a former communist country? *We can, we have to, and we will*, Vesna asserts.

Bosnian women have found ways to be politically active despite the extreme challenges of war, engaging inside and outside the official system to help restore their country — and restore themselves in the process. In addition to participating in humanitarian projects that aided people of all ethnicities, FAHRIJA organized a letter-writing campaign to President Clinton even while she was a refugee in Buffalo, New York. *I know he didn't open all those letters, but somebody had to, and so I was helping spread the truth about what was going on in my country.* Similarly, while living as a journalist in Moscow, in addition to gathering aid to send home, SABIHA gathered signatures from over a hundred Russian intellectuals to protest the war. Sixty showed up for her press conference to demand a lift of the siege of Sarajevo by the Serbs, even though they were political cousins to the Russians. Despite her own activity, Sabiha isn't optimistic about women in politics. *I've been working with women's organizations for twenty years. I was president of several, and I've thought a lot about the psychology of all this. There's a lot of hypocrisy. Women don't stand up for women political leaders. There's solidarity among male politicians, but not among women — even though women are the most vulnerable.*

Women may be more successful at political action from outside, directed at the system. MIRHUNISA worked with refugees from the Srebrenica massacre, to help them organize into a potent political force. *There were various groups, each identifying itself as representing the women of Srebrenica. Trust was a challenge. How could I convince a woman who'd lost her whole family, "Listen to me, I'm telling you the truth!" A group came to my office. I told them, "You can't accomplish anything piecemeal like this. You need an official association. You've got to organize, form a committee, create an initiative." That's how these associations of women started. Later they had some problems, but that scene in my office was the most important moment I ever witnessed.*

KADA has been one of the leaders of that grassroots political movement. She describes how tens of thousands of people waited in 1995 for help by the international community. While the Serb army forces tightened their noose, a natural leadership selection process was underway within the UN-designated “safe area.” *We had to get organized—out of the clear blue sky. Simple people had to take charge to try to protect us. We created some diversions and stole a few weapons from the Chetniks, but we didn’t have any way to defend ourselves. Forty guns among us, and we were surrounded by tanks. As if the victims must answer for their victimization, she asks: What could we have done? Is there some genius out there who can say?*

The Bosniaks who had gathered from the surrounding rural area had been left to their own devices as their men and boys were rounded up and executed. But now the women were in charge of their own survival. According to UN estimates, some thirty-five thousand women, elderly, and children flooded into Tuzla, where they waited in tents on the airport tarmac, anticipating the arrival of thousands of boys and men who had, unbeknown to them, been massacred. *We asked the government officials where the men were who had stayed behind in Srebrenica. We went to the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent.⁸ When they didn’t want to listen to us, we took to the streets and protested. Week after week passed. The women became desperate for word of their missing sons and husbands. Their protests became noisier.*

For Kada and her wounded community, inaction is dangerously close to complicity with the aggressors. Years of fear and deprivation during the siege of Srebrenica, followed by a melee of widespread rape and killing, were capped off by an international community that mostly ignored the needs of victims. We can ensure that international troops have gymnasium equipment to keep morale high, while traumatized women and children are lucky if they have four walls and a roof to keep them dry. The survivors have formed several associations and launched dozens of initiatives—including street protests that paralyze the traffic in the capital—to pressure local and international governments to respond to their plight. Progress has not been in a straight line. Distrust among different groups of survivors has led to infighting. Local politicians have used the survivors for their own purposes. But Kada keeps at it. In a sense, political action has moved into the space left vacant by the destruction of Kada’s family. *Now we have an organization to look for the missing, to demand an answer about the fate of 10,000 people. As an individual, I can’t do anything, but as an association we’re strong.*

Opting for change, not charity, Kada has learned that political action is not only about influencing others. It’s also about preserving her last shred of self-



Mostar café life. July 1997.

respect. That sense of self is critical, for ultimately she has no one to turn to except herself. *If I hold myself back, I can't expect someone to come along and rescue me.* In fact, even comfort from others comes at an unacceptable price. *No one can feel the pain of my wound. They can only show compassion. Then I feel like I've become a beggar. I feel better when I protest.*

Easing the Anguish

IRMA: *In the war, women were calmer. They faced it: "Okay, we have to survive.*

We have to eat. We have to find water. We have to figure this out."

GALINA: *Talking to people touches my soul, and then I know what to do.*

Several women I met with are running programs addressing the physical and psychological anguish of war survivors. They understand that trauma is the enemy of trust, and that trust is a basic building block in the reconstruction of

their society. For example, returning from her own concentration camp and exile experience, EMSUDA made a point of visiting other refugee camps. *I saw people I knew — intellectuals and entrepreneurs — now destroyed, just staring into the mud. They asked the same questions a hundred times, or wouldn't say a word. I thought to myself, they need me.* Emsuda trains community organizers who must work in a context of fear of indicted war criminals still on the loose. She includes among her trainees Bosnian Serbs, a difficult feat for a woman who endured a Serb concentration camp. In addition to her training workshops, Emsuda has founded two nongovernmental organizations and arranged educational opportunities outside the country for hundreds of Bosnian children.

Along the same lines, during the war, KAROLINA organized an art group, really to maintain her sanity, she says. As the siege stretched on, year after year, friends brought her paints and brushes through the tunnel under the Sarajevo airport, which teenaged Irma used for her escape. With about \$600 from the Open Society Institute,⁹ Karolina furnished a studio from a space with all the windows blown out. Now her group puts on exhibits and sells crafts. Even though she can't make ends meet, the profits from the sales go to support the mentally retarded. *I've gone through some hard times, but the colors I use are vivid and bright — which means I still have some life inside.*

In addition to her political work, VESNA has helped start a church-sponsored NGO called "Antonia," using sewing and knitting to raise funds to take care of vulnerable people, particularly elderly and women. Professionals among the volunteers offer various services and training. *The women we help arrive uncertain and timid, but they leave feeling like they've received the greatest gift in the world, just because someone took the time to teach them.* In Mostar, ALMA has organized women veterans of the war, like herself, to create jobs (in greenhouses, for example) and to support each other emotionally as they deal with problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder, from which she herself suffers. *We're the women who stayed in the country throughout the war instead of going somewhere and waiting for humanitarian aid. All those days and nights in the trenches, rained on, rescuing people, nursing them. We'll overcome our trauma now only if we have jobs. We don't yet have the laws and regulations we need. But then a wheel can't roll 200 miles an hour. Slowly but surely . . .*

In the heart of Republika Srpska is GALINA, caring for refugees in Banja Luka. The city was mixed ethnically before the war; during the war, it became a Serb stronghold. When I talked with Galina about the mosques and Roman Catholic churches that were razed,¹⁰ she said she doesn't want her home city to be singled

out as a symbol of Serb aggression. Instead, she insisted that the physical destruction and the flood of Croats and Muslims leaving the city was the unfortunate result of Serb refugees pouring into Banja Luka from other regions and forcing non-Serbs out of their homes in the city. She wanted to be sure I know that one million Serbs have left their homes. *Who knows how or why, including 90 percent of the Serbs in Mostar and Tuzla.* Galina seemed unaware that both cities she named were being shelled by Serbs during the war.¹¹ It wasn't fruitful to get into a back and forth with her about who started what, and who reacted to whom. Whatever the order of the expulsions, she says, *It was really hell.* In our conversation, she let wars become intertwined across decades, underscoring the cumulative psychological and physical effect of deprivation and violence. *Some people went from one war into another without being aware the first one ever stopped.* Galina echoed the sentiments swirling among ethnic Serbs throughout Yugoslavia, as the media and politicians revived memories of World War II concentration camps in Croatia, where hundreds of thousands of Serbs perished. *Half the local people I've talked with were in camps. They keep saying, "In that war, mothers and fathers were killed, just like now." There was a lot of mistrust. And when there's mistrust, it's easy to manipulate the citizenry.* Ultimately, however, it's not propaganda or politics but people Galina cares about. *I've seen so many tortured faces and held the hands of honest, hard-working peasants. Even under socialism, they always suffered most. Some of them never had enough to eat. And now they're hungry once more, and again there's war. They say, "First my father, now my grandson."*

By mid-1995, Franjo Tudjman had built up a strong fighting force to expel the Serbs occupying a large portion of Croatia. A ground offensive of combined Croat and Bosniak military, together with NATO bombing, drove the Serbs back. Now Serbs were fleeing the same areas from which Croats and Bosniaks had earlier been driven. As the fortunes of war reversed, streams of Serb civilians poured into Banja Luka ahead of advancing Croat and Bosniak troops. Galina's wartime and postwar work was sparked by scenes passing on the street beneath her. *I saw so much from only one window. The stories are almost endless. There was a vocational school near my house. Serb refugees from Croatia started coming there in late 1991. One cold and rainy night I looked out and saw some cars and tractors, with women and children soaking wet. It was dark—around 9 P.M.—when I went out to see who they were and where they came from. They were sitting in the bare school corridor, hungry. Everything was closed—shops, the Red Cross office. Nothing was being organized. My home was across the road. In my fridge I had a packet of margarine, some lettuce, a little bread. They needed much more, but with my half a loaf I fed some kids who were*

the hungriest. The next day I took them some cookies, and I started looking for their lost family members. They didn't know where their fathers and mothers were.

That was the day I started this work, and every day since I've been with the refugees. In '93 and '94 they came from central Bosnia, around Sarajevo, and near Mostar. We filled the schools as makeshift shelters. In '95, ten thousand people arrived in one long stream. Twenty-four hours earlier all those people had been in their homes, frightened. Now they were homeless, and who knew for how long? If they had been vagabonds, maybe I'd have felt differently. But they were people like me: teachers, professors, doctors, landowners. Children who were well cared for, with their own beds, toys, TV sets. Suddenly they'd lost everything. They were hungry and afraid. The images were surreal. Tractors loaded down with furniture, people, and pigs. Lines strung up for drying clothes. Old women knitting in the middle of it all. A few of us women took some hot loaves of bread up to a truck. Someone said, "Hey, lady, bring us that bread! There's an old woman here who hasn't eaten for three days." But at another, a man said, "Forget the bread! There's a woman here we need to bury; and take this new mother to the hospital." The grandmother had died on the truck, and the granddaughter was lying there in blood from giving birth.

Galina created a system of emergency medical response, bringing doctors to the refugees' trucks or tractors, or to the "collective center" set up in the school. The doctors examined hundreds of children; we'd take the sick ones in our car to the hospital. Then we began visiting the hospitals. The wounded men were soldiers and were taken care of by their families, one way or another. But the wounded women . . . In '92, women were injured either on the front line or by snipers and shells from across the river. Some had been imprisoned in their houses and in camps.

In the face of this suffering, Galina created the NGO "Duga" ("Rainbow"), gathering some seventy women at a time to commit for one to three years of service to the most vulnerable among the refugees. The members operate with the guiding principle, she says, of do no harm—which seems rather rudimentary until one remembers that "Duga" is operating in a world in which violence has become, if not the norm, then commonplace. They provide everything from direct care to hand-knitted sweaters. Galina gave me one of their handmade dolls when I visited her in Banja Luka. With proceeds from sales, they managed to get an office. But this is a shoestring operation, with volunteer members compensated occasionally with the likes of an \$8 bus ticket, or perhaps a meal.

*It's clear, as she speaks, that Galina's focus is on the individuals she's helped. She's opened herself up to the pain that now permeates her city, and one story follows another: *A woman refugee had a baby in Banja Luka. While she was giving birth, they removed a tumor. She lost a huge amount of blood. We took care of her in the**

hospital for three months, and I brought her to my place to bathe her. The day after the operation she learned everybody from her region had had to evacuate. She didn't know if anyone had survived or if she'd ever see them again. Many of us made calls to help her look for family members. Through an NGO, we found her husband in a camp in Croatia. She was desperate to get a message to him.

Galina's word portraits are painted with not only vulnerability but also human connection. One young woman was so modest and miserable. We'd tell her, "No, we don't have clothes, but we do have some flour." But whatever we offered, she'd say, "No, I don't want that," or "I'll come back tomorrow." I finally realized—and explained to our psychologist—that what she needed most was to be with people, and if she was given the physical things she needed, she wouldn't have a reason to come again. Every time she came, I'd hug her. I think she was coming for that touch—that small touch of life. Once I took her into the kitchen and asked her, "Who are you? Where do you come from? Where's your husband?" She said her husband was on the front, and she had no word about him. She had a small baby. Her mother-in-law was calling her names. It was a general mess. She was so fragile; she actually just came to hear some kind words directed toward her. We worked with her about six months. I used to tell her, "You just sit here on this chair. I'll look after things. Don't worry about anything." If there'd been an earthquake, I would've stayed there with her. It felt good knowing I was helping someone who needed me.

The first time I met her, in early 1996, Galina introduced me to half a dozen Serb women who related to me terrible experiences they'd experienced during the counteroffensive. One of those women was Radmila, from a nearby village. Galina told me more of her story. She was with about twenty other people, mostly women and children, in a house. The Muslim "Green Berets"¹² threw a grenade in, and then massacred them. She fell first, and the other bodies fell on top of her. After the voices of the soldiers stopped, she crawled out. She was the only one who wasn't killed, but she was severely wounded. The night of the attack, she'd sent two of her children to her mother's place in a Serb village, so they survived.

For two months, she was in shock—couldn't speak. We learned she was five months pregnant, and her husband had been killed. Father-in-law, mother-in-law, uncle, sister-in-law, three brothers-in-law—they were all killed. I used to bring soup to her, or trim her nails and hair, with other women from Duga. We asked her if she wanted to see her children. She didn't react. But the nurse noticed that at 3 o'clock she'd start looking toward the clock, probably expecting someone. That was the first sort of communication—visual more than anything else. Some emotions were awakening. Eventually she said to me, "I want to see my children." So we brought them to her. [Galina begins to cry.] She said

that for months she'd been afraid they wouldn't recognize her, because they were small, and she was so scarred and in a cast. In fact, the girls didn't recognize her at first. They said she wasn't their mother.

When it came time for her delivery, Radmila was still in bad shape. She practically gave birth between the orthopedic ward and the delivery room. For two more years, she was on the orthopedic ward, trying to heal her legs and arms. She grew psychologically stronger alongside her baby. Galina maneuvered through the war-choked bureaucracy for Radmila, helping her to secure a place to live and open a small shop. Now she and her sister-in-law are raising their six children. The other day, she passed her driving test. We've supported her for over three years. It's precisely this sort of extreme vulnerability that Galina is devoting her life to address. We identify the hardest cases, because we can't help everyone. We organize into two groups: one for logistics, clothes, food, etc. The other works on psychological rehabilitation, which takes longer. These seven years, we've helped five hundred women, spending a full year, on average, with each woman. We select cases where many members of the family have been killed, including a lot of war orphans. We've also worked with raped women. That's profound trauma. A group of thirty-six women from Posavina needed much more care than we were able to offer them; they were shuttled from one shelter to another. And I'm especially sorry for elderly people. These have been hard times.

To be sure I understand that she doesn't buy into the idea of ethnic-based separation, Galina says: *Duga has helped Muslim families too. We brought them a Muslim doctor, took them coffee, clothes, and food. We notified the International Red Cross, who visited them and tried to get them back home. We didn't have the authority to give them back their houses, which are now full of refugees; but as the Muslims were leaving Banja Luka, I felt it deeply and personally. My uncle, a Muslim married to a Serb woman, went to Denmark and my family feels terrible about that. They were rich and lost what they had. We didn't have enough food, and there was mistrust. But they weren't kicked out of their house. They left because they couldn't handle not having enough to feed their grandchildren. Their son is in a mixed marriage; they couldn't go to Muslim cities, because the wife wouldn't be accepted.*

Listening to Galina's account, I wondered how closely her uncle's version of his story would match hers. In the moral confusion of war, Galina's stout effort may have to be couched in myth so that it can bear to exist at all. That doesn't mean her work isn't essential, and, indeed, laudable. Though she fails to acknowledge the ethnic cleansing that drastically changed the composition of her city, she tells me: *We worked with women of other ethnic groups — Muslims and Croats — who remained in Banja Luka when their families had fled. They've trusted us, and we've visited*

them in their homes. We thought it best to go to them. Usually those women are alone. Women stay in their homes till the last minute, after their sons and husbands leave. It's important that they know—and their neighbors know—there's someone behind them, supporting them.

Galina's analysis of the place of NGOs is sophisticated, given that no such organizations existed prior to the war. *An individual can't give the same support as an organization. From '92 onward, we've offered all kinds of help. Duga was the only women's NGO. We applied to foreign sources for funding for lots of projects. In '97, seventy-four outside organizations visited Duga. The next year we had twenty-five more than that. We applied to about thirty of them, but we only got help from five.* Galina is in a particularly tough position, because U.S. aid was conditioned on Republika Srpska's compliance with the Dayton Agreement—for example, letting refugees return to their homes. Harassment and intimidation occurred on all sides, but in the first two years after Dayton, 8,551 Serbs returned to the Federation, compared to 1,125 Croats and Bosniaks to Republika Srpska.¹³ That meant a large disproportion of postconflict aid to the Bosniak/Croat-led Federation. *We've conducted seminars in how to develop businesses. And we've met with organizations in the Federation, because they were way ahead of us in that type of training.* One of the groups with which she met was the feminist collaborative that produced the magazine *Zena 21* in Sarajevo, started by Nurdzihana, with help from Rada. *I was really sorry the international humanitarian organizations didn't come into Republika Srpska until the end of '95, when the peace agreement was signed. By then the Federation already had a lot of projects; but we were alone, fighting for recognition.*

During its first year, Duga gave temporary assistance to more than a thousand people, while about eighty women who had suffered severe war trauma received long-term aid. Galina describes her motivation: *Knowing that people are in need, that there are helpless people who are suffering, I do only what little I can and never promise more than that, because then I'd be traumatized myself. Just to give a hot meal, a cup of soup, some warm words, or schoolbooks makes me feel better. That's a gift from the women I help. I write a lot of funding proposals, but working directly with people is best. In all the turmoil, there may be fifty women asking for food or clothes. At least I can talk to them, give them warm socks or a sweater, or write a letter to look for somebody's son. I was the first person from here to join the International Red Cross, and I was thrilled when we reunited some families. That's kept me going.*

Bringing Them Home

GALINA: *Everyone wants a little piece of earth under the sun.*

SABIHA: *What's the meaning of human rights or of multiculturalism without the return of refugees? To speak of justice is to speak of bringing people home.*

At the heart of the most gripping hardship in postconflict Bosnia is the right of refugees to return to their homes. Viewed from opposite sides of the war lines, the struggle is the same. As these women described to me their work they spoke in one voice, insisting on the right of every person to go home. Slain children, parents, or lovers can't be brought back to life. Severed limbs don't reappear. Physical and mental trauma will not be erased. But the survivors can be allowed back into the precious familiar—the homes from which they were driven. More than regaining property, this is an issue of psychological restoration.

Upon her graduation from the university, AMNA set to work on projects to reintegrate minorities into her home area of Mostar, dominated by Croat nationalists. *A house has a completely different meaning here. If you destroy a man's house, you destroy his possibility of returning to that place.* She ignored the common wisdom that the war-shocked populace would never return. *I found homes that were in good shape—I mean with a door that opened.* Amna searched until she located the original, displaced owners, then claimed their homes, arranging for security as well as construction materials. *You should have seen their faces! A destroyed village—no electricity, just one well—but they were singing, they were so happy to be home.*

DANICA, still living in exile (since her home is now part of Republika Srpska), has poured her energy into supporting refugees to keep the Croat diaspora connected and hopeful as they wait for the day they can return. *When a needy person arrived, I wanted others to automatically say, "I know someone who will help you."* She contrasts her years of waiting with Kosovar refugees, who ignored UN workers warning them not to return. *We were punished because we played nice, waiting for years and years for someone to figure out a way around our problems.* Meanwhile, Danica has gathered refugees like herself in Croatia, helping them think through how they'll organize their communities upon their return. Her eyes fill as she concludes, *When we gathered for the dinner I put together, it seemed to them like they were no longer refugees, because they were among their own. You see how a few unimportant people can create an evening that means so much to others.*

ALENKA, a practical civil engineer, works for Mercy Corps, providing shelter to returnees. But ultimately, she understands, refugee return is a matter of tolerance and compassion as much as bricks and mortar. *Look, if you wanted, you could pick a fight with your own mother, but that's not the point. As for the women in our program, I know their opinions, so why ask? We'd just argue and get nowhere. It's much better to have indirect influence. So we bring women from both sides together. They have a good time, form new friendships, then change their attitude much more than if we'd argued with them.* Alenka can speak from firsthand experience. *When trauma's fresh, arguments are useless.*

Having fled from her home ahead of advancing Croat troops, KRISTINA returned to find 50 percent of her town and 80 percent of the surrounding rural area uninhabitable. Her home was in ashes, but that didn't keep her from reaching out to others. Since 1992, she's been part of the Association of Serb Sisters,¹⁴ distributing clothing and food to refugees. As a provider, she's distributed international aid to thirteen refugee centers. Having also been a beneficiary of help, she has incorporated into her work in Sipovo the lessons she learned on the receiving end of charity. After school hours (she's an elementary school teacher), she works with needy and handicapped people — mostly children — pulling in help from the British troops stationed in that area to guard the peace. *Whatever I ask for, they try to give.* In fact, Kristina says the soldiers are more helpful than the international humanitarian groups. In a pointed contrast, she notes that her organization is made up of volunteers, a fact not lost on the troops who provide Kristina and her friends transport. *They bring us out to the farthest villages. They give us secondhand clothes and go with us to make deliveries to the most vulnerable.*

Vulnerability is a concept Kristina understands firsthand as she directs her work toward children, who, she says, suffered most in the war. Her second priority is women. Kristina has looked beyond food and shelter to help women like herself, whose dignity has been destroyed along with their homes and families. *Women need to return to normal life, so I asked the British troops to help me organize a fitness club. They said it was too expensive, so I asked them to help me with an aerobic center for women. They were so surprised! One of their soldiers was trained in "step aerobics," and they suggested we start with twenty women. It was unbelievable. When we announced our aerobics class, eighty women crowded into our gym. The soldiers said they hadn't agreed on so many, but I said I couldn't turn them away. Every Monday and Friday we have an hour of exercise. I can't thank SFOR enough.* When the unit rotated out, the military hospital physiotherapist agreed to double as the aerobics teacher. *The therapist has also come with us to visit very old or disabled people, including children with cerebral palsy. She's helped ease their suffering — a little, at least. She even*

promised to try to provide a chair to support the children, since they can't sit or stand or even hold their heads up. Kristina goes on to describe her difficulty, first begging for help from humanitarian agencies, then deciding who of the most needy will be the recipients.

Against that backdrop of intimate involvement in the community, Kristina discusses the return of those who left because of the war. At first she sounds optimistic: *In Sipovo, we were 18 percent Muslims and maybe 1 percent Croats. Muslims are coming back and having no problems. Sipovo is an "open city."*¹⁵ As a Serb, she's proud: *It's a stark contrast to most places I've heard of.* But she also knows the problems she faces: *A lot of humanitarian organizations supported this work at the beginning, but now they've all gone. Of course others want their help, but we need it to establish some sort of a life for returnees. The problem isn't finding people who want to return, or a community wanting them to come back. There's the physical reality. What are people going to do? They need to earn money to support themselves. So what if you're in your home? If there's no economy, you're not going to make it.*

The international community shouldn't be surprised that returning people to their homes isn't easy. It's been years, and they've built another life. For them to return would be another displacement. Maybe they just want to forget. Most of the returnees are older people, who couldn't start again after the war, or the poor, who didn't earn anything in their time abroad. Her reasoning is accurate but incomplete. She doesn't mention the difficulty of those who've survived terror or torture returning to a region now bearing the name of the perpetrators. Leaving past politics aside, Kristina focuses like a laser on the here and now. *Do you understand what this is doing to the structure of the community and how much the war devastated us? We've lost the people we need to rebuild this country. Our most educated people have left and created another life. Now we hear that they're trying to exchange or sell the damaged houses they left behind. It's like cement on top of our future.* She adds: *That's true for all three ethnic groups.*

Kristina's words are personal and emotional as she describes not only the damage to her community but that within her closest sphere. *All the members of my family were refugees, and nobody else has returned.* She doesn't blame her brothers for not coming back. *This problem has so many levels—and no simple answer. They don't have a place to return to because their apartments are destroyed. It's so hard to re-create a normal life. Look at me. Everything I had was burned. But there are worse cases and more vulnerable people. The economy is dead; people have no way to earn any money. Everything they had is destroyed, and even if they do manage to make a few pennies somewhere, where do they buy a pot, a bed, or a blanket?*

She says some of her Muslim and Croat friends are not coming back. *But it's*

not because relations are strained. You know, some people don't want to live in a place torn apart by war. Kristina wants to be clear: She doesn't believe the problems in her hometown are because of discrimination. *I was raised not to hate anyone. As much as I can, I try to assist any vulnerable person in any moment . . . no matter the ethnic background. When we received a donation of clothing from SFOR, we distributed it to the Muslims as well as the Serbs who returned.* Ultimately, for Kristina, the key is personal: *I'm thoroughly content, and I don't envy people who have more than I do. In fact, I'd love to see as many wealthy people as possible, so they don't need to ask anything from anyone.*

Meanwhile, given the scarcity of resources, refugees returning to a home that is inhabitable must expel other refugees who've taken shelter there. But Kristina can't stay too long on the debit side of the ledger. Her mind invariably drifts to solutions. *The international community could play a big role in this process—through credit, micro or macro, through revitalization of businesses and factories. When people earn some money, they'll know how to allocate it. They'll buy what their families need most. If that weren't so [she adds sardonically], we'd really be in trouble!*

Kristina pulls a piece of paper out of her purse. She had time on the bus trip to our appointment to ruminate on what's needed to support the returnees; and she wants to make sure I, as a potential source of help, have this practical list: *English instruction, computer courses, sewing and knitting lessons, handcrafts, and the production of traditional costumes for folk dancing.* Before I can ask if the folk dancing revival is a response to new ethnic-based identities, Kristina has moved on with her rush of ideas: *A women's information technology course, psychosocial assistance, legal help, preventive health care, and agriculture projects such as gathering medicinal herbs.* She's soliciting me, just as she has the SFOR troops.

MIRHUNISA is approaching the same problem from the opposite side of the war divide. *Here's the scenario: I come to your apartment, grab you and your family, and say, "Get out! Everyone outside!" "Where are we going to go?" you ask. And I shout, "I don't care! Just get out!" And you're happy I didn't kill you.* This scene has been described to Mirhunisa over and over as she's worked to get refugees back into their homes. As an accounting professor she's well suited for the job, but the task is huge. During the time of our interviews, Mirhunisa reported that there were 530,000 Bosnians without roofs over their heads. She's driven by the challenge of such statistics. *I must get them back to their original house. I feel personally responsible for them. I'll be successful, because I'll never give up! I was named a "human rights hero," but my response was, "Thank you, but that will be true only when I've got everyone back home."*

Her work to help thousands who want to come home is set against enormous structural challenges. *Our people have been driven from one place to another. In addition to what they endured during the war, they still can't go home. The 2,500,000 who left their houses — they're lucky to be alive, since many who tried to preserve their property died.* Mirhunisa sees those who stayed behind not as foolish or blind but as martyrs. *They died for all of us who survived.* That attitude, glorifying those who perished trying to hold onto their homes, is typical of Mirhunisa, who champions those shunted aside by others. Still, the political divisions drawn in Dayton make her work much, much harder. *Someone sits in my office, returning with just his suitcase. He asks, "Can you put me up anywhere?" We have agreements with local authorities that everything is fine and people can return. But when a person shows up, everything has been destroyed, and we haven't even got an address to which we can send him for assistance.*

I asked Mirhunisa how and why she keeps going. She reflected on a scene described earlier by Nurdzihana: the massacre of civilians by radical Serb forces on June 17, 1992, near the Sarajevo airport. *That day will go down in history as the greatest shame this town has ever known. People were slaughtered in their bedrooms. Before the war, the neighborhood was part of the Olympic village. It represented the future, infusing Sarajevo with new life.* But Mirhunisa adds: *That horrible event moved me; it gave me strength.*

Horrific experiences from which others retreat pull Mirhunisa forward into engagement. *In the early years of the war, June to October '92, when I was collecting statements from raped women, I learned that many of them were pregnant, and they obviously didn't want to keep the pregnancies. They had no place to go. Sarajevo was packed with refugees. I tried to find them shelter. Every hotel in town that was left was damaged, but we tried to house people in one of them. Then imagine, in 1993, when Sarajevo was under heavy shelling, we organized the founding assembly of our Association of Displaced Persons and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina.*

Experiences with women from the rape camps fortified Mirhunisa for her work with the survivors of Srebrenica. *In July 1995, we were informed by eyewitnesses that there were 50,000 people living in "safe havens" in eastern Bosnia. They were from towns there but also from other places, fleeing ethnic cleansing, moving to any place that was safe. The country was in chaos. Communications were extremely difficult. Mirhunisa was working in a city under siege. But she persevered: We kept searching till we found them shelter. We fought for those women. I mobilized my friends — anyone I could find.*

Instead of resting as the war drew to a close, Mirhunisa geared up, taking on

the task of registering 2,500,000 people displaced from their homes. She formed regional associations for refugees in four towns, helping them organize, advocate, and work through one obstacle after another in a determined, systematic way. *I had a lot of assistance from the media, as well as from international groups and from NGOs throughout Europe. We had to deal with legal, social, psychological, and housing issues. When we organized an association, there were people from all three ethnic groups leading it. We started working as if we were living in peacetime, with meetings, a presidency group, and committees for gathering data on refugees. More than forty-five people canvassed house-to-house, writing down the information. I still have their lists — pages and pages.*

With 60 percent of the housing stock destroyed during the war, the return of refugees has been an evolving nightmare. Exercising one's right to return has meant evicting not only other refugees but also people who've put their time and savings into restoring the damaged structure. Mirhunisa has been in the middle of this quagmire, in which already difficult situations are further complicated. *Also, some people face reprisals from hardliners if they say they want to return.*

Rather than focusing on the problems, Mirhunisa keeps bringing our conversation back to what can be done. Because she works across the country, she can arrange exchanges. *Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats — they all want their houses back. Recently I visited twenty towns. I was with Croats who resisted the HDZ nationalist police forces. They were offered villas if they'd stay, but they said, "No. We're going back to our homes in Republika Srpska," even though their houses there were completely destroyed. That gathering of Croats seemed to me like any gathering of Bosniaks who want to return to their homes. Mirhunisa's efforts include Bosnians like Nada, who fled or were driven from the Bosniak-Croat Federation and settled in the Republika Srpska. I've been working a lot on the return of the Serbs and the Croats who are in Republika Srpska; that way the return of Bosniaks will be possible.*

Her role on both sides of the conflict has not endeared Mirhunisa to political leaders. When she met with the minister for refugees in the Republika Srpska, she was criticized by officials from the Federation. *They said I should blunt my efforts. It was a sort of threat, but they didn't frighten me. Ninety-nine percent of my time I've worked with men, so I don't get frightened. I talk to them only when I need them, not when they need me. From seven years' experience I can say our politicians don't really bother you unless you want power. And they know I don't want any power whatsoever. I was asked if I wanted to be a government minister. When they learned I didn't, they were pleased. I'm not in their way. They don't have the least idea what I'm working on. They learn it from newspapers. So I'm not pulled by powerful people from political parties.*

I returned to the question of Mirhunisa's source of strength. *The power of living comes from helping. Through my organization, I've located 1,600,000 people. When I think about all that's happened . . . the number who tell me they're happy, the letters I receive from abroad from various associations. . . . Can what I lost be compared to what I've gained?* She means more than abstractly gaining meaning from contributing to society. The strength of others becomes her own. In particular, there's a survivor of the Srebrenica massacre who, like so many other women, is now alone. *She lost all the men in her immediate family, but she lives full of energy, always ready to face the next day. When I need a break, I visit her hut in the woods. She shows me photographs of her two sons, who were eighteen and twenty, and says, "I don't have a television. If my sons come back, they won't have anything to watch . . . but they can look at these pictures."* She's a pitiable figure, a simple farmer, with no clear future. But Mirhunisa says: *I gain strength from her. And when I think of her, I'm ashamed I ever complain.*

Getting the Message Out

BILJANA: *During the war the TV kept showing Bosnian women wearing black, with scarves on their heads, calling them "the Muslims." Sure, if you looked on U.S. farms you could find some poor, depressed people and call them "the Americans."*

GALINA: *I read dailies from Zagreb, Sarajevo, all over. Sometimes they make you laugh, the way the same news is treated so differently. Journalists have damaged this country a lot. We need new ones now, with more training.*

ALENKA: *The more TV, radio, and papers, the better, so you can read them all, then create your own picture. Nothing's black or white; it's somewhere in the middle.*

With a multiparty system emerging several years after the war, Bosnian media vastly improved, although the situation has a long way to go before the necessary legal reforms are in place and implemented. Judges must be trained to crack down on political harassment of media professionals such as SUZANA, who's been fearless as an investigative journalist. With a Serb name, she was able to go into

the field with the Yugoslav National Army. She collected over a hundred interviews with key political and military players, some of whom are now indicted or convicted war criminals. Suzana used a wartime pseudonym to protect her parents. Since the war, leaders of different political parties have tried to discredit her as she's investigated the secret intelligence system, political corruption, and state terrorism. Bosnian President Izetbegovic alluded to her as a journalistic whore. *That was his exact wording. In an open letter, we asked him to back up his statement with facts, as we had in our article. He never did. After that we felt burned out — not depressed by his statement so much as by the fact that for months after our exposé, the minister didn't take any action and parliament didn't discuss it. Our accusations weren't followed up, so dust fell on the whole case.*

Meanwhile, working within the political system, TANJA observed: *Media shapes people, telling them over and over that if they return home they'll be killed. But media can also be calming, softening antagonisms among political parties by looking at issues globally and urging agreement on essential points.* Tanja was relieved when the UN finally insisted on a media code of conduct. Until then, state-controlled journalists felt free to spread scandalous rumors for political purposes. Those reforms haven't come a day too soon for AMNA, in Mostar. *The media started the war, and only the media can finish it.* She describes her radio station, which broadcasts balanced news coverage in her divided city—a much-needed refutation of the nationalists who still dominate the region. *If the radio broadcasters say, "Croats are no good," "Bosniaks are no good," "Serbs are no good," people on the street won't think, "Well, I have a Serb who's a good friend, and he's the same today as he was yesterday. Why should I hate him now?"* Amna lives in a community rife with harassment, by not only criminals but also police. Her work at the radio station is completely voluntary, and she's spent her salary, and part of her mother's salary, to cover the costs of her ten-minute broadcast every hour. She beams as she tells me about her talk show profiling a successful woman, with a discussion of how to balance home life and work.

Given the history of a controlled press under Tito and the powerful misuse of media thereafter, Bosnians rebuilding their country have a great appreciation for accurate news. Although hate-filled broadcasts began before the war and continued well into the implementation of the Dayton Agreement, the accord curiously contains only one narrowly defined reference to protecting independent media. Abuses of freedom of expression by Milosevic, Tudjman, and Izetbegovic, who signed the 1995 agreement, were well documented.¹⁶ Lack of media standards made the fragile peace even more difficult to sustain, as the earliest

elections, under the influence of unscrupulous journalists, legitimized nationalist leaders. After almost four years of noncompliance, the UN Office of the High Representative began to insist on open, independent media fundamental to democracy.

A seasoned journalist, NURDZIHANA has scathing words for the Dayton Agreement, which requires political collaboration among nationalists, creating a deadlock that prevented the country from moving forward during the immediate postwar years. She's quick to point out that central to that difficulty were the media. Each faction had its own cheering section, reinforcing misinformation that deepened the lines of division drawn by the politicians.

In contrast, in her professional work, Nurdzihana has committed herself to alleviating discrimination and suffering. She spends hours over cigarettes and espresso telling me about her life before the war—filled with new places, new people, and new ideas. Nurdzihana's vision was expansive. *My spirit was like a leaf carried by the wind.* She drafted a proposal to create a women's magazine for *Oslobodjenje*, Sarajevo's leading nonnationalist newspaper. The newspaper's name means "Liberation," and it was started in 1943 as an underground publication of Tito's Partisans. In the late 1980s *Oslobodjenje's* staff abandoned communism for a more democratic approach. Leading up to the 1990 elections, the newspaper rejected the nationalistic rhetoric coming from all the parties. *Despite great popular interest, the manager just put my proposal in a drawer. Later, an older, male colleague of mine wrote up the same idea on just a half page. His project was immediately approved.*

I started working on something even more interesting. Weekends, I'd lower the curtains, unplug the phone, and close myself off with my papers for two or three days. I started a newspaper column called "She and He," taking real-life situations and commenting on them from a woman's and a man's perspective. Readers talked about them on the streets, and some journalist friends used to go down to the printing room to read them before they were published. The psychological base from which she writes underlies Nurdzihana's account of her father's death in 1991. *That was a huge loss for me. I felt completely alone, just my voice echoing, "My father's died. What will I do now?" I'd lost part of myself, but part of me became stronger in that wretchedness. I was deeply sad, but I didn't cry. My father didn't accept hopelessness.*

Nurdzihana turned her grief into action. *After his death, I organized a counseling center for women and families. We needed a place where people could talk with some expert about what worried them. From more than a thousand readers' letters, I saw how many people have problems—and no time for each other. Psychologists spoke of society's*

increasing alienation. I wrote an article about a man who'd been dead four days without anyone knowing. Two receptionists linked the callers with the 150 professionals who rotated through the center. The professionals didn't wear white coats. They were there as listeners and problem solvers. The two people sat and talked as trusted equals. Clients—I don't like calling them clients—could be honest. They found something they could find nowhere else. Nurdzihana occasionally sat in the reception room, which was filled with flowers. A woman came out of a room assigned to psychiatrists, crying and smiling at the same time. As she walked by, she hugged me and said, "I'm the happiest person in the world today." Launching the center was unusual work for a journalist and editor. Why did she do it? I thought it was needed, and it nourished me.

In a similar way, Nurdzihana's wartime journalism drew from examination of human nature, particularly the battlefield version of good and evil. After seven months with her mother and nephew in a cellar in Dobrinja, which she calls "The Hell of Sarajevo," her words could paint pictures of dramatically compelling scenes. In June 1994 she published the first edition of the monthly *Zena 21* (invoking "Women of the 21st Century"), including many first-hand accounts she'd recorded. In the turmoil and deprivation of war, a publication for women coming off the presses had immense meaning. To buy refreshments for the launching event, Nurdzihana had only about \$20—in an inflated war economy. Braving heavy shelling, nearly 200 people crammed into the reception.

The ongoing production group assembled spontaneously. Some had no publishing experience; they were engineers, psychiatrists, saleswomen. When electricity was cut off, the staff worked by candlelight in a cellar café across the street. The readership was devoted, as well. Without public (or, of course, private) transportation, distribution throughout the city was on foot, at risk of sniper fire. Members hand-carried fifty or a hundred copies to different parts of town. Readers would walk up to two hours from the suburbs into the city on the day they thought *Zena 21* would be published. One person would make the trek to pick up a copy, which might be read by up to fifty people holed up together, as they waited for the war to end.

Five thousand copies were printed—and distributed for free. The first financial supporter was a German women's group, which funded the magazine for a year and a half. After that, the UN High Commission on Refugees and some other donors pitched in. The UNHCR distributed around 2,000 copies to refugees in their emergency shelter projects. In postwar Sarajevo, *Zena 21* became much more than a magazine. I knew it as a convener, a clubhouse, and the sponsor

of conferences and contests promoting women's full participation in rebuilding Bosnia. I originally met Rada Sesar there, as she helped out, although she was a radio journalist.

As our meeting draws to a close, Nurdzihana pauses. She's been telling me her life story ever since we met in Sarajevo in July 1994, the middle of the war. What shall she say now, to condense into paragraphs these postconflict years that drag on like millennia? She describes a recent two-hour radio interview in which she was the guest, not the journalist. *I talked simply, openly. When the first listeners started calling, the topic of war spontaneously intruded. I mentioned some names of ordinary people I'd met, whom I'll always remember, given the experiences we shared. I talked about their readiness to help others.* [Nurdzihana leans forward, crossing and recrossing her hands.] *As listeners called in, emotions swelled. Some called to say they remembered me. They were crying because I hadn't forgotten them. I couldn't hold back my tears either—I get goose bumps now even talking about this. We were connected in some way. Mostly they didn't know me or what I'm doing. I reexperienced the whole war in those two hours.*

I've been thinking a lot about this broadcast. It's still in my heart. Listeners jammed the lines, and the next day, they looked me up in my editorial office. They weren't calling because we'd talked about such important and sophisticated issues. We talked about everyday things—small but great people, who are anonymous. Those listeners Nurdzihana touched through her interview are the citizens who must ultimately knit their society back together. As she was with *Zena 21*, Nurdzihana is their guide, balancing the need for emotional catharsis even as she insists on no-excuses social activism.

Grooming the Next Generation

ANA: *My first-grade daughter is the only Croat in her school, but she's happy.*

An older girl is the only Serb, and she's happy too. The children are not the problem.

AMNA: *The next generation . . . they basically believe everything will be okay, because they weren't soldiers during the war; they didn't kill. But Bosnia is too small for them; they consider themselves part of Europe. They won't accept these ghettos in which local authorities want them to grow up.*

SABIHA: *The problems come when our schools focus on Bosnia's invasion by the Turks, instead of thinking of the future: space exploration, computers.*

GALINA: *In Bosnia, we can count on the young people. Kids can accept anything.*

Some of the women I interviewed are devoting themselves to grooming the next generation, convinced that the future of Bosnia is inextricably tied to the opportunities—and perplexing difficulties—faced by young people. During the conflict, a mass exodus swept many of the most able youth to other shores. Who could blame them for leaving? In July 1994 I asked a University of Sarajevo professor of architecture if I should send her, perhaps through the U.S. diplomatic pouch, some recent magazines for her classroom instruction. She smiled weakly, then responded patiently, “Sure, but what we really need are pencils.”

The young people who left created a talent vacuum, resulting in a substantial weakening of the fragile new political system. During and following the war, as sympathetic Western universities have created places for Bosnians, the brain drain has been dramatic. Homegrown proposals to launch local entrepreneurial ventures for Bosnian young people have languished due to the lack of outside support.

Several mothers have already described the drama of parenting in wartime, and how their choices impinged on their sons and daughters. In Sarajevo alone, over 1,800 children were killed.¹⁷ As Bosnian parents were distracted by issues of survival, they frequently described to me being torn between needing to protect their children and wanting to provide opportunities for their children to become independent.

A different kind of danger has come in the form of separate educational curricula, created by nationalists, with “specialized” accounts of Bosnian history and culture. ALENKA, in Tuzla, recalls schoolbooks during the war: *They were filled with propaganda, saying things like “our poor people were massacred by Chetniks, by Ustashas, by these, by those. . . .” The books in different areas had the same stories, just with different names. They had a lot of horrible details about killing. I read some analyses of schoolbooks sponsored by different political groups. It was terrible! This is a huge complication for the return of refugees. How can parents send their kids to a school that's teaching that their ethnic group is the enemy?*¹⁸ History is being rewritten in Bosnian schools, SABIHA concurs. As an outrageous example, she tells me how in Prijedor, where Emsuda was imprisoned in a concentration camp, Serb children are being taught that Bosniaks committed those atrocities against Serbs. As a jour-

nalist, she sees communication as the answer. *If we can teach the next generation that our diversity is actually a big advantage, our country will stay united.* With a grant from the Bosnian Women's Initiative, Sabiha has started a business producing dolls of all four different ethnic backgrounds, each with stories and songs about landmarks, folklore, and traditions. Her dolls don't talk about war. She'll eventually have a product for boys, but she's started with girls. *We're strong, so we should be first.*

It wasn't easy for Sabiha to get funding for her doll enterprise. Donors often come at a steep price, especially if they're trying to proselytize. For example, very conservative Islamic states have sent in humanitarian aid for children, with the requirement that the recipients' mothers wear headscarves. Children in these situations become pawns in a political game, while their parents are often distressed by the teachings of a new religious conservatism foreign to Bosnian tradition.

Such challenges are a somber backdrop for youth programs, such as the summer camp organized by KRISTINA, who lives in an area from which all non-Serbs were expelled. As if I were one of her students, she insists: *Now look at this picture. Here are the tents and beds the international troops gave us.* Beginning with just an open field, Kristina went from one business to another, begging for supplies to create the camp for children, many of whom are orphans or are Bosniaks returning home. *Look, here are the children arriving. At the end, they said, "We hope the bus breaks down, so we can stay longer."* Kristina has dozens of ideas of programs for the children: from musical training, to an ecology course, to sports uniforms. She wants her kids in Republika Srpska to compete with teams in the half of Bosnia controlled by Bosniaks and Croats, known as the Federation.

JELKA'S organizing has been in the Federation, in Mostar. Even that small city was further split into two parts after Bosnian Croat nationalists proposed it as the capital of a breakaway region to be annexed to neighboring Croatia. Children huddled with their mothers in basements as the neighborhood that was predominantly Muslim was shelled relentlessly by the Croats. Jelka lives in the part of town shelled by nationalists of her own ethnic group. She organized school lessons near the front line that cut through the center of her town. *That was my first effort helping kids. When there was shelling, teachers went from basement to basement. We had no electricity, water, or paper.* Organizing a school is a challenge. Organizing a school with no supplies, with terrified students and exhausted adults, in a town in which ten people are being killed each day, is a near miracle.

Jelka's social activism was cemented the day fifteen people died a few meters from her home. After the war, her spontaneous organizing of cellar schools

evolved into a Center for Culture and Youth on the line of separation. *First, we wanted to help kids overcome the years of education they missed. But our second goal was to reanimate our culture, because I believe a spiritual revival would lift the quality of life in our town. The third, but not least, goal was to connect youth from the west and east parts of town. I knew it would be possible, since the young people kept sending letters to each other throughout the war by the Red Cross system. Romantic relationships were sustained with those letters.*¹⁹ *Several weddings followed the end of the war—ethnically mixed marriages.*

Jelka isn't surprised that love crossed battle lines in Mostar. Her confidence has an authenticity born out of her internal experience, as she's redefined her identity, erasing lines of separation. *I felt so guilty, because all this destruction was being done in the name of my own ethnic group. Now I don't like to think of myself as Croat. I'm a Bosnian Catholic.* Likewise, she speaks of her hometown with almost palpable pride, refusing to give in to the nationalist politics keeping the city divided and dangerous.²⁰ *Now some people even in the Croat-controlled part think we must be reunited. The west part has modern housing units, but the soul of our town is the old section in the east part. One needs the other. Even the people who aren't from Mostar are fighting for unity. It's not natural to divide such a small town and name half Croat and half Bosniak. That can't be sustained.*

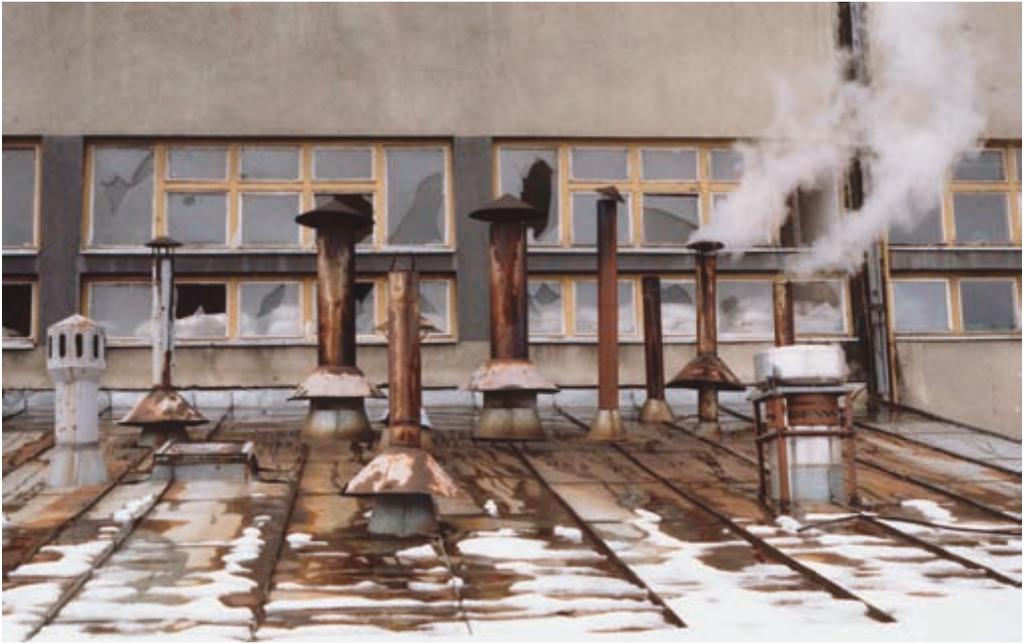
Despite the political recalcitrance in her community, Jelka's eyes shine as she describes her new center: *A place for kids to meet, make their own rules, reestablish cultural ties, get to know and respect each other again. A place where they don't think about politics.* I had the privilege of visiting Jelka's center in July 1997, when she mounted an exhibit of my photographs of children from around the world. Posters advertising the exhibit hung around town on walls reduced to rubble, and a throng turned out for the occasion. Jelka invited people from both sides of town and set up appointments for me with the two dueling mayors, but the more memorable hour was in the center meeting with the young people, who crossed the lines that stopped the adults. The kids asked me what I thought about the future of Mostar. "You are the future," I responded, inspired by the gleam in their eyes.

Jelka's youth center is more than an activity spot for young people. It's a hotbed of fresh ideas. She tells me about the extensive networking she's undertaken. *I've made contact with alternative movements. Everything the political opposition hadn't been able to do, we did in our center. I started organizing in 1995, when delegates from across the country declared their commitment to staying in touch culturally and spiritually. These were people from Belgrade, coming to Mostar for the first time since*

the war started. It was an amazing feat in a community that had been under relentless bombardment. Her efforts attracted media and political attention. The mayor hosted a cocktail reception for the group and presented her a certificate of appreciation. These early ventures had lasting impact, not only on the people at the conference but also on Jelka, who's convinced that the arts can pull people together. *Given our difficult political situation, people slip into apathy.* To fight the depression, Jelka is organizing an arts festival. *We had a drama performance the first night with an audience of 600, including civic leaders from west Mostar.*

In all this activity, children are never far from Jelka's mind. Cultural revival and the youth of Mostar share not only the physical space of the center but also a space in the founder's vision and soul. Jelka's energy is fed by her great hurt. When she learned, a few days before the end of the war, that her twenty-two-year-old son had been killed in a car accident, her grief might have caused her to close up, to withdraw. But Jelka was galvanized. *With help from my husband, I've actually managed to transform this grief into a positive force. The only way for me to deal with my loss is to help others who are also trying to return to normal life, despite their pain.*

Of all the women I interviewed, Jelka lives closest to her feelings, whether of love or loss. Rather than being debilitated, she's committed herself to giving to others the care she would have given her son. In that sense, her son is always present. *The only time I didn't obey my husband was after our son died, when he asked me not to have so many of our boy's pictures around, because people who visited us felt uncomfortable. I couldn't agree. I've had lots of pictures of him enlarged. They fill my living room. Every morning, the first thing I do is say, "Good morning." It's difficult for me to speak about it; this is the first time I've told anyone. [Jelka is weeping.] He was such a wonderful young man, with a great sense of humor. When I tell about his life, I always start laughing. They're all lovely stories, his stories. I go, very often, to his grave. I make sure there are always flowers. Those are my intimate moments.* Jelka is keenly aware of how in those gestures of mourning she's holding onto a life. She exerts an inner discipline, as she carefully apportions her care. First comes the relationship she maintains with her deceased son. *The rest I've given to everyone who wants to work with me.* And the rest is enough.



Sarajevo bread factory, which operated throughout the siege. December 1995.