

The Road to Reconciliation

FAHRIJA: *I lost many things in this war . . . and learned even more: what it means to be afraid, to be betrayed, to have those you thought were friends turn their backs because of your name. But the kindness showed me in America helped me teach my children to believe in humanity and not see the world through cynical eyes.*

MAJA: *Men justified their caution, saying it wasn't safe. Women have ventured out more across the lines.*

ALENKA: *If we could live together for fifty years, why can't we now?*

KRISTINA: *Why shouldn't we live together again? I know it's extremely difficult for people who've lost their own family members, and it will probably take them longer than others. But we simply must reconcile.*

Kristina's statement isn't naïve. She's a realist in a small country where, in 2000 alone, over four hundred incidents against minorities were reported to the International Police Task Force.¹ She understands the lowest scheming and the highest aspirations of her community. Her voice, however, can be almost drowned out by a chorus of international cynics quick to pronounce the futility of reconciliation. Among the most vocal has been Henry Kissinger, former secretary of state for presidents Nixon and Ford. He criticized Clinton's intervention in Kosovo, citing how "we are forcing three reluctant nationalities to live together in Bosnia."² Arguing that American security was not threatened by the conflict in Kosovo, he told U.S. senators on February 23, 1999, "Ethnic conflict has been endemic in the Balkans for centuries. Waves of conquest have congealed divisions between ethnic groups and religions. Through the centuries, these conflicts have been fought with unparalleled ferocity because none of the populations has any

experience with, and essentially no belief in, Western concepts of toleration.” Such experts in Realpolitik seem oblivious to the steady restorative process that rebuilds, block by block, destroyed homes, or heals, gesture by gesture, damaged trust. To hold up another lens, the same foreign policy experts who called for a division of Bosnians into ethnically designated regions would surely not have proposed that solution in America, splitting post-riot Watts or Cincinnati into racially separated administrations.

Kristina doesn’t have time to waste with such analyses; she, like thousands of other Bosnian women, is too busy doing the work the cynics say can’t be done. But what qualifies her to claim, so insistently, that reconciliation is possible? Given their social roles, women often are particularly suited to the sensitive work of helping not only their families, but also their societies, recover from trauma. Sadly, in a mismatch of expertise and authority, their assessments and recommendations usually go unnoted. Instead, professionals hang out shingles declaring themselves experts in “conflict resolution”; from their comfortable offices they describe, prescribe, and proscribe. Clear rules and discrete stages of recovery are laid out. Indeed, “reconciliation” has become a sort of hybrid subfield crossing psychology and international affairs. Ironically, this sphere of reconciliation is marked by considerable contention. Some delineate between forces external to a society imposing justice versus forces within the society bringing about reconciliation.³ Others insist that the very notion of reconciliation is an inappropriate attempt to resolve what cannot be resolved, to forgive what is, and should remain, unforgivable.⁴

Breathing life into such abstract analyses, Biljana, Karolina, Maja, and Vesna discuss the difficulty of postwar reconciliation. Each is imagining how she would have reacted had she been the person affected—if her husband or son had been killed, or if she had been beaten and her face slit with a knife. Perhaps it’s MAJA’s medical training that helps her remember the suffering she’s been spared. *People say, “I can forgive, but I can’t forget.” They have a right to their memories, but we don’t have to emphasize the negative.* Then, as if she hears a judgmental tone in her comment, she adds: *I can say these things today because nobody in my family was killed. Maybe I can be tolerant now, because I haven’t lost anyone. People who lost their closest family . . . Things can be reconstructed—factories, bridges—but lost lives can’t. When I think about mothers and fathers who lost their children . . .*

Just as Maja has empathy for others’ suffering, BILJANA identifies with the Bosniak refugee nursing her dying mother. The woman’s husband had been murdered, and she feared her two teenage sons would be sent to the front lines by

the Croat army. *So after my mother died, my brother saved the two boys, helping them get out of the country. Just think, they were about seventeen and nineteen. Now they live in Germany. But what's going to happen with those boys? What kind of feelings are they going to have? Do we really think they're going to say, "Let's forgive and forget"? The perpetrators: What are they thinking as people? The lives of these two young men were destroyed overnight. Their mother was an educated person, an engineer. Now they're probably all three working in some factory. Biljana, a convert to Judaism, has seen the scars of victimization. It's only natural to feel vengeful. I certainly would. [Her Jewish husband, Al, who's in the room, seems uncomfortable with her statement and attempts to soften it, but she's adamant.] If someone came into my house and killed my husband, all I can say is, "God help them."* [She pounds the table.] *For me there would be no life other than to get them. Those people in Bosnia lost everything. Why shouldn't they become vengeful?*

Biljana's reaction is not unusual for those in the diaspora, who live isolated from the perpetrators. She has no practical need for reconciliation; and even if she did desire it, she'd have little occasion to venture forward in small interactions with the Serbs and Croats who launched the genocide.⁵ Reconciliation, after all, requires forgiveness, one of the most problematic of human interactions.

In fact, none of the women I interviewed describes herself as a forgiving soul. VESNA, for example, joins Biljana in asserting just the opposite, although she speaks of forgiveness as a virtue, even if it's out of reach for her. *When the war started, my daughter and I went to Zagreb, in Croatia. We just wanted to get away, maybe for a couple of weeks. I never thought it would last.* Her husband and his father, Bosnian Serbs, stayed home. Vesna asked her brother, a Bosnian Croat, to stay with them, just in case. After an anonymous call, Croat paramilitaries broke into the apartment, saying the brother of one of them had been captured by Serbs, and they wanted revenge. *They asked my brother why he was staying in a Chetnik's home. He said they weren't Chetniks, but loyal citizens, with no relation whatsoever with the Serb paramilitary. The gang didn't care. They beat my husband so severely that he had a hernia. One of the thugs grabbed my father-in-law's head and cut his face with a big knife, down the side, from his temple to his cheekbone. He barely escaped with his life. Then with a white flag, my husband crossed the minefields to the Serb positions. They interrogated him for three days. How had he managed to get there? Why? He finally was able to get in touch with some old school friends and got some document allowing him to go further, to Belgrade. Vesna's father-in-law stepped on a mine, and his leg had to be amputated below the knee. Ultimately, he was exchanged by the Red Cross in a prisoner swap.*

Those thugs who destroyed my family . . . [her voice becomes more energized]. I'm glad two of them were later murdered. But one is still alive. He was actually my husband's friend—the goalie of the soccer team my husband covered as a sports journalist. They stole whatever they wanted from my place, but that's not important; as we say, "As long as you have your life, you have everything." Vesna would like to live beyond a craving for retribution, but thinking of the lone gang survivor, she declares, with spite: Surely God's punishment is on him. Just to let you know how good my husband is, here's what he says: "Vesna, don't curse them; I forgave them. If you can't, please try to forget." I'm a believer; he's an atheist. But every time I think of evil, I see that man, holding the knife, slicing my father-in-law's face. I can't forgive them . . . and that's okay.

Like Vesna, KAROLINA's passion is in defense of others who've suffered more than she. My son, eighteen, was given the job of standing guard, with a rifle that didn't work. It was actually bent; it couldn't fool anyone. Can you believe it? [She brings her hands to her face.] But there is a God, and He saved some of our children. I thank God my son survived. Then a moment for self-reflection: *I'm probably not as forgiving as others. If I'd lost him, I'd probably have taken revenge.*

The vengefulness of Maja, Biljana, Vesna, and Karolina is intense—and hypothetical. They were the only women of the twenty-six I interviewed who spoke of revenge, and they did so only when empathizing with those who had suffered more than they. Speaking about the hardship they actually experienced, they were not bitter. For example, KAROLINA was not only a mother fearful of her son being killed, she was also a Croat living in the old Muslim part of town, while the ragtag Bosnian militia was trying to defend towns from attacks by not only Serbs, but also Croats. *I was someone other Sarajevans could target for their anger.* But she excuses those who harassed her: *People were suffering, and they were influenced by extremists.* She bears no grudge.

Similarly, MAJA, after saying she might not be able to forgive, talks about her friendships on both sides of the conflict. In the crucible of war, those relationships were tested, and postwar, they've emerged galvanized. *Life is empty without friends.* It's a simple statement, but spoken by a woman who's mastered the art of nuance. *Bridges were destroyed, but true friendships couldn't be.* The troubled terrain of her city becomes the symbol of her attitude toward life. *There's only one Mostar; I walk on both sides, visiting my friends—not only today, but also when it was much more dangerous. I never divided them in my mind into one group or another. I didn't forget them, and they didn't forget me. We need to nurture friendships like flowers. You can find many more ties in a real friend than you can find in your family. Maybe I was lucky in choosing friends, or maybe I've been a good friend to them. Many people say how*

they distinguish between friends from before the war and friends from after the war, but all my friendships survived. Sure, there are always small disappointments, but they're not so important that they destroy the relationship.

The women tried to tell me what it was like to live in fear of being raped, to clutch their ears for hours against the bombing, to embrace the inconsolable father grieving his dead child. They've sifted through ashes, looking for precious remains of a photo album. They've lain awake at night, worrying how they will feed hungry children. They've walked home from the train depot weeping, after seeing their oldest child off to build a future in a more promising society. But they've been able to transform their suffering into motivation for rebuilding shattered communities. Their work for their country has informed their personal understanding; conversely, their personal understanding informs their work.

Part of their expertise is their ability to judge the cost of reconciliation not attempted. They've studied their situation and concluded, obstinately: *We simply must reconcile.* With that decided, the women offer three fundamental imperatives: Tell the truth. Impose justice. But remember that the perpetrators are human. The three principles are not only linked but also interactive: All three must be at work in a community to effect reconciliation. Without truthfulness, justice is impossible; and without truthfulness, the enemy remains a two-dimensional demon. In turn, the possibility of justice emboldens those pursuing the truth. Truth, in turn, is most often discovered in the wide, gray zone between good and evil, where perpetrators share space with the rest of humanity. And humanizing the enemy is required of those seeking justice in place of revenge. The three imperatives function as a network, supporting the mysterious internal transformation known as reconciliation.

The Truth Must Come Out

SABIHA: We have to find out what happened. All of us—children and adults—need to know. History is the teacher of life. We've got to learn the truth so this horror won't be repeated.

KADA: It would be much easier if I knew my Samir was dead.

There are several models for a new democracy dealing with a sordid past: amnesia (Churchill's "blessed act of oblivion"); a purge of collaborators from public

office (Czech Republic and East Germany); Nuremberg-type trials (the trademark of victors); and truth commissions (more prone toward reconciliation than the pure imposition of justice).⁶ In Bosnia, the formal setting for exposing the truth hasn't been local and regional media, discredited by rampant abuse under communism and manipulation by nationalists. Instead, truth telling has been organized around the UN war crimes tribunal and a new truth commission as the primary means of sorting through allegations of atrocities.⁷

Having a place and a process for getting to the truth serves many functions: it points to the guilty and absolves the innocent; it asserts the value of the victims; it distinguishes history from propaganda; it allows the survivors to move on to the future; and it lays the groundwork for reconciliation.⁸ But finding adequate words to describe atrocities is futile. What adjectives exist for a father's anguish watching his young daughter raped by a dozen men, then killed? For me to even write these words seems maudlin, too dramatic, over-the-top. Yet they are the reality. Silence in the face of the unspeakable is understandable, but it colludes with those who don't want to hear what has happened.⁹ Thus enormous internal strength is required of victims who voice the truth. Their drive comes from a desire for answers, but also their understanding that reawakened memories—while painful—may be essential for healing not only themselves but also the entire cast of the tragedy.¹⁰

Outside forces ripped apart the world—families, communities, and country—of the women I interviewed. Postwar, they look back on a multicultural homeland that was a model of tolerance, and they long for restoration. Here, two women ask for the truth about the crime that leaders of the international community, ashamed of their bungling or complicity, attempted to cover up: the massacre at Srebrenica. Theories abound as to why UN officials refused to intervene to stop the massacre. Was a deal struck with the Serbs to save the lightly armed UN Protection Forces harm or humiliation, after troops had been shown on CNN, handcuffed to telephone poles? Did the international community need a jolt to free itself from policy paralysis? Or was it, most benignly, simple incompetence? Kada was inside, Mirhunisa outside the scene of the worst atrocity in Europe since the dark days of the Third Reich.

KADA speaks with the gut-level understanding of a survivor: *Many Bosnians are missing, but Srebrenica is unique, because so many people disappeared in just one day. They were sacrificed for some ridiculous goal: some kind of negotiation with Chetniks—or it might have been the price to end the war. We were disarmed and “protected by the UN.”* The pretense of protection was a disaster. The Dutch battalion charged

with ensuring the security in the safe haven was not equipped to intervene when the Serbs launched their assault. When the refugees packed into the Dutch compound, sanitation and health facilities were so overwhelmed that the battalion agreed to monitor the Serbs' "evacuation" of the refugees, in effect participating in the process of ethnic cleansing. Serb troops expelled over twenty-three thousand women and children, and captured and executed the fighting-age boys and men.

Beyond her grief, Kada describes another emotion—a primal, furious worry like that of a lioness searching for her cubs. *Those who know the truth about the missing of Srebrenica are silent. I don't know why.* Her words spiral. *The UN troops that protected us must know what happened. The Dutch battalion stayed there ten days after the fall of Srebrenica. How long does it take a bulldozer to bury 10,700 bodies?¹¹ There's not one mass grave with thousands of people. It doesn't add up.¹² Our women went to Holland, begging them to say what was done to our men who were taken away. Nobody would say anything except, "I don't know." The Chetniks are silent, too. Who gave the orders? Not the soldiers who pulled the trigger; they're not the guilty ones. The commanders should be indicted and taken to court.¹³*

Kada's insistence that the tribunal should not be prosecuting ordinary soldiers acting under orders but rather the commanders and political leaders who gave those orders is not uncommon. In fact, the tribunal has met arduous evidentiary standards in indicting (in both sealed and public indictments) a number of military and political commanders, including Ratko Mladic, Radovan Karadzic, and Slobodan Milosevic. The bottleneck was not in indicting these leaders but rather in arresting them, a task the international political and military leaders were very reluctant to take up. But until the war criminals are apprehended, the survivors will continue to "fill in the blanks," trying to piece together just what happened.

General Mladic was the direct commander of the Serb troops. He's a high officer of the former Yugoslav army. He knows the price of killing all those people. That's why I think there must be survivors hidden somewhere—probably in the coal mines of Serbia. Lots of men can be hidden in underground tunnels—after all, President Milosevic is a clever man. Her words flow, as if she is negotiating with a terrorist: *I don't ask to have our men returned, if they were killed. I just want to know if they're no longer alive.¹⁴ We have religious rituals. We mothers would rest easier if someone would just come on out and admit it—would tell the truth so others can learn from our tragedy.*

Like Jelka surrounded by enlarged photographs of her dead child, Kada's energy is fueled by the memory of her son. *Now, in the night, when I think of him, that's when I hurt most. That's the greatest pain of my life. I picture him. Where is he?*

Who shot him? How did they shoot him? Was he killed by the bullet? Maybe only injured . . . then buried by a bulldozer. Maybe he's still alive somewhere, in a prison. Maybe he's hungry and eating rotten bread. I don't know. Uncertainty is the worst part—believe me. The kindest thing someone could do is to tell me the truth. Everything else is bearable. If I knew he was dead, I wouldn't suffer. It would be over. We must know the truth. The world wants to hear us. I'll give interviews to anyone who'll listen. I don't care who they are and what their interest is, as long as they report exactly what I tell them—report the truth. Only truth will heal.

The campaign for truth has been waged not only by the survivors and some in the international community,¹⁵ but also by Kada's countrywoman MIRHUNISA, who was trying to organize help for people flooding into Sarajevo from eastern Bosnia in the middle of the war: *I sent a fax to Madeleine Albright and the presidents of Bosnia and Herzegovina just before Srebrenica fell: "Please protect the 30–40,000 people crammed into the 'UN safe havens.' We've been informed that something terrible is going to happen; fighting has started up in the surrounding area." The people were unarmed; they couldn't defend themselves. Tragically, Mirhunisa's information was correct. When the first refugees arrived in Tuzla, I contacted the Ministry for Refugees, saying, "We're missing people!" They answered, "Your information is wrong. People are coming out." But we were right. We were missing ten thousand people. [Mirhunisa is in tears.] Ten thousand . . .*

Different truths need to be told: Kada's informational truth about what happened to her husband, son, and brothers, as well as the confessional truth of perpetrators. But there are also those like RADA, a Serb for whom "truth" includes acknowledging her identification with those who committed the crimes, and asking the victims for forgiveness. Without that step, Rada won't be able to move beyond the collapse of history caused by "her people." *How to justify the Serbian aggression?* It can't be done; but at the same time, Rada will not deny her roots: *I'm a Serb woman, and I wouldn't renounce my identity, ever. Never. I don't think it's a handicap or an advantage. Rada offers advice to innocent Serbs: Those who didn't commit crimes must face the fact that others who belong to their ethnic group really did those things. It's difficult to accept that one part of the people I belong to did what they did. [Her hands, usually moving constantly, are strangely still.] No matter how I've tried to rid myself of that feeling of guilt . . . it's still there.*

Justice, Not Revenge

GALINA: *A mother shouldn't differentiate, saying, "These children are good and these are bad"—even though she may be right—because she'll create a problem among her children.*

ALENKA: *I don't like to judge others, because, what if the same happened to me? I can't tell you now what I'd think. Maybe one day I'll be in that situation. Who knows how I'll behave?*

SUZANA: *We tend to blame only the Serbs and Croats, but we have to know what every side did . . . and that's for the tribunal to decide.*

FAHRIJA: *This war taught me that people may be good or bad, but that's independent of race and religion.*

TANJA: *People who say, "There are no good guys or bad guys in this fight," don't know Bosnia.*

Even in the aftermath of extreme vulnerability, not one of the twenty-six women I interviewed called for greater military power. Revenge wasn't on their minds. That includes ALMA, who spent years with the fighting forces trying to lift the siege around Sarajevo. *I'd be the happiest person in the world to hear there was no army anywhere. An army is an evil necessity.*

Instead of greater militarization, the women put their faith in justice. As an American, I took for granted a robust system of accountability that divides criminals from victims. But in a postwar society, the lines are not so clearly drawn. Justice necessitates judgment, and judgment comes at a price—for laying blame is at the same time beneficial and disturbing to a postconflict society. Even the concept of blind fairness loses its luster when outsiders try to judge citizens who've lived under a bombardment by outrageous political propaganda, or who are trying to preserve a shred of respect for the group into which they were born.

In extremes, practicalities easily override principles. For example, when Slobodan Milosevic was indicted for war crimes,¹⁶ even Western policymakers convinced of his guilt debated the political advisability of that step.¹⁷ Some felt he was necessary to maintain as a leader to broker peace in the region. Others felt

that to let him go free would not only be wrong at an individual level but also undermine the entire effort to hold perpetrators responsible. Serbian society, in turn, was split in their response to Milosevic's imprisonment. Some felt they were once more victims of a worldwide conspiracy against the Serbs; others saw his being brought to trial as an opportunity for justice to speed the process of healing from the war.

The very process of judgment of war crimes can be — at its worst — an autistic, self-absorbed concern. It can consume tens of millions of dollars when victims lack a roof over their heads. But it can also be a rigorous exercise, sharpening thinking, and fueling a person's motivation to get involved in shaping the future. A woman like Kada, jobless and homeless, with the five closest men in her family murdered, hardly has the psychological energy to turn her attention to the larger world and future generations. She needs an external social process that allows her to see beyond her own misery, and an internal psychological process to let her move through her grief. The two processes are related. A solid justice system encourages the victim to eschew revenge.

In postconflict situations around the world, as the interaction of wrongdoing, memory, confession, forgiveness, justice, and reconciliation is probed, variations of imperfect retributive and restorative measures have been crafted: war crimes tribunals, community-based transitional courts, truth and reconciliation commissions. The creation of a court system to deliver justice is complicated by delays in funding, political morasses, logistical snafus, and personnel inadequacies. The international court must conform to the bureaucratic formulae of a dozen other institutions. Thus months, then years go by with no action. Victims are pushed into the background as questions of jurisdiction, or the definition of war crimes, or military mandates are debated. By the time the court opens, concern for the victims has been subordinated to the UN administrative schedule, the UN member states' fiscal years, the judges' personal holidays. Given these limitations, one might question whether such grand attempts at justice are worth the expense and effort. A hundred years of trials won't bring back the dead; the money spent on lawyers and cells is sorely needed to rebuild homes across war-ravaged landscapes and jump-start economic activity; and true accountability lies far beyond the reach of a courthouse. The system becomes hopelessly clogged, overwhelmed by numbers far beyond what it was designed to handle.¹⁸

Despite these problems, the Bosnian women have been at the forefront of the call for justice. At the end of the 1998 Sarajevo meeting I chaired with two hundred women from the most nationalist to moderate political parties, the women

voted unanimously to support implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement, which included the apprehension of all indicted war criminals. What common principle trumped their political differences? A million women suffered the Bosnian war in a million ways, but the women at that conference shared the sense that those who had suffered were owed a public reckoning.

There's a gendered aspect to their concern, as well: Women have less social power, and without an external system to defend them, they're all the more vulnerable. Subtle and blatant layers of discrimination allow women to be targeted, for example with rape, which is a form of torture often treated by officials as nothing more than an incidental by-product of warring boys being boys. Bands of males may assert their manhood as warriors, but war affords women no corresponding empowering role; instead, they become victims, not only displaced and damaged, mourning the loss of family members, but also prey for men on the enemy side.

The Bosnian war is associated with rape, since it was in relation to this conflict that sexual violence was finally given the status of a war crime, rather than simply the unfortunate but inevitable behavior of marauding paramilitaries scouring the countryside. Although the Red Cross and UN purportedly ignored early reports of systemic rape,¹⁹ as the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing approached, the rapes of Balkan women received attention from advocates all over the world. Strong pronouncements such as Hillary Clinton's that "women's rights are human rights" became a rallying cry for a movement that insisted that the newly formed UN war crimes tribunal include violence against women in their scope. But the ideal imagined in Beijing is far from reality. For example, Bosnian law considers rape only penile penetration. So the woman a UN official described to me who had an AK-47 shoved up her vagina was not legally raped. Instead, the perpetrator committed an indecent act. The crime itself is defined, in Bosnian law, in terms of the perpetrator's experience.²⁰

The justice process not only can provide women relief; it also wounds. By coming forward to testify, Bosnian women and girls bring social shame on themselves and their families. Whatever good may come of the ordeal of testifying is offset by the risks of being met with incredulity, being targeted as the cause of the rape, being trivialized, or being deemed unmarriageable. Men rape women because they're ordered to by commanders intent on humiliating the enemy, or because they're caught up in a spree of violence. In either situation, rape in wartime is a dramatic act of male dominance over women. The prosecution of such crimes is, therefore, highly symbolic, not only at a personal level but for women

as a group. The recognition of rape as a form of torture acknowledges that sexuality is not only personal but also political; and the appointment of women as judges and prosecutors, and the inclusion of rape in the list of war crimes at the tribunal, sent an unmistakable signal to women not only in Bosnia but around the world.

When the universe is out of joint; when the solid foundation has evaporated; when life is no longer work laced with joy, but suffering occasionally ameliorated by humanitarian relief—in such a time, the longing for what's right becomes an all-consuming passion. Justice stubbornly insists on some sort of order in the wake of chaos, a rebalancing of what is off kilter, an expression that there is yet a core around which to build a new life.

KADA, a survivor of relentless depravity in Srebrenica, carefully separates justice from revenge, in self-examination with profound social implication: *I don't curse anyone. I couldn't torture anyone—not even those who caused me this pain. But I'd like to see those people singled out and have them admit they're guilty. Their lives can be spared, but I want them put away so they can't do any more wrong . . . so they can't lure anyone else into evil. If they were taken to court, maybe we'd be able to talk about living together.²¹ We don't have to love each other, just respect each other's rights. I hate General Mladic, because he was there when my husband was taken away. I'd love to see him pay. But I couldn't do anything to hurt him. After I did, I wouldn't be me anymore. Why would I burden myself with that? I've never consciously harmed anyone in my life. Kada has one area left in her control—her conscience. *That's why I'm at peace. I'm reconciled with myself.**

What is the mechanism by which that reconciliation occurs? The question is not rhetorical for MEDIHA, a sophisticated professor who endured Sarajevo under siege. As a member of parliament, she must now consider justice for a country in which the majority of the population has been violated: killed, tortured, or robbed. She moves the issue to a higher level. *Reconciliation is possible, but certain conditions must be met: the unification of our country, including freedom of movement and allowing people to return home; and the punishment of war criminals who committed the genocide of the Bosniak people.²² Neither Mediha nor any other woman I interviewed is demanding retribution or compensation from one people on behalf of another. She draws a clear line between collective and individual guilt: *A finger needs to point to the ethnic group, but we can't charge an ethnic group. Within that group, as in every group, the names of the criminals are known. In fact, the whole world knows who they are.**

Like many mothers across cultures, Mediha turns to homespun wisdom, in a penetratingly apt assessment of the wartime fiasco of international players who

turned their back on the slaughter. *I've often wondered what my son, Bojan, would look like if I had raised him without any principles, like the international community during the war. When a child tells a lie once, if you pretend you don't notice, he'll lie to you again. If you ignore it again, the child will stop respecting you, because both of you know about the lie. In the same way, the countries with the ability to intervene when we called should have acted more honestly.*

On the other side of this war story is GALINA, who, for all I know, could have nursed the mother of the soldier who executed Kada's Samir or offered solace to the family of a sniper picking off civilians like Mediha's Bojan. Galina is tired of hearing her leaders being blamed for the war. She represents thousands of Bosnian Serbs who live in communities in which mosques were razed and Catholics expelled, but who've been inundated with warnings about impending persecution of Serbs. She's in a difficult position. An empathetic, tireless advocate for those near her who are hurting, she feels that the Serb people are misunderstood, misjudged, and maligned. Confronted with human rights reports of ethnic cleansing, she notes simply that hundreds of thousands of people left her home city of Banja Luka and Serbs moved into their homes—as if the non-Serbs preferred a different climate or were following a new job opportunity.

Galina has great sympathy, however, for the Serbs streaming into Banja Luka as refugees from other fronts, fleeing the dangers of war, or the reverse ethnic cleansing perpetrated by Croat and Bosniak troops pushing back against the Belgrade-backed onslaught. She's frustrated that, for political leverage, distribution of aid after the war was linked to compliance with the Dayton Agreement. This policy was highly criticized by humanitarian workers (including Americans) I met in Republika Srpska. Those supporting the aid-ban decision noted that short-term hardship was balanced by the possibilities of long-term gain for refugees ultimately returning to their homes, a provision of Dayton being stymied by the hard-liners elected by Serbs in that area. But Galina wants to keep politics out of the aid question. *People in war are vulnerable. We were caring for the hungry, the sick. We didn't even get ten kilos of flour in aid. A single foreigner could have come to help us. Then you listen to CNN or the BBC talking about us as aggressors. I don't feel like an aggressor. If aggression means trying to take what is not rightfully yours, by Galina's logic, the Serbs were not aggressors but liberators of their own land. My people have been here for centuries. I can't be aggressive in my own home.*

Her unease at hearing her people blamed extends to a distrust of the tribunal. Still she recognizes the essential need for justice, not only to expose the perpetrators but to preclude collective guilt and prejudice: *If someone is taken to court, there are proceedings and witnesses. Once it's proved that this or that was done by this or*

that person, nobody can deny it.²³ It's finished through normal procedures. But if it's just hearsay or rumors . . . ("These crimes were committed . . ." "They weren't committed . . ." "We did . . ." "They did . . .") then it's a problem. As a Serb, Galina feels maligned. Anyone who's guilty should pay; but many things haven't been officially proved, and now anyone who's against the Serbs is OK. I hate that. Our side suffered too. There are people responsible for massacres in Serb villages. She pulls herself up short with a noncontroversial generality: *Everybody should be judged fairly.*

Galina is wary of the UN international criminal tribunal, which she sees as politicized. *The Croats say, "We're all in prison in The Hague." And then the Serbs say all the Serbs are in The Hague.* Galina doesn't adopt the nationalist line that the court is simply a tool of NATO. But she is skeptical about fairness. *People are biased, especially given their emotional trauma and fear; plus, the international community doesn't treat all sides the same.* That last complaint is ironic. A great obstacle to justice was the attitude of U.S. commanders who were sent in to maintain the peace immediately after the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed. Preoccupied with their own "force protection," the military leaders refused to apprehend indicted war criminals, saying first that this action wasn't in their mandate, and second that it would not be "even-handed." Their concept of even-handedness was Galina's: the same number of Croats, Muslims, and Serbs. Indictments issued according to who did what to whom were irrelevant in this logic-defying reckoning.²⁴

Galina points out that Bosniak leader Alija Izetbegovic had not been indicted as a war criminal when he died in 2003; yet, she asserts, if he didn't know about the atrocities his soldiers committed, he was guilty for not knowing. Likewise, Croatian leader Tudjman was not taken to The Hague. *But he started ethnic cleansing—the rest was just a reaction.* Had he not died of cancer, Tudjman might well have been indicted like Milosevic, but Galina's last statement reflects a remarkable revision of history. Although human rights groups have documented that the overwhelming majority of the atrocities committed in the war were by Serbs, Galina says that her people are convinced that the call to justice is one-sided. *It's fine if you think badly of Milosevic; but everyone must be taken to court at the same time, and then the guilt will be decided.*

Such denial of Serb responsibility for the war is hard to take for NURDZIHANA, who witnessed and documented tragedy at the hands of Belgrade-backed paramilitaries. She focuses not on the importance of formal justice but on finding an even larger framework that allows her to resist revenge. During the siege, she used her journalistic training to record tales of carnage and courage. Reflecting on all she heard, she moves the notion of justice beyond earthly courts to a spiri-

tual reckoning in which people receive their due rewards: *Why did the Bosnian Serb leader Karadzic bring such destruction to his own people — not just to us Bosniaks (who suffered the most), but to his own people. Now justice prevails — although sometimes very slowly. I'm not sure if I believed in God before the war, but I believe there is Something, and everything we do and whatever happens is in relation to that Something. A person can't do whatever he or she pleases without having it come back in some way — not just as a sanction by a court. There is a God, and sooner or later everyone gets what he or she deserves.*

Nurdzihana had ample moments for theological reflection during the long days and nights of Sarajevo's bombardment. She watched her community divide among those who fled as refugees to escape danger and deprivation (creating a serious talent drain), those who left due to political pressure because they were ethnic Serbs or Croats (and thus at war with the Bosniaks), and those who remained, regardless of ethnic heritage. She tried to explain to me how the postconflict psychological divisions among those groups have been as difficult to overcome as any notion of ethnicity. *The people who stayed in Bosnia were the real victims. The ones who left — I'm not sure they really knew why they were leaving.* Yet despite the atrocities she witnessed at the hands of "Chetniks," Nurdzihana can empathize with her Serb neighbors who left. They were, after all, hearing constant propaganda about their saintly people being persecuted by heathen Muslims. *When somebody keeps telling you you're a saint, you start believing it.* Then the sentiment that grabbed my attention, as I heard it from one woman after another: *Maybe I'd like to be told that too; I don't know.*

How can she speak so matter-of-factly, and even empathically, about people who were part of a group who robbed her and those around her of friends, lovers, security, beauty? Even outside a formal justice system, Nurdzihana's belief in an ultimate reckoning allows her to escape revenge, to leave behind a wretched past and move into the future. Rather than becoming mired in her victim status, she's willing to excuse those around her with a blanket statement: *People I knew didn't start this war.*

Humanizing the Enemy

MAJA: *Whatever I wish to have happen to others, let it happen to me and my family.*

SABIHA: *During the war, when I collected food to send to my country from*

abroad, I never thought about whether it would go to Croat, Bosniaks, or Serbs—just hungry Bosnians.

GRETA: *The snipers. Who were they? What are they like inside?*

AMNA: *The soldiers were ordinary Serbs, Croats, and Muslims. It's sad but true.*

They were normal people, trusting their leaders, in a simple, rural region where people believe what they hear.

Women like Greta and Amna seem to know intuitively the trap of demonizing the enemy. One was deported to Auschwitz because she was a Jew; the other was tossed out of the university because she was a Muslim. Both have been victims of distortions over politicized airwaves that transformed cultural heritage into a ticket to hell. But neither they nor the other women described themselves to me as having progressed from martyrs to saints. In fact, given the complexity of morals, values, and loyalties, our conversations were far from simple as the women I met with struggled with questions of others' motivation and the extent to which the perpetrators were acting with free will. Many wanted to give the boys and men who wreaked havoc in their lives the benefit of the doubt. *Perhaps they were misled. . . . Surely they were duped. . . . In the same situation, maybe I would have done the same. . . .* They were reluctant to judge, even as they recognized the importance of assigning responsibility for the raging aggression let loose on innocents.

As they spoke of what they'd experienced, several of the women found themselves beyond the continuum that runs between good and bad. They'd witnessed evil, and they were haunted by questions: When Milosevic reached into the bowels of Serbia's prisons to find criminals who would take pleasure in terrorizing the Bosnian people,²⁵ what well of psychopathology did he plumb? Is sadism a sickness or—worse—a choice? And who ultimately bears the responsibility, the drunken soldiers laughing as they mutilate an old woman,²⁶ or the political architect of the war, lounging in a leather chair, sipping slivovitz with visiting diplomats?

"Humanizing the enemy" is a complicated process, as my conversations with the women demonstrate. For one, the most important element is an acceptance that "the enemy" are really normal, everyday people. Another deals with the issue by saying "the system" is accountable for leading individuals into temptation. Another describes victims forgiving perpetrators. Another recounts acts of

kindness toward those on the other side. Each reaches into a psychological space closed to those who demonize others as a way of coping with overwhelming evil. Each represents a voice calling for a reconciled community.

SABIHA, from the eastern enclave of Gorazde, watched the war brewing while living abroad: *The Bosnian Serb political party was strong. They brainwashed their party members in Sarajevo: "Pack a few things and go away for the weekend. We'll take the capital in three days." Once those Sarajevo Serbs were caught up in the game, it was difficult to get out of it.* For a Sarajevo Serb who had left, to reconnect to her former neighbors after the shooting started, she'd have to cross a psychological distance littered with corpses. But Sabiha's analysis invites reconciliation: *Maybe even those who didn't want to be part of Milosevic's game didn't have the inner strength to return and say, "I made a mistake. Will you take me back?" The war in Sarajevo was horrible; everyone wanted to escape. But among some of the bravest people who stayed to defend the city were Serbs.*

In a cellar of the Sarajevo suburbs, NURDZIHANA learned a lesson of reconciliation from her mother, whom she describes as the soul of the community. *She was an unusual woman, full of optimism and energy. People in Dobrinja were panicked: packing, trying to escape, running back in, shouting, insisting they had to get out. She said, "Excuse me, may I ask where you're going?" Nobody had an answer. Then when we moved into the cellar, we took down a telephone. People would make calls, going on and on about how horrible it was. And she'd say, "I'd like to ask something of you. When you talk to people by phone, don't say it's so bad for us here. Don't you see how good it is?" We had a mini-TV, a transistor radio, and some mattresses piled up high on the floor. "Look, this is like a café! It's not as awful as you're saying." The elderly woman was more than a naïve optimist; her whole attitude was rooted in reconciliation as a stubborn possibility. And then there was something I didn't expect: When people would talk against the Serbs as if they all were the same, my mother would say, "Please don't talk like that around me. They are not all the same." She kept saying that throughout the war. She spoke with authority . . . and people respected what she said.*

That same generosity is woven throughout DANICA's description of the man who was the final impetus for her fleeing her community in northern Bosnia. As tensions mounted, she'd been holding out, not wanting to leave her home and business to cross the river to Croatia. One day, there was a pounding on her door. There was nothing obviously different about the man standing there. *He was completely average: between forty and fifty years old, average height and build. Just a normal man.* But he had a wild look in his eyes. In his panic, this normal man was her signal of danger. *My daughter had been resisting leaving, but after she saw*

him, she packed her kids up so I could take them to safety. He looked just like any of us, but when I realized his mental state, I knew there was going to be a war, and I had to leave. Danica converts the threat into a gift: *So he's the one, in a way, who saved our lives, because the next day, the war started.* I asked her more about the man, but Danica let me know that wasn't her point. *I have no idea what he did when he left, if he became a war criminal, if he killed people . . .* Her message is broader. *That's how war is. We're all similar. We all look alike.*

ALENKA knows how it is to live under the burden of stereotypes: *My mother is Slovene; my father is Serbian. I don't feel like any one identity. I'm a zero, and that's perfect for me. No one can insult me. I'm above that. I did my own silly experiments working in a shelter project in '94. The shelling was terrible, and a lot of people were killed.* Interviewing people about their homes that needed repair, Alenka slipped in another question: *"What do you think of me? Because . . . well, I'm not, uh . . . You know . . . I'm Serb . . . and I'm here. So what do you think?"* And the people would always say, *"No problem. You're with us. You're helping us. Don't worry. It's fine."* Even in refugee centers, she received the same answer. And so she concludes: *The problems are political. There's not that much ethnic trouble between ordinary people. Or if there is, it's because of political manipulation. It's easy to break through prejudice if you have the right attitude.* For five years, she's been working across ethnic lines. *Never, ever, did I have any trouble, because I don't have an ethnic agenda. If you just behave normally, you don't have those problems.*

But such social optimism doesn't explain the carnage she witnessed. *I ask myself, how could people divide into these herds? These are good people. So what happened? They're simply easy to manipulate. It's probably because we had no democratic traditions. Before, someone else was thinking instead of you. You didn't have to have your own opinion. You weren't taught to think independently. So when some idiots came along, they could easily manipulate the population.* Alenka repeatedly distances "ordinary people" from the evil that was perpetrated. *People think they have their own opinion, but they just believe the media and politicians. Today they say, "Ooh, ah, I hate this. I hate that." But tomorrow they change their minds quicker than you can imagine. A different politician . . . different propaganda . . . and your mind-set changes.*

To the extent that "the enemy" was everyday citizens, Alenka is ready to excuse their actions, including killing. *There were criminal gangs, but there were also just ordinary people. How many of them honestly accepted the idea of killing and war? How many were forced to pick up a gun, put on a uniform and fight?* Her excuses for those soldiers range from the practical to the psychological. *Many had no choice. What could they do? Some couldn't find work. Call it stupid. Call it crazy. Call it . . .*

*You don't know yourself until you're in a situation. She moves to the broader question: How could this war start, and then go on so long? A massive spiral was spinning out of control, and you had no choice but to become part of the army. Of course, there was no reason to become more criminal and massacre people, but those are two different categories. You can stay human in any situation. You had ordinary soldiers firing rifles and tanks, and then you had criminals. That's the choice. But to take up a gun or not, people had less choice.*²⁷

Those who insist on seeing Bosnia in terms of ethnic groups might point out that since Alenka's father and husband were Serb, her excusing the soldiers may be one more example of Serbs not being willing to come to grips with their complicity in the aggression. But not so KADA, who lost every man in her world to a massacre perpetrated by Serbs. She speaks with legitimacy as she puts aside her grief to enter the reality of the aggressors. *How can people like that live with themselves? They must have flashbacks all the time—cutting people's throats . . .* Her words are much more like a care provider than a victim. But she goes further, allowing the soldiers complete freedom from responsibility. *There must be something inside making them do that. When they come to their senses, I wonder how they feel. It must be so hard for them. We all can get upset and break down, but after that we're sorry. I can't understand what happened in the war. It's as if the people didn't want to have a good life any more, as if they wanted some spectacle, even if it was evil. It's unbelievable.*

She moves to the larger questions: *Why did God create us if we do evil to others? It's better not to be alive. They were awarding medals to whoever committed the worst crime, to the one who killed the most people in the fiercest way, or raped the most women. He was a hero by their standards. And the worst part is, that soldier believed he was doing good for his people and for his religion. I'm sure they're not aware even now that they were committing crimes, and that they did evil to other people.*

Ultimately, some of the women are able to go even further, actually mustering some modicum of kindness toward the enemy. EMSUDA, who saw her neighbors turn into monsters who murdered, tortured, maimed, and raped, still wants to remember the old times when they were just neighbors. She puts herself through mental gymnastics to escape the trap of hatred: *When I see those people, I try to think of the pleasant times before. It works . . . as long as they don't start talking about what happened. I haven't felt any anger or hatred toward them—just pity.* Emsuda's sense of justice is cosmic. *The evil they did, even when they really believed they were doing the right thing, will remain for them and for their descendants a curse—not only personally, but for the whole nation.*

But is her sense of ultimate justice enough? How does Emsuda control her

natural feelings of revulsion or revenge? No matter how depraved a person is, I try to find in the depth of his soul at least a little positive spark that could be a nucleus for change. If I find there's no possibility, I give up—but with great sadness. Even the most horrendous criminal in the world has a bit of positive energy and can change. The soldier who saved me from being taken to the Omarska death camp had no doubt killed hundreds of people; but after we met, I bet he didn't kill again, but saved hundreds. He changed, and friends who were with him also were turned around. That's when I realized we need to work with people and look for what can help them become better. They have to create those changes inside themselves, instead of having me tell them what's good or bad. I asked Emsuda about the contact she had with the soldier afterward. She didn't have any, she told me; she was just certain that he must have changed.

RADA was the recipient of such a benevolent spirit, during the war. *I was doing a documentary story. It was 1993—a spring of hunger. I went to a neighborhood at the edge of Sarajevo where all the houses had been destroyed. The people were mainly Muslims; now they were living underground—in holes they had dug only two hundred meters away from the front line. It was a dangerous place, with bitter people who didn't want to set eyes on a Serb. We were a symbol of evil, of crime, and all the horrible things that had happened.*

I understand people—especially country folk—so I was ready for what lay ahead. The first five minutes were always crucial. Often, people didn't want to shake hands when they heard my Serb name, "Radmila." They'd keep silent or just walk away. I was met by a group of people in the street. Among them, a seventy-year-old man, wearing an old, shabby but clean suit. He stared at me. Then he shook my hand and said, "When you've finished, please come visit me. They call me 'Hadjija.' Where do you come from?" I should have said "Sarajevo." I wanted to. But then I thought twice and imagined someone might tell him otherwise, so I said, "I am from Pale" [the town of the Bosnian Serb headquarters]. He said "No problem! You're mine."

The cameraman and I completed our assignment then went to see him. He was highly respected; despite his age he had joined the army with his son to try to defend their community. Now he was living in a space he had dug out under his burnt house. He had even managed to run a phone line into that hole! When we arrived, he had a fire going. It was Ramadan, when no Muslim eats during the day, but his wife had made big plates of pita and sauerkraut. Sauerkraut! It was unimaginable at that time! My God, that aroma! And the beauty of the place! It has stayed in my soul. It was difficult; I was the only one eating. He asked me, "How do you manage? Do you have a family?" I told him, "I have two children and a husband. Nobody is earning money." I was being honest; we didn't have any money for five years. Then he said, "Why didn't you say so? I have plenty of

flour!" I told Hadjija, "I can't take anything." The old man worked in his garden every night, with his wife. They had managed to grow onions and potatoes. They wanted to pack something for me to bring home. There was nothing in town . . . not even salt . . . not even bread . . . only hunger; but I left empty-handed. I didn't want to take anything from him.

I broadcast this story on the radio. I polished it, as a work of art, with all my love. He heard it, and then he called me, saying we had to meet the next day. He told me to wait outside the studio. He had no transportation, of course, and it was a long way. He got up at five that morning to walk two-and-a-half hours. I was waiting for him outside the building. He was carrying a rucksack on his back. He was a small man, and the heavy load dug into his shoulders. He told me to take the rucksack. When I opened it at home, it was full of potatoes, beets, onions, sauerkraut, and smoked plums. Then I found, in a pocket, something more: a box of cigarettes! Cigarettes were only a dream during that time. That was unimaginable! And in the packet of cigarettes was a piece of paper, wrapped around some money. A few Deutschmarks. The note read: "Radmila, this is from Allah. Don't be offended."

I didn't cry even when my father died. But at that moment, I cried from happiness. We're still friends. I visit his home as if I'm his own child. I'm part of his family. That feeling has kept me going.

Keeping going is, after all, the first task of each of the women in this book as they walk the long road to reconciliation. And so KRISTINA sums up the lessons of these twenty-six women in a final benediction and call to action. *It's time for us to return to our normal flow of life, for our children to play outside without fear, without having to dread the next shelling, or snipers, or any other danger. Like all other children in the world, they want to live free—not only our children, but all of us. All, including journalists, NGO leaders, farmers, politicians, greenhouse managers, stay-at-home mothers, retired entrepreneurs, artists, publishers, dress designers, school teachers, massacre survivors, students, physicians, engineers . . . all the women of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and with their help, all the people of that country. For, as Kristina insists: The war has ended . . . and it's time to put a full stop on that story.*