

Bosnia: Symbol of Prison Camp Suffering

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Head down and hands tied, a simple carving by a former Bosnian Muslim detainee is a powerful symbol even ten years on.

At first glance, Hasan Osmancevic would be hard to distinguish from any of the thousands of other Bosnian Muslims held at the Manjaca prison camp in the early Nineties.

But although his name and face are unknown, a simple wooden figure – head down and hands behind its back – carved by this baker from Sanski Most while imprisoned at Manjaca has become a powerful symbol for the plight of detainees everywhere.

It has appeared on television and in international newspapers and since 1993 the International Rescue Committee, IRC, has used the image to decorate a humanitarian award.

Osmancevic explained to Balkan Crisis Report, BCR, that the figure is carved in the position that he and other Bosnian Muslim prisoners stood each time they walked out of the barn where they were held in Manjaca.

“We got beaten every time we looked up or moved our hands, and I think that was the greatest humiliation of all,” he said.

Osmancevic was arrested and imprisoned along with thousands of other Muslims living in Serb-controlled areas when war broke out in Bosnia in 1992.

After a month of “physical and mental torture” in Sanski Most prison he was sent to Manjaca and for the next 210 days things only got worse. He had to endure torture, famine, thirst, dehumanising living conditions, disease and unbearable heat followed by bitter cold that sapped whatever remaining reserves of energy the exhausted detainees had left.

“From the moment we set foot into a barn with only a thin layer of bracken on the floor, I was well aware that we were going to be treated worse than second-rate human beings, more like animals. I knew the guards could do whatever they wanted with us,” he said.

“I prayed just to survive, to see my family again, to keep my sanity. I decided that if I ever walked out, I would have to take something with me apart from my memories to show the hell we have been through.”

Creating the figure was painstaking work. He first stole a piece of wood from the kitchen and started carving with a piece of broken glass. When that proved unsuccessful, he took a nail from the camp fence and a piece of metal from the sole of his shoe and continued to work over endless hours in the darkened barn. He then polished his creation with his own clothes.

His efforts even inspired others to commemorate their time in Manjaca with some producing hand carved key rings, cigarette holders and other items.

The figure began its unlikely journey around the world when Osmancevic gave it to an American asking him questions following his release from Manjaca in December 1992.

That man was former US diplomat Richard Holbrooke whose first encounters with the war in the former Yugoslavia came at the refugee camp in the Croatian town of Karlovac where he met Osmancevic.

“Among the people we spoke to, there was a young man who introduced himself as a baker from Sanski Most. As we interviewed him, he pulled a slim plastic bag under his mattress and gave me two carved wooden figures, neatly tucked away,” Holbrooke described in his book *Ending the War*, detailing negotiations that resulted in the Dayton Peace Accords.

“Please take them to your country and show them to your people. Show the Americans how they treated us. Tell America what’s going on,” Holbrooke quoted Osmancevic as saying.

Many years later, the encounter with Holbrooke is also still fresh in Osmancevic’s mind.

“Reporters, politicians and foreign diplomats took turns in interviewing us the day we arrived in the Karlovac refugee camp,” he remembered.

“They were asking a million questions and I was waiting to reunite with my wife, children and mother. I know that I gave the figure to an American instead of answering his questions. I didn’t know who that man was or why he was there.”

Upon his return to New York, Holbrooke remembered his promise. He displayed the figure in television interviews, even attracting the attention of the *New York Times* which printed a full page photo in its magazine.

Osmancevic and his family were also on the move and had started a new life in Canada, far from their hometown of Sanski Most.

Four months after arriving, Osmancevic was told by a Canadian government official of the figure’s remarkable journey and approved the IRC’s request to use the image on its IRC Freedom Award, given out for extraordinary contributions to the cause of refugees and human freedom.

“I agreed on one condition only – to keep the Manjaca 92 engraving so that it keeps reminding everyone what we had been through,” he said.

He was also told of Holbrooke, at the time the US ambassador to Germany, and a telephone conversation was organised between the two men.

“We were able to communicate even though I had only just started learning English,” said Osmancevic,

who was happy to learn that the media attention surrounding his piece had resulted in significant aid being given to Bosnia.

He returned to Sanski Most with his family in 1996 and rebuilt his house, the mill and the bakery – starting over once again. He tries not to think about the detention camp and says he has told very few people in his homeland about the wooden figure.

“Throughout the 210 days I spent standing or walking around in Manjaca with my head down and my hands behind my back, I dreamed of the day I could lift my head up and look in the eye all those who detained and tortured me,” said Osmančević.

That day duly came. “The majority of Sanski Most’s police and military of that era are still free. I have come across some of them. I was infinitely proud. I looked them in the eye and they put their heads down although I don’t carry a rifle,” he said.

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