

Faded Bosnian Resort Haunted by Killings

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Any attempt to live a normal life in Klotjevac is entwined with memories of the Bosnian Serb massacre at nearby Srebrenica.

Hadzira Dozic is a gracious hostess, patiently cooking coffee on a wooden stove for the journalists who drop by her house in the village of Klotjevac, some 25 kilometres from Srebrenica. She now lives in Srebrenik, near Tuzla, and only comes to Klotjevac on the occasional weekend. This week she came to bury her husband, 14 years after his death in the July 1995 massacre.

Her voice shakes when she describes her concern for her children, especially the youngest, who wanted to carry his father's coffin, which she feared would be too heavy.

"But then I realised it is a light coffin," she said. "Their coffins are not heavy like the other, normal ones. Those are only bones."

Any attempt to live a normal life in Klotjevac is entwined with the memories of July 1995, when Bosnian Serb troops hunted down and killed some 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and teenage boys through the woods of eastern Bosnia, burying their bodies in dozens of mass graves to hide the crime.

"My father did not cross the woods" is an expression used around Srebrenica to refer to death. Crossing the woods means life. The word genocide is reserved for the mass killing. For individuals people were personally attached to, the circumlocution is preferred.

Perhaps the neutral expression makes personal memories of death and desperation more bearable, the metaphor masking the pain of a genocide that weighs on the hearts of thousands who mourn by the graves every summer or still wait for the bones of their loved ones to be found, identified and buried.

Before the 1992-95 war, tourists flocked to Klotjevac to enjoy the distinctive natural beauty of its waters and gorges, like the Perucac lake formed by the building of a hydroelectric power plant in the 1960s, and the 24 km-long Drina canyon between Klotjevac and Zepa, the third deepest canyon in the world.

With the Drina river marking a relaxed border with Serbia, Klotjevac was a popular tourist destination for people from both sides of the river. The number of inhabitants doubled every summer with holidaymakers and people staying in cottage-style summer homes. But the location proved less auspicious when it was among the first places to be shelled by Serb fire in April 1992.

Some 108 people, a third of its original residents, were killed during the war, most of them in Srebrenica. During the winters the village now has just 13 inhabitants living in four houses.

"I am not afraid now. I used to be afraid. We did not have electricity. It is still weird, it is like a deserted place with no people around," said Edina Sejdinovic, who lives in Klotjevac with her husband Nurija, a farmer, and their three children.

“It was nothing like this before the war when this village and the surrounding areas were buzzing with people. But we have got used to it now.”

Hamed Mesanovic, who is in his thirties, returned to Klotjevac in 2003 after the humanitarian organisation Care rebuilt his house. He lives with his mother, son and younger brother and makes a living from farming.

“I have sheep, cows and some bees,” he said. His son goes to school in the village of Osat, 10 km away, in a small school bus which is organised and paid for by the municipal authorities.

“We are satisfied with this help. It would be good though if they would help with some other problems. Our biggest concern is the road. We are 25 km from Srebrenica. That is a rocky unpaved road and during winter there are days when we are snowbound, but still the road is cleared only once a week.”

His expression alternates between sad, worried and pensive, a testimony to the hard times shared by the villagers. People might work hard on the land and tend to their livestock and beehives, but there is no one around to buy their butter or honey, and the nearest market is hours away on a bad road.

The only time Mesanovic relaxes is when he starts talking about fishing. “We go fishing during winter, we meet at the lake with ‘their’ (Serbian) fishing warden and fishermen,” he said. “We don't have any problems.”

He smiled widely and added, “Last year Huso caught a catfish. It was huge, 20 kilogrammes. We usually do not sell fish, we only fish for our own needs, to eat during the winter, but this was the only fish we managed to sell.”

His expression becomes more serious as he remembers the only trouble they had since they returned. One of the local Serbs came in 2003 and verbally abused them. After they reported it to the police, they had no problems again.

Everyone in Klotjevac is ready to talk to journalists, but it takes only half an hour for the excitement about visitors to fade. The attention of outsiders is appreciated, but it is too little to change the sad lives of the villagers, now reduced to the most basic of existences.

Two people committed to returning and making a difference are Melbourne University professor Ron Adams and social anthropology lecturer Hariz Halilovic, originally from Klotjevac. In the summer of 2007 they led a Bosnian study tour, teaching students about the devastating effects of genocide on a local community through fieldwork in Klotjevac, ten days spent living with returnees, working in the fields with them and sharing their everyday life. Together they set up the Friends of Klotjevac association and started raising money for the village.

Two years later, they are standing in front of a monument bearing the names of Klotjevac's 108 war dead, ready to unveil it as 200 people gather for the occasion. Standing by the Australian flag, Adams speaks emotionally, remembering the days he spent in the village two years ago, when with his students he made a promise to the people of Klotjevac and to himself to stay in touch, and try to help returnees improve their quality of life.

“But I also remember thinking that the past can be reclaimed”, and perpetrators “can be denied their final victory”, he said to audience applause.

“What was demonstrated that night - and during the whole of our stay in Klotjevac - was that survivors can honour victims by continuing to live and to act according to the values and traditions by which the victims had lived their lives,” Adams concluded.

The monument, shaped like the ragged triangle of Bosnia and Hercegovina on a map, is placed above the village water pipe which was the meeting place of inhabitants before the war. Local lore says that the water from this spring, famous across eastern Bosnia, made the village children more intelligent and was the reason why many scholars from the village are now scattered across the world, including Halilovic.

“For the first time in 17 years I was united not only with the place where all my family came from, but also with both the living and those that perished during the war,” Halilovic said. “The people who not only shared the same geographic area, but also the same memories and the same attachment to the place came together today. In a way my personal memory and collective memory of the place materialised through the monument and the act of unveiling the monument.”

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Location: [Serbia](#)
[Bosnia and](#)
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