

My Encounter With Convicted War Criminals

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Reporter had to overcome both his own apprehensions and prisoners' suspicion of him.

Last summer, I found myself behind prison walls in the southern Bosnian city of Mostar.

I visited the prison together with a few colleagues to interview individuals convicted of crimes committed during Bosnia's 1992-95 war, as part of the research for a story on the laws applied in war crimes trials.

Bosnia and Hercegovina currently has two criminal codes in use, one the document it inherited from the old Yugoslav state, the other a new national code dating from 2003. Depending on which of them is used in a particular war crimes trial, the sentence for similar offences can vary greatly, in some cases by as much as 20 years.

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Before I got to the prison, I was quite nervous. I really didn't know what to expect, but I knew one thing for sure – that interviewing people convicted of war crimes including mass murder and torture was not going to be a pleasant experience.

From the outside, the Mostar prison looks like a medieval fortress. Its walls are five or six metres high with barbed wire on top.

The traces of war are still visible everywhere, because the prison is located where the front lines of warring Bosniak and Croat forces were once only a street apart.

We entered through a squeaking metal door, leaving our IDs and mobile phones at the reception desk.

On seeing the prison guards who came to escort us to a meeting room, I suddenly felt goosebumps and had to repeat to myself that I was only a visitor and had nothing to worry about.

Shortly after we took our seats, seven convicts entered the room. They seemed rather intimidating at first, with their military-style crewcuts and strong muscular builds, which suggested they spent a lot of time in the prison gym.

We wanted to ask them about their experience of being convicted under one or other of the two criminal codes, and how it affected their sentences.

Some had been tried under the old Yugoslav code, others under the new one, but all agreed that the current system was not fair to anyone – neither the perpetrators nor the victims of war crimes. One law should apply to all, they told us.

At the beginning, though, they were reluctant to talk to us.

"What do we get out of this?" one of them asked. "You come here, do your story and leave, but we stay here with all the problems we have that no one is trying to solve."

It took an hour of casual conversation before they started opening up to us. They listed a number of issues that troubled them, such as being denied the vote. Surprisingly, this seemed to bother them a lot, as they see the right to vote as a basic human right.

One of the men we talked to participated in the murder of 200 people. Another was convicted of involvement in killing 15 people. I couldn't help but wonder whether they regretted what they did, though I didn't dare ask that question out loud.

One by one, as if they read my mind, they eventually started saying that what they did was terrible, that they were fully aware of the consequences of their crimes, and that they sincerely regretted committing them. Some of them pointed out that they pleaded guilty in court.

These men we were talking to were on different sides during the war and once fought against one another. Now they appeared to get along very well.

Prison governor Romeo Zelenika told us that their behaviour was exemplary and that they never got into any trouble with the other inmates.

After we finished interviewing the convicts, we were shown around the prison. It has a fairly small yard surrounded by high walls, with one exercise machine in the corner and a phone booth so that inmates can call their families.

The prisoners we spoke did not complain about the conditions inside, but said they wished they had more space for sports activities.

“I have always loved basketball, and my friend here loves handball. If you can, please try to persuade the governor to arrange that,” said one man, who also complained about the limited amount of time he was able to use the phone friends.

We visited a small workshop where prisoners make tools and other items – “just to kill time”, as one of them put it. Finally, we stopped off in a small cafeteria where the warders can get refreshments, served by inmates.

“It isn’t bad here, but there are some things that could make serving our sentences easier,” the prisoner who served us our coffee said. “We know we are guilty – most of us have confessed to our crimes – but we wish the authorities would pay us some attention.”

As we drove back to Sarajevo, I could still taste that cup of coffee in my mouth – the first and probably the last I will ever have that was made by a convicted war criminal.

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Location: [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)

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