

Serbia's Forgotten Martyrs

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Once the Serbian media portrayed them as martyrs whose plight demanded war against Croats, Muslims and Albanians. Today, the forgotten victims of Belgrade's drive for a Greater Serbia, they live in squalor in collective centres in Serbia where mental illness

Once their plight was the principal concern of the Serbian media. At that time, however, they lived in their own homes, the alleged victims of "Croat fascists" and "Muslim fundamentalists". Now, having fled Croatia and Bosnia, they are refugees in Serbia, their tragedy ignored by the regime that claimed to be intervening on their behalf.

Some 200,000 Serbs from Croatia and Bosnia, nobody knows exactly, are dispersed across Serbia in collective centres, dispossessed, jobless and futureless, every one as much a victim of Milosevic's drive for a Greater Serbia as the Croats, Muslims and Albanians who bore the brunt of the military offensive.

The Sljivovica refugee camp, named after the Serbian plum brandy, is now home to some 180 Bosnian and Croatian Serbs who live crammed into four pre-fabricated structures in western Serbia, between the town of Uzice and Mount Zlatibor - barely ten kilometres from the summer residences of the country's political and economic elite. Three are schizophrenics, ten chronic alcoholics, and others suffer from a range of illnesses.

The Sljivovica camp was formerly home to 400 Muslims from Srebrenica, captured by Yugoslav military and police on the Bosnian border in July and August 1996. They were survivors of the Bosnian Serb offensive on the UN safe haven, for which the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague has charged Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic with genocide.

Fleeing the Bosnian Serb forces, the Muslims surrendered to Yugoslav soldiers and police and were then interned in Sljivovica for 10 months. Today's inmates are, unlike their Muslim predecessors, free to leave, at least in theory, but complain that the conditions they live in are even worse.

"At least they had food, clothing and regular medical care," Drago Markovic, the centre's manager, says. "The doctor visits us once a month now. I ask him to pay attention to those who are still normal, so that he can save someone at least. I fear that we will soon have to put a barbed wire around this centre and declare it a lunatic asylum."

Nenad Markovic, 42 and born in Sarajevo, made his way to Serbia from Bosnia at the end of 1997. He lives in one room together with his wife and two children.

A dozen empty beer bottles are lined up behind a small ring stove in their room. A pan with the leftovers lies on the stove; tablets are scattered across the floor; cigarette smoke disappears in babies' nappies hung out to dry on the wall above the bed.

Nenad's wife Snezana, and their two daughters, the three-year-old Milica and baby Kristina, lies on the iron bed under two military blankets. Snezana tries to hide big bruises under her eyes. "I have that from the seizure. I have epilepsy. It happened last night. I had several beers, and forgot to take a pill, and there you go," she explains.

Nenad shows off two wounds he incurred during fighting in Sarajevo's suburbs. He says that 65 out of 130

soldiers in his company were killed, while 50 were wounded some lightly, some seriously. "For four years, in one building in Sarajevo, we, Serbs, controlled four entrances, and the Muslims the fifth one. If you made one wrong step, you could say goodbye to your life," he says. "I don't dare go back to Sarajevo, I have heard that they put me on that list of war criminals."

The next room is home to an alcoholic. A schizophrenic lives next door to him. And a pensioner lives in the next room. The fourth room along the corridor is home to a family with a baby. "Can you imagine what happens when the first gets drunk, when the other has a fit?" asks Markovic, the centre's manager.

The men have no jobs, no income and nothing to do. If they do manage to make some money, however, the first thing they buy is alcohol. Fights often break out and the police have had to intervene on many occasions.

Every refugee has his own tragic tale to recount. A bearded man in his fifties tells how his friend Bogdan, a former soldier from Croatia who had spent four years in various Serb armies, died recently. Ill, he went to a state hospital where he was told he should bring the medication with him before he would receive treatment.

"Bogdan did not have 100 dinars [8 German marks], so he returned here and died the next day. He died for lack of 100 dinars. His life was not worth 100 dinars yet he fought for four years for the state."

Lazo and Ljubica Medic lived in Croatia before the war where they had a big farm. Now they too live in Slijivovica in one room, together with five children. The oldest daughter is 12, and the youngest, Bojana is only five months old. "I feel worst about the baby. She coughs all night. We have nothing to give her," Ljubica says. "We would go back to Croatia immediately. But our houses were burnt down and everything was stolen."

The author is an independent journalist from Belgrade who wished to keep his identity secret.

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