

Pople are dying in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Yet the pictures of mortar explosions and dead bloody bodies on the streets of Sarajevo, the statistics telling us that thousands are dead no longer have meaning for us. What is occurring in former Yugoslavia is occurring to individuals, individuals fleeing a war which is affecting millions of faceless people in this beleaguered region. What we seem to have forgotten is that war is not a simulation, its people not images on our televisions.

The western Bosnian town of Hrustovo was attacked by the Serbs on the 27th of May 1992. In the weeks that followed its mostly Muslim inhabitants became victims of the widespread Serb repression that has caused the largest refugee crisis in Europe since the Second World War. Five Muslim families from the Hrustovo district recently arrived in Fredericton as part of Canada's refugee assistance program. We spoke to them during their brief stay at a Fredericton hotel.

During our first meeting it was clear that these people were still experiencing the terror of Serb ethnic cleansing. When asked for their names they hesitated, fearing a Serb reprisal here in Fredericton. Four men agreed to speak to us, and in keeping with our promise we will not use their full names. Although we wanted to interview the women, we noticed that the men spoke for them, even providing "eye-witness" accounts for events they had not seen.

Because of the delicate nature of questions dealing with the mistreatment of Muslim women, we decided not to press the issue. We asked each of the men to recall the events before, during, and after the Serb attacks on Hrustovo. They told us of Serb control of radio and television using propaganda to instill fears in the Serb population. Tales of rape and wholesale slaughter committed by the Bosnian army were heard on a daily basis. This must have caused fears among the Croats and the Muslims; why were these stories reported and what would be the repercussions?

What is so irrational and disturbing about this war is the relationship between its combatants. The Hrustovo district was an ethnically-mixed community, located between Croat and Serb villages. People came to Hrustovo on a daily basis to shop. They saw each other every day, grew up together, went to school together, played soccer together, and drank together. Two of the refugees, Hikmet and Enver, told us of conversations with Serb friends shortly before the attacks. Hikmet had been in a bar, Enver driving a cab. Neither believed any harm would come to the residents of Hrustovo when the Serb army ultimately arrived. The Serbs were people they both knew. All of the men, when finally captured, recognized at least a few of their Serb guards. A few were ashamed of their actions; one offered Enver cigarettes. Others only offered insults.

On the 27th the Banja Luka corps and the Knin corps could be seen on the hills above Hrustovo before they shelled the village and descended into it. A brief resistance was made by poorly armed Muslim villagers. There were rumours that the killing of two or three soldiers by either a Muslim priest or a bartender set off the extreme and arbitrary violence in the town. The Serbs, most of whom were intoxicated, looted and burned at will. When the villagers saw the mosque in flames they knew that "it was finished."

Three of the four refugees interviewed escaped into the woods only to be captured later. Arif was able to remain in the forest for a full month before finally being taken prisoner after journeying to Sanjski Most to stay with his sister. Like the others he had heard the shooting and escaped before the Serbs arrived.

Hikmet believed that only divine intervention prevented his death. When captured by the Serbs he was going to be killed, but a soldier who knew him let him escape. The men were eventually rounded up and shipped off to a micro camp in the nearby city of Sanjski Most.



A memory of better times: A Christian peasant and the muslim butcher discuss the price of a sheep.



Western Bosnia: the simplicity and peace of this pastoral setting is something for the Bosnians to reacquire.

Many were beaten along the way, some were beaten to death. Those that arrived with their families were separated there. The men were crammed some 200 at a time into canvas-covered trucks for the 70 kilometer drive to the Manjaca concentration camp. The men told us it was 30 degrees outside, 50 in the trucks. All mentioned deaths en route.

At Manjaca the men passed through the "application to the camp." This was a line of Serb guards wielding sticks, pipes, and police batons. Beatings were a nightly ritual, every evening at nine o'clock. According to Hikmet, between five and fifty prisoners were called off a list, and taken to the woods. Some did not return.

The refugees told us that despite the beatings, food was the greatest concern. Before the Red Cross arrived in July, the men could count the number of beans they ate for lunch. Often their daily ration was 200 grams of liverwurst, two deciliters of water, and a small chunk of bread, shared by up to six people. Arif lost 40 kilos, Hikmet dropped from 85 to 60, and sometimes they were so weak they could not stand up by themselves. Arif told us that the men ate all the grass at Manjaca. There was so little food that often a full month passed before the prisoners could have a bowel movement. Typhus was widespread.

During the day the prisoners laboured under the drunken supervision of their guards. They hauled wood, dug trenches, and were forced to build an East Orthodox church. However, despite the horrific experience at Manjaca, the 700 prisoners who arrived from the Omarska camp spoke of even worse conditions there. Stories of men being buried alive and others of prisoners drinking acid were reported. The Red Cross supervision of Manjaca made conditions more tolerable. The men were given blankets, warm clothes, and three meals a day.

While interviewing the men we could see their pain. As Arif spoke about Hrustovo, Hikmet and Enver sat side by side on the bed and stared vacantly at the floor. The children lay on the bed listening to Bosnian music while their fathers spoke of beatings and starvation. It struck us surreal that these people who buried their neighbors and suffered at Manjaca should be sitting in a Fredericton hotel watching Hockey Night in Canada.

Today there are about 150 concentration camps in Bosnia, most of which have yet to be investigated by UN observers. There are still 2500 prisoners in Manjaca.

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death in bosnia