

## Chapter 4: What Happened in Vocin

When the Croat forces retook the territory the Serbs had occupied and entered the Croatian village of Vocin on December 14, 1991, at 10:50 AM., they found bodies in the streets, in their burned houses and in yards. With one exception, all the victims were Roman Catholic Croatian villagers who were massacred in ways that defy imagination. Half the victims were over 62; the eldest was 84. Most of the young people, especially the males of the village had fled; or were rounded up by the Serb invaders and shipped to parts unknown. Two of the victims, a husband and wife, were found bound with chains and burned. Subsequent chemical tissue analysis performed at the University of Zagreb Medical School laboratories revealed that they were burned alive. Others had their skulls split open by axes or chain sawed in half while still alive. Those shot or stabbed were the lucky ones.

One of the victims, Marijia Majdandzic, was an American citizen. Her citizenship was verified after the Governor of Pennsylvania pressured the Bureau of Statistics to open their office on a Sunday to investigate their files. Born in Erie, Pennsylvania, nee Skender, as a young girl she moved to the what has turned out to be for her god's forsaken valley in Croatia. Her life was snuffed out like a candle after being trapped in her house when the Serbs torched it. Surprisingly, Majdandzic was the only Vocin victim that didn't show signs of torture before death. The autopsy photographs depict her as a big boned woman; her roundish figure and lack of worry lines indicate to me that she enjoyed good eating and had a zest for life. Although the pathology report said the cause of death was heart failure, even a cursory examination of the pathologist write up, lab analysis, and photos clearly indicated carbon monoxide poisoning. She was probably the first American casualty of the conflict. Had she been an oil company employee, maybe the American government would have been stirred to action.

The Vocin massacre, forensically, is the most extensively documented war atrocity of the conflict. United States Congressman McCloskey and Pat Mackley had been on a fact finding mission in the vicinity when they received reports about what had taken place in Vocin. Mackley immediately made arrangements to take them to the site. While the bodies were still warm, they were among the first to arrive on the scene. A number of witnesses gave them telling testimony within hours of the event. Some of the perpetrators, who had been captured, were also interrogated.

One of perpetrators was captured through a number of remarkable circumstances. Most of the Chetniks, either before or after slaughtering, looted. One of the head Chetnik's locked a Croatian couple in a pigsty prior to ransacking their home. The reason he didn't kill them then and there, if he wasn't satisfied with what he found, he could always go back and force them to tell where they had hidden other valuables. The couple truly had God on their side that day. The Chetnik had found some good sljivovica, got drunk, and passed out. As luck would have it, the couple's son had been one of the Croatian national guardsmen who liberated the village. He who went home not knowing what he would find. To his dismay he found the passed out Chetnik; a further search found his parents in the pigsty. Surprisingly, rather than seeking revenge, he turned the Chetnik over to his officers for interrogation.

After witnessing the ghastly aftermath of the slaughter, Mackley made arrangements to schedule a news conference for the next morning. Unable to sleep because of what he had witnessed, McCloskey woke Mackley, after midnight. As the Washington Post reported, he told Mackley he was so shaken up he didn't wish to speak to the media. This just wasn't an issue he wanted to be involved in. Mackley said, "okay" and went back to sleep -- only to be awakened three more times by the distraught McCloskey.

He said, "I don't want to talk about it, but I just can't get those faces out of my mind," recalls Mackley. "I watched him wrestle with the politics of it all that night. Ultimately, he decided he didn't care what the political implications were --- for him or anybody. His sense of humanity took over."

Interestingly, Mark Dalmish, the CNN reporter in Zagreb refused to attend McCloskey's press conference because he didn't want to give the Congressman a "soapbox."

As a result of his Vocin experience, Congressman McCloskey became the first person in American government circles to articulate the situation in former Yugoslavia objectively. Although a Democrat, he became the voice of conscience in Congress where his humanistic stance embarrassed the liberal wing of his party and finally stirred it into action. Mackley subsequently became McCloskey's congressional aide and valued foreign affairs advisor. McCloskey's moral stand may have been the trigger mechanism that caused President Clinton to violate the U.N. arms embargo to former Yugoslavia.

One witness, Vera Doric, who escaped and hid in a nearby cornfield with her two-year old granddaughter said: "I saw them set a house on fire, and they wouldn't let the people out. There were local Serbs going with them, showing them to the houses. They had a list."

In his attempt to carry out my recommendation to document the slaughter at Vocin with forensic protocols, Mackley met, not surprisingly, with a great deal of obstinacy from the Croatian authorities. Despite the body of hard evidence, the Croatian attitude was blasé. They viewed the Vocin episode as just another routine Serbian operation. Submitting proof to the world was deemed unimportant. The Croatians, to their loss, have never believed in public relations. Besides being unorganized, the government forces saw no intrinsic value in it, particularly when they pointed how the media and the world had ignored previous slaughters of Croatian civilians. Basically they looked upon the European observers as a bunch of ghoulish voyeurs.

Although Mackley had documents issued from the highest offices in Zagreb, the local police at Podravska Slatina, where the Vocin victims were brought for burial, told him Zagreb had no authority and to get lost. Mackley was caught in the middle of a turf war between Zagreb and local authorities. The latter wanted to keep the matter local since they had no faith in Zagreb's government and wanted to extract its own form of justice. Not deterred, Mackley realized the importance of documenting the latest Serbian atrocity would have for Croatia, he phoned Gojko Susak, Minister of Defense. Even Susak's direct orders had no effect on the local police commanders. Eventually special units from the Ministry of Interior were called. Their arrival almost induced a fire fight with local police over jurisdiction. After the crisis was resolved the Health Minister's team of forensic pathologists from Zagreb's medical school performed some of the autopsies there and some in Zagreb. In any case, each Vocin corpse was worked up as they would a murder case.

In an all too familiar scenario that was being played out daily in other parts of Croatia, terrorist acts on the Croats in Slavonia, in western Croatia, started on August 14, 1991, when masked Serbian military forces shelled a number of villages, including Vocin. Communication and freedom of movement to the outside world then stopped when the Serbs set up barricades to isolate the local population. At 6:55, shortly after sunrise, on August 19th, almost every Croatian home in Vocin was targeted and hit by Serb artillery, as though for target practice at a carnival.

After the shelling, the terrified Croatian survivors were gathered together at 9:00 and informed by two local Serb villagers; Boro Lukic and Drago Dobrojevic--who were now wearing JNA officer uniforms--that the Serbs were in command. As a show of force two columns of local Serbs, some wearing army uniforms, some in civilian garb, marched by carrying Kalashnikovs. A few days earlier these same Serbs had worked together with the Croats as friends and colleagues in the forestry industry (a major local industry), in shops and factories; attended the same schools, drank with, and chased the same girls.

The eighty surviving Croats, from the prewar population of four hundred twenty six, were forbidden to leave their homes to go work or tend their fields and livestock. They were denied access to physicians to care for their health needs. Since most of the Croatian homes were badly damaged, the surviving Croats found shelter in the basements. During the four months the Serbs occupied Vocin the, non-Serb population had been inhumanely

abused and harassed, which culminated in the December massacre. The day of the massacre, December 13, eight individuals managed to escape from the village. The testimony of a woman, R.O. (initials used to protect her identity because of fear of reprisals), recorded in Milos Judas and Ivica Kostovic's seminal work about the atrocities in Croatia, *Mass Killing and Genocide*, and verified by Helsinki Watch, best summarizes what transpired in Vocin and shows the manner in which Serbian psychological warfare was carried out ---and the effectiveness of Serbian disinformation.

"The Croats in Vocin were regarded as slaves. The men were forced to work very hard in the forest and in the fields, and received only a scarce amount of food and several cigarettes from local Serbs who ran the village. When one of them was killed by Serbs, the rest of us had to say again and again that he deserved it and therefore it was normal that he had been killed. So, for example, Chetniks (Serb paramilitary) first forced four Croats to bring their ammunition to the hills around Balinci, and after that killed one of them--Drago Ivankovic. After hearing the death of her husband, his wife Fatima moved to my house--she almost went crazy and every day she had to say that it was really all right that they killed her husband. Namely, she was extremely afraid for her life and the life of her five year old son. Some of our neighbors of Serbian nationality told us constantly that it had to be so, because Ustashe in Podravska Slatina (a large town close to Vocin) had shot 120 Serbs in the market place and that each day in Slatina 15 Serbs were shot.

"They also told us that Kurds who fought for the Ustashe would kill us, too. We were so brain-washed by their propaganda that even two days after we succeeded in escaping from our village (on December 15, 1991) we were afraid to contact members of the Croatian National Guard although we observed them from the forest. Fortunately, Pero Carevic from our group recognized some of those guardsmen and brought help to us in this way.

"While we lived in Vocin, we lived mostly in basements and in the evening we lit hand-made candles. We met each other in complete secrecy and then mostly discussed our bad fortune and how to survive. We were not afraid so much of rifles and bullets, but we were extremely afraid that our throats would be cut with knives, because Serbian Chetniks like to execute people in this way. Furthermore, although we were not in a real prison, we were in fact hostages in our own homes. So we were never able to predict whether one day we would be released or whether they would just kill us. On Friday, December 13, 1991, a friend arrived in our basement and said that Chetniks had started to slaughter villagers in the other part of the village called Busija. Therefore we decided to run away immediately and, thank God, we succeeded in doing so."

Even before the actual massacre, the manner in which Franjo and Kresimir Doric were maltreated, two cases I personally verified from a number of EC and Croatian government documents, typified the Serbs' behavior during their four month "occupation." The Dorics were beaten with wooden rods, stomped by Serbs wearing boots, then tied to a tree for five days without food. A number of times they were blindfolded, and had the barrel of a gun placed in their mouths--which was fired repeatedly on empty chambers.

Evil incarnate descended on that cold Friday the 13th day of December 1991. After the Serb forces received orders to retreat, following a Croatian offensive to regain some of their lost territory, they ordered the local Serbs to go with them. However, a unit of paramilitary Serbs called the "White Eagles" stayed. Most of the Croat homes were then torched, or were hit by mortars, grenades, and shoulder held anti-tank rockets.

The destruction acted as a catalyst for a killing orgy. Soon the town was filled with screams of the dying. Inasmuch as the victims were geographically concentrated around the Roman Catholic Church, the Serb murderers decided to blow it up, thinking the devastation would cover up the massacre. They didn't take into account the church's 6 foot thick walls. The church's basement was loaded with munitions of almost every description since it had been used as a central ammunition depot by the Serb occupiers. Despite the massive destruction, 58 bodies were eventually found; a great number of others, including children, disappeared without

a trace.

Historic, Our Lady of Vocin Catholic Church built only 25 years after the Gutenberg Bible was printed, was destroyed in seconds. Standing among the rubble like a sentinel stood a stump of masonry wall--all that remained of the 750 year old church (see photograph).

The Serbs, in their haste to retreat, left behind a number of credible witnesses. Their accounts agree on the essential details of the slaughter. Most of the surviving Croats lived because their Serbian neighbors warned them about what the Serbian forces had planned for them. Thirteen found refuge in a small basement in the remains of what was once called a house; a number of others hid in cornfields, or in a pigsty.

Probably the Serbs' most grotesque act was when they handcuffed a 23 year old Croatian and hung him by his arms high on a tree limb across the road from the Catholic Church. According to witnesses, the Serbs toyed with him by lightly cutting his face with a chain-saw several times. They then proceeded to amputate his lower limbs. While still alive they chain-sawed him in half. His body parts were doused with gasoline and set afire.

The Croatian was a soldier who came home on leave, but wasn't aware that the Serbs had occupied his village. He was captured and stripped naked. His actual torture began when the Serbs chained him to a tractor and dragged through the village before stringing up on the tree.

The witnesses were questioned, along with several captured Serb soldiers who had been in Vocin during the slaughter. Congressman McCloskey was present at the interrogation of the soldiers. Aside from giving details about the slaughter, the Serb soldiers admitted to being members of Vojislav Seselj's infamous "White Eagles" and that they had been acting under direct orders from Belgrade.

Once the conflict extended into Bosnia-Herzegovina the White Eagles were linked to all the major atrocities there.

The White Eagles are only one of many Serbian paramilitary organizations whose objective is to terrorize non-Serbs. In the global context of Yugoslavia, Serbian paramilitary units, regardless of what subtitle they may carry, are called Chetniks. They are the enforcers of Serbian policy, at its most base. Most Westerners erroneously associate the Chetniks with the guerrilla fighters of World War II, but their main activities were terrorizing the non-Serb populations. At that time the Chetniks were carrying out the Yugoslav royalist government policies. Today they are carrying out the policies of Milosevic's Serbia.

Atrocities have always been part and parcel of Serbian policy. The link between the Serbian leadership and the ethnic cleansing programs has been established by a variety of sources. In 1995, a leaked CIA report and a high ranking Serbian defector with documentary evidence clearly shows the link. Information in the data banks at DePaul University, where the evidence for the war crimes trial is being compiled under the auspices of the U.N. Commission of Experts provide verification. According to Helsinki Watch, as early as 1992 evidence existed that was sufficient to indict the top officials in the Serbian forces for grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions.

The paramilitary group's agenda is to "ethnically cleanse" an assigned area and it works in conjunction with the Yugoslav army. Their modus operandi follow a clearly defined pattern of massacres, sexual torture, torture of elderly and children, looting, burning, and destruction. It is truly mind boggling for me to learn that this is happening in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Yet despite McCloskey presence and trustworthy documentation furnished by European Community monitors and Helsinki Watch, some media accounts implied the massacre never happened; or that it was an act of disinformation planted by the Croats. For example, *The New York Times*, two days after the event, said the

Croats have “alleged” that a massacre may have occurred in a village near Podravska Slatina. Perhaps the photographs printed in this book will allow the truth to be known.

Mackley, a media animal, had gotten me involved in the Vocin aftermath for several reasons. He knew I was, coincidentally, heading for Croatia to investigate the poison gas stories. Also, as an American physician and, although I was by no means representing the University of Southern California, an Associate Clinical Professor at the USC-LA County Hospital Medical Center, I would, he felt lend credibility to the incident.

Which, in retrospect, I indeed did. CNN had been extremely skeptical about Vocin, not reporting it all until ten days after it occurred and then only when the rest of the media slowly started to believe it really happened. But after Mackley told the CNN staff in Zagreb that an American doctor possessing good credentials was involved and presently in Zagreb, they begged for an interview. The interview, conducted at the Intercontinental Hotel in Zagreb, lasted a half hour, but aired less than a minute. My bite of fame lasted a few seconds; yet it was enough to get the salient feature of the atrocities across.

The film clip started with the tolling of church bells, panning the huge crowd moving in procession attending the mass funeral of the victims of Vocin. Then, the film switched to close-ups showing caskets draped with Croatian flags, crowds weeping, relatives and children filled with grief, and finally the caskets being placed in hearses and trucks departing for the cemetery. The commentary overlay: "Croatian officials said Monday that an elderly American was among the victims of a massacre at the village of Vocin ten days ago. At least 43 people were killed as Serbian- led Yugoslav federal forces withdrew from Vocin. The American was identified as seventy-two year old Marija Majdanzic of Pennsylvania. Born in the U.S., she had lived most of her life in Croatia."

The film then switched to me in a conversation, but without the sound on. The commentator's overlay: "Doctor Jerry Blaskovich of the University of Southern California told CNN he had examined the autopsy reports of half the victims. And has no doubt that a massacre took place." While the commentator continued, footage slow zoomed in on two of the victims lying on the ground: then the film again switched to me but this time the microphones were on as I was saying, "The way the wounds were inflicted, most of the people were lying on the ground when shot. It was done by groups of people--uniformed soldiers apparently." The camera then switched to the commentator, holding a microphone: "Croatian officials said the death toll at Vocin could go higher as more bodies are being discovered every day. Mark Dalmish, CNN, Zagreb." CNN's presentation of the events at Vocin, with me as testimonial to their reality, was, at least, finally seen worldwide. According to Mackley my interview with them was the only reason CNN reported the Vocin incident.