

## **Chapter 8: Into the Maelstrom**

Little did I realize that participating in the Vocin medical investigation, observing my colleagues' medical heroics at the front lines, and talking to the survivors of Vukovar would trigger my personal odyssey to attempt to rectify media distortions. Over time I began questioning who was committing the greater crime, the perpetrators of terror or those who ignored it? Because no forum existed to rebut unsubstantiated statements by media pundits, I used the only method available to an individual, the media itself. My letters to editors and Op-Ed pieces as well as my direct letters to politicians have been moderately successful because they were acknowledged and/or published.

In an attempt to set the record straight I became a frequently called upon commentator about the atrocities for various civic clubs, including the Kiwanis and Lions. I presented my paper, The Hits and Myths of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, at the plenary session of the XVth International Humanitas Congress of the World Federation of Humanists held at Arizona State University (Tempe). I gave one of the keynote addresses and chaired a forum on the subject sponsored by the Rosen Holocaust Center at the University of California at Irvine.

Acutely aware of the ramifications of disinformation, the Croatian Physicians For Human Rights and Professor Matko Marusic, Associate Dean of the University of Zagreb Medical School, urged me to expand upon my essays and other writings and publish them before the revisionists take over.

My desire to uncover the truth prompted me to return to the devastated areas in former Yugoslavia seven times. During each trip, while visiting the front lines, inspecting refugee camps, medical facilities, and interviewing rape victims, I witnessed the human misery increasing exponentially. There was no shortage of statistics to support my subjective observations. But for me, when the statistics took on human faces and dimensions, the conflict became personal. While interviewing victims I was often moved to tears by the victims' appalling stories. In order to separate my professionalism from sympathy, I'd excuse myself and leave for a few moments. I'd take a deep breath, occasionally mutter a silent prayer, and then return to my task.

One such later mission started on July 13, 1992, in Zagreb, when I escorted Assistant Director of the Massachusetts General Hospital Dr. Thomas Durant and Attending Physician at John Hopkins Hospital Dr. David A. Bradt, both acknowledged experts in evaluating refugee problems, to former Yugoslavia. Their primary mission was to evaluate the health needs in the region. We excluded Serbia and Montenegro because both regions were undamaged, and nobody had been wounded or lost a life due to war in those republics.

We met our Croatian counterparts at the Institute for Mother and Child Health. The Institute served as the main children's hospital for the Republic of Croatia and the final triage point in the referral chain. Hospital chief Dr. Ivan Fattorini and his staff eagerly provided us with information about the medical ramifications pertinent to our mission.

The Serbs destroyed or damaged a large number of medical facilities in Croatia. Besides causing a large number of casualties, the Serbian ethnic cleansing program resulted in hundreds of thousands of displaced persons that severely strained the remaining medical facilities. But after the Serbian forces unleashed their attack on Bosnia, Croatia became inundated with an enormous influx of refugees, many suffering from major physical and mental trauma, and further jeopardizing an already fragile health care system. Ironically, due to the nature of their Serbian weaponry, one-third of the treated war injured children were Croatian Serbs.

War injuries, amputations and burns, which aren't common in urban hospitals, require intensive nursing care and prolonged, costly rehabilitation. Besides the war trauma cases, the hospital was morally and ethically

bound to treat Bosnian children for "normal" illnesses. Sophisticated treatments such as chemotherapy were prohibitively expensive. So since Croatia's economic status was precarious, allotments to treat these patients were given low priority. At the same time American physicians were agonizing over what creature comforts Clinton's health plan would allow for their patients, such as the size of TV screens, or whether one or two patients would be comfortable in a hospital room, Croatian physicians were agonizing over the morality of withholding certain medications from patients with leukemia in order to treat patients who were considered more salvageable. Traffic accidents further strained the medical system; one-half of all traffic accidents in Zagreb involved refugees, mostly Bosnian children.

On our fact-finding mission we visited a broad spectrum of medical facilities, from comparatively tranquil Zagreb and Split to war-ravaged Osijek, Slavonski Brod, Karlovac, and Mostar. We saw facilities with sophisticated, first class equipment, and facilities where bandages were removed from the dead, washed and then reused on the living. We went to "new" medical centers in basements, bunkers, and warrens created from destroyed buildings that had forced physicians and patients underground. Major trauma was managed under unimaginable conditions, occasionally without anesthesia, but always with caring, skilled hands. Disposable items, which we in more comfortable situations take for granted, were reused ad infinitum. Despite their frustrations, the physicians never seemed to lose their compassion and respect for human life.

Although practicing medicine under often extremely adverse conditions, the heroics and expertise of the physicians and treatment protocols remained outstanding. Medically, Croatia was a first world country whose crude mortality rate was on a par with the United States.

Operations in the remaining 20% of Osijek's hospital functioned with an optimism that belies the destruction. Chief of Urology Dr. Antun Tucak graciously escorted our team around his surreal domain. The American medical team duly noted that the hospital had few buildings that were salvageable and would have to be totally rebuilt.

In the Slavonian city of Djakovo we had an audience with Bishop Cyril Kos. His briefing impressed us more than any other individuals on our odyssey. He viewed the world's reaction to the Serbian atrocities and the flood of refugees like cries in the wilderness. The bishop said Croatia was caring for 350,000 Muslim and 270,000 Catholic refugees from Bosnia and appealed to the world for assistance.

The tent and barrack city of Gasinci lay just outside Djakovo. Once a JNA base, at the time of our visit Gasinci housed approximately 3,000 Muslim refugees, mostly women and children. Those billeted in barracks were going to be the fortunate ones when winter came. One pediatrician and a couple of paramedical assistants had the responsibility of caring for all the inmates' medical and social needs. The clinic had no set closing time; it stayed open as there were people seeking help. Physicians volunteered from the Institute in Zagreb and rotated approximately every three weeks.

The high caliber of medicine practiced in Croatia and the physicians' selfless heroics had thus far kept morbidity from infectious diseases in check. Upon arrival at the camps, refugees were immediately immunized. Of course, those who brought current immunization records with them were exempt. Despite the fact that these refugees came from supposedly primitive areas, most were found to have been previously immunized. In contrast, Los Angeles County public health records show that only one-third of the county's children has received their necessary vaccinations.

We drove to Slavonski Brod whose 40,000 population had been burdened with 60,000 refugees. Sandbags surrounded the hospital, geared for attack. Every day approximately 100 patients were admitted, 95% of who had shrapnel wounds. Chairman of Internal Medicine Dr. Dragica Bistrovic oversaw a hospital whose primary function was caring for the refugees in the Brod area. Her dynamic enthusiasm touched everyone with whom she came into contact.

The Sava River separates the Croatian city of Slavonski Brod from Bosnia's Bosanski Brod. In order to reach Bosanski Brod we had to be escorted by Croatian militia over a bridge that had been bombed numerous times by Serbian aircraft. Iron plates covered the partially destroyed areas so the bridge was still usable. The military personnel were lightly armed. Most of the houses around the bridge had been destroyed and all the extant buildings were pockmarked from projectile hits. So we were surprised to see that the mosque had escaped damage. Standing like a beacon, it offered a ray of hope for the Muslims. But a death pall still hung over the city.

We witnessed incalculable material destruction in all the locales of our tour, but that destruction was nothing compared to the human toll. A stream of refugees trying to cross the bridge into Croatia appeared desperate and haggard. The roads were dense with people fleeing; many packed together in the backs of trucks, or clinging to the roofs of tractors.

At the refugee center in Bosanski Brod we learned that the refugees' stories were documented carefully. Many knew the names of those who had committed atrocities in their villages, information that could prove helpful to eventual war crimes commissions.

Feeling it was physically and economically unable to cope with more refugees; Croatia began putting newly arrived refugees on trains and buses and dispatched them to the nearest borders. Slovenia, Hungary, Italy and Austria reacted by closing their borders and shifted the refugees to and from countries that didn't want them. For humanitarian reasons the Croatian government rescinded their order.

Coincidentally, about 6,000 men who had been labeled deserters by the Bosnian government fled across the Sava River to the salvation and safety of Slavonski Brod, Croatia in July 1992. Sherry Ricchiardi, an American reporter who'd been to Croatia a number of times, interviewed a great number of them. The troops had fled their posts when their field commanders read a communiqué to them that was supposed to have come from central headquarters. It read: "It has become obvious that the Serbs and Croatians will divide Bosnia ...For all practical purposes, Bosnia is nonexistent and there is no reason for us (them) to die for a nonexistent state...We are not deserters, we are not refugees, we are expelled, there is nothing left to fight for." But evidence subsequently revealed that the communiqué was disinformation that had emanated from Serbia. These refugees were simply victims of JNA psychological warfare.

Croatia was faced with a dilemma since these Bosnians refused to lay down their arms; but Croatia granted them asylum in Slavonski Brod anyway. The next day Serbian 155-mm artillery rounds, leaving many of the refugees dead and an extremely large number of them wounded hit the sports stadium, where the refugees were billeted. Undoubtedly they had been targeted because a Yugoslav airplane had flown over the area a number of times that day.

Split, an ancient Roman city on Croatia's Adriatic coast, had become a magnet for refugees. All of the former resort hotels were jammed with Bosnians. These refugees were fortunate because many others were housed in the sports complexes, basketball stadiums, and gymnasiums; and were forced to sleep on mats. A lack of bathrooms made the overwhelming fumes that engulfed these facilities even worse.

We then drove to Mostar via Imotski. Mackley showed us the city's massive destruction and explained the military aspects. The area around the old bridge and the Muslim quarter resembled what I imagined Dresden must have looked like following the allied bombing. Only the facades of the Catholic Church and the bishop's palace still stood. The destruction was so devastating that the heat had melted most of the church's marble altar. The peaceful, arbor-like city park had become a graveyard because sniper fire wouldn't allow Mostar's inhabitants to bury their dead in the town's true cemetery. The first body buried in the park was a Croatian soldier who was buried by his bride-to-be. The park is where they had walked and spent time as lovers. She was later killed. Fresh graves bearing crescents or crosses and dates that all ended in 1992 never failed to move even

the most hard-nosed observer.

On the outskirts of Karlovac lay the suburb of Turinj, which had been an ethnically mixed community of 5,000 people before the war. By the time we arrived, all that was left was rubble; not one building was salvageable. Only ghosts of the former residents and a handful of patrolling soldiers remained. Looking toward the Serbian neighborhood, 50 yards away, we saw, as we had in all the villages we visited that their houses had suffered almost no destruction.

Serbian military offensives inexorably followed the same pattern. They first pressured the local Serbian population to evacuate. Once that was accomplished, JNA armored rifle regiments attack, supported by artillery and MIGs. As the defenders abandoned their positions, Chetniks moved in and cleansed the town. The Chetniks didn't discriminate. They cleansed the town of any Muslims, Croats or even Serbs who refused to cooperate.

The Serbian ethnic cleansing program struck terror among Muslims and Croats of Bosnia-Herzegovina. They were well aware of the concerted policy to carry out systematic killing and mayhem. None of the killings were "clean"; victims were repeatedly found with their throats cut, eyes gouged out, decapitated and dismembered.

The Bosnians rightly had reason to fear. For example, America Cares, a nongovernmental organization, representatives Andrew Hannah and Jonathan Bush, nephew of President Bush, listened to ham operators from Gorazde say that many inhabitants were committing suicide rather than fall into Serbian hands. Bodies were strewn all over the streets; nobody could bury them because the starving survivors had no strength left. The remaining had taken to eating roots and grass. The only human sounds the survivors heard were children crying from hunger. Absolutely no medicine could be found. This scene took place in 1992, when all of the seven major cities in Bosnia, excluding Sarajevo, were under siege and reported widespread starvation.

Although Doctors Durant and Bradt had worked in refugee areas all over the world, they said that the high caliber and sophistication of the medical community in Croatia left them with an indelible impression. Durant and Bradt were especially impressed by how the physicians were able to keep morbidity and mortality rates at tolerable levels despite the inordinate number of refugees and adverse conditions under which they worked. The Americans commended the generosity of the Croatian people and noted that they found Croatia's ability to absorb so many refugees to be without parallel in their team's previous experiences.

One lesson I learned from my missions to Croatia and Bosnia was that although every story told by refugees and survivors of ethnic cleansing was unique, in the aggregate, their stories shared a common theme: terror. The story of one such survivor, Fadila Zecic, started when Serbian forces instituted genocide in the northern Bosnian town of Brcko. Even in the relative security of Paris where I spoke with Fadila and where she found refuge after being exchanged as a prisoner of war she continued to be tormented by nightmares and flashbacks of the demonic acts she had witnessed.

At precisely 5 A.M. on April 30, 1992, after the Serbs deliberately disabled a vehicle on Savski Most, one of two bridges over the Sava River that connected Bosnia with Croatia, the resultant bottleneck of vehicles, including busses loaded with at least 150 commuters, were blown to smithereens. Following the explosions that destroyed both bridges, the Serbs placed barricades at strategic locations and systematically set out to destroy the 100 or so houses around the bridges.

For the next three days and nights the Serbs committed an orgy of looting in non-Serb homes. A continuous stream of trucks and cars, predominantly with Belgrade registrations, returned to Serbia to sell their booty on Belgrade's thriving black market. Following every typical Serbian offensive campaign, Serbs from Serbia would come to the conquered Bosnian or Croatian areas by the busloads and ransack houses as if on a shopping spree.

On the fourth day, the Serbs placed a large poster of Tito sporting a hand drawn beard on a warehouse door in the port area called Lucko. The warehouse became one of the Serbs' most lethal slaughterhouses. The Serbs rounded up all the intellectuals: physicians, lawyers, teachers, or anyone with organizational skills. Once accomplished, the Serbs started their systematic murdering frenzy. Thousands of Croats and Muslims were killed in two days in Brcko. Only women and pensioners survived; all youths and able-bodied males ultimately disappeared.

An ancient Roman settlement situated on the Sava River with a picturesque blend of Turkish and Austrian architectural styles, the pre-war town of Brcko was a microcosm of ethnicity in Bosnia. Brcko and the surrounding area, comprised of 75,000 Muslims and Croats, and 13,000 Serbs, had three mosques, a Roman Catholic, an Orthodox and a Seventh Day Adventist church. Despite hearing reports that Serbs were committing atrocities in other parts of Bosnia and the fact that the town was teeming with thousands of refugees that had fled from ethnic cleansing at Foca, the citizens of Brcko naively clung to the belief that they would be spared. Most of the Muslims in Bosnia believed in the concept of Yugoslavia. Brcko's mayor ironically called the town an oasis of peace. It became host to the seven furies instead.

Fadila had been a designer and dressmaker of renown. Her creations were often used in the movie industry in former Yugoslavia. She felt that she was spared the tribulations other Muslim women were subjected to because the Chetniks feared reprisals from her husband and brother, both well known to the Chetnik forces. Before the war her husband was a policeman, but later he became a commandant in the Bosnian Army. Even after she was evacuated to Paris, he remained to defend what was left of Bosnian territory. Her brother was a commandant in the 108th Brigade of the Bosnian Army who, along with 319 children in his charge, were killed during a Serbian tank attack. Throughout my interviews with her she reiterated that what she agonized over most was not knowing the whereabouts of her son's remains; he was killed by a grenade but never buried.

Fadila's house was strategically located in the area called Srbski Varos of Lucko. From her window she was able to look down on the warehouse and yard where prisoners were housed and slaughtered nightly.

Isak Gasi, one of the rare survivors of Brcko's slaughterhouse, in testifying to war crimes investigators from Washington, confirmed many of Fadila's statements. Fadila had witnessed the atrocities almost nightly.

Like clockwork, the killings started at 11 P.M. and finished at 3 A.M. The main supervisor was Monika Simonovic, a prostitute turned Chetnik. Her favorite method of torture was to break the necks of glass bottles and then gouge the genitals and abdomens of her prisoners. She also burned them. Fadila recognized most of the perpetrators as local Serbs. A preamble to the slaughter would begin with three Serbian songs the prisoners were forced to sing. After "Tko kaze da je Srbija malo, Tri puta rata, tri puta pobednik" ("Who said Serbia is small, three times war, three times victors"), then a shout "Tisina" (silence), the killings commenced. In the mornings, Fadila saw trucks leave the camps, their beds bulging with body parts.

The rapes and killings Fadila witnessed were under the direction of Zoran Pejic, the head Chetnik in Lucko. All the perpetrators were in uniform, displaying the Red Star of the Yugoslav Army on their hats. The Chetnik headquarters was the Serbian Orthodox Church. The glavna rijec (main orders) came from Pop (Father) Slavko. On August 3, all the mosques were mined and destroyed. Although the Catholic Church was mined, it wasn't destroyed because it was located too close to the Skladiste, a military storage facility. All Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim cemeteries were bulldozed. The destruction of religious structures and graves was nothing more than a barbaric attempt to erase evidence of a culture and a people.

In her darkest hour, after learning about the deaths of her son and brother and witnessing the human mayhem being committed under her very nose, Fadila turned toward God. But she was shocked to learn that she didn't know how to pray. The most often heard expression in Bosnia, "Thank God," is usually uttered by those who are irreligious. Although Fadila professed to be a Muslim, she typified the attitude of the overwhelming

majority of the Muslims in Bosnia: she identified with Turkish customs but was ignorant about Muslim theology. The Muslims' attitude toward their religion contradicts the Serbian assertion that the threat of Islamic fundamentalism justified the war.

As a product of communist secularism, Fadila's only exposure to religion had come from her Catholic friends. She said she sought and got religious instruction from a Catholic friend who had some knowledge of Islam. In what was probably an admixture of Catholicism and Islamic mysticism, using 110 peas as beads, Fadila recited over and over "God watch over me." On Tuesdays, she fasted, and meditated on a picture of St. Anthony donated by a Catholic friend. The prayers pulled her out of her depths of despair and she began to feel invincible. She felt as if a glass dome enveloped and protected her and her home.

A married couple took Fadila in for 20 days; the husband, a Croat, eventually had to witness the gang rape of his wife, a Muslim, before he was hanged. Fadila had to move 15 times to keep one step ahead of the terrorism inflicted by her previous neighbors. Once, when she was hiding, her Serbian neighbors opened the gas jet on her stove. On her return they assumed she would light a match because there was no electricity and cause a massive explosion (gas in that area is odorless). Only her strong sense of survival averted disaster.

Fadila noticed numerous vehicles with Belgrade registrations bringing people who moved into homes whose previous inhabitants had disappeared without a trace. She said most of the events she cited occurred in the presence of UNPROFOR forces. According to Fadila, UNPROFOR's only functions were carousing, womanizing, and drinking. The Hotel Golub, where they were billeted, maintained a holiday like atmosphere.

When Fadila received word that she was to be exchanged as a prisoner of war, she was given an hour's notice. In probable deference to her status, she was allowed the luxury of one small sack. She took some jewelry with her, and miraculously it escaped notice though prisoners were normally stripped and given tattered rags to wear. Aside from humiliating the prisoners, the process enabled the Serb guards to ransack the clothing for valuables that may have been sewed into the lining. The only satisfaction Fadila had during her captivity was knowing that information that she had relayed to her brother, such as minefield locations, saved many Bosnian lives.

Would she and other refugees return to their homes if a guaranteed peace were declared? All the refugees I interviewed answered, "Yes!" They all felt they could forgive, but never, never forget. As to living next to their known tormentors, they all responded, "No." But surprisingly few said they would seek revenge.