

### 29.3 Ethnic Cleansing in Northwestern Bosnia: Three Witnesses

The dissolution of Yugoslavia, which began in 1991, resulted in great physical destruction. The once resplendent cities of Dubrovnik and Sarajevo are now battered, shell shocked, and strewn with rubble. By 1996 between 200,000 and 500,000 people were killed in the fighting, more than 3 million were refugees, and between 20,000 and 50,000 Bosnian Muslim women were raped.<sup>1</sup>

Ethnic, religious, and national rivalries in the Balkans run very deep. Certainly the animosity between the Muslim and the Christian populations in the Balkans stretches back over six hundred years of bloodied history. These ethnic and religious tensions came to a flash point in the years immediately following the death of Communist Party leader Marshal Tito, who had ruled Yugoslavia with considerable skill between 1945 and 1980. To assuage the ethnic rivalries after the death of Tito, the seat of government of Yugoslavia in the 1980s rotated among the six autonomous republics of Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Slovenia, and Montenegro. But this system of rotation soon proved unworkable, and in 1991 Croatia and Slovenia declared their independence from Yugoslavia. Serbia, the largest of the republics, tried to forestall further dissolution, but the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina also declared its independence from Yugoslavia.

Of the six former Yugoslav republics, Bosnia is the most ethnically and religiously diverse. It is the only republic not established on a purely ethnic or religious basis. It was not until 1971 that the Muslims in Bosnia gained official separate recognition in the Yugoslav census. Prior to 1971, Muslims were identified as "Yugoslav" or "other." This distinction underscores the difficulty of defining precisely who and what a Bosnian is, because Muslims, Serbs, and Croats all lay claim to this designation. At the time of the 1992 referendum on independence, the 4 million Bosnians were divided approximately into a population that was 44 percent Muslim, 31 percent Serbian, 17 percent Croatian, with the remainder being Gypsies, Albanians, and other Balkan or Western European people. This religious and ethnic division was further complicated by the fact that large concentrations of Serbs live in western Bosnia close to the Croatian border and large concentrations of Muslims live in eastern Bosnia close to the Serbian Republic. Beginning in the spring of 1992, brutal internecine fighting broke out among the Muslim, Serbian, and Croatian populations in Bosnia. The practice of "ethnic cleansing," or the forced removal (or annihilation) of a targeted population from its homes, villages, and cities, has been used by all groups against their enemies throughout this war. The following accounts are the statements of three Muslim survivors of Serbian ethnic cleansing in former Muslim-occupied areas of northwestern Bosnia-Herzegovina who were later interrogated in Zagreb, Croatia, and Wifferfuert, Germany.

Source: From Ant e Beljo, ed., *Bosnia-Herzegovina: Genocide: Ethnic Cleansing in Northwestern Bosnia* (Zagreb: Croatian Information Centre, 1993), pp. 43-44, 77-79, 94-95. Reprinted by permission of the Croatian Information Centre.

<sup>1</sup> Sabrina Petra Ramet, "Europe's Painful Transition," *Current History* 95 (March 1996), p. 97; and Lenard J. Cohen, "Bosnia and Herzegovina: Fragile Peace in a Segmented State," *ibid.*, p. 112.

#### **A WITNESS FROM THE OMARSKA AND TRNOPOLJE CAMPS (NEAR PRIJEDOR); MUSLIM, BORN 1931, MALE**

After the occupation of Kozarac, on May 27, 1992, I was imprisoned for the first time in Ciglane (the Brickyards) near Prijedor. I spent two days and three nights there. Then I was transferred to the "Keraterm" camp and after three days, I spent another six days in the Omarska camp. The last camp I was taken to was Trnopolje. The total number of days spent in various camps is one month and twenty days.

We heard that they took away children from their mothers and that the children were never returned. Women were separated from men. People slept on the concrete floor under the eaves of the brickyard. People would urinate at a spot ten meters away from the rest of the prisoners. The people imprisoned there were mostly from the village of Kozarac, the surrounding area of Prijedor and even from Bosanski Novi.

They caught us in such a manner that they used the Red Cross emblem and shouted into a megaphone: "Surrender, the Red Cross is waiting for you, you will be protected." There were twenty-one buses on the road and in front of them they separated women and children. We had to keep our heads lowered in the bus. Some buses drove straight through the woods and into Trnopolje, the others went to Ciglane (the Brickyards).

They would take people to Ciglane by night. Then machine-gun fire would be heard and that person never returned. I saw how they tortured a reserve policeman. First they broke his bones and then they put a piece of clothing into his mouth, drenched him in gas and set him on fire.

In Omarska they battered and interrogated people. I think that I saved myself by my persistent claim that I have no brothers or children. I did not betray anyone for being in battle or having arms. The camp was on the Banja Luka-Bosanski Novi railroad. There was also a mine with screening towers 20 meters high. Inside the towers there were bins (10 x 3 x 6 square meters) each containing some 300 people. These bins were used for screening ore. Each bin had four floors and there were 8,000 people in six rooms. We could not sleep but maybe doze on somebody's shoulder. There was no light. At last, after three days, we got one loaf of bread to share among six people. We urinated inside the same room we occupied. My two brothers were there and one of them died on the second floor. I did not dare look at him and I did not know that he died until I came to Trnopolje and was told so by some people. Approximately thirty-five or forty people died in six days. We got bread once every three days. Later we even got some beans. They would come to the door, and we would form a circle and take our food in a piece of cardboard or a milk pack that we found there. Every day they would give us as much water as we could catch in a piece of cardboard. On several occasions they put a hose through a steel mesh platform which separated each floor. The camp was divided into three sections: A, B and C. No one survived in the C section. I know that because later nobody from the C section came to Trnopolje. Three men from the village of Kozarac committed suicide. Two of them got out through the drain and the guards outside killed them. Besides the towers, there were also prisoners in the storage building. There were only thirty women in the camp. Interrogations were carried out every night. They put a gun barrel into my mouth and thus I lost seven teeth. Many did not return after the interrogation. Interrogators were educated Serbs. I know three of them. Two of them were Mladen Mitrović, our neighbor, and Slobodan Kuruzović, a local teacher. They were both some sort of commanders in the camp. They wore caps with the Chetnik insignia.<sup>1</sup> They beat camp prisoners. They used to tell us that they would kill thirty Muslims for each Serb killed.

I was the only one from the C section to mount a bus with forty-five men, mostly older in age. Young men would come to the camp, and the older ones would leave. Boys and young men did not stand a chance.

We arrived in the Trnopolje camp at 5:00 p.m. It was as if we were free at last. We were happy for being able to lie on the concrete. Upon my arrival, there were some 4,500 people in the central fenced-in area surrounded by guards. However, the entire village of Trnopolje was a camp, and seen from this angle it contained 10,000 prisoners. Some women were allowed to go home escorted by Chetniks and prepare meals. On the one side of the camp there was a highway, and on the other side there was a railroad where people were hurled into cattle wagons for the purpose of ethnic cleansing. From the cinema where I spent my first night, Bakir Mahić was taken out. They entered every night and took away people in succession, not according to any list or bill of indictment. They would take boys to a macadam road and tread on them. However, less people died here than in Omarska because there was some food. In the entire central camp area there was one school and one outdoor toilet. We got enough drinking water and A.V. would pass us a hose over the fence.

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<sup>1</sup> Chetnik originally described the partisan guerrilla fighters who fought against the Germans in World War II, but in the context of the current ethnic cleansing it has come to refer to the Bosnian Serb military.

Once the camp commander gave me permission to go home for a visit and after 2.5 kilometers the guards caught us, forced us into a van (seven people on top of another seven people, etc., like logs), and then they returned us to the camp. They filed us in the clinic and there I saw captured Muslim doctors. In front of the clinic I saw how Chetniks carved the Chetnik insignia (four Cyrillic S) into S.K.'s chest. He was a big thirty-one year old man. After that they cut the sinews on his legs. They threw another man on the ground and cut his spine in half with a knife so that his legs were instantly paralyzed. The Chetniks who call themselves Rambos did such things. Those particular members of irregular units had various details to their uniform such as reticular masks on their faces, black gloves, and black ribbons on their foreheads. They were not Bosnian Serbs because they talked in Ekavian dialect (used in Serbia) and they often used the word "bre" (Serbian dialect). Through an open window I could hear women crying from twenty meters away. One girl was saying through tears: "People, leave me alone, I was operated only a month ago." "Do you have a mama?" they asked her, and then they brought her parents to her. They raped her mother in front of her and her father. Once they took five thirteen-year-old girls to Mirsad's house and returned them the following day in such a state that S.P., a medic, managed to sew up two of them, while the other three had to be transferred to the Prijedor hospital. At least they said that they took them there. Ten women were raped under a poplar tree. Some thirty Chetniks were standing guard in shifts. Doctor P. told me how Zeljko Sikora from Prijedor, Czech by nationality, was mutilated. He also worked in the hospital as a medic. They chopped off his testicles and gouged out his eyes. He was falsely accused that he had castrated 300 Serbian children before the war. After one month and twenty days spent in camps, I left Bosnia with a convoy of refugees.

*Zagreb, July 31, 1992*

### **A WITNESS TELLS OF THE INTERROGATION METHODS IN THE OMARSKA CONCENTRATION CAMP (NEAR PRIJEDOR); MUSLIM, BORN 1966, FEMALE**

I finished electrotechnical school in 1985. Because of difficulties in finding employment, I was forced to work as a waitress for an entrepreneur in his restaurant. I worked there until September 1, 1991, when the restaurant was sold. I had to wait four months, until January 1, 1992, when I started working at a grill for the same owner. Our boss did not want to send us to the employment office to wait, because the restaurant was in the process of being built and he would need us at any time. I worked at the grill in shifts until April 30, 1992, when the government changed overnight. I was working the second shift and while walking through the city I saw armed persons in uniforms. I did not understand anything. At that point I was unaware of these events. At work I asked what was going on and they told me to be quiet and work. On the same day a curfew was proclaimed. Because of my grave financial situation I had to keep working. At work there were constant provocations, people would play around with weapons, but I put up with it thinking that it would pass. I heard them saying that all Croats and Muslims were going to be slaughtered and killed, but I never believed that would actually happen. They often asked me if I was a little "Ustasha," and gave me that nickname.<sup>2</sup> All of this was more or less normal for me until they came to my place. First they told me that they would set all of my things on fire, that it all had to burn because it was Muslim, and after all of these provocations they took me to jail. At the Internal Affairs Office they hit me and yelled at me and looked for a Serbian flag to nail it on my head. They even said that they would carve it in my forehead. I spent the night in jail and in the morning I was taken to the Omarska camp. The drive to Omarska was horrible. They taunted me and hit me sometimes, and told me that I would never again return to Prijedor, and that they wanted an ethnically clean Greater Serbia. They drove me through Kozarac. At every one of their checkpoints they stopped and took me out with the intention of shooting me right on the spot. They told me to take a good look at Kozarac, which no longer existed and never again would. I could only see destroyed and burned houses. They told me that this was no longer Kozarac, that it was now Radmilovo. There were two militiamen with me in the car, Bato Kovačević and a certain Jančević. Both of them took some writing pads on this trip. When I arrived in Omarska, they said that I was an extreme case and that I had to be watched closely. First they took all my money and turned my pockets inside out. Several times they hit me over the back with automatic guns and they struck me with a cane twice. Then they took me to the interrogation room. While they were questioning me, they extinguished cigarettes on my legs because I could not answer their questions. I ended up with two open wounds. After the interrogation they locked me up with the other women. Here I was able to see the elite of Prijedor society. These people had had it all, and now they were poor and pathetic. Every day we watched what they did to our men. Prisoners had to lie out in the sun on their stomachs all day, while the guards danced on them. The worst was night time. They often came and took me out somewhere and raped me. In the morning Commander Željko Međaković would call me and ask me how I had spent the night and if I had slept well. I could not say anything because they hit me a few more times with their fists or rifle-butts with the warning to shut up. This same commander knew what was happening because he was one of them. Every day I counted and looked to see where the men were taken after interrogation, either to another room or out in the field. When they took a man out we knew that there was one person less. Every morning and evening a truck came by and took all of those that were out in the field. They even came with a dredger to pick them up. In the course of the day they often took me to their office to clean up the blood. When I came in they would tell me

whose blood it was and how they were beaten.

One day I was cleaning Asaf Kapetanović's blood and on the way back to my room I saw that they were taking Idriz Jakupović in for questioning. They were hitting him and yelling at him, and they threw him against the wall so that he broke his arm. This whole scene and all of these images are always in my head. These two are no longer alive, but they are not the only ones. Muhamed Čehaić, Abdulah Puškar, Nedžad Šerić, Ziko and Osman Mahmuljin, Ado Begić and many others were killed in front of me. The way they killed men was to beat them to the point when they could no longer get up, so that they would lie there and rot. They would just throw them outside and let them die. This is very hard for me to write, because every moment that I spent in that camp is like an open wound. My writing about it only scratches the surface. I spent fifty-six days in this camp. Every night I listened to the people crying and moaning, begging and pleading for their torturers to stop, trying to convince them of their innocence. They were guilty on only one charge: for being Croatian or Muslim. Then the Serbs brought in the people from my hill (Bišćani). They beat and killed them. At the same time, members of the Serbian Red Cross arrived, and among them was a Mića from the medical center. He did not have a hand, but he was able to beat and kill people. Then they beat up and killed Ratih Kadirić, who worked as a driver at the medical center. There was a Zoran, called Zoka, who distributed the sour and moldy food, who was also one of the killers, and Kole, who carried an extension cord, Krle, Dražen Kačavenda, Mite, Drago, Živko who would not let us have our bread, Čkalja, who watched these scenes with pleasure, and many others whose names I do not know. After fifty-six days I was taken to Trnopolje with twenty-eight other women. I stayed there for three days and then I was released. I remained in the city, because I could not get to my house in the village. I knew nothing of my family. The people in my village were either forced out or killed. I stayed in the city for two weeks and then I left with a convoy for Travnik. Just as we departed, after a few kilometers, they began with the looting. Every few kilometers they stopped and looked for money, German Marks, jewelry and other things. They also took various pendants, nail-clippers, pencils, lighters, etc. Sometimes they took someone's child and said that they would kill him/her if they did not get a set amount of German Marks.

Subsequently they even stripped us of our clothes and shook us to make sure we hid nothing. In this way they stripped us of all we had, and in the end, on Vlašić Mountain, they took out 250 young and strong men and killed them. They took fifteen men out of the truck that I was in. In Travnik, after three months, I finally met up with my parents. They told me everything that had happened to them. I do not know anything about my brother. After several days I received an affidavit of support from Germany so I left for Zagreb with my parents. I stayed there a few days and had a medical check-up. This was a gynecological check-up. A friend of mine who had also been in the camp and was the only person who knew what I had been through got a telephone number that I could refer to. The wounds on my legs had gotten worse. Because of a lack of any kind of hygiene they got infected and I had to see a doctor about this as well. Because of fear I did not tell the doctor what had happened. After a month and a half the wounds healed, but still I have two scars. After a few days in Zagreb my uncle came for me and my family. Immediately after we exchanged greetings, he said he was inclined to kill me. Because of this vile treatment from him and his wife, I did not tell them any of the things I had experienced. Surely more provocations would have followed. After twenty days they threw my parents and me out. While I was going through all of these medical procedures I applied for a room from social services. This room was 13 square meters, but my uncle did not even like that, and he wanted to have me taken out of there as well. My aunt is German, so that the people from social services believed her more than me, but after all of these problems I am still here. I now have psychological problems and sometimes I ask myself what to do. I have not found work yet, and I do not know what to do because I am still afraid of any contact with men. Sometimes I wish I could work at anything just so that I do not have time to think about it all. This is about everything, in summary. I survived all of this and I have to keep on living.

*Wipperfuert, December 1992*

**A VICTIM OF RAPE IN THE VILLAGE OF RIZVANOVIĆI (PRJEDOR COUNTY);  
MUSLIM, BORN 1977, FEMALE**

After the attack on my village, I witnessed the massacre of civilians as the worst tragedy. At that point I did not know that something much worse than death was yet to come. My sister gave birth to a child in the basement where we hid, during the mortar attacks on the village. After the village of Rizvanovići fell, and after the Chetniks came, I saw dead children, three to eight years of age near my house. I saw the destroyed mosque, and men who were taken away. Some more prominent men were singled out from the column and taken away. They shot them in the head. They fell down and remained lying there in grotesque positions. There was chaos, panic and death. My grandfather was accused of killing a Serb, and they executed him on the threshold of his house. A certain number of women and children remained in the village. We hid in the basements of the destroyed houses. Our house was intact. That day, several Chetniks arrived. They searched for valuable things and men who hid in the nearby forest. One of the Chetniks, thirty years of age, ordered me to accompany him into the house. I had to go. I was terrified, but I did not comprehend what was going to happen to me. I knew that I would endanger the lives of the members of my family if I resisted.

When we entered the house, he searched for money, jewelry and other valuable objects. He could take everything he wanted. He ordered me to confess where the men were hidden. I did not answer. Then he ordered me to take off my clothes. I was horrified. I took off my clothes silently, and everything fell apart in me. Under my naked skin I felt I was dying. I closed my eyes. I could not bear look at him. He hit me with his fist and I fell down on the floor. Then he jumped on the top of me. He raped me. I cried, and squirmed, and bled a lot. I was a virgin. He ordered me to get up. I wanted to pick up my clothes and cover my naked and disfigured body, but he told me not to touch them. He ordered me to stand still and wait. He said I better be careful of what I did, because I am responsible for the fate of my family. He went out, turned around to make sure nobody saw him and then invited another two Chetniks to come in. I felt lost. I did not feel anything when they left. I do not know how long I was lying on the floor. My mother came in and found me lying there. And her seeing me in such a humiliating state was even worse than everything that had happened to me. I suddenly realized what had happened. I realized that I had been depraved, raped, deformed forever. My mother knew what was happening inside of me. That was the saddest moment in our lives. We both cried, screamed. She covered me. Together, we went back to the basement. I remember all that was happening to me later on through some sort of mist, some distorted dream. We were transported to Trnopolje, and then went on foot to Travnik over the Vlaxi'c Mountain, some thirty kilometers away. It was in Travnik that I emerged from this dreamy, confused state. Now, I sometimes find myself wondering if all this ever happened to me. To me of all people. My mother helped me tremendously. I want to become a mother one day. Only how? For me, men represent a horrible picture of violence and pain. I know that not all of them are like that, but this feeling of horror is stronger than my sense of reason. I cannot help myself.

*In Zagreb, July 1992*

**Questions:**

1. How do you account for the brutality suggested in these statements, particularly since in many cases the oppressor and victim had, until recently, been neighbors and whose people had lived in the same community for hundreds of years?
2. It has been estimated that between 20,000 and 50,000 Bosnian Muslim women have been raped in this ethnic conflict. Why would rape become one of the preferred tactics of ethnic cleansing? Why would the woman in the second account admit that after seeing her uncle in Zagreb, "Immediately after we exchanged greetings, he said he was inclined to kill me"?
3. Do you see any connections between the Serbian "Program of the Society of National Defense" and these accounts of Serbian ethnic cleansing?
4. How would these readings compare to the other accounts of genocide in this section?