

Documentary details Serbian outrages

by Margaret Sexton

International Dispatch: "A Town Called Kozarac"

Directed by Ed Harriman
Goldhawk Films/Channel 4, London, 1993,
approx. 41 minutes

At a time when news media are attempting to get Americans to accept the so-called five-power agreement for Muslim safe havens in Bosnia, the broadcast of "A Town called Kozarac" by Long Island's public television station WLIW provides a ghastly, but urgent, case study of how the Serbs have carried out "ethnic cleansing." The British-initiated documentary series "Dispatches" sent a crew this spring to the Bosnian towns of Kozarac, Trnopolije, Omarska, and Prijedor, as well as to a refugee camp near Zagreb, Croatia and a refugee settlement in Watford, England, to interview survivors of the Serbian depredations of this northern Bosnia valley, one year ago.

Some of the footage shows burned Muslim homes and shops, each one identified for razing by a spray-painted "X" inside a circle—just as Jews under Hitler's reign of terror were identified as targets by the Star of David painted on their doors. On farms, however, the Serbs did not destroy homes, but resettled Serb refugees in them. One Serb woman was interviewed, as she wheeled a Muslim's washing machine stolen from his abandoned home, toward her home. Asked what happened, she matter of factly stated that the Muslims were "expelled." A Ukrainian woman, whom the Serbians had not forced to flee, said, her face guarded, that she had "no problems" with her new Serb neighbors.

Some of the residents of the Kozara Valley were freed, and ended up in the Croatian refugee camp, or resettled in England. They cannot go back, because their homes, their shops, and their mosques were all destroyed. As one refugee interviewed, Nedžad Jakupovic, noted, ethnic cleansing works: Those who flee cannot return, because they have nothing to return to, and because they cannot be safe from the Serbs who have sought to exterminate them.

The interviews and film footage shot there detail the thor-

oughness of the "cleansing": The Serbian forces systematically lay siege to the towns, take over the government, then drive Muslims and other non-Serbs from their homes. Those targeted to be "cleansed" are either forced to flee (in some cases, to be shot in the back as they run), or are simply rounded up and shot. In the case of the Kozara Valley, Muslims were also taken to prison camps where they were systematically tortured, and women and teenage girls were raped repeatedly.

Still photographs, shown by Dispatches' film crew to Dr. Minka Cehajic, a physician from Prijedor now in the Croatian refugee camp, were of the main street of nearby Kozarac. She identified where Muslims' homes had been bulldozed, the debris removed—as if those residents had never lived there. Her husband Muhammad, mayor of Prijedor before the Serbs overthrew the government in the spring of 1992, disappeared after the town surrendered. The town had been the seat of government in the valley. She commented during her interview, that before the cleansing, she and her husband's friends were all Serbian, not Muslim.

Like the Nazi Holocaust

In statements that can only remind the viewer how the Nazis used to round up Jews, gypsies, and other ethnic groups they had targeted for extermination, survivors of the attacks on Kozarac and Prijedor who had, miraculously it seemed, been released from concentration camps at Omarska, Keraterm, and Trnopolije, described, with haunted faces, how Serbian Army troops running the camps had tortured and mutilated Muslims. Young Muslim Jasmin Haskic, many of whose friends were Serbian, was tortured for three days, and castrated by a Serb who had been his friend, and who "licked his blood." His family, when interviewed, expressed hope that he is alive, but the faces of his Muslim friends, who witnessed his torture, suggest a different outcome.

Dr. Idriz Merdzic, a Muslim physician interned at the camp in Trnopolije, was able to photograph torture victims and smuggle them out of the camp after his release, including photos of one of Jasmin Haskic's friends, Nedžad Jakupovic, now a refugee in England. The photos, which have been turned over to the United Nations commission investigating war crimes, provide mute evidence of the beatings, designed to elicit confessions of armed resistance to the Serbs, as well as to obtain money.

Little is said on the video concerning the children, who were taken to prison camps along with their mothers, including babies. But one woman, sitting with her two children of about 7 and 9 years of age, told how a Serbian soldier, whom she had gone to school with, tried to keep her from getting her children's shoes. Her son, the older of the two, rocked back and forth, as do children who are disturbed, as he told the interviewer how he saw a man killed by Serbian soldiers. Asked what he would like to do to the Serbians, the boy said, "Cut their throats." As he said this, he grinned, and his sister grinned also, the gap-toothed grin

of a child who has just lost her baby teeth.

Providing evidence of war crimes

The documentary, produced at the time the Vance-Owen plan was being rejected by all parties, makes clear that the international community has not seen fit to do anything to stop ethnic cleansing. Nedzad Jakupovic remarked bitterly in his interview that the West's actions have only benefitted the Serbians, by scattering Muslim refugees throughout Europe, ensuring the success of the extermination campaign. Asked if he would like to return home to fight, the young man said, yes, but added that there is nothing left to fight for.

However, as the narrator of the film points out, the Dispatches crew decided to use its film, and its access to the "cleansed" northern Bosnia valley, to obtain evidence of war crimes. Still photos of camp guards were shown to some of the camp survivors, who were able to identify them. The photos of a beaten Nedzad Jakupovic taken by Dr. Merdzic, showing bruises along the entire length of the youth's body, are also evidence.

The former inmates had described the "red house" and "white house," buildings set aside for torture. They described how inmates were forced to watch people being beaten, tortured, and shot, and were forced to dig the mass graves to bury the dead. The comparison to the Nazi death camps is only obvious. But, when the crew interviewed the Serbian

mayor of Prijedor, Milomir Stakic, he brazenly denied that people were tortured and murdered at the prison camps, claiming that a few died "natural deaths."

The narration states that the U.S. State Department officially estimates that 1,500 were killed at Omarska alone. The whereabouts of thousands more are unknown. Although some kept in the prison camps were released to the Red Cross, and are now in refugee centers, some 500 residents of the Kozara Valley were kept by the Serbs as "hostages." Of these, 401 were located by the Red Cross, and 31 are reportedly alive, but the Red Cross has no access to them. The film crew took footage of some who were being moved, reportedly being "exchanged." Their fate is not known, but most of them were from the Kozara Valley.

One man, asked what he would tell the West, said he wouldn't wish what has happened to him, to happen to anyone, whoever he may be.

And Bert Schweizer of the Red Cross, interviewed for the documentary, said that for those 100 Muslims who still remain in Prijedor, there is no justice: They have no weapons, and their existence is perilous. In this war against the civilian population, he said, the Red Cross cannot protect them. What is needed, he said, are political answers that the international community must provide.

It is to our shame that the answers have not only not been provided, but that for many, it may be too late.



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