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Peace Studies Conference Spring 2012

Coming Home?  
Return and its Implications for Peacebuilding in Post-War Bosnia

Sanski Most, situated along the Sana River in north-west Bosnia,<sup>1</sup> had the misfortune of being ethnically cleansed twice during the 1992 to 1995 war. In 1992, Bosnian Serb forces took the town and displaced or killed many of the Bosniak (a term marking Bosnian Muslims) and Bosnian Croat residents. They maintained control until 1995, when the Bosnian Army retook large swaths of north-west Bosnia in Operation Sana, which displaced many of the Bosnian Serb residents. Underscoring these campaigns was the ethno-territorial assumption that “demographically homogenous ‘ethnic’ spaces would provide security through separation,” and that this quest for security and fear of other ethnic groups necessitated the “un-mixing” of Bosnia’s multi-ethnic communities.<sup>2</sup>

Shortly after Operation Sana, leaders of the warring factions met in Dayton Ohio to sign the General Framework Agreement for Peace, the Dayton Accords. These Accords created two autonomous entities—Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia- Herzegovina—perfunctorily linked by a weak central government. The Dayton Accords preserved the “un-mixing” of Bosnia, achieved through ethnic cleansing, and used the military borders to define the new political borders, thus enshrining separate

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<sup>1</sup> Between Bihac and Banja Luka, just south of Prijedor, but in the Federation.

<sup>2</sup> Dahlman, Carl and Geariod O Tuathail. “Legacy of Ethnic Cleansing: the Localized Geopolitics of Displacement and Return in Two Bosnian Places.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* Vol 95, No 3, 2004. Pp. 576-77.

physical and political spaces for the continuation of ethnic discourses.<sup>3</sup> The territories of “Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina,” notes anthropologist Stef Jansen, “were founded on the expulsion and/or escape of over 90% of their inhabitants of undesired nationality.”<sup>4</sup> The legacy of these war-time campaigns, reflected in the demographics, has direct implications for the viability, health and sustainability of communities such as Sanski Most.

Addressing the realities of ethnic cleansing and their implications for peacebuilding was a major concern of the Dayton Accords. Creating a stable political and social order required addressing the needs of the 2.2 million Bosnians displaced by the four-year war, resolving issues of property restitution, and clarifying the legal status of refugees and internally displaced persons alike. The “solution” identified in Annex 7 of the Dayton Accords granted all refugees and internally displaced persons the right “to return to their homes of origin” as a means of “settlement of the conflict.”<sup>5</sup> Or, as geographer Richard Black argues, as a forum for “righting the wrong” of ethnic cleansing.<sup>6</sup> Defining home as “place of origin” underscores the individual-centric rather than broader community-situated conceptualization of home the Accords took.<sup>7</sup> This framework minimizes the importance of social interactions in defining community

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<sup>3</sup> de Koning, Mireille. “Return Migration to Bosnia and Herzegovina.” University of Amsterdam. January 2008

<sup>4</sup> Jansen, Stef. “The Privatization of Hope and Home: Return, Reforms, and the Foreign Intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina.” *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol 30, 2006. Pp 179.

<sup>5</sup> General Framework Agreement for Peace. Annex 7: Refugees and Displaced Persons. Nov, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Black, Richard and Saskia Gent. “Sustainable Return in Post-Conflict Contexts.” *International Migration*, Vol 44, No 3, 2006. Pp 23. Eastmond, Maria. “Transnational Returns and Reconstruction in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina.” *Transnational Migration*. Vol 44, No 4, 2006. and Jansen, 179.

<sup>7</sup> Black and Gent, pp. 32.

spaces, and thus misses the significance of examining the “interpersonal ruins” the war created.<sup>8</sup> Addressing the human impact of the war, in addition to the physical, remains crucial for the success of reconciliation efforts.<sup>9</sup>

In 2004, the UNHCR proudly announced that one million Bosnians had returned and touted the success of Annex 7. This emphasis on return to physical structures and the measure of “success” through the number of returnees does not take into account the dynamism of the process of return, nor does it define home as a socially constructed and situated space whose meaning is in part developed through the social interactions which occur there.<sup>10</sup> It also fails to acknowledge the impact of personal experience during the war, and how “those returning to their former homes often find *themselves* vastly transformed, physically and socially, and have to negotiate their re-entry in quite different contexts of power and inequality.”<sup>11</sup> Assessing just one element of return masks the inherent emotional and social complexity of return. Furthermore, defining return as a physical movement attempts to uncouple the physical from the emotional and social experiences of returnees. In this way, the physical or demographic characteristics of a community take precedence over social cohesion.

Through emphasizing return to pre-war locations, Annex 7 enshrines a pre-war, multi-ethnic vision of Bosnia, and claims the objective of return is recapturing the “normalcy” disrupted by the war. Relying on memory of pre-war life to define

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<sup>8</sup> Clark, Janine. “From Negative to Positive Peace: The Case of Bosnia and Hercegovina.” *Journal of Human Rights*. Vol 8, 2009. Pp 362.

<sup>9</sup> Clark, pp. 361.

<sup>10</sup> Eastmond, Maria “Introduction: Reconciliation, Reconstruction and Everyday Life in war-torn societies.” *Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*. Vol 57, 2010. And Black, Richard. “Conceptions of ‘home’ and the political geography of returnee repatriation.” *Applied Geography*, Vol 22, 2002. Pp 20.

<sup>11</sup> Eastmond (2010) Pp 9. Italics my own.

“normalcy” assumes that reinstating demographic diversity will enable the return to pre-war harmony.<sup>12</sup> Such a perception fails to acknowledge the economic and political transformations, both as a product of the war but also post-socialist restructuring, which define Bosnia’s present situation and render the past unobtainable.<sup>13</sup> On an individual level, the language of “return” suggests a cyclical physical movement, which may not align with the emotional, social or economic trajectory of an individual. As Stef Jansen notes, “displaced Bosnians remembered previous *lives*, not just a previous place of residence,” and reclaiming a physical space will not necessarily reestablish pre-war lives.<sup>14</sup> This language also articulates a fixed end for the process of return: the physical re-entry into one’s “home of origin.”<sup>15</sup> Emphasis on “home of origin” neglects the needs and reality of over 100,000 Bosnians who remain internally displaced,<sup>16</sup> often living in collective centers or occupying homes of other displaced individuals—further complicating the reality of “return.”<sup>17</sup>

My fieldwork, conducted in April of 2011, was centered in Sanski Most and the village of Hrustovo, and examined how individuals experience making a home in a community still deeply impacted by the war.<sup>18</sup> Returnees spoke of the physical processes:

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<sup>12</sup> Jansen, pp. 184. A problematic remembrance of Bosnia in and of itself, but not an issue to be explored further in this paper.

<sup>13</sup> Eastmond (2010).

<sup>14</sup> Jansen pp.184-85

<sup>15</sup> Black and Gent, and O Tuathail, Gearoid and John O’Loughlin. “After Ethnic Cleansing: Return Outcomes in Bosnia-Herzegovina a Decade Beyond the War.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. Vol 99, No 5, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. “Country Statistics: Bosnia and Herzegovina.” 2010. <http://www.internal-displacement.org/>

<sup>17</sup> Dahlman and Tuathail. “The Legacy of Ethnic Cleansing,” pp 589.

<sup>18</sup> Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six individuals, and one in-depth informal conversation with a seventh, in addition to information gleaned through

repossessing property, rebuilding, and regaining a sense of security—all elements emphasized in the rhetoric of the Dayton Accords. At the same time, my informants also discussed the broader social and personal transformations that influenced their process of remaking homes and communities, either as returnees to their “home of origin” or as internally displaced, unable or uncomfortable returning to their site of pre-war residency. Thus, beyond the physical loss and processes of reconstruction, the war also left a clear mark on the social fabric of Sanski Most. Despite the courage of those who have returned, Sanski Most has been irrevocably changed by the war. Before the war, roughly 50% of the population was Bosniak, a term marking Bosnian Muslims, and 40% Bosnian Serb.<sup>19</sup> Although there has been no official census taken since 1991, it is estimated by the Union for Sustainable Return that nearly 90% of the population in Sanski Most is now Bosniak—numbers that illustrate only one dimension of the demographic impact of the war, but not the entire story.<sup>20</sup> Many youth I spoke to, a majority of whom were returnees themselves, all expressed desire to move to a more urban environment or, even more ideally, out of Bosnia entirely for economic, educational and social opportunities. This brain-drain contributes to the fragility of many returnee communities. For Sanski Most, like small, rural spaces across Bosnia, the demographic upheaval the war fueled has not fully concluded.

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participant observation. I received IRB approval from the School for International Training who ran my study abroad program before conducting my research.

<sup>19</sup> The remainder of the population was Bosnian Croat (5%) or identified as Yugoslav (5%). Union for Sustainable Return, Correspondence with Author

<sup>20</sup> After twenty years, Bosnian politicians have finally agreed to conduct a census in 2013, a decision which occurred only after years of political battle. See *Balkan Insight's* coverage of the lengthy Census debate. [www.balkaninsight.com](http://www.balkaninsight.com)

The lack of opportunities in Bosnia encouraged many refugees, especially the young and middle-aged, to seek permanent residency abroad while still maintaining a connection with pre-war homes, communities, and family.<sup>21</sup> These members of the Diaspora also fail to fit neatly into typical portrayals of “the returnee” as they maintain relationships within multiple spatial and social environments. Members of the Diaspora with whom I interacted often financially support their “homes of origin” and return periodically without establishing—or intending to establish—permanent residency there, even as many were rebuilding the family home. This contributes to another hidden form of return—seasonal or semi-permanent—the complexities of which are not reflected in official statistics on return. The implications, however, of part-time residents for communities, such as the village I lived in, are broader than seasonal bursts in population. Nearly half of the houses in the Hrustovo were inhabited semi-permanently, and the presence or absence of those families shaped the social environment of the community. With fewer full-time residents, many of whom were elderly, class sizes in the local school were falling, and local businesses were closing. At the same time, remittances from Bosnians abroad constituted roughly 10% of Bosnia’s GDP in 2011.<sup>22</sup>

In late April, around the Easter holiday, the population of Hrustovo and Sanski Most swelled as many displaced Bosnians returned during the vacation. Many with whom I spoke discussed the difficulty of being both “a stranger here and there” as one interviewee, Dina, put it. Dina’s brother, who was translating, added, “the term we use here [in Bosnia] is crucified. One hand here and the other there” he gestured outstretching

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<sup>21</sup> Eastmond (2006), pp 141.

<sup>22</sup> “Global Economic Prospects June 2011 Regional Annex Europe and Central Asia.” World Bank, <http://go.worldbank.org/JW2N41TE50>

his arms. “But my heart is here,” Dina responded. These displaced Bosnians have been robbed not only of their homes, but of their sense of community, belonging and identity. The tension of belonging also finds expression in language use. One evening when relatives now living in Slovenia were visiting my host-family, the conversation quickly slipped into Slovenian. Oddly, I was the only non-Bosnian in the room, and for everyone else, Slovenian was their second, not their mother-tongue—yet it was obviously a language of comfort and connection for those assembled. As Dina later told me, “no matter how long we are [in Slovenia]...there is always something in Bosnia that connects us to this land, but here [in Bosnia] I am [also] a guest.” This contradiction, as expressed linguistically and through identification with place, positions members of the Diaspora between two rooted communities. Arguably what I observed that evening was the formation of a third community: the displaced, bound together by their shared tension of belonging, expressed in their common adopted tongues. The experiences of this transient community are often overlooked in attempts to quantify “return.”

Among the permanent community of returnees, many are elderly.<sup>23</sup> This trend, coupled with low birth rates, creates conditions for demographically unsustainable communities which are slowly dying out. On my first day in Sanki Most, for example, my host father, trying to sound nonchalant, noted that no new children had been born in their village that year. Many people of child-bearing age fled during the war, and have not returned permanently. One resident of Stariji Rijeka, a predominately Bosnian Croat village close to Sanski Most, noted how important it was for his parents to remain in their

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<sup>23</sup>Steffanson, Anders. “Homes in the Making: Property Restitution, Refugee Return and Senses of Belonging in a Post-War Bosnian Town,” *Internal Migration*, Vol 44, No. 3. 2006. Pp 116-137.

village after the war, even though they were now the youngest family in the village, and the village still carried physical scars of the war—especially land mines.<sup>24</sup> “They were hoping others would return,” Kruno, a high school senior, said, “but it doesn’t look like that will happen...there are only old people, and in seven or eight years there isn’t going to be anyone in [Stariji Rijeka] because all the old people are going to die and that will be that.” Attending the Easter Mass in Stariji Kijeka, Kruno’s words echoed in my ears as I surveyed the church. Just a handful of young faces dotted the congregation. Of the eight individuals under twenty in the crowd, three were Kruno and his two teenaged sisters, two were children of members of the Diaspora who returned to Stariji Rijeka for the holidays, and three were Bosniaks, friends Kruno had invited to celebrate Easter with his family—a big step for many of them. Obviously, the congregation isn’t getting any younger, especially as the youth, like Kruno, seek opportunities outside Bosnia. This snapshot of the community illustrates the unspoken precariousness many of Bosnia’s aging communities face, a reality not accounted for in assessments of or programs facilitating permanent return.

Attending Mass that afternoon not only illuminated retention of youth as a post-war hurdle, but clarified how ethnic cleansing has led to increased homogenization within the country, and within communities.<sup>25</sup> One of the Bosniak girls who attended Easter Mass with me shyly admitted, “I don’t know how to greet them [Bosnian Croats]” on Easter. Her comment indicates how presence of minority returnees does not entail, as my host father, Vahido, who runs a peacebuilding NGO in Sanski Most terms it, “meeting

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<sup>24</sup> All interviewees cited in this paper received pseudonyms.

<sup>25</sup> O Tuathail, Gearoid and Carl Dahlman. “Post-Domicide Bosnia and Herzegovina: Homes Homelands and One Million Returns,” *International Peacekeeping* Vol 12, No 2. 2006.



the other.” Furthermore, minority returnees may not be permanently settled. On a walk through Sanski Most, the only neighborhood where I saw signs selling *rakija*—home-distilled alcohol, a marker of non-Muslim families—also sported placards offering “house for sale or exchange with a house in Banja Luka or Prijedor”—both large towns in Republika Srpska. Many minority returnees, such as Bosnian Serbs in Sanski Most, hope to relocate to communities where they will belong to the majority, even if this entails leaving their “home of origin.” These sale signs indicate that even Sanski Most’s small Bosnian Serb community may not be permanently settled, that return, for these individuals, has not satisfied their social, emotional or economic needs.

Two of my interviewees, both Bosniaks, fled Prijedor (Republika Srpska) during the war, opting to settle after Dayton in Sanski Most for economic as well as security reasons. They, like many displaced persons, feared the implications of being “minority returnees.”<sup>26</sup> One, Edin, described Bosniaks who did return to Prijedor as “living under the shutter,” that is keeping as low a profile as possible to prevent conflict with their neighbors.<sup>27</sup> The other interviewee, Mirsad, emphasized the importance of living under “our”—meaning Muslim—government rather than returning to “enemy territory,” to Republika Srpska, even if that was his “home of origin.” Like his physical house in Prijedor, his community was destroyed by the war. His comments illustrates the larger, harder truth that bricks and mortar can only reconstruct a house, not a home.

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<sup>26</sup> In addition to concerns about physical security, many minority returnees were concerned about access to services (employment, housing and education) under local and entity governments dominated by other ethnic groups (Steffansson 2006, Jansen 2006)

<sup>27</sup> See also Steffansson’s (2006) ethnographic work on Bosniak returnees to Banja Luka.

The homogenization and physical separation of communities provides a significant obstacle to peacebuilding.<sup>28</sup> My interviewees also highlighted the importance of face-to-face inter-ethnic contact in healing trauma. Selma, another high school senior, shared how it took meeting Bosnian Serbs for her to cast off her own assumption that a “Serb was a monster, and a Croat too,” and that realizing that “they were people just like me...really helped me with my trauma.” These instances of personal transformation mark, according to psychologist Ervin Staub’s research in Rwanda, the first steps towards creating lasting peace through changing conceptions of the “other.”<sup>29</sup>

These pivotal moments of sharing experiences of suffering during the war and acknowledging common humanity provided the catalyst for many of my interviewees to begin reimagining the “other.” However, in divided communities, spaces for genuinely encountering the “other” are few. Furthermore, these spaces do not often occur organically, and depend upon the courage of individuals to enter into them with openness to truly hear the other’s story. Fear of meeting and interacting with the “other” inhibited many of my informants, including Vahido, from willingly entering such spaces. Required to attend an inter-ethnic teacher training session, Vahido was concerned that he would meet his former teacher, the Serb who “made me start hating ‘them.’” He later reflected in his Masters Thesis,

...I hated Serbs so much that my only motivation to go on with life was revenge: to harm at least one Serb in order to make him/her pay for my suffering...[at the training] it was very hard to sit in the same room with

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<sup>28</sup> Clark, 365.

<sup>29</sup> Clark.

Serbs. It was disgusting to see their names on nametags that were stuck to their chests.<sup>30</sup>

Yet, as Vahido told me, the training also “transformed my life...it made my life much easier because it’s much easier to love than to hate.” Although the atmosphere was tense and the Bosnian teachers “couldn’t stand each other,” the facilitator framed this painful process as necessary, saying “either you deal with this or your children deal with this.” For Vahido, like a generation of Bosnians raised on horrific World War Two stories and processing his own wounds from the most recent war, this logic resonated. Before the training, he had difficulty understanding why Serbs, especially those he knew, didn’t speak up in protest of the atrocities committed around them. For Vahido, inaction by his Serb acquaintances implicated them in the crimes, directly or indirectly. These trainings enabled Vahido to hear from Serbs how they too were threatened, and that their silence was not synonymous with support for the regime. He recounted,

This was my biggest difficulty with Serbs, why didn’t you say something? But now I realize that there were Serbs who were not supporting [the war]...[and] that they were threatened...and of course when you have to choose between your family and your children and your neighbor, I kind of now understand...I understand why they didn’t [speak up] and before I couldn’t.

Hearing the stories and experiences of “others” harmed by the war enabled Vahido to begin understanding the destruction of his community and his life in a more complex and compassionate way.

Integral to Vahido’s experience was his ability to return to his pre-war community, to confront not only Serbs, but the individuals who directly defined his

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<sup>30</sup> Omanovic, Vahidin. “The Role of the Project Diacom in Reconciliation in Bosnia” (2003). *Capstone Collection*, School of International Training, Paper 181. <http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/capstones/181>.

wartime-suffering. Yet, the process of reconciliation, like any process of return, occurs on a personal timeline. Furthermore, Vahido's physical return to Sanski Most did not enable this transformation. Addressing his "interpersonal ruins" from the war took additional steps, took "meeting the other."<sup>31</sup> Yet this component of reconciliation is grossly overlooked in number-based evaluations of return. Until assessment of return encompasses sustainability of community, includes the transnational experiences of the Diaspora and encourages "meeting the other," such statistics scratch only the surface of what it means to come home.

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<sup>31</sup> Clark, 362.