

*David M. Berman*

## **Calling The Wandering Souls: a journey through the heartland of ethnic cleansing**

### **The Pit of the Abyss**

“In this seventh month the rain is endless,” wrote the Vietnamese poet, Nguyen Du. “The cold penetrates into the dry bones” (Luce, et al., 1971:11). In the seventh month of this year, with the rain driving across the ridgeline, I feel the cold as it penetrates into my bones, a world and a generation away from Vietnamese landscapes. Chilled by the rain and the fear and the memory, I am there at the edge of the pit, afraid of being sucked into the darkness below, into the abyss, into the *jama*. Indeed, I must be dreaming once again, caught in an old nightmare, staring into the eyes of my executioner, questioning my dignity and courage. In my dream, I am lying there in the barbed-wire cage, wondering whether I would bear the torture, whether I would face the execution as a man, wondering how long I would last, whether I would cry, beg, grovel, whine. What would they do to me now that they had me? Would they cut me up piece by piece, or would they execute me cleanly with a bullet through the forehead? It is my turn now as the guard reaches into the cage and drags me out, and I am screaming and sobbing and flailing. In this moment, I know that I am not half the man the village chief was who uttered not a cry while he died a slow and painful death some thirty years ago the seventh month of this rainy season in the Central Highlands of Viet Nam.

“If there was a world more disturbing than this,” wrote Bruce Weigl, of his time in Viet Nam, “where black clouds bowed down and swallowed you whole ... you don’t remember it” (1988:53). In the midst of a world more disturbing than this, I find myself looking out through the mists of the Central Highlands, remembering journeys travelled through Vietnamese landscapes. In the madness of the world of the present, I turn back to the madness of the world I remember, recalling the timeless poem of Nguyen Du, “Calling the Wandering Souls,” in search of the wandering souls of my own lost war. Searching for the lost souls of his American War, Bao Ninh found himself in the same Highland mists, where “one could hear birds cry-

ing like human beings,” where “trees and plants moan in awful harmony,” where souls “still wandered the jungle, along the stream, refusing to pass over into the other world” (1994:7–8). Here at the edge of the Pit of the Abyss, in a world even more disturbing than the one I remember, I wonder how the wandering souls of the Bosnian war can pass over into the other world while apparitions of their lost souls still wander the mists of the Bosnian Krajina?

Indeed, it must have been another of the old nightmares sometime during the early morning hours while staying at the guest house in Bascarsija, the old quarter of Sarajevo, during the latter months of the siege. I must have dreamed it all, awakening before the thump of the 122 millimeter rockets launched from the mountains above down toward the old quarter of the city. I must have dreamed of hearing the small arms fire on the perimeter and seeing the beauty of the descending flares that illuminated the night sky. I must have dreamed of the impact that shattered my senses and the shower of plaster as I hugged the mattress from my bed. I dreamed that I had “the sense of being inside a killing jar” as the concussive effect of the rockets slamming into the city reverberated within the high mountain walls. Mostly I dreamed that I heard the song of the rocket whistling through the night sky, that I felt the panic as my lungs gasped for air and my stomach contracted into my throat, only to awaken to the smell of fear in my sweat, unable to comprehend that I was reliving the nightmares in the midst of another merciless war.

I am here in Bosnia now on a Fulbright fellowship under the auspices of the University of Sarajevo where I am conducting research on the war schools of the country. How do the Bosnians teach about the war that ravaged their country, and about the ethnic cleansing of the countryside, in their curriculum, textbook, and instruction? My first book, *The Heroes of Treca Gimnazija: A War School in Sarajevo* (2001), explored how the teachers and students of one particular *gimnazija*, an academic secondary school that prepares students for the university, adapted their instruction and learning to wartime conditions. I am now working on a second book on the war schools of Dobrinja, “a special place,” in the words of one teacher, “a siege within a siege,” totally cut off from Sarajevo proper during the first months of the war, creating in the people who were trapped there a determined resolve to survive. What can teachers offer their students, I think, when those students leave class for the frontline to defend the settlement? “I am going, Mother, to defend Bosnia,” they sang in defiance. “If I am killed, do not regret it.”

“I’m leaving Sarajevo, and I’m going to Bosnia,” a friend told me. My research is taking me out into the Bosnian countryside where I find I know nothing about the war in the villages and the “cleansing of the ground” or

the pits of the Bosnian Krajina. “In Sarajevo, people were killed by shelling in their homes, or by snipers in the streets,” said Esad Bajramovic, my host, in Bihac, the notorious Bihac pocket, “but here in the *Bosanska Krajina*, the Bosnian Krajina, the people were butchered like dogs, and I took their bodies out with my own hands” (Personal Communication, 14 July 2001)<sup>1</sup>. During the fall of 1997, Esad Bajramovic, and his colleagues from the Institute for Crimes against Humanity, exhumed the remains of 81 men from the bottom of the Pit of the Abyss 82 meters below the ground. Of the 81 sets of remains, smashed, mangled, and burned, only 47 were identified while 34 others were in such condition that identification at the time was problematic. Twenty bodies into the pit lay an unexploded mine. Among the 34 men unidentified may lie the remains of Muharem Kurtagic, from a nearby village just down the road, but there is no doubt, however, that Muharem Kurtagic was seized in front of his wife Esmā, his daughter, Suada, and his son, Senad, and executed by his captors, according to information revealed to his wife, Esmā Kurtagic, five years afterwards, for blood money and the price of beer (Personal Communication, 15 July 2001)<sup>2</sup>. “And your blood on the field, your flesh rots,” wrote Nguyen Du. “Your bones unclaimed, lying who knows where?” (Raffel, 1968:37).



A roof shelters the floorboards that cover the area around the black hole in the ground. The flag of the Bosnian Federation waves in the breeze. A plaque commemorates the massacre of the 81 men, seized in front of their families and friends, under the eyes and guns of French UNPROFOR (United Nations Protection Force) troops, on 11 June 1992. The plaque reads:

*In Remembrance  
of the Innocent Victims of Chetnik Genocide  
Killed in 1992 and Thrown  
into the Pit ... the Abyss*

As if to commemorate the depth of the depravity, the pit was given a name,

*Jama Bezdna*, the Bottomless Pit or the Pit of the Abyss. There at the edge of the Pit of the Abyss, high on Hrgar ridge in the Grmec range of northwestern Bosnia, six kilometers off Highway 5, between Bihac and Bosanski Petrovac, gazing out across the ridgeline, I can only wonder how the searchers found another of the 200 mass graves of the Bosnian Krajina. "For money and for the price of beer," said Esad Bajramovic. "One of the killers led us to the pit." Pondering the absurdity of killers now in the police service of the entity government with whom the searchers must cooperate, leading them to the remains of those whom they killed, he said, "It is the fate of Bosnia to live and work with killers."

Once the military frontier (*vojna krajina*) defending European civilization of the west from the Ottoman empire of the east, the Krajina was often a killing ground for the innocents of all ethnicities caught in the path of opposing armies and local warlords. If I were a Serb, I wonder, and my family was cleansed from the Krajina during World War II, to be massacred at places like Kozara, or sent to the *Ustasa* concentration camp at Jasenovac in Croatia nearby, would I in turn seek blood vengeance (*krvna osveta*) from my neighbors today, remembering the slaughter of a previous generation, thinking my turn has come? In the cycle of hatred of the recent Bosnian war, would I have turned on the Muslims and massacred them in their homes or sent them to concentration camps like Omarska, Keraterm, Trnopolje, and Manjaca in the Krajina itself? In the aftermath of this most recent slaughter, there are today perhaps 200 mass gravesites located across the 20 municipalities of the Bosnian Krajina alone, according to the men who search for them, on ridgelines, in forests, and in the villages where they lived. In the luckiest of circumstances, some anonymous soul who knows what happened then, who feels a sense of conscience, writes a letter to reveal another one of the 200 or so mass graves. Otherwise, the information on the mass graves of Bosnia comes for a price, for blood money and for the price of beer, sometimes paid to those who were involved in the killing.

"Every village in the Bosnian Krajina has mass graves and cemeteries for the dead," said Esad Bajramovic, as he took me on a journey to the villages, the pits, the cemeteries, the execution sites, and the mass graves, to confront the slaughter that took place here in the mountains of northwestern Bosnia a few short years ago. From Hrgar to Laniste to Velagici to Biljani, from Sanica to Vrhpolje to Hrustovo to Hrustova Glavica Brdo, from Kljuc to Sanski Most, and finally to Strbacki Buk, where it all began, connecting the circle, the story of the cleansing of the Bosnian Krajina unfolded at a relentless pace, much like the slaughter itself. There in the countryside of the Bosnian Krajina, we travelled back in time to the early summer of 1992 when Bosnian Serb forces were "cleansing the ground," on a journey

through the heartland of ethnic cleansing, each of us, no doubt, caught up in our old and unforgiving nightmares. “Whoever can remain unmoved?” asked Nguyen Du. “Your abandoned souls are roaming in strange lands” (Luce, et al., 1971:11).

### **The Pits on Laniste**

We drive the gravel road three kilometers down off Hrgar and then back onto the highway heading east towards Bosanski Petrovac. Highway 5 runs smooth and easy between the ridgelines, but the ride to our next pit is in silence. An hour down the open road are two more pits located on Laniste mountain on either side of Highway 5 between Bosanski Petrovac and Kljuc. Set amongst the forest of Bosnian pines, on the site of what was once a former base of the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA), occupied by the Bosnian Serb Army (BSA) during the war, these pits are known simply as Laniste 1 and Laniste 2.

The remains of 79 men were exhumed from the pit at Laniste 2 on the north side of the highway. These 79 men were from the village of Velagici located approximately five kilometers from the army base down Highway 5 towards Kljuc. On 31 May 1992, as the story goes, the occupying Bosnian Serb forces requested that the men of Velagici come to the village schoolhouse to obtain registration cards from the new Bosnian Serb administration of Kljuc municipality. On the next day, 1 June, the 79 Velagici men were lined up and gunned down inside the schoolhouse. In the aftermath of the slaughter, one villager recalled, “There’s blood all over the school, the wall’s covered in blood, the stairs in blood, later they blew up the place so nobody’d see” (Bec, 1997). The schoolhouse was burned, razed, and covered with earth. The charred and bullet-riddled bodies were thrown into trucks, taken the five kilometers up the mountain on Highway 5 to the army base, and thrown into the pit at Laniste 2. There were two survivors of the execution at the Velagici schoolhouse. Today, a village cemetery stands on the site of the execution grounds of the old schoolhouse with 120 markers for the Velagici dead. In addition to the 79 men executed in the schoolhouse, and who were exhumed from Laniste 2, the 120 graves include another 41 villagers executed in their homes who failed to make the appointment for new registration cards. Standing there in the Velagici cemetery, we gaze back up the road towards Laniste on the ridge above the village and record the stories of the survivors of the spring and summer of 1992.

A total of 188 sets of remains of men, women, and children were exhumed from the pit at Laniste 1. Just off the gravel road that runs from the main highway through the army base, a wooden frame shelter with

shingled roof resembling a park pavilion over a concrete block base protects the pit. A plaque reads:

*At This Place the Chetniks Threw 188 Bosnians  
who were Killed in a Savage Manner at Biljani  
into the Abyss 10 July 1992  
I Forget Evil We Commit More Evil*

The rusted bucket of the steam shovel that lowered the bodies into the pit lies in a field of wildflowers at the edge of the pine forest. The pits on the army base disclose that this was an army operation.

From the cemetery at Velagici just off Highway 5, we travel some five kilometers up the winding local road to the village of Biljani, where all 188 men, women, and children thrown into Laniste 1 were executed. In the heart of the village, amidst the orange-tiled homes on the hillsides, lies the village cemetery where the 188 bodies exhumed from Laniste 1 are buried. Here in Biljani, on 10 July 1992, just over a month after the massacre at Velagici, the same procedure was repeated by Bosnian Serb authorities who requested the villagers to sign for registration cards under the new authorities. Here in Biljani, the families came to the community center next to the cemetery where the women and children were separated from the men and then executed. A number of the Biljani men were then taken to the Manjaca concentration camp to the east of Kljuc; one survivor notes that the men of nine villages in the area were taken away (Bec, 1997). The men of Biljani, however, eventually ended up in the pit at Laniste 1 where, in groups of ten, they were taken to the edge of the pit, shot in the back of the head and, in the words of the plaque, thrown into the abyss. From one group of twelve men who were taken away from the main group, there was one survivor who related the details of the executions at Biljani and Laniste 1. Villagers there in the cemetery offered to tell us the story, filling in any details we missed.

The Biljani cemetery also contains the graves of those who refused to come for registration, entire extended families killed in their own homes. I noticed 18 Botonic family graves, but Smail Cekic notes that “47 members of the family Botonic were exhumed” (n.d.). The only Dzaferagic family survivor was the father who was not home at the time, but the other five family members who were executed in their home included: Mehmed, age 78, Nail, age 40, and Besima, the mother, age 30. The grave markers for the two children, Almir, age 4, and Amila, age 6 months, read: *Sebid*, Dzaferagic, Amila, 1992–1992; *Sebid*, Dzaferagic, Almir, 1988–1992. “There were babies born at an untimely hour,” wrote Nguyen Du, “who lived only a few moments ... Heart-rendering are their feeble cries” (Luce, et al., 1971:13).

## Cleansing the Bosnian Krajina

Winding our way through the Bosnian countryside, through villages secluded in their hidden valleys, alongside streams flowing down from the ridgelines above, the idyllic beauty of the landscape overcomes me. The narrow road follows one of these streams as it winds its way from Biljani through the hills to Sanica, by Donja Sanica, or Lower Sanica, and eventually to Hrustovo and Vrhpolje, then onto Highway 15 between Kljuc and Sanski Most. There at Donja Sanica, we gaze across the stream towards the hillside where 16 people from one extended family were executed in their homes. We can only stare out towards the gutted houses, recording another detail in the cleansing of the landscape, that those who failed to accept the invitation to come for new registration cards, and attend their execution, were tracked down and executed in their homes. I can only wonder how the killers found these small and unobtrusive places unless they purposely and systematically set out to cleanse them. "You cannot imagine that anything could happen here in these villages," I say to no one in particular, to which Esad Bajramovic said once again, "Every village in the Bosnian Krajina has mass graves," adding, "There is no place here where genocide did not happen."

In the midst of this picturesque, deadly landscape, Esad Bajramovic introduces me to Salko Karajlic, the mayor of Kljuc municipality, and Aziz Gromilic and Muharem Muheljc, of the criminal police. Over lunch, I find myself talking with them about what happened in villages surrounding the town of Kljuc (Personal Communication, 14 July 2001).<sup>3</sup> Here were the men who searched for the mass graves, investigated the massacres, and went after the war criminals if they could. Here I am, the honored outside guest, enjoying traditional Bosnian hospitality, and talking about the massacre of their people over trays of meat pies, potato pies, and spinach pies. There were, of course, trays of *cevapcici*, the traditional Bosnian sausage, and *Sarajevsko pivo*, Sarajevo beer, from the Sarajevo brewery whose springs supplied water for the city with no water during the siege.

These massacres in the Krajina were not isolated incidents of crazed soldiers going berserk, these men explained, but a crazed policy that encouraged soldiers to go berserk. This was a systematic policy of "cleansing the ground" (*ciscenje terena*), often translated as ethnic cleansing (*etnicko ciscenje*), designed to clear the landscape of all those labeled as the Other. The crazed policy was rational and systematic; the insanity lay in the implementation of a crazed policy that unleashed paramilitary forces composed of thugs and criminals upon an unsuspecting population allowing them the luxury of doing whatever they wanted as long as they accomplished their mission. How do you do this best, to ensure that our lands are now your

lands, and that there is absolutely no turning back, but by unforgiving and uncompromising savagery? So you execute innocent civilians who happen to get in your way, including the children, you execute all males of military age so we can't then retake their lands, and you rape the women to pollute the population and send a message of shame that penetrates into the consciousness of the Other. Now we know that we are indeed the Other, and there is nothing we can do since we never expected that our neighbors, raised as a generation of "brotherhood and unity," would ever perpetuate such atrocities upon us. And we talked about this matter of factly, to ensure that I had the facts down, to ensure that I had it right, over lunch.

Particular importance was attached to creating corridors along the major roadways from Banja Luka, the capital of the "Serbian Autonomous Region [SAO] of the Bosnian Krajina," actually created well prior to the Bosnian war, to Knin, the capital of the "Republic of the Serbian Krajina," or the Knin Krajina (*Kninska Krajina*), across the border in Croatia. The grand design was to connect these Serbian Autonomous Regions that were carved out of the republics of the former Yugoslavia to form the Serbian Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, or the *Republika Srpska* (RS), which declared its independence from the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina three months prior to the war.

With the onset of the war in the spring of 1992, one assault by Bosnian Serb forces followed Highway 16 south from Banja Luka over to Mrkonjic Grad, then west northwest on Highway 5 to Kljuc. Another assault proceeded west northwest from Banja Luka to Prijedor on Highway 4, then south on Highway 15 to Sanski Most and Kljuc. Either road you travelled, the municipality of Kljuc, to include the surrounding villages outside of town, Hrustovo, Vrhpolje, Biljani and Sanica, were dead center in the way, and virtually all of these surrounding villages suffered a massacre of their population. With the two roadways converging upon Kljuc, the assault proceeded west on Highway 5 past Velagici and Laniste to Bosanski Petrovac, then south on Highway 11-2 to Drvar, down to Bosansko Grahovo, and then across the Croatian border to Knin. The linkage of the Bosnian Krajina with the Knin Krajina created a Serbian Krajina across eastern Croatia and western Bosnia connected through the Posavina Corridor to the Serb Autonomous Region of Northeast Bosnia adjacent to Serbia itself. In the words of *Bosnia Report*, "The process of creating the RS [Republika Srpska] began in [Bosnian] Krajina" (Andjelic, 2001:2). Indeed, the insanity of the savagery seemed so rational now.

The cleansing of the 20 municipalities of the Bosnian Krajina was accomplished by the 6<sup>th</sup> *Krajiska* (Krajina) Brigade of the former JNA, by the 7<sup>th</sup> Krajina Brigade of the Bosnian Serb Army, by special police units and paramilitary forces, and by mobilization of the local civilian population to

support military and police actions. Aziz Gromilic and Muharem Muheljc pointed specifically to the 7<sup>th</sup> Krajina Brigade as the military unit criminally responsible for the savagery of the ethnic cleansing of the villages of Kljuc municipality. I promised these men that, if I wrote something of their story in whatever fashion it developed, whether for academic purposes or a popular audience, I would specifically mention these units, along with their execution squads of paramilitary accomplices, as operationally responsible for the slaughter during the ethnic cleansing of Kljuc. So here it is.

Our conversation turns to the villages outside of town where the criminal police were responsible for recording the details of the cleansing. Thus Muharem Muheljc found himself in the village of Donja Sanica amongst the gutted houses where he discovered the 16 members of a single extended family in a single mass grave outside their homes. Among them was a three-year old girl whose remains were identified by the blond strands of her hair. In tears now, he could only shake his head at the savagery of the military and special police units that would implement policy by killing children of three and infants of six months. In the words of Aziz Gromilic and Muharem Muheljc, the killers of the Bosnian Krajina are living just across the Inter-Entity Boundary Line in the Republika Srpska, and “we do not have the authority to go after them. In fact, we must sometimes rely on them for information.” For emphasis, Officer Muheljc added, “They all know who did the killing.” I thought of the words of Esad Bajramovic once again, that “it is the fate of Bosnia to live and work with killers.”

### **The Pit on Hrastova Glavica Brdo**

The road from Donja Sanica passes by the village of Hrustovo and onto Highway 15 at the Vrhpolje elementary school where it runs north to Sanski Most. There are 250 graves among the wildflowers of the Hrustovo village cemetery for victims of the massacres committed by Serb paramilitaries that began on 26 May 1992 and, according to one account, led by the principal of the Brotherhood Elementary School in Tomina village nearby. Many of the victims remain unidentified, with markers that read simply, *sebid* (martyr) with the identification number of the remains, NN-1, or NN-2, for example, followed by the year of exhumation. There are 14 new graves in the cemetery, with green, wooden markers and identification numbers for the remains found in mass graves found recently just down Highway 15 toward Kljuc. A young man from Hrustovo, visiting his father’s gravesite in the cemetery, found him in a mass grave nearby, six years after his execution, for blood money paid to an informant.

The town of Sanski Most, like Kljuc to the south, was at the center of the killing fields in the villages around the town. Human rights reports cite



the cleansing of the villages of Sanski Most municipality, among them, Kijevo, Caplje, Tomina, Sehovci, Husimovci, Poljak, Sasina, and Donji and Gornji Kamengrad, as well as Hrustovo and Vrhpolje. The Sanski Most killers included the same 6<sup>th</sup> Krajina Brigade that operated in Ključ and the 5<sup>th</sup> Kozarac Brigade from the Prijedor area. One other unit that appeared in the area during fall 1995, just prior to the advance of the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps of the Bosnian Army, was the Arkanovici, the paramilitary unit of Željko Raznatović, aka, "Arkan." Its appearance was intended to clean up any evidence, that is, witnesses, that might be left behind (Human Rights Watch, 1996).

To the northwest of the town of Sanski Most, we followed a narrow, paved road through the hills well off the main highway, turning onto a gravel road into the forest of pines and firs. Here a clearing marked another mass gravesite in another deep pit high on the side of Hrastova Glavica Brdo (Oak Knoll Hill). A makeshift wooden shelter with clear, plastic wrapping protected the site from the elements. Two paper birch trees framed the shelter. The forest had been cleared around the pit and, from the clearing, we could look out over the hillside towards the farmers' fields of Velicevo village located just across the Inter-Entity Boundary Line that divides the

Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina from the Republika Srpska beyond.

The pit on Hrastova Glavica Brdo lies 40 meters deep with a series of horizontal tunnels running off the vertical axis. The remains of 144 men were hauled up from the bottom of the pit to the clearing above, including two sets of remains dating from World War II. The other 142 men were from Prijedor, just up Highway 15 from Sanski Most, by way of the Omarska concentration camp. Upon locating the remains, the initial, prevailing view was that the victims were executed in the Omarska camp, like so many others, and transported to the pit for disposal. But Esad Bajramovic noted that the gravel road was built specifically to provide access for the exhumations from the narrow, paved road to the pit, so there was simply no way to transport the bodies through a forest so thick here, he said, that “you couldn’t ride through it on a bicycle.” In other words, the victims were alive when they were transported by bus to the turnoff where they walked through the forest to their execution. In fact, one man somehow escaped from the column, running away from the executions at the pit on the hillside. When he finally reached safety, he was incoherent from the exhaustion and the trauma, and everyone thought he was crazy. Early in the war, no one wanted to believe his story of the executions there in the middle of the forest. Today, the former enemy on the other side of the boundary line tells the very same story, for blood money, of the executions in the middle of the forest on Hrastova Glavica Brdo.

Searches are underway for two more mass graves around the village of Dubovik, where other mass graves have previously been found, just a few kilometers further up the road. Outside of Bosanska Krupa, near the town of Ljubija in Prijedor municipality, just across the boundary line in the Republika Srpska, another mass grave has recently been discovered. The initial report confirmed that 301 bodies were exhumed from the pit (B92, 2001), an iron mine 85 meters deep, “the infamous Ljubija mine,” where eyewitnesses reported that “scores of buses arrived” with prisoners from the camps, most notably, from Omarska (Human Rights Watch, 1997:42). Esad Bajramovic recently updated the count to 370 sets of remains (Hadzic, 2001), and indicated that he would take me to visit the site near the town of Ljubija, “where the killers live,” he said, citing one of the killers who performed his work at the Pit of the Abyss on Hrgar. He also indicated, in his own indomitable way, that “the same criminals killed them all.” “In wartime, human lives are so cheap,” wrote Nguyen Du, “apparitions of their lost souls” (Luce, et al., 1971:13).

### **From Strbacki Buk to the Pit of the Abyss**

We are closing the circle now, travelling once again down Highway 5

between Bihac and Bosanski Petrovac, and passing by Hrgar and the Pit of the Abyss on the ridgeline above. We are turning off the highway onto yet another gravel road that winds its way over the mountains a distance of twelve rugged kilometers down to the falls of the Una River which marks the border between Bosnia and Croatia. "We have some beautiful rivers and streams back in the mountains of Pennsylvania," I remark, but Esad Bajramovic says that we have "nothing like the Una." Indeed, the Una shimmers the green of the forests as it follows its course through the mountains, flowing through Bihac, giving the town its bridges and its beauty. From Bihac, the Una follows a series of breathtaking bends through the town of Bosanska Krupa where it once marked the frontline during the war. For a short distance, the Una marks the border once again eventually flowing into the Sava River that, in turn, marks the natural boundary of historical Bosnia.

Here on the edge of the Bosnian Krajina, our road ends on the hillside above the Una providing a view of the mountains that frame the green of the river as it runs the limestone gorge. We find ourselves at Strbacki Buk, Strbacki Cataract, a run of tumbling falls so picturesque that there are postcards of the scene in the kiosks back in Bihac. Esad Bajramovic leads us on a pathway down below the falls where the spray from the torrent cascading down towards us leaves me breathless. The natural wonder of the cataracts is so captivating that, for a moment, I forget the darkness of what took place here at the onset of the ethnic cleansing of the Bosnian Krajina—the sequence of events that led to the mass grave deep in the Pit of the Abyss on Hrgar mountain looming in the distance beyond.

The cleansing that took place upriver from Strbacki Buk in the villages of Kulen Vakuf, Klisa, Cukovi, Ostrovica, and Orasac, was well underway in the early days of June 1992. These villages were initially shelled by the Bosnian Serb Army creating an increasing panic among the village inhabitants. Based on interviews with villagers at the time, Silber and Little cited token resistance when paramilitaries entered the villages and began the separation of the men from the women and children who were allowed to go free (2002; 1996). Prominent local men were separated from the rest and disappeared, and others were taken to a prison camp at Ripac. I was told, however, that the shelling sent the villagers fleeing for safety in the mountains along the river. A number of the older people stayed behind, and at least 50 of them were executed and found years later in small mass graves nearby. Others who stayed behind were sent to Orasac for forced labor where some were killed, their bodies burned, and dumped into the earth. Six of these people escaped to tell their stories. Others were released in a prisoner exchange for Bosnian Serb soldiers.

As the story goes at Strbacki Buk, somewhere between 6,500 and 7,000 villagers, men, women, and children, fled through the mountains from the

enemy soldiers who were chasing them downriver along the Una, shelling and shooting at them along the way. The fleeing mass of civilians was heading for Strbacki Buk where a railroad bridge crossed over the Una from Bosnia into Croatia. On the hillside above the bridge on the Croatian side was a small train station that marked the stop on the line between Zagreb and Split on the Adriatic coast. To prevent the villagers from crossing into Croatia, the enemy shelled the railroad bridge into ruin leaving only a small, wooden, footbridge nearby across the river.

Recognizing the difficulty of the situation, the fleeing villagers sent two boys ahead of the group to swim across the river and contact the battalion of French UNPROFOR troops located in Lapac across the border in Croatia. By the time the mass of frightened villagers reached Strbacki Buk, they found French UNPROFOR troops coming down the road on the Croatian side towards the river. The boys had accomplished their mission, but the villagers found themselves trapped there at Strbacki Buk, unable to cross the footbridge over the river in any numbers, soldiers of the Bosnian Serb Army now in their midst, and French UNPROFOR troops on the other side.

It is clear that negotiations took place between the French UNPROFOR troops and the Bosnian Serb Army. Either the French made a deal with the Serbs allowing 210 men and boys in the group to be taken in front of them, or the Serbs realized they could not take the women and children as captives and settled for the 210 men. According to Esmā Kurtagić, the Serbs moved amongst the villagers, charging all males of military age as soldiers, refusing to leave them go, although the villagers said that none of the males in the group were soldiers, but that they all were civilians. Eventually some sort of an agreement was reached, and the women, children, and older men crossed the river with the French while 210 of the men and boys were taken prisoners by the Serbs. The French took the mass of refugees up the road on the Croatian side of the river and then back across the border into Bosnia, into Bihać, where they left them inside the very Bihać enclave that was besieged by the same Bosnian Serb Army that took their men.

For the 210 male captives, mostly boys and young men in their teens and twenties, it appears that the French made no attempt to inquire about their fate after they left them to the mercy of the enemy. One group of men was taken to an elementary school located in Kamenica just outside Drvar on Highway 14-2 south of Bosanski Petrovac. The other group was taken to a tractor repair shop located in Ripac on Highway 5 south of Bihać, in the shadow of Hrgar, a stone's throw from the residence of Esad Bajramović. Both the elementary school in Kamenica and the tractor repair shop in Ripac were converted into one of the many, small prison camps that supported localized cleansing operations. Of the 210 men taken to the two camps, 59 have never been accounted for, but Esad Bajramović

believes that they were executed at Kamenica and are somewhere in one of the mass graves that dot the landscape. Another 70 of the men were accounted for in a prisoner exchange for Bosnian Serb soldiers.

The 81 bodies hauled out of the Pit of the Abyss on Hrgar account for the remainder of the 210 men taken at Strbacki Buk. Forty-seven sets of remains have been positively identified, while the other 34 are unidentified at present. In regard to Muharem Kurtagic, wife of Esmā, father of five-year old Senad and eight-year old Suada at the time, taken in the presence of French UNPROFOR troops to the Ripac camp, his remains have never been identified. I met Esmā Kurtagic there on the banks of the Una, on a picnic with family and friends, where we travelled together upriver to see the columns of the railroad bridge over the Una and the remains of the wooden footbridge that she once fled across, leaving her husband behind. She wanted someone to know that none of the young men seized there at Strbacki Buk on 11 June 1992, taken to prison camps, and later executed, including her husband, were soldiers. Rather, she said, they were all civilians, villagers, family members, husbands, brothers, and sons. She knows, however, that her husband was one of the men who was taken to the prison camp in the tractor repair shop at Ripac where he was beaten by his captors. She also knows that the remains of her husband are yet to be identified and that they may be one of the 34 sets of remains exhumed from the Pit of the Abyss.

In the living room of the Bajramovic residence, just above the tractor repair shop turned prison camp at Ripac, we talk about his work among the 200 mass gravesites that lie across the Bosnian Krajina, on both sides of the Inter-Entity Boundary Line that divides former if not present enemies. A professor on the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Bihać, his work on the exhumations of mass graves is carried out through the Institute for the Research of Crimes against Humanity and International Law of the University of Sarajevo, under the director, Smail Cekić. The Institute publishes its findings from the exhumations of the gravesites, as well as studies of crimes against innocents during the Bosnian war, and Professor Bajramovic is responsible primarily for the work of the Institute in the Bosnian Krajina. He plans to publish his work on the exhumations of the Pit of the Abyss on Hrgar through the Institute, which is particularly interested in working with an American publisher to ensure the quality of the photographs of the project.

In the comfort of his living room, drinking traditional Bosnian coffee served by his wife and daughter, Esad Bajramovic asks me if I would like to look at his collection of photographs of the exhumations from the mass graves of the Bosnian Krajina. Nodding my agreement, he comes to the heart of the matter, asking me if I have ever seen dead bodies before. "Yes,"

I murmur. "I have seen dead bodies before." He looks at me once again, sizing me up before taking me into his study, where piles of photographs of the exhumations are neatly arranged and the exhumations are thoroughly documented. From professor to professor or, I would like to think, man to man, he gives me copies of his photographs to show my own students about what happened here a few short years ago. "The world still knows very little about the truth in Bosnia," said Professor Bajramovic of his life's purpose, of his work amongst the photographs, amongst the documentation, amongst the sets of remains, amongst the wandering souls of the Bosnian Krajina. "It is the fate of Bosnia to live and work with the killers," he said again, knowing full well the difficulty of making peace with an enemy who hides his secrets in the pits of the Bosnian countryside. I wonder again how I would have fared with such an enemy, in a barbed-wire cage in a tractor repair shop in Ripac, caught again in an old nightmare, knowing that I am not half the man that Esad Bajramovic is who works with killers in order to find his friends. "Where are they now, those lost souls?" wrote Nguyen Du (Luce, et al., 1971:14). Esad Bajramovic is looking for them.

### **Postscript**

As of the date of this writing, Esad Bajramovic and his colleagues are in the process of exhuming another mass grave at a place called Tihotina, just two kilometers down the ridge from the Pit of the Abyss on Hrgar in the heart of the Bosnian Krajina. To date, some 60 sets of remains have been exhumed from the Tihotina pit which, at one time, was the shaft of a former coal mine some 50 meters deep into the earth. According to the most recent information received by Esmā Kurtagic, the remains of her husband may be among the sets of remains presently being exhumed the Tihotina pit or, according to information previously received, still lying amongst the 34 sets of unidentified remains exhumed from the Pit of the Abyss on Hrgar.

### **Notes**

1. The initial conversations with Esad Bajramovic took place on 14–15 July 2002 in Bihac, Ključ, and Sanski Most municipalities, Bosnia and Herzegovina. A follow up conversation took place in Sarajevo on 11 October 2002, while Esad Bajramovic was on the road to another exhumation, in which he provided new information on the mass grave at Tihotina, under exhumation at the time of this writing.
2. The conversation with Esmā Kurtagic took place on 15 July 2001 at Strbacki Buk in Bihac municipality, Bosnia and Herzegovina.
3. The conversations with Aziz Gromilc, Salko Karajlic, and Muharem Muheljc took place on 14 July 2001 in Ključ municipality, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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