



One Woman Against Genocide

Story and photos by
Doug Hostetter

"It is women on all sides who lose the most in war. Rights for which women have fought and won during time of peace disappear in a war. A woman cannot protect her family. Men with weapons take your husband and your boys to train to be murderers. Your daughters, your property, your freedom and even your own body can be taken during war by men with guns."

Emsuda Mujagic's address to the FOR National Conference in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania left the audience both stunned and inspired. How could this elegantly dressed, obviously cultured mother and businesswoman have been sentenced to die in a concentration camp a few miles from the town in which her family had lived for hundreds of years? How could this slight forty-four-year-old woman—with her then thirteen-year-old son and nineteen-year-old daughter—have escaped from the concentration camp, crossed the front lines dodging artillery shells, rifle fire, and landmines, and upon arriving at safety, set herself to organize women from across her country and around the world to stop the killing?

Emsuda comes from a prominent family in the ancient northwestern Bosnian town of Kozarac. Emsuda's grandparents were devout Muslims; her parents, though Muslim, identified mainly with socialism. During WWII, her father joined Marshal Tito's Partisans in their fight against the Fascists. As a child, Emsuda attended mosque only on special Islamic holidays. She has, however, always felt that her character and beliefs have been profoundly shaped by the lives of her grandparents and her parents, and the teachings of Islam. When asked about regular prayers and worship at the mosque, she smiles, "I practice Islam in my life and my work."

After graduating from high school, Emsuda married Osman, who had just finished college. Alisa came a

year later, and six years later, her brother, Adis. Life was comfortable for the Mujagic family in Kozarac, a 700-year-old town of 8,000 people. Osman taught fourth grade, Emsuda worked as a government accountant, and on the side started a sweater factory to give employment to women who were widowed, had left an abusive spouse, or needed additional funds to support the education of their children.

In Kozarac as in most other Bosnian towns, the Muslims tended to live in the town proper, while the Serbs (Eastern Orthodox Christians) and Croats (Roman Catholic Christians) tended to live in agricultural villages surrounding the town. Emsuda was not aware of any ethnic tensions between the town and the ten surrounding villages, or of any conflicts in Kozarac among the overwhelming Muslim majority and the eighty Croats, twenty-

seven Serbs, and scattering of Gypsies, Hungarians, Albanians, Italians, and a half-dozen other ethnic groups who also lived there.

In 1992, when the vast majority of Bosnians voted to secede from the former Yugoslavia and become an independent republic, this apparently peaceful harmony disintegrated. Bosnia was immediately recognized by the US, the UN, and most of the rest of the world—but not by Serbia, the largest of the republics of the former Yugoslavia, and inheritor of the Yugoslav army

"When you identify only with yourself, the suffering of others is meaningless. Women's identity, however, is usually with their family and their community. When you identify with others, you can easily understand the pain caused to others through war or domination."

and air force. With the assistance of Serbs who lived in Bosnia, Serbia attacked Bosnian Muslim and Croat population centers. Bosnia, a country only a month old, had no armed force. The "war" was between the Yugoslav Army (fourth largest in Europe) and the civilian population which had voted for independence. If the majority of the population would not vote to remain with Serbia, the solution was to remove the population. The term used by Serbian politicians was "ethnic cleansing."

In the Kozarac District, the war was short and devastating. Seven thousand people—over a quarter of the population of the district—were killed in the first two days of bombing and artillery attack. The assault focused on the town and the six Croat villages

Croat leaders to assist officials at Trnopolje in deciding who should be transferred to the death camp at Omarska. The remaining inmates, after months of intimidation, would be taken to the front lines, where the Yugoslav Army would use them as a shield while advancing against Bosnian militia positions.

The population at the Trnopolje camp stayed at around four thousand, but the individuals in the camp changed constantly. Every day some people from the master list would be gone, transferred to Omarska. Almost every morning, some of the teenage girls and young women who had been taken the night before to be raped by soldiers would fail to return. Every few days, refrigerator trucks would enter the camp to remove the bodies of those who



Emsuda and her daughter Alisa at the 1996 FOR National Conference.

around it. Five concentration camps were set up in the area to receive Muslim, Croat, and other non-Serb civilian survivors.

Emsuda, her mother, her husband, and her two children were sent first to Trnopolje concentration camp. Trnopolje was a sorting camp where people were tortured, intimidated, and humiliated, but not routinely killed. People selected to be killed (young men of military age, intellectuals, and political, religious, and economic leaders) were usually transferred to explicit death camps. Local Serbs had already prepared a list of Muslim and

had died of disease or torture. Occasionally, groups of previously screened and humiliated women and children would be released at the battlefield to make room for more inmates who were just arriving. Thirty percent of the Muslim, Croat, and Gypsy inmates who passed through the Trnopolje concentration camp are known to have been killed, or have disappeared.

Emsuda's name was high on the death list because of her earlier work with needy women. When she was discovered at Trnopolje, the camp commander indicated she should be transferred at once. A



"Shalem is the crucible that formed my contemplative approach to living. Shalem is the catalyst for my willingness to embrace mystery."

—An Extension Program Graduate

SHALEM EXTENSION PROGRAMS IN THE CONTEMPLATIVE TRADITION

For over 20 years Shalem has served thousands from a variety of denominations by calling forth a deeper spiritual life in both person and community.

Application is open to all who want to learn from and deepen their givenness to God in the light of contemplative traditions.

STAFF:

ROSE MARY DOUGHERTY,
TILDEN EDWARDS,
GERALD MAY, AND OTHERS

Yes! Please send me more information about the program(s) checked below.

- Spiritual Guidance Program** (2 years) for those who are called to the ministry of one-to-one spiritual direction *
- Group Leadership Program** (1 year) for those who lead contemplative spiritual formation groups and retreats *
- Personal Spiritual Deepening Program** (1 1/2 years) for those who want to dedicate themselves to a contemplative grounding within the context of their daily lives

* Accredited by Washington Theological Union (WTU)
Scholarship assistance is available.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ ZIP _____

1196FL

Call or write us today!

**SHALEM INSTITUTE
FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION**
5430 Grosvenor Lane
Bethesda, MD 20814
301.897.7334

Just 30 minutes from BWI (Baltimore
Washington International Airport)

young Serb soldier offered to carry Emsuda in his military van to the other camp, about five miles away. Once in the van, however, he broke the news to her that no one would ever return from Omarska. He also informed her that although they had never met, he knew her through his sister—whom Emsuda had helped years earlier. Emsuda had given life to his sister, he explained, and now he would return the favor.

The soldier gave Emsuda a Serbian Red Cross name tag and identification number that had belonged to a peasant woman killed some days before. He told her they were going back to Trnopolje: the guards would simply assume that she was one of the women who had been taken out for rape the preceding night. He explained that after their leaders had been killed, whoever remained in the camp would be expelled at the battlefield. If she were lucky, she might survive.

Since first arriving at Trnopolje, Emsuda had not been able to communicate with her son and husband, who were kept in the segregated male section of the camp. Now she also didn't dare speak with her mother or her daughter. Through other women, however, she was able to tell Alisa everything that had happened and why they must never disclose their relationship.

After all of the Muslims from the town of Kozarac had been captured, they were taken from the concentration camps, loaded in trucks, and driven to a hilltop above the town to watch as Serb soldiers set fire to every Muslim home in Kozarac—about ninety-five percent of the city. Emsuda's elderly mother-in-law, who had told the soldiers that she was too old to leave her home, died as her house was burned with her inside. A month or so after watching their homes go up in smoke, Emsuda (with a different identity) and her son and daughter were among a group of women, children, and men over sixty-five who were taken to the battlefield and pushed across the lines.

Dodging artillery, minefields, and snipers, Emsuda, Alisa, and Adis miraculously survived a harrowing two months' journey. With help from Muslims in Bosnia and Croats in Croatia, they finally reached the relative safety of Zagreb, Croatia. (Half a year later, Emsuda's husband, Osman, who after eight months of torture had turned completely gray and was assumed to be over sixty-five, was also released at the front. He too survived a similar crossing, and shortly thereafter rejoined his family in Zagreb. Not sure he could consistently count on passing as older, he slipped through one checkpoint because two Bosnian women sat on him at the back of a bus.)

Three days after reaching safety, Emsuda encountered an old co-worker. "I'm so glad that you survived!" her friend exclaimed. "Now I know something will be done! You must let the world know what is happening, and organize us to help the refugees and the survivors of the camps."

"She knew what I had done with the women of Kozarac District before the war," Emsuda said with honest modesty. "I guess I had a reputation for making things happen. I suddenly realized that I could not disappoint her. I had no money, no job, not even a place for me and my children to live—but with God's help, everything has been possible."

Shortly after the chance encounter with her old friend in Zagreb, Emsuda met a Croatian woman who shared her vision: an organization for women of all religions and nationalities who would unite in an effort to end war in Bosnia and elsewhere, while giving assistance to survivors. In August of 1993, during the period when Croatia had aligned itself with Serbia against Bosnia, they organized their first conference for women of their two countries. The organization that then arose is called *Through Hearts to Peace*, because of their belief that it is from



Emsuda Mujagic

the hearts of women that peace can be built.

Their founding conference put forth these principles:

- War can be stopped by the women of the world.
- By ending war in Bosnia, women can begin the establishment of world peace.
- The cities of Kozarac and Vukovar, totally destroyed in the wars in Bosnia and Croatia, contain the keys to peace in those countries.
- Love can bring life and hope to every human being.
- As women help the war wounded and reduce the suffering of others, they help to heal themselves.

Since that first meeting, *Through Hearts to Peace* has grown. During the height of the war, the group organized three international women's conferences in Sarajevo. Undaunted by the fact that Sarajevo was constantly being shelled and was completely surrounded by Serb forces, women from Europe, the US, Croatia, and Bosnia took their buses over the mountains and through the blockades to gather in peace in the midst of war. The organization has also met with Serb women from Banja Luka, and some members of the group have returned to Kozarac, where they have met with women who still live there.

Peace is also about personal healing. Emsuda discovered that many women survivors were seriously traumatized and often suicidal. She and an associate

founded a second organization, the Association of Women of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which set up a center where these deeply injured women could gather to knit, talk, and support each other. The Association found that women who met together and worked together did more than learn new skills and earn money. More importantly, they began to recover from their own depression and pull together their shattered families. The Zagreb center hired professional seamstresses to teach dressmaking and knitting so that women could produce clothing marketable in Europe or the US. They also hired beauticians to teach hairdressing and cosmetics. Nor have men been forgotten. The group is now in the process of establishing a small sheet-metal factory in Sanski Most, Bosnia. This factory is primarily intended for demobilized Bosnian soldiers, who have also been greatly traumatized.

"It was natural for me to organize women," Emsuda says. "It is women on all sides who lose the most in war. Rights for which women have fought during time of peace disappear in war.... Not all women understand this. Some are blinded by personal self-interest. In Bosnia, some women lost their ability to think clearly about the war by accepting gifts of gold and jewelry which their husbands had taken from women whom they had raped and killed. Other women were blinded by their own poverty, prejudice, or the domination by their husbands. But for those who think, it is clear that all women have the most to gain from peace."

"I believe that women have an inherent advantage over men in working for peace," she explains. "Men's identity is often with themselves and their work. They are frequently interested in power and control. (It is men who design the new weapons and systems of control.) When you identify only with yourself, the suffering of others is meaningless. Women's identity, however, is usually with their family and their community. When you identify with others, you can easily understand the pain caused to others through war or domination. Women need to work

together to stop men from producing weapons, and to convince the men who are in power that they should treat those under their control as they would want their own children treated."

"Perhaps the most amazing aspect of my work," she confided, "has been what I have learned. When I started, I was afraid and angry at those who have organized and carried out such great crimes. But looking closely, I have discovered that the evil which was done has turned back upon those who perpetuated it, and upon their children. The mass graves and concentration camps are a testimony against their deeds. My survival is a witness to all that they tried to do. They have driven me from Kozarac, but I am free; they remain in Kozarac, but they are in prison. I

can come and go as I please; they are constantly fearful that I will return. They are afraid that the wives and children might someday learn what the husbands and fathers have done. They are now afraid of me!

"I have also learned the incredible strength of women and the power of love. In assisting other women I have myself been strengthened. In consoling the loss of others, I have myself been healed." □

Doug Hostetter is director of FOR's Bosnian Student Project. For more information on Through Hearts To Peace, contact him at Box 271, Nyack, NY 10960. Phone: (914) 358-4601. Fax: (914) 358-4924. E-mail: forbsp@igc.apc.org.

With Our Own Eyes

Don Mosley

With Our Own Eyes is the story of people who threw themselves into an effort to take the teachings of Jesus seriously, "in scorn of the consequences." These Christians, based at Jubilee Partners in Comer, Georgia, have experienced an ever-deepening commitment to being channels of God's love in a violent world.

"With Our Own Eyes is the inspiring story of what can happen when a group of Christians take seriously Jesus' call to be peacemakers in a world full of violence." —Jimmy Carter

"With Our Own Eyes is incredibly well written, and it also tells such a thrilling story of activated faith and love. I am sure the book is going to bless, motivate, and inspire a great number of people in the coming months."
—Millard Fuller, Executive Director, Habitat for Humanity

Paper, 304 pages, \$12.95; in Canada \$18.50.

To order call: **1 800 759-4447**

hp%0mph@mcimail.com



HERALD
PRESS