

STAIRWAY TO OBLIVION

The image is burned into my mind's eye. I have only to pause to see it again. The memory is a bare concrete stairway of a dozen steps reaching into emptiness from its base of rubble stone, brick and concrete. It hangs in the air seemingly defying gravity and fate. The lonely stairway will always be an icon on my mental screen for war's futility, pain and losses -- and, in Robert Burns' words, "Man's inhumanity to man..."

The stairway marks what had been until an ill-fated day in May of 1992 the home place of generations of the Stakic family. The house had looked like most of those in the small town. I have seen a worn photograph of the original building, taken in the 1960s. It once stood proudly as did the thousands of Bosnian houses now crumbling after the 1992-1995 war.

Most residential structures built in the past 100 years in "Bosnia and Herzegovina" were constructed two or three levels high of large, hollow bricks, and finished with white stucco. Overhanging red brick tile roofs capped the houses. The winsome buildings were adorned with small balconies, shutters and flowered window boxes. The front doors were ground level, of course; the rear and other outside doors often opened into other floor levels because of the prevailing unevenness of this mountainous land. Characteristic of houses in Bosnia was at least one stairway on an outside wall from ground level to the second or third floor. Support was stone at ground level, metal rods in the depths of the concrete, and horizontal attachment to the wall. The stairs were railless but on them sat pots of geraniums and other colorful flowers.

The stairway had been trod for decades by the Stakics. Those steps were as much a part of their lives as the red roof that sheltered them. The generations of this family that had tilled this land since far back in Ottoman Empire times had built a two level house about 1900. Another floor was added according to information from several older women who lived in neighboring houses that were still habitable. The older women were the

majority population in this town as in most of Bosnia. Few men remained after the conflict. In a poignant phenomenon seen throughout the nation, most of the remaining males appeared disabled. They had eye patches, empty sleeves, peg legs or other such 'medals' commemorating their military service. Their psychological scars were less obvious. The women, amazons by necessity (*jnakinje*, heroines), may have wondered why this American doctor asked so many questions but then most of them seemed beyond surprise, almost beyond caring, as if in chronic shock. Zlata, my translator and assistant, helped obtain information. What we heard was sad but so typical of families across the beautiful and seemingly accursed land.

The first crimson flow in the spring of 1992 contrasted ironically with the snowy white pear trees blossoming over the countryside. And the Stakics were among the first to bleed. Four generations then lived in the stalwart Stakic home. We learned little about the patriarch in his 90s, Matdjis, except that he had fought in both World Wars, and was referred to by the neighbor women as "old lion" and "fine old man." Grandpoppa Ibrahim and his mate, Marija, were the senior couple. He was Muslim and had been born in the home; she was Roman Catholic of Bosnian Croat background from a neighboring town. This only slightly unusual union was never a problem. They raised two sons and a daughter while tending acres of potatoes and some cattle. Their orchard bore the fruit they sold largely as *rakija*, a general term for brandy, particularly plum brandy, *sljivovica*. Such production was an honorable and common enterprise. Ibrahim was a respected farmer, an elder on the town's governing board; Marija is remembered as a caring mother and shrewd market woman. The eldest son, Bakir, and his brother, Casim, remained at home. Bakir, unmarried, had attended the university and was a school teacher but was still helping with the farm when the Serbs invaded. Casim was married, had twin boys about six years old, and managed an agricultural co-op in addition to spearheading the family farm operation. Their widowed sister, Dervisa, had a son about nine and daughter two or three when the war started. She held a clerical job with a fuel distributor and worked on

the farm. She and her close friend Emira, Casim's wife, had organized a community weaving guild. Each family member had added to what he or she entered this world with, and each contributed to the welfare of the other. One neighbor recalled that all four generations of the Stakics could be seen working together in their garden or fields. In later years, with declining stamina, the aged Matdjis would often sit on the upper level of the outside stairway in the afternoons, watching his family in the fields.

The mystical stairway to nowhere was barely discernible from our truck the first time we saw it. The stairs stood in a near-vacant area among other wrecked but still recognizable houses. I thought most of them uninhabitable but their true status was revealed when faint trails of smoke were seen rising from stumps of chimneys, and when drying patched clothes waved from lines stretched between wall posts and door frames. Our curiosity about what we saw drew us from our intended course. We stopped and walked gingerly about the stairs, too awed and wary of land mines to get close. What an incongruous sight it was! How lonely! The stairway looked as if it were silently calling out, seeking, reaching to reclaim its house, its family.

As weeks passed and we continued on that route, our group would stop, wonder at the naked stairway, and talk with people in the neighborhood. The organization we represented was trusted in Bosnia, and we seemed legitimate to these people. Location and identification of missing persons was one of our NGO's (non-governmental organization) recognized missions. There was scarcely a family in Bosnia without members missing from the war.

Reasons developed to visit the town other than to marvel at the stairway. We often had to get physical and clothing data about missing people or obtain blood samples from survivors for potential DNA matching. We often brought with us simple things for the children, a soccer ball, or items difficult for the people to obtain. They resisted charity and in return would give us fruit, loaves of still warm bread or even a bit of lace work. They had their pride.

We learned that when the Serb advance troops arrived, Grandpoppa Ibrahim went with a town elders contingent to parley for the safety of the townspeople. Matdjis hobbled along with his son. The Serbs were having no parley. The elders were herded into the school gymnasium. In the ensuing struggle, townswomen reported, Ibrahim was shot. We learned that he died within a few days of his injury without medical care. The prisoners were held without food for several days and then executed amidst the clashing URPURPURPURPURPs of several Kalashnikovs firing at once. The bodies were unceremoniously trucked away and disposed of in unknown fashion. One nearby mass grave containing about 75 heaped and entangled bodies, dirt-covered by an earth mover, has since been found and its grisly content examined by my group. Personal papers, wallets, jewelry and trinkets that might have offered clues to identity had been removed. None of the remains had the skeletal age of Matdjis or Ibrahim. There are more mass graves to be examined.

Marija had taken her daughter-in-law, Emira, and the twins to her birth village to visit two elderly aunts. None of them has been seen or heard from since. We did learn that many villagers there were impounded behind barbed wire for weeks and then killed, the bodies being disposed of in several deep, naturally occurring limestone pits in the area. We did find one such pit from which our group removed some 70 bodies, including children, as well as debris the village had discarded over the decades. Three small yellow rubber boots were found also. Local folk there said the only boots they had ever seen like those were on Emira's two boys.

Dervisa and her daughter were seized at the family home, held in a crudely improvised camp in the town for days and then moved to other detention. The little girl was torn from her mother and loaded with other young children on to a bus. This disappeared toward Banja Luka, the capital of Republika Srpska, a Serb state within Bosnia itself. Scores of small children and infants were kidnapped in Bosnia by Serb troops and given to couples in Republica Srpska and Serbia. The little girl's nine year old

brother evaded the troops, living hand-to-mouth while dodging the soldiers, sleeping usually in basements and barns. He cadged food from remaining townspeople and stole it when he had to. The boy survived the summer and autumn but in the icy winter he was found dead one bleak snowy morning, a thin blanket over him, nestled into the rubble beneath the outreaching stairway that was all that remained of his home. His burial site was unmarked and is unknown.

The children's mother, Dervisa, was "maintained" in the quarters of Serb officers for a week. When she slashed the throat of one of the officers and tried to kill herself, she was shot and her body was burned with several others and the ashes scattered.

The Stakic house suffered the fate that became the signature of the Serb troops. It was blown up and the wreckage set afire. Squads of soldiers went systematically from house-to-house, detonating them. Dynamite was used; sometimes the "plastic explosive" C-4 or bundles of grenades were employed. Shelling of personal dwellings with mortars or heavier artillery destroyed many. Torching what remained after the explosions was common. This was part of the "scorched earth" policy, part of the organized "ethnic cleansing" of the Eastern Orthodox Catholic Serbs against both the Roman Catholic Croat Bosnians and the Muslim Bosnians in this insane, three-sided war.

Precisely when and how Bakir and Casim escaped the invading troops was not known by the women I conversed with through Zlata. They offered guesses and stories how other men had avoided capture and death but did not know the particulars for these two. They did relate that both served in the Bosnian Army in different units and areas. Each returned at least twice looking vainly for his family. One woman recalled Bakir, on one of his return visits, standing so still and staring so long at the bare stairway among the ashes that she thought he might have turned to concrete. Bakir fought as an infantryman in southern Bosnia around Mostar where he was wounded by Bosnian Croat troops. He is believed to have been killed with his entire squad in an ambush set by Bosnian Croat civilians. A body said to be his was among many traded in a three-way exchange of bodies

among Muslim, Croat and Serb authorities. The age and size of that body as determined by our NGO group showed it could not have been Bakir's. None of the bodies examined from that area had physical data matching his.

Casim fought for three years and became a lieutenant in what we term the quartermaster corps. He lost much of one foot in a land mine explosion. After two or three months recuperation he returned to duty. From information we have from surviving fellow soldiers and from the International Red Cross, he is last known to have been alive mid-July, 1995, at Srebrenica. The account of ignominy and incompetence of the United Nations there is the subject of much writing. Suffice-it-to-say, the UN had designated Srebrenica an official "Safe City" status, offering its protection for the 20,000 refugees and escaping soldiers. The latter were largely in civvies and trying to get to their homes as the war was ending. The Serbs became so menacing in spite of the small Netherlands' UN troop contingent that some refugees and soldiers tried escaping. Over 7000 never got beyond Serb assaults and ambushes. The bodies we examined in 1996 and many from our work in 1997 and 1998 were from that disaster, recovered from the occult graves created by Serb forces after mass executions. Groups of bodies were found with their hands wired behind, a few had blindfolds in place. The average number of bullet wounds was about 10 per body. Individual "escapee" remains are still being found scattered over many square miles around Srebrenica. Two to three thousand bodies have been recovered from this fiasco. Careful and conservative estimates by international organizations of those killed from Srebrenica have been refined to about 7700. The great majority of the bodies are yet to be found despite close searching with everything from divining rods to infra-red sensors and satellite surveillance but the terrain is remarkably rugged. The Serbs made profound efforts to hide the bodies and to prevent identification of any that might be found. Of the bodies recovered from Srebrenica less than 100 had been identified at last count (in 2000) despite immense expense of dollars and time. That Casim may well have been one of the bodies I examined myself has occurred to me. Or his bones may lie yet in a

crevice in one of the rocky, wooded hillsides near the city. No one will ever know. No one will ever know the individual identities of the great majority of the unknown dead.

The Stakic line is extinct. None remain. There is no one to grieve for them. Their family land stood vacant for years after the war except for transient squatter refugees until the town annexed it for displaced persons.

But the unearthly stairway remains. It is a shrine today although no one calls it that. Much ground about it has been cleared and grassed. Sappers examined it recently and removed an “explosive device” that had been lurking there for years. Engineers and curiosity seekers have peered about it, wondering how it avoids collapse. A recently erected sign warns of the hazard of the stairway collapsing. Some locals say it never shall fall, that a mysterious, benevolent fate will preserve it forever. In this town that has not had much good fortune in recent decades, the spooky stairway is regarded by the townsfolk as “lucky.” Many visit and touch it before a business deal, getting married or traveling to a distant place. An occasional vase of flowers or basket of fruit appears upon this shrine.

There is no official gravestone for the Stakics, a family that was all too typical of what transpired in Bosnia, and in so many wars. The eerie stairway that is the Stakics’ *de facto* physical monument may not remain forever. But in my mind’s eye it will be there always, reaching for meaning and for peace.