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# Building Houses, Making Homes: The Experiencing of Returning to Post-War Sanski Most

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*SIT Study Abroad*

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**Building Houses, Making Homes:  
The Experiencing of Returning to Post-War Sanski Most**

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**Abstract:**

Over half of Bosnia's population was displaced by the war from 1992-1995. One of the political objectives of the war was the separating of Bosnia's ethnically intermixed population into homogenous spaces. This was achieved through ethnic cleansing of communities. Broadening the discussion of ethnic cleansing, authors, such as Gearoid O Tuathail and Carl Cahlan, have analyzed ethnic cleansing, as it occurred in Bosnia, within the framework of 'domicide,' or the "the intentional exercise of violence to destroy a particular type of spatiality: homes. It is 'the deliberate killing of home'" (O Tuathail and Dahlman, 244). Assuming 'domicide' rather than just ethnic cleansing, how and why have more than a million Bosnians returned to their pre war home?

I explored this question through participant observation in the town of Sanski Most, Bosnia and Herzegovina, at the Centar za Izgradnju Mira (CIM), as well as in the village of Hrustovo, where I lived with a host family. I conducted seven semi-structured interviews with members of the community about their experiences of displacement, and of returning to Sanski Most, as well as numerous informal conversations.

In analyzing the data, I discuss the process of return on three different levels: physical, social and personal, examining the various reconstruction processes which are occurring at all three levels. I explore the dynamics between returnees and the Diaspora community, especially how that pertains to the sustainability of returnee communities. I conclude that return occurs as a process, on a variety of levels. At each level, personal as well as situational characteristics can promote or hinder the progression of reconciliation with the past.

## **Introduction:**

Gesturing to the television screen, *Dido* told me “Hrustovo was just like that.”<sup>1</sup> On the screen, men in military uniform were yelling, shooting, suitcases littered the streets, gunfire in the distance, a man being dragged into the street and executed at point-blank range. The film was “Harrison’s Flowers,” and although those streets, those soldiers, those victims were hundreds of kilometers away, in a city called Vukovar,<sup>2</sup> that same ethno-nationalism, manifested by people with guns, had marched its way through Bosnia and Hercegovina,<sup>3</sup> through our village of Hrustovo,<sup>4</sup> leaving carnage in its wake and displacing half the population of Bosnia (Dahlman and O Tuathail “Broken Bosnia”, 645).

Unlike the rest of his family, Dido had stayed in Hrustovo in April of 1992 upon the arrival of armed forces. After being later reunited with his family, who were seeking refuge in Slovenia, they returned in 1998 to Hrustovo, to the shell of their burned out house, to bury their dead and continue living. How, I wondered, did Dido, or could Dido, return to the exact place he had been violently expelled from 19 years earlier? Why do people return to these war-touched communities, places which hold so many reminders of the atrocities committed there? Who returns? To where? And what does that life look like? What sorts of communities and relationships have been forged since the war, and how does memory of the war, or life before the war, factor into those interactions?

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<sup>1</sup> Dido and Nana are typical Bosniaks names for grandfather and grandmother, and were used within my host-family.

<sup>2</sup> Present day Croatia. See Kardov, Kruno. “Remember Vukovar: Memory, Sense of Place, and the National Tradition in Croatia,” in Sabrina Ramet and Davorka Matic (eds) *Democratic Transition in Croatia: Value Transformation, Education and Media*. College Station: Texas, A&M University Press, 2007 for more information on events in Vukovar.

<sup>3</sup> Hereby referred to as Bosnia.

<sup>4</sup> About 12 kilometers from the city of Sanski Most, in the Canton of Bihac, North-West Bosnia and Hercegovina.

My aim, through this paper, is to highlight the experiences of seven individuals, all current or former residents of the municipality of Sanski Most, using their stories to shed light on the complexities of reconstructing not only the physical spaces damaged by war, but also social and spatial relationships. I am hesitant to frame my research in terms of return—because it connotes a circular movement of being displaced but eventually returning to that same location. This language excludes (or could exclude), in my mind, the experiences of nearly a million Bosnians who were internally displaced by the violence,<sup>5</sup> and cannot, or have not, returned to their pre-war homes, making lives in new communities (O Tuathail and O’Loughlin, 1047). This language also “assumes that the cycle will then be ended and that refugees will be morally, spiritually, culturally and economically better off. But this may not be the case—return may not be ‘re-’ anything but the beginning of a new cycle” (Black and Gent, 20). I have not found more suitable language to discuss this process, and this paper I use “return” to describe the process of building lives, social interactions, and physical buildings after the war, whether they be in the location of pre-war residence or in new locals. Return, in this sense, describes more than the physical restructuring, and allows me to examine the social processes at work in the community.

I am an undergraduate student of Political Science with a focus on Eastern European Studies at Grinnell College in Iowa. I am currently studying abroad through the School for International Studies on a program entitled Serbia, Bosnia and Kosovo: Peace and Conflict Studies in the Balkans. Our program spent two weeks traveling through

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<sup>5</sup> Residents of the country of Bosnia and Hercegovina, without regard to their ethnicity, or residence in one of the two entities which comprises Bosnia and Hercegovina.

Bosnia, spending one evening in Sanski Most,<sup>6</sup> where we participated in an identity workshop at the Center za Izgradnju Mira, or Center for Peacebuilding (CIM). In the workshop we wrote down six of our identities, and then slowly eliminated them until we were left with only one, then discussing that identity.

The identity I shared that day was being “rural,” as identifying with this kind of earth-based community in a way I never could connect with the cement of Belgrade (our primary city of residence during our study abroad), of the feeling of peace and contentment I find when among nature. Finding this sense of something familiar in Bosnia, something akin to home, was on the one hand comforting, and on the other disheartening because this is also a landscape where physical remnants of the war are still so present. Driving through emptied villages, there were reminders almost everywhere I looked of the war: burned out houses now grown over with ivy, seas of graves, growing like a stone harvest planted in perfect rows, villages marked by either the spire of a steeple, or the spike of a minaret, watching over their flock of red-tile roofs.

The summer before coming to the Balkans, I interned at the Vermont Folklife Center, where I produced audio pieces from interviews conducted with Vermont’s Bosnian refugee population about their experience as refugees, about finding “home” in my home-state.<sup>7</sup> In addition to informing my understanding of the events in Bosnia and of the emotional and logistic complexities in being a refugee, the project also left me with the knowledge that each person has a different story. As my fellow study abroad students and I wound our way from Sanski Most to Sarajevo, I wondered about the stories of those

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<sup>6</sup> A small city in North West Bosnia named for its bridge (*most* in Bosnian) across the River Sana, who runs through the middle of the town. Sanski Most is surrounded by small villages, mainly agricultural, although before the war there used to be several large factories.

<sup>7</sup> See their website “New Neighbors: Bosnia” for access to the audio pieces.  
<http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/neighbors/bosnia/>

communities we were passing through, about the lives that were being continued in spite of the war. I decided to use my independent research project as an opportunity to explore those stories. While my focus is on the post-war experience and the process of (re)building houses, communities, lives, integral to understanding that process were the stories of displacement.

Through my literature review, in addition to providing a contextual framework for events proceeding and during the war, I aim to raise some of the key concepts and debates surrounding the process of returning for Bosnians, especially highlighting the tension between war-time ethnic cleansing with return, as a counter-force to that cleansing. In my methodology section, I will describe my methodology for obtaining data. I will then, in my analysis of the interviews, highlight themes raised in the interviews, concluding with recommendations for further study.

## **Methodology**

During my time in Bosnia,<sup>8</sup> I lived with Ahmet, his wife Selima, their three-year-old son Amir and Dido, Ahmet's father, in the village of Hrustovo. Ahmet is co-founder and co-director of the Center for Izgradnju Mira (CIM), and ran the identity workshop I participated in with my fellow study abroad students. My stay in Hrustovo (from mid-April until mid-May, 2011) coincided with the visiting of the Diaspora,<sup>9</sup> neighbors, family members and friends who live abroad but visit Bosnia during holidays, and as a "member" of Ahmet's family, I spent countless hours, and drank numerous cups of

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<sup>8</sup> I spent two weeks in Bosnia on a SIT excursion, after which I returned and lived for a month in Hrustovo, near Sanski Most.

<sup>9</sup> The Diaspora (said with a capital D) was the way Ahmet described the arrival of the extended family.

coffee with members of their extended family, friends and colleagues. In addition to these discussions, Ahmet and I spent hours informally discussing life, his work as a peacebuilder, and sharing memories and stories of his life as a refugee/returnee to Hrustovo. Through volunteering at CIM, I was also able to discuss informally with youth there their perceptions of Sanski Most, as well as participate in and observe activities at CIM. These experiences provided me with a broader understanding of how this community functions, of the kinds of relationships developed, and how life continues in these communities.

In addition to these discussions, which provide much of the context for my study, the majority of my data comes from 6 semi-structured interviews I conducted and one in-depth informal discussion with residents or former residents of Sanski Most. I consulted Ahmet who helped me identify individuals whom I should approach about being interviewed. This was both a strength and a weakness to my study (see the Limitations section below). I received approval from the SIT IRB Board before conducting this research, and received verbal consent from each of the interviewees, as well as outlined their right to not participate, or to not answer any questions of their choosing, before conducting the interview, which were tape recorded. I did not draw distinctions between Serb, Croat or Bosniak interviewees.<sup>10</sup> All of the individuals cited in this paper have received pseudonyms to protect the identity of my informants, but I have kept original names of towns, cities, and organizations visited in the course of my research. The pseudonyms which I have chosen loosely reflect the ethnic identity of the individual. I did not directly ask my interviewees to identify them as belonging to a certain ethnic or

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<sup>10</sup> Term used to describe residents of Bosnia who are religiously or culturally Muslim. The term Bosnian refers to all citizens of the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

religious community, but they often identified themselves in the course of the interview. Interviews were conducted in English and when necessary, I worked with an interpreter. While the interviews were all based off of the same interview questions (see Appendix I), their presentation and applicability varied from interviewee to interviewee.

### *Limitations of the Study*

Being a non-Bosnian speaker, language was a huge barrier to my study. I was not able to interview individuals in their native language, either conducting interviews in English, or using a translator to act as an intermediary. While I had utter confidence in the three interpreters I used, I would have liked to conduct the interviews myself, for clarity as well as the comfort of the individuals I was interviewing. In addition, I was also unable, due to the language barrier, to get as much sustenance out of observing social interactions, especially in regard to the content of informal discussions happening around me. This limited my ability to assess how or if the war, memories of the war, or memories of life before the war factor into the popular discourse.

Another limitation to my study was the way in which I identified individuals to interview. All of the people I interviewed were somehow, directly or indirectly, connected to CIM. Using CIM as the focal point for identifying potential interviewees, and especially going through Ahmet, the co-director of CIM, defined the population I interviewed, and their position especially towards issues concerning reconciliation and inter-ethnic relations. I also am not sure how pressured the interviewees, especially the CIM volunteers I spoke to, felt to talk to me because Ahmet was helping coordinate my interviews. At the same time, Ahmet is a respected figure in the community, and I expect that the level of trust between Ahmet and the individuals whom I interviewed contributed

significantly to the depth and personal nature of the stories they were willing to share with me. My access to a diverse population was also impacted by demographic changes which have occurred in Sanski Most since the war, the community is now predominantly Bosniak. While CIM does inter-ethnic outreach into the community, I was not able to speak with any Serbs about their experiences of returning to Sanski Most, and with more time I would certainly expand my research to include more members of minority communities in Sanski Most.

My research was also limited by time, both time to schedule interviews, and the complications of coordinating with interpreters when necessary, as well as only having a month to collect and analyze data. Living and working with Ahmet meant that I was able to gain perspective into his and his family's life, especially their relationship with members of the Diaspora, and I would have appreciated more time to explore in more depth the complexity of the community I was situated in.

### **Literature Review:**

In this section, I aim to provide some context to the experiences of those I interviewed. Many of those I spoke to for my research emphasized the need for an official Truth (said with a capital T) concerning what happened in Bosnia during the war. This illustrates just how many of the facts concerning events during the war are still disputed, and how the discourse is still very contested and politically charged. I will speak briefly about events of the war and the environment created through the Dayton Peace Accords before delving into the existing literature on Bosnia's refugees, returnees, and internally displaced persons.

As with beginning to provide historical context to any situation, choosing the starting point is often the most challenging—and often a very charged decision. While memories of World War II, Tito and post-Tito Yugoslavia did emerge in the course of my interviews and were certainly significant in shaping the course of events in the 1990s, for this paper, my emphasis is on the recent past, examining the wars of the 1990s, and the past 16 years recovering from them.

Nationalist ideology, especially when linked to notions of ‘home’ and ‘homeland’ as being ethnically homogenous spaces, dismantled the former Yugoslav state into seven successor republics (including the contested territory of Kosovo) . “In these nationalist discourses, being ‘at home’ meant living amongst members of one’s own nation on one’s own territory” (Jansen, 179). Beginning after the death of Josip Broiz Tito in 1980, the multi-ethnic, multi-religious state of Yugoslavia collapsed as political leaders began reinvigorating nationalist discourses as a tool for gaining and maintaining political control (Jovoc, Watchel and Bennet). “We all lived together before the war,” Mirsad told me with a sigh, “everyone, with no problems” (Informal Conversation with the Author, 5 May 2011).

Frustrated with what they viewed as Serbia’s President Slobodan Milosevic’s efforts to consolidate control of the Federal Socialist State of Yugoslavia in his hands, Slovene and Croat delegates walked out of the 14<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party in 1990. Shortly thereafter, in June 1991, both Slovenia and Croatia declared independence from Yugoslavia. Bosnia followed suit, declaring independence in April 1992. Although

the war in Slovenia, settling its status as an independent state, was over in 10 days, neither Bosnia nor Croatia were so lucky, war ravaging their territories until 1995.<sup>11</sup>

As would later be the case in Bosnia, a significant number of the difficulties surrounding Croatia's declaration of independence stemmed from the tension between ethno-nationalistic discourses and ambitions, which defines the state as an ethnically homogenous space, and the actual diversity within that territory. One of the tactics used to destruct the Yugoslav Federation was framing the need for changes, especially demographic, within the context of preserving security. Capitalizing on insecurities produced by failing economic policies, changes in the international world order with the waning of the Cold War, nationalist leaders proposed reorganizing the territory into "demographically homogenous 'ethnic' spaces that would provide security through separation" (Dahlman and O Tuathail "Legacy of Ethnic Cleansing," 576-77).

This sentiment was rooted in the assumption, explicitly expressed in a Memorandum published by the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1986, that "the 'Serb people' throughout Yugoslavia [were] a kind of primary entity, possessing a unitary set of rights and claims which transcended any mere political or geographical divisions" (Malcom, 207). This belief helped inform leaders such as Radovan Karadzic, war-time political leader of the Bosnian Serbs to pursue policies which would separate, by will or force, Bosnia's ethnic communities.<sup>12</sup> In 1992, he outlined the main Serb military objectives: "unmixing" Bosnia's three constituent peoples, gaining access to the sea, and

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<sup>11</sup> For discussion of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, see BBC's production *Death of Yugoslavia*, 1995.

<sup>12</sup> Karadzic was later indicted by the International War Crimes Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), and is currently under trial. See Elizabeth Neuffer's book [The Key to My Neighbor's House](#) for more information on the ICTY.

the creation through force of arms of an ethnically homogenous statelet in Bosnia, Republika Srpska, adjacent to a similar entity in Croatia, Republika Srpska Krajina, setting up the potential unification of both into a reconstituted Yugoslavia centered on Serbia and an exclusivist Serbian identity. (O Tuathail and O'Loughlin, 1046)

This assumed entitlement, to territory and to belonging to the majority within that territory, provided the foundation for one of the war crimes committed in Bosnia from 1992 to 1995,<sup>13</sup> “the removal by members of one group of another group from a locality they define as their own,” a process also called ethnic cleansing (O Tuathail and O'Loughlin, 1045). This tactic gave “perpetrators...a means to realize a political geography of security through separation and distinct boundaries” through physically removing the “other” from that territory (Dahlman and O Tuathail “Legacy of Ethnic Cleansing,” 573).

This ethnic cleansing resulted in mass displacement of individuals, both internally and internationally. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that 2.2 million individuals were displaced during the war in Bosnia, of whom (officially) one million have returned (UN High Commission for Refugees).<sup>14</sup> The General Framework Agreement, known colloquially as the Dayton Accords, signed in late 1995, had several key impacts on the fate of persons displaced by the war. Firstly, the Accords ended the violence, although evictions from homes continued.<sup>15</sup> But, the

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<sup>13</sup> For the sake of this paper, I will highlight displacement, for discussion of a range of other crimes committed during the war see Helsinki Watch. War Crimes in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Volume I and II. New York, Human Rights Watch: 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Bosnia's pre-war population was 4,365,574, and roughly half of the pre-war population was displaced during the war from 1992-1995 (O Tuathail and O'Loughlin, 1047). The UN High Commission for Refugees acknowledge that figures of “return” can be misleading because they do not convey the duration or sustainability of return.

<sup>15</sup> Ioannis Armkolas's article “Sarajevo No More?” which examines the experience of Serbs displaced from in 1996. Post-Dayton population shifts usually occurred in contested territories

environment it created was not necessarily conducive to building peace (Eastmond “Introduction,” 5). The Accords created a weak central state comprised to two entities, Republika Srpska (RS) and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (the Federation). The Federation was then sub-divided into 10 cantons, or administrative units, loosely based on ethnic demographics of those cantons,<sup>16</sup> and with a high degree of autonomy. These entities were, as Stef Jansen comments, direct results of the ethnic cleansing which occurred during the war. “Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina were founded on the expulsion and/or escape of over 90% of their inhabitants of undesired nationality, and the latter was itself largely unmixed into Croatian and Bosniac-dominated zones” (Jansen, 179).

The creation of territories whose boundaries were a direct product of military campaigns (Serb, Bosniak and Croat) as well as the ethnic cleansing which resulted from those campaigns, has significantly complicated the process and ability of individuals to return to their pre-war homes. Yet this return, as an objective of post-war Bosnia, was enshrined in the Dayton Accords as a means for “settlement of the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina” (Dayton Accords, Article 7). The Dayton Accords, building upon preexisting human rights rhetoric,<sup>17</sup> granted Bosnians the right to return not only to their

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which has been officially deemed either Federation or Republika Srpska territory, and ethnic minorities left (or were strongly encouraged) to leave.

<sup>16</sup> The cantons reflect the post-war (and not pre-war) ethnic demographics, and are criticized as being another way of institutionalizing the demographic changes which occurred throughout Bosnia due to the war by creating political structures supported by (and dependent on) the ethnic cleansing which occurred during the war (Jansen, 179).

<sup>17</sup> Article 13, section 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 states that “Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.”

pre-war country, but to their pre-war homes as a means for “righting the wrong” of ethnic cleansing (Black and Gent, 23).<sup>18</sup>

All refugees and displaced persons have the right freely to return to their homes of origin. They shall have the right to have restored to them their property of which they were deprived during the course of the hostilities since 1991 and to be compensated for any property that cannot be restored to them. (Dayton Accords, Article 7)

Return to pre-war homes was seen (and still is seen) as a measure of success in combating the ethno-territorial objectives of political and military leaders during the war (Jansen, 179). Yet while publicly stating return as policy priority, the Dayton Accords also enshrined and legitimized the ethnic cleansing which occurred during the war through creating the two-entity political system. These entities have created physical and political space for ethnic discourses and separation—which return is supposed to counteract (Eastmond, “Introduction” 9).

The emphasis placed on return to pre-war homes (physical structures, buildings), and the measure of “success” through number of returnees, does not take into account the dynamism of the process of return, nor does it define home as a socially constructed space whose meaning is in part developed through the social interactions which occur there (Eastmond, “Introduction,” Black, 20). It also fails to acknowledge 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 (Eastmond, “Introduction,” 9) It also assumes, that “normalcy” (defined by perceptions of pre-war life) can be recreated through the reinstallation of a multi-ethnic

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<sup>18</sup> Homes in the context of the Dayton Accords means physical locations. It was assumed that recreating ethnically diverse communities would recreate pre-war communities. This assumption overlooks the vast importance of social connections which were disrupted by the war, which need to be rebuilt, in addition to the rebuilding of physical structures which will allow for return (Black, 20).

society in Bosnia (Black, 20). This notion of “normalcy” fails to acknowledge, in addition to the changed nature of relationships resulting from the war, Bosnia’s economic and political transition from a socialist-communist to a capitalist-democratic state. These transitions add further dimensions of distance separating the past from present (Eastmond, “Introduction”, 11).

Some authors have taken the discourse on ethnic cleansing one step further, describing the intentional reshaping of communities as ‘domicide:’ or “the intentional exercise of violence to destroy a particular type of spatiality: homes. It is ‘the deliberate killing of home’” (O Tuathail and Dahlman, 244). To me, framing ethnic cleansing in such a manner describes not only the forced displacement from physical locations, but deliberate efforts to change the social and spatial relationships which occur within those physical spaces, as well as prevent the former inhabitants from being able, or wanting, to return to those spaces. “It is an attack on...the embedded social meaning and personal identity of place—and not simply on buildings, landscapes, ecologies and infrastructures” (O Tuathail and Dahlman, 245). Therefore, the process or experience of returning to those spaces is shaped or hindered not only by their physical destruction but by changed demographics of communities, and the possibility of revisiting the personal trauma surrounding displacement and connected to physical spaces (O Tuathail and Dahlman, 250).

Framing the conflict—and thus the process of returning—in terms of ‘domicide’ further problematizes the emphasis placed on the notion of returning to pre-war homes. Home, in one sense, can refer only to the physical building. Yet a broader definition of home, as indicated in the term ‘domicide,’ encompasses social and spatial relations, the

way in which meaning is ascribed to physical spaces. While the return of individuals to physical spaces could be promoted, monitored and measured, the process of recreating the emotional spaces, “of identity and memory” is much more personal (Black, 126). “The more than two million persons displaced by the war not only lost their property but also their homes, communities and the personalized meanings they had built around home places...[and is] unlikely to be recovered by simple material repossession of property” (O Tuathail and Dahlman, 246). It is with this broad of a lens that I wish to examine the experience of returning to post-war Sanski Most.

There are several levels of return which I wish to discuss, however briefly: the role of the international community and those displaced externally, the internally displaced, minority vs. majority returns, and the physical reconstruction and property restitution processes.

Of the roughly two million displaced by the war, nearly half remained internally displaced (IDPs), and another million found refuge abroad. For the displaced, physical return is often an open-ended process, which may “involve mobility between places and active links to people and resources in the country of asylum” (Eastmond “Transnational,” 141). Eastmond examines the various processes and relationships displaced Bosnians, residing in Sweden, developed in regard to the physical spaces they left behind, framing return as a process, contingent upon a number of factors broader than physical repossession of one’s home. She examines how employment opportunities (both in host country as well as in Bosnia), perceived (or real) security threats, as well as the possibility of returning to the third, host country allows for a more complex process of

return. Some of the displaced are forced or encouraged to leave their host country, and support programs vary from host country to host country (Black, 130).

Another major distinction made between returnees is that of majority or minority—describing a returnee’s ethnic status upon repossessing their pre-war home. This distinction was made to especially encourage minority returnees, as a way of ensuring Bosnia, as a country of multi-ethnic, multi-religious communities, could be recreated and thus pre-war “normalcy” reinstated. In addition to security, economic or personal reasons inhibiting minority returnees, also physical repossession of property can be complicated, because such a significant portion of Bosnians remain internally displaced.<sup>19</sup> They often occupy homes of other displaced—thus returning to one’s pre-war home can often involve displacing the family currently living there (Black, 129).

Black further complicates the discourse surrounding “return,” adding that just under 1/3 of internally displaced have returned to their pre-war locations, and over half of all returnees have not returned to their pre-war home, again raising the question “what is meant by ‘return’?” (Black, 131). One of the many barriers to return, especially of ethnic minorities, is obstructionist bureaucrats who bar repossession of occupied homes, discrimination as well as tacit or verbal support by political leaders to deter minority returnees, and the availability of economic opportunities (Dahlman and O Tuathail “Legacy of Ethnic Cleansing,” 588; Black, 134).

Nor are returnees returning to neutral spaces. Ethno-nationalist discourses are still very present in the political discourse, especially in RS. While I was conducting my field research, Milorod Dodik, president of RS, was pushing for referendum on the

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<sup>19</sup> Not to mention the significant number of Croatian Serbs who were displaced by the war in Croatia and ended up living in Bosnia.

Prosecutor's Office of the War Crimes Court of Bosnia and Hercegovina which, he claimed, was biased against Bosnian Serbs. My host dad, Ahmet, also said, with a sad smile on his face, that the Bosnian flag had been removed from RS official buildings, and that anti-Bosniak and Croat graffiti had again appeared in Prijedor.<sup>20</sup>

Anders Stefansson's fieldwork centered around Bosniak returnees to Banja Luka, the capital of RS and site of ethnic cleansing during the war. His research illustrates how changes in the community have resulted in feelings of isolation and insecurity. Yet, at the same time, how important it was for the Bosniaks he interviewed to return and repossess their pre-war homes (Steffansson, 124). Yet he makes the sharp distinction between houses on the one hand, and homes on the other, noting that it was assumed by the international community that "when displaced Bosnians after the end of the war finally managed to legally reclaim their occupied houses it could be assumed that they would seize this opportunity to link up with their past life trajectories," something which he did not observe in his fieldwork (Stefansson "Homes," 123). These "past life trajectories" have not only been disrupted by the war, experiences of displacement and/or demographic changes within the community, but also by the country's political and economic transitions resulting from the collapse of socialism. There are many more elements to pre-war life trajectories than just ethnic diversity.

Another element to return which Stefansson addresses, and which Richard Black elaborates on, is the sustainability of return, especially looking at the demographics of returnees. He notes that many returnees are elderly, especially pensioners, who return to

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<sup>20</sup> Dodik later backed away from the referendum. The removal of symbols of the state of Bosnia in RS was something I noticed while traveling from Sanski Most, through Prijedor to Belgrade. While driving through RS, even while in Banja Luka, the capital of RS, the only Bosnian flags I saw were on the uniforms of the border police as I crossed into Croatia.

rural communities where they can survive off of subsistence farming. “In contrast,” he comments, “the return of younger, middleclass minority people to urban spaces is quite rare” (Stefansson “Homes” 120). Return to urban spaces is especially contested because of the higher probability of displacing another family, or “direct confrontation with the local ethnic majorities created by the war” (Dahlman and O Tuathail “Legacy of Ethnic Cleansing,” 589). Younger displaced persons also may have more opportunities to develop connections, economic and social, to their host country or community.

Thus, the process of return, has not only physical elements, but social, economic, security and personal factors which help determine how, when, where and who returns to Bosnia, and what sort of communities are formed in that process.

## **Introduction to Places**

### Sanski Most

The town of Sanski Most is situated on the plains surrounding the river Sana—which gives the town its name. The town’s one main street leads towards the central Mosque, a huge green dome with four minarets. Across the River Sana are an Orthodox Church and a Catholic Church, reflecting the town’s multi-religious history. Before the war, roughly 50% of the city’s population was Bosniak, 40% Bosnian Serb, 5% Bosnian Croat, and 5% Other, including Yugoslav. The city’s population hovered around 55,000 (Correspondence with the Author, 7 May, 2011).

Unlike many cities in Bosnia, Sanski Most underwent two different periods of ethnic cleansing—the first in 1992 when Bosnian Serb armed forces took the town, and during which all of my informants (except Kruno) were displaced. The town was

predominantly ethnically Serb during the war, but in 1994 Sanski Most was retaken by the Bosniak Army. During that period many of the Serb inhabitants fled, many of whom have not returned. Before departing Belgrade, when I announced to my Serbian host family where I was going and what I was researching, they told me “but you can research that from here. I know people from Sanski Most who live here [in Belgrade]” (Informal conversation with the Author, 13 April, 2011).

Much of Sanski Most was destroyed in 1992. One of my interviewees, Ahmet, told me that the entire left bank of the Sana, the side where the Mosque is, was almost entirely destroyed. During the war 9,927 houses were damaged or destroyed in Sanski Most, and 25 apartments (Correspondence with the Author, 7 May, 2011). The right bank suffered less damage, because, for the most part, as Ahmet told me, Serb families lived there before the war. Walking down the street which runs down the right bank of the river, I saw many older houses, old windows, old stone foundations than on the other side, although there were several on the left bank too. Ahmet also mentioned that while before the war, the right bank had housed a lot of businesses, shops were slow to return to the right bank, because of residual animosity leftover from the war (Informal Conversation with the Author, 22 April, 2011).

Now, Sanski Most is predominantly Bosniak town. According to the Union for Sustainable Returns, 14,143 families have returned, totaling 47,461 individuals, with the average family size being 3.3 persons (Correspondence with the Author 7 May, 2011). Of those individuals, 42,416 are Bosniaks, 809 are Bosnian Croat, and 4,512 are Bosnian Serb. Represented in percentages, 89.5% of Sanski Most’s residents are Bosniaks, 1.7% Bosnian Croat, and 9.5% Bosnian Serb. Since the war, 8,005 houses and 13 apartment

buildings have been restored, leaving 1,922 houses and 12 apartment buildings still damaged or destroyed (Correspondence with the Author 7 May, 2011).

### Hrustovo

The village of Hrustovo stretches along a road, leading up and over the hill and away from the floodplains of the river Sanica, one of the many rivers running into the Sana. Houses are clustered in little patches, with three larger centers, one of which has a store, although Dina, one of my informants, remembered having three stores before the war (Interview with the Author, 25 April, 2011). After Serb armed forces entered the village on April 22, 1992,<sup>21</sup> most of the inhabitants fled. In the following two days more than 300 civilians were killed, many of the bodies disposed of in three mass graves throughout the village.<sup>22</sup> Those who survived the massacres, as Ahmet called them, were transferred to one of the near-by concentration camps: Omarska, Ketatarn, Manjaca and Trnopolje.<sup>23</sup> Although the mass graves were exhumed in 1996-1997, another unmarked grave, containing just one body, was reported during my stay in Hrustovo in 2011 (Informal Conversations with the Author, 19 May, 2011). An estimated 359 families, or 1,313 persons have returned to Hrustovo since the end of the war (Correspondence with the Author 7 May, 2011).

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<sup>21</sup> It was unclear from my interviews which armed forces, Yugoslav National Army, the army of Republika Srpska or Serbian paramilitary forces—all of whom were operating directly or indirectly during the war, entered Hrustovo. The International War Crimes Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia identified the soldiers as wearing JNA (Yugoslav National Army) uniforms, but identifying as members of the “Serbian Army” in the case Prosecutor v. Radoslav Brdjanin.

<sup>22</sup> See from the International War Crimes Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, specifically from Radovan Karadzic vs. Prosecutor. <http://ictytranscripts.dyndns.org/trials/karadzic/100413ED.htm>

<sup>23</sup> See Helsinki Watch’s relevant sections in War Crimes in Bosnia-Herzegovina for more information on the concentration camps.

## Introduction of the Interviewees

I will firstly share a brief biography of the seven individuals I interviewed before analyzing the themes identified in their interviews.

### Ahmet and Dina

Ahmet, it seems always has something to say. With whomever he is speaking, he is able to find that place of commonality, building conversations from there. I met him when our study abroad program visited his peacebuilding NGO, based in Sanski Most, although Ahmet lives in Hrustovo, a nearby village. For the duration of my research, I lived with Ahmet and his family and much of my experience of Sanski Most was shaped by him and his family.<sup>24</sup>

Dina, Ahmet's older sister, on the other hand, was somewhat quieter, more reserved. When I asked her if I could interview her, she said "ok, but I don't think I have any thing to say. And I'm worried I might cry" (Informal Conversation with the Author, 24 April, 2011). I'm sure this was shaped by the loss of their mother in October, and added an immense additional emotional layer to her coming back to Hrustovo to visit. The loss of *Nana*, while present throughout my stay with Ahmet and his family, was especially in the forefront during Dina's visit, and the visit of Ahmet and Dina's other sister—Lejla.

Together, Ahmet and Dina fled Hrustovo on April 22, 1992, traveling across Bosnia and eventually living in a refugee camp in Slovenia until the end of the war. "We made the decision to leave in fifteen minutes," Ahmet told me (Interview with the

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<sup>24</sup> For my paper, the municipality of Sanski Most will be referred to as Sanski Most, the center, around the town of Sanski Most as Sana when this distinction is necessary—this was the way local residents made the distinction between the two.

Author, 22 April, 2011).<sup>25</sup> “I thought it would be for fifteen days, and then we would return,” Dina said, with a sigh. Although Dina returns frequently to Hrustovo, she and her husband stayed in Slovenia after the war, rooted by his citizenship, jobs, and their young children. While she is, on the one hand, grounded in Slovenia, she also shared a feeling of homelessness. “The term we use here [in Bosnia]” Ahmet added “is crucified. One hand here, and the other there,” he gestured, outstretching his arms.<sup>26</sup> “But my heart is here,” Dina added (Interview with the Author, 25 April, 2011).

Although still connected to Bosnia, Dina never felt like coming back permanently was an option. “We [her husband and her] never talked about [returning to Bosnia], he had a job, he had citizenship, he had an established life there, so it didn’t make sense for us to come back here to where we didn’t have anything, we didn’t have jobs [in Hrustovo]” (Interview with the Author, 25 April, 2011). They do, however, come back frequently, nearly every month to visit, and more frequently when their mother was still alive. This time, Dina, her husband and two teenaged daughters came back to Hrustovo during the school holiday around Easter, spending much of their time with Ahmet and his family.

Ahmet, Nana and Dido all returned to Hrustovo together in 1996, shortly after the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords. During their displacement they had lived in a refugee camp in Slovenia. Even after having opportunities to relocate abroad, Ahmet and his parents decided to stay because “we would be so close to Bosnia. But [being in the refugee camp] was just waiting to return” (Interview with the Author, 22 April, 2011).

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<sup>25</sup> I interviewed Ahmet on the 19<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his “Day of Sorrow,” the term he uses to describe when his family decided to leave Hrustovo during the war. I don’t know how the timing of the interview shaped which stories he shared with me.

<sup>26</sup> Ahmet was my translator for my interview with Dina. I am sure that his presence and the support he offers her helped her feel comfortable in opening up to me.

When they returned to Hrustovo, their house had been burned, and, salvaging what they could of the foundation, they began rebuilding. “I was unemployed at the time,” Ahmet said, “so I had two goals: one was to finish my education and the other was to find a job so we could rebuild the house.” He laughed that on the one hand, as a twenty year-old, he mourned the lack of nightlife in Sana due to the curfew, but “it gave us plenty of time to work on the house” (Interview with the Author, 22 April, 2011). He found a job teaching English in the local elementary school (in exchange for fresh produce and hand soap—then, “none had any money,” he laughed). Forced to attend an inter-ethnic teacher training session, Ahmet slowly became open to reconciliation as not only possible, but necessary for himself and his community. In 2001, he attended a graduate program at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, VT, returning to Bosnia in 2003, and co-founding the Center for Izgradnju Mira with Edin. Ahmet and Edin co-run CIM still.

### Edin

Edin, son of an imam and an imam himself, was raised outside Prijedor. When the war neared their village of Rizvanovici in 1992, their family fled their house in fear because as imam, his father “would be the first one who will be killed if the Army, Chetniks, comes because according to the stories which we heard, they first kill people who are in important positions and imams, and all leaders in every community” (Interview with the Author, 5 May, 2011). Their family, after sleeping in neighbors’ basements for a month, moved to another village, hiding in the forest with another imam and his family.<sup>27</sup> Their families decided to go to Prijedor, where they were transferred to the Trnopolje, site of a

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<sup>27</sup> Edin mentioned how his family made other families uncomfortable of being targeted because an imam was with them. (Interview with the Author, 5 May, 2011)

concentration camp.<sup>28</sup> From Trnopolje, they moved to Travnik, and from Travnik they moved in with a series of relatives and friends in Zenica. After his father found work their family again relocated. Edin and his family spent the years of 1992-1996 living in other people's homes. In 1996, hoping to move closer to Prijedor, their family settled in Hrusto Palank, where they lived until 2001, when the family moved back to Prijedor. Edin found work as an imam in a neighboring village, Carakovo, and only in May of 2011 moved to Sanski Most, to work at CIM with Ahmet as an employee, as opposed to volunteer.

### Emira

I met Emira at an art exhibition in downtown Sana, my second evening there. Although my Bosnian at that point was particularly unconversational and Emira spoke only a little English, we spent twenty minutes walking arm in arm, looking at the paintings, using them where words failed us. She has the clearest blue eyes, which are accented by her white *hijab*, which frames her face. I later interviewed her at the office of the NGO, Krajina Tear she helped found and still works for.

Born in Sanski Most, Emira fled with her family in October of 1992. "I didn't decide, I was forced to go," she told me. Her eyes became glassy with tears as she began talking about her displacement, during which she lost her husband, leaving her alone with two small children. "First I fell down and then I stood up and then I fight through my life," she said (Interview with the Author, 5 May, 2011). After attending psycho-social training sessions in Travnik, where she and her children remained internally displaced during the war, she helped found a women's group, helping women cope with and

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<sup>28</sup> For a record of the crimes committed at Trnopolje see Helsinki Watch [War Crimes in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Volume II](#)

overcome their trauma. Emira did not feel like she had any opportunities to leave Bosnia during the war, nor really any options now. “I’m afraid,” she said, “to leave. To leave this job, this place, and when I go there [abroad], they will just expel me back and what do I do then, I’ll be in the middle of nothing” (Interview with the Author, 5 May, 2011). She returned to Sanski Most in November 1995, where she continues to live and work at Krajina Tear. Like Edin and Ahmet, reconciliation, with an emphasis on forgiveness, is fundamental to how Emira views her ability to live, to “to grow up from my trauma... [Forgiveness is] not simple, it is very hard, but it is also much safer than the way of violence” (Interview with the Author, 5 May, 2011).

### Mirsad

Mirsad is another friend of Ahmet and Edin’s, their children go to the same daycare, and all three are imams. Ahmet and Mirsad went to theological high school together, and remained close after the war. I met Mirsad at Ahmet’s son’s birthday party. It was a few days after Osama bin Laden had been killed, and he began by asking me if I, as an American viewed bin Laden as a terrorist.<sup>29</sup> We then began talking about his views on Islam and violence, eventually discussing the war, and his experiences during it.

Like Edin, Mirsad grew up in Prijedor and was displaced in 1992, experiencing various violent traumatic experiences, witnessing deaths of relatives and surviving an execution squad. “I only realized five hours later that I was still alive.” (Informal Conversation with the Author, 5 May, 2011). Mirsad’s story was especially haunting for me because it was the first serious conversation that I held in Bosnian, and as person

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<sup>29</sup> Unlike the other individuals who informed my research for this paper, I did not formally interview Mirsad. His experiences were shared with me both by himself, in an extended informal conversation, and through anecdotes Ahmet shared with me. For the sake of clarity, I will note what Mirsad directly told me, and what Ahmet later shared with me.

displaced locally, many of the places he mentioned as being crucial points in his experiences were familiar to me, or were places I had read about.

Although Mirsad has a house (or perhaps more accurately, property which once had a house) in Prijedor he and his wife have decided to remain in Sanski Most, raising their family here. Ahmet later told me, unlike for Edin, the choice between living in Prijedor and Sanski Most was non-existent, as Prijedor, as part of Republika Srpska, is predominantly ethnically Serb (Informal Conversation with the Author, 5 May, 2011).

### Selma

Selma is one of the members of CIM's high school volunteer club. She was perhaps the easiest person I interviewed, as the interview quickly evolved into a discussion, about politics, prospects for young Bosnians, art, and identity. As a young woman who wants to study acting upon entering university in the fall, to me she clearly felt comfortable expressing herself, through her alternative clothing style as well as verbally.

Selma's parents were displaced when the war arrived in Sanski Most, and she was born in a refugee camp in Slovenia in 1992. While being Muslim, Selma's family's experience is shaped by their Roma heritage. Her family was "kicked out" of Slovenia after nine months, to Germany, where they lived for four and a half years, before returning to Sanski Most in 1997. Although her mother learned German, Selma stressed that her parents raised her and her brother "in the Bosnian way," and that returning to Bosnia was important for her family—although it was not their choice to return to Bosnia at that time. "This time we really were kicked out," she laughed (Interview with the Author, 29 April, 2011). When they returned to Sanski Most, the family slept in their car for ten days before they were allowed to repossess their pre-war home because another

family was living there. “They [the local authorities] told us [residents of Sanski Most] not to let Roma come back,” a friend told their family, “because ‘if you let one ear of Roma come back to Sanski Most they will all come [back].’ Our family had to break the rule” (Interview with the Author, 29 April, 2011).

### Kruno

Kruno, like Selma, is a member of the volunteer club at CIM who was born in 1992.

Unlike any of the others I spoke to in the course of my research, Kruno and his family stayed in their village, Stariji Rijeka, 10 or so kilometers from Sanski Most, throughout the war. Most of the inhabitants of Stariji Rijeka fled during the war, now the village, Kruno estimated, has about 10% of its pre-war population, roughly 100-150 current inhabitants. Most of those who stayed are elderly, “my family is the youngest in the village,” Kruno added (Interview with the Author, 29 April, 2011). In 1992, they were briefly displaced from their home, but allowed to return after a few hours, after soldiers had entered “and stolen what they needed” (Interview with the Author, 29 April, 2011). Kruno grew up in Stariji Rijeka, although he hopes to leave, for education and eventually employment opportunities which he does not see in Sanski Most, perhaps, he said, going to live with his brother in Germany.

### **Interview Analysis:**

In this section I discuss the processes of returning to Sanski Most as illustrated by the seven individuals I interviewed. I have framed my discussion of return not only as a process extending much further beyond repossession of physical spaces, but as multiple processes, happening simultaneously, but not necessarily synchronized. I conceptualize

these processes as occurring on multiple levels, both personal and communal, and have broken my discussion into three main levels of return: physical, social and personal. The experiences shared with me often blurred the lines between these levels, illustrating the complexity and interdependency of those processes. But, this structure helps articulate the multi-facetedness of the experiences shared with me during my time in Hrustovo and Sanski Most.

*Physical:*

I was hoping that everything was just a dream and that I would come back and everything would be the way I left it. And then I came back and I just saw ruins. Everything was kind of wild. When I came here, I couldn't step out from car, I didn't feel my legs, I couldn't go out. I was just paralyzed. (Interview with the Author, 25 April, 2011).

Living in Hrustovo now, 2011, where most of the houses have been repaired, Dina's memory of the village in 1996 seems just as dreamlike, although perhaps nightmarish, as the pre-war Hrustovo she left from the one she returned to. While there still are many abandoned houses which have not been reconstructed, most of the houses in our area of Hrustovo, a pocket of 16 houses, have been. Of them, some are freshly plastered and painted although some are still bare brick and concrete. Yet on the drive into Sana, each day I drove through clusters of "houses," concrete shells without roofs, often overgrown with ivy and brambles, driveways covered in grass, un-pruned fruit trees, places, that, for whatever reason, had not been repossessed and reclaimed as post-war spaces. These houses are my constant reminder of how much physical progress has been made in reconstructing the area since the war.

## Finding Home?: Changes in Physical Spaces

Similarly to Dina, when Edin first returned to Prijedor, he was amazed the by how unrecognizable Prijedor had become.

I had one picture in my head, but when I first went to visit Prijedor it was like another place. There were not any houses only small hills of rocks and [rubble]. Everything was burned out, trees were growing up in the middle of houses... And I couldn't believe that I couldn't find my school because it was huge, it was about 200 meters from my house, and there was just nothing... I couldn't find her, because she just disappeared. Not even any rocks. And the mosque, she was next to my house, she also disappeared. (Interview with the Author, 5 May, 2011)

Edin's use of the word "disappeared," which illustrated to me the totalness of the changes he felt upon returning to a space he was so familiar with.

Edin and Ahmet also expressed grief around the physical destruction of their homes. Both Ahmet and Edin left their pre-war homes spontaneously, and upon returning to those spaces found most of their pre-war possessions gone; stolen, burned or unrecognizable. Edin said, "I tried to find pictures, because I didn't bring even one picture from my home and I couldn't find any. I just found one cup for tea, I still have it, and that's it. Everything [else] was just burnt out. I just couldn't believe in that short time [six years], nothing [remained]" (Interview with the Author, 5 May, 2011). While Edin was repossessing his pre-war house, the physical elements which made it his "home" had been utterly altered by the war.

The physical spaces individuals returned to can also be highly contested spaces, politically as well as interpersonally. In discussing Selma's experience trying to repossess their pre-war home, she recounted "it was like a little war happened in front of my house" when her family tried to evict the family possessing their home (Interview with the Author, 29 April, 2011).

## Physical Security

In addition to the physical changes, physical security was also a serious concern for those deciding between returning and remaining in their host communities. While fear of inter-ethnic tension or violence certainly was a security threat, it was not the only, nor perhaps most pertinent security threat my interviewees faced. When Ahmet first came back to Hrustovo, he said “I was worried about stepping on human bones or unexploded ordinances. I didn’t know which would be worse” (Informal Conversation with the Author, 22 April, 2011). On a visit back to Sanski Most in 1997, one individual mentioned hearing explosions at night—mines being detonated by animals (Personal correspondence with the author, 7 May, 2011). Land mines are still a danger across Bosnia, although I saw only one area around Sanski Most marked with warning signs.<sup>30</sup>

Several of the people I spoke to mentioned the presence of soldiers on the streets and a curfew, both reminders of physical insecurity, although Ahmet stressed that he knew of no ethnically-motivated violence after the war.<sup>31</sup> Mirsad commented that he felt safer under “our” [Muslim] government, and that fear (emotional as well as social) was one of the forces keeping him in Sanski Most (Informal Conversation with the Author, 5 May, 2011).<sup>32</sup>

Selma remembered how when her family had to travel to Banja Luka shortly after they returned to Sanski Most, they made up pseudonyms, refrained from calling her father Baba, and changed their clothing and jewelry to prevent their family from being

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<sup>30</sup> For more information about land mines in Bosnia see, Land Mine and Cluster Monition Monitor’s publications on Bosnia and Herzegovina at <http://www.the-monitor.org/index.php>.

<sup>31</sup> Although that also may be influenced by the relatively low number of minority, especially ethnically Serb returnees to Sanski Most, which was estimated at between 0-4% from 1996-2005. See O Tuathail and Dahlman, 256).

<sup>32</sup> He also has a family, and I’m sure employment opportunities, and fear of discrimination, especially against his wife who wears a *hijab*, also influenced his decision

identified as Roma or Muslim while there—in fear of what response that could elicit (Interview with the Author, 29 April, 2011). Ahmet mentioned having negative experiences while visiting Prijedor with his wife, Selima who wears the *hijab*. “You wouldn’t believe what one old woman said,” he told me (Informal Conversation with the Author, 2 May, 2011).

Edin’s father, even while living near Sanski Most, returned regularly to Prijedor to be the imam at the rebuilt mosque there, and to hold religious services. While Prijedor is only 45 minutes from Sanski Most, for several years after the signing of Dayton international troops were stationed on the boarder between Repubika Srpska and the Federation. Calling between the entities was incredibly costly, and cell phones registered in one entity did not work in the other—all contributing to a sense of separation between the two (Informal Conversation with the Author, May 4, 2011). Edin shared several stories of hostilities or violence directed against his father when he returned to Prijedor, someone interrupting a funeral service and punching his father, and another individual firing guns above the heads of the mourners gathered there. Edin described the small community of Bosniaks who returned to Prijedor in the late 1990s as “living under the shutter,” as trying to keep as low a profile as possible within the community (Interview with the Author, 5 May, 2011).<sup>33</sup>

### The Physical Landscape

Driving through the region with Ahmet, he would often describe the places we were passing through, peeling back the layers of reconstruction for me, or describing the events which marked this or that place as significant in his life, and the life of the

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<sup>33</sup> This sentiment was echoed by other Bosniak returnees to Prijedor interviewed in Elizabeth Neuffer’s book *The Key to my Neighbor’s House*, or Anders Stefansson’s article “Homes in the Making.”

community. Turning down the road to Hrustovo, we passed 120 neat white graves and several new wooden ones,<sup>34</sup> perfectly aligned in straight rows, and a constant reminder to all who drive by of those who died in this village during the war.

But what I can't read are the less obvious signs of war and how it traveled through this community. "This mosque," with a green egg-shaped dome and light-green minaret, he told me one afternoon, "was constructed so that they can deconstruct it in four hours, in case the war should come back. That way, at least, it can't be destroyed again." The village which spreads out below that mosque, he told me, wasn't destroyed during the war, and at the base of the village stretches a green field, used during the war as the airfield of the Serb armed forces in the area. "That building," with an industrial-sized electric mixer out front, "that was their air control building."

The bridge, right before entering the village of Vrhpolje, the village next to Hrustovo, he shared, was called the 'Bridge of Terror,' for the role it played in the two day massacre which occurred in Hrustovo and Vrhpolje in April 1992. "And there," he said, pointing to a field on the edge of Hrustovo, in the floodplains of the river Sanica, "that's where the first mass grave was found in Hrustovo. But", he said, "it gets exhausting telling you about everything that happened." To me, this indicates that Ahmet has found a way of not letting these memories seep into his everyday interactions with this landscape, although that landscape still offers countless reminders of traumatic events. I also felt this distancing from the past in talking to both Dina and Emira—both of whom remembered the past with a degree of discomfort.

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<sup>34</sup> In the Muslim tradition, Ahmet told me, for the first year after burial graves are marked with wood, after that year marked with stone. The wooden graves in the war cemetery in Hrustovo mark graves of remains which were identified and buried in the past year. I counted six or seven such graves.

*Social:*

### Experiencing Community

Another dimension to return, and one which became immersed in through living with Ahmet and his family, was the ways in which the war socially disrupted the community, and the ways in which a sense of community has been (and is being) rebuilt after the war. My experiences of community revolved around three things: coffee, cigarettes, and *kolac*.<sup>35</sup> Although a non-smoker, these three activities, often done together, provided the foundation for many social interactions, especially those which occurred in the home. Especially in a small village such as Hrustovo, returning from work and sitting out in the garden with a full *jezba* of coffee was always an open invitation for neighbors to visit.<sup>36</sup>

And visit they did. Interactions between neighbors was very interesting for me to observe. Like any small town, neighbors looked after each other, and got on their nerves. From the garden, which has a view of the main intersection in our branch of Hrustovo, Ahmet joked one evening, “those two ladies,” pointing to our neighbor ahead of the house, and the neighbor to the right, “they haven’t spoken to each other in 45 years. And their husbands are cousins.”<sup>37</sup> Of Ahmet’s six closest neighbors, two are members of the Diaspora—seasonal residents of Hrustovo, two are elderly couples who have family living abroad, one is an elderly aunt of his, whose husband is in a nursing home in Sana, and one is another young couple, with a small daughter and teenaged son. One other family in the near vicinity has children, and although their youngest daughter is nine and

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<sup>35</sup> *Kolac* is Bosnian for cake

<sup>36</sup> *Jezba* is a Turkish pot used for cooking coffee. In Bosnian the verb used is not brew, but cook.

<sup>37</sup> Cousin, and many other words connoting the extended family, has a somewhat looser meaning than in my American setting.

Amir is three, they spent significant time together, in part, I fear, because there are so few children to play with.

One of my first days in Hrustovo Ahmet told me that this year, no new children have been born in the village, and as its population ages (and dies) few new people are continuing to replace them (Informal Conversation with the Author 19 April, 2011).<sup>38</sup> These problems are not specific to Hrustovo, or Bosnian villages in general. Growing up in a small rural village myself, being in Hrustovo made me question the future of my own community. But, the war and return process have certainly drastically changed the community demographically. Ahmet told me that when his family was returning from Slovenia, his mother begged him to let her and Dido return alone. In addition to different kinds of relationships to place, and opportunities available in a small village, Ahmet also mentioned that “for [his mother], the war was never over and I think that she died being afraid of war. And she begged me to stay [abroad], not to come back” (Interview with the Author, Ahmet, 2011). Fear of renewed war was something several people I interviewed mentioned, not necessarily in the context of influencing decisions to return, but certainly as a threat to the sustainability or long-term nature of residency in Sanski Most.<sup>39</sup>

I also observed this trend of aging populations when Ahmet and I went to visit Stariji Rijeka to celebrate Easter with Kruno and his family. The village’s Catholic Church, recently built had a simple interior, and although it was quite full, the average age of the congregation was probably 55 or older. The choir consisted of five ladies,

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<sup>38</sup> Eastmond notes that “younger generations...seem to show less interest in the parental house as a possible home for themselves in the future” (Eastmond “Transnational”, 153). This reluctance further exacerbates the demographic shift occurring in many communities in Bosnia.

<sup>39</sup> Another element, although it was not something which was brought up in interviews, was the financial security provided by pensions, especially those from abroad, which enabled the elderly to return.

probably all in their late 60's. At the service, I saw five small children and four teenagers, three of whom were Kruno, his sister and another CIM volunteer. This may reflect generational secularization in the community, but I also understood it as a broader representation of the local demographics. Kruno told me that many of the young children who attended the Easter mass were members of the Diaspora, coming back to visit family and property in Stariji Rijeka and not permanent residents. He also mentioned that his family is the youngest family in the village (Interview with the Author, 29 April, 2011).

While Kruno said his family did have chances to move to Slovenia, it was important for his parents to “live in their birth place, where they were born. And they were hoping that others would return, 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” (Interview with the Author, 29 April, 2011).<sup>40</sup> The aging of communities also reflects, as Jansen framed it, broader social changes present in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, “where most people deeply resent being thrown back onto what they perceived as premodern peasanthood” (Jansen, 193). While perhaps Jansen's wording is a bit strong, but, as I observed especially in Hrustovo, but also when I visited Selima's parents on their farm near Cazin, life in rural communities is very agrarian. Most families had their own vegetable gardens where they grew much of their own food, several neighbors had cows or other livestock. My family, in addition to their vegetable garden, kept chickens and bees. Much of Dido's time was spent tending to the garden or animals. As a pensioner, he had time, as well support from the pension to maintain their homestead. While perhaps from my standpoint, rooted in

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<sup>40</sup> This sentiment was echoed by one of the Bosniak returnees to Banja Luka, interviewed by Anders Stefansson, who commented “when we are dead—and this we will soon be—then Banja Luka will become a purely Serb town” (Stefansson, “Homes,” 126).

America, this lifestyle was quaint if not alluring, I can also understand, especially with the increase in higher educational opportunities, how unappealing this future could be for Hrustovo's youth, and how individuals, who have created lives elsewhere would be hesitant to return to this lifestyle.

As the only minority returnee I spoke to, an additional layer of return Edin discussed was that of returning to communities where the demographics—especially ethnically speaking—had dramatically changed. In the village where Edin worked as a teacher of Islamic religion after returning to Prijedor in 2001, he had 15 students out of 400 to 600 in the school.<sup>41</sup> Before the war, the community had been predominantly Bosniak, and during the war many had been killed. Of the 500 repaired houses in the village, only 150, Edin added, had people living in them, “everybody else is living in Germany,” he said, with a sigh (Interview with the Author, 5 May, 2011).

### The Diaspora

For the last week of April, Hrustovo, and our lives in Hrustovo, began to bustle, as extended family members, all part of the diaspora, returned to Bosnia during the Easter holidays. While unable to understand many of the conversations happening around me, the interactions I observed were fascinating. Most of the young people who came with their parents looked quite bored or socialized with other children of the Diaspora. To me it seemed that many of the needs fulfilled by these visits were those of the parents, those who had memories rooted in Hrustovo, as well as more developed connections with the people they were visiting. The young who I spoke to commented that they often felt as an

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<sup>41</sup> Religious educational classes are part of the school curriculum as an elective course. Typically only religious instruction of the majority community is offered. I did not ask Edin why his school also offered Islamic classes. See Renata Stuebner's article “The Current Status of Religious Coexistence and Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina”

“outsider” in Slovenia, because they were branded as “Bosnian,” yet direct attachment to Bosnia or envisioning a future here was rare.

But even of those who did have memories rooted in Bosnia, not all I spoke to felt necessarily as rooted in Bosnia, or that the relationship to Bosnia was straightforward.

Dina expressed that complexity, saying,

No matter how long we are there [in Slovenia], no matter what we have there, there is always something in Bosnia that connects us to this land, [but] here, I am [also] a guest...Now I feel more that I belong there [in Slovenia], even though I'm not Slovenian. But when I'm in Slovenia I don't feel that I belong there, only that I kind of belong there, because my whole life is there. But when I come here I also see that I don't belong here one-hundred percent because I live in a different way. I kind of feel a stranger here and there. (Interview with the Author, 25 April, 2011)

When I asked Dina and Ahmet's niece Lejla, who is just a few years younger than them and was raised with them in Hrustovo but now also lives in Slovenia, about being back in Bosnia, she said even though she was raised speaking Bosnian, she feels freest speaking in Slovene (Informal Conversation with the Author, 27 April, 2011).

One evening, when the living room as packed with relatives, all visiting from Slovenia, as we were sitting around, eating cakes another relative had brought from Slovenia, Ahmet asked me “can you hear the difference? They're speaking in Slovenian.” We, Ahmet and I, were the only people in the room without Slovenian citizenship, although the vast majority, other than myself, had been born in Bosnia. It seems to me that the habitual return of members of the Diaspora involves not only maintaining connections with Bosnia, and people in Bosnia, but has created a community of its own—of the displaced who meet only in Bosnia.

## Meeting the “Other”

Another social element of the rebuilding and reconciliation process many of the individuals I interviewed discussed was the complications of confronting individuals associated with wrong-doing during the war. In addition to coping with trauma related to specific places, the individual experience of recreating community in Sanski Most is influenced by the fracturing of the community which occurred during the war. While some of these interactions revolved around meeting those who had “betrayed” one’s trust, returning to Sanski Most also entailed confronting others whose experiences, even as members of the same ethnic group, differed immensely from one’s own.

One of his first days back in Sanski Most, Ahmet was stopped by the police.<sup>42</sup> After giving the policeman his ID card, the policeman remarked, ““oh you have the old ID from Yugoslavia. Where have you been?” and I told him ‘in Slovenia.’ And he said ‘yeah, while I was fighting in the mountains you were in a warm nice room in Slovenia.’ I already had this feeling of guilt so that wasn’t comfortable” (Interview with the Author, Ahmet, 22 April, 2011). This guilt, Ahmet shared, later helped compel him to begin teaching locally rather than taking a better paying, more secure job working with the international community, as a way of giving back to his community. He said, “I felt guilty because I didn’t participate really in fighting, in defending, that’s how we called it, so I felt this would be a way for me to kind of payback to my country” (Interview with the Author, 22 April, 2011). This sense of duty—to become engaged in the community as

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<sup>42</sup> In later discussions with Ahmet elaborated on how militarized the community was shortly after the war. International troops (NATO troops part of first the Implementation Force (IFOR) and later Stabilization force (SFOR)) secured the inter-entity border, and there was a civilian curfew in Sanski Most (Informal Conversation with the Author, 30 April, 2011).

well as to physically return—was also shared by Emira, something I will discuss further in the context of reconciliation.

Both Ahmet and Edin shared stories of feeling betrayed by their primary school teachers—who happened to be Serbs and did not defend or protest the maltreatment of them, their students, due to their ethnicity. I was unable to interview either of these teachers, so I don't know if there were ways in which they felt they could safely protest what was occurring, but Ahmet and Edin's perception of them remains damaged.

Ahmet's teacher was the wife of the Serb mayor of Sana during 1992, the period in which Bosniaks and Croats were expelled from the area. Both the former mayor and his wife—Ahmet's teacher—were people we passed while driving through Sana—people he still does not feel comfortable confronting, about the present or the past. Through his work as a primary school teacher after the war, Ahmet was forced to attend an inter-ethnic teacher training session in 1998. He opposed attending “because it meant going and sitting with Serbs and working with Serbs and talking to them about the war and at that time, even people among their own [ethnic group], like in my school, teachers would never talk about what happened to them.” The training also raised the possibility of confronting his own pre-war teachers. “I was afraid about who is going to be there... and how I'm going to react [to them]” (Interview with the Author, 22 April, 2011). While attending that teacher training marked the beginning of Ahmet's transformation process, that process is challenged by frequent confrontation of people, such as his former teachers, who act as reminders of the personal faces of his war. While Ahmet is actively engaged in peacebuilding work in the community, his unwillingness or inability to meet

his primary school teacher illustrated to me extent to which reconciliation, peacebuilding, and return are indeed processes.

Edin encountered his former teacher when his family arrived at the concentration camp at Trnopolje, where she was registering newly arrived detainees. “And at the door of the concentration camp I saw my teacher from primary school, she was a Serb and in one moment I felt happy because she will help us, she will do something, she knows us very well. But she acted like she never saw us, she just wrote down our names, and that was it” (Interview with the Author, 5 May, 2011). After the war, when Edin himself became a primary school teacher in a village outside Prijedor, his supervisor was that same woman. When he, her formal pupil, introduced himself to her, she said “‘I can’t remember you.’ And she taught me for four years, and I said, ‘it’s fine’...I worked in that school for two years, and from time to time I had an issue to tell her, but I didn’t. She’s retired now,” he added with a laugh (Interview with the Author, 5 May, 2011). Like Ahmet, in avoiding potentially sensitive issues, he has been able to find a degree of peace, or at least non-confrontation, with individuals whom he felt harmed by.

Fear of confronting perpetrators was perhaps most pronounced in Mirsad, who chose to not return to Prijedor, for fear, as Ahmet termed it, of “betraying his wounds” both figuratively and literally (Informal Conversation with the Author, 5 May, 2011). In our conversation about Islam and terrorism, Mirsad stressed the peaceful nature of Islam as a religion, and how the war, as he perceived it, was “done to” the Bosniak community by “others.” Mirsad also declined Edin and Ahmet’s offers to participate in inter-ethnic dialogue, resistant to being forced to sit down, and listen to the “Other” (Informal Conversation with the Author, 5 May 2011).

Kruno was also struggling with how to process individuals who inflicted violence on his family, especially violence against him. His parents held a family meeting to discuss their experiences during the war but wouldn't tell Kruno the name of the individual who threatened to drop Kruno, then an infant, out of the second-story window if the family failed to produce enough money. While Kruno expressed curiosity about this individual's identity, he also confessed, "if I did know, maybe it wouldn't be the best...it would be better to just forget about it because it was [a] really bad [time]. Everyone tries not to talk about it, that's for sure. And for myself, looking at how things were, maybe it would be better for me not to know what happened" in fear that knowledge could lead to tension or violence between himself and that individual (Interview with the Author, 29 April, 2011).

It was interesting to contrast Kruno's ideas of how the past should be handled with that of Ahmet or Edin—both of whom stressed how their children (they are both fathers of young sons) need to know their personal "Truth" about what happened to them, to their family. Ahmet said,

But I will at least tell [Amir] what happened to me so that he hears it from me and not from someone who heard my story. No matter how painful or happy or whatever the story is, it is important he knows it from me... and I think it's important that he knows really everything so that he doesn't have question marks, because I have many question marks about World War Two.... [when] our village was burned, but it was never clear who did it, they would always say every time just Them. They did it. And then I think that's a burden [for the future generations]. (Interview with the Author, 22 April, 2011).

Bosnia is struggling with how officially to discuss and represent the events of the 1990s, and Bosnians themselves are also grappling with how these experiences should be discussed within the personal as well as public realm.

Selma also shared her experiences of confronting the family who was living in their house upon her family's return from Germany. The son of that family was a classmate of her younger brother's and because of her traumatic experiences with that family, "I had problems," she said, "to see him as a boy, a normal boy like everybody else" (Interview with the Author, 29 April, 2011). Tensions with that family were eased after members of the family apologized to Selma's father for their behavior, which helped bring closure to conflict. Yet, not all of my interviewees were able to find such closure in their intra-personal conflicts, some choosing to not know, others to not confront those individuals.

*Personal:*

In addition to physical and interpersonal elements of reconstructing life in post-war Sanski Most, in my research, informants also discussed elements of their return beyond physical and social reasons for (or barriers to) returning, something more personal and often emotional, usually about their connection to Bosnia. Two of my informants who were internally displaced during the war very strongly emphasized the feeling of homelessness they experienced during the war, and the emotional need to fill that void in creating lives after the war.

In analyzing my research, I struggled with how to classify "reconciliation," a theme which came up in many of my interviews. While reconciliation has strong social components, usually involving meeting the "Other," I ultimately wanted to frame reconciliation as beginning with a personal process, as a choice to not only meet the Other, but begin deconstructing that Otherness within yourself. Both of these processes offer windows into the deeply personal component of returning.

### Homelessness:

Both Edin and Emira were internally displaced during the war, and their experiences as internally displaced shaped how I understand their relationship with and to their current places of residence. I hadn't quite internalized what it meant to be "Internally Displaced" (IDP) until Ahmet, Edin and I were driving north out of Sanski Most, towards Cazin, and we passed through the village where Edin spent four years as an IDP. The main street through the town still had ivy-covered shells of houses without roofs, windows or doors, yards grown over with dandelions. Edin mentioned that CIM had tried to partner with youth in the village, only to find out that there were only five youth there. It was the 6<sup>th</sup> of May—Djurdjevdan, a typically Serbian Orthodox holiday celebrating St. George—and people, mostly elderly, were gathered in the city square.<sup>43</sup> What struck me most about driving through the village was realizing that this town, just like towns across Bosnia, was on the one hand a site of refuge for Edin and his family, and on the other, scarred by war (Informal Conversation with the Author, 6 May, 2011).

Emira mentioned how life in Travnik, a city in central Bosnia, "was for me even harder than being [in Sanski Most]. We had there two enemies [Croats, Serbs]," and shortly thereafter after her husband died (Interview with the Author, 5 May, 2011). "We are all poor. No one had enough food, enough things, enough stuff during the war," Edin told me, and often his family was moving in with friends or relatives, already stretched thin by the war (Interview with the Author, 5 May, 2011). He remembered feeling like a burden upon those he stayed with, people telling his father "we don't have anything to eat and [now] we have to feed you?" (Interview with the Author, 5 May, 2011).

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<sup>43</sup> The Catholic community celebrates on St. George's Day, or Jurhevo on a different date. The 6<sup>th</sup> of May is also a holiday for the Roma community.

Edin and his family certainly mourned the loss of physical goods during the war. He told me, “[in] Prijedor we had everything, we had house, things, stuff, car, bicycles, keys, everything. But in Zenica during the war we had just nothing” (Interview with the Author, Edin, 2011). While Edin did stress the physical goods associated with loss, and later regaining home, he also shared how his family, especially his father “just couldn’t wait, wherever we were, just to not be a refugee” (Interview with the Author, 5 May, 2011). When I asked him if he felt pressured to return to Prijedor, Edin replied,

Nobody clearly said to us, you have to go. But it is also about our feelings. We feel that we don’t belong there, we feel that we are in a place which is not our place, we feel like we just want to go home. To have home, to have place where you belong. For example, when people ask you where do you come from, since when you say you are from Prijedor, it means you are a refugee, you don’t have your home. And we were burning to return to our home, I have my home, it is there [in Prijedor]. If I wanted to move, if it was my decision to move [it would be different]. But we were just expelled from our homes. It wasn’t feel safe in our home, and that’s the reason why we moved, that’s the one reason why we really want to return. (Interview with the Author, 5 May, 2011)

In addition to echoing Edin’s feeling of not belonging in Travnik, Emira’s war-time place of residence, Emira felt compelled to come back to Sanski Most, as a way of thanking and acknowledging those who made it possible for her to return there.<sup>44</sup> She said,

I was expelled from Sanski Most and as everyone else I want to return, I want to return to my home, to my city. I want to see my city, to live there, I want to show in some way my thanks to those [who] released this place [from the Serb Army], and they gave their lives, their souls, and their time for releasing this town. My thanks to them was to come back, to return. (Interview with the Author, 5 May, 2011)

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<sup>44</sup> In 1994-1995, Sanski Most was one of the towns which the Bosnian Army retook/liberated from Serb forces. Many of my informants, in discussing the retaking of the town expressed an underlying assumption that had this military campaign not been successful, they, as Bosniaks, would not have been able to return to Sanski Most (Interview with the Author, 22 April and 5 May, 2011).

Similarly to Ahmet's story of feeling guilty about not participating in "defending" his community, returning was a way for Emira to celebrate the ability to finally return to Sanski Most.

Similarly, when Edin made the choice, in May of 2011, to relocate with his family from Prijedor to Sanski Most, he said making that decision, especially the decision to leave Prijedor was entirely different because he was moving voluntarily, and into his own house.

And the main difference for me between this moving from Prijedor [in 2011] and the moving in 1992 was that this is my decision. I was not expelled. I brought all my stuff, all my pictures, and I left Prijedor with a smile on my face, but in that time [1992] I left crying and with a lot of fear, for my mother, my sister, my father, for everything. And that's a huge difference... I feel special because now I am living in my home. This is really my home [in Sanski Most]. And I think the feeling is much stronger because I realized what it your home means to you. Before [being displaced] I didn't feel something, "oh this is my home," I thought "whatever" but now [after being displaced], I really appreciate to live in my home. I have something which belongs to me, to my family.  
(Interview with the Author, 5 May, 2011)

Home, as described by Edin entails an element of ownership, something other than a spatial relationship to a place. While Sanski Most is not where he grew up, he has found personal attachment, rootedness, in the ownership of his home, something he never experienced as an internally displaced person.

### Reconciliation

Reconciliation, on the one hand, can be examined on a broader level between groups or communities, but the discussions of reconciliation which I found most compelling in my interviews were when informants discussed their personal process of not only "confronting the 'Other,'" but accepting and deconstructing that "Other." Ahmet said that one of his philosophies behind CIM is that "for every Bosniak there needs to be one

Serb” and through the formulation of personal connections which break or challenge prejudices built during the war, people, and thus the broader community, can overcome those tensions (Informal Conversation with the Author, April 29, 2011).<sup>45</sup> This process of challenging prejudices is, like all of the processes explored in this paper, very personal and occurs (or does not occur) individually. It can be facilitated, but an important component, as I see it, is also personal willingness to begin this process, a willingness not all of my informants were ready to take.

For Selma, fear within her family, both tacit and verbalized, as well as fear stemming from her own personal trauma, helped her create barriers against (specifically) Serbs. She recounted how “my mother forbid me to interact with Serbs... And when I was little I thought ‘Serb is a monster, and Croat too.’ And then I met people, and they said that they were Serbs, but they were people not monsters” (Interview with the Author, 29 April, 2011). Her mother attended a local conference discussing war trauma. At that conference, one Serb woman stood up and spoke about her trauma and loss of her son during the war. After the conference Selma’s mother recounted, “ ‘I was thinking, what are *you* [a Serb woman] doing here [at a conference on war trauma]?’ and she [the Serb woman] told her story... And then my mother told me ‘They’re people like me. There is no difference.’” After her mother began to open up to Serbs, Selma found herself

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<sup>45</sup> With that said, CIM’s activities do not exclude Croats, or other groups who do not identify as “Serb” or “Bosniak.” For Ahmet, and for the specific events which happened in Sanski Most, most of the underlying tension is between Bosniaks and Serbs. But Ahmet began his conflict-transformation work acting as a mediator between Bosniak-Bosniak groups with antagonism due to the war.

involved in CIM activities, which she said, “really helped me with my trauma” (Interview with the Author, 29 April, 2011).<sup>46</sup>

But there were still individuals in Selma’s family who resisted, or could not comprehend breaking down those ethnic barriers. Selma mentioned how her grandfather, when she was going on an excursion to Sarajevo, warned her “so you’re going to Sarajevo, there are Serbs there.’ ‘Yeah.’ ‘Don’t interact with them.’ And I told him ‘Oh, I have Serb friends here.’ ‘What?’ he said” (Interview with the Author, 29 April, 2011).

At first, I thought that perhaps what Selma was illustrating was different perceptions between generations about the prospects, or desirability of meeting the “Other.” Ahmet had also shared how “the war wasn’t over for [his mother]” and that she was constantly urging him to move abroad (Interview with the Author, 22 April, 2011). Yet, in contrasting the experience of Mirsad with someone like Edin, both of whom experienced different kinds of trauma during the war and their displacement, I began to see reconciliation not as a spontaneous event, but also involving a choice, a willingness. This is not to pass judgment on either Edin or Mirsad, but to highlight what I see as another element, or step, in reconciliation. Not only must there be spaces in which this interaction can occur, but individuals must be willing to firstly enter into those spaces, before they can “meet their Other.”

### **Conclusions:**

What I see, drawing on the interviews as well as informal discussions and experiences I had while living in Sanski Most, is that yes, return, just like displacement or

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<sup>46</sup> Ahmet shared that it took CIM, as an organization formed by two imams, four years before they attracted their first non-Muslim volunteers (Informal conversation with Author, 3 May, 2011).

reconciliation, entails multiple processes, which occur in unique manners for each person and over different spans of time. One of the processes I observed was rooted in the physical: the physical reconstruction which needed to happen before houses could be reinhabited, roads rebuilt, jobs restored. In the last of my days in Sanski Most, one of the roof-less, windowless, doorless houses we passed each day on the commute to Sana was just beginning to be covered with a roof. These physical changes are a necessary element for the possibility of return to pre-war homes, but not the only determinant of return, as individuals such as Dina, who was displaced and has continued to live in a new local or like Mirsad who has reservations about his reception upon returning to his pre-war house.

Although my research ultimately centered around the experience of displacement and return to Sanski Most, my personal questions, experiences and ultimately interviews were interlinked with exploring these issues within the context of peacebuilding in the community.<sup>47</sup> What I found through my interviews was that that question “what kind of peace is this?” is answered not by internationals or programs but by individuals. For some I spoke to co-existence was enough but for others it was just the beginning. I found it not only helpful but important to frame my research and indeed my approach to my life in Sanski Most within the context of peacebuilding because in examining the experiences of those impacted by war it was impossible for me to not constantly be asking not only “how did this happen?” but “how can we make this not happen again?” My research was conducted within the heated political environment of a possible referendum in Republika Srpska, which, as Ahmet noted, “would result in war, should it happen” because it would pave the way for an additional referendum on Republika Srpska’s independence,

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<sup>47</sup> Although, what exactly is meant by “peacebuilding”, and what and whose objective it is, is debated. Peacebuilding to some entails the rekindling of inter-ethnic “harmony,” but to others purely non-violent co-existence (Eastmond “Introduction,” 5).

something which he believed could not happen without bloodshed (Informal Discussion with the Author, 7 May, 2011). Within this context, I find examining return within the framework of sustainable peace all the more important.

Many of the processes in place to evaluate return also focus on the quantitative rather than qualitative measures. The existence of “covered houses” as Edin called them, is not necessarily a measure of the number of permanent returnees, and does not necessarily ensure the sustainability of communities. As I observed during my time in Hrustovo, the aging population of many communities and lack of economic opportunities to attract new residents, for me, calls into question the success of the Dayton Accords in creating a sustainable Bosnia, not entirely regardless of the political system enshrined in the Accords. Sanski Most, as the closest semi-urban space in north-west Bosnia to Republika Srpska, served as a substitute home for families like Edin or Mirsad, who wanted to be as physically close to their pre-war houses, now in Republika Srpska, while still being in the Federation (Informal Conversation with the Author, 27 April, 2011). Some families, like Edin’s, eventually did return, but others, like Mirsad, have stayed for economic, personal, or security reasons. This, in addition to the low number especially of Bosnian Serb returnees to Sanski Most, had created a community which is both individually and ethnically different than the pre-war population. This, of course, is a product of the displacement due to the war, but is also contingent upon perceived or actual opportunities to reclaim pre-war homes, something which has been both enshrined in and deterred by the Dayton Accords.

While the Catholic Church in downtown Sana was rebuilt after the war, and the Orthodox Church was never destroyed, the presence of these physical religious markers

did not fully represent the religious diversity I experienced while in Sanski Most. The Catholic Church, Orthodox Church and the central Mosque are all within walking distance from each other, and are distinctive architectural markers of Sana. Yet, I never saw the gates to either of the churches open, never heard their bells, while hearing the call to prayer five times daily. All of the death notices, which are printed using different symbols and colors for the different religious affiliation of the deceased, I saw were for Muslims. The default greetings I heard were either *selam alejkum* or *merhaba*,<sup>48</sup> both of which are used between Muslims. When we went to celebrate Easter in Stariji Rijeka, one of the girls who went with us confessed to me “I don’t know how to greet them. What do I say? I can’t use *merhaba*” (Informal Conversation with the Author, 24 April, 2011). On our way, we stopped in a Bosniak village, greeting two old men wearing the traditional Bosniak black felt cap with “*Selam alejkum*” before asking directions to Stariji Rijeka—a nearby Croat village. As we drove away Ahmet commented, “man, they must have been so confused” because we identified ourselves as Bosniak through using *selam alejkum* yet were looking to go to a non-Bosniak village on Easter. Language, it seems, has become just another marker of ethnic identity, used among the majority population as a way of expressing common belonging, but in a community also comprised of minorities, potentially as a way of also marking their “otherness.”

On one occasion, my host mother, Selima, greeted an acquaintance of a friend with *selam alejkum*, to which he replied *cao*. While *cao* was the greeting I used with many of the volunteers at CIM and heard frequently in conversation, in this context, especially after being greeted with *selam alejkum*, Selima was offended by his choice of

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<sup>48</sup> Spelled here in Bosnian, as opposed to Classical Arabic. In Bosniak communities, these typically Arabic greetings are used.

greeting, understanding it as a marker of his non-Bosniak identity. The choice of greeting, especially during the extremely tense period after the signing of Dayton, was a way of distinguishing between the different ethnic groups (Informal Conversation with the Author, 25 March, 2011).<sup>49</sup> While the war has been over for 16 years, this interaction illustrated to me that there is still tension, that relationships and social interactions, especially but not only between ethnic groups, are still being negotiated.

Along side of the physical reconstruction process, what I also observed were individuals and communities in the process of negotiating relationships to places, to each other and within themselves; to their experiences and memories. I view these processes as a fundamental component of being human, of having the capability to ascribe meaning to places and people, and not as specific to Sanski Most or its inhabitants. Within Sanski Most, the recent violence and resulting trauma adds additional layers to these processes.

### **Recommendations for Further Study:**

I see many ways in which my research could have been expanded. Firstly, the lack of Bosnian Serb voices in my research is something which could be addressed. It would be interesting to speak not only to Bosnian Serbs living in Sanski Most, but also individuals who have not returned, exploring why and how they have found homes in other areas. I was unprepared for the arrival of the Diaspora, and certainly more research could be conducted within that community about their relationship to place and each other. I also

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<sup>49</sup> Later, asking my host father to explain, he noted that after the 1994-95 Bosniak Army military campaigns, and with the formalization of boundaries through the Dayton Accords, many ethnic Serb residents fled, either to Serbia or Republika Srpska, and many displaced Croats and Bosniaks were returning to Sanski Most. Serbs mainly used *cao* or *dobar dan*, while Bosniaks use the Arabic greeting *selam alejkum*. In understanding this, I see the prevalence of *selam alejkum* as a daily greeting as another marker of Sanski Most's changed post-war identity.

did not have the opportunity to interview any individuals of Dido's generation, and their perspective would be very enlightening for this research. I was hoping to conduct multi-generational interviews, to better understand how parents made the decision to return as well as how their children, often too young to remember that decision, understand those decisions. It would also be interesting to interview minority returns to Republika Srpska, and better understand the differences and similarities returnees face due to the different political environments in each entity.

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## **Appendix I: Interview Questions**

1. Could you describe your life before the war—where you lived, your occupation, education, did you move, was your family close by?
2. Did you ever dream or desire to move away from the place where you grew up?  
Could you describe to me how and when you decided to leave your home? Did you feel like you were voluntarily leaving, or was there pressure being applied to leave? If so, why? From whom?
3. Where did you go? How did you decide/did you decide to go there?
4. Did you live near other families from the former-Yugoslavia?
5. When you were living abroad did you think of Bosnia as “home”? How would you define what home is? Is it the place where you are born, or is it broader than that? Are there specific things you think of when you think of “home”? Would you describe the Sanski Most of today as “home”?
6. Did you want to stay there (abroad)? Why or why not? Did you apply for citizenship?
7. Did you speak the language, or learn it? Did you think you were well supported by your host country? Did you experience discrimination there? Were you able to find employment comparable to your educational level or Yugoslav position?
8. Did you decide to return, and how did you make that decision? Was there any pressure to return? Why did you return to Sanski Most in particular? Had you maintained connections with friends, relatives here while living abroad?
9. Could you describe those first few days when you came back? What condition was your house in? Were there things which surprised you? Things that felt the same? What

was the most different from what you remembered? Were you at all nervous about returning? What things were you nervous about?

10. Have you been back to the place where you lived (abroad)? Do you still maintain contact with people there (abroad)?

11. Have you had any difficulties moving back? Can you describe those difficulties?

12. Do you want your children (if have any) to stay here? Do you think your children want to stay here? What sorts of education opportunities do they have here? what sorts of employment opportunities are there? Is it important for you that your children grow up or live here?