

Perspective of a Refugee

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Abstract

I chose this particular topic on the basis of my personal experience of being a refugee. My sons aged seven and five and I were among the tens of thousands of Bosnians who sought refuge in Slovenia after the war broke out in Bosnia and Herzegovina in spring 1992. I saw this text as a good opportunity to speak about the issue of being a refugee. My decision was further encouraged by the experiences I gained during my four-year stay in Slovenia, which still live inside me. By describing my experience of refugee life, I would like to illustrate the complexity of refugee life and the importance of integrating refugees into the new environment.

The article not only presents various excerpts from my refugee life in Slovenia, but also from my current life in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is intertwined with firm, continuous and intense ties with Ljubljana and Slovenia. In this sense, the text points out some of the many ways in which my family and I integrated into Slovenian society in the period from 1992 to 1996 and the positive effects of this integration in the years that followed after our return to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Our integration was stratified and included integration into social life, the university community and the school system. This stratified integration shaped us as individuals, directed my future professional work and enabled my professional progress. In short, it changed our lives.

Zusammenfassung

Ich habe mich aufgrund meiner eigenen Erfahrung als Flüchtling für das Thema dieses Artikels entschieden. Meine Söhne, damals sieben und fünf Jahre alt, und ich gehörten zu den Zehntausenden Menschen aus Bosnien und Herzegowina, die im Frühjahr 1992 nach dem Kriegeausbruch Zuflucht in Slowenien suchten. Der Beitrag bietet eine gute Gelegenheit, um über die Flüchtlingsproblematik zu schreiben. Meine Entscheidung wurde außerdem durch die Erfahrungen motiviert, die ich in meiner vierjährigen Flüchtlingszeit in Slowenien sammelte und die noch heute in mir präsent sind. Die Beschreibung meiner Erfahrung als Flüchtling soll die Komplexität des Flüchtlingslebens aufzeigen und die Bedeutsamkeit der Integration der Flüchtlinge in die neue Umwelt hervorheben.

Der Beitrag zeigt nicht nur verschiedene Ausschnitte aus meinem Flüchtlingsleben in Slowenien, sondern auch Episoden aus meinem heutigen Leben in Bosnien und Herzegowina, das durch starke, kontinuierliche und intensive Bindungen mit Slowenien und Ljubljana verflochten ist. In diesem Sinne verweist der Text auf viele Aspekte sowohl der Integration von mir und meiner Familie in die slowenische Gesellschaft im Zeitraum von 1992 bis 1996 als auch auf die positiven Effekte der Integration in den Jahren nach unserer Rückkehr nach Bosnien und Herzegowina. Dieser Prozess war vielschichtig und umfasste die Integration in das Gesellschaftsleben, die Universitätsgemeinschaft, und das Schulsystem. Die Integration formte uns als Persönlichkeiten und stellte die Weichen für meine spätere berufliche Arbeit, sie ermöglichte meinen beruflichen Aufstieg. Kurz gesagt, sie hat unser Leben verändert.

1. Twenty Years Since Our Return

At the time of writing this text, twenty years have passed since my family and I came back from Slovenia to Bosnia and Herzegovina. We came back to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sarajevo after living in Slovenia, more precisely Ljubljana, from April 1992 to August 1996.

Our return to Sarajevo was not as dramatic as our departure from Sarajevo on 27 April 1992: It was only two hours before the bus was scheduled to leave that I learned that I had to leave Sarajevo together with my children and head for Ljubljana. There was no time to say farewell to the dearest ones, we passed by control checkpoints held by various military formations, and two days after our departure from Sarajevo, all exits from the city were blocked and the street-fighting began. Although our return was planned and prepared, it still did not go without difficulties; it was especially hard for our children to accept, who were 12 and nine years of age by the time, we left Ljubljana in August 1996.

The decision to return to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sarajevo was made after the situation here started to change (the Dayton Peace Agreement had been signed six months earlier), and following long discussions at the Department of Criminal Law and the Institute of Criminology at the Faculty of Law of the University of Ljubljana about the different living conditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina since the war, our four years of living in Ljubljana, the option of staying in Slovenia, and of going back to Slovenia if the living conditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina turned out to be poor. It was a difficult decision; after it was made, my husband and I began to prepare our children, who had meanwhile become “true Slovenians”, for our return to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sarajevo.

2. Arrival in Slovenia and Ljubljana and the Beginning of a New Life

2.1 My Colleagues from the Department of Criminal Law and Institute of Criminology Helped me in All Kinds of Ways

The war that started in April 1992 completely changed our life in Sarajevo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. With two children, aged seven and five, I left Sarajevo; my husband initially stayed in Sarajevo. I arrived in Ljubljana by train via Zagreb around 1 May. I was there for the first time although I did already know some of the colleagues from the Department of Criminal Law at the Faculty of Law in Ljubljana from previous joint meetings with the departments of criminal law in former Yugoslavia; in 1988, one of these meetings had been held in Sarajevo.

I telephoned them during the Labour Day holidays and told them that I had left Sarajevo because of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and that I was currently in Ljubljana. They immediately asked me to come to the Faculty of Law. It was Tuesday, 5 May, and already at our first meeting they were willing to help my family and me. They very quickly found me an apartment, furniture and other necessities. As the days went by, our needs grew and we needed more and more help. My colleagues helped me to organize life for my children and me, to get used to the new environment and new living conditions, and to cope more easily with the uncertainty of being a refugee. They helped me enrol my children in school. My elder son was enrolled in a school near the apartment where we lived and started second grade in 1992. When my younger son was ready to start school a year later, my colleagues helped me enrol him in the same school. We also received help from the colleagues from the Institute of Criminology. I assisted in the library at the Institute of Criminology and also received financial compensation for the work I did. I had a desk so I could read and write, I had a computer, I studied languages. I knew I was safe, that I could go there every day and that I was welcome.

I was also engaged in voluntary work in Slovenian voluntary organizations that worked with refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina, taking part in providing psychosocial assistance to those who were living in Slovenia as refugees (usually people in refugee centres), as well as those who were set to leave for other countries around the world.

2.2 My Professional Education and Work

Despite the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, my colleagues encouraged me to continue with my professional education. Prior to leaving Sarajevo, I had worked at Sarajevo University Faculty of Law as a senior assistant at the Department of Criminal Law. My priority was to continue to work on my doctoral dissertation on the position of witnesses in criminal proceedings. I had started to work on my doctoral dissertation in the late 1980s, and my husband sent me my notes and previously prepared material in late 1993 from Sarajevo (they arrived in Ljubljana by mail, via Switzerland). I had great working conditions at the Institute of Criminology: I had a library full of books and magazines at my disposal, and I could discuss various issues relating to my doctoral dissertation with exceptional professors and younger colleagues. They encouraged me to continue with my work, which was not always easy with the tragic circumstances in Sarajevo and Bosnia and Herzegovina in mind. Thanks to their help and support, I managed to complete my doctoral dissertation before my return to Sarajevo.

My professional development was not limited to writing my doctoral dissertation. I was enabled to attend professional and scientific conferences in Slovenia and beyond of its borders (Poland, England) during my time as a refugee and thus advance my professional education. I was also able to continuously monitor developments in the field of criminal law, as well as debates on matters of criminal law and criminology that were being intensively discussed in the last decade of the past century in the European states, the US and Canada, and of which I learned at unforgettable daily meetings at the Institute of Criminology. Finally, I was publishing articles on current topics from the field of criminal law in the *Journal of Criminal Investigation and Criminology*.

3. The Gravity of Refugee Uncertainty and the Perspective of Solidarity

Refugee life involves trauma, loss of home, loss of family, or separation from family, loss of job, loss of education options, and loss of many opportunities for normal development and progress. Refugee life requires resolving complex cultural, linguistic, social and other issues, including issues of national affiliation and identity. It was noted a long time ago that two processes in particular occupy the thoughts of refugees – on the one hand there is the process of getting used to the new environment, and on the other are the thoughts of returning home. And there is also the feeling that once you lose your home because of war, it is difficult to build a new one somewhere else. The truth is that being a refugee changes your life overnight.

My period of being a refugee because of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina lasted for four years. When I came to Ljubljana, I thought I was going to stay there for no more than 15 days. In fact, four years went by. In June 1994 my husband joined us in Ljubljana.

Like our fellow citizens from Bosnia and Herzegovina, we signed up with the Red Cross and received the status of temporary refugees immediately upon our arrival in Ljubljana. This

status gave us the right to healthcare, free public transportation in the city, assistance with buying food, and we also received the necessary information.

4. Integration into a New Community and Looking Back on it Today

4.1 Integration into a New Community

I have already described various excerpts from my refugee life in Slovenia and tried to point out numerous aspects of the integration of myself and my family into Slovenian society in the period from 1992 to 1996, I would still like to emphasise some of the facts from that period that had a major impact on our life back then.

Although we were still living in the former common state of Yugoslavia, Slovenia was after all a new environment to us for many reasons, including different social and economic developments, different customs and culture, and the language is different as well.

Regardless of the differences, I did not experience Slovenian society as closed, especially not in relation to other cultures and customs; on the contrary, I experienced a cultural pluralism. In Slovenia I encountered an attitude of respect towards me, my personality, culture, habits and native language. I was offered social equality, and I felt the need and desire to adapt to the new environment, its culture and customs, as well as to learn the Slovenian language as far as possible.

My children had a normal childhood, they went to school, made friends with a number of their peers (with whom they are still in touch today), learned the Slovenian language, learned about a different culture and different customs, and learned that “no one who is a refugee can survive without the help of the environment in which they are in.” They did not come home from school with a sense of lesser value or discrimination, on the contrary, their teachers, schoolmates and their parents asked them about their father who was still in Sarajevo, they asked them about Sarajevo and what it was like there because of the war.

Thanks to such favourable living conditions, I managed to preserve the memory of my previous life, smells from my homeland and precious memories; I managed to keep my children’s memories of our life in Bosnia and Herzegovina alive and to teach them that good things that happened before the war there were not unknown to others, including Slovenians (for example, the Winter Olympic Games that took place in Sarajevo in 1984 and in which Slovenian athletes participated as well, with some even winning medals for the former common state).

4.2 Integration and Reflections on it Today

The perspectives of someone who is a refugee should not be discussed only in relation to the period of refugee life. Their later perspectives, once the situation leading to their flight has ended, should also be discussed, and whether they decide to stay in the country that offered them shelter as a refugee, whether they go somewhere else, or whether they return to their native country from which they fled.

As I wrote before, my colleagues from the Department of Criminal Law and Institute of Criminology helped me in every possible way. They helped me every day during the four years we spent in Ljubljana, and they even helped me when we left Ljubljana and Slovenia in the sum-

mer of 1996 and returned to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sarajevo. That is why, more than 20 years later, I can never forget how my family and I were accepted in Slovenia: with open arms and open hearts, especially at the Department of Criminal Law and the Institute of Criminology, which became my new home during those four years. The foundations of our new life were built on the help that was at the same time material, moral and humane. This is why Ljubljana and Slovenia are still present in our home in Sarajevo and in our everyday lives.

Even though 20 years have now passed since our return, our ties with Ljubljana and Slovenia have remained firm, continuous and intensive, both on the professional and the private level. Today I work as a full professor at the Faculty of Law of the University of Sarajevo, the same faculty where I worked as a senior assistant prior to moving to Ljubljana, and to which I came back in spring 1996. Many aspects of my professional work today have grown out of my experiences and the connections I made while living, studying and working in Ljubljana from 1992 to 1996, or are based on my firm ties with Slovenia that have lasted until today. Last, but not the least, we monitor current developments in criminological and criminal matters and carry out comparative analyses of the judicial systems both on the national and international level through many joint activities, including, for example, the following: joint projects, at the level of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Slovenia, or at the level of the Institute of Criminology at the Faculty of Law in Ljubljana and the Faculty of Law in Sarajevo; participation in conferences, for example, the experiences of our Slovenian colleagues concerning the application of EU regulations are very important to us in Bosnia and Herzegovina; editing of professional journals, for example, I am a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Criminal Investigation and Criminology*; reviewing of books that are published in Bosnia and Herzegovina or Slovenia. I would also like to mention our cooperation in preparing reports for elections in the teachers' profession at the Faculty of Law in Ljubljana and the Faculty of Law in Sarajevo and exchanges by professors and students.

Considering the fact that my development was strongly influenced by integrative and other processes that I went through as a refugee, I would like to particularly note the following: my life experience in the past 20 years confirms that the statement that "no one who is a refugee can survive without the help of the environment in which they are in" is not only humane but also true; my life story during my four-year stay in Slovenia and Ljubljana confirms that every period is equally important in a person's development, regardless of the situation in which you are in; last, but not the least, a person is shaped by experiences, especially the ones that are positive, and that is why these experiences should be conveyed to others by reconnecting with our thoughts from our past and current life, and in turn giving back or giving forward what others gave us in the past. After all, that is how we can nurture humane relations in the future between one person and another!

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