

# the white house

## FOREWORD

By Donald Reeves, Director of the Soul of Europe

In April 2004 Mittal Steel acquired the iron ore mine at Omarska, near Prijedor in north western Bosnia. The acquisition was part of the company's policy to buy up and then invest in dilapidated state owned mines in central and southeastern Europe.

Omarska (1) was used as a killing camp from May to August 1992 during the Bosnia War. Bosniaks (2) and Croats had been brought to the camp to be exterminated.

Mittal Steel's acquisition provoked demands from the survivors of Omarska for a memorial to be established in the mine complex.

Roeland Baan, Mittal Steel's Chief Executive for Europe realized he had a serious problem. If it was not addressed, the region could be destabilized and this could harm the mine's potential profitability. Survivors demanded a memorial. Serb management and mine workers would have none of it.

The Soul of Europe (3) was commissioned to bring Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats together to agree on a proposal for a memorial.

We were invited because we had demonstrated it was possible to gather together former adversaries in Bosnia. In 2001, at our invitation, senior politicians, religious leaders and business people from Banja Luka, the administrative centre of the Srpska Republic, together with the mayor of Banja Luka and his cabinet, traveled to the International Centre for Reconciliation at Coventry Cathedral for four days of intensive discussion. Our success had been noted in Bosnia by the international community.

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*Though this be madness yet there is method in it*  
Hamlet, William Shakespeare

'Many witnesses speak of good inter-communal relations, of friendships cross ethnic and coincident religious divides, of intermarriages and of generally harmonious relations', write the judges of the ICTY (International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia) in the trial of Dusko Tadic, the first individual from Prijedor to have been tried and sentenced at The Hague for 'acts of persecution, murder and inhuman treatment committed in 1992 against Bosniaks at Omarska.'

Those witnesses were referring to life at Prijedor in the 1980's.

But on April 30<sup>th</sup> 1992 life changed there for ever. A meticulous program of ethnic cleansing began. For six months a group of Serbs, known as the 'Crisis Staff' had been preparing for this day. Non-Serbs were sacked. Bank accounts were frozen. Bosniak

leaders and professional people in Prijedor were rounded up and taken to Omarska, teachers, lawyers, shopkeepers, religious leaders, accountants, local politicians and officials. Travel within Prijedor was almost impossible. Communication with the outside world was suspended. Following an incident when two Serbs were killed, all non-Serbs were required to wear white arm bands and display white flags. In all, forty three thousand people, all non-Serbs – and about half of the population fled, disappeared or were driven into exile or taken to Omarska and other camps to be tortured and killed. The precise number of those who died is still unknown, but there were certainly more than three thousand and less than four thousand.

The purpose of this barbarism was to create a pure and greater Serbia. It was orchestrated from Belgrade and was the major political impulse behind the war in Croatia and Bosnia. Western governments, initially, were reluctant to intervene, giving the excuse that these conflicts were merely stirring up ancient tribal hatreds. Serbs often told us: ‘This was a civil war.’ We firmly contradicted them.

When the war finally came to an end in December 1995, Bosnia was divided into two entities, the mainly Bosnia/Croat entity whose capital is Sarajevo, and the Republika Srpska, the predominantly Serb entity, whose administrative centre is Banja Luka. The Republika Srpska had been proclaimed in January 1992, but the Dayton Accord did not allow it to have the status of an independent state. But both entities had the trappings of independence: presidents, prime ministers, various ministries, separate flags, different national anthems and coats of arms.

The international community required the entities to work together to create a modern European state. Under their constant pressure a structure has been created for a single police force, a joint army, a state border and customs service, a single judiciary and much more. But there is a marked reluctance by Bosnian politicians of all the ethnic groups to inhabit the structure, because of the enduring strength of nationalism on all sides.

Prijedor, the second city after Banja Luka in the Republika Srpska, received special attention from the United Nations and a range of international agencies to encourage the return of those driven from their homes. Prijedor is geographically closer to the Federation while Srebrenica for example is close to Serbia. Moreover, the Bosniak villages and settlements around Prijedor had long been homogeneous. Better to return to a ruined village and rebuild there than to return to an ethnically mixed area. Some of the Bosniaks and survivors of Omarska whom we would meet in the following pages were returnees to these villages. Twenty thousand are said to have returned, but the figure is now lower. There was no attempt by the UN and its satellites to integrate the returnees into Serb Prijedor. Intimidation, discrimination and a completely inadequate school system led many to leave. Certainly driving through some of these villages in an early winter evening is to be struck by the darkness, little if any street lighting and most houses standing empty.

This broad perspective omits one significant factor: the mistrust and suspicion that many Bosnians, especially public figures and officials had for ‘westerners’. Five years in

Bosnia had prepared us for this. Serbs believe the West want to demolish the entities, so the Republika Srpska would cease to exist (and with it their identity as Serbs) Bosniaks feel betrayed by the West for not preventing the massacre at Srebrenica and failing to capture Radovan Karadjic and General Mladic. The Croats, the smallest ethnic group in Bosnia, feel ignored and marginalized.

Moreover as we learnt from many Bosnian friends, there was palpable anger at the swarms of NGO's and agencies, large and small, which parachuted into Bosnia after the end of the war. Indiscriminate interaction, far from being welcomed, was often interpreted as a lack of respect.

Therefore as well as trying to bring Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats together, we had to convince them of our commitment to being of use. We were like a ground bass. If the note sounded firm and clear, then their trust in us as mediators could develop, and the discordant notes had some possibilities of resolution.

In this we did have some success. After an early meeting with Serb and Bosniak women, one of them, Danica Vujcic, a Serb manager at the mine headquarters, thanked us for coming: 'You show human qualities; and you keep on coming back.' Six months later after a difficult meeting, noticing the look of anxiety on our faces, she asked: 'Why are you looking so sad?' I replied: 'I was not sure if we had done enough, and if we should have done more.' She put her hand on my arm encouragingly and said: 'It will be all right. You'll see. It will be all right.'

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We devised a plan. We had to discover if any Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats would be ready to meet and engage in serious conversations about the past. Finding this was so, we then gathered people together and finally set up meetings for Bosniaks and Serbs to develop plans for the memorial. These were presented at a conference in Banja Luka in December 2005 before the local and international media. From April 2005 to February 2006 the Soul of Europe spent half of every month in Prijedor.

There is now a mass of expertise and wisdom in mediation, conflict resolution and processes of reconciliation, some of which we drew on (4). Practitioners and academics produce a steady flow of sophisticated approaches to facilitation, negotiation and all manner of group work.

But at its heart the road towards reconciliation is a long, hard and profoundly human activity. These are not always realized by techniques, although they can help. And the journey never ends. It is never completed. Politics and history are not like that. There is always more to be done. But without reconciliation, even partial reconciliation, there is descent into barbarism and never-ending violence.

So from our experience we knew we had to be ready to hear the raw memories of Bosniaks and Serbs (Croats had mostly left the area, so they hardly figure in our story).

We knew we would need to be patient and to listen well. We knew humility would be required of us, for we were after all visitors in a country not our own. We realized we would need all our own wisdom to interpret what we were being told. We had to be alert, so nothing was missed. We knew we would have to be prepared to take risks, that the outcome of tense and awkward meetings might be unpredictable. We knew from the day we arrived in Prijedor that there would no short cuts, no quick fixes and no instant solutions.

This is the story of what happened.

## NOTES

- 1 For more information about the Prijedor region during the Bosnia War:
  - a) The Prijedor Report – final report of the United Nations Commission of Experts. S/1994/674/Add.2 (Volume 1)
  - b) *Raw Memory – Prijedor, Laboratory of Ethnic Cleansing* by Isabelle Wesselingh and Arnaud Vaulerin, Saqi Books. ISBN 086356528X
- 2 BOSNIAK – Bosnian Muslims are invariably described as Bosniaks, in order to separate their identity from religion. The word Bosniak means Bosnian and was once used for all inhabitants of Bosnia, regardless of faith. The other main ethnic groups in Bosnia are Serbs (Orthodox Christian) and Croats (Catholics).
- 3 THE SOUL OF EUROPE – see [www.soulofeurope.org](http://www.soulofeurope.org)  
For the memorial project we had a team of six. This was made up of two project managers: Anel Alisic (Bosniak) and Zoran Djukic (Serb Croat), an interpreter, Emir Muhic (Bosniak), a driver, Misha Stojnic (Serb), Peter Pelz and Donald Reeves, directors of the Soul of Europe. Kate Goslett, psychotherapist and chair of the Soul of Europe's Advisory Council, joined the team for one visit.
- 4 The writings of John Paul Lederach, Professor of International Peacebuilding at the Joan B Kroc Institute of International Peace Studies at Notre Dame University, particularly *The Moral Imagination*, Oxford University Press 2005 ISBN 0-19-517454-2

*Democracy and Deep Rooted Conflict: Options for Negotiations*, published by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. ISBN 91-89098-22-6. A most useful handbook.

*The Moral Imagination* by Donald Reeves, available on the Soul of Europe's website (see above). This lecture given at Lambeth Palace in May 2006 is a reflection on the Omarska project, incorporating the insights of John Paul Lederach.