
Bosnia, thirty years after the war. Omerspahic (former prisoner): "I hate no one"

(Sarajevo) "I was born in the village of Godjenje, in the township of Han Pijesak, in the eastern region of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was a multiethnic village, with a majority of Serbs, but in nearby villages many residents were Bosniaks. No one cared what religion you professed or where you came from until April 1992. Until then, life flowed peacefully." Thus begins the story of **Amir Omerspahic**. He describes to SIR the conflict that turned Croats, Bosniaks and Serbs against each other in the years 1992-1995, with a string of horrors that were finally stopped with the signing of the Dayton Agreement (November 1995). The story of Amir is not only the dramatic war account of a young Bosniak, it is also a testimony that sheds light on the fate of countless individuals (over half a million. Ed.'s note) who were deported and imprisoned in more than 960 concentration camps. Thirty years later, the memories of those years remain vivid and detailed. **The story.** "I was 17 when the Yugoslav, or rather Serbian, army and its allied militias started attacking in the spring of 1992. It soon became clear that from then on, what was once everyone's army would represent only one side. At the beginning of June, the Serbs shelled my village and the neighbouring ones, all of them Muslim. All we could do was flee into the woods and hide in the mountains. Many people were killed, including children, many were left disabled." But that was to be only the beginning, because in September 1992 the village of Amir was razed to the ground, and the young man and his family were forced to seek shelter in the nearby town of Zepa. But also Zepa was shelled by Serbian paramilitaries, which continued in spite of the fact that NATO had enforced a no-fly zone over Bosnia. In addition, the local population was starving because the Serbs were blocking the passage of humanitarian supplies. In May 1993, the UN declared Zepa a safe area. "At that time," Amir recalls, "things started to improve, but we couldn't leave the area because it was besieged." The situation remained unchanged until July 1995, when Serb forces attacked and conquered Zepa and the neighbouring villages. "We were in a state of panic because we had learned of the Srebrenica massacre that had occurred a few days earlier from a group of survivors. Bosnian Serb militias under the command of General Ratko Mladić had killed over eight thousand Bosnian Muslim men." The only chance of survival was to cross the river Drina and pass the Serbian border. But on August 2, 1995, my companions and I were captured by the Serbs who killed a friend of ours before our very eyes as a mark of their welcome." Since then, there was nothing but violence and humiliation: "They forced us to line up in a column two by two, with our hands behind our necks, and forced us to run in the woods. While we ran they beat us on the head. Only then did I realise I was bleeding but I couldn't move my hands. I had a serious wound on my right hand. They then threw us into trucks, we were crammed together to the point that some of the prisoners suffocated to death. When we arrived to a small Serbian village, we were transferred to the local police. I thought our conditions would improve, but the inferno was about to begin. We were interrogated, charged with crimes we had never committed, beaten, humiliated in every way for days on end. They gave us inedible food, not to mention the total absence of hygiene. When we arrived, we were also given Serbian names because we had to call each other by our Serbian names, we had to pray like Orthodox Christians, and we had to do the sign of the Cross. The very first time I made the sign of the cross I made a mistake and for that I was slapped by a soldier. In the meantime, the wound on my right hand had worsened, the infection made it impossible for me to move my arm. My health conditions were getting worse. I was seen by a doctor who ordered that I be immediately admitted to hospital because I had gangrene at an advanced stage." At the hospital, Amir was treated by a doctor: "For the first time after a long period, I felt some human warmth again thanks to that doctor who saved my life. I lost part of my thumb but it doesn't matter. When I was dismissed to be brought back to the prison camp, the doctor gave me a blanket - until then I had slept on the bare concrete floor - and the soldiers were ordered not to beat me any more. From then on, I was only subjected to psychological torture. I finally left that

concentration camp on January 29, 1996.?

"I never understood the reason for so much hatred against us, from people we had never seen in our lives."

Inside the tunnel. When Amir left that camp, he entered a tunnel of isolation from the outside world, a tunnel of health disorders and silence. The only glimmer of light remained the face of that Serbian doctor, "the face of the person who saved me. That person, the people I saw as my enemy, had my same heart, my same soul." **"Let us choose peace together."** He finally received what was to be a providential invitation from Caritas Bosnia to participate in one of their many peace-building programmes where participants would meet their enemies, they too interned in other camps, victims of the same atrocities. The name of the programme was "Let's Choose Peace Together" - promoted by Caritas Bosnia with the support of the Catholic Relief Service (the international humanitarian agency of the Catholic Church in the United States). "As I listened to their stories", Amir recalls, "I reflected on myself and my experience. Thanks to psychologists and therapists, I started to process at least part of my story and now I am able to talk about it." Nowadays, Amir travels around Bosnia to share his story in schools, universities, local communities, associations and with young people. And he is not alone in his efforts. In fact he is accompanied by other fellow travellers, Serbs and Croats, because, he points out: "We are all victims of the tragedy of deportation and war. Together we share our stories and conceal nothing. We do our best to ensure that what we suffered on our skin will not happen to others." "I don't hate the Serbs, since, as with any people, there are the good and the bad. In my experience, at the hardest moments when my life was at risk, I was saved by a Serb who did not ask me who I was. He treated me as a person. I am not haunted by hatred, I feel I am walking on the right path, the path of mutual understanding and reconciliation." That was not an easy task in post-Dayton Bosnia: "At the beginning we were also labelled as traitors. But it really didn't matter as I felt and continue to believe that it was the right thing to do. We have been speaking everywhere in Bosnia, in places with a Croat, Bosniak and Serb majority. Our greatest pride lies in the talks we give to young people, in schools, in groups, because it is unfair for young people to have to face the experience of war."

"We don't talk about the guilty. We share our personal story".

"When we see that these young people understand that divisiveness and hatred will never be worthwhile, our struggle and pain of remembering is rewarded. I have learned that there is still a great need to talk, to share, to explain. It is for the Courts of Law to determine what happened. Unfortunately, our politicians have no interest in talking about these things. Their mindset is still one of divisiveness, indeed even of war. They care more about power than about the good of the people, whom they seduce with the myth of nationalism, whose sole purpose is to secure their votes." This is also why Amir is concerned about what is happening in Ukraine: "We hope that the conflict will not spread to the Balkans. We should learn from the experience of the 1992 war." In this respect, Amir expresses his gratitude to Italy and to the thousands of volunteers who helped the Bosnian people during the war. "Bosnians are very fond of Italy. We even cheered for you at the last European Football Championship," he concludes with a smile.

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