

In Focus

Back to Bosnia, a Painful Journey Home

Back to Bosnia, a documentary winner of the MSN/Visa Ideas Happen Award 2003, chronicles the Vajraca family's return—after eleven years of exile—to their native hometown and still-occupied flat. What they find is a city still very much alive – but one that is steeped in the unspoken legacy of ethnic cleansing and hesitant to re-examine its past.



“I went back to Bosnia wanting it to embrace me,” says Sabina Vajraca, who directed and produced the documentary. “But it slapped me in the face instead. It was like following a string that still connects you to your homeland, following it all that way only to find that there is no one holding the string on the other end. It was nothing like home.”

On their family's journey back home, Sabina and her parents discover that remnants of ethnic tension still fester in Bosnia despite the official conclusion of the conflict. Before the war, Banja Luka, the largest city in northern Bosnia and now the capital of the Republika Srpska entity, was a melting pot, with Bosnians, Muslims, and Serbs living together in peace – often even in mixed marriages. The city, however, located in northwestern Bosnia, was of strategic importance to the Bosnian Serb Forces and witnessed the bulk of the most severe and systematic “ethnic cleansing” according to a report issued by Human Rights Watch in 1994.



“Banja Luka is the forgotten child of the war,” says Sabina. “It's like the dirty family secret that no one wants to talk about.” She believes that what happened in Banja Luka was a clever maneuver on the part of the Serbian government, which inflicted psychological terror on the city's population rather than enforcing an outright massacre. Instead, such massacres were happening in the towns and villages surrounding Banja Luka as the propaganda of fear. The people of Banja Luka were told that they were to be next – and they were given the “choice” to leave peacefully rather than being forcibly evicted. It was a choice that most people accepted.

“They eliminated 80 percent of the city's population and replaced it with Serb families,” says Sabina. “To me, the biggest tragedy is that Banja Luka is still mostly Serbian.” The street signs have been rewritten in Cyrillic, the houses have been renumbered, even the city's new flag and police uniforms bear the controversial “4-C's” symbol – a symbol of intimidation used by the Serbs during the war to denote pure Serbian territory. “Even the bakery sells loaves of bread imprinted with this symbol,” says Ali Hanson, the film's producer and editor.

In the film, Sabina and her family find that the city they left behind has been changed almost beyond recognition – except that some remnants of the old days have remained unnervingly preserved. When the Vajraca family arrives at their flat, the door is answered by the same Serbian official who forced Emir, Sabina's father, from their home a decade ago.

The man now lives in the flat with his wife and children, including a daughter Sabina's age who sleeps in the girl's old room. A lamp Emir and his wife

bought years ago, when they had filled the flat (their first home) with furnishings from their travels and family vacations, remains in the home that has been taken over by strangers. A set of glasses hand-painted by Sabina's mother is now used by the Serbian family as their own.

A polite but pinched discussion ensues regarding ownership rights to the flat and its contents, but while the adults attempt cordiality, Sabina and her Serbian peer find it difficult to temper their emotions. This tendency towards repression on the part of the adult generation countered by the fervent desire of their children to understand the past is one of the film's broader undercurrents. In fact, one of the film's greatest strengths is its ability to tackle this issue while restraining itself from slipping into reckless melodrama. Emotion is shown sparingly, but powerfully – perhaps an indication that the film is, after all, truly Bosnian.

According to Hanson, it is this potent yet controlled show of emotion that has been evoking response from the film's viewers, no matter their ethnicity. "There is something about the film which brings these emotions up for people," Hanson says. "The film is making people start to talk about these issues."

Some have called Sabina brave for sharing her story, but Sabina sees it more simply. "I do not think I was brave enough to tell the story," she says. "I just did it." Bravery aside, it's a story of collective significance shared by thousands of others who were forced from their homes during the conflict, and a story of questions with no real answers. It is Sabina's generation – children who grew up in the shadow of war – now seeking to untangle the confusion of their pasts amidst politics, the rhetoric of hatred, and parents who would rather look towards the future than dwell on the past.

But for Sabina, looking forward means stepping back and coming to terms with her history. She emphasizes that *Back to Bosnia* is not meant to be a political film, although its subject matter is inherently political – rather, it is a tool she used to help her tap into emotions she had been holding onto for years and needed to expunge. "I was seething with rage because my childhood had been taken away," she says. "But when I went back, the bitterness and rage came out with the sadness, and I could release everything. And I believe that sadness, that deep emotional connection to my city, should be shown."

Sabina Vajraca (Director and Producer) and Ali Hanson (Producer and Editor) of *Back to Bosnia* (2003). The film will be featured during the AFI Fest (the Los Angeles International Film Festival) this November 3-13 (<http://www.afi.com/onscreen/afifest/2005/>). For more information go to: www.backtobosnia.com

by Erin Marie Daly

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