

Soundings

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Refusing ethnic closure

*A women's therapy centre
in Bosnia-Herzegovina*

Photo-
narrative
by Cynthia
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Zenica, Central Bosnia



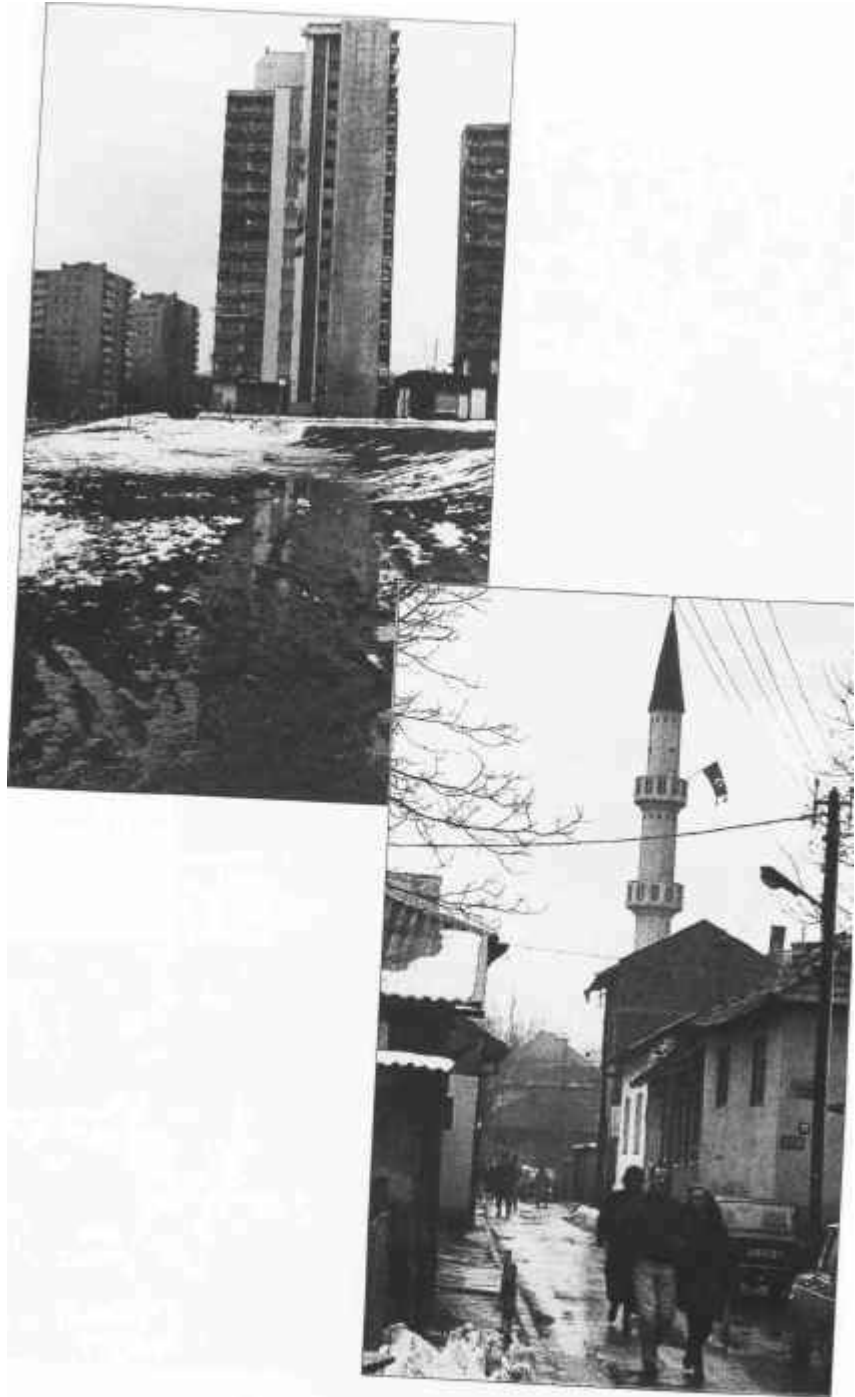
Devastation in a nearby town: ethnic 'cleansing' like this has driven refugees to Zenica

The agreement they call 'Daytonski' has brought a ceasefire to Bosnia. But as 1995 ended the people of the industrial city of Zenica still felt embattled. Winter weather had taken over the blockade of central Bosnia where Serb *četniks* and Croatian *ustase* left off.

Roads over the mountain ranges were hazardous with deep snow, tumultuous thaws, surging rivers, bridges unequal to the weight of monster military vehicles and aid convoys.



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The water supply was rationed, electricity dodgy, and a curfew still prevailed. No smoke yet from the tall stacks of the steelworks that used to employ 20,000. Effort centred on the basic stuff of life - firewood, bread and cabbage.

Zenica was defended throughout the war by the Bosnian Army. It has taken in 70,000 expelled people, from places whose names are inscribed in the dark book of atrocity: Vitez, Mostar, Visegrad, Zepa.



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Working with women refugees in Zenica is Medica, a women's therapy centre.

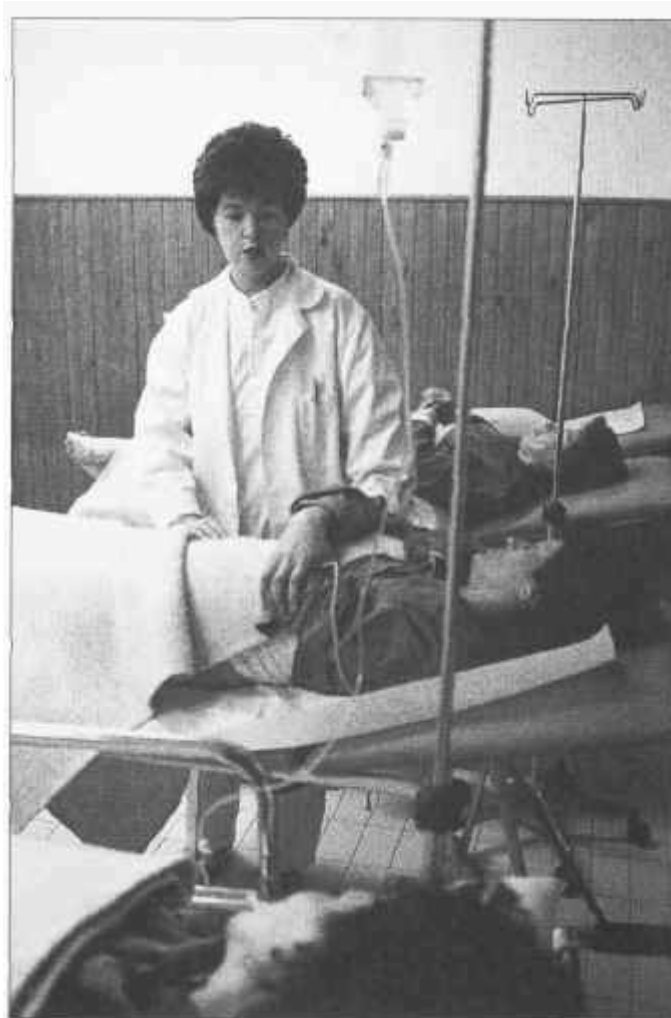
Monika Hauser, a gynaecologist from Germany, was disturbed by Western failure to respond to reports in 1992 of the mass rape of women as deliberate war strategy by the Bosnian Serb Army. She came to Zenica and made contact with Bosnian women doctors and psychologists already coping with war trauma.



Ensuring supplies during the war has involved dangerous road journeys to and from the Croatian coast. Medica's drivers use radio-equipped four-wheel drive vehicles.

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The project they built together, supported by donations mainly from the German women's movement, now has 60 staff, including a gynaecology clinic with fourteen doctors and nurses, a team of seven psychotherapists and social workers, and a mobile health unit. It treats outpatients from the area and its camps, and gives longer-term therapy to around 80 severely traumatised women and children housed in its three centres.



The gynaecology unit gives medical support to both refugee and local women.

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The weapons used in the Bosnian war were crafted to sex-difference. For women and girls they included systematic torture-by-rape, abduction, enslavement and in some cases murder, in concentration camps and prison-houses. Involving how many women and girls.⁷ - certainly several thousands.

Both the Bosnian Serb Army and the Croat HVO are implicated.

The crimes are written in the survivors. This young woman who refuses sleep at night rather than surrender to the nightmares. This one who still has choking fits. Another who's so deeply harmed that the pain is entombed in wordlessness - and must be read in her eyes.

Eyes which do in fact say enough.

The women who collectively run Medica have to heal themselves and each other as well as their patients. The aggression has left no-one unhurt and many have themselves been forcibly uprooted from somewhere else.



Psychotherapists work with individuals and groups of women and their children.

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But there is a lot of love and gaiety about the place. The nursery school is bright and noisy. Solid, warm meals and log fires distance the memory of hunger and cold in the woods. Evenings knitting in front of the TV suggest old habits. One of those Balkan love songs on the radio and the young ones are up and dancing. Better still, U2 or the Pet Shop Boys.



New Year performance: Medica's children dance the Charleston

Because, contrary to the media image of the 'refugee' - scarved, weathered and confused - many of the displaced two million Bosnians are bright, educated, travelled and competent. It's just that their social and economic life has been torn in shreds. We'd all look a bit rustic if that happened to us.

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The strife in Bosnia-Hercegovina is commonly represented as a war between ethnic groups. It isn't. It's a war between two ideas: the ethnic principle and the principle of mixity. Or, you could say, between fascism and democracy. We're losing.

Bosnia was the Yugoslav republic that was most 'Yugoslav', had the most mixed marriages, the most tightly-woven texture of ethnic groups. The efforts of Serbia and Croatia over the last five years have not (quite, yet) destroyed this quality.

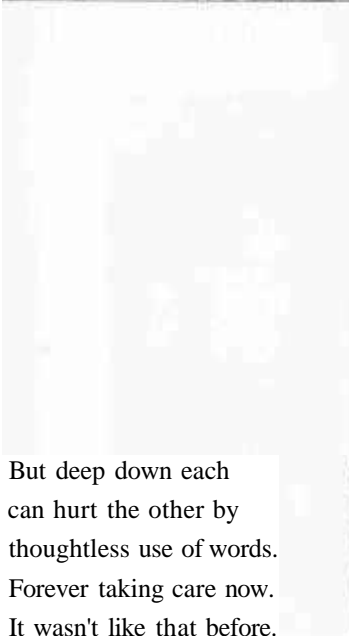


Medica consciously keeps alive the Bosnian culture of multi-ethnicity. So while women of Muslim background are a majority, women of Serb, Croat and other ethnic groups are part of the team. Mostly, you can only tell by names: Selma will be Muslim, Duska will be Serb.

At one level co-existence is no problem: everyone wants the same kind of future. Peace, democracy, mixity. The project stops work to celebrate Muslim, Catholic and Orthodox festivals. *It's* done in the spirit of a gift to those whose day it is from those of other traditions.



*Women of different back-
grounds work together at
Medica. A face reveals
nothing about ethnicity.
And there are numberless
different ways of being a
Muslim, a Serb or a Croat.*



But deep down each
can hurt the other by
thoughtless use of words.
Forever taking care now.
It wasn't like that before.



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And what of men? Them of the gun and the phallus. Yes. But you can't hate them all. Not while you're longing for your own to come back safe and sound. As with 'Serb' and 'Croat', so with men. You have to invoke a distinction: the Good and the Evil.





The trouble is, some men are arriving back in town more than a little crazy. Government soldiers, still in combat fatigues, saw in the New Year with volleys of rifle fire and exploding grenades.



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All over former Yugoslavia women's groups have found war and the aftermath of war bring more domestic violence against women. If peace comes, Medica will still have work to do. But it will be painful to acknowledge the one who may harm you is sometimes here at home, not the other side of an ethnic battle line.





Muslim graveyard and steelworks, Zenica.

This essay derives from a research project on gender and cross - communal relations in conflict zones, carried out by the author in the Centre for Research in Gender, Ethnicity and Social Change, City University. It is the second of a planned series of three photo-narratives in Soundings, representing women's projects in conflict zones.

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