

*Bosnian Refugees
in America
New Communities,
New Cultures*

CLINICAL SOCIOLOGY

Research and Practice

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New Cultures**
Reed Coughlan and Judith Owens-Manley

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Bosnian Refugees in America New Communities, New Cultures

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Preface

In April of 1992, war began in Bosnia. Sarajevo, site of the 1984 Winter Olympics, and, we were told, one of the most beautiful cities in the world, became a city under siege. For all of the people of Bosnia, life shifted in unimaginable ways in a matter of hours, days, or weeks. An immediate exodus began from Bosnia, and people who had never anticipated leaving their country became refugees, dependent upon a world system of resettlement for displaced persons.

This book relates the experiences of a hundred Bosnian families who came to Utica, a town in upstate New York. Bosnians in Utica came here as refugees beginning in 1993, having fled from the wars of succession in the former Yugoslavia. Our study evolved over several years as a result of our interests in the war in Bosnia and the massive flow of refugees that it precipitated. We began work on the project in the late 1990s as we set out to learn about the war and to explore refugee experiences of displacement, transit, and resettlement. Our intent is to portray the experience of Bosnian refugees in one American city and to capture, in their words, in as much detail as possible their adjustment to a new community and a new culture.

The community that serves as host to these Bosnian families is unique in several respects. It is a small city with a relatively large population of refugees who have been resettled here by the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees (hereinafter, MVRCR). MVRCR was established in 1979 with a mission to resettle refugees and to aid them in becoming self-sufficient. Since its inception, MVRCR has assisted nearly 11,000 refugees from more than twenty different countries. Approximately 5,000 of these refugees are from Bosnia.

In addition to the interviews with one hundred families and the review of literature on the war and the refugee experience, information about the resettlement experience of Bosnians was gathered from a number of other sources. Owens-Manley has served on the Board of Directors of MVRCR for eight years and is currently the Board president. Both authors are also well acquainted with many current and past staff members at MVRCR who have been generous with their time and information. Also, through our many informal contacts within the Bosnian community, we have been apprised of news, events, and rumors that shaped the Bosnian experience in upstate New York.

This project was a continuous learning experience for us, and even our considerable access to and familiarity with parts of the Bosnian community were not enough at some junctures. At one point about three quarters of the way through our interviews, we were told that there was a rumor afloat that we might be working for the United States Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A.) or the Federal Bureau of Investigation (F.B.I.) and that we were trying to catch people working “under the table.” We immediately halted our interviews and planned a large picnic in a town park for the seventy-five families whom we had interviewed. A Bosnian caterer prepared six whole lambs, barbequed on the spit, in Bosnian style, and we hired a Bosnian band to provide music for folk dancing at the picnic. The picnic was a great success. It helped to dispel the rumor and allowed us to complete the interviews in the ensuing weeks and months.

This project would not have been possible without the support of and funding from Empire State College, State University of New York (SUNY) and Hamilton College. The initial research and interviews in 1999–2000 were supported by a year-long research grant awarded to Coughlan by the SUNY Empire State College Arthur Imperatore Community Fellowship. Empire State College later provided a half-year sabbatical that made the completion of the manuscript possible. In October 2003, a travel grant awarded by Empire State College made it possible for Coughlan to travel to Croatia and Bosnia, where he visited several families whose relatives we had interviewed in Utica. This visit helped to corroborate some of the information we discuss in the book. The Arthur Levitt Public Affairs Center at Hamilton College supported the project extensively through the funding of student research assistants, equipment and supplies, library resources, and funding for completion of the manuscript.

We express special thanks to the following individuals, without whom we could not have finished our project and our book: our colleagues Linda Sallett, Kris Paap, Linda Weber, and Hal Goldman for reading and providing invaluable comments on drafts of our work; librarian Jacquelyn Coughlan, Institute of Technology at Utica-Rome, SUNY, for her considerable assistance in locating resources for us and the reference librarians at Hamilton College for their assistance in finding maps for this volume and for obtaining the necessary copyright permissions; Karen Raybeck and Sally Carman for assisting in the preparation of the final manuscript; Colin Owens for the graphic design of the illustrations; and Hamilton College student research assistants from the beginning of the project—Timothy Palmer, Tonya Bloomer, and Amela Porca.

Our interpreters Mirha Osijan and Denis Mistic traversed a language barrier for us that we would never have been able to cross. Denis became more than our interpreter and was truly a collaborator with us in the research project, as well as a friend. We are also grateful to our friends from Bosnia, now American citizens, who graciously agreed to read the manuscript and provide feedback on short notice: Berislav and Lily Vidovic, Denis Mistic, Suvada Veiz, and Mirha Osijan.

We are, of course, primarily indebted to all of the families who consented to share their stories with us. Nearly every family we interviewed invited us back to talk, to have coffee, and to share a meal. They were generous in their conversation, anxious to describe their experiences, and sometimes frustrated with the language barrier themselves. We had approached our initial interviews with a little trepidation about sensitive topics; we wished first and foremost to do no harm. But our overwhelming experience confirmed what Stevan Weine reported about his work with Bosnian refugees in Chicago. As he puts it, “testimony functions in both the private and the public realms, as a means for individual recovery and as a means of bearing witness to historical and social realities related to political violence” (Weine *et al.*, 1998, p. 1720). We were not engaged in psychotherapeutic work, but our visits and conversations with families who had experienced ethnic cleansing bore witness to their lived experience; these families often thanked us for caring enough to ask and to listen. Now it is our turn, once again, to thank them.

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