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Bosnian refugees in Australia: identity, community and labour market integration

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Introduction

Refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina¹ ('Bosnia' in further text) were the largest single component of the Australian humanitarian immigration program during the 1990s (Jupp 2002). Almost without exception, Bosnians arrived as 'quota refugees' with permanent visas, and have mostly settled in large Australian cities. Over the past decade, an estimated 4,000–5,000 settled in Perth, Western Australia, and between 12,000 and 14,000 in Sydney and surrounding areas of New South Wales. This research has been conducted in Perth and Sydney.

While exploring the process of Australian resettlement of Bosnians I have identified several key issues. These issues - identity, community and re-establishing 'normal life' - featured prominently in refugee narratives. The central condition for the re-establishment of 'normalcy' seemed to be gaining employment, and for professional people, gaining a satisfactory occupational status. All three issues are complex and very much interconnected in the process of resettlement of Bosnians in Australia. The issue of community seems to be central; Bosnian communities represent a crucial micro-context of resettlement, both in terms of identity reconstruction and employment, especially in the early stages of resettlement.

Community is also a medium, a breathing space of culture, whether conceived as national, ethnic or professional culture, or any form of 'subculture'. 'Culture' is an important part of people's identities. However, when people migrate, 'culture' is not something they can pack in a suitcase; it is rather a set of social processes, alive and dynamic, that needs the context of a community which shares customs, cultural practices and narratives, myths and the feeling of belonging in order to live on.

In the course of war and forced migration, Bosnian communities fell apart and cultures became uprooted, finding themselves in a vacuum, or at least in transition. The same applies to the identities embedded in these cultures. Apart from an obvious need of refugees from a different linguistic and cultural background for community support in a new setting, re-constructing the familiar culture and rebuilding identities threatened in the process of forced migration made the establishment of communities a post-arrival priority.

In the Bosnian case, the processes of breaking apart of communities and uprooting of culture started at home, before the war and geographic displacement, during the last communist decade of the 1980s. Strictly speaking, processes of social change are a constant and inherent part of a social dynamic, although sometimes subdued and latent and in other times overt, vigorous or even violent. For Bosnians, they reached paroxysm in the late 1980s and 1990s. During the 1980s the three main Bosnian ethnic groups became increasingly aware of their separate ethnic identities, and political tension was building up.

The process of ethnic separation and development of ethnic antagonisms was substantially influenced by developments in neighbouring Croatia and Serbia, where ethno-nationalist politics ran high and inevitably cast their shadow on the ethnically

¹ Refugees have also arrived from other parts of ex-Yugoslavia (Croatia and Serbia) but Bosnians account for a vast majority of the ex-Yugoslav refugee intake in Australia during the 1990s.

mixed Bosnia-Herzegovina (Ramet 1999). During the Australian resettlement of Bosnians, the issue of ethnicity remains relevant in re-creating communities and rebuilding identities, but seems to have little relevance on labour market integration and other practical resettlement issues. Class and rural-urban background seem to be more relevant in this respect.

For professional people, gaining adequate employment is closely linked to identity reconstruction. For the majority of Bosnians from working-class and rural backgrounds the issue of identity seems to be more associated with the rebuilding of communities after arrival to the place of permanent resettlement. While each of the three issues — community, identity and employment — is complex and comprehensive enough to warrant separate papers, I find them interconnected in a way that requires joint handling. This paper therefore maps them and gives an overview but does not provide a comprehensive analysis. The interested reader will be able to find more detailed accounts of particular resettlement issues in some of my other publications, and elsewhere.²

This paper is based on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The interview sample consisted of Bosnian refugees, service providers who worked in the government-funded refugee resettlement program, and community leaders and activists. Interviews were conducted with 35 refugees, 25 service providers (13 bilingual settlement workers and 12 Australian professionals), and 3 ‘community leaders’ in the period from late 2001 to early 2003. Most bilingual settlement workers (all but 3) were themselves refugees from Bosnia.

The sample of Australian refugee professionals consisted of teachers of migrant English, community nurses, torture and trauma counselors, ‘general’ counselors, community workers and advocates, interpreters and resettlement volunteers. The sample of interviewed refugees consisted of people between 18 and 73 years of age (median age 42 years), who had been in Australia for at least two years at the time of interview (median resettlement period 5.5 years). The refugee sample consisted of 20 women and 15 men, with varied education levels, from one year of formal schooling to postgraduate degrees. This sample is not necessarily representative of the Bosnian refugee population in the two cities, as people with higher education were more willing to participate in the research and be interviewed.

Data were also collected through observation in a Bosnian community centre and the homes of refugees. Another set of observational data that I, for ethical reasons, only use in a general sense, was collected through my professional interpreting work with Bosnian refugees 1996–2000. This professional experience allowed me to become acquainted with the government resettlement program and to identify some and patterns and problems in refugee resettlement. These initial insights prompted further formal research.

² ‘The process of community and identity building among Bosnian Muslims in Western Australia’ *Mots Pluriels*, May 2002, available online at <http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels>; ‘Human capital, acculturation and social identity: Bosnian refugees in Australia’, (with Iain Walker), *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* Vol. 13, pp. 1-23 (2003); see also included list of references.

Bosnian refugees in Australia: where do they come from, and why?

In the 1990s, for the first time since the aftermath of the Second World War, a massive outflow of refugees came from Europe. The ‘war for Yugoslav succession’ raged through Bosnia from 1992 to 1995 and displaced more than 2 million people (Phuong 2001); up to half a million people fled to other countries.³ In the first instance many found refuge in neighbouring Croatia and Serbia, and other ex-Yugoslav republics, and were subsequently granted temporary asylum in European countries, the largest number in Germany. They were later pressured to move on and either return to Bosnia, or permanently resettle in overseas countries such as the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Although hundreds of thousands of Bosnians (refugees as well as internally displaced persons) have returned to their homes since the end of the war, at the end of 2001 about 650,000 Bosnians were still uprooted and in need of a permanent solution (US Committee for Refugees 2002; UNHCR 2002). Nowadays, about 200,000 people from Bosnia are ‘permanently resettled’ all over the world, the largest number in the US. During the past decade, about 30,000 people from Bosnia-Herzegovina settled in Australia (Mistic 2001).

The Bosnian war should be understood in the historical context of not just the Balkans but of Eastern Europe and indeed Europe as a whole. Rather than being a European anomaly and a product of a mythical ‘centuries old ethnic hatred’ in the Balkans — as some authors alleged — Bosnian developments were rather a dramatic consequence of European history. In this history, Eastern Europe and the Balkans have always played a less fortunate role, being divided and dominated as empires (Ottoman, Russian, Habsburg and later Soviet) and the great powers saw fit. The war for Yugoslav succession, and its still unsettled aftermath, was embedded in, and represented, aspects of the crisis that engulfed communist Eastern Europe during the 1980s and 1990s. The economic, political and moral collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, accompanied by the resurgence of nationalism and another round of formation of nation-states (Pavkovic 2001) is the relevant context of the Bosnian crisis in the 1990s.

Australian immigration policy privileged Bosnians over other refugee groups ‘competing’ for Australian residency in the 1990s. The humanitarian immigration quota (between 10,000 and 15,000 permanent visas a year, and usually about 12,000, see IOM 2000) was increased by 2000 places in the financial year 1993–94 to allow for a larger intake of this refugee group (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 1996). This was done on the basis of several perceptions and arguments, some explicit and some only implicit in the public arena. One of them was the ‘community argument’ (see Jupp 1998; 2002). ‘Yugoslav’ communities of considerable size (largest being Croatian, Macedonian and Serbian) were formed during the large wave of economic immigration from ex-Yugoslavia in the late 1960s, and it was expected that these communities would be instrumental in the successful resettlement of Bosnian refugees.

The ‘resettlement potential’ of Bosnians was another argument on their side: their relatively high educational profile and European background were seen as factors

³ Figures from different sources differ and this is my own rough approximation.

which would facilitate their integration into Australian society. The ‘resettlement potential’ argument (Iredale et al. 1996; Jupp 1994) is based on the human capital approach which has dominated Australian migration policies since the 1980s. This approach favours highly skilled, young immigrants with good English language skills as they are seen to be able to contribute more to the host society by ‘reinvesting’ their human capital in the Australian labour market (Iredale 2001).

Implied within the resettlement potential argument is an argument of the cultural closeness of Europeans to the ‘culturally European’ Australia; this argument represents a political residue of the White Australia Policy but still seems to ring plausible to the majority of white Australians. The White Australia Policy, officially abandoned in the late 1960s, nowadays only works through the government’s expectation of public support for the permanent resettlement of ‘invisible refugees’ (cf. Jupp 1995). Thus, based on concern for social cohesion which has always been part of the ongoing immigration debate in Australia, it was politically expedient to privilege the ‘invisible refugees’ over the more visible non-European groups. The Australian public, indeed, supported such a composition of the humanitarian program in the 1990s. The plight of Bosnians, and European refugees in general, seems to have attracted more sympathy in the West than the plight of other, mainly Asian and African refugee groups (Pittaway and Bartolomei 2001).⁴

‘White refugee elite’? The issue of identity in the Australian context

The Australian perception of Bosnians as ‘distant European cousins in trouble’ seems to be reflected in their self-perception: most Bosnians perceive Australia as a white country and an outpost of ‘European culture’, and themselves as consequently ‘belonging’ to it. This perception is partly an outcome of a desperate search for home and identity that inevitably follows forced migration and displacement. Displacement is probably the key word to describe the experience of Bosnians in the 1990s. It goes beyond the experience of spatial displacement: it was, and has been, also a displacement of identity. Various aspects of identity — ethnic identities, ‘territorial’ regional and local identities as well as ‘imagined’ national identities, rural and urban identities, and professional identities — have been threatened or lost as a consequence of displacement (Timotijevic and Blackwell 2001).

Forced migration often strips off the signs and props of identity, temporarily reducing people to the title of ‘refugee’, and sometimes, as in the case of asylum seekers, to no more than their physical selves (Rajaram 2002). The refugee identity is itself stigmatized and people want to shed it as soon as possible (cf. Queensland Health 2002). For this to happen, aspects of social identity need to be reconstructed in the new environment (Colic-Peisker and Walker 2003). The issue of identity loss and reconstruction featured prominently in refugee narratives and was implied when other issues were discussed.

⁴ In 1999 donor governments gave \$207 for every person in need in former Yugoslavia and \$8 per head for those in need in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. European Union emergency assistance to former Yugoslavia in 1999 was four times the amount given to the 70 ACP (Africa/Caribbean/Pacific) states, see *Did You Know? Forced Migration Review*, available at www.fmreview.org, retrieved on 15 April 2003.

Therefore, immediately upon arrival of Bosnians in Australia, the apparent sign of belonging - their 'whiteness' - was employed to counteract the 'otherness' implied in their refugee status: most Bosnians first saw themselves as 'Europeans'. Being European represents a collective identity beyond the discarded Yugoslav identity, or historically notorious 'Balkan identity'. At the same time, 'Europeanness' contains a centuries old Western claim of 'superiority' in regards to non-European cultures, and can thus compensate for the low status of forced migrants and losses they experienced during displacement.

Paradoxically, the claim to European identity sometimes extended to a claim of superiority towards Australian culture as well, as the latter was seen as a 'bastard offspring' of European culture, especially in regards to its convict origin, and as a 'much younger' culture lacking in historical and cultural underpinnings, as several respondents put it. Generally, however, the claim to be 'European' is a claim to be included in a vaguely conceived white Australian identity (cf. Hage 1998). The whiteness and therefore 'invisibility' (cf. Gale 2000) of Bosnians has been a way to create, at least in a superficial and temporary way, a feeling of belonging in the context of displacement and uprooting. Whiteness is also conceived as a shield against prejudice and discrimination in the predominately white environment (cf. Price 2000).

The same psycho-social mechanism seems to be responsible for the perception of Australians of non-European origin as 'others', which came across in comments made by some of my interviewees. The advantageous self-identification of Bosnians as white Europeans also precluded identification with other refugee groups. Distancing from them was observable early upon arrival in Australia, when Bosnians shared government-provided on-arrival accommodation with other refugee groups, mainly Iraqis and various African nationalities. Bosnians considered these refugee groups to be culturally distant from the white, 'culturally European' Australian society, while they 'naturally belonged' to it. Some felt insulted when their European cultural 'know-how' was not sufficiently acknowledged by their sponsors or refugee professionals, and when they felt they were treated the same as refugees from Third World countries (cf. Madjar and Humpage 2000).

For Muslims among Bosnian refugees (over half of them) the Muslim identity — a means of internal differentiation in the Bosnian three-ethnic context even after the context had been transferred to Australia — was usually seen as largely irrelevant in the wider Australian context. Bosnians are again the 'invisible' European Muslims and, coming from a communist country, largely secular (Lopasic 1996). However, the religious aspect of the Muslim identity had been strengthened during the war in the 1990s as the main pillar of their ethnic identity, and a means of further differentiation from Catholic Croats and Orthodox Serbs in Bosnia who, during the war featured as 'ethnic enemies' (Eastmond 1998). Attending mosques, praying and observing religious rules in everyday life had apparently been on the increase among Bosnian Muslims in their homeland since the 1980s. However, only a tiny minority of rural Bosnian Muslim women wear traditional dress with a scarf that covers their hair, which makes them 'visible' in Australian suburbs.

The religious aspect of Islam and its cultural practices, such as an extremely modest female dress code and a general ban on alcohol, are virtually insignificant in the Bosnian Muslim community. The only Muslim cultural practice that seems to be

adopted by a considerable number is celebrating the festivities of *Bajram* (Eid), at the end of Ramadan (the Muslim holy month of fasting), in the community setting, through family and community gatherings and attending a mosque. This, however, may not testify a strong Bosnian Muslims' religious allegiance more than celebrating Christmas does for nominally Christian Australians. Mrs B., a bilingual social worker put it this way:

Being Muslims for Bosnians is more a badge of identity than anything else [...] Most Bosnian Muslims drink, most Bosnian Muslims eat pork, most Bosnian Muslims have never stepped into a mosque; Bosnian Muslims are not very big Muslims when it comes to following Islam. They do respect their imams: it's a sort of public recognition of their role. Imams get acknowledged but I would not call them leaders of the community [on the basis of their religious role]. When imams are invited to community functions there is no alcohol but people bring little flasks and drink under the table so the imam does not see [...] Religion has more importance on paper, publicly, than in people's everyday lives.

In the West, Muslim identity acquired a new meaning after September 11. Many Westerners, and Australians among them, have since seen Islam and the Muslim identity as problematic and potentially dangerous. Consequently, Muslim identity is pushed further into the realm of otherness and has become (even more) socially disadvantageous. Bosnian Muslim refugees are well aware of this but as largely secular and 'invisible' Muslims they do not seem to feel endangered by these developments. The identification of Bosnian Muslims with other Muslim communities is not so much precluded by the perception of Muslim identity as 'deviant' and disadvantageous, but by the perception of cultural differences between European Slavic Muslims and Muslims outside Europe. This European-Muslim tension within the Bosnian identity (European identity seen as advantageous and Muslim as disadvantageous) was articulated in the following way by Mr A., one of the community leaders in Sydney:

Muslims from Bosnia and Herzegovina... [that] has nothing to do with Islam... They never had a religious platform... Bosnian Muslims are people of European civilization, they are Europeans, they understand religion differently from those you can see around here [in Sydney] as belonging to Islam. A person from Bosnia-Herzegovina understands religion in the same way as someone in Mannheim, Berlin, Vienna, New York or Paris... I mean they are not people who are prone to tie their every failure, or success, to God.

The distinction between non-European Muslims as 'real' Muslims and Bosnians as European Muslims was often emphasized during interviews.

The structures of support: extended family and ethnic community

Belonging to communities is one of the main props of people's identities (Martin 1972). There is a strong emphasis on family and community connectedness in Bosnian culture, especially in rural areas, but also in the densely populated cities where daily contacts with neighbours and relatives are a norm (cf. Coughlan and

Owens-Manly 2002). In the case of refugee resettlement, extended family and 'ethnic' community are apparently a source of practical support as well as identity. Many Bosnians nominated or sponsored their aged parents and other close relatives to migrate to Australia. Many financially support their relatives back in Bosnia and elsewhere (Al-Ali et al. 2001; Waxman 2001). The following quote illustrates the strength of family obligation in Bosnian culture:

My sister is still in Germany with her children but not eligible for support any more. She only gets food parcels from charities and we send her some money every month, although we are struggling ourselves. We've only been here for three years, we pay off a home loan and have four children in school. (Mrs H., settled in Perth)

Bosnian refugees in Australia reconstruct their identities through rebuilding their extended families and 'ethnic' communities. Most people chose to remain spatially close to their compatriots. Relatively large residential concentrations (1,000 people or more) can be found in Perth and Sydney. In Perth, the largest concentration is in the north-eastern suburbs around the Bosnian community centre (Colic-Peisker 2002a).

Just as one's own home is seen as a symbol and a stronghold of the family, a meeting place for a community seems to have great significance too. The Bosnian cultural and recreational centre in the Perth's suburb of Beechboro was built in 1994–95, and officially opened in 1998 on the Bosnian Statehood Day, with the Miss Bosnia beauty contest, and in the presence of the Bosnian ambassador from Canberra, several local politicians and the Western Australia's Minister for Family Services. The soccer pitch was opened in 2000. A community leader told me that about forty boys gathered there for soccer training most nights. Monthly community events, usually dance parties, but also visits from Bosnian artists, are organized at the club. A similar development is taking place in Sydney, where a community centre is currently under construction on the south-western edge of the metropolitan area in Leppington, close to Liverpool, where the largest concentration of Bosnians in New South Wales can be found.

Other residential concentrations in the Sydney metropolitan area are in the south-west, in suburbs of Auburn and Blacktown (Bosnia-Herzegovina Project 1999). In both cities, Sydney and Perth, the choice of these particular locations for the settlement of large numbers of Bosnians seems to be mainly informed by relative affordability of these areas, coupled with the fact that government-provided on-arrival accommodation was located in these areas, so the newcomers, as many respondents explained, became used to the areas, felt familiar in them, and just stayed on, moving from the on-arrival accommodation to either the private rental market or government housing. Many spent periods of time as private tenants while waiting for government housing to become available. The location of available government housing also influenced residential concentration. About 20 Bosnian families in Homeswest's⁵ high-rise housing in Perth's otherwise expensive inner city suburb of Subiaco, is such an example.

Bosnians value government housing as not only cheaper, but what seems to be equally important, as more secure and permanent accommodation compared to the private

⁵ Western Australian department of public housing.

rental market. Many people entered a government scheme for joint ownership. Secure, long-term accommodation is one of the culturally determined high priorities for Bosnians, as it is seen as the only viable basis for a stable family life, free from rigid tenancy rules, property inspections, frequent moving and changing the schools their children attend. Many Bosnians obtained their Perth homes through Homeswest's 'Good Start' Shared Equity Scheme, which enables tenants to buy a share of their rental property. Mr A., a manager in a housing society explained:

Our clients from ex-Yugoslavia maintain their properties very well and are excellent payers. Their homes seem to be their first priority: professional people — we had doctors and engineers among them — were ready to take cleaning jobs while they go back to study or sit for exams in order to have their qualifications recognized [...] We normally have many refugees among our clients. They are hard-working people, everyone in the family goes out and works, including teenage children, in order to pay off the home loan and secure a decent life.

Living close to each other contributes to community development among recent arrivals. Mrs P., a bilingual settlement worker and herself a refugee, described her experience:

We first rented privately and then lived in a Homeswest's unit. It was a block of 15 units and in nine units were people from ex-Yugoslavia... This was a really good experience... We were there for one and a half years. [We were] people of different ethnic backgrounds, different life experiences and different values but we nevertheless got along well and I actually remember that stage of my Australian life with nostalgia. I think we were all happy there. Then we bought a house and moved... We're paying it off now.

A community leader in Perth reported that many Bosnians who 'arrived only several years ago are today in their own homes and some of them have already paid them off'. Many people who bought houses on the private market chose to live close to other Bosnians. This pertains somewhat less to professional people who as a rule congregate in smaller clusters of several families and are more scattered across the Perth and Sydney metropolitan areas. The following quotes from a bilingual settlement worker and a bilingual social worker explain the influence of socio-economic background on residential patterns:

[...] People who are dispersed [across the Sydney metropolitan area] are almost all university educated professionals [...] Most well-educated people tried to escape from Liverpool... Liverpool is an outer suburb, not very nice, no-one's in the street after 5pm; they wanted to go to areas closer to the city, with better schools, better quality of living, lifestyle. Perhaps 20 per cent of people who were initially in Liverpool left; but it is cheap so many Bosnians congregated here and Liverpool has always had 'net intake'. (Mr T.)

[...] Professionals [...] can usually speak English better and some of them do not want to have anything to do with their [ethnic] community. They affiliate with people who have similar interests regardless of ethnicity.

They are more proficient in dealing with the mainstream culture and able to acquire social support elsewhere [outside ethnic communities]. For people who do not speak much English the ethnic community is the main source of support; they often end up tolerating and accepting [community leaders'] political views and 'trading in' some of their political views for social support. A lot of the dynamics of rural life exist in community affairs... most Bosnians who stick to the communities are from rural areas. (Mrs B.)

For most Bosnians, sticking to their ethnic communities and networks is a way to deal with the exigencies of resettlement. Mrs I, a bilingual settlement worker in Liverpool, explained:

People rely on each other a lot... on relatives, neighbours, acquaintances, friends, people who speak the same language. People help each other, accompany each other to a doctor's appointment... community support is an old Bosnian custom. I believe the community is more important and do more than what bilingual services can provide.

The less individualistic and more collective-based Bosnian subcultures originated in the specific requirements of survival under communism, in which self-sustainable income, civil society, meritocratic selection and promotion, the rule of law and many other underpinnings of individualism and individual self-sufficiency were rudimentary. The strong communal instinct visible in a substantial residential concentration is therefore not only a need to 'stick together' in a time of hardship in a new country, but also a cultural reflex acquired in their homeland.

Bosnian refugee communities are usually modeled as traditional rural face-to-face communities - as much as such a model can survive in the Australian suburbs - and seem to provide a warm and somewhat suffocating embrace. Rebuilding of social networks and communities in this refugee group runs along ethnic as well as class lines, and stems from the specific emotional and practical needs of resettlement. Nonetheless, in these communities, like in any other, closeness, cooperation and support exist alongside gossip, competition and control. As living in one's own house is culturally highly valued, for example, and securing 'one's own roof above one's head' is a symbol of resettlement 'success', there is a competitive pressure coming from the community to get a home loan as soon as possible. Mr D., a community settlement worker, explained:

There's this pressure: get a job, go to the building, do Gyprock⁶, money's good there, so you can buy a house... you are not supposed to wait for a long time to buy a house. But then they [Bosnians] work a lot, from daybreak to nightfall; people even buy expensive houses, have high mortgages, and have to keep working hard no matter what...

Ethnic communities and networks with their infrastructure - associations, memberships, clubs, soccer teams, choirs, organized dances and other types of community activities - offer word-of-mouth exchange of information, social support and assistance with the job search, but also exert considerable pressure to conform to

⁶ A brand name of plaster board used in building.

the community rules. These rules seem to be as much in line with Bosnian customs and traditions as is viable in the new spatial and social set-up; the old rules and customs had to be modified to a degree. For example, intense socializing with neighbours and friends had to be reduced because of work pressures and car dependency that hampered the spontaneous socializing that Bosnians consider typical for their culture. Many expressed great regret that this part of their lifestyle had been lost in Australia.⁷ A bilingual worker explained:

[...] People like it much better in Bosnia, their heart and soul is there... they do adapt well, but some issues remain unresolved... they always think what would happen if they hadn't left ..it's always something missing... they miss their community life, strolling downtown, going to coffee shops, the idea of 'raja' ('folks') is 80 per cent of life for them. Socializing, seeing other people, there's nothing like that here in Australia...life is reduced to work and family and this is probably a large part of the problem... (Mr T.)

As the old, in many cases life-long, communities have been lost, the building of new communities encounters emotional and practical difficulties. Kelly (2002), who explored the resettlement of Bosnians in Britain, argued that the formation of various Bosnian associations may not reflect the existence of 'true' communities and may be largely instrumental.

Ethnic communities and identity

Bosnians in Australia belong to three different ethnic groups: Croats, Serbs and Bosnian Muslims. Bosnian Muslims represented close to half of my respondents, while Bosnian Croats and Serbs each represented about a quarter of the interviewees. Bosnians were given priority in the Australian humanitarian intake from ex-Yugoslavia, as they were seen as most victimized in the war, so they are the most numerous group in Australia (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 1996). No specific questions were asked about ethnicity during the interviews, but respondents usually mentioned it and commented on ethnic politics within their refugee community.

Australian immigration authorities acknowledged the potential tension within the Bosnian refugee community⁸ between Muslims, Croats and Serbs, and devised policies meant to be 'politically sensitive' and acknowledge their differences. For example, interpreters are provided in three different languages — Croatian, Serbian and Bosnian⁹ — so refugees from Bosnia, who speak the same language for all practical purposes, can make their 'political choice' of language. Responses to such a choice seem to be mixed among Bosnians: some people welcome it while others think choosing among three languages forces them into declaring their ethnicity and siding

⁷ And in the US as well – see Coughlan and Owens-Manly 2002.

⁸ By 'refugee community' I simply mean all the people that fled from Bosnia-Herzegovina in this particular time (1990s), while I do not claim that they really belong to the same community in any sociological sense – they indeed form a number of smaller communities and networks.

⁹ Which are the same languages for all practical purposes, with minor differences in vocabulary, spelling, grammar and syntax, and spoken in different accents, comparable to the differences between American and Australian English.

up with one of the ethnic communities, which they see as divisive. The new émigré identities, or a search for them, have thus been superimposed on the internal tensions and uneasiness. Many people I spoke to felt that the lines of separation that run within the Bosnian 'refugee community' are forced onto them and that they are involuntarily ethnically labeled, usually on the basis of their name. This attitude was more pronounced among people in 'ethnically mixed' families.

Upon arrival in Australia, Bosnian Croats and Serbs found large and established Croatian and Serbian communities. Not so with Bosnian Muslims: only when their intake in Australia reached a critical mass in the mid-1990s was the creation of publicly visible 'Bosnian' ethnic communities imminent. 'Bosnian' clubs and resources, information and welfare centres nowadays exist in most Australian capital cities, mainly catering for and representing the Bosnian Muslim population.

As a consequence of the war, Bosnian Muslims have claimed their political and cultural distinctiveness from Croats and Serbs more than before. The process of ethnic differentiation was noticeable in all three ethnic groups. There seem to be a tension between the understanding of 'Bosnian' identity as Bosnian *Muslim* identity and understanding it as the identity inclusive of the three main ethnic groups. In the wake of this tension a differentiation between 'Bosnian' and 'Bosniak' has been created, where Bosnian means people from Bosnia regardless of ethnicity, while Bosniak (Bošnjak) denotes Bosnian Muslims. These are the people for whom, unlike Bosnian Croats and Serbs, Bosnia is considered to be their only homeland.¹⁰

In terms of collective politics of identity, the building of Bosnian 'diasporic' communities in Australia reflects political processes in post-war Bosnia. A considerable number of Bosnian Croats and Serbs chose to dissociate from their Bosnian identity and joined previously established Croatian and Serbian communities. Some, especially people in ethnically mixed families, did not feel accepted in such environments and chose to bypass the ethnically defined communities and stick to their smaller networks of like-minded people. Some people of Bosnian Serb origin seemed to feel uncomfortable about their identity because Serbs were seen as aggressors in the Bosnian war.¹¹ These uneasy identity discourses and definitions are normally dominated by ethnically defined collectives in Australia and the homeland, and transmitted through the ethnic media.

The uneasiness and sometimes confusion about their identities that a considerable number of people felt under such pressures is reflected in the census count of Bosnians in Australia, which is much lower than the number of people who actually came from Bosnia on humanitarian visas. While some defected to Croatian and Serbian identities and communities, many still felt more comfortable declaring themselves as 'Yugoslavs'. However, the Bosnian state nowadays officially practices ethnic inclusiveness as the only possible strategy for its post-Dayton¹² survival and similar movements are noticeable in the diaspora: some Bosnians, mainly those living in ethnically mixed families are eager to replace the exclusive and clear-cut nationalist

¹⁰ There is some confusion about whether 'Bosniak' is a replacement name for 'Bosnian Muslims', in order to avoid the reference to religion, or an inclusive title with which all Bosnian citizens could identify regardless of ethnicity.

¹¹ See S. Pryke, 2002, 'British Serbs and long distance nationalism', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 26:152-172, p. 168.

¹² Bosnian peace agreement signed in November 1995 in Dayton, Ohio.

discourses of identity by more complex and more inclusive understandings, and do not want to be aligned under ethnic banners. There is a movement among Bosnians in Sydney towards understanding 'Bosnian' as a civic identity, inclusive of all three ethnic groups¹³. This way the Bosnian identity has been reclaimed as a civic rather than an ethnic identity. The Australian multicultural environment may foster this process.

Employment: the key resettlement issue

In the present context, the issue of ethnicity influences identity processes among Bosnian refugees but hardly bears any relevance for practical resettlement issues such as employment. People from the three different ethnic backgrounds encounter the same problems while attempting to enter the labour force and establish themselves in the new environment. Although ethnic divisions in the community are noticeable and much discussed among people involved as well as researchers, it is the class lines of separation, and rural-urban division, that significantly influences the practical aspects of resettlement. Rural-urban and class division often coincide; people from rural areas are usually peasant-farmers or working class; people from urban areas have higher education on average, usually at least 12 years of schooling, and many have university degrees.

Upon arrival in Australia, refugees go through a government-funded resettlement program (DIMIA 2003). This early assisted stage of resettlement, lasting from several months to several years depending on the particular needs of individuals, is sometimes described by refugee researchers as a 'honeymoon stage'. However, a crisis, sometimes described as the 'depression stage', may strike after the 'honeymoon' is over.

In many cases, an unpleasant encounter with the competitive Australian labour market, which operates under different rules from what Bosnians have been used to, and often does not recognize their overseas' skills, makes people give up their initial claim to Australian belonging through their 'whiteness' and 'Europeanness'. Starting a job search can often trigger a feeling of otherness and disadvantage. At this stage many become more acutely aware of the language and cultural barriers that separate them from mainstream Australia. Many Bosnians find acculturation difficult and many aspects of the new society alien and unattractive. For a number of people social marginalisation and cultural separation takes the place of alleged — or expected — quick integration.

The relationship of Bosnian refugees with the host culture seems to be ambivalent and contradictory. During my fieldwork I heard accounts about the encounter with the new culture that could be described as a love-hate relationship. Excessive praise and even idealization, but also harsh critique and total rejection of 'things Australian' were not rare in the course of a single interview. Migrants' ambivalence towards their host country has been reported in migration research, and is not surprising in forced migrants, as grave losses and traumas inherent in the refugee status call upon emotional coping strategies and compensatory mechanisms (cf. Ward et al. 2001). The ambivalent relationship towards the host country seems to be one such

¹³ The recently created Bosnian Civic Association.

mechanism. The general mood of individual respondents, and how they described their allegiances, much depended, of course, on how 'successful' they perceived their resettlement to be and how much control over their own life they felt they regained following displacement. The following quotes are illustrative:

I have several friends who came from Sarajevo, highly educated people, doctors, pediatrician, journalist - unemployed here for about 8 years... [they have] poor English... they live on social security benefits and they completely deny this [Australian] culture; they just hate the place but they think their children will have a better future here than over there [in Bosnia]. (Mrs. F., a bilingual social worker, Sydney)

For many of our people the role model of a professional is not [based on] achievement but status; they cannot cope with the loss of status. They project it as their superiority and they do not want to subject themselves to competition, job search, job interviews... behind it is a fear of failure, I suppose. It sometimes produces this total rejection of Australia. (Ms S., Australian-born bilingual worker)

Regaining control over one's life and a feeling that one can plan for the future seems to be one of the best predictors of a generally positive outlook. Contrary to commonsense expectations, better educated people may experience resettlement trauma more acutely. For many Bosnian professionals migrating to Australia meant losing their formal qualifications, as they were either not recognized or partly recognized. This meant that they could not practice their professions unless they studied at an Australian university or underwent demanding professional exams. This not only brought about a decline in their standard of living and social status, but often also a loss of identity, as middle-class urban professionals tend to see their professional work as the main axis of their identity (Colic-Peisker 2002a). Welfare dependency, underemployment and loss of occupational status for professionals are widespread among Bosnians (cf. Jupp 2001). The following quotes further illustrate this issue:

Very few people, probably under 10 per cent, work at jobs commensurate to the jobs they had back in Bosnia, from university graduates to tradespeople. Their qualifications are often not recognized, but then not many people feel confident to go and study at Australian colleges, universities, or TAFE. Therefore they go for alternative jobs, so you have a teacher working as a shop assistants [...] and her husband who may be an engineer now works in the building industry as a manual labourer... So there's no way they can be satisfied. But they persist because they have no choice: they cannot go back to Bosnia and this is what they can get here, so... Then there are lot of injuries at work, especially among people who have never done physical jobs before ... (Mrs I., a bilingual settlement worker in Liverpool, Sydney, previously a lawyer).

Mrs P., another bilingual settlement worker, described the case of her father: I have a feeling that my father had a hard time dealing with the loss of... what? I am not sure how to put it... social life? Status? The feeling of self-worth? We used to live in a small town where he was

well-known and respected. [Upon arrival in Australia] he never complained openly but it was more than obvious from his comments... Until recently, he used to talk about his past life non-stop... about having been this and that, about his business trips, privileges, how much money he used to earn, on what committees he sat...

The identity crisis often experienced by professional people who lost their previous occupational and social status by accepting menial jobs or opting for early retirement is a serious emotional affliction that may be hard to overcome (cf. Ager 1999). The language barrier seems to be the most relevant single factor in this unfortunate outcome. A young Bosnian from a professional family, who completed his law degree in Australia and now works for a law firm in Sydney, and who previously worked as a resettlement worker for several years, observed:

In many cases parents sacrificed their own professional life for the sake of their children... Many of the second generation are now in high schools and universities. Parents who are architects, dentists, doctors...very few of them returned to their jobs in Australia... They often do really low jobs just to earn some money... cleaning or whichever meaningless job... to support the children through their schooling.

For working-class people who often come from rural areas of Bosnia, Australian resettlement may bring a better standard of living and more opportunity for consumption than was the case back home, if they can find employment and overcome initial welfare dependency, which many do. For working-class people from Bosnian villages and small towns, their ethnicity (or regional and local belonging) is often central to their sense of identity, and work is usually understood simply as 'earning money'. Buying a house and achieving a satisfactory level of consumption for the family may partly compensate for many difficulties associated with the refugee experience (cf. Martin 1965). As Mr S., who settled in Liverpool, Sydney, explained, manual jobs can often be found through ethnic communities:

Many people found jobs through ethnic businesses... Bosnian older immigration, Croatians... most people who succeeded in establishing their own businesses are those who arrived in the 1980s. People [recent refugees] do well, most people work full time, especially men.

Mrs B., an Australian community nurse working with refugees, observed:

Sometimes people see material possessions as a sign of normality. [The loss of status] can be more frustrating for professionals: if you have a university degree and you have to accept a cleaning job and get up at 5am to do it, that's perhaps harder than for someone who used to work in an abattoir back in the old country [...] Work is critical for a person's success in the new country... you cannot be happy on the Centrelink¹⁴ benefits.

¹⁴ Australian department of social security.

According to my respondents, job-search agencies do not provide adequate services for highly skilled people. In addition, Bosnians are sometimes reluctant to persist through the official channels which are usually perceived as too bureaucratic and 'endless useless form-filling'. There is a Specialist Migrant Placement Officer Program in New South Wales that should assist skilled migrants in getting qualifications recognized, find placements for work experience and voluntary work, but this service may be underused; at any rate, its success rate in this migrant group is not great. Because of the corruption they experienced amongst officials in their home country, many Bosnians do not place a great deal of trust in formal agencies. Using informal channels is a culturally defined way to find a job and other ways are often considered 'unrealistic' and a 'waste of time'.

Relying on informal community networks during the job search exposes individuals to community pressures that are not always beneficial in the long run. For example, there is competition in consumption within the community and men, perceived as breadwinners, are under pressure to adequately provide for their families as soon as possible, rather than delaying it in order to learn English, study and update their skills to better fit Australian circumstances. The above mentioned pressure to buy a house as soon as possible is a community pressure to 'behave reasonably' and not 'waste money' on rent.

Based on the experience of others in the community, occupational aspirations are often lowered. Older Croatian, Serbian and Muslim migrant communities, being pronouncedly working-class, exert similar pressure towards 'occupational down adjustment' (Bloch 2002), while assisting newly arrived refugees to gain employment. Cultural differences, pride and misunderstanding of the new world around them add to the usual job-search difficulties. This way, highly skilled refugees who aspire to regain their earlier job status not only need to learn a great deal about the Australian labour market, but also have to resist pressure from their own communities to accept low-skilled but instantly available jobs. Mr. Z., a bilingual settlement worker in Perth explained:

Our people [refugees from ex-Yugoslavia] would do anything to buy a house as soon as possible, and then they need to furnish it 'properly', which cannot be done without a job, and a job requires time, so they do not allocate time for learning the language. They do manual, low-paid jobs; everyone in the family does cleaning and newspaper delivery, and they do it a lot, so they can earn a considerable income that way... I believe that [acquiring] language proficiency is currently more important than material possessions for my future in Australia. I have been here for four years and I haven't bought a house yet because I have other priorities. My wife and I both study full-time. Together with full-time work and family responsibilities it is sometimes very hectic and tiring, but we decided that's the best way to go for our future goals.

It seems that a large proportion of Bosnian refugee in Australia fits into two resettlement patterns that can be loosely described as 'frustrated downwardly mobile professionals' and 'people in low-skilled jobs under consumerist pressures'. However, there are people who do not fit into these patterns: for example, professionals who persisted and were successful in achieving their previous job status, as well as those who preferred to remain welfare dependent to accepting 'lowly' jobs.

For some working-class people the language barrier proved insurmountable for even a low skilled job. This mainly pertains to people in their 40s and 50s who may have experience ‘ageist’ discrimination on top of other difficulties during their job search.

Conclusion

For many Bosnians, war trauma, the language barrier, age and other factors seriously impede the possibility of successful resettlement. The alien land of Anglo-suburban-individualistic-capitalist Australia triggers wonder and admiration in Bosnians (as the ‘West’ seen through the eyes of Eastern Europeans), but many reject and resist any notion of acculturation. For example, most Bosnians live in the outer suburbs of Australian capital cities, but the suburb remains an unfamiliar social concept: spatially, it resembles what most rural people would see as a ‘village’ but its social alienation is the exact opposite to their idea of a closely knit, face-to-face community. Suburban living seems to be equally unattractive for urban Bosnians, as it does not fit into their idea of urban living, where a large number of people mingle in familiar spaces within walking distance (cf. Coughlan and Owens-Manley 2002).

Language and cultural barriers seriously affect the resettlement of Bosnian refugees in Australia, especially when people from rural areas are concerned. However, many among them find their way around these difficulties by sticking to their ethnic communities for identity reconstruction and practical support. In the case of professionals, the ramifications of the language and cultural barriers are manifold, and especially acute in the form of downward mobility. Often, their qualifications are not recognized or only partly recognized in Australia, and with the language barrier interfering in skills transfer, unsatisfactory labour market outcomes — unemployment, underemployment and occupational downgrading — are widespread. Age is an important factor in these outcomes: middle-aged professionals among Bosnians are especially affected. Loss of occupational status often means a loss of identity for these people, and the outcome may be a deep dissatisfaction with their Australian life. Many find consolation in what they see as ‘good prospects for their children’.

When analyzing resettlement issues and outcomes, it should be kept in mind that most Bosnians are still in the relatively early stages of their Australian life and that the picture presented in this paper may change in five or ten years. A factor that this paper does not analyze, but of which one should be aware as a background of refugee resettlement — as opposed to resettlement of ‘voluntary migrants’ — is the psychological trauma that many refugees suffer and which can considerably (if temporary) adversely affect their abilities as well as their attitude towards the process of resettlement.¹⁵ Regardless of these limitations, and in the light of the fact that the rates of unemployment are high in all refugee groups in Australia (Jupp 2001; DIMIA 2003a), it seems that a good case can be made for the Australian refugee resettlement program to focus more on services devised to assist with labour market integration of

¹⁵ There is an ample literature on refugee health and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) within refugee studies.

refugees because this seems to be the single most important aspect of successful resettlement and social inclusion in general.

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