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Film Chronicles Suffering at Omarska Concentration Camp

By Rajeev Purohit

Calling the Ghosts is a documentary film which describes the suffering of two women, Jadranka Cigelj and Nusreta Sivač, who were held in Omarska, the Bosnian-Serb concentration camp where many Bosnian Muslims and Croats were held captive, tortured, raped and killed. Washington College of Law (WCL) recently screened the film, and attendees had an opportunity to speak personally with Ms. Cigelj and Ms. Sivač.

The film evening was sponsored by Amnesty International, The Coalition for International Justice, The Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law at WCL, and Women for Women in Bosnia (see *Spotlight on Women for Women in Bosnia on next page*). The rights to the documentary have been purchased by Cinemax, and this will hopefully lead to a wider distribution of the film. The two women featured in the film are on a mission to educate the world about the atrocities committed at the concentration and rape camps. One of their primary goals is to ensure that rape is

included in the international lexicon of war crimes. In their struggle for peace and justice, they have collected testimony from other survivors and presented it to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Their work contributed to the indictments made against the men responsible for the rape and torture at Omarska.

Jadranka Cigelj and Nusreta Sivač were childhood friends and legal professionals in Bosnia prior to the war. After the war began, soldiers kidnaped these women and imprisoned them in the Omarska concentration camp. For two months, Serbian officers, soldiers, and police, many of whom were their former neighbors, raped and tortured Ms. Cigelj and Ms. Sivač. Radovan Karadžić, leader at the time of the self-proclaimed Republika Srpska, had said on international television that there were no concentration camps for civilians in Bosnia. A British news crew accepted his invitation to visit any part of the country to look into allegations

that Serb forces were indeed running concentration and rape camps. Before the news crew arrived, the women were released, except for a few younger women who were kept hidden while the reporters visited the camp. The reporters tried to talk to the male prisoners at Omarska, but the Serbian soldiers stood too close to allow the prisoners to speak freely. The film includes some of the news crew's dramatic footage of the camps, showing the demoralized and emaciated prisoners. The scenes in the camp mirror the images from another time and place, and it is hard to believe that these images are from this decade, not 50 years ago.

Despite its painful story, *Calling the Ghosts* ends on a hopeful note, with Ms. Cigelj and Ms. Sivač in the Hague, providing testimony for the ICTY. They send a postcard to their Serb former co-workers which reads, "Hoping to see you one day in this fine city," that is, facing the Tribunal. ☉

The following are excerpts from "Calling the Ghosts"

Nusreta: My husband got out on the 22nd. . . I said I'd come in three days after I took care of some things at work. In the meantime, all the roads were closed. I had insisted that he leave, thinking that something could only happen to the men, that no one would touch the women. . .

Jadranka: Most of them [the guards at Omarska] I knew personally. I knew them by their first and last names.

Nusreta: Before the occupation, we had coffee together at work, talked; now they pretended that they didn't even know us. The commander of the camp was also from the town . . . Željko Mejakić. . .

There were 36 women. Otherwise it was a male camp. From 7:00 at night we slept in former business offices which during the day served as interrogation rooms. The place looked normal, [but] during the day the rooms were stained with the blood of those who were interrogated. When we went to sleep, we first had to wash the walls, the furniture, and the floor from that blood. . .

Jadranka: The next day they took us to the restaurant at 7:00 in the morning and told us that we no longer had names. We, the women, were supposed to distribute something they called food that was coming in once a day. And then around 9:00 . . . the men started coming. I was paralyzed from the shock of what I saw. . . wild looks full of fear, men wounded . . . beaten up, torn apart, dirty, and an unbearable smell followed them . . . of excrement and dried blood. Then I realized where I was. . .

Nusreta: I tried to put together a mosaic in my head. Why was I there? I was never involved in politics. And then I realized that there was a pattern. I am an intellectual and a Muslim. That was the reason. Muslim and Croat intellectuals were the first targets when the Serbs occupied our town. . .

Jadranka: At night, fearing that they would come to the door, call one of us out by name and take her away. . . No one had touched me yet. . . In my room there were mainly older women, on average in their

fifties, so that the other room was being hit more often. I thought that maybe they had even forgotten me. I thought that until July 17th. It was 9:30 at night, like the last time when they took my friend. . . The door opened and there was the commander of the guards, Željko Mejakić. He called me by my last name, to come out. I came out and entered the room. Six or seven men were there. First they started with verbal assaults. He ordered me to lie down. . . and then he indulged himself on me while the others watched. That lasted until 2:00 in the morning. Then he brought me back to the room.

I didn't tell anyone what had happened to me, and the women didn't ask. It was an unspoken rule that we not talk to each other about what happened during those absences.

The worst sadism was when the camp commander, the man who most often initiated those tortures of women and was one of the perpetrators himself. . . in the

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morning asked whether anyone had raped you. . . And if they had, to freely tell him.

Jadranka: And then, just as they had arrested us without any explanation, they told us to get ready, that we were going home. And they let us go. We didn't know why. Later we found out that the first journalists were about to break through to the Omarska Camp that day. Since the camp authorities claimed that there were no women in the camp, they quickly got us ready to leave. The seven women who

remained were locked in the bathroom so they wouldn't be seen. I went home on foot. . .

Nusreta: Most women are silent about what happened to them. It is very difficult to make them speak. One woman told me that her husband divorced her . . . He couldn't get past it. . . She is scared that her son will find out everything about her experience.

Jadranka: In the beginning the need to tell the truth was strong and I hoped we would

all speak out. Other women arrived from Omarska. I organized them and told them that we had to tell the truth, no matter how painful it was.

Nusreta: I always say, it's a new shock every time you talk about it. . . But I feel some kind of obligation toward all those women, friends of mine who are now gone, who were killed in the camp, toward all those people who were dear to me. . . and who are now gone. . . If the story is not told, then no one will know about it, right? ☹

Spotlight on Women for Women in Bosnia

By Gillian Brady

Washington College of Law is fortunate to have a personal connection to Women for Women in Bosnia (WWB), a non-profit humanitarian organization that has helped hundreds of women in the war-torn regions of Bosnia and Croatia. Zainab Salbi, the founder and president of WWB, and her husband Ahmjad Attallah, a J.D. student at WCL, have inspired many at WCL with their devotion to helping the women in Bosnia. Zainab's idea was a simple one; to provide financial and emotional support to women who have lost almost everything; their homes, their families, their dignity. WWB is committed to supporting women regardless of their religion or ethnicity.

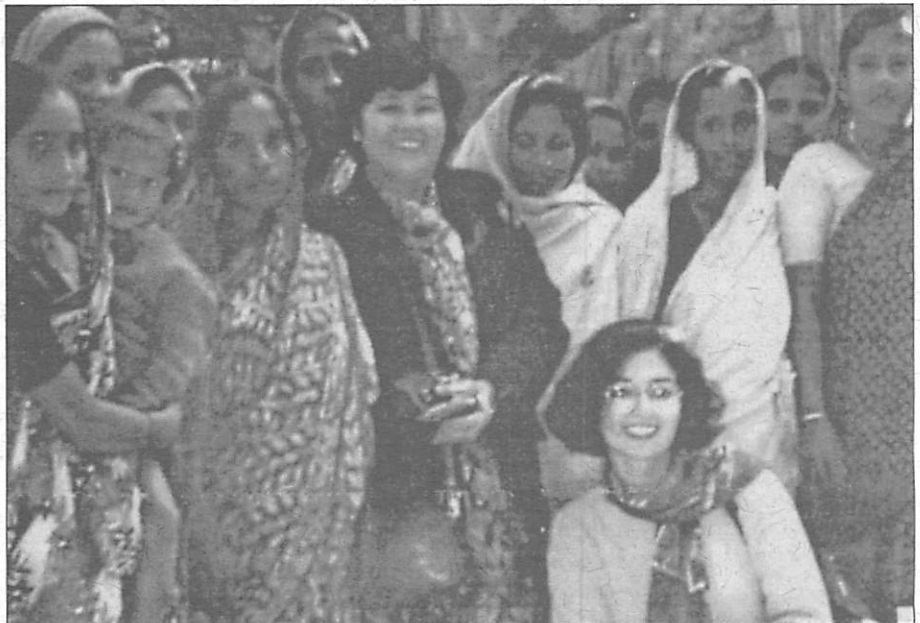
Zainab founded WWB in June 1993 to help women in Bosnia and Croatia who are especially in need of support due to the Serbian army's use of rape and torture as a war strategy. The Serbian army set up rape camps and concentration camps for Croats and Bosnian Muslims and Catholics. The rape camps targeted women exclusively, victims were as young as six years old and even women 80 years old were not spared. Women were forcibly impregnated and kept in rape camps until their eighth month of pregnancy to prevent them from attempting an abortion. Rape was also used to spread terror. According to a captured Serbian Soldier "rape is part of (ethnic cleansing); it spreads fear and terror so that the people flee and don't come back." Women were raped publicly in front of their families and neighbors, who were then ordered to leave their homes and never return. Soldiers

were also ordered to rape women as a means of increasing the men's morale.

WWB was founded to provide emotional and financial support to the women who suffered through this campaign of rape and terror. WWB matches Bosnian and Croatian women with sponsors from all over the world. Sponsors donate \$22 a month and also write letters, which are a very important part of WWB's sponsorship program. The letters are translated by WWB volunteer translators and hand-delivered to the recipients. The emotional support provided by the letters gives many women the strength to begin rebuilding their lives and their faith in humanity.

WWB is currently embarking on a micro-credit program, through which small groups of women can obtain loans using the assets of the entire group as collateral. WWB hopes that by forming these groups among women from different ethnic backgrounds, this program will help to foster cooperation and reliance on each other, and ultimately help in the rebuilding of Bosnian society.

If you would like more information, please call Women for Women in Bosnia at (202) 822-1391, or write to: Women for Women in Bosnia, 1725 K Street NW, Suite 611, Washington, DC 20006. ☹



Zainab Salbi, seated, founder and president of Women for Women in Bosnia, on a recent trip to Bangladesh for Grameen Bank's micro-credit program training.

Photo courtesy of Women for Women in Bosnia