

# Troubled locations: Return, the life course, and transformations of ‘home’ in Bosnia-Herzegovina

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*Abstract:* This article confronts the nationalist and foreign interventionist discourses on ‘home’ in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina with the everyday experiences of a category of persons who are perceived as the ultimate embodiment of the promised homecoming encapsulated in sedentarism: minority returnees. It ethnographically traces the initially mirroring movements of two households and their differential ways to overcome the effects of displacement as well as their insertion in broader transformations. Infusing the notion of ‘home’ with an eye for security in its widest sense, and, in particular, highlighting the importance of the life course, it investigates the significance of place through a contextualized household political economy of ‘home’. In that way it explores the conditions in which certain remakings of ‘home’ come to be seen as more feasible than others.

*Keywords:* Bosnia-Herzegovina, home, place, post-socialist transformation, refugee return

NIJEDNA KUĆA K’O SVOJA, NIJEDNA RIJEKA K’O DRINA  
(Not one house is like one’s own, not one river is like the Drina)  
—Banner at 2001 meetings of displaced persons in Tuzla

## **Cool ground: Return and social projects of ‘home’**

Five years after the end of the 1992–95 military violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina, hundreds of thousands of survivors of ‘ethnic cleansing’ signed up for return. But most could not fail to notice the dramatic transformations their pre-war place of residence had undergone over the past decade. In 2001, people’s memories of the two villages at the heart of this article<sup>1</sup>—Bistrice, in

a shaded valley, and Izgled, perched on a hill range overlooking the Drina—evoked almost archetypically bucolic landscapes. Meanwhile, however, they had actually become unrecognizable. Buildings had been destroyed, forested areas had been decimated for firewood, and fields and orchards were now overgrown and believed to be mined. In Izgled, the banner’s proclamation that no river is quite like the Drina had been perversely reinforced by the river’s war-time significance: It had become the inter-state

border with Serbia, and many returnees remembered the corpses that had floated in it.

Such a context of ‘ethnic cleansing’ provides a particularly challenging site to investigate the role of violence in place making, and especially to assess the value of sedentarism, which I define here as a discourse, prevalent in refugee studies and policies, that naturalizes the link between people and place (see the introduction to this special section). On the one hand, the very logic of ‘ethnic cleansing’ contains a stark reminder of the danger of positing such essentialized links rooting persons into territory. On the other hand, the rootless fantasies proposed by some as an anti-sedentarist antidote sound cruelly naive to those violently expelled from ‘their’ places. Wishing to avoid the pitfalls of both fixing sedentarist and free-floating anti-sedentarist paradigms, some scholars argue for a middle ground that factors in transformations of places and persons as well as continued attachment to a culturally defined ‘home’ locality (Markowitz and Stefansson 2004; Stefansson 2004a, 2004b, 2004c). Working with Bosnian repatriates in Sarajevo, Stefansson draws attention to their pragmatic attempts to re-establish “a sense of normal life, which in its turn is defined by three key issues: creating sustainable livelihoods, finding a place of relational identification [and] developing a site of cultural attachment” (2004b: 174). He argues that, despite radical wartime transformations, for some Bosnians it may be tempting to go home—indeed, his findings, like my own, demonstrate that it may be. More precisely, they demonstrate not only that it may or may not be *tempting* but also, I anti-sedentaristically reiterate, that it may or may not be *‘home’*.

This text channels legitimate criticisms of anti-sedentarism and sedentarism toward a call for a culturally sensitive political economy of displacement and emplacement—investigating the conditions in which certain (re)makings of ‘home’ come to be seen as more feasible than others. My starting point is that embodied attachment to place should not be taken for granted and that it is all the more problematic when combined with an exoticist approach to non-Western Others, somehow locating them closer to nature.

Rather, embodied attachment to place should itself be analyzed as a possible dimension in the making of ‘home’. Zetter has shown how Cypriot refugees mythologized the ‘home’ from which they had been expelled and hoped that return would bring about its restoration, but he warns that ‘home’ includes a “living organism of relationships and traditions stretching back into the past” (1999: 12). Likewise, Jackson has stressed the trans-generational, collective aspect of home making among Warlpiri in Australia, adding that a “sense of home is grounded less in a place *per se* than in the activity that goes on in a place” (1995: 148). Importantly, these relationships and activities take shape in particular political and socio-economic contexts. Constructions of ‘home’, part of individual and collective life trajectories, make certain places into ‘idioms’ for power relations through which people position themselves and others (Gardner 1995: 272).

Among refugees, the prevalence of a ‘home-orientation’—often referred to as ‘myth of return’—varies according to their previous political and socio-economic positioning (Al-Rasheed 1994). Moreover, return movements are not only affected by but are also thoroughly implicated in ongoing transformations of both returnees and societal structures (Gmelch 1980; Long and Oxfeld 2004). A useful approach to these issues is proposed by Allen and Turton (1996), who found African Mursi refugees to be ‘in search of cool ground’—trying to find or establish a place characterized by relative security to start a project toward a better future. Bosnians too, I discovered, were more preoccupied with finding such ‘cool ground’ than with return *per se*. More precisely, return to the place where ‘home’ had been located would only be feasible for them if it promised such ‘cool ground’. A possible return ‘home’ was thus conceptualized as a social project to construct a ‘sense of possibility’ (Hage 1997), a basis from which individual and collective lives could be (re)launched.

This article aims to provide building blocks for an analysis of displacement and emplacement, conceptualizing home making as a dynamic social process in which relationships to places and persons are produced. This, I argue,

allows us to address the importance of place in 'home' through an emphasis on personhood and transformative social relations, rather than on assumptions of sedentarist memory. Such an approach sheds a light on differential attitudes toward return among displaced Bosnians and embeds them in social relations, drawing attention to factors such as gender, class, education, and life stage. Elsewhere, in an individual case study, I have deployed this approach to analyze why a Bosnian Serbian man preferred to remain in the Serbian-controlled town where he had found shelter (Jansen 2003). Instead of returning to his pre-war place of residence, now in Bosniac-controlled territory, this displaced person wished to live with 'his own people' in what to me was an 'ethnically cleansed area', but to him 'liberated national territory'. In this article, I bring the same approach to bear on return movements in Bosnia-Herzegovina, arguing that it allows us to critically analyze a variety of phenomena, from attempts at (il)legal emigration to proclamations—such as the one in the banner opening this article—that seem to underscore sedentarist interpretations. Slogans of that kind abounded in Bosnian displaced persons' (DP) associations. Their emphasis on embodied attachment to a particular (usually rural) landscape was articulated both with competing nationalist discourses that territorialized 'home' as a national homeland and with the return policies of the Foreign Intervention Agencies (FIAs),<sup>2</sup> which focused on physical safety in localized bricks-and-mortar private property. In this article I analyze the predicament of returnees in north-east Bosnia-Herzegovina in order to subvert such reductionist conceptualizations of 'home'. Paying particular attention to people's stage in the life course, I trace dynamics of home making in relation to differential insertions of personhood into the socio-economic and political context of Bosnia-Herzegovina. In particular, I explain how the twin emphasis of the FIAs on safety and property sidelined other dimensions of 'intimations of homeliness' (Bauman 1999; Hage 1997), and how this oversight was conveniently congruent with their 'reforms' policies. In this way, I argue, rather than a reinstatement

of a previous situation, return was experienced by many Bosnians as one dimension of a process of societal transformation.

### Degrees of minority return in Bosnia-Herzegovina

Let us now turn to two households in north-east Bosnia-Herzegovina. While the pseudonyms (like the real names) of the Savićes and the Mehmetovićes make them recognizable as having Serbian and Bosniac backgrounds, respectively, they shared appearance, language, and a host of other characteristics associated with rural life in this region. There had been little intermarriage here and a complex history of conflict and shifting alliances during World War II (Duijzings 2002), but in the Yugoslav state, villagers had shared schooling, health care, markets, and public services on the municipal, republican, and federal levels. In the 1990s, both households suffered wartime 'ethnic cleansing' and later became 'minority returnees'—bucking the dominant trend, they returned to pre-war places of residence in municipalities now under the jurisdiction of representatives of the very national Others they had fled. Nationality was clearly a factor in their predicaments, but we shall focus here on other factors that are often overlooked (cf. Jansen 2005a, 2005b).

The 1995 Dayton Agreement had put an end to the post-Yugoslav wars by recognizing Bosnia-Herzegovina as a sovereign state consisting of two nationally homogenized Entities that were produced by the agreement: *Republika Srpska* (RS) and the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina ('the Federation'), the latter itself effectively divided between Croatian- and Bosniac-dominated territories. The Mehmetovićes's village, Izgled, was now part of RS territory while the Savićes's village, Bistrica, had been incorporated into the Bosniac-dominated part of the Federation. Much of the former frontline had been consolidated as an Inter-Entity Boundary Line (IEBL), and it is this line that the Savićes and the Mehmetovićes crossed five years later in a mirror-movement as minority returnees. In a sedentarist

interpretation, their return had thus drawn a definite line under their displacement: these people were *back home*, living proof that homecomings were possible. Or were they?

### ***Joka and Živko Savić, Bistrica, 2001***

Both infirm due to advanced age (around seventy years old), Joka and Živko Savić were registered Serbian minority returnees in Bistrica, on the Federation side of the IEBL. In Yugoslav times, Bistrica had been almost homogeneously Serbian-populated, cuddling up to a Bosniac-inhabited village. Like many elderly Serbs, the Savićs reminisced about harmonious and reciprocal coexistence. Bistrica had been located within convenient distances from the towns of Tuzla and Zvornik, both ‘mixed’ regional centers. Joka and Živko had both worked in socially owned industries nearby and retired on the eve of Yugoslavia’s disintegration. Their plan had been to spend their days in the family house, with a garden they had always kept for their own use.

In 1992, Bistrica fell under control of the armed forces of RS, inheritors of the Yugoslav People’s Army. Partly due to Bistrica’s proximity to a frontline, most women and children, including Joka, had sought shelter in nearby towns that had by then been ‘cleansed’ of non-Serbian inhabitants and of most symbols of their presence. The Savićs’s daughter had moved in with her sister-in-law in Serbia and still lived there, while her husband spent most of the 1990s in Switzerland. Živko had stayed on, and their two sons had been mobilized to fight elsewhere. However, within months, an offensive by the Bosniac-dominated Army of Bosnia-Herzegovina saw the RS Army withdraw from Bistrica, and all remaining Serbian inhabitants followed suit. The Savićs and their youngest son’s household occupied a Bosniac-owned flat in Zvornik, now in RS. Virtually all houses in Bistrica were looted and severely damaged, and the Army of Bosnia-Herzegovina established a base nearby. The village was subsequently inhabited by Bosniac expellees from the Zvornik area, some of them repatriated refugees.

In the immediate post-war years, Serbian nationalist authorities strongly opposed return of

both expelled Bosniacs and of their ‘own’ DPs, but by 2000 some Serbian pre-war inhabitants of Bistrica applied for foreign assistance to reconstruct their abandoned houses on the far hillside of the village. Initially, these minority returnees were fearful both of their new Bosniac neighbors and of Serbian anti-return militants, but soon neighborly relations in Bistrica became correct, based on the stated agreement that no one wished to live in a stranger’s house (*u tuđoj kući*) but that circumstances forced some to temporarily do so.

### ***Mirsad Mehmetović, Izgled, 2001***

Registered Bosniac minority returnees in RS, Mirsad Mehmetović and his wife Enisa, both about thirty, lived with their two daughters and Mirsad’s mother in Izgled.<sup>3</sup> Pre-war Izgled had been a Bosniac-inhabited set of kin-based clusters of houses, near the regional center, Zvornik. Since the 1970s, scores of Izgled men had become migrant construction workers. Mirsad’s father had commuted weekly to Beograd, the Yugoslav and Serbian capital, located a few hours away. Others had worked in contractual labor for Beograd firms in non-aligned and socialist states and in Germany, investing salaries in houses and durables. Women did unpaid housework and engaged in small-scale agriculture, and some younger ones were employed nearby.

Serbian (para)military formations attacked Izgled in 1992 and hastily organized local Bosniac units were unable to respond. All able-bodied men, including Enisa’s father and brother as well as Mirsad’s father, had been taken away. Almost every household was directly affected by these mass disappearances. All other villagers were deported to what had now become Bosniac-controlled territory. Izgled had then been looted, torched, and mined. Many survivors became DPs around the town of Tuzla, where, like the Mehmetovićs, they occupied houses owned by Serbs who had fled in the other direction. Many men who had escaped in time and numerous underage boys had joined the Bosniac-controlled Army of Bosnia-Herzegovina during the war. Mirsad, who had already fought in Croatia dur-

ing his military service in the Yugoslav People's Army in 1991, had also signed up. The nearby frontline had remained stable during the war and had later been transformed into the IEBL.

The Dayton Agreement assigned the remnants of Izgled to RS, on a narrow strip of territory between the IEBL, separating it from the Federation, and the Drina, now the state border with Serbia (Federal Republic of Yugoslavia). The area had long been considered extremely unsafe, but with the support of the main Bosniac political parties, DPs in Tuzla had planned collective return. In the late 1990s, many who had found refuge in third states had been repatriated and moved once again into internal displacement in the Tuzla area. By 2000, following a familiar pattern, DPs from Izgled had secured foreign funding and organized clean-up visits and overnight stays in tents. Foreign organizations had also improved a dirt track and restored electricity and water supply. A partly reconstructed house then served as overnight accommodation for all. After early incidents with Serbian DPs housed nearby, by 2001 foreign protection had been scaled down and there was a reasonable working relationship with local RS police patrols.

Neither village had a post office, café, or shop, even though one Izgled family did retail some basic foodstuffs and household goods. No employment opportunities existed locally and, due to discrimination, minority returnees were also last in line in the unlikely case that jobs did crop up nearby. Farming, previously a sideline, had now become central to survival, supplemented by tiny and delayed pensions, humanitarian aid, and remittances. Agricultural activities fell mainly to women, with the men crowding the building sites. Still, while some foreign assistance was available for agriculture, most returnees lacked the resources to work the overgrown land and were afraid of landmines.

### *Joka and Živko Savić, Bistrica, 2001*

The Savićs were one of two elderly couples who had returned permanently to Bistrica. Electricity and water had recently become available, and

a dirt track had been patched up slightly, but most recipients of reconstruction assistance only spent some weekends or holidays there, tentatively working on their houses. Some never visited, whereas others came regularly, including a man who had spent the war years in Germany and had recently bought a house in Serbia. In the spring of 2001, this man appeared almost daily, working to repair his wife's parental house, and driving back a considerable distance every evening. Most other pre-war inhabitants remained displaced in RS, while still others now resided in Western Europe. Most people had relatives abroad and, with the exception of the elderly Serbian returnees, virtually every household explored possibilities of emigration.

All households retained the accommodation in RS they had occupied during displacement, even though they received reconstruction assistance on the basis of the whole household returning. The Savićs' application had actually included themselves *and* their oldest son's household, thus paving the way for a larger structure. Their house-in-reconstruction had initially been used as overnight shelter for all villagers reconstructing their houses, but unlike most, Joka and Živko had rebuilt it to the point where it was minimally inhabitable—a feat which, they told me, had featured as an item on a German TV report. However, both of their sons lived with their households in Zvornik, the oldest in a house purchased before the war and the other in Bosniac-owned accommodation. The latter had also signed up for reconstruction and return, but, like many others, had not completed the work to make his house habitable by post-war Bosnian standards. He said this was because the deterioration of the road made commuting to his informal Zvornik job more difficult than before.

### *Mirsad Mehmetović, Izgled, 2001*

Dozens of houses were being built and re-built where a much larger Izgled had existed. In reciprocal efforts, returnees made one section of their house habitable, collecting the means to reconstruct other parts in a later stage. Izgled occupied a place of pride among foreign donor

organizations in this ‘difficult’ region, and during spring and summer weekends it was buzzing with activity. However, only a few villagers, mainly elderly people such as Mirsad’s mother, had actually moved into their houses as their first and only residence. Although reconstruction assistance usually included an explicit conditionality clause of actual return, most, like Enisa and Mirsad, maintained a working-week presence in the Tuzla area and failed to vacate Serbian-owned accommodation there. Foreign humanitarian aid was crucial in enticing people to engage in reconstruction, and this aid featured prominently in the complaints of villagers about the favoritism and false promises of ‘the foreigners’, who, for their part, rightly suspected that a portion of building materials was illicitly traded. They also belatedly discovered that the beneficiaries of several reconstructed houses had emigrated to the West, with more attempting to do so.

The Mehmetovičs had considered two houses in the village theirs: Mirsad’s parental house and a villa across the track belonging to his uncle, who had been a *Gastarbeiter* in Germany for thirty years. Mirsad said the latter now wanted to gain German citizenship and then return for his retirement. For the time being, only the foundations of his villa were distinguishable. The Mehmetovičs spend the nights in the partly reconstructed parental house, while building a new one for Mirsad and Enisa’s household (they had gotten married while displaced in the Tuzla area). Those Izgled adults who could—particularly men—hung on to (in)formal employment in the Federation. Mirsad still worked for the army near Tuzla on monthly contracts. His salary was a matter of resentment among some other villagers, who wildly overestimated the actual amount. Mirsad simply counted himself lucky to have a job at all.

Associated with different sides in the conflict, the Savičs and the Mehmetovičs had engaged in mirror movements across the IEBL, and as registered minority returnees whose actual return was a matter of degree, they were faced with similar concerns in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina. But how did they evaluate their return?

### *Joka and Živko Savić, Bistrica, 2001*

Despite their dire living conditions, Joka and Živko Savić compared their current situation favorably to the “awful” years of displacement in Zvornik. All they wished for, they said, was that their children and grandchildren would visit more regularly. No city life could tempt them, they stated, and they had been “the first ones on the list” to apply for return and to actually move back to Bistrica. When describing that day, Živko exclaimed, “I was so happy to return home [*na svoje*]. This is mine! This is where I belong!” Joka joined in: “Oh, son, you should have seen how happy we were when we returned. All the time in Zvornik I wanted to come back here. This is where I spent my life, this is where I want to be. We lost a lot, we had a house and we had everything in and around it, but when I think about it, I was lucky ... I thank God that [my sons] are alive! I look at other mothers, they lost one or two or even five children in the war! What a fate! We lost a lot, but on TV I see those people in tents, and I think: I can’t complain. People who have been hit by earthquakes and floods—they need help as well! So I don’t think we have it that bad ... Now nothing matters anymore. Now I can die and thank God.”

### *Mirsad Mehmetović, Izgled, 2001*

While rebuilding a house in Izgled, Mirsad Mehmetović did not see a long-term future in Bosnia-Herzegovina and launched consecutive attempts to secure (il)legal entry into Western states. Almost all households in Izgled had relatives scattered around the world as refugees. Some villagers had recently been admitted to the US, and this had intensified activity on the emigration front. Hoping to secure a US visa for his family, Mirsad was following the then common trajectory, involving a fictional claim of refuge in Croatia. When stopped at the border post on his third trip to Croatia, he put the usual DEM 30 in his passport in order not to have it stamped (crucial to this strategy). “It was some new, young guy,” Mirsad sniffed. “He went by the book and I was done for bribing. I got a year’s worth of prohib-

ited entry into Croatia. But I am telling you, I would leave tomorrow if I could. I wouldn't stay here. What's here for me? What can I do here? I would go anywhere. Just give me a visa, for whichever country, and I would go straight away ... Nobody wants to stay here anyway. Everybody wants to go abroad. Only old people perhaps, because they have already lived [their lives]. When they know that their children are okay, they want to return home [*na svoje*] ...”

The difference in evaluation of remaking 'home' could hardly be starker: whereas Joka and Živko Savić expressed great joy about returning to their pre-war place of residence, Mirsad Mehmetović desperately wanted to leave his. A range of sociological factors are at play in such experiences—for example, gender, urban/rural, and class differences—but in the remainder of this text I focus on one of them: people's stage in the life course and the correspondent insertion of their personhood in the changing political and socio-economic Bosnian context. In this way, I hope to highlight the value of conceptualizing 'home' as the 'cool ground' that is projected in social engagements with place, whether through return or not.

### Political economies of displacement and emplacement

The Dayton Agreement stipulated the right of all the displaced to 'freely return to their homes of origin' and this was key to the Western-led intervention, due to the lack of funds for compensation, pragmatic anti-asylum concerns in refugee-receiving states, a moral argument against 'ethnic cleansing', and a wider sedentarist understanding of human belonging (Jansen 2005b, 2007b). Ample resources were invested in return, and by January 2001 just under one-third of the almost 2.5 million displaced Bosnians were registered as returnees.<sup>4</sup> However, two-thirds of all DP returns and more than 90 percent of all refugee repatriations had taken place within or to the Federation. Most refugees had been deported in 'assisted or organized repatriation' policies by

host governments, and a majority of them 'relocated' into internal displacement in areas dominated by political forces of their own nationality (Black 2002: 131; Phuong 2000: 174). These people could only be counted as having 'returned home' if 'home' were to mean their being within the borders of a sovereign state that hardly functioned as such. By 2001, about a quarter of all returnees were 'minority returnees', and it was an important stated FIA objective to increase this figure. After a peak return season in 2003, it is now widely considered that a point of saturation has been reached with just over a million registered returnees (Philpott 2005).

The return issue was also central to the strategies of local nationalist parties (Ito 2001), sometimes amounting to campaigns of 'ethnic engineering' elaborating on wartime 'ethnic cleansing'. In the 1990s, Serbian and Croatian nationalists in particular had demographically 'secured' certain areas through strategic 'implantation' of their own nationals, thus consolidating the division of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Using promises and threats, they now discouraged these same people—such as the Savićs's sons—from returning across the IEBL. Refusing to evict 'their' DPs from occupied Bosniac-owned accommodation, they assured themselves of electoral support and foot soldiers for 'spontaneous' violence. In addition, although local authorities were officially responsible for implementing minority return, they obstructed the return of Bosniacs through intimidation, direct or proxy violence, and non-intervention, except to 'harmless' places and in insignificant numbers—and even then mainly in order to satisfy foreign demands. In partial contrast, the main Bosniac nationalist parties favored a unitary Bosnia-Herzegovina, even if in a rather inconsistent manner. While no national group constituted an absolute majority in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bosniacs were the most numerous and the most likely to express loyalty to Bosnia-Herzegovina as a state. Providing only lukewarm cooperation for the return of non-Bosniacs to the territory under their control, Bosniac nationalist politicians were quick to capitalize on people's right to vote in their pre-war place of residence and became actively involved in Bosniac DP

associations known as ‘municipalities in exile’. Hence, Bosniac minority return movements into RS also allowed interventions in the national-demographic puzzle and, in 2000–2001 north-east Bosnia-Herzegovina saw substantial volumes of minority return in targeted villages just across the IEBL. Organized return to the IZGL area, for example, was seen by some Serbs as an attempt to cut RS territory in two at this narrow strip between the Federation and the Serbian border.

In any case, Bosniac minority returnees thus often re-inhabited the remnants of remote hamlets, accorded little strategic importance by Serbian local authorities. Like IZGL, these places had lain abandoned for years and did not involve competition over housing since there was none left. Violent incidents still occurred, but return to towns such as Zvornik was much more controversial and dangerous, because accommodation there would require the eviction of Serbs displaced from the Federation. Return to IZGL illustrates how, through movement en bloc, Bosniac minority returnees thus constituted local majorities in villages that formed part of a RS municipality. This pattern was replicated, to a lesser extent, by Serbs in a few places in the Federation, but in 2000–2001 Serbian minority returnees in the Federation were concentrated in urban zones. Still, urban returns were proportionally smaller in scale and, given the exchange value of city accommodation, often constituted mere repossessions with intention to sell (see Jansen 2007a).

With FIAs and local nationalist forces making return into a key object of struggle, it is not surprising that we do not find the kind of random return movements we would expect if individual decisions of homesickness were the main determinant of return. In fact, a large majority of displaced Bosnians did *not* return to their pre-war place of residence. Reluctance was particularly great among those who had found refuge abroad, mainly Bosniacs from what is now RS. Interest was greater among DPs,<sup>5</sup> but many, even among those who had signed up for return, also considered exchange or sale of their property. Almost no one who had not owned accommodation in their pre-war place of residence

wished to return, and many others simply justified their interest by saying they “had nowhere else to go” (UNHCR 2003). In explaining such patterns, existing studies point to the above conflict between the return policies of the FIAs and local nationalist politicians (e.g., Albert 1997; D’Onofrio 2004; Fischel de Andrade and Delaney 2001), but another significant dimension of the predicament of displaced Bosnians is conspicuous in its absence. It is this dimension that I address now.

My research made me increasingly aware that Bosnians experienced a combination of forced migration and what I would call ‘forced transition’—a transformation from Yugoslav socialist workers’ self-management, via a predatory war economy to some form of neo-liberal capitalism. This transformation, if mentioned at all, is usually referred to with the neutral-sounding term ‘reforms’. Elsewhere (Jansen 2007b) I have explored in more detail how the FIA focus on national coexistence and the restitution of property obscured and *therefore* reinforced foreign-imposed ‘transition’ policies. Let me summarize the argument here: While many local and foreign observers called for *more* ‘reforms’ in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the particular shape of the intervention served to depoliticize not only displacement and return, but also society as a whole. In other post-socialist contexts, cuts in public services and reductions in other forms of state intervention usually followed from conditional multilateral assistance policies. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, such policies were imposed directly by the Dayton protectorate and, anyway, most of the job had been done already: many socio-economic institutions that had not been destroyed during the war had collapsed due to the disintegration of the Yugoslav market and infrastructural decay. Those that survived were now endangered by ‘transition’—they were unprofitable in capitalist terms—and many of those that might contain a promise in a capitalist future fell prey to nationalist elites through crooked privatization processes (Papić 2001; Schierup 1999).

In line with the dominant Western representations of Bosnia-Herzegovina, these overwhelming changes are all too often neglected in work



on displacement, except in general references to poverty and unemployment, and to the disadvantageous legacy of socialism (e.g., Stefansson 2004b: 176). But 'transition' itself, however incomplete it was according to its advocates, had powerful effects for the displaced (cf. Phillips 2004: 151). This was particularly clear from the experiences of minority returnees: considerable foreign funds were invested in property restitution, reconstruction, and safety, but much less was done with regard to people's livelihoods upon return. For the vast majority of Bosnians, no attractive or even feasible economic opportunities resulted from the FIA-enforced 'reforms', which instead brought humanitarian aid and the promotion of self-employment through micro-credit schemes and donations of seeds, animals, and so on. These programs were usually run through non-governmental organizations, which was partly a response to obstruction by local nationalist politicians but which was also congruent with the neo-liberal onslaught on any sense of entitlement to a public sector.

The cases of Bistrica and Izgled indicate that such experiences of 'transition' came to be articulated with another underestimated factor in Bosnian transformations of 'home': an increased preference for urban residence.<sup>6</sup> War-related displacement had strengthened earlier migration into the cities (Allcock 2002; Bougarel 1996; Jansen 2005c; Lukić and Vikitović 2004), and this process, in turn, was reinforced by the self-initiated wartime occupation of city flats on the part of majority-identified (hence by no means 'ethnically cleansed') people from surrounding villages. Although the original background to rural habitats in Bosnia-Herzegovina had been a kinship-based pattern of ownership of agricultural land, villagers in Izgled and Bistrica had *not* lived primarily off agriculture before the war. Rather, while they had also worked the land (particularly women), their insertion into the Yugoslav developmentalist modernization process had been shaped largely through labor market participation by most men and, to a lesser extent, women (see Lockwood 1973). With the war, extended Bosnian families had been scattered across the globe, and the socialist program of

disclosure of the countryside had been abandoned: transport and communications had deteriorated, and previous employment in socially owned workplaces had all but disappeared.

### ***Unsicherheit, location, and the life course***

If the issue of return was part and parcel of competing political strategies in Bosnia-Herzegovina, this does not imply that returnees were powerless pawns in the hands of local and foreign authorities. Put simply, most DPs understood the FIA safety-cum-property policies for what they were, and they made provisions in case they were evicted from occupied accommodation by signing up for return programs. With reconstruction assistance targeted at cross-IEBL minority return, most of the Izgled population fell into this category. While the Savićes reflected this pattern in Bistrica, we saw how it was much less common among Serbian DPs in 2001. Later, many Serbs actually lamented having 'missed the boat', often couching their frustration in the wider stereotype of Bosniacs as shrewd instrumentalists and 'pets' of the FIAs (Jansen 2003). In any case, I found that, rather than blindly serving as guinea pigs in the making of Dayton Bosnia-Herzegovina, returnees had usually weighed, to the best of their knowledge, the risks and opportunities of returning versus staying put. The recent experience of 'ethnic cleansing', the subsequent losses, and the generalized precariousness of Bosnia-Herzegovina made people wary about subjecting their loved ones and themselves to the risks associated with full-time minority return. So, aware that the FIAs also tended to bet on various horses at once, notably by encouraging return and coexistence *and* consolidating wartime territorial conquests in two Entities, Bosnian DPs hedged their bets. Next I explain how they went about making the return process theirs.

DP households assessed concerns of security and opportunity in relation to varying degrees of fear, homesickness, political pressure, financial assistance, local and transnational networks, and so on. As we saw, actual minority return was

a matter of degree, with systematic age-related differences. By January 2001, 80 percent of minority returnees belonged to social categories that were considered 'non-threatening' by the dominant forces in the majority group (United States Committee on Refugees 2001: 6). There was a gender imbalance, with men of 'military age' underrepresented due to wartime disappearance (especially among Bosniacs in north-east Bosnia-Herzegovina) but also due to fear of revenge and perhaps reluctance to face responsibility. However, the above figure mainly indicates a predominance of elderly people and the smallest commitment to return was consistently found among young, upwardly mobile parents (Lukić and Vikić 2004: 102; UNHCR 2003). In addition to safety concerns, FIAs tended to explain this within a sedentarist paradigm in reified culturalist portrayals of elderly, rural Bosnians desperate to return to their land. Likewise, the Savićs and Mirsad Mehmetović indicated that elderly persons were dying to return and returning to die, but they related this pattern more specifically to intra-household relations and generational dynamics conditioning insertions into political-economic structures. I now take their lead to interpret differential decision making about whether to return or not, and to what 'degree', in terms of people's positioning in the life course and in social relations-in-process in the peculiar Bosnian context.

Following Freud, Zygmunt Bauman (1999: 17) uses the German term *Unsicherheit* to encompass all three of the following dimensions: insecurity (what one has learned and achieved may not remain valid and valuable), uncertainty (what one knows may not be a sufficient basis to make decisions), and unsafety (one may be subject to physical harm). He points out that under neo-liberalism, the state is increasingly reluctant to even pretend that it deals with the first two and effectively privatizes them, thus reducing all anxieties of *Unsicherheit* to safety issues only. I found an amplified version of this in Bosnia-Herzegovina. There was still widespread fear of living in an area under political and police control of national Others, and many local authorities purposively maintained this fear. But,

as in Bistrice and Izgled, foreign protection had made most return sites relatively safe, and potential returnees were well informed about this.<sup>7</sup> Hence FIA return policies did take responsibility for safety, but due to their focus on restitution of property they rendered security and certainty private concerns, beyond the realm of what politics could or should engage with. Once Bosnian society was successfully 'reformed', these private concerns would be regulated by 'the market'.

However, 'home' is more than just shelter from physical harm (cf. Hage 1997: 102ff.), and anxieties about coexistence and minority status, as well as about livelihood in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina, led most households to be careful about the 'degree of' their return. Return patterns thus reflected a new political-economic geography, as the IEBL had reconfigured maps in both practical and imaginative terms and re-allocated places to a new type of marginality. This became an integral part of everyday considerations among displaced Bosnians, and, compared to their pre-war lives, returnees often shifted what could be called their *Sicherheits*-horizon following the Entity-logic of Dayton Bosnia-Herzegovina. Hence, in contrast to a pre-war Zvornik orientation, Izgled returnees now relied entirely on the Tuzla area for health services, education, administration, economic activity, and so on. A foreign donor had reconstructed a school in a nearby village, but obstruction by the RS authorities and by the returnees themselves had ruled out its use for the foreseeable future.<sup>8</sup> In Bistrice there were no returnee children, but life was now almost exclusively oriented toward Zvornik as opposed to Tuzla. Most returnees in both places still carried documents of the other Entity and many retained an occupied property there, effectively straddling the IEBL. This often involved collective household strategies whereby elderly, retired family members returned to settle permanently in their pre-war village, whereas the younger ones engaged at most in part-time return. When confronted by employees of foreign agencies or anyone perceived as such, people tended either to deny this situation or explain it as temporary. However, it seemed that few had any intentions to disambiguate the process voluntarily.<sup>9</sup>

Such household strategies constituted an insurance policy against excessive *Unsicherheit*, crucial for those still bearing the scars of war-related displacement and facing the precariousness of post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina. On the one hand, signing up for return and hence qualifying for reconstruction assistance was an opportunity to repossess property and to make actual return possible. On the other hand, keeping one foot in the other Entity limited exposure to the risks associated with minority return, stopping short of making it compulsory, and it allowed the maintenance of networks and engagements built during displacement. In practice, strategies often simultaneously included conflicting strands: seeking to retain occupied property in the area of displacement, obtaining reconstruction assistance for return to a certain degree, and seeking emigration to a Western state.<sup>10</sup> In Bosnia (and in Serbia, Croatia, and Kosovo) I have as often been approached by DPs for help with assistance for reconstruction and return as I have been for help with their visa application, or, if that had failed, buying my passport. Crucially for my argument here, these were often the same people.

If dreams and acts of return were strongly intertwined with intra-family relationships and generational phases, these in turn should be understood in relation to socio-economic conditions in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The combination of war and 'transition' has brought down living standards dramatically, and minority returnees were doubly hit by towering unemployment due to discrimination on the shrunken labor market.<sup>11</sup> But their situation was extremely contradictory. On the one hand, many returnees resented being thrown back into a peasant existence of attempted self-sufficiency and de facto dependency on aid. On the other hand, the enforcement of 'reforms', justified with a promise of "entry into Europe," encouraged those unwillingly re-peasantified Bosnians to simultaneously increase other, this time capitalist, expectations of modernization (see Chase 2002; Ferguson 1999).<sup>12</sup> Faced with this contradiction, the vast majority of displaced Bosnians I got to know over the years, wherever they were, considered the Bos-

nian 'home' they once had to be irrevocably lost. Rather than longing to return to the locality where that 'home'—usually captured in terms such as 'a normal life'—had been experienced, they relied on a mixture of resignation and mourning. Many nostalgically recalled a typically Bosnian way of life, hinged upon a sociality in the context of the relative *Sicherheit* of the socialist Yugoslav federation. Regardless of their feelings on socialism and nationalism, most concurred that their previous lives had been much better than their current ones (of course, disagreement existed as to who was to blame for that). But the point was that that 'normal life' was gone, and few had illusions of time travel to a past 'home'. Moreover, they themselves had changed, as ongoing societal transformations interacted with changes in the life trajectories of particular individuals in particular households (cf. Jackson 1995: 126). Positioning in the life course and in social relations-in-process are therefore crucial considerations in understanding why Joka and Živko Savić celebrated their return 'home' with unambiguous joy, whereas Mirsad Mehmetović did not see a future in Izgled.

The case of the Savićes (and of mother Mehmetović) indicates that for some elderly persons minority return constituted a feasible option. While it would be stretching it to call this a 'homecoming to the future' (Stefansson 2004a), their trajectory was not *entirely* out of tune with their pre-war expectations. Certainly, Joka and Živko had thought their retirement would be much more comfortable, but city life, remember, could not tempt them. While their circumstances were infinitely more miserable than they could have foreseen, to a degree they did have the planned quiet life of retirement, tending the garden around the family house. They had returned full-time to a reconstructed house in Bistrica, supported by three children who had households of their own and who were, to their relief, alive and doing fine given the circumstances. Their daughter lived in Serbia and their sons, who had received assistance too, remained in Zvornik: one in his own property and the other in an occupied Bosniac-owned flat. The elderly couple had no schooling concerns, and when in

need of health care, they called on their sons. The Savićes had retired before the war and were not dependent on the labor market. Of course, with the average pension standing at less than USD 90 in the Federation and less than USD 60 in RS, this was hardly a position of economic comfort (*Oslobođenje*, 30 October 2000: 4). Still, their return simultaneously allowed the couple to spend their remaining years ‘at home’ and the wider household to repossess property with minimized *Unsicherheit* for all involved. To a sufficient degree, return to Bistrica allowed them to live as the persons they imagined and were expected to be—it allowed a socially embedded emplacement of that personhood.

Others, like the Savićes’s children and Mirsad Mehmetović, found themselves in another stage of their life course and faced different predicaments in terms of the emplacement of their personhood. Mirsad, Enisa, and their daughters retained occupied Serbian-owned accommodation in the Tuzla area, visiting Izgled on weekends and holidays. Only Mirsad’s mother lived in Izgled permanently. Even regardless of safety considerations, if returning ‘home’ meant eking out a life through subsistence farming, few adults with children and younger people in general considered this a feasible option. The few who, like Mirsad, were employed in nearby towns, were endangered by contractual precariousness and, given the location of such jobs across the IEBL, often had even less reason to commit to permanent return to areas without any livelihood opportunities (cf. Green 2005; Holt 1996; Jansen 2002, 2006). In the initial phases of minority return this problem was rendered less prominent by the need for reconstruction labor: most men (whose numbers, I recall, had been decimated in Izgled) were engaged in building houses, while women, who were involved in the former in less visible ways, also ran the households and engaged in small-scale agriculture for household consumption. But what would these people do afterward? This question was strongly gendered, as, in the absence of their fathers, young men like Mirsad were confronted with a particularly sharp discrepancy between the lack of opportunity in the precarious Bosnian economy and even greater

expectations to be breadwinners than had already existed previously in these patriarchal households. Mirsad Mehmetović had been a young man living with his parents in 1990, and ten years later he had lost his father and had become a married father of two. The experience of war and displacement had brought the loss of loved ones and livelihoods, as well as new responsibilities to construct ‘cool ground’ from which to build a future for his household. Having been expelled almost a decade earlier, Mirsad believed emigration could be a way to reduce his household’s exposure to *Unsicherheit* and to start fulfilling their reformulated expectations of ‘modernization’. He mentioned that perhaps he would retire to Izgled, but it was clear that, at least for now, the place did not afford him the ‘sense of possibility’ to construct his envisaged and expected personhood as a young father, as it resisted a socially embedded emplacement of this personhood.

## Conclusion

In this article I have analyzed the workings of people’s stage in the life course in the emplacement of ‘home’ in early post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina, through the prism of personhood and the tensions between opportunities and expectations in particular local contexts. While elderly displaced Bosnians were more likely to yearn for and to actually remake ‘home’ in their pre-war place of residence, many others, especially younger ones with children, straddled official categories as they focused on the practicalities of having to make ‘home’ for their households. What is ‘cool ground’ for the former may not be ‘cool ground’ for the latter, because ‘home’ is not simply a shelter from unsafety, but also a base where insecurity and uncertainty can be reduced and confronted (Bauman 1999: 17; Hage 1997: 102ff.). After the war, most people in Bosnia-Herzegovina felt they were worse off than they had been before and, perhaps even more important, worse off than they had ever imagined they would be. Some, of course, hailed what they considered to be the ‘liberation’ of their nation (Jansen 2003) but given the precariousness that pervaded post-war Bosnia-

Herzegovina this was rarely considered as sufficient reason for celebration or for so much as a generally positive outlook. Still, in their own ways, competing nationalist discourses did provide sources of some sense of security and certainty to many people. FIA return policies, on their part, represented an interweaving of the sedentarism of the nationalisms they were meant to oppose with a mantra of 'reforms'. Their neo-liberal reluctance to even engage with wider concerns of *Sicherheit*, reducing 'home' to safety and property, failed to appeal as an alternative for most Bosnians. With little to compensate for the massive changes in their lives, many felt forced to start all over again, if not for themselves, then at least for their children. Now, if this was what was required, and if they themselves, the society in which they lived, and the particular locality where 'home' had once been grounded had been radically transformed, it is no surprise that many considered starting over again in a different place altogether. In fact, many of the refugees who had returned to Bosnia-Herzegovina in the glow of early post-war enthusiasm had soon focused their energy on regaining access to a foreign state. Hence, particularly people who had invested heavily in starting new households, with great responsibilities to others, saw return not as a restorative but as a transformative process on the societal, household, and individual level. If they had to start over again anyway, they reasoned, they might as well *also* look for 'cool ground' in a place without the handicap of a post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina location. Thus, while the desire for a 'normal life' might entice some to return, the more common scenario involved "searching for better places, where the possibilities of leading a normal life were deemed to be more realistic" (Stefansson 2004b: 182).

My study has highlighted the complex social nature of the building of such 'cool ground'. Clearly, the patterns I exposed contained a dimension of economic strategizing for material benefits, but an eye for the dynamics of life trajectories and the trans-generational social webs in which they exist refutes reductionist interpretations. My analysis of the role of the life course highlights forms of personhood (channeled

through relations of kinship and gender) that may or may not be successfully articulated in place-making projects and that condition people's insertion into a societal context. A dynamic political economy of 'home' as an affective construct that can only be approximated thus casts light on why many Bosnians combined various strategies in their search for 'cool ground'. They were confronted with multi-layered, prolonged precariousness caused by war and by 'transition'. As in other, not war-affected, neo-liberalizing contexts of intensifying *Unsicherheit*, their search for 'cool ground' often included more reactive elements of risk avoidance and of protecting some vestiges of worth, than of proactive instrumentalism. Hence, the experiences of displaced Bosnians are best understood through an approach that retains the significance of place in 'home', but infuses it with the dynamics of developing social relations and political-economic transformation. People's imaginings and acts of return were inextricably linked to a 'sense of possibility' and the perceived potential of a location for the emplacement of their personhood conditioned effective coping with *Unsicherheit* and, more positively, the creation of a social base for recognition, and, ultimately, for hope. Rather than reducing 'home' retrospectively to a remembered site of *belonging*, we should also analyze it prospectively as a socially constituted object of longing.

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## Notes

1. I carried out long-term ethnographic research among displaced Bosnians in north-east Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Australia, and The Netherlands (2000–2001) in a project developed with Andy Dawson and financially supported by the Toyota Foundation, the Leverhulme Trust, and the University of Hull. Pseudonyms are used for persons and villages. All translations are mine. Following local use, I refer to ‘Internally Displaced Persons’ as DPs and ‘Bosnian’ is short for the non-national term ‘Bosnian-Herzegovinian’.
2. I use the term ‘Foreign Intervention Agencies’ to refer to Western-led inter-governmental structures and to major so-called Non-Governmental Organizations, most of which are dependent on the same governments for all intents and purposes. The use of this blanket term reflects representations among Bosnians and foreign personnel alike. The latter preferred the even more problematic term ‘International Community’, as did the mainstream media. Except in contexts controlled by precisely those FIAs, most Bosnians tended to refer to *stranci* (the foreigners), sometimes specifying the state in question.
3. While I spent many afternoons with Joka Savić, gender segregation was strong in Bosniac-inhabited places like Izgled. Except for interactions with elderly women, such as the owner of the house-in-reconstruction containing the bare concrete room where I stayed, I mostly socialized with Izgled men, helping on the building sites during the day and talking and playing football in the evening. Younger women were often present too but retained a distance from an unmarried foreign man such as myself. I thus refer to Mirsad Mehmetović’s story on an individual basis, but relate it to his role as husband and father.
4. All figures, unless otherwise indicated, are UNHCR statistics (see [www.unhcr.ba](http://www.unhcr.ba)).
5. In a 1997 survey, 22.5 percent of Serbs said they wished to return, as compared to 80 percent of Bosniac respondents (UNHCR/Commission for Real Property Claims 1997). With many returned already, a 2003 poll among Bosniac DPs in Tuzla found that 55 percent stated a wish to return to RS (UNHCR 2003). Note that the interviewers were usually perceived as exercising control over the allocation of assistance, thus limiting respondents’ likelihood to exclude return entirely.
6. A UNHCR/Commission for Real Property Claims survey (1997) found that 84 percent of all DP respondents reluctant to return said they wished to live in a town. Studies of return migration outside of Bosnia-Herzegovina have also highlighted urban relocation; even returnees to rural areas rarely engage in agriculture (Gmelch 1980).
7. E.g., through daytime return visits, contacts with other returnees and/or former neighbors, DP associations, media reports. Some ignored this information if it contradicted nationalist representations (Jansen 2003).
8. In 2001, 85 percent of Bosniac returnee children in RS went to school in the Federation (United States Committee on Refugees 2001: 6).
9. In 1999 an estimated 60 percent of all reconstructed houses were inhabited (Cox 1999: 232). However, in contrast to a militant hard core (see Jansen 2003), many DPs privately expressed not only resignation at the prospect of eviction from occupied accommodation, but also agreement with the principle. They did not want to live ‘in a stranger’s house’, but they saw no alternative.
10. An estimated 250,000 people left Bosnia-Herzegovina in the first five post-war years. In a 2001 poll, well over half of respondents aged eighteen to fifty stated they would emigrate if they could (UNDP 2004: 54).
11. A 2000 survey among returnees to RS found that only 5 percent were employed (UNHCR 2000a). Particularly vulnerable were widows and single mothers, elderly and disabled persons (UNHCR 2000b).
12. I substitute ‘modernization’ for Ferguson’s ‘modernity’ in order to describe the transformative dynamics involved. Ironically, a common channel for successfully engaging with those expectations was through contacts, experience, and funding in FIA jobs.

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