

Bosnian Undergrad Reconnects With Uneasy Past

They discovered the mass grave on the day of Elvira Saracevic's high school graduation. It was near the site of a Bosnian concentration camp where she, her mother and young brother were separated from her father 14 years ago.

She was eight, then. Her family lived in Vlasenica, a small town northeast of Sarajevo with a cordial integration of Bosnian Muslims and Serbs. But when the country erupted in sectarian violence in 1992, even Vlasenica was not spared. Muslim families, like the Saracevics, were rounded up by their Serb neighbors into make-shift camps. The lucky ones were cast off in buses, sent on unnerving odysseys across a land that was suddenly out to kill them. The unlucky were murdered where they had lived. "We were among the last groups they let out," recalls Elvira, now a senior at the UW Business School. "When we were leaving we crossed a street that was filled with blood rushing down the hill through the city."

She didn't fear for her father, though. It happened that the man in charge of operations at the concentration camp was one of her uncle's best friends, a man who had been a frequent guest of the Saracevics. He had let her father leave his bags in the camp office. "We were assured that he was going to be okay, that they would transfer him out," Elvira recalls. "It's pretty difficult to comprehend what people go through to make that kind of transformation. This guy was at our house all the time. Now he's in The Hague, serving 25 years for genocide."

Elvira and her incomplete family eventually found their way to safety in a refugee camp, and lived for a few years in Hungary. By the time they immigrated to the US in 1996, hope for her father had been exhausted. An aid group helped the Saracevics find an apartment in Tukwila, Washington. Elvira took classes to learn English. Her mother found work and lifted the family off welfare.

Eventually, Elvira stopped looking back. A bright student in high school, she qualified for a Washington Achiever Scholarship, was accepted at the UW and fixed her mind on the promise of her American future.

And then she learned of the grave. A few years later, she provided DNA samples that confirmed the presence of her father, one of an estimated 50,000 victims of the Bosnian genocide.

The past had caught up to Elvira. She began recognizing how distant she had become from her homeland and the many displaced countrymen, women and children who lived in her town—even in her apartment building. "I was getting



to a point where I was losing my Bosnian, I wasn't involved in the community, I had secluded myself," she says. "Maybe I just didn't relate to them, but I had set out this whole alternative future for myself."

She decided that it was time to reconnect and joined the nascent Bosnian Cultural Artistic Association (KUD-Behar). The group quickly grew to 50 members, and began performing Bosnian folk dances around the region. Elvira, studying marketing and entrepreneurship at the Business School, took on promotion, booking and recruiting.

KUD-Behar continues to grow, and grow younger, which is very exciting to Elvira. "We're trying to build this organization so the next generation doesn't get lost," she says, "so they still have some connection to Bosnia and Herzegovina."

Elvira is busy raising funds for the organization's future performances, including a planned trip to dance at the Sarajevo Folk Festival this summer. First, though, she is returning with her mother and brother to Vlasenica this April to attend the belated funeral of her father and the neighbors and friends who died with him.

She has mixed feelings about returning to the place of remembrances so muddled with pain and bliss. But, she says, the fond memories are gradually returning as she works to translate her old world to new. "It's not the same, living away from Bosnia," she says. "But we still do the folk dancing, listen to the music, eat the food. We're still so connected in a way."