

SUNDAY REPORT

Symbol of Hope in a Land of Hate

The mayor of Drvar was brutally beaten for attempting to return Bosnian Serb refugees to their former homes in the Croat-controlled town.

By TRACY WILKINSON, Times Staff Writer

DRVAR, Bosnia-Herzegovina--It takes an eternity for Mile Marceta, the mayor of Drvar, to walk down a flight of stairs. He grasps the railing with his left hand, a metal crutch in his right. One stair at a time, baby steps, he lowers his stiff and wounded body. Ever since an angry mob pulled him from City Hall, beat him to a pulp and left him for dead, Marceta moves slowly--but with a determination that makes him a hero to some, a major nuisance to others, as he wages a quixotic campaign to return Bosnian Serb refugees to their homes in Croat-controlled Drvar.

On this day, the Serbian mayor is traveling to Drvar--prone in the back seat of a Land Rover to ease the painful jolts on the bumpy road--to meet with the most powerful American military man in Europe, NATO chief Gen. Wesley Clark. Marceta expects to enlist Clark, NATO and anyone else who will listen in his crusade.

A 56-year-old former traveling salesman with barely a high school education, Marceta pursues his goal like an obsession, even after beatings, killings, arsons and riots. He is a man of "considerable courage," Clark says.

Nearly three years after Bosnia ended a ferocious war, Marceta is one of a handful of Bosnians who embody the chance for real change in a country struggling to rebuild itself. They are men and women who are trying to make a difference by bucking the system and fighting against the nationalism and ethnic prejudice that were used to stoke the war.

Their challenge to the status quo puts them at risk and opens them to attack, but they persist. Along with Marceta, there is a Muslim reporter writing from a ringside seat at Serbian atrocities; a Croatian priest resisting Muslim fundamentalism; a Bosnian Serb woman helping to repair the damaged psyches of women of all ethnicities; and a Muslim judge who promotes the rule of law, regardless of whom it makes

uncomfortable. Sometimes their roles seem small, but if they and people like them fail, so will U.S.-led Western efforts to secure lasting peace in Bosnia.

Marceta and thousands of Serbs, who had constituted 97% of Drvar's population before the war, were driven from the city by Croatian and Muslim armies pressing the final offensive of the war in the autumn of 1995. The city was occupied by Bosnian Croat soldiers, hard-liners and refugees. Marceta never accepted his expulsion. Just weeks after the war ended, with the lines of ethnic division seemingly cemented forever and tempers still inflamed, he hopped into his red Lada and drove back into Muslim-Croat-controlled territory.

"I immediately joined the battle to return," he said, "and I will fight this as long as I can breathe."

2 Million People Displaced by War

A thickset man with graying hair who tends to wear the same loud tie and polyester plaid jacket several days in a row, Marceta shows a resilience that is rare in the fatalistic mentality of the Balkans. More than 2 million people were displaced by the war in Bosnia, nearly half the country's population. The United Nations designated 1998 the "year of returns," yet only small numbers of people have been able to cross ethnic lines to go back to hometowns where they are now in the minority. It remains the single greatest problem in postwar Bosnia.

Marceta's response was to organize a political party dedicated solely to leading Serbs home to Drvar. His actions pose a direct challenge to the hard-line dream of ethnic purity--on both the Croatian and Serbian sides. Bosnian Croat nationalists do not want Serbs to return because Drvar, in far western Bosnia, was a strategic step toward their goal of keeping this part of the country largely for themselves and eventually uniting with Croatia proper. Bosnian Serb nationalists do not want Serbs leaving for Drvar because they want to build the Bosnian Serb population in their half of the country, after having rid it of most Muslims and Croats. Besides, Serbs and Croats living together is certainly not what the nationalists waged a war for.

Under attack from both sides, Marceta managed to get himself elected mayor of Drvar last year, thanks to election rules that permit refugees to cast absentee ballots in their prewar home cities. Ignoring warnings and threats, and even as Serb-owned homes were being routinely set afire, he marched into Drvar and convened the City Council, taking what he saw as the first step in reversing the "ethnic cleansing" of his hometown.

An estimated 2,000 Serbs, gingerly and with trepidation, followed him back to Drvar.

His plan was working. International experts credited Marceta with almost single-handedly directing the most successful return of refugees across ethnic lines anywhere in Bosnia. In fact, it was working too well. When a handful of Serbs moved into their homes in the center of Drvar last spring, effectively displacing a unit of Bosnian Croat soldiers, hard-line Croatian nationalists decided they'd had enough. Dozens of houses belonging to Serbs were set aflame. And two Serbs, Vojin Trninic, 63, and his wife, Mileva, 59, were slain as they slept in their newly restored home. Whoever killed them attempted to torch the house, apparently to conceal gunshot wounds in the victims' backs, but Canadian soldiers spotted the smoke and pulled out the bodies.

The mayhem snowballed in the ensuing days: Serbs in the town of Derventa, 85 miles away, took out their aggressions on a Bosnian Croat church, trapping its senior religious leader there for hours. Croats in Drvar rioted, destroying U.N. buildings and torching about 200 Bosnian Serb apartments. And Marceta was beaten up.

He remembers being dragged and chased from his City Hall office. The crowd used pieces of wood, ashtrays, bricks and anything else they could get their hands on to pummel him around the chest, kidneys and face, he recalls. They stomped on a leg that was mending from a traffic accident, rebreaking it and tearing tendons.

Marceta believes the only reason he escaped was that after crawling to a nearby field, he feigned death, lolling his tongue and rolling his eyes back into his head.

"Let's slaughter him!" he heard one of his attackers exclaim.

"He's finished. Let's go," another said.

Overhead, he heard the staccato of a NATO helicopter. Eventually, Canadian troops in an armored personnel carrier roared up and evacuated him to a NATO hospital.

Marceta has not resumed his mayoral duties since, and he is living in the Bosnian Serb city where he had been a refugee. Yet even as some doubts nag at his resolve, he is not quitting his crusade. First in a wheelchair and later on crutches, Marceta has continued to pester international mediators, visit terrified Serbian returnees and demand change.

Subtlety Not His Strength

His critics--and Marceta has many--contend that he is too confrontational and stubborn to be effective. Marceta certainly is not subtle. Gruff and impatient, he sticks in the crowd of many international mediators, who stand more on bureaucratic niceties. He will publicly scold diplomats and government leaders. He has little time for issues other than his own. And he is relentless, motivated by his profound desire to go home and his revulsion at the thought that wartime upheaval might be rewarded. Four days after he was attacked by the mob in Drvar, a crippled Marceta wheeled into an international conference on refugee returns and passionately took the peacemakers to task for the violence keeping citizens from their homes.

"With every new victim," he railed in a hoarse voice, finger jabbing the air, "both you, the international community and I lose credibility. . . . If the international community flees a bunch of hooligans, then be sure that the peace that we could barely wait for will have no chance."

The men in suits shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Some rolled their eyes or rubbed their chins in a gesture of patronizing tolerance. Everyone looked a little embarrassed. The performance was typical Marceta, not smooth but heartfelt.

"He says all the wrong things. He is very politically incorrect. He dresses all wrong," said a European diplomat who has worked with Marceta. "He's a real irritant. But he's also a real fighter."

The violence surrounding Marceta and Drvar highlights the changing nature of international peacekeeping in Bosnia and the dilemma that it creates.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces are reluctant to get involved in the kind of crowd control that might have saved Marceta on the day he was attacked. Yet, ultimately, they were called on to restore calm to Drvar, set up checkpoints around the city and run daily patrols as protection for returning Serbs. Just how involved international players should become in this morass is a subject of constant debate, as each step pushes Bosnia closer to becoming a protectorate and makes it harder for the West to extract itself. Yet Bosnians such as Marceta who are fighting uphill battles against the status quo welcome as large an international role as possible.

"Drvar is an important indicator for how [refugee returns] will go in the future in the whole country," NATO commander Clark said.

Clark promised to tackle Marceta's single greatest worry in Drvar: the presence of Bosnian Croat soldiers. The Bosnian Croat army, which remains separate from the Bosnian Muslim army despite a multimillion-dollar U.S. program to unite the two, billeted 2,500 soldiers in Drvar. NATO has reduced that number to 500, Clark said. It's 500 too many, as far as Marceta is concerned.

A History of Violence

Three months before Marceta was born, in 1942, his father was killed--by either World War II Fascists or partisans, no one is sure. His grandfather and great-grandfather were killed in earlier wars against occupying forces.

"Maybe in my genes there is something," he says with a smile.

After graduating from high school, Marceta says, he didn't have the money to continue his studies, so he joined the Yugoslav national army, then moved into sales, peddling food products to restaurants and businesses.

Being a traveling salesman was an unusual occupation in communist Yugoslavia. It represented having a free spirit, an independent streak, a willingness to take risks. Marceta never married, has no children and still cares for his elderly mother. He sounds like a broken record as he tells people around him and those he meets that he is determined to push ahead with returns to Drvar.

The slaying of the Trninic couple, however, is the one thing that seems to have shaken Marceta's resolve. They were killed the night of April 15, about a month after they returned to Drvar.

"I have the right to be responsible for my own head, but do I have the right to risk others?" Marceta asks, before answering, "I have no right to take people back so they die without reason."

He is seated about 50 miles from Drvar in the little office in Banja Luka of the Coalition for Returns, a grass-roots organization formed when it became clear that the nationalist governments that continue to run Bosnia were not truly interested in returns. The organization represents all ethnic groups and has scant connection to politicians. On the wall hangs the coalition's theme poster: a large yellow map of all Bosnia-Herzegovina and a picture of a house with a little chimney. "Hocu kuci," it says. "I want to go home." Marceta has his leg propped on a chair. He occasionally grimaces in pain. A reddish-brown scar mars his forehead.

He is busy filling out forms for a new passport--his old one was burned in one of the arson fires in Drvar--and contemplates invitations to speak at a European Union seminar and to pick up an award in London.

Later this same night, he will dine for three hours with the U.S. ambassador to Bosnia, Richard Kauzlarich, who will gently urge him to return to work in Drvar. And, at some point, he needs to fit in time for a CT scan that the doctors have ordered for his injuries. In the weeks after fleeing the beating in Drvar, Marceta slept in the Banja Luka hospital, sometimes under guard.

If his biggest enemies now are hard-line Croats, Marceta earlier was persona non grata among ultranationalist Serbs. Marceta's insistence in 1996 elections that he and his followers vote in their prewar hometowns ruined the plans of hard-liners who needed those votes in parts of Bosnia that the Serbs had captured and emptied of Muslims and Croats.

"People always asked me if I knew what I was doing, and didn't I know it would be better for me if I stopped," Marceta says.

'One Huge Hate-Crime Scene'

Drvar sits in the basin of a dramatic valley, miles from the nearest city. The city's prewar population, according to the 1991 census, was 16,608 Serbs, 33 Croats, 33 Muslims and 452 others. Today, there are about 8,500 Croats who settled here after the war and the roughly 2,000 Serbs who have returned since Marceta's election as mayor. Descending into Drvar, one gets the feeling that one is in Croatia, not Bosnia. As in many parts of Bosnia that are controlled by Bosnian Croats, most flags, the telephone company, license plates and the dominant currency all are Croatian.

An American official involved in investigating the arson and assaults in Drvar describes the town as "one huge hate-crime scene." At City Hall, some of the Bosnian Croats who were elected to the local government along with Marceta say the mayor brought on his own troubles. He provoked the Croats, they say, and ignored their needs in his zeal to fight for the interests of his own people, the Serbs. Even international officials find it necessary to remind Marceta on occasion that he must be a mayor to all Drvar's people.

"He forgot his real, main task is to lead the government and be useful for both Croats and Serbs here," said Boro Malbasic, a municipal official and retired Bosnian Croat army colonel. Like most Croats in Drvar, Malbasic

is a refugee who was forced by Muslims to leave his home in the central Bosnian city of Vares.

"A mayor should be an expert, well prepared, well educated," Malbasic said, seated in his City Hall office with a picture of Croatian President Franjo Tudjman and a large map of "Herzegovina," the Bosnian region controlled by Croatian hard-liners, on his wall. Bloodstains--Marceta's blood, apparently, from the day the mayor was beaten--were visible on Malbasic's curtains. Windowpanes, shattered in the riots, had been recently replaced. Malbasic complained that international officials have overreacted to the attacks on Serbs and are unfairly punishing Drvar's Croats with armed raids by NATO soldiers and attack dogs and with nighttime helicopter overflights. The violence and the killings were unfortunate, he said, but killings can happen anywhere, to anybody.

On the day of the riots, many recently returned Serbs in villages around Drvar fled into the hills to other Serbs' farmhouses, where they figured they were out of harm's way.

Milorad Srdic and his wife, Bosilka, keep a pitchfork by their front door as protection against the gangs of young Croatian thugs who they are certain will return. The Croats have shut off their water, cut their trees and stolen their electrical cables, Srdic said. "Where you see lights at night, those are houses with Croats," Srdic said. Srdic and other Serbs in the brush-covered hills above Drvar said Marceta's work inspired them to return home, even though the process is not complete. "Mile [Marceta] is the one who had the vision,"

Srdic said, sipping a small cup of Turkish coffee and smoking cigarettes while his wife cooked beans on a wood-burning stove. "He seduced us with the idea that we should come back. People from the Balkans want to be on their own land. He knew our mentality, that we had only one desire: to go home. He sang our tune." Now it's up to Marceta whether he will come back to Drvar to stay. If he does not, mediators warn, the hard-liners will have won.

"The issue is safety," Marceta said. "Not food, not housing, not money, but safety--safety for all of us."

A Nation Still Divided

Nationalism and ethnic prejudice were used to stoke 3 1/2 years of war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the deadliest conflict in Europe since World War II. Millions of lives were ruined. Long after the shooting stopped under a Western-imposed peace settlement, much of Bosnia remains separated

along ethnic lines. But a small number of Bosnians fights the system and resists the status quo in uphill battles to make a difference and give Bosnia hope for genuine change. This series introduces a few of these men and women:

* SUNDAY: A Serb mayor's quest to go back to a hometown now controlled by Croats reveals the complexities of refugee returns, the single greatest problem in postwar Bosnia.

* MONDAY: A Muslim reporter who remained in Serb-held territory grapples with how to live alongside the very men who abused him for his faith.

* TUESDAY: A Muslim judge endures threats and condemnation from fellow Muslims for standing up for what he feels is just, even if it runs counter to nationalist wishes.

* WEDNESDAY: A Serb woman in the Muslim-Croat half of Bosnia ignores ethnic prejudices to help women assert their rights and rebuild their lives.

* THURSDAY: A Croat priest working in a Muslim city challenges hard-liners from both groups to preserve a Catholic community in unfriendly territory.