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Human Costs of Temporary Refugee Protection: The Case of Slovenia

Natalija Vrečer

“...to show how ‘gender’ is constructed in our multinational world, feminist research has demonstrated that we also need to deconstruct the concept; that is, to show how identities and experiences are simultaneously structured by class, culture, race, nationality, religion, age, sexuality, individual experience, as well as by ‘gender.’”

Warren B. Kay and Bourque C. Susan (1991)

*Introduction*¹

Asylum on a temporary basis has a long history; however, it became wide spread especially after the collapse of ex-Yugoslavia (Goodwin-Gill 1996). Many Bosnian refugees, and later refugees from Kosovo, were protected temporarily. As both

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groups of refugees went into exile in a foreign country in great numbers (an estimated 1.2 million Bosnians and 900,000 refugees left Kosovo)², the response of the host countries in dealing primarily with the immediate needs of refugees, providing mainly food and shelter, seemed logical. It seemed logical during the initial arrival period to the host country, but not as a long-term solution. My claim is that temporary refugee protection in the case of ex-Yugoslav refugees inefficiently replaced long-term durable solutions and thus considerably lowered the quality of the lives of refugees. Namely, in most countries they were granted fewer human rights than the refugees who received the formal status of a refugee according to the Geneva Convention about a Status of a Refugee from 1951³ and its Protocol from 1967.

This is certainly the case in Slovenia where the refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina have held temporary status for eight years. This temporary refugee protection caused many negative consequences for their way of life. For the purpose of this paper, I will analyze those consequences, focusing primarily on the Slovenian example.

In order to enable the reader to understand the situation of refugees in Slovenia as fully as possible, I chose a more holistic approach and focus on different themes to render an anthropological understanding possible. Therefore, the first part of the paper focuses on the global aspects of the refugee question, including some brief statistical data worldwide and for Slovenia. I will then explain my methodology and describe the sociocultural context in which refugees live. Namely, the conditions in the host country largely shape their life in exile. Therefore, I will describe the refugees' living conditions, which resemble ghettos. I will then briefly analyze of the Slovenian refugee law and refugee policy. In the second part of the paper I will discuss the consequences of this refugee law and policy on the refugees' way of life, tracing them in intergenerational, gender and interpersonal relations, as well as in feelings of prolonged liminality. Finally, I will mention briefly the changed ethnic conditions and repatriation and give some policy recommendations.

In addition to enabling an understanding of people in exile in Slovenia (through the reconstruction of their perspective) and giving policy recommendations, this paper documents human suffering.

² The number 1.2 million is an UNHCR estimation, because the exact number of people who were forced to leave Bosnia-Herzegovina during the war is unknown. I took the number from the study written by Alice Edwards (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) with the assistance of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Sarajevo in April 2000. The number 900.000 for the refugees who fled Kosovo was provided by the Pristina office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in January 2000.

³ In the following text it is referred to as the Geneva Convention.

I will use the word “refugees” in my paper, although, according to the Slovenian Law of Temporary Asylum from 1997, the refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo in Slovenia have a legal status of “persons with temporary asylum.” Technically, Slovenia has only three refugees according to the Geneva Convention, which defined the term refugee. According to this definition, “*a refugee* is a person who experiences a well-founded fear of being persecuted on the basis of race, religion, nationality; or because he or she belongs to a certain social group; or because of his or her political opinion and is outside of the country of his or her origin and owing to such fear is unwilling to return to country of his or her origin.”

The term *forced migrant*⁴ is often used nowadays, although it is not a legal term yet. It emphasizes that people in question were forced to leave their countries. Its increase in use could be attributed also to the fact that the stigma of a helpless victim that is connected to the term refugee is not (yet) attached to the term forced migrant. The Slovenian expression for forced migrants, *pregnanci*, is mainly used by some NGOs and sometimes in media. The refugees in Slovenia, however, refer to themselves as either refugees, Bosnians, or Albanians from Kosovo, but not as *pregnanci*.

I use the term refugee to remind that all those refugees from ex-Yugoslavia could have been given refugee status according to the Geneva Convention had the governments’ interpretation taken human rights into account.

In order to define *temporary refugee protection*, I use Goodwin-Gill’s choice, namely, the UNHCR definition. According to this definition, temporary refugee protection is considered “a flexible and pragmatic means of affording needed protection to large numbers of people fleeing human rights abuses and armed conflict ... who might otherwise have overwhelmed asylum procedures” (1998, (1996), pp. 200). The word “needed” could be questioned here, because human needs are much wider, especially in the long run, than merely the immediate needs of food and shelter, on which temporary protection practices usually focus. This of course varies from country to country. It is also quite evident from the definition that the UNHCR became the main proponent of contemporary temporary refugee protection, though this may seem to oppose its mandate which is to promote the Geneva Convention.

⁴ Helton (the director of the ex-Forced Migration Project) wrote a proposal for a definition of forced migrant. It is more liberal and inclusive as it encompasses also the flights due to natural disasters, human rights’ violations, discrimination, persecution etc. I hope Helton will finish the definition and it will become legalized, as it will be much more convenient than the old definition of a refugee from Geneva Convention.

Global Aspects of the Refugee Question

While the history of asylum as a protection from persecution dates back to the Greeks and Romans, the number of refugees in the 20th century is greater than ever before. The number of refugees has been rising, especially in the last decades. In the 1970s, there were three million refugees in the world, in the 1980s eight million (Loescher 1993). According to the UNHCR data, in 1995 there were 27 million people who were forced to migrate outside their country of origin. In 1999, this number fell to 22 million, but there were also 30 million internally displaced persons; persons forcibly displaced inside the country of their origin. Thus, one out of every 280 people in the world is a refugee. More than 90% of refugees are outside of Europe.

Refugees are often considered a humanitarian catastrophe; however, it is too often forgotten that they also present a political and security question, which can be solved only in a global strategic context (Loescher 1992: 5). Let me use two recent examples: the masses of refugees from East to West Berlin who helped crush the Berlin wall in 1989 and the Rwandan crisis in 1994. This crisis in Rwanda was started by refugees who were under temporary protection for many years and without any prospects for a suitable, durable solution. Because the country was not willing to address social cohesion and integration, the Rwandan situation resulted in a large-scale genocide. The inter-relatedness of the security question and refugee movements is a very rare topic of refugee studies.

The main causes of refugee movements (both direct and indirect) are wars, dictatorial regimes that violate human rights, natural disasters, arms industry, disintegrating states, colonialism, global economic inequalities and racial discrimination.

Some brief statistical data for Slovenia

The refugees started arriving in Slovenia soon after the ten days' war for the independence of Slovenia in June 1991. Unfortunately, the war followed in two other former Yugoslav republics. Refugees from Croatia started coming to Slovenia in September 1991 and the majority of refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina arrived in the spring 1992. At that time there were approximately 45,000 refugees in Slovenia with a local population numbering two million people. The frequently mentioned number of 70,000 was just an estimate. In September 1993, the first official counting was issued and there were 31,100 refugees from the former Yugoslavia in Slovenia.

Refugees from Kosovo came sporadically. They were not given a status according to the Geneva Convention for reasons I will explain later on. They mainly stayed with relatives and the total number was unknown. Following the NATO attacks on Belgrade, they started arriving in greater numbers. Slovenia decided to accept 1,600 refugees from Kosovo. The Ministry of Exterior's decision on this number was based on the fact that Portugal had accepted 1,500 refugees, which was the lowest number of all the European Union countries. Slovenia decided to accept a higher number than Portugal. By accepting refugees on an individual basis, Slovenia tried mainly to achieve family reunions. In addition, Slovenia issued a status of "persons of temporary asylum" to more than 2,500 refugees from Kosovo that came on their own.⁵ At the beginning of April 2000, 3,100 refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina were left in Slovenia and 1,116 from Kosovo.

Research Methodology

The method of my research was ethnographic and exemplifies qualitative research. I did the fieldwork mainly with the refugees in refugee centers; however, I also spoke and associated with individuals who live in private arrangements. From August 1992 to December 1994, I focused on two locations of the refugee center in Celje (the third biggest town in Slovenia). Beginning in 1995, I conducted participant observation in Ljubljana, where I worked in the refugee centers Vic and Smartinska Street. After the closure of the collective refugee center on Smartinska Street in spring 1998, I continued with occasional visits to Vic. My approach was emic as I tried to reconstruct the refugee's point of view.

I found the participant observation particularly appropriate for studying refugees, especially when I realized that my findings were very often different from those who came to the refugee center once or only a few times. Very often they misjudged the refugees' spiritual and psychological condition by focusing on impoverished material conditions. While the collective refugee centers in Slovenia are not really the most desirable place to live, this research reflects incomplete conclusions based on limited observations.

However, I agree with Hammersley who writes about ethnographic method. In spite of the high probability of the facts collected by ethnographic research in comparison with other methods, all descriptions are selective and they never reproduce

⁵ On May 1, 2000 their status of temporary protected persons ended, as the government of Slovenia considered the conditions in Kosovo safe enough for the refugees to return. The refugees from Kosovo have to return to their homeland by June 30, 2000.

what they describe (Hammersly 1992). He writes that “all we have are interpretations, and the ethnographer’s account is just as much an interpretation as are those of the people that he or she is studying” (Hammersley 1990: 14).

In my attempts to understand the experience of refugees in Slovenia, I used partial identification, which was developed in gender studies. It sprang from the awareness of differences among people and represents “an attempt of the construction of the feeling of closeness in everyday life and dialogue, an attempt of sharing the experiences and problems in spite of the different socio-cultural contexts” (Rosker 1996: 53). The focus on common experience despite the fact that I was not a refugee made me understand the Malkki’s emphasis that refugees are not an isolated tribe. Malkki emphasized that most of us experienced many of the losses that refugees encountered by escaping into exile: most of the adults experienced at least one loss of a dear person, many experienced a decrease in standards, many changed social relations by moving or migrating, lost jobs, etc. What is characteristic for refugees is that they experience many of those losses in a short period of time (Malkki 1995 a). Therefore, the experience of resonance that was characteristic for my fieldwork was also accompanied by the awareness of the fact that this intertwined refugee experience was, on the whole, understood only by themselves. The experience of Loizos was similar when he described the Cypriot refugees, although he was of Cypriot origin himself (1981).

Living Conditions

Most of the refugees decided to flee to Slovenia because they had relatives there. The ex-Yugoslav heritage, with a similar Slavic language and cultural proximity, were probably other factors attractive to 45,000 refugees.

After their arrival, the majority settled in the apartments of their relatives. At first, they thought they had come only for a few days and the situation in the home country would calm down. As that did not happen, the living conditions became intolerable because of crowded conditions in the small flats. Therefore, many of them went to one of 58 refugee centers which the Slovenian government provided. These refugee centers were comprised of the military barracks that the former Yugoslav People’s Army left behind and of workmen’s dwellings. Today, ten such collective refugee centers are still open in Slovenia. They are always too crowded. Upon the arrival of new refugees, more families lived in bigger rooms and the whole family in smaller rooms, sometimes accompanied by a member of the wider family. The lack of space for intimacy is characteristic for such conditions. For school children, it is very difficult to find room to learn.

Most of the collective refugee centers are in the suburbs. Because of the absence of integration models in the Slovenian society, the centers resemble ghettos. They might have had some positive effect when refugees first arrived because they lessened the culture shock. Namely, it was important for the refugees that they were able to share the experience. Some refugees from private arrangements even went to live in the refugee centers because it eased the psychological burden of isolation. However, the Slovenian refugee centers are not an appropriate place to stay, especially for a longer time. According to the psychiatrist Oravec, people should not live in them for more than six months (personal communication).

Another negative aspect of refugee centers in Slovenia was that most of the centers were under the direction of Serbs and some of the directors' wives worked there as social workers. Taking into consideration that the Serbs were the aggressor in the Bosnian war, it is not too difficult to understand that the refugees interpreted this as a provocation although it was not. It was an unfortunate intertwining of circumstances; most of the Yugoslav National Army officers were Serbs and some wished to stay in Slovenia after the Yugoslav National Army had withdrawn. Since the Serbian officers remained unemployed after deserting the army, they were available at the time when people were needed to lead the refugee centers. Those who employed the Serbs simply forgot that they were dealing with vulnerable people and did not take ethnic issues as important and into consideration. Unfortunately, this lack of sensitivity is frequently the case with governmental institutions.

The organization of a refugee center depended to a large extent on the person in charge. Some of the heads of centers, for example, let the refugees put stoves in the rooms and cook their own food. The preparation of traditional food was an important element of cultural continuity as it enabled them to preserve some of their customs. Others were given Slovenian food and were not allowed to give many suggestions for the menu, nor did they participate in preparing the food or in other activities connected with the organization of life in refugee centers, except for cleaning.

Another negative aspect of collective refugee centers was that their number decreased steadily. With each closure of a refugee center, refugees moved to another center, usually in another town. Because of changing social networks and loss of opportunities for occasional work, the refugees were very reluctant to move. They experienced every move as another uprooting.

Refugee centers seem to be more appropriate for the elderly than other social groups. Their identity is less flexible than children's, for example. Every adaptation to exile requires the formation of new identities. The elderly do not have the much opportunity to mix with the local population; very often they do not wish to associate with the Slovenes or to learn the Slovenian language. Children, however, learn

the language very quickly at school and make friends with the Slovenian children. Actually, there is an increase of regional identities, especially among the elderly in refugee centers, because they prefer to associate among people who come from the same region of Bosnia.

Living conditions of refugees in private arrangements are far from ideal either. Many of them live with their relatives and the rooms are crowded. Refugees who live in private arrangements do not get adequate financial support from the state,⁶ nor they are in an equal position with the relatives. Since refugees are dependent on the relatives, this leads to an increase in tension over time. According to de Levita's analysis of intercultural data, refugees who live in private arrangements very often experience the loss of personality characteristics because they try to be cautious all the time to not disturb their hosts. This is especially true in the case of children, who are very often hindered at play (1993).⁷ The difficult economic condition of refugees also extends to the host families. This unfavorable situation for those hosting people from Bosnia-Herzegovina is now in its eighth year. Stubbs uses Ellis's syntagm and speaks about "collectivization of poverty" (1996: 36) in private host families.

Refugee law

Slovenia approached the situation of refugees as a temporary one, although the status of temporary refugees was not legally defined until 1997. When the refugees from Croatia came, they were treated as *displaced persons* according to the agreement between Croatia and Slovenia. When the refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina arrived, they were treated as *temporary refugees* (Grizold 1994). On August 10, 1992, Slovenia tried to seal its border to prevent more refugees from coming. The status of the newcomer was considered illegal. However, a status of temporary refugee was given to those who obtained a letter of guarantee from a Slovene citizen that they would live in his/her apartment. The refugee also had to have a similar letter of guarantee from a second country of asylum, which meant that the refugee would be permitted to stay in Slovenia only temporarily. Once the refugees arrived, however, they were not forced to leave the country. In September 1993 all those

⁶ For many years they did not receive any financial means, however, starting in 2000, some started receiving a symbolic sum.

⁷ A lecture given by de Levita on May 26, 1993 in the seminar about the psychosocial help to refugee children, which was organized by the Counselling Center for Children, Adolescents and Parents in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

who came illegally had an opportunity to apply for the status of a temporary refugee and receive the same rights as those who had come before August 1992.

Although Slovenia signed the Geneva Convention in 1992, the country has only three refugees according to this convention, as previously mentioned. The legal status of temporary refugees was defined in 1997 when the Law of Temporary Asylum was put into force. This law still applies to the refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina. In certain aspects, it is a denial of the Geneva Convention. I would especially like to focus on two basic human rights that it denies. First is the right to work. Refugees are allowed to work only eight hours per week, which, of course, is not sufficient to solve their economic problems. Secondly, refugees are denied the right to participate fully in the social and cultural environment of the society in which they live.

In 1999 the new Law of Asylum was enacted. This law is more liberal and allows refugees the right to work. The benefits of the right to work would allow for a more natural integration, namely, the refugees would have a means to actively participate in the society. This new law, however, will not solve the problems of all the refugees who came from Bosnia-Herzegovina because it does not apply to them. Instead, the Law of Temporary Asylum from 1997 remains applicable to them. Therefore, the problems of Bosnian refugees have remained unsolved for eight years and, unfortunately, the government does not seem to have a long-term solution.

The question remains how often will the new Law of Asylum be applied? This is especially relevant if we remember that Slovenia signed the Geneva Convention, but applied it only four times in eight years.⁸ It should also be kept in mind that this law was forced on Slovenia by the European Union. The issues of asylum and migration became very important to the negotiations for joining the European Union, especially after 1997. Since the Slovenian government is in favor of joining the European Union, it really had no choice in the matter.⁹

Many other countries offered temporary protection to the refugees from ex-Yugoslavia. The rights granted to refugees differ from country to country. Belgium, France, Finland, United Kingdom and Portugal gave people with temporary protection permission to work. However, even if the permission to work is granted, refugees often face difficulties accessing the labor market and experience downward mobility. The permission to work is more conditional in other countries such as

⁸ One refugee has already returned the status.

⁹ Several non-governmental organizations and the Peace Institute where I am employed are now preparing to put The Law of Temporary Asylum from 1997 to the Constitutional Court as it violates Slovenian constitution as well.

Spain, Germany and Austria. In Spain it is granted only for specific jobs. It is the same in Germany, but only after the job is first offered to German and EU nationals. Austria also gave temporary protection to the refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, considering them *de facto* refugees. Austria granted the right to work to the Bosnian refugees in July 1993. However, the third priority rule was applied meaning that the jobs were available to *de facto* refugees only if nationals and resident migrants did not take them. *De facto* refugees from Kosovo were not granted the right to work. More than 60,000 refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina changed from the status of a *de facto* refugees to the status of economic migrant because it provides for residence and work permits. Despite this provision, it remained very difficult for them to find work. In Hungary it is slightly easier to get the refugee status as outlined in the Geneva Convention and be granted the right to work, when compared with Slovenia. But again, it is difficult to find work in practice. Hungary also has temporary protection for the refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina and those under temporary protection do not have the right to work.

According to the guidelines of the Parliament of the European Union, temporary refugee protection should not last more than five years. It is obvious from the above that this guideline is not followed.

Adaptation to the European Union *Acquis Communautaire* leads to increasingly restrictive policies in Central Eastern European countries, namely, the European Union refugee policy is extended to the East. This policy is especially discriminating to non-European refugees, but let me focus on the Slovenian refugee policy.

Refugee policy

Upon the arrival of refugees, Slovenia adopted the “relief” model in order to solve refugee problems. Harrell-Bond, one of the founders and ex-director of Refugee Studies Program at Oxford University, together with Sue Elliot, gave a critique of the “relief” model. They were advisers to the Slovenian government in 1993 and criticized the relief model, because it viewed the crisis as a temporary one. This model treats refugees as a burden and not as an opportunity for development for both refugees and hosts. It ignores the resources of refugees and of the local population (1993). Harrell-Bond further developed the critique of the relief model. According to her, the relief model fosters bureaucracy and authoritarian styles of management, as well as complacency about refugees remaining in centers. The relief model presumes that needs are uniform when they are not. It also increases costs and heightens xenophobia because the host population resents that refugees get eve-

rything for free while they have to work. The fact that the refugees are not allowed to work at all is usually forgotten.

The situation is similar in Croatia, where the relief model was also adopted. According to Stubbs who wrote a critique about integration and humanitarian aid in Croatia, the relief model enforces the territorialization of social control and fails to promote the development of a local infrastructure (Stubbs 1996: 33).

The refugee policy of the Slovenian government resembles the behavior of the ostrich. Namely, it does not confront the problems at the beginning, nor does it offer an adequate solution when later, more complex problems arise. Unfortunately, the advice of Harrell-Bond and Elliott were not taken into consideration. The same holds true for the advice of non-governmental organizations.

Partial Integration of Children

Refugee children are allowed to enroll in schools in Slovenia. However, this integration into the Slovenian society is only partial, as the adult family members do not have opportunities to integrate.

Although children are a vulnerable category because they are not yet adults, they do not represent the most vulnerable category of refugees in Slovenia since most of the help, both foreign and of the host country, is targeted at them. Some children experienced trauma during the escape and pre-war psychological pressure, while all experienced losses. Most children, however, arrived soon after the war started and stayed with relatives who endeavored to maintain the homely routine in exile.

Children seem to recover most quickly from the stresses of conflict and have the least difficulties in adaptation to the foreign country. They also learn the new language more quickly than adults. The care of the parents, especially mothers who maintained the homely routine in exile, lessened the culture shock effects and functioned preventively in the psychosocial condition of the children. School was another important factor that functioned preventively because it structured their time and enabled them to maintain continuity in education (Mikus-Kos 1992).

While school attendance was beneficial for refugee children, it was also problematic. The negative factors included: numerous changes in school facilities, limited access to proper levels of instruction and difficulties with admission. Some children had to move twice, even five times, as the number of refugee centers in Slovenia continuously decreased. So many changes meant that they sometimes missed a whole year of school. Though they also had the opportunity to attend secondary schools and universities, they were limited to those with spaces available. This meant that children could not freely choose a secondary school or a university they

wished to attend. Third, some persistence was needed to get the proper information about the enrollment in schools and, for some, foreign language represented a barrier. Those children who decided not to finish the secondary school they had started in Bosnia-Herzegovina could also be regarded as a vulnerable category. They spend their time at home, without prospects, and very often focus on the negative aspects of their life. Their situation can be contrasted to those children who are successful in school, those who plan to stay in Slovenia or move elsewhere, and those who wish to repatriate after completing their studies. By allowing for only the partial integration of children and not the integration of the whole family, Slovenian refugee policy caused tensions and deepened the generation gap in many families.

Gender and Interpersonal Relations

I find the approach that is sensitive to gender particularly appropriate for understanding both interpersonal relations between men and women and for life in exile in general. Although much has been said and done in the last decades in refugee studies to promote gender issues, most of that work focused mainly on improving the rights of women and include them in the programs of planning, in the organization of refugee lives, and so on. Recent research has emphasized that although women and children usually represent the majority of refugees, this is not often the case (Harrell-Bond 1995). It has also been emphasized that a gender sensitive approach must pay attention to both the female and male; neglecting the gender needs of the male is also a form of gender insensitivity (Voutira et al.1995).

This approach seems appropriate to address the problems of refugees in Slovenia. It is true for Slovenia that the majority of refugees (80%) are women and children and that women without husbands represent a vulnerable group. However, men who could not get a work permit and have lost their principal role as breadwinner comprise another vulnerable group. They experience this loss as a very severe one. Refugee men usually seek occasional work and find themselves in informal work situations. However, they are frequently disillusioned because they work hard for a very low wage and often do not receive it at all.

According to the Muslim tradition, men are the principal wage earners and women usually stay at home. This is very often the case with those from rural areas, the majority of whom are still in Slovenia as refugees; many intellectuals have already repatriated. In spite of the fact that many Muslim women lived primarily in the domestic sphere, it was common that women with secondary and higher education worked in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Some of the wives tried to save the family economy by doing household chores for Slovenian families. The situation is similar with other migrant women in Europe who predominately find employment as domestic workers in private households (Anderson, in: Kofman, Sales 1998: 387). The problem with this type of work is that it is low-status, informal labor without contracts and, as such, it does not grant any social security and pension benefits. These pressures are altering traditional family relations, for the first time, many women are becoming independent from men. These changes add to husbands' insecurity and, sometimes, cause frictions between wives and husbands.

The woman continues to be responsible for maintaining the household even if she works and does not expect any help from the men at home. Only one female student held the opinion that a husband and a wife should share the chores in the domestic arena. Therefore, mothers are important bearers of the traditional culture that is maintained through the homely routine. Most women do not eat food from the refugee center, but prepare their traditional meals. They also make carpets, cushions and other hand-made embroidery. Religious rituals also preserve cultural heritage, but many people do not attend very regularly.

It is characteristic for new marriages in exile that female refugees marry Slovenes, usually workers who came to Slovenia from Bosnia-Herzegovina many years ago and are now Slovenian citizens. I have not heard of a marriage of a male refugee to a Slovenian woman. Sometimes, girls married very quickly, even if doubts about the relationship were present before the marriage. These women obviously could not bear the refugee conditions anymore and tried to change their situation through marriage and live a more fulfilled life.

Refugees in Slovenia are not involved in aid programs or in the organization of refugee centers. They should be included in these issues because they would have an opportunity to structure their time in exile. Also, non-governmental organizations, which provided the cultural and holiday activities for refugee children, should target the whole family. There have been cases where volunteers from Italy invited the whole family for holidays to Italy, but most of the activities were organized only for children.

All these changes pose a question whether the contact with a different culture will leave traces in gender relations. This is relevant even in the case of eventual integration or repatriation. It would be an interesting inquiry especially if the changes in women's economic role were not just an adaptation to hard living conditions in exile, but a permanent influence of the sociocultural system of the host country. This would be interesting for future research in Slovenia. It would also be interesting to trace this change after the refugees' return to Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The Experience of Prolonged Liminality

It is impossible to understand how the refugees feel in exile in Slovenia without taking into account what Van Gennep called the liminal phase of *rites de passage*. If *rites de passage* are by Van Gennep's definition, "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age," then the transition is marked by three phases: separation, liminality and reincorporation (Turner 1969: 78).

The second phase is marked by its ambiguity because some characteristics of the past are still present in the new situation, simultaneously with some characteristics of the future. Their situation, however, is unstable because they did not yet acquire the stable state of those reincorporated, where customary norms and ethical standards, as well as their roles and obligations, are clearly defined. Turner developed this concept further and wrote that "liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention or ceremonial... Liminal entities, such as neophytes in initiation or puberty rites, may be represented as possessing nothing... It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition..." (1969: 81). In Malkki's words refugees become "the embodiment of pure humanity" only (1995 b).

The temporary status of the refugees' condition is very similar to the liminality phase. The refugees are not sure when their temporary status will end, and whether integration into the host society or repatriation will follow at all. Although in some tribes with such *rites de passage* the reincorporation phase into stability follows, the question remains if repatriation will offer any firm prospects to achieve the stable condition. Refugees do not expect such a condition upon their return to Bosnia-Herzegovina because of the country's slow rebuilding. Cross-cultural data supports the evidence of the universality of the refugees' liminality experience (cf. to Eastmond 1993, Malkki 1995, etc.). The refugees thus live between the memories that tie them to their home country and their life in Slovenia. The latter is transitory, a preparation for their return, however, since this return is uncertain, the future is also tied to Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The fact that refugees were not sure when their center would close down and whether or not they would have to move again reinforced the feelings of prolonged liminality. Events in Bosnia-Herzegovina where some areas became safe sooner than others also affected feelings of prolonged liminality because they added to the already unstable condition on the termination of temporary asylum. This uncertainty caused additional psychological stress and was very often a result of information given without sufficient notice, sometimes resulting in misinformation. This easily could have been avoided by more efficient organization.

The refugees' feelings towards past traditions were also reinforced by the fact that at the time of their escape, Bosnia-Herzegovina was becoming an independent state. This aroused patriotic feelings. The pride in Bosnia-Herzegovina, however, calmed down after the war. Current politicians who do not fulfill the Dayton Agreement, especially those parts where all of the refugees would have an opportunity to return to their homes, create even more disillusionment. The arousal of patriotic feelings also functioned preventively as it added to the refugees' positive self-esteem when they made new contacts in Slovenia; it was emphasized that it was good to be Bosnian.

We should bear in mind that the refugees came to Slovenia in large numbers after the country separated from Yugoslavia. The prevalent sentiment in Slovenia was to forget the Yugoslav past and to join the European Union. Refugees faced feelings of xenophobia by some Slovenians, as was often the case with economic migrants from other ex-Yugoslav republics. However, the xenophobic reaction was limited to a segment of the Slovenian population. Many Slovenians were compassionate toward refugees. According to the public opinion survey from 1992, 68.7% of the Slovenian respondents helped or donated to the refugees and 66.1% agreed with the Slovenian government's decision to accept such large numbers of refugees and to give them temporary status (Tos, ed. 1999: 203). Although most of the respondents agreed that refugees are entitled to a certain quality of life, only 81.5% agreed to granting temporary refugee protection and were against permanent integration to Slovenia, even if only for a limited number of refugees who would be willing to stay in the country.

Public opinion echoes the government's rhetoric and policies. It is no wonder that refugees who wish to stay in Slovenia live in limbo and experience an uncertainty which is more intense than the one that is characteristic for the transformation period in Central and Eastern Europe in general. The situation for people who go through transformation in Central and Eastern Europe is difficult as well, despite the fact that they have citizenship in the country in which they live.

Interethnic Relations and Repatriation

Although interethnic relations changed much between the Serbs, Muslims and Croats because of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the conflict did not cause major conflicts between those living in exile in Slovenia. The refugees were successful in maintaining the neighborly life they lived before the war, where they usually respected other ethnic groups and where different religions usually did not cause conflict. Some Serbs and Croats, however, complained of minor offenses and said that

it is not always easy to be a minority. There was a silent rule in refugee centers that politics were not discussed with the members of other ethnic groups.

Refugees are aware that after repatriation the situation will not be very easy because the war changed interethnic relations to a great extent. Therefore, many are reluctant to repatriate. A seventy-three year old Croatian woman cried to her Muslim neighbor in a refugee center because she was repatriating to Mostar and had been advised by her Croatian community in Mostar that it was not desirable to mention or associate with her Muslim friends.

Because of these changes, some refugees fear to repatriate, even if their houses still stand and are unoccupied. This fear is especially prevalent in the case of mixed marriages as the following examples from the Slovenian refugee centers show. The Serbian wives of Muslims are reluctant to return because they fear to live among the Muslim majority. A forty-five year old woman who lived with her husband in Bosnia-Herzegovina wished that they would move from the Muslim village to a bigger town. They thought that there would be a more suitable atmosphere for a mixed marriage outside the smaller village. This also means they will have to start life again without relatives, possessions or a social network. The situation is even worse for a couple that lost their son during the war. The son was killed by Serbs, even though his mother is Serbian (his father is a Muslim). Now she does not wish to return to the community where her son was killed out of revenge. The woman blames herself because she thinks that he was killed because of his ethnicity.

Most couples from mixed marriages have already moved from Slovenia to western countries in search of more durable solutions. Many of them want to stay in the new country of asylum permanently. No mixed marriage have ended while in exile in Slovenia, they just complained they were under more pressure than other marriages, because of the fear of repatriation and sometimes permanently changed relations with the wider family.

Refugees who are reluctant to repatriate extend beyond those from mixed marriages. Some are afraid of land mines in Bosnia-Herzegovina and many feel tense about changed relationships; they do not know on which side was their neighbor or friend during the war or how they will rebuild their social ties. Many still do not have anywhere to go because their houses are occupied by the Serbs. Some refugees say that they would go even to the barracks as long as they have somewhere to sleep. Unfortunately, these barracks only exist in the Bosnian-Croat Federation and not in Republika Srpska. Other refugees are reluctant to repatriate from Slovenia because they have heard that there are conflicts between those who stayed in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the war and the returning refugees. This information about conflicts comes from personal visits to Bosnia-Herzegovina as well as the media.

Most of the refugees wish to return to their homes and are therefore disillusioned with how their respective government fulfills the Dayton Agreement. Repatriation in itself, unfortunately, does not offer a solution to problems. The process of repatriation causes insecurity and means that the refugees will need a lot of strength and means to rebuild their lives. For the elderly, one of the most vulnerable groups of refugees in Slovenia, this goal seems to be unattainable.

The return to Bosnia-Herzegovina will not be a return to the pre-war Bosnia-Herzegovina where most of the refugees would, understandably, like to return to. Nevertheless, the voluntary repatriation would at least mean the end of the liminal phase and refugees would hopefully be able to regain stability to build their future. We can only hope that politicians will soon take all the points in the Dayton Agreement seriously. Stability will be most quickly achieved if they can return to their homes, especially in Republika Srpska. Unfortunately, the absence of durable solutions such as integration into the Slovenian society or repatriation to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, resemble Beckett's drama *Waiting for Godot*, namely, neither of them ever comes.

Conclusion

The most suitable solution for those refugees who wish to stay in Slovenia permanently and integrate would be achieved if they were granted the right to work. The change of legal status of persons with temporary protection would be required in order to achieve that goal of integration. Besides, if the refugees were permitted to work, they would not be a burden for the state because they would be able to take care of themselves. They would enlarge the active population in Slovenia, which would be an advantage for the country with a decreasing population and demography. For the elderly, an agreement between the Slovenian and Bosnian governments regarding the transfer of pensions would present a partial solution.¹⁰ In order to integrate successfully into the Slovenian sociocultural system, language and computer courses would also be needed so that the refugees could more easily meet the demands of the labor market.

For Slovenia the refugees represent an opportunity for pluralism and an acknowledgment of cultural diversity. It should not be forgotten that in the age of globalization the myth of culturally homogeneous states has become unrealistic. It has also become clear that minority rights are central to the future of liberal tradition throughout the world (Kymlicka 1995).

¹⁰ Boldizar Nagy (personal communication).

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Summary

Most of the refugees from the former Yugoslavia were protected temporarily around the world. The claim of the author is that temporary refugee protection in the case of ex-Yugoslav refugees inefficiently replaced long-term durable solutions and thus lowered the quality of the lives of refugees considerably. Vrecer gives the analysis of the negative consequences of temporary protection on the everyday life of refugees in Slovenia. Beside enabling an anthropological understanding of people in exile, the aim of the paper is also to document human suffering and give some policy recommendations.