

A Unique IDentity



Aussie Bosnians from Germany

Our sense of who we are and where we belong is an evolving process, influenced by many psychological and social factors. Hariz Halilovich looks at the identity of a group of young Bosnians and the factors that shape the way they see themselves.



When the war in the Former Yugoslavia was officially declared over in late 1995, Germany asked all of the more than 400,000 refugees to leave the country. Most were from Bosnia.

For thousands of Bosnian refugees the 'peace deal' did not mean much, as they had lost family members, their homes had been either destroyed or occupied and their communities shattered. Furthermore, many of the perpetrators of the ethnic cleansing and the killing of more than 250,000 people, were rewarded for their crimes, by allowing them to keep ethnically cleansed areas under their control, in their roles as politicians, mayors, policemen or company directors.

Traumatised by the war and reluctant to return to what remained of their country, many Bosnians opted for resettlement in a third country. The USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Scandinavia were the destinations on offer.

Some chose Australia because family and friends were already here, for others Australia was so far away that they hoped the physical distance would help them forget the pain and misery. For many, this journey also meant leaving all they knew behind. Many refugees hoped to make a new start and rid themselves of the refugee label, while others just wanted to provide safety and opportunities for their children. In my case, it was a combination of all of the above.

While most old Bosnians remained stuck in their identity as 'displaced Bosnians', refugees and war survivors, the younger generation was able to adapt to the new environment more easily. Furthermore,

they managed to become an active part of the culture and language of the countries they escaped to, rather than remain mere outsiders like their parents' generation.

A group of young Bosnians spoke to me about how they saw themselves in relation to Australia. Everyone was born in Bosnia, had spent years in Germany, and now lived in Australia. My interviews revealed that there is a direct link between the refugee experience and the sense of belonging, which fits into the category of cultural hybridity. Contrary to the traditional exclusive forms of group identity - based on one culture, language, ethnicity, territory or nationality - the Aussie Bosnians from Germany have crossed both imagined and real boundaries of identity and exclusiveness, and have integrated different cultural domains into their identity.

Refugee identity: Transnational? Hybrid? Or something else?

While we may have a clear idea about our own identity, based on our sexuality, colour or family background, our personal identity is not only defined by the way we feel about ourselves, but also by the way others perceive and 'categorise' us. As the sociologist Shapin put it, "identity belongs at once to an individual and to the social networks and groups of which that individual is a part."

This may be especially true in the case of refugees whose 'refugee identity' is imposed by others, who in many cases disregard the individual aspects of the refugee experience. Being treated collective-

ly as a group with a common experience and background, refugees may not have a choice other than to accept their new collective categorisation. In such circumstances, developing and exploring the sense of personal and group identity, especially during the period of adolescence, may prove to be much more complex than in the case of individuals who have not gone through such a dramatic and traumatic experience.

'Speak up, so I can see who you are'

Language is both an important identity marker and a central factor for interpreting cultural identity in the young Bosnians I talked to. It proved to be far more than just a means of verbal communication and social interaction. All the young people are authentic polyglots, speaking, writing and thinking in three different languages - English, German and Bosnian - in their daily lives. Their memories are also inscribed in one of the three languages, each belonging to a cultural cluster of time and events. The different languages, however, play a different role and are used selectively depending on the audience, situation and theme. English is the language most used at school and in other public spheres. At home they speak German almost exclusively, with their brothers and sisters, and also with other 'Bosnian adolescents from Germany'. Their shared experience and the German language is also the main factor of cohesion of the group. Bosnian is mostly spoken with parents, relatives and non-English/non-German speakers from the wider Bosnian community.

1 Remembering the 'first home'

Our interviews were also conducted in the various languages. While discussing Bosnia, the "first home", we naturally spoke Bosnian. Bosnia was a painful memory for those who did not want to recall their lives in detail. They mostly gave general statements describing their lives as 'normal' and 'happy'. Most of their families had been middle and 'well-off working class' as they lived in their own houses and owned a car. Some even had holiday houses. Only three participants gave more personal accounts of their lives in Bosnia before the war.

Aida: "I remember picking cherries with my grandma and going to school. I was very happy then..."

Almir said that his life was normal and that he could vividly recall camping and fishing with his father on the river Drina.

However, all of the participants had clear memories of the time when the war was about to start and they fled the country, in most cases accompanied only by their mothers. Emina described that moment in the following words:

"There were a number of buses waiting to take women and children to Slovenia. My mother argued with my father long into the night. She didn't want to leave without him. He convinced her in the end by saying that this was going to be a holiday for us and that he had to look after the house. He also needed to look after grandma and grandpa...I was very excited about the idea of going somewhere with all the kids at the town's main bus station... Every school excursion after that reminds

me of the day I left home... My father drove us to the station. He and my mother were both silent and looked worried. He put us on a bus and kissed us goodbye. My mother cried... My brother and I waved to him through the window when the bus was leaving. He was waving with both his hands among a countless number of hands of other children's fathers and relatives that came to say goodbye. He had a blue shirt. That was the last time I saw my father... I cannot recall his face, but I will never forget his waving hands and that blue shirt... My mother cried all the way to Slovenia. Not far from our town, we were stopped by Chetniks. I don't remember seeing them, but I know that I was very scared..."

2 Being in transit in the 'second home'

Shifting from English into German meant also entering a new sphere of cultural identity in the participants. They proved to be great narrators, using a much wider range of vocabulary than in English. Nostalgia for Germany was present in all interviews. All ten participants would love to move back to Germany, but only two have made clear decisions to do so once they complete their studies in Australia. The other eight prefer to keep Australia as their home base and to live and work in Germany only temporarily, if an opportunity arises.

The best thing about Germany was the friendships and relationships with teachers and others from both German and non-German backgrounds. Other positives included the high living standards, excellent education and healthcare systems, and

peace. While they cherished their friendships with ordinary people in Germany, they had all experienced institutional discrimination by German authorities, who saw them as 'unwanted' refugees and foreigners. This included regular visits to Die Ausländerbehörde ('The Department for Aliens'), sometimes on a weekly basis, to extend their temporary refugee visas - Duldung - which could be translated as 'being tolerated'.

Each participant knew of *Ausländerfeindlichkeit* (xenophobia) and had seen anti-immigrant and racist graffiti on walls, such as the most common one: *Ausländer Raus!*. However, they did not always feel they were targets of xenophobia themselves, since their skin colour and language protected them. As Suad said, it made them 'invisible foreigners'. On the other hand, they reported that asylum seekers and refugee centers were firebombed by neo-Nazis and people were killed in these attacks which occurred in the 1990s when they lived there. None of the participants witnessed such attacks directly.

3 Finding the 'third home'

Turning to Australia, we spoke English. After some initial unhappiness because they missed their friends in Germany and the way of life, most were, to varying degrees, happy with their lives in Australia. A very common description of the 'cultural shock' experienced upon arrival was that 'everything was so different', referring to the houses, streets, public transport, shops, driving on the 'wrong side of the road', food and even people. Those who already had relatives here

found it a little easier. All remembered the stress of finding accommodation, enrolling at school, registering with government and other institutions to get 'all the numbers and plastic cards'. The unpleasant task of being their family's interpreter from the moment they arrived here was something frequently mentioned.

In terms of what they liked most of Australia, it was multiculturalism and the Australian way of life. Multiculturalism was described as 'not being important who you are', 'the opposite of racism', 'many cultures living together', 'sharing the classroom with all sorts of people', 'different food' and so on. The Australian way of life was described as 'casual', 'slower than in Europe', 'having a BBQ', 'using first names' and 'owning a house'. They also mentioned equality, the right to apply for Australian citizenship and 'lack of racism', which Almir saw as the absence of racist graffiti commonly seen in Berlin like 'Ausländer Raus!' 'Foreigners get out!'

Being a refugee: everything that doesn't break me makes me only stronger

The participants have lived half or more of their lives as refugees after having fled from Bosnia and Herzegovina in the early 1990s. Their options have been in many ways limited by their refugee status. Being a refugee has meant for most of them displacement, dispossession, discrimination, homelessness, dangerous flight, exposure to violence, lack of basic necessities, loss of relatives, grieving, refugee camps and being subject to charities and bu-

reaucratic regulations. On the other hand, the experience of being a refugee has created some opportunities such as learning other languages, adopting other cultures, creating new social networks and the migration to Australia under Australia's refugee and humanitarian program.

Aida's account of her refugee experience captures many of the negatives mentioned by everyone else:

"...It is the worst thing that can happen to anyone. From a normal and happy life, losing everything and having to go without having a destination. Then people look at you like you are an alien from Mars. They ask you stupid questions and think you never had a home and a life that was better and happier than theirs."

"They ask you where do you come from? Are you a refugee? And you start hating these questions and being called 'izbjeglica', 'Flüchtling', 'a refugee'... Kids laugh at you at school because of your name or accent. Then, after school, you go to a Flüchtlingsheim (refugee camp) instead of going home."

"You walk down the street with shops full of food and all the goodies while you know that people in your country are starving and kids are being killed... You wait until life returns to normal and then one day you realise that life will never be normal again... Then you start a new life, but you really never recover and never forget... You know that there is no one behind you and you have to succeed. That's what gives me strength. Sometimes when I have hard times and I worry about something, I only remember how it was when I was in Bosnia in 1992 and 1993..."

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After the initial experience of being singled out and discriminated against by non-refugee peers and other individuals, it is important to note that positive experiences were frequently mentioned:

"I met a lot of good people in Germany and Australia. Many people wanted to help my family and me. They were strangers but they became my best friends. In Germany, I was good at school and had a lot of friends. We had such a good time... But it was bad being a refugee and waiting to be returned somewhere I didn't want to go. What I like best about my life here in Australia is that I am not a refugee any more. I am a migrant. I am a free man and can do everything that other normal people do. I can study, work, travel, and have a house..."

In some cases it was possible to change the perspective and make an advantage out of being disadvantaged by circumstances:

"It makes me feel really mature having lived in different countries and speaking three languages. It is such a great thing understanding other cultures and feeling part of them and also

knowing both the bad and the good sides of life. It makes you appreciate things better. I feel that my life has been enriched through my refugee experience... like I have been living three different lives... Instead of feeling homeless I feel like I have many homes.”

Being a refugee is definitely not a desirable status, as Aida elaborated. The participants have however shown great resilience, creativity and adaptation skills by refusing to be defined as ‘a disadvantaged group’ and by actively participating in the everyday life activities of their peers and the society in which they live. To a great extent, they have turned around their role, defined by refugee status, and have benefited from their refugee experience.

My Queen Kylie

During the interviews, we talked about nation, nationality, nationalism and what all those concepts might mean to each of them. Their answers on Bosnian nationality included many elements that commonly define a nation such as: Bosnian people, Bosnia and Herzegovina as a country, the map of Bosnia, the flag, language, golden lilies, three religions, borders, war and the Bosnian army. Australian nationality and their place in it was most frequently described in terms of multiculturalism, English language, citizenship, equality, right to vote, having a home and an address here...

Shapin says that personal identity is constructed out of materials at hand. The stuff out of which identity can be made is presented by the local culture. Refugee adolescents with experience of multiple resettlements and exposure to a number of local cultures

may integrate the “stuff” of various cultures as part of their personal identities.

This is illustrated by something I witnessed that captured my attention during an interview. The room was decorated with an old Bosnian flag with golden lilies (not the contemporary flag of Bosnia), a poster of the famous German soccer club, Bayern München, and a large poster of Australian pop singer Kylie Minogue. All three icons were placed next to each other on the largest wall in the room, apparently of equal importance and equally admired by my host.

All you need is friends!

When exploring the experience of social connectedness, all the young people emphasised the importance of friendship. Friendship seemed to be a much more important identity factor than belonging to any of the defined broader communities. As Milan Kundera wrote in one of his novels, “Friends are our mirror; our memory; we ask nothing of them, but they polish the mirror from time to time so we can look at ourselves in it.”

Memories of the German part of their lives included a great deal of talking about friends and the good times they had together. Without hesitation, all the participants referred to their friends as the greatest asset they had in Germany and in Australia. Social connections with Bosnia on the other hand were experienced more in relation to the members of extended family still living there, with whom most of the participants did not have an opportunity to develop a closer relationship.

In Australia, friends continue to play an important

part in the participants’ everyday lives. In addition to socialising with young German-speaking Bosnians, their friends also include young people from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

“The worst thing when I came here was that I didn’t have any friends. I felt very lonely and I missed my friends back in Germany. I felt displaced and I didn’t believe that I would ever feel happy in this country. Now I feel much better. I’ve got a lot of very good friends here. They are from all sorts of backgrounds; Anglo, Greeks, Italians, Chinese, Bosnians, Lebanese, Croats, Sudanese... I also keep in touch with my friends in Germany.”

They also have become friends with young people from the ‘enemy background’, that is, the Serbs and such contacts have made them think about issues of collective responsibility, blame and individual suffering. Possibly without realizing it, they are starting a grass-roots reconciliation process.

“My best friend is a Serb. Her parents are refugees from Croatia. My mum doesn’t like me being with her and neither do my friends’ parents. But we are best friends at school and we help each other. I told her that Serbs killed my father and she was really sorry. I cannot blame her for something some bad Serbs did. She told me that she believed all Croats and Bosnians were bad before she met me. That’s what she learned at school when she was a refugee in Serbia. Now, I also know that not all Serbs are bad...” ●