

After the massacre, a homecoming

Ten years ago, thousands of Bosniak Muslims were killed at Srebrenica. Though faced with danger and hostility, some of their families are returning to their old homes in what is now Serbian territory, some within sight of the mass graves of their relatives. Ed Vulliamy meets survivors to find out why they have done it

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The following correction was printed in the Guardian's Corrections and clarifications column, Thursday May 12, 2005

In the article below we wrote that the number of Muslims killed at Srebrenica was 8,500. In fact, the official Bosnian government figure for Srebrenica missing is 7,942. The Bosnian Serb government in June last year conceded a figure of 7,779 missing assumed murdered from Srebrenica.

The snow lies deep, the air is still and seven degrees below zero - but the shiver is not from cold. It comes from somewhere within this terrain, from within this building: a disused warehouse on the country road that runs through the village of Kravica in eastern Bosnia. Ten years ago this July, 1,200 men and boys were rounded up, packed into this place and executed, by machine gun fire and grenades. And Kravica was just one part of what came to be called the massacre of Srebrenica, a small mountain town nearby. Some 8,500 Bosniak Muslim men and boys were systematically slaughtered by Serbian troops and paramilitaries within six days. On one infamous occasion, cited by Judge Fouad Riad at a trial in The Hague, an elderly man was skewered to a tree by a knife and made to eat the innards of his grandson. "Truly scenes from hell," said the judge, "written on the darkest pages of human history."

Ten years on, the warehouse at Kravica has changed little. But for the fact that it was summer then, the shooting, the explosions, the screaming could have been a moment ago. The walls are pitted with bullet holes - some now filled with cement, a futile gesture that conceals nothing.

A little further up the road is the village of Glogova. Here, some houses remain as skeletal ruins, monuments to the killing and burning that began in 1992 as the Serbs attacked and "ethnically cleansed" the community. Other buildings, however, have been rebuilt - a sign of the remarkable, precarious return of Muslims to the area, to live among the executioners of their relatives and the ghosts of their dead. They have come, despite what befell them here, into a menacing land that is effectively Serbian; some have come back out of defiance, some out of necessity, some to be close to the dead.

Just off the road at Glogova is a field where the bodies of those killed at Kravica were ploughed into the earth. A rusty, abandoned car is the only monument. There are bones beneath much of this terrain, shredded by bulldozers as bodies were unearthed and reburied for concealment. They are still being patiently exhumed, as the immense task continues of matching them with the names of those who disappeared 10 years ago.

The story of the Srebrenica massacre began in 1992. That year, the break-up of Yugoslavia already under way, Bosnia-Herzegovina followed Slovenia and Croatia and voted to become an independent state, in which the Bosniaks (then known as Bosnian Muslims) were the biggest ethnic group. The Bosnian Serbs, however, rejected this independence, wishing to remain aligned to Belgrade and be part of President Slobodan Milosevic's vision of an ethnically "pure" Greater Serbia. They duly formed their own statelet, under "President" Radovan Karadzic, and their own army, under General Ratko Mladic. And in the spring of 1992, with backing from Serbia proper, the Bosnian Serbs unleashed a hurricane of violence against the Bosniak population that - three and a half bloody years later - effectively achieved its

aim with the partition of Bosnia and the creation of the Republika Srpska at the Dayton peace accord of 1995.

Some of the first and most terrifying violence was along Bosnia's eastern border with Serbia, which the Serbs wanted to dissolve, along the valley of the river Drina. In some places - Zvornik, Visegrad, Foca - the "ethnic cleansing" was swift, brutal and effective. Tens of thousands were killed, and hundreds of thousands were forcibly deported or fled into the Srebrenica enclave. For more than three years, a pocket around Srebrenica somehow held out, cut off and surrounded by the Serbian enemy. The town was brimful of its own population and refugees from the surrounding area. They faced a fusillade of artillery fire, day after day. On one morning in 1993, scores were killed when a shell landed in a school playground where they had pitched camp. Somehow, the enclave held on, defended by desperate soldiers of the Bosnian government army supplied by couriers who would bring ammunition on foot through the forests of enemy territory from the Bosnian government-held town of Tuzla.

In March 1993, the French general Philippe Morillon arrived in Srebrenica promising protection by the United Nations; the following month, just as the town was about to fall, it was declared a "safe area" by the UN Security Council, along with three other surrounded enclaves. Canadian and Dutch UN troops were detailed to protect Srebrenica. But the siege continued, and on July 6 1995 the Serbs, under the command of General Mladic, who is now wanted for genocide, began a final assault. The international community stood by. Dutch commander Ton Karremans asked for Nato air strikes to halt the assault, but when they came, they were half-hearted and ineffective, too little and too late. On July 11, Mladic and his troops entered Srebrenica.

Terrified, the people of the town left en masse. Heading north, they split into two groups. Some 20,000, fearing the worst, set off in a great column into the mountain forests, hoping to strike through Serbian territory and reach the safety of Tuzla. Most of the Bosnian army fighters chose this option, leading civilians, children and farm animals along what would become known as the Road of Death. Another 20,000 or so proceeded to the Dutch UN base at the outlying village of Potocari, hoping for protection. They had packed the UN compound by the time Mladic and the Serbs arrived on the morning of Wednesday July 12. "Don't be afraid," pledged Mladic. "No one will harm you."

There, in front of the UN force, the Serbs began the separation of men from women and children. The men, they said, were wanted for "screening". But the killing as well as torture and rape began right there in Potocari. Women, children and the elderly were taken by bus or truck into territory held by the Bosnian army, to the west. Males, aged 11 to 65, were transported to a network of locations - Karakaj, Bratunac, Kozluk, Branjevo, Grbavici and others - and summarily executed. The Road of Death was meanwhile repeatedly cut and ambushed; thousands were either killed along its route or taken to places such as the warehouse at Kravica for mass execution. By July 19, some 8,500 were slaughtered, rather more along the Road of Death than from Potocari.

In the years since the massacre, it has emerged that the UN high command in Bosnia had decided the enclaves were a lost cause and, deeming it prudent not to antagonise the Serbs, vetoed serious air strikes that might have averted the massacre. The Serbs themselves began nearly a decade of denial. That November, Karadzic said that "nothing happened" at Srebrenica, that accounts of a massacre were "a propaganda trick in the run-up to the negotiations at Dayton". Other Serbian accounts, including defence testimony at The Hague, proposed that the Muslims had either been killed in combat, fought among themselves, committed mass suicide or been murdered by a despatch of French, Bosnian and other mercenaries in order to discredit the Serbs. They were not believed. In a landmark trial, in August 2001, Mladic's right-hand man at Srebrenica, General Radislav Krstic, was convicted of "aiding and abetting genocide". Last year, uniquely among atrocities committed by the Serbs, responsibility for the Srebrenica massacre was finally admitted, at the insistence of the international High Representative in Bosnia, Paddy Ashdown.

In Potocari, where the slaughter began, there is a memorial to those lost, and a cemetery where those whose remains have been found and identified are buried - 1,438 of them so far. The initiative came from

the Mothers of Srebrenica, women who lost their menfolk in the massacre. When they first returned to Potocari to claim their site, they were met by hostile crowds, Serbian salutes and spitting. But their project won international backing, and in 2003 the first burials took place. The green gravestones fan out almost as far as the eye can see, and there is space for many more.

Only a handful of men - no more than 15 - survived at the mass execution sites to which the men of Srebrenica were shipped by bus and truck. One of them was Mevludin Oric. He is wan, thin and, in a scrappy flat in Sarajevo, tells his story. When Srebrenica was cut off at the beginning of the war, Mevludin walked to the enclave, through enemy territory from Tuzla, because his wife and newborn daughter were there. During the siege, he served in the Bosnian army as a courier of ammunition from Tuzla. When the town fell, Mevludin was among those who elected to make a way along the Road of Death. But on a hillside near the village of Konjevic Polje, "We were surrounded. None of us had guns, and they took us." First, Mevludin was bused to Kravica; the warehouse was full, overflowing into "a field full of prisoners, sitting on the ground with their hands behind their heads". The bus then went in convoy to the Vuk Karadzic school in Bratunac, site of a massacre of Muslims in 1992. "Inside the school, we could hear screaming and shooting. They told us to wait on the bus because there was no room. I prayed for dawn to come and for us to move on." The convoy headed north, and then turned off the main road, "which is when I suspected that they would kill us all". At a school in the village of Grbavici, the men were unloaded and packed into the gym. "It was so hot, people were fainting. They gave us water, but we fought over it so that it spilled, and men were licking it off the floor."

Then into the gym walked General Mladic himself - "laughing with his bodyguards" - with news that the men would be taken to a camp. Two prisoners were selected to stand by the door and blindfold the others as they made their way back to the trucks and buses. "I was on the sixth truck," says Mevludin, "with my nephew Haris. We huddled up, so that if we were going to a camp we could be together. They took us to a field, and when they stopped the trucks and said 'Line up!' I knew what was coming. I could see bodies in the field. They were cocking their guns. I took Haris by the hand; he asked, 'Are they going to kill us?' I said no, then they started shooting. Haris was hit. I was holding him, he took the bullet and we both fell. Nothing hit me; I just threw myself on the ground. My nephew shook, and died on top of me."

Mevludin remained lying, face-down, all day. "When they finished shooting, they went back to get new groups of men. I could hear crying and pleading, but they kept on shooting. It went on all day." At one point, Serbian soldiers began shooting dead and half-dead men through the head, but still Mevludin was spared. For a while, he lost consciousness. "When I came round, it was dark, and there was a little rain. My nephew's body was still over me; I could not move my leg, but I removed the blindfold. There was light coming from bulldozers that were already digging the graves. By now, the Chetniks [a Bosniak word for Serbian extremists] were tired and drunk, and still shooting by the light of the bulldozers. They went to those who were wounded and played around with them. 'Are you alive?' and if the man said, 'Yes', they would shoot and ask again and again. Finally, they turned off the lights. I started to move a little. I got my nephew off me. I arose and saw a field full of bodies, everywhere, as far as I could see. And I cried, I could not stop myself."

Amazingly, he says, "there was another man on his feet. I thought I was dreaming, seeing things. I walked towards him; I had to step on bodies to get to him. I hugged and kissed him - his name was Hurem Suljic." Mevludin and Suljic walked through the forests to Tuzla, narrowly escaping ambush and death many times. Their journey took 11 days.

Mevludin, now 35, lives for the time being in emergency accommodation in Ilias, a town near Sarajevo. He survives on a share of his mother's retirement pension, with which he keeps his four children and wife, Hadzira, who suffers from schizophrenia. He spends his days going to the employment office in Ilias, to be told there is no work.

In a flat in the Sarajevo suburb of Vogosca, surrounded by neighbours also from Srebrenica - invariably women - Sabaheta Fezic, 49, lives with her mother. The mountains remind her of home, where she was once a manager in Srebrenica's zinc mine. Her husband Saban opted for the Road of Death: "He waved

at me as he left - I never saw him again." Her son Rijad stayed with her. "He was my only son, and only 17, which is why I took him to Potocari, hoping the Dutch would help us. We were lined up into a column and made to walk past the Dutch to where the Chetnik guards were waiting. They sent men to the right, and women left. They told Rijad to go to the right and me to the left, but I didn't listen to them. I held my son's arm, I said, 'Wherever he goes, I go, too.' They said they just wanted to question him - I said, 'He doesn't know anything - ask me.' Then they lost patience and tried to pull me away. We were struggling, me pulling Rijad on one side, them on the other. He was terrified; his eyes were wide; he burst into tears. Of course, they wrenched him away, and I fell on my knees." She is inconsolable.

"When I got to Tuzla, I tried to commit suicide, but thank God I did not succeed. I knew the moment they took my son that he was dead, but I went to places where people were coming out of the forest to see if my husband was among them. I wandered the hospitals where the wounded were. Eventually, the last man to see him alive told me he was killed just a few kilometres from free territory, that he had nearly made it. I went back with the Commission on Missing Persons to look for his remains; I found only a piece of his jacket.

"It will be 10 years now, but it is like it happened yesterday. My biggest fear is that I will never find my child. That I will have no grave, and will never know how they killed him."

At the offices of the Mothers of Srebrenica in Sarajevo she has found kindred spirits - some whose husbands' and sons' remains have been identified, others for whom the search continues. "Our only happiness is to have this place," says Zumra Sehomirovic. "We give each other the willpower to keep going towards our aim - to find the missing and bury them."

In Sarajevo, within the Muslim-Croat Federation, the women are in relative safety. For those Bosniaks returning to what is now the Republika Srpska, the future is more uncertain. The return began in a remote mountain village above Srebrenica called Suceška. To reach it, you take a mountain track and trudge on foot through snowdrifts. There, wearing a hat and a grin, is the man who led this homecoming, Hasib Huseinovic.

As Serbian troops destroyed Suceška, Hasib escaped, hiding in a field of corn: "I saw them burn the village, enter my house and set it alight." Hasib's wife Tima was deported from Potocari to Tuzla, along with most women from the village, but their son Fadil decided to try the Road of Death. He was captured and last seen being taken to the warehouse at Kravica. Hasib, however, made his own way to the free territory, through the forests for 85 days, finally arriving in Tuzla on Tima's birthday.

And in June 2000, he returned to Suceška. "When I first came, I was heartbroken to see it," he says. "Every house had been destroyed to the foundations. It was all overgrown. Tima did not want to come back, but I was determined to do so. For the first few weeks, we lived in tents, then slowly rebuilt our houses, one by one." His eyes fill with tears: "I wanted to be where my son grew up. I wanted to feel a connection to him. I always have this feeling that one day I might see him coming over the hill, that he went somewhere and will return."

Suceška, a burned-out shell five years ago, is now a peasant hamlet again, of seven men and 30 women. "We have returned, but now we need to stay," says Hasib. "Our problem is to create work. Otherwise we will have to leave again. We have all these elderly women here who have lost their husbands and sons. They need machines to cut their grass; they need tractors and help with their livestock."

Perhaps most remarkable is the return of the Risanovic family to the house they watched burn in 1992, in Glogova, where the dead from Kravica were buried. Their home, now rebuilt, is less than 100 metres from the mass grave. Munira Risanovic believes that the remains of her brother and her husband Hasan were buried there. "We were here," she says, "when they were exhuming the graves. Just in the field there . . . I am thinking all the time that my husband and brother might be there, right there."

Hers is a stricken household. Munira's granddaughter Alma, aged one, has a serious eye disease. The extended family lost 35 men in the massacre. "I wish we could have stayed with the rest of our people in the federation," says Munira, "but we had nothing. Here they taunt us with insults, but we have two cows at least."

The return to Glogova was led by a local businessman, Senad Avdic. One returnee's car was attacked with gunfire, another was killed when his house was booby-trapped. Fresh graffiti down the road reads "Knife and wire Srebrenica" - in the massacre, men's hands were tied and their throats cut. "But we had to come back," says Avdic, "if only so that the Serbs failed to achieve their aim."

Avdic is among those who survived on the Road of Death; he now runs a cafe and mini-market within sight of it. In July, on the 10th anniversary of the massacre, he and others from all over Bosnia and Europe will commemorate the Road of Death, as they walk the route again.

Srebrenica, once beautiful, nestled among forested mountains, is now a baleful, dilapidated town. Buildings are still claw-marked by shellfire and shrapnel; some are skeletons of charred iron. "It is a shell of a place that does not make sense," says Emir Suljagic, a former UN translator who survived the massacre. "A few Serbs, a few Bosniaks, and the entire apparatus behind the genocide still there, intact." The zinc mine at which Sabaheta Fezic was once a manager has finally reopened, contracted to a Russian firm, but employs only Serbs - Bosniak returnees are regarded as ineligible for work there.

Before the war, the Srebrenica district comprised 36,600 people, of whom 25,000 were Bosniaks and 8,500 were Serbs. Now the population is 10,000, of whom 6,000 are Serbs and 4,000 returnee Muslims, mainly in the surrounding villages, making Srebrenica itself an almost entirely Serbian town. In the marketplace, Milan Pavlovic lays out his stall of plumbing parts and padlocks. Originally from Sarajevo, Milan left with his fellow Serbs - and their disinterred dead - after the Dayton accord gave the city to the Muslim-Croat Federation. "We were herded out of Sarajevo like animals," says Milan, "to this sad place, where everything is destroyed."

The present mayor of Srebrenica, Abdurahman Malkic, is, ironically, a Bosniak member of the Muslim SDA party (because the outlying villages have a vote in the municipal elections). But outside his headquarters hangs the flag of the Republika Srpska, and on the door are the crossed Ss standing for the slogan, "Only unity can save the Serbs."

A Serb who returned home to Srebrenica after the massacre was Milos Milovanovic. When fighting first broke out in the town in 1992, Milovanovic was commander of a paramilitary unit called the Serbian Guard. He now sits on the municipal council for the SDS party, founded by Radovan Karadzic, and is also head of the Bosnian Serb army's war veterans association, trying to secure benefits for those who fought in the siege and "liberation" - as he calls it - of Srebrenica in 1995.

Surrounded by some of his "warriors" in a freezing coffee bar, he refers to an ugly incident in early 1993 when Muslim defenders of the town briefly broke through the siege lines and killed Serbian civilians as well as soldiers - a crime for which the commander of the defence of Srebrenica is currently on trial at The Hague. It is in this context that Milovanovic discusses the events of 1995. "The massacre is a lie," he says. "It is propaganda in order to make a bad picture of the Serbian people. The Muslims are lying, they are manipulating the numbers, they are exaggerating what happened. Far more Serbs died at Srebrenica than Muslims."

In this climate, it is a dangerous, lonely business for Muslims to return to the town of Srebrenica. Sija Mustafic, aged 72, who lost her husband Mehmed and her son Sead in the massacre, has moved back into town; she puts planks up against her door at night and keeps the police station's number beside her telephone. Her wedding photo, and one of her dead son, adorn the wall of the home she reclaimed from a Serbian family three years ago. "Srebrenica was all Serbian then," she says, "and the people living here would not let me come and see my own home. I said to them, 'But we were sitting in here drinking coffee

together before the war - you know it's mine.' I stayed upstairs for three months, and finally got the court order telling them they had to leave. They took everything when they went, even the telephone lines. But I sold my necklace to buy a few things - dishes and pans. I did it to spite them. I won't let them live in my house. My husband and my brother built it; it's mine and I want to die here."

As she speaks, a man walks by the window, checking electricity meters. "He is doing that now," says Sija, "but during the war he was burning houses. I know they killed my husband and my son. I know that my neighbours were involved in this. But you can't say this one burned that house and that one killed that man - they were all involved. They wanted me to go to The Hague, but my daughter said people here would kill me, and I didn't. So I don't talk to them. They have their life, I have mine. If I cry, I would die of heartbreak, so I don't. Instead, I fix my house, I eat something, I drink some coffee."

The dead of Srebrenica were not left to rest in peace. Within weeks of ploughing their victims into mass graves, the Bosnian Serbs embarked on a morbid operation: to unearth and move almost all the bodies to so-called "secondary" graves, in an effort to conceal the evidence of what they had done from prying international eyes, and especially from The Hague. For months, bulldozers and trucks heaved the decomposing dead from one place to another.

From 1996, however, teams from The Hague began, under heavy military guard, to locate and exhume some of the graves. Their purpose was prosecution: to determine the cause and manner of death, and investigate the guilt of the perpetrators. But they did not try to identify the dead. That is the next task, one of the most extraordinary enterprises in the field of science and human rights: to give every fragmented skeleton of someone killed at Srebrenica a name, to return the remains to the bereaved, and to bury them at Potocari.

Responsibility for the identification and exhumation of mass graves has passed to the Commission for Missing Persons for the Muslim-Croat Federation. Murat Hurtic, who represents the commission in Tuzla, has opened 66 mass graves now, and takes us to the dam at an artificial lake near Petkovici, beneath which hundreds were lined up and shot. We are chased off the premises by the security guard, but follow the trail of the dead, who were dug from here and taken up a winding mountain track to a village called Liplja for reburial. Hurtic strides into the snow: "In this village, in three graves, are shredded remains of more than 1,000 people. When I came, we found skulls and bones on the surface - they didn't do the job very well. All the graves were in Bosniak villages that had been completely destroyed, to which they thought people would never come back . . . We live strange lives," he reflects, "traumatic, but we do it. Because we have to."

Amor Masevic, head of the commission, explains the gruesome nature of their work: "Each primary grave has four or five secondary graves, so that bodies became split up; there are pieces of the same person spread out across graves all over Bosnia. Therefore we are left with a dilemma: we may only have someone's forearm, and maybe we can find out the name of that forearm, but we don't have the nerve to say to the family, 'We have found your son.' How can you hand over to a mother a son represented by a forearm? But unfortunately death does not wait for us to find the missing. Every day that passes, someone from the enclaves dies before their missing relatives have been found. And that is our moral dilemma: when you find a bone that has a name, do you tell, or do you keep silent? We have talked a lot about this, and have reached a consensus that if 50% of a body is found, we tell."

As body parts are assembled, so the process of "re-association" of skeletons begins. At the Podrinje Identification Project in Tuzla, tens of thousands of body bags from all over Bosnia are stored in a tunnel dug into a hillside. Most of those from Srebrenica are kept separately, piled up on shelf after shelf, row after row: white plastic bags for body parts, brown bags for personal effects. From Tuzla, the body bags journey to the centre in Lukavac, where skeletons are reassembled. As we arrive they are piecing together bones originally from Glogova, from the field next to the Risanovic family's house; these are the remains of the men who were executed at the warehouse at Kravica.

The third location in the process, back in Tuzla, is the Identification Co-ordination Division. In 1988, the commission began using DNA testing for identification - both from bone to bone, and between bones and blood samples collected from surviving family members. The effect was immediate and dramatic: approaching 2,000 bodies have been identified and given back to their families.

"Having a war crimes tribunal looking at mass graves with a view to prosecution is new," says Kathryn Bomberger, chief of staff for the International Commission on Missing Persons in Bosnia. "But having a parallel operation looking at mass graves to try to establish truth - and ultimately justice - in a society that craves it is also a voyage into the unknown. What we are doing is unique in the world."

And it is unique to Srebrenica. "There is no collective sense of the atrocities that took place in Bosnia," says Bomberger. "And what we are doing is politically charged. The numbers are skewed: 85% of persons who are missing are Bosniak Muslims, 12% are Serbs and 3% are Croats. The numbers speak for themselves; they tell the story of what happened here - but we have to be seen as credible and politically impartial. How do you get people to recognise the horrors? Our work is intended to be a contribution."

Srebrenica is iconic - the massacre initiated the closing phase of a war that had dragged on for more than three years. The name is synonymous with the wilful inaction of the international community to stop the massacre, and with three years' appeasement of the Serbs. Mladic and Karadzic are now wanted war criminals, but on the eve of the Srebrenica massacre the world's diplomats and political leaders were happy to entertain them. These are the thoughts that haunt Emir Suljagic when he visits Srebrenica from his new home in Sarajevo. Emir survived the massacre - and a meeting with Mladic himself - because he was working throughout the siege as a translator for the UN military observers in the area. He was at Potocari, frantically trying to register names of the men gathered in the factory across the road from the Dutch base. This July, his father, whose remains were found last year, will be buried along with hundreds of others.

Emir has a project - to make a reckoning of what happened at Srebrenica and elsewhere. He has gathered objects found in mass graves - lighters, watches, tobacco boxes, glasses - for a museum to be built within the factory where he took the names that day. He is now tracing the surviving families of the owners of those objects. "The idea is to make a personal portrait out of each object. When you tell someone that 10,000 people died, they cannot understand or imagine it. What I want to say is that these people were peasants, car mechanics or masons. That they had daughters, mothers, that they leave someone behind; that a lot of people are hurt by this person's death.

"I have given up on this generation of Serbs," he says. "I have given up on the people who were my friends, whom I played basketball with. It seems that they will never reckon with what they have done. But what I want is for their children to have a chance to make up their own minds. Children who will be passing by the memorial every day. I want them to know and think about what happened, and to learn from it. And if there are places where the Serbs were murdered, then we should mark them, too. Only then can the next generation grow up and be told by what they see: that this should never happen again."

Most wanted: doctor death

Ten years after Radovan Karadzic's troops killed 7,000 Muslims in Srebrenica, the former Serb leader remains at large. In this remarkable report from the heart of Bosnia, Antony Barnett goes on the trail of Europe's most notorious war criminal

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What strikes you first is the colour of the house. As you drive along the bumpy stone road that leads to

the family home of Dr Radovan Karadzic, Europe's most wanted war criminal, its garish pink exterior bursts out in front of you. But despite its bright facade, it is a house that hides many dark secrets.

On Monday 11 July it will be 10 years since Karadzic's Bosnian Serb soldiers marched into the United Nations safe haven at Srebrenica and slaughtered more than 7,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys. Yet Karadzic, the chief architect of this massacre - as well as the mastermind of the 1,000-day siege of Sarajevo that saw 10,000 civilians killed, 1,000 of them children - remains a free man.

Despite a \$5 million (£2.7m) bounty on his head, Karadzic is a fugitive. Protected by a secret underground network made up of politicians, criminals, spies, businessmen and priests from the Orthodox church, Karadzic - a psychiatrist, children's author and poet in another life - is believed to be hiding in the mountains of eastern Bosnia close to the border with Montenegro.

His liberty remains a major embarrassment to the international community and an open sore in a country where 200,000 people were killed in a bitter ethnic war between Serb, Muslims and Croats. There can be no healing until Karadzic faces justice.

A decade after Srebrenica and his indictment at The Hague, The Observer set out on a journey to reveal the network built to hide a man accused of committing the worst atrocities witnessed in Europe since the concentration camps of Nazi Germany.

Karadzic's pink family home is the obvious place to start. It stands on the outskirts of a town called Pale, cradled in the Bosnian mountains. Before the war in 1992 it was a ski village 10 miles south east of Sarajevo. Today it is the capital of the Republic of Srpska (pronounced Serbska), the semi-autonomous region of Bosnia that the Serbs like to call their own. It is a state within a state, where Karadzic's nationalist Serbian Democratic Party (SDP) still holds considerable power and is linked to an organised crime network run by Serb former paramilitary leaders and war criminals loyal to him. Most towns and villages there were ethnically cleansed, with Muslim communities expelled or exterminated. Mosques came down, Orthodox Serb churches went up.

Pale was a Karadzic stronghold in the war. It was from the Panorama hotel in the town centre that Karadzic and his cronies planned their brutal campaign. It takes only a few minutes to drive from the hotel to the Karadzic home.

As I arrive at the house the front door opens. None of the three people standing by the hall, who are thought to be part of Karadzic's extended family, will be interviewed, nor answer questions asked through the locked iron security gate. 'Have you seen Radovan? Where do you think he is? Can I speak to his wife Ljiljana? Has she seen him recently?'

All the questions are greeted with silence. After a while a tall, broad-shouldered man with closely-shaved dark hair, believed to be Karadzic's brother-in-law, comes to the gate and says they cannot help us. Karadzic's wife is not here. She is at another property, painting it after it was wrecked during a raid by Nato troops searching for clues to the whereabouts of her husband.

The next-door neighbours watch nervously from their first floor balcony. They too refuse to answer questions. A man in a scruffy red polo shirt with a walkie-talkie in hand comes over to ask for my ID papers. I ask for his. He claims he is with the Republic of Srpska police. He asks us to leave. I have doubts about the authenticity of his own ID, but decide to head into the centre of Pale.

Love letters from 'Radovan' to his beloved wife 'Lili', dated 2002, have recently been published showing that these two psychiatrists, who fell in love at medical school in Sarajevo, have met at a secret location. In one letter Karadzic tells his wife it would 'take a battalion' to discover his hiding place ... Of course, caution is necessary but there is not need of such fear and paranoia.'

His apparent lack of concern appears well founded. Despite being, like Osama bin Laden, one of the world's most wanted men and hiding in a country as small as Wales, the commitment to capture him by the 7,000 overseas troops still in Bosnia seems questionable. The French are regularly accused of being 'too close' to the Karadzic network, and even the British seem reticent.

One British officer serving in Bosnia, alluding to the fact that any attempt to snatch Karadzic is likely to lead to a shoot-out, said: 'If you think we would risk the life of one British soldier for these people, then you're wrong.'

This month - a week after a remarkable video appeared revealing the horror of the massacre in Srebrenica - Karadzic's brother, Luka, said: 'My brother has made a strategic decision to never surrender to the Hague Tribunal [set up to try those accused of war crimes]. If he surrendered he would betray his people and God, which has protected him from the enemies for so long.'

To those hunting the so-called Butcher of Bosnia, these people make a web of clandestine supporters who form a protective financial and spiritual cloak around Karadzic that keeps him free. Such is their influence that one source claims trackers sent from The Hague to find Karadzic are sometimes spotted as arriving at Sarajevo airport and put under surveillance. Information is fed to Karadzic's army of bodyguards, who can move him at short notice should one of these investigators get a lucky break.

To these supporters Karadzic is a folk hero, a leader who helped protect them from the Muslim hordes. They inhabit a closed world, hostile to outsiders and suspicious of questions.

An orthodox priest, Father Jeremija Starovlah, gets up from his chair when he sees me approaching. His short silver hair and beard offer a striking contrast to his traditional black robes. The small, pretty white church that he runs is in the centre of Pale, a short drive from the Karadzic home.

A local newspaper reported last March that Starovlah was calling on Orthodox believers to shelter Karadzic. A few weeks later the international authorities said they had intelligence suggesting Karadzic was staying with the priest. Nato forces raided Starovlah's home, blowing up his front door and injuring his son. Karadzic was not found.

The raid provoked street protests by more than 2,000 Bosnian Serbs. Some wore masks of Karadzic while others waved the blue, red and white flags of the Republic of Srpska.

Now Starovlah refuses to speak or answer any questions. 'Has Karadzic been here?' I ask. 'Do you regard him as a hero? Where do you think he is now? Should he go to the Hague?' He says only: 'I have no comment to make. I do not wish to speak about this.'

Starovlah shows no desire to set the record straight. This is a priest in the Bosnian Serb capital, who is close to the Karadzic family. And in the Republic of Srpska, family secrets are closely guarded.

One of the most shocking parts of a recent film of Srebrenica, showing six Muslims being bound and shot at close range, was that it began with a Serb Orthodox priest blessing the camouflaged paramilitary troops who carried out the massacre. Rumours persist that Karadzic is disguised as a priest and moving from monastery to monastery.

As well as the church in Pale, intelligence agencies have monitored phone calls that disclose he has hidden in the isolated mountain monastery of Ostrog. Karadzic's grandson was christened there. According to a diplomatic source it is estimated that Karadzic spends 80 per cent of his time in church property. The source says it is not a coincidence that since the war dozens of new Orthodox churches have been built at a cost of millions of pounds. It is alleged that most of this money comes from the same illicit sources that provide the funds to protect Karadzic.

Yet while the church may offer Karadzic spiritual and physical sanctuary, an altogether more criminal network funds the \$200,000 a month operation to protect the 'Doctor in the Forest'.

Milovan Bjelica is waiting for me outside Cafe Iceberg in the town of Sokolac, a 45-minute drive from Sarajevo. Smoking a Marlboro and drinking an espresso he beckons us over with his steel-blue eyes. A disfigured right hand hangs loosely by his side.

Nato arrested Bjelica twice last year, detaining him for a month at a time. Armed troops swooped on the town last August and questioned him for more than two hours a day for a whole month. They had heard he had gone to Belgrade and accused him of meeting supporters of Karadzic. Bjelica claims he was there to have surgery.

Bjelica has been accused by the US State Department and the European Union of funnelling money to the Karadzic network and running the security and intelligence units that guard him. His name is on the US list of international terrorists and he is banned from travelling to any EU country.

In March 2003 the US government described him as a 'long-time friend and business associate of Karadzic, [who] presides over a network of legal and illegal businesses that are also used to provide for the protection of Karadzic'.

Bjelica denies all this but there is no doubt he is a supporter of Karadzic and was a powerful figure in his Serbian Democratic Party. Bjelica was the party president in eastern Bosnia during the war and spent time with Karadzic.

Bjelica has agreed to meet us because he wants to ensure I understand that many Serbs were killed in the war and suffered Muslim ethnic cleansing. He takes my notebook and draws a sketch of Sarajevo, pointing out areas where he claims 5,000 Serbs were killed.

Bjelica has seen the video of Srebrenica and thought it was 'terrible'. But he claims there are films of the Bosnian Muslims, or mujahideen, as he calls them, beheading Serbs. 'Why is that not shown on your TV?' he says.

Like many of Karadzic's closest allies, he believes their leader 'signed a contract' with Richard Holbrooke, President Bill Clinton's chief adviser during the Dayton Peace Accord in 1995 that ended the war. This stipulated that if Karadzic disappeared from frontline politics he would not be arrested.

'To over 90 per cent of Bosnian Serbs he is a hero,' says Bjelica. 'He protected the Serbian people during the war.'

So where does Bjelica, whose nickname 'Cicko' means pussycat, think his friend is hiding? He shrugs. Stubbing out his cigarette, he gets up from the table, shakes my hand and leaves.

The centre Sarajevo is a long way from the corridors of Westminster, but the heated complexity of Bosnian politics makes the hurly-burly of the House of Commons seem tame. Yet it is the former Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown, who, as the High Representative of the International Community in Bosnia, has overall responsibility for stability in the region. As part of Lord Ashdown's brief, the capture of Karadzic and other war criminals such as General Ratko Mladic, the former Bosnian Serb military commander, is pivotal.

'You can't have peace without justice,' says Ashdown. 'And only after that you can get to reconciliation. This can only happen when the major architects of these crimes are brought to justice.'

His office sits on the former front line of the Sarajevo's bloody battle, and the surrounding buildings are pockmarked with bullet holes. The former Bosnian parliament building across the street remains a burnt-out wreck, a vivid reminder of the horrors faced by civilians in the siege of the city that was inspired by Karadzic. It was largely Serbian sniper bullets and shells that rained down from the surrounding mountains killing those queuing for bread or buying fruit in the main street market.

So why, 10 years on, has Karadzic not been found? 'Catching war criminals is a campaign, not a commando raid,' says Ashdown. 'It requires changing the political climate, attacking corrupt networks, removing the money he uses to fund himself. It requires isolation by taking out lower-level war criminals. Then we have a better chance of catching him.' Ashdown describes Karadzic as 'the head of a vast criminal organisation' that thrives on corruption and extortion. Visits are paid to businessmen from dark forces who ask for contributions for the 'doctor in the forest'. These organised crime networks make vast sums from smuggling drugs, petrol and tobacco as well as trafficking young girls for the sex trade.

Ashdown's office has carried out investigative audits on many of the state-owned companies, such as the electricity firm Elektroprivreda and discovered tens of millions of dollars missing.

'We have just carried out an audit of Srpska Sume, the Serb forestry organisation, and found it riddled with political backhanders just siphoned out of the system. This is public money just disappearing into political parties such as the SDS. From there siphoning it to Karadzic is not a difficult thing to do.'

Ashdown's office believes that one of the key 'bankers' to Karadzic's network is Momcilo Mandic, a former minister who commanded Karadzic's police force. Mandic has made a fortune from running petrol stations, a bank and other businesses. Like Bjelica he is on a number of international blacklists but lives freely in Belgrade. The US has described him as a 'major funding source for Karadzic through his control of an elaborate network of criminal enterprises engaged in embezzlement, business fraud and fictitious loans'. He too has denied the claims.

Another Bosnian Serb accused of providing money for the Karadzic network is Radomir Kojic, who is also on the US terrorist list and banned from travelling. Last month an Observer investigation discovered that his mine-clearing company, Unipak, won many lucrative contracts from foreign governments including six from the UK Department for International Development. Kojic, a wartime Serb commander in the hills around Sarajevo, rejects the claims, saying he is the victim of false rumours spread by business rivals who have provided no evidence of wrongdoing.

Meeting us outside his hotel in the ski resort of Jahorina, where Sarajevo's Winter Olympics was held in 1984, he claims his business now faces ruin. 'It is better for my family if I kill myself,' Kojic says. He does, however, admit he was a member of Karadzic's party in 1990 and the property developer who built Karadzic's family home in Pale. The pink house, it seems, is never far from the centre of the story.

They call the area the heart of darkness. The geographical triangle created by the towns of Visegrad, Cajnice and Foca in the Republic of Srpska in the far east of Bosnia is indeed a cold, dark place. But these are not adjectives used to describe the region's physical appearance. It is rich in natural beauty, with the majestic River Drina snaking its way through the glorious pine forests in the valley as the peaks of the Zelengora mountains tower above.

The chill comes from the history that swept across the nearby borders of Serbia and Montenegro and whipped up a storm of ethnic hatred that brutalised a generation. It remains a hotbed of fervent Serb nationalism where some of the worst genocidal crimes of the Bosnian war were committed. Ten years ago it was not dead branches from the pine trees that the Drina carried in its fast-flowing, but the bodies of hundreds of butchered Muslims that were swept along in its bloodstained water.

It is among these mountains and remote villages of his loyal supporters that many believe Karadzic is hiding. It is close enough to the porous borders of Montenegro, the country of Karadzic's birth, that the 'Doctor from the Forest' can easily slip through out of the clutches of Nato and European Union forces.

At the apex of the triangle is Foca, a place renowned for harbouring war criminals. Before the war more than half of the town's 40,000 population was Muslim, now there are none. Rape, torture and murder changed that.

Today the centre of Foca is a scene of normality. Teenagers wearing fashion able sunglasses sip beer and smoke cigarettes at cafes overlooking the river while rock music pumps from the speakers. At Cafe Uno, a group of four older men sit around a table eating the traditional local Bosnian dish of cevapi, small sausages made of lamb and beef.

I ask if they will talk about Karadzic. At first nobody wants to speak. 'We don't want to talk about politics,' said one. 'Do you think of him as a hero or a war criminal?' I ask. After a pause, one of them, a chubby man with curly hair, barks: 'A hero, of course. He protected us.'

The oldest in the group, with a moustache and fine grey hair, then takes over. He snarls: 'You English and Americans, you know where he is. You are protecting him. If you wanted to arrest him you could.' The others around the table nod in agreement. They want us to leave.

As I start driving high into the mountains towards the Montenegro border, it becomes increasingly clear why it has been so difficult to catch Karadzic. Not only is he among people who view in him as one of a long line of Serb heroes who have fought off foreign invaders. But the terrain itself is almost impassable in a normal car. The roads are practically dirt tracks and wind their way up steep mountainous slopes that rise into the clouds. If Karadzic was hiding anywhere here, his security people would see anybody coming from miles away.

As I leave Foca and head back to Sarajevo there is a sign for Niksic, the home town of Karadzic's mother, which is 105km east in Montenegro. As I drive on, three young boys coming from a game of football pass by. They raise their hands in the infamous three-fingered salute of Serb nationalists.

Fugitives from justice

General Ratko Mladic

Mladic was commander of Serbian troops in Bosnia during the war. Along with Karadzic he is charged with genocide for ordering the massacre of Muslims in Srebrenica and the siege of Sarajevo in which 10,000 civilians were killed. He is blamed for abetting the 'systematic' campaign of sniping at civilians in the city over the past three years and for the seizure and use as human shields of 284 UN peacekeepers in May and June 1995. He is accused of shelling the towns of Tuzla and Srebrenica 'in order to kill, terrorise and demoralise the Bosnian Muslim and Bosnian Croat civilian population'. Aged 50.

Ante Gotovina

A Croatian, he is the Hague tribunal's third most wanted man. He is accused of the murder of hundreds of Serbs. Aged 49.

Milan Lukic

The notorious leader of the White Eagles paramilitary group, he is accused of masterminding the massacre of thousands of Muslims in the eastern Bosnian town of Visegrad. Many were burned alive. Women and children were forced across the bridge over the River Drina and shot. Thousands of local men were killed elsewhere. Aged 38.

Dragan Zelenovic

Zelenovic is charged with organising the mass rape and torture of Muslim women in the Bosnian town of Foca. Aged 44.